Chapter 6:
Covid-19 and US Politicisation of Fear

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Abstract

This chapter focusses on how the Covid-19 pandemic, and the crisis surrounding it, was used as a populist political instrument in the US to dominate public and political discourse and steer opinion towards supporting President Trump's radical-right agenda. The politicisation of fear as a strategy in pursuit of radical-right agendas, with the objective of retaining political power at all costs, is examined at length. Ruthless exploitation of fear of the unknown by Trump and his close aides and leading supporters led to blaming, demonisation, and scapegoating of 'the other,' whether foreign nations, foreigners, scientists, and medical experts holding evidence-based positions that contradicted radical-right emotional or political opinions, or indeed anyone daring to challenge radical-right assertions or their numerous conspiracy theories. The chapter addresses how, in an attempt to hijack national virtues, radical-right populists sought to strengthen their identity through 'othering,' juxtaposing themselves with 'the other,' and projecting themselves as sole paragons of conservatism, patriotism, and protecting democracy. Risks to various parties are systematically identified.

Keywords: Covid-19, discourse, fear, politicisation, conspiracy theories, crisis

Introduction

Since early 2020, Covid-19 has been a drawn-out crisis, with daily new infections and death toll still rising in Spring 2021, and a health care system and health policy-making that have been constantly challenged and tested worldwide. At the time of writing, more than 26 million Americans had been infected by Covid-19, resulting in more than 436,000 deaths (CDC 2021). The pandemic health crisis that Covid-19 brought to the world became a critical determining factor of new realities and backdrop for public life. In countries worldwide, the

responses to this pandemic health crisis had been innumerable, from restrictions on individual liberties in terms of mobility and traveling to restrictions on economic activities in order to control viral spread, something that generated public dissatisfaction, disappointment, and distrust towards governments, authorities, and institutions. In line with these new realities, authoritarian propensities, conspiracy theories, and misinformation have endured and gained ground and adversely affected the content of public and political discourse.

In any type of crisis, a moment of uncertainty occurs. During a crisis situation, there is a battle of understanding that emerges, in terms of what caused the crisis, who is responsible for the crisis, but also what will be the potential solutions. Blame attribution, subversive, anti-establishment, or even anti-populist narratives are being developed by actors whose main focus is imposing and framing their own perception as the right one to the masses. As Katsambekis and Stavrakakis (2020) note, when addressing the issue of populism and the Covid-19 pandemic, a crisis creates a fertile ground for populist actors and movements to arise. It tends to exaggerate and even increase socio-political divisions between institutions and the masses, as it is not just a public health crisis but also affects e.g. the economy, politics, and society. The uncertainty the crisis creates leads to doubts towards society's institutions, which are perceived as disconnected from popular demands, and therefore both unresponsive and unrepresentative. This gives an opportunity for populists to use 'crisis' as part of their own narrative in an effort for further mobilisation against the institutions, who are perceived as responsible for the crisis (Moffit 2016) and for generating this notion of uncertainty and fear.

This chapter examines Covid-19 from a US domestic perspective and examines the role and prospects of populism in the context of the pandemic in the US. It focuses on how President Trump and the radical-right have sought to accentuate the pandemic and its risks to the US population's wealth and the economy and, at the same time, play down its danger and threat to public health. The chapter looks at data produced by President Trump, e.g. White House statements and Covid-19 task force meeting minutes, along with information shared on media platforms that engage in promulgating conspiracy theories regarding the pandemic. The aim is to identify and examine the public

discourse surrounding the challenging emotional arguments raised against science-based and evidence-based policy on Covid-19.

The Developing 'Covid Hoax' Discourse and its Orchestration

> "Humanity is imprisoned by a killer pandemic. People are being arrested for surfing in the ocean and meditating in nature. Nations are collapsing. Hungry citizens are rioting for food. The media has generated so much confusion and fear that people are begging for salvation in a syringe. Billionaire patent owners are pushing for globally mandated vaccines. Anyone who refuses to be injected with experimental poisons will be prohibited from travel, education, and work. No, this is not a synopsis for a new horror movie. This is our current reality." *Plandemic* (2020)

