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Article

The Spectre of Populist Leadership: QAnon, Emergent Formations, and Digital Community

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Abstract

QAnon is an online conspiracy movement centred on cryptic posts published by an unknown figure referred to as “Q.” Its anti-hierarchical framework and deployment of an unknown leader can be understood as a substantial departure from other 21st-century populisms that are sustained by the celebrity relationship between a leader (often aspiring to or gaining political office) and its followers (constituted in community through consumption of the leaders’ social media posts). Reflecting on contemporary debates and insights within cultural studies and digital communication literature, this article investigates some of the ways in which the spectral leadership of Q presents challenges for understanding and apprehending populist movements. In light of QAnon, there is an emerging need to make sense of populisms that are built on mythical or anonymous characters rather than on identifiable human actors in leadership roles. We begin by discussing the role of key practices of contemporary populist leadership and contrast these with justice-based populisms that are community-led without the figure of an identifiable leader. We argue that, as a populist movement, QAnon fits neither of these frameworks and, instead, has drawn on the affordances of digital media and its intersections with postmodern hyperreality to produce a new formation of populist movement today. Arguing that Q is the simulacra of a leader, we theorise the ways in which QAnon fosters affiliation and action from its adherents who, themselves, take on the role of saviour-leader.

Keywords

digital affordances; identification practices; leadership; networking; populism; QAnon; simulacra

Issue

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1. Introduction

Digital communication affordances have enabled significant shifts in the practices of political communication, affiliation, movement building, and promotion of political causes. These are most ostensible in everyday political marketing (Hughes, 2018) in which engagement and audience interactivity have emerged as an ordinary part of the practice of public discourse on politics and influence through network-building. At the same time, emerging political and populist movements have taken advantage of digital networking, includ-

ing, notably, the Trumpist Republican movement which utilised regular direct-to-followers social media communication and community building through digital engagement to present a presidential candidate’s views in ways not previously deployed in governance and electoral politics (Minot et al., 2021).

Much like the alt-right’s use of theatrics and entertainment across social media platforms, 21st-century populist movements make considered use of digital communication for the disruption of recognised political and communicative practices, the sharing of disinformation, and sensationalist messages that appeal to followers at

an emotional level, and for suturing conflicting messages and illogical positions into a coherent ideology (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). Perhaps most importantly, digital media affords populism the capacity to sustain the presence, engagement, and entertainment value of a populist leader who utilises celebrity and builds a brand in the form more often recognised among everyday social media influencers (Abidin, 2018; Cagliuso, 2021) in order to represent themselves in the messianic figure of a political “saviour.” Arguably, the practices that have emerged in the past decade are increasingly normative in political engagement across both populist and democratic movements, and across both legitimate parliamentary politics and marginal populist and protest movements.

Less attention, however, has been paid to how some of the most popular and influential populist formations have operated in ways which diverge from that norm. Based on our analysis of existing scholarship on emergent populism and conspiracy theory discourses, and how these two strands inform one another, this article interrogates aspects of the QAnon movement with a view to developing a conceptual understanding of populisms which are not focused and centralised upon an identified leader, but which utilise aspects of digital culture to present a “simulacra” of leadership (Baudrillard, 1988). The QAnon movement first emerged as a conspiratorial subculture on the social media network 4Chan, gaining adherence among disaffected North American voters who came to believe a liberal and elite-driven “deep state” was manipulating politics, journalism, health care, and other aspects of everyday life. Much QAnon rhetoric has been a pastiche of older conspiratorial beliefs of a secret society behind governance that involves satanism, cannibalism, child sex trafficking, and manipulation of institutions in order to establish a new world order (Bracewell, 2021). For instance, QAnon conspiracies and adherents played a key role in the January 2021 capitol riots in Washington, D.C. (Shephard, 2021). Denunciations of the absurdity of QAnon conspiracy theories have, according to Zuckerman (2019), obscured the possibilities of scholarship on what is novel, unusual, and interesting about the movement, and what it reveals about the intersection of politics and contemporary digital culture.