This is the picture of our future approaching, as imagined by *Plandemic* (2020), an American film that alludes to Covid-19 disease as being a product of human design, and that behind the pandemic, there is a rogue lobby that aims to make billions, infecting millions of people with a contagious virus and killing them with infected vaccines. The video was uploaded to *Facebook* and *YouTube* on May 4, 2020, and only a week later, it counted millions of views. Among the active supporters of *Plandemic's* argument, one can identify several well-known conspiracy theory platforms, e.g. *Infowars*, which embrace and contribute to the debate. These add further arguments for alternative therapies to combat the virus while making declarations on the value of anti-vaccination, creating a movement against Covid-19 public health policy, and taking their argument to the streets. Examples include demonstrators in London calling for an 'end to medical tyranny,' Berlin protesters against the Covid-19 lockdown, and protests in Paris and Zurich against government response measures to the virus (e.g. making wearing masks mandatory), which argued that such measures are based on lies that result in restraining the individual's freedom and objected to mandatory vaccinations. However, the movement against public policy on Covid-19 does not simply focus on medical aspects but also offers an opportunity for the radical-right to strengthen their voices, attract the attention of the public, and grow,

The 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States brought a qualitative change in terms of conspiracy theories mentioned above and in the empowerment of their supporters. Conspiracy theories and misinformation are no longer on the side-lines. President Trump himself transmitted large amounts of

misinformation regarding Covid-19, which, according to (Evanega et al. 2020), constituted 37.9% of the overall misinformation on this topic in 38 million English language media articles, and that few article writers and editors had fact-checked Trump's statements. Accurate information is essential, as it is one of the core tools of framing the credibility that political leaders need to create in crisis times. American followers of conspiracy theories frequently are followers of Donald Trump. A couple of months into the pandemic, he claimed to be taking a hydroxychloroquine pill every day as a form of anti-Covid medication. However, it had no FDA medical approval for such use.

In times of crisis, such as during a pandemic, there is a high expectation of public leadership, which requires their grasping present realities and prioritising their action options. Yet, as Covid-19 started to spread globally, so did the discourse on 'othering' and blaming people from outgroups. Much of this discourse was generated by political and other public leaders. This focus on attacking scapegoats, rather than getting a practical grip on combatting the pandemic, was particularly evident from Trump, his administration, and his radical-right supporters.

By bringing together theories on 'othering' and crisis exploitation, the role of the leader, and the circulation of misinformation, this chapter analyses anti-science theories of President Trump and the radical-right on the causes, transmission, treatment, and management of the disease and the pandemic, and their anti-expert narrative. Crisis in this context is seen as the means of nurturing a specific agenda, where governing leadership makes decisions by the operationalising crisis to foster its own doctrine. The aim is to explore the amplification and politicisation of fear about 'the other,' the invisible foreign 'other,' the invasive enemy asserted to be aided and abetted in the US by elites, scientists, experts, socialists, Democrats, liberals, and others. The study argues that the discourse that is created under the Covid-19 health crisis seeks (possibly unwittingly) to undermine and destroy the US in multiple respects. In this context, by identifying the 'other' as the source of danger, the dominant group minimises the notion of helplessness during such circumstances while structuring an identity that stigmatises the 'other,' e.g. 'unhealthy and contagion' (Crawford 1994), something that can be seen in the prevalence of anti-

Asian attitudes and violent attacks in the case of Covid-19 (see Rehy and Barreto 2020).

Reflecting on the bigger question of what is the impact of such discourse on the US, Europe, and the rest of the world, this study focuses on the case of the US by providing compelling evidence of 'othering' discourse and misinformation and highlighting the dangerous effects such attitudes can produce.

Crisis-Exploitation and a Window of Opportunity

A crisis may be defined as a sudden focusing event (Kingdon 1995), or as Boin, 't Hart, Stern & Sundelius put it, crises are defined as "events or developments widely perceived by members of relevant communities to constitute urgent threats to core community values and structures" (Boin et al. 2009, 83). Rather than a static event in time, a crisis can be seen as a process that demands attention at different points in time. This depends not only on the perspective and understanding of the event by the public but also on the various and changing themes and issues that require attention, since a crisis imposes and is formed by the "broader developmental context of the society in which it occurs" (Porfiriev 1996 in Boin and t'Hart 2003, 546). For Rosenthal, a crisis can constitute one focal event among many potential related events over time and throughout the social structure (Quarantelli 1998, 200). Therefore, a crisis may be socially defined.

In times of crisis, there is a level of incrementalism in relation to the remedial process, with decisions rarely being deposed in a rational and comprehensive way. The process involves a variety of competing moralities that government and policymakers have to consider to ensure citizens' safety while still being able to preserve the democratic principles of self-determination. In the case of a health pandemic, this means combining and unifying apparently contradictory principles, such as individual freedom and collective safety. When discussing in terms of policy change in times of a crisis, a defining moment for policy change occurs, known as a "window of opportunity" (Birkland 2005), such that when it is open, it can allow policymakers and governance mechanisms to put forward selective solutions-in-action. However, this chapter puts forward the idea that a window of opportunity can be taken even further and be applied in relation to

the policy change and discourse structure in times of a crisis as an additional form of action.

In order for an event to be identified as a crisis, three variables need to be considered: threat, urgency, and uncertainty (Boin et al. 2005). Initially, suppose a crisis in society presents a threat to the public, e.g. public safety. In that case, it induces a sense of urgency for dealing with it quickly. Lastly, it creates uncertainty about both the nature and scale of the threat itself and the potential consequences (Boin et al. 2005), resulting in the disruption of a wide range of socio-political and organisational processes. In a situation where a combination of these variables is presented, a window of opportunity appears, giving the space and opportunities for governance mechanisms and policymakers to take action and exploit any advantage they may have. Additionally, as Rosenthal (in Quarantelli 1998) highlighted, the modern crisis is not confined by common boundaries since it is an outcome of modern processes, e.g., globalised information flow, technological advances, and related developments. In conjunction with organisational responses, media pressure, and erroneous information flow (Boin and t'Hart 2003), technology makes crisis and crisis exploitation rather complex processes.

With a crisis unfolding, and the challenges that arise from a crisis, political leadership has to deal with the damage that has been inflicted while also addressing the issue of accountability that crisis triggers and to altering perceptions and public emotions the crisis creates in an effort "to minimize the consequences of—and make the most of the opportunities associated with—crisis" (Boin et al. 2016, 12) and ultimately providing a sense of return to normality. For t'Hart (2014), by introducing ambitions and ideas to the public, they will highlight the course of action that will be decided upon. The leadership uses the opportunity to make a crisis malleable so as to foster a specific agenda.

However, a crisis does not mean with certainty that there will be a window of opportunity for political abusers. In order to understand the circumstances that assist in opening such a window of opportunity, one has to emphasise the aspect of crisis exploitation. The latter defines the crisis-type discourse that public leaders use in seeking to exploit the opportunity the crisis has created—in other words, to assemble and offer a 'winning frame' to the public that seeks to strengthen their levels of support (Boin et al. 2009). For these authors,

the crisis produced characteristics that include denial, crisis as a threat, and crisis as an opportunity (Boin et al. 2009, 84). For this chapter's purposes, the argument focuses on the Covid-19 crisis as a form of opportunity. There is a political stance focussing on the blame of the 'other' as a victim, which makes conceivable the prospect of a formalisation of a specific agenda.

Looking back at Moffit's argument (2016), a crisis can be a trigger or a precondition for the rise of populism. However, the notion of a crisis, or more accurately the uncertain notion of a crisis, creates recursion problems, as Fischbacher-Smith (2014) discusses. In reference to how a crisis develops and evolves, in terms of, e.g. systemic failure, a crisis can be perceived as highly related to uncertainty regarding the stability and continued existence of a system. It nurtures notions of loss of control, further instability and system failure (Paxton 2018). Reflecting on Moffit (2016) and Fischbacher-Smith (2014), Paxton, referring to a crisis, highlighted the significance of failure (e.g. financial, political, social), which, when it is "widely regarded as salient through its mediation into the political, cultural or ideological spheres, then it is seen as symptomatic of a wider problem" (2018, 344). When examining populist politics in a crisis context, there is thus a considerable variety of heterogeneity and diversity in terms of expressions.

Populism: The 'People' Versus 'The Other' in Times of Pandemic Crisis

Populism has been extensively used as an umbrella label within the political scene, something that has often been compared to a 'chameleon' phenomenon (see Taggart 2000). As most recent definitions of populism make references and appeal to "the people" (Canovan 2004), this provides an indicator of using populism as a tool to understand populist subjects and, therefore, the way in which people comprehend their social existence and themselves, how they fit and interact with others and how they position themselves in relation to others (see Taylor 2002). For instance, in times of a crisis, a specific discourse on the 'other' offers the opportunity for fostering a specific policy agenda, e.g. the migrant crisis and tougher migration policies. Crisis, in this sense, is used to structure the power of discourse and its impact.

The notion of the 'other' constitutes a sense of exclusion, which makes the constituted self, possible. Irigaray (1985), when discussing the 'other woman', for example, refers to it as a constituted abjection condition of becoming. Building on Irigaray's concept of abjection, the 'other' is a form of exclusion, and identities are self-dependent on the 'other.' In the case of populism, there is a mutual dependence in relation to the 'otherness,' system, and abjection, with populism becoming a tool for a constitutional and political base. In other words, populism establishes specific constituencies and/or creates identities of a constituency, e.g. believing in conspiracy theories or categorizing 'others' is a form of creating an identity for oneself. An example is provided by the recent mob attack on January 6, 2021, on the US Capitol building in Washington DC. The mob participants, comprising a wide range of radical-right devotees including a number being pursued by the FBI and Department of Homeland Security as domestic terrorists, believed that the November 2020 presidential election results were rigged and that there had been voter fraud. Thus, by weaponizing this motivated reasoning (however remote from the factual evidence), they created an identity for themselves as self-styled protectors of democracy.