In this article, we argue that what is distinctive about QAnon not merely as a conspiracy theory but as a populist movement is that rather than operating in the “norms” of contemporary right-wing populisms built around a singular leader as “saviour,” QAnon has only the “spectre” of a leader: the unknown, anonymous, mysterious, and/or possibly non-existent “Q” who has provided thousands of online messages drawing on and promoting conspiratorial thinking. The anonymous but persistent posting of QAnon missives by Q simultaneously presents a form of populist leadership that is both present (regular communication) and spectral (invisibility and possible non-existence). We propose that this is a new, emerging form of populism—more than

a mere variation on existing forms—that takes advantage of the intersection between digital cultures, networking, and the postmodern hyperreality to build a disruptive political movement. Although several studies (e.g., DiMaggio, 2022; Enders et al., 2021) have pointed empirically to the relationship between a rise in the use of social media and right-wing conspiratorial belief, we argue that notions of social media causality are limited by a technological-determinist approach and that explaining QAnon’s appeal to its adherents requires a cultural analysis that makes sense of how it is a substantial *variation* on other populist movements. We are therefore interested in the conditions that enable a “leaderless” populism. Using cultural analysis, we argue that: (a) not merely decentralised networks but the conceptual changes to textuality and meaning that occurred alongside the development of digital cultures prepared people for believing in a leader without any evidence of this leader’s existence; and (b) in the absence of evidence of who the leader is, followers feel (even more than usual) personally responsible for political action beyond merely supporting a representative politician.

We begin this article with a brief introduction of key understandings of populism and the way in which discourses of populism have traditionally centralised the figure of the leader, followed by a brief summary of alternative community- and justice-based “leaderless” populisms. We argue that QAnon operates outside both of those recognisable populist frameworks. It does so by drawing on the contemporary digital-cultural conceptualisation of the simulacra—a resemblance to something (the image or implication of a leader, in this case) with “nothing behind them” (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 169). By shifting away from questions about digital networks producing decentralised communication for polarised political and conspiratorial perspectives, we suggest that the wider digital culture that prompts hyperreality produces the conditions for the QAnon movement to operate in the liminal zone as a leader–leaderless populism. We conclude the article with a discussion as to how QAnon “democratises” certain aspects of the leader’s role as political and cultural “saviour” by encouraging identification with the absent leadership in order to adopt the disruptive actions that, in other populisms, are normally undertaken by the leader on the people’s behalf.

Furthering our understanding of QAnon’s reversal of the recognised practices of populist movements is significant given the identification of QAnon by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation as a domestic terror threat (Barr & Pecorin, 2021), the normativisation of QAnon discourse through fake news channels (Cover et al., 2022), and the mainstreaming of QAnon ideas within the US Republican Party (Rosenberg & Haberman, 2020). Identifying QAnon’s distinctive practices of leadership and the ways in which this emerges from the logic of contemporary digital culture rather than concrete digital networks or political discourse helps identify QAnon

not as a unique accident but as constituted in contemporary culture.

2. The Figure of the Populist Leader

The centrality of the figure of a “leader” has marked most of the familiar forms of 20th- and 21st-century populism. Although populism itself has a long and complex history, since the latter half of the 2010s, the term populism has generally been associated with right-wing political movements in Western and Asian democracies (Mouffe, 2018). These are almost always constituted in a form of political relationship between a “charismatic” leader and a social base who are sustained through what Ostiguy (2017, pp. 1–2) described as “‘low’ appeals which resonate and receive positive reception within particular sectors of society for social-cultural historical reasons.” He notes that in the most extreme versions, the appeal of the leader is one of “fusion” between the personality and the masses, such that the leader is seen by their followers as both “like me” and an “ego ideal,” invoking the fantasy that they are simultaneously of the people and, in the sense of protecting or saving the people, above them (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 12). This has been the form found in some of the contemporary examples of right-wing populism where, although strongly contested, they have had success in sustaining movements that are unlikely to persist without their particular brand (Inglehart & Morris, 2016). Examples include the US (Donald Trump), France (Marine Le Pen), India (Narendra Modi’s prime ministership), Russia (the alternating presidency and premiership of Vladimir Putin), Australia (Pauline Hanson), Hungary (Viktor Orbán), and Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), among others.