Moreover, similar to Reinfeldt's (2000) model, the general understanding of populism divides society into two opposing groups, the 'true people-we/us' and the 'others,' i.e., both internal and external enemies. 'We' therefore 'not them,' in the same sense of opposition to 'them' can be interpreted as 'not us.' 'Them' can refer to multiple actors, e.g. established political parties and the political elite, while 'not us' can refer to foreigners, migrants, or any other distinguishable or marginalised group. These differentiations serve to justify and rationalise the distinction from the 'other' as alien and dissimilar, emphasising the differences between groups (Wistrich 1999). For Wistrich, it is the need and desire to distinguish one's self from the other in order to maintain one's identity, and therefore, draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them.' In relation to conspiracy theories, which by definition are an explanation for events that relies on the assertion that, for example, the 'elite' is dishonestly manipulating society, 'othering' can be mobilised to believe someone's prejudices towards the elite, regardless of whether they are true or not. In the case of Covid-19, for example, a conspiracy theory concerning the rationale behind the alleged

creation of the virus in a scientific lab could be that powerful people created the virus in order to establish a new world order. Similar conspiracy theories abound in the febrile milieu of QAnon and other conspiracist groups (see later section).

Taking this forward, populism creates modes of identification that contribute to constructing differences and antagonisms and drawing divisions between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Howarth 2000). Therefore, populism may be interpreted as a form of identity politics, essentially 'equivalence' reinforcing the selected discourse. This conceptual reflection of populism strongly articulates a division between exclusion and inclusion of specific groups, e.g. based on class, religion, culture, ethnicity, or political beliefs. For Laclau, the process of creating populist identities forms around certain signifiers whose role is "not to express any positive content but to function as the name of a full identity which is constitutively absent" (2005, 96), and in this way contributing to the marginalisation of different groups. Targeting marginalised groups is the discourse of 'othering' in practice.

As mentioned above, a crisis situation creates a sense of threat, urgency, and uncertainty that affects the way people exist and understand the world around them, while shifting the focus onto dominant discourses and creating additional dynamics as part of the outputs. In this case, it is an urgency that opens the window of opportunity. It is fear of the unknown, uncertainty, and urgency as the driving force behind the argument that *now* is the time to take action that creates the need to blame 'the other.' In a time of a health crisis and cross-border pandemics, new boundaries are set between identity groups, focusing on distancing self from the group that is perceived as responsible for the virus (as an unhealthy group or as carriers of the virus), then to take measures to isolate the groups that allegedly pose a health threat, and finally generating an indictment of the groups that are targeted as the threat (Kam 2019). For Flowers (2001), infectious virus outbreaks usually are accompanied by misinformation or little in-depth medical opinion, something that contributes to a redistribution of blame, followed by prevailing patterns of discrimination against 'the other'. Dionne and Turkmen (2020) historicize and classify pandemic 'othering' and blame by drawing on existing scholarship examining previous pandemics. They conclude that pandemics aggravate the marginalisation and scapegoating of already less powerful and oppressed groups

(e.g. migrants), and consequently shape and activate hostile and even violent attitudes towards those groups, and embrace a discourse of stigma and discrimination. Recent anecdotes of 'othering' during a health pandemic crisis can be found in reports on the Black Death and the Jewish community, Spanish flu and Spanish and Portuguese nationals, HIV/AIDS and the LGBTQ+ community, and most recently, the SARS-CoV-2 case and the Chinese (see Dionne and Turkmen 2020).

Finally, leadership has been recognised as a key to populism since the discourse that leaders use is a tool to transform social problems into social demands in an effort to attract the support of the public. Some leaders may also exploit a pandemic health crisis such as Covid-19 and rely on populism to foster a specific political agenda. Thus, populism is signified in a crisis environment and provides opportunities for emergency politics, a marginalisation of the opposition and the media. The role of the media is crucial at this point. The media and social media, e.g. *Twitter*, provide cheap and instantaneous communication, something that instantly expands the audience range and typology, spreading information and misinformation alike on a global scale.

US Domestic Responses to Covid-19: the Evolution of the Asserted Danger of the 'Other'

First reported in December 2019 by the Chinese authorities in Wuhan province in China, this particular coronavirus (Covid-19) has managed to rapidly spread throughout the globe and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in mid-March 2020, with (to date) 218 countries and territories that have reported to be impacted by the virus. While the WHO and the world's scientific community and global health experts are collaborating to accelerate the research and development process, focusing on the containment of virus spread while seeking effective vaccines, the political response to the virus in the US from President Trump and his administration appeared more to emphasise blame rhetoric and alleged Chinese patterns of misconduct.

In a crisis, it appears that the structure of discourse is not the one that actually changes. It is the evolving essence of the perceived danger that actually motivates the shift. It is also essential for the 'otherness' to be identified by politicians seeking scapegoats, as its danger

is reframed in a specific context and a crisis environment. By structuring a discourse that is triggered by the urgency aspect of the danger of 'the other' (in a variety of ways throughout the discourse), a new agenda is fostered. In this, the 'other' becomes an evolving metaphor for danger in the discourse, reframing the threat to the current crisis format, in this case, Covid-19. This can also be understood through the concept of intertextuality. As Allen (2000) highlights, dialogue refers to social 'positionings' that characters enact, where the text is the absorption and transformation of another (Kristeva 1986). Thus texts can be seen as being in conversation with the other. This can be applied to understand discourse and the essence of the danger of the 'other' in crisis format, as it constantly changes its structure through this filtering process.

Even during the first months of 2020, it was clear that the coronavirus phenomenon's impact was evolving into a threat to President Trump's career, with the Republican Party worrying about the impact on the forthcoming November presidential election campaign. The main concern at the time was the White House's ineffective and slow reaction and the potential blow to the US economy. For months into the pandemic, President Trump downplayed the situation by avoiding masks, criticising others who wore them, and holding large rallies with supporters who did not wear them in defiance of expert advice, constantly emphasising that the situation was under control and that the virus would 'miraculously' disappear. In addition to Covid-19 evolving into a major threat to public health and the national economy, only a few months after the virus took hold in the US, the demonisation of the Chinese and Asian communities emerged, followed by a reference to the virus as 'Wuhan virus,' 'Chinese virus' or a 'Kung flu,' a choice of language that was adopted by President Trump and that inspired racism and violence against those communities (see Reny and Barreto 2020). This relates not only to pejoratively identifying the 'other' but also to the notion of danger the 'other' is allegedly posing to society. Months into the pandemic, President Trump's discourse continued to escalate on the Chinese government's alleged malfeasance, with a dominant focus on China's accountability and responsibility for allegedly unleashing the plague of Covid-19 (Trump, September 22, 2020).

While the selected discourse clearly demonises foreigners as threatening and dangerous, President Trump continuously defended the use of such language as "not racist" but indeed as "accurate" (Trump, March 18, 2020), while the WHO advised against terms that link the virus to China to avoid any form of stigmatisation and 'othering.' This does not come as a surprise. Refugee and migration issues have been high on the agenda of Trump's presidency, similar to those of radical-right movements across the globe, and the pandemic offered a new opportunity for exploitation of these issues. Taking advantage mainly of the ignorance, fear, and indisputable fatigue of citizens, the agenda may have evolved but has not fundamentally changed. In a health crisis such as Covid-19, the scientific and expert focus may be on wearing masks, scientific facts, or vaccinations. However, the public and political discourse still target opposing political arguments or embellishment of unscientific theories with 'othering' and exclusion-oriented comments. President Trump and his Administration portrayed themselves as the sole possessors of the truth on Covid-19 (and indeed many other topics) in a year were gaining influence and attracting voters was deemed essential for their electoral campaign. Fear and ignorance, cynically exploited as they were, evolved to become a source of tension and despair that assisted the arguments made by this administration, namely that Trump's re-election would be their only salvation.

Furthermore, mistrust of and suspicion towards governance institutions was deliberately fostered, a tactic seen both among conspiracists and populist actors, which also involved provoking disbelief in science to help fuel further fear and ignorance public. In line with this growing populist mood, President Trump, in May 2020, announced the termination of US funding and the country's relations with the WHO, accusing the organisation of protecting China and highlighting Trump's distrust in the role of the organisation and its alleged misconduct (Trump, May 29, 2020). The argument made by Trump against the WHO was twofold: first, it alleged WHO withheld information and ignored warnings in relation to the danger of Covid-19; second, it alleged that WHO has been 'virtually' controlled by China, and that China had pressured the organisation to strategically mislead the world regarding the virus (Trump, May 29, 2020).

However, targeting China and Chinese and Asian communities as an alleged threat was not confined to Covid-19. They were also targeted as an economic threat. This can be detected in the statements of President Trump, in the name of protecting the integrity of the American financial system and American investors, in which Chinese companies listed on the US financial markets should be investigated and accused of conferring 'undue' and hidden risks (Trump, May 29, 2020). In addition, the argument put forward brought focus on claims regarding continuing efforts by China to obtain intellectual property and technology secrets from American industries illicitly, also raising potential national security risks for the US. Further, the argument highlights transparency and fairness issues that extend beyond China's economic and financial policy and reflects on supplementary indicators of China's longstanding tactics.