It is well-recognised in cultural theory that populist leaders serve, in Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) terminology, as an “empty signifier” around which a large movement can cohere despite the illogic of supporting (usually) an elite figure who does not represent the social demographics of that movement. Empty signifiers are symbols so divested of any meaning that those who see and read them are able to impute their own meanings and relevance, establishing equivalence and a sense of representation. That is, the figure of the populist leader is always considered “unreal” in the sense that they are open to a multiplicity of significations in ways which expand the possibilities for members of a movement to more easily forge an identification and sense of belonging with a leader. This, of course, is not unlike other forms of political and partisan leadership and the inculcation of support among those who are otherwise different or feel disenfranchised from the class or sociality to which the leader belongs (Cover, 2020b). More recent research, however, has argued that although populist leaders are by necessity empty signifiers, that emptiness is not as neutral as depicted by Laclau and Mouffe (2001)—rather, the gendered, racialised, and adversarial identities of populist leaders prevent their identification with the people as a whole (McKean, 2016). This alternative perspec-

ive has prompted attention as to how populist leaders in the 21st century use their personal identities as a wedge to foster adversity between followers and an excluded other, for example, President Trump’s religious conversion to “pro-life” perspectives during his campaign, and the labour that went into producing a coherent and intelligible narrative for that new identity position, put the significations of his identity at the forefront of his claim to represent “the people” (Colvin, 2020).

The figure of the populist leader is understood to perform several cultural and communicative functions in sustaining a populist movement. Recent scholarship can be synthesised to identify four that have been significant across 20th-century populist movements. Firstly, the leader must generate a narrative of “direct connection with the people” (Anselmi, 2018, p. 8). This is typically through the leaders positioning themselves as best placed to serve as mediators between a subset of the population who are framed as “the people” and the institutions of governance which, through a leader’s rhetoric, are framed as corrupted, damaged, or not working effectively for the people (Weyland, 2001). From the national socialism of Adolf Hitler (Fischer, 1986) to the anti-immigration politics of Pauline Hanson in Australia (Sengul, 2020, 2022; Stratton, 1998), the leader makes the rhetorical claim that they mediate between the people and the machinery of government in the form of a “saviour” who will restore traditional practices and/or represent the people among a political class who are framed as disfavouring the people (Schneiker, 2020).

Secondly, the leader’s role is to deploy adversarial rhetoric to draw on an existing ambivalence towards authorised progressive social changes in order to build a conservative movement (Poynting et al., 2004, p. 71), often one that re-deploys older racisms, anti-diversity, anti-immigrant, nationalist, and anti-cosmopolitan discourses together into a political force that the leader vows they will set right or eradicate from the nation-state (Müller, 2016). Populism, then, can be understood as a “cultural reaction of those social sectors who perceive the promotion of these values [cosmopolitan liberalism] as a threat and propose a more simplified and backward vision, of the world, dominated by an anti-establishment feeling against the cosmopolitan elite” (Anselmi, 2018, p. 98; see also Waisbord, 2018, p. 17). The leader’s function in this, then, is to convince the sector of the public that will adhere to their populism to perceive themselves as the “authentic” people who, in their authenticity, are best placed to see the “truth” in contrast to those who have traditionally benefitted from the status quo but remain misguided, misled, or “ignorant,” particularly if they hold progressive, inclusive, and multicultural views.

Thirdly, the leader traditionally draws on an existing sense of disenfranchisement or grievance over socio-economic conditions to build a movement of people who are positioned (sometimes rightly) as having been “forgotten.” For example, key popular leaders in right-wing politics, including former Australian

Prime Minister Robert Menzies, Pauline Hanson, and US President Richard Nixon have deployed the rhetoric of the “forgotten people” or “silent majority” to describe a lower-middle-class authenticity that is a predominantly white settler and suburban, but whose values, economic stability, and lifestyle are framed as vulnerable to (adverse) changes brought by the presence of liberal thinking, elite social actors, the welfare class, immigrants, gender- and sexually-diverse persons, and so on (Cover, 2020b; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This rests on a leader who is capable of projecting vulnerability onto a population group or electorate in such a way as to present others as undeserving or to make forgettable the in-built “unequal distribution of vulnerability” (Butler et al., 2016, pp. 4–5).