Through the spread of the virus, China's stigmatisation took various forms during President Trump's discourse. In an effort to highlight the differences between China and the US, President Trump also challenged their principles, values, and tactics in comparison to the US, e.g., commenting on China's foreign affairs with Hong Kong (Trump, May 29, 2020). The confrontational attitude of the Trump administration towards China, in relation to the economy, right from the beginning of Trump's presidency, was eclectic in its range of topics, e.g. from tariffs to trade agreements, security threats, and human rights, and contributed to his generally unilateral foreign policy agenda (see e.g. Waring 2018).

Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation as Covid-19 Response

Newly formed conspiracy theories appear to appeal differently to various radical-right groups. In contrast, many existing conspiracy theories appear to have been deliberately reframed to serve the purpose of the Covid-19 narrative, building on existing prejudices. Additional conspiracy theories also contribute to broadening the xenophobic and 'othering' exclusion item related to the Covid-19 crisis. Following traditional patterns of the radical-right discourse, during the Covid-19 crisis, there has been a series of conspiracy theories that degenerate into anti-Semitism and target the Jewish community, who are alleged to be responsible for distributing the virus in the first place. The false

association of Jews with diseases has a long history and is deeply-rooted within anti-Semitism, e.g. the Black Death plague. In the case of Covid-19, the Jewish conspiracy theory takes different forms, from claims that the virus is a hoax concocted by Jews to its being real but still fabricated by Jews in order to manipulate the global economy, or even the Jewish community being the primary spreader of the virus (see Anti-Defamation League 2020). An example of such discourse can be found on the *TruNews* media, a radical-right Christian channel, alleging that the Jews created the virus in order to kill the Christian population and overthrow President Trump (Weiner 2020).

The rapid spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation raises the prospect of polarisation and further division among the population in an effort to recruit supporters and further inspire additional threatening trends and radicalisation, including impact on terrorism and generating and promoting violence and hate worldwide, e.g. numerous QAnon conspiracy theory devotees, radical-right extremists, and possibly domestic terrorists in the radical-right mob attack on the US Capitol, January 6, 2020. The study by Evanega et al. (2020) highlighted the role of Trump's leadership in the spreading of misinformation by identifying Trump as the single largest driver of misinformation around Covid-19, an "infodemic", something that makes it difficult to separate truth from fiction. The study underlined the role of misinformation in relation to attitudes towards the virus itself, e.g. mistrust of medical experts and beliefs in worthless 'miracle cures,' contributing to a further spread of the virus. For wider examination of radical-right conspiracism, see e.g. CCDH (2020), Douglas et al. (2019), Nagel (2017), van Prooijen (2018), and Waring (2021, chapter 9 in this volume).

The political exploitation of the pandemic by the Trump administration, and radical-right voices within and beyond the US, also liberally employs various conspiracy theories in its mix of misinformation, misdirection, anti-science attitudes, and 'othering' discourse. As one example, the *Plandemic* video alleges an orchestrated attempt by 'Big Pharma' companies, in collaboration with philanthropist Bill Gates as a scapegoat, to sponsor a large-scale Covid-19 vaccination programme knowingly using a harmful vaccine, with the hidden aim of eliminating a significant proportion of the population while generating huge profits or even using the vaccine as a disguise in order to

insert digital microchips into people *en masse*. The use of Bill Gates as a scapegoat by anti-vaccine activists and QAnon supporters, for creating the virus and seeking profit out of it in an effort to control the global health system (Wakabayashi, Alba, and Tracy, 2020), has led to false information about Bill Gates being spread through online, social and other media.

With the *Plandemic* video, the radical-right found an opportunity to exploit the crisis in order to promote their extremist ideas. Even in early March 2020, anti-vaccine activist Larry Cook raised the discussion on *Facebook,* calling Covid-19 a pandemic being used to "usher in mandatory testing, tracking, and vaccination" #ResistThePlan (Cook 2020). Members of Cook's group on *Facebook* Stop Mandatory Vaccination (with more than 195,000 members), further used the platform to spread other conspiracy theories and false health information (Zadrozny 2020). The group was eventually banned from *Facebook* for "militarised social movements and violence-inducting conspiracy networks, such as QAnon" (Sulleyman 2020).

A Pew Research report in April 2020 revealed that a third of the American population believed the virus was created in a laboratory by human scientists (Pew Research 2020) or held ideas that it was even created as a biological weapon at the Wuhan Institute of Virology linked to Beijing's covert bio-weapons programme. As the Pew Research report pointed out, the proportions of Americans who believe or partially believe in the conspiracy that the Covid-19 was planned differ by demographics and partisanship. The results showed that less-educated Americans (around 48%) were more inclined to accept some truth in the conspiracy theory, whereas a third of Republicans or people that identify with the GOP agreed or partially agreed with the theory that the virus was planned, compared with 18% of Democrats and people that leant towards the Democratic party. The denial of the Trump administration, in reference to the danger and state of the virus for many months since its first emergence, appeared to foster further trust in conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus per se, creating further questioning of the validity of official narratives and figures on the pandemic.

In the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Trump embraced and enacted a populist approach in the form of daily briefings in the White House. In many of the press briefings, Trump openly challenged

expert and scientific knowledge and suggested instead untested treatments, e.g. hydroxychloroquine, while at the same time refusing to use protocols as suggested by the WHO (e.g. wearing a mask) or also openly opposing lockdown measures being adopted by different states.

Conspiracies theories and disinformation spread rapidly via social media platforms, as Covid-19 also began to spread globally. As a report from ISD (2020) highlights, between January and April 2020, 34 known disinformation-hosting websites gathered 80 million interactions on *Facebook*, whereas, over the same time period, posts linking to the WHO's website or the US Centers for Disease Control received less than 6.5 million. In the same report, ISD researchers highlighted an increased volume of threads within radical-right circles about so-called 'elites,' e.g. Bill Gates, George Soros, and Jeff Bezos, along with also replicating false and misleading information about their alleged role in the creation and spread of the virus.

Conspiracy theories connected to Covid-19 are also connected to radical-right extremism. As discussed above, there is an increase in plots and attacks against Asian communities, but it is not confined to the latter. As Silke (2020) points out, there have been attacks planned against medical and other critical infrastructure, e.g. Timothy's Wilson attack in Kansas City (*BBC* 2020). Moreover, there is also an overall increase in online extremist activity that raises the risk of increasing short-to-medium term radicalisation. For Comerford and Davey (2020), the engagement of extremist groups with Covid-19 emphasises the argument of crisis exploitation and the opportunity to mobilise the masses by promoting conspiracy theories, e.g. that the virus is an opportunity for state authorities to curb civil liberties, target minority communities, and build on existing prejudices to fit the crisis (e.g. accusing minorities of spreading the virus), while also inciting hate and violence.

Reflecting on the points above, the Covid-19 phenomenon has provided a vehicle for blending multiple stands of conspiracy theory thinking, radical right politics, and populism. The anti-vaccine movement, since the start of the pandemic, took a radical shift, with such groups as Stop Mandatory Vaccination focusing their discourse not only on the danger that vaccines allegedly pose but also on attacking the Democrats for promoting the vaccine agenda, or posting pro-

Trump campaign messages, while also making references to QAnon (Butler 2020). However, while conspiracists have become more radical, it seems that the radical-right have also become more conspiracist, by publicly questioning vaccine effectiveness, engaging in Jewish collusion theories, or, in the case of Trump, making claims that Joe Biden is controlled by people who are in "the dark shadows" (Buranyi 2020). Such baseless assertions support the argument that populism and the radical-right have not been weakened by the Covid-19 situation, but rather have been energised by it and continue to thrive, not only in society but also increasingly within mainstream politics.

Conclusion

Populist leaders tend to challenge commonly accepted facts and data for fear of alienating or antagonising their electoral base. In the case of Covid-19, this is evidenced by why they are reluctant to tell people to observe social distancing, avoid unnecessary social mixing, self-quarantine as necessary, or wear masks in public. Additionally, they tend to create divisions in society, either with nationalist/nativist banners or by demonising those they consider elite or unwilling to accept their populist ideology. They typically embrace a unique personal style that eschews giving wise advice or demonstrating self-restraint (Daniszewski 2020). On the contrary, their rhetoric, advice and cavalier personal conduct frequently rejects out-of-hand authoritative medical advice. In the case of the Trump administration, one tactic was to advocate antidotes or treatments that have not been shown to be effective. Moreover, scientists and health officials were often sidelined by the Trump administration, and instead of developing a consistent anti-virus strategy, state and local leaders were left to their own devices to battle the spread of the virus if at all. As Daniszewski (2020) pointed out, populism in practical politics means promoting policies that are popular with the masses and not the elites or even the experts, and instead adopting a discourse that minimises disruption for a radical-right administration while undermining trust in institutions.

Opponents of government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have initiated protests across the globe, often including violent attacks. Media platforms have offered a space for highly misleading Covid-19 content to be spread online, e.g. the QAnon conspiracy

theories and the *Plandemic* video that gathered millions of views, but also for attacking and scapegoating vulnerable groups as being responsible for the crisis and spreading radical discourse against the 'other' in a wider audience in order to inspire further conspiracies theories and attacks. Covid-19, in this sense, is capitalised in order to expand propaganda against the allegedly dangerous 'other' while at the same time spreading narratives of mistrust towards institutions and government.

The success of 'anti-Covid-19 protection' movements, from public and political discourse to street protests, lies in the fact that their radicalised message has managed to spread widely and rapidly among a public audience and involves various aspects of populism and self-defining negative attitudes. When looking at the case of the US and its domestic response, the pandemic health crisis has contributed to a radicalised version of reality, having only a weak base of evidence to support it. With Covid-19 still the predominant global health crisis, radical narratives on the danger of the 'other' and misinformation related to the virus continue to find their way to a growing audience, which opens a window of opportunity for different discourses to flourish.

As discussed above, the radical-right reframed its long-standing radicalised discourse to fit with the Covid-19 narrative, encouraging the pandemic to amplify ideas on race, class, and welfare and entangle them with that of perceptions of a spreading virus. From anti-migrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, and a broad 'othering' discourse, to discussion on the end of institutions and economic collapse and claims that 5G mobile telephony infrastructure is responsible for the spread of the virus, the pandemic crisis created new opportunities for constructing and disseminating the overall radical-right discourse. What is essential, though, is to explore how radical-right actors respond to the pandemic and explore how the pandemic and the populist narrative are being used, reframed, and co-opted in the new circumstances created by Covid-19. Additionally, the battle against conspiracy theories and an 'infodemic' is challenging, with experts and public actors and institutions emphasising constantly the importance of factual information.

Covid-19 developed into a health crisis and an economic, political, and societal crisis, challenging the structures of social cohesion

and democracy itself. With the discourse still in process, xenophobic, anti-institutional, exclusive, and individualistic narratives found their way into the public domain. Scapegoating of the 'other,' in the name of fighting a posited danger, offers a potential emotional escape from the apprehension (if not anxiety) brought on by the health crisis, something that builds on existing and longstanding prejudices and discriminatory attitudes. As argued throughout this chapter, populism and construction of the 'other' changes the urgency of the agenda and inflates the Covid-19 health crisis context. In addition to how the 'other' is mobilised to seize the window of opportunity, the self and the 'other' serve as a domestic response with an altered version of danger from others. In line with this, understanding the opportunities for exploitation in terms of public discourse and leadership offers the prospect of further comprehension of the process of shifting attention and blame in a crisis context.

In summary, identifiable risk exposures include the following, which are assessed further in chapter 10:

Risk Exposures of US Public and Society

Risk Exposure 1: Scapegoating of others and politicisation of fear

US radical-right political leaders and others who amplify and politicise fear among the public by falsely blaming and scapegoating particular nationalities, ethno-religious or other minorities, or those who reject radical-right ideology, as being responsible for the Covid-19 crisis or its economic consequences, are likely to increase harmful division and polarisation of US society.

Risk Exposure 2: Exclusion and violent extremism

'Othering' and marginalisation via the discourse of exclusion create a fertile ground for propagating violence towards communities considered responsible for spreading Covid-19. Expression of prejudice, e.g. racism and ethnocentrism towards the targeted communities, increases as well as the likelihood of violence.

Risk Exposures of US Democratic Governance and Institutions

Risk Exposure 1: Undermining public trust and confidence in democratic order

US radical-right political leaders and others who promulgate baseless conspiracy theories, misinformation, misdirection, manipulation and exploitation of crises, and egregious discourse, are likely to undermine public trust and confidence in US institutions of democratic governance and scientific and medical authorities.

Risk Exposure 2: Denigration of institutions

US radical-right political leaders and others who promulgate baseless conspiracy theories, misinformation, misdirection, manipulation, and exploitation of crises are likely to disregard and disrespect institutions that could challenge them, and project a discrediting animus against their role. This denigration may lead in the US to a more radical and anti-social discourse, an undermining of rational debate, and also provocation of conflict and violence.

Risk Exposures of US Trade and Foreign Policy

Risk Exposure 1: False allegations against other countries as a political tactic

US radical-right political leaders and others who blame and scapegoat particular countries or nationalities with false allegations (e.g. concerning Covid-19, trade violations, cyber-attacks) are likely to engender foreign policy mis-steps, international tensions, and anti-US reactions, which may damage US foreign relations.

Risk Exposure 2: International economic impact

US radical-right political leaders and others who blame and scapegoat particular countries or nationalities with false allegations (e.g. concerning Covid-19, trade violations, cyber-attacks) are likely to engender foreign policy that may damage international trade, create damaging shifts in finance and stock markets, and possibly lead to global economic recession.

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