Fourthly, the leader generates a discourse of anti-elitism, despite often being from among the elite political and financial actors in the first place. The leadership rhetoric typically claims neglect or suppression by one or more perceived blocs of elites, most often imagined to be dominated by left-liberal figures—in the US context and the experience of Trump populism, this has been comprised of the Washington, D.C. political establishment, the New York press, and the film and television production industry in Hollywood, California. The elite are positioned in leadership rhetoric within an adversarial dichotomy between the elite and authentic subjects suppressed by that elite.

Across each of these four functions of the leader, some of which are in discursive conflict with each other, the leader is positioned as messianic and redeeming (Anselmi, 2018, pp. 55–56). In the context of the 21st century, this involves a digital framework by which the figure of the leader works with a form of sensationalist entertainment and the careful cultivation of a brand (Bause, 2021). Where 20th-century populists had to rely on broadcast media technologies to maintain their presence among the people, digital media has permitted even greater persistence and regularity of messaging and public engagement.

Social media, then, serves as a powerful communicative tool not only to disseminate and reinforce the movement’s rhetoric but, importantly, to generate a sense of community and anger among those who are called on to recognise the mutuality of their grievances or disenfranchisement. The combination of persistent repetition of messages and the active sense of community building among those who share, re-circulate, comment upon, and build upon those messages is key to the contemporary success of populism (Mangerotti et al., 2021). What is key here, however, is that despite the proliferation of active voices, contestations and debates that mark social media and digital communication channels, the leader remains the vocal authority on political or social issues in their simplistic, sensationalist, and appealing rhetoric and use of disinformation (Cover et al., 2022) while dissenting arguments are dismissed as “fake news” or “biased” criticism (Farhall et al., 2019; Haw, 2021).

Indeed, social media has presented affordances to 21st-century populisms that re-position the figure of the leader as less reliant on being an “empty signifier” available for widespread identification by the people. Part of that is the expectation of authenticity and everydayness that marks online self-representation (Cover, 2016). This turns the function of authenticity away from the need to represent the sector of populist adherents as the authentic people and, instead, to represent the leader as authentic and grounded through persistent reference to their everyday lives, their homes, their families, their personal squabbles, their feelings—tweeted and articulated alongside policy statements. In this respect, the 21st-century populist leader straddles the framework of the empty signifier and the framework of the authentic and everyday individual, putting their identities at the forefront of the campaign in a way which varies from, say, mid-century fascist populism in which the everyday “self” of European fascist leaderships was obscured.

3. Leaderless Populisms

Despite the scholarship and public discourse that focuses on the figure of the leader in describing and analysing contemporary populisms, there are examples of populisms that arise and operate without the central figure of a leaderly personage. The term “populism” itself is, of course, an empty signifier (Anselmi, 2018, p. 32), yet often is used in a way that eschews the fact there are also positive, politically progressive forms of populism that are not always marked by the exclusions and marginalisations inherent in right-wing movements (McGuigan, 1992). This is not to suggest that there is a clear-cut, polarised distinction between right-wing populisms (Trumpism, QAnon, Nazism) and progressive movements (The Occupy Movement, Black Lives Matter, etc.) since the appeal to addressing the needs of the disenfranchised characterises both forms (Mouffe, 2018, p. 34). Rather, we can distinguish between the kinds of leader-led populisms described above, and other kinds, such as progressive populisms where a movement often persists without the need for a leader. This is not, of course, a universal truism: For example, the left-wing Five Star Movement in Italy had a clear leader Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte while espousing progressive welfare and environmental policies. When looking, however, at the broader range of progressive movements, there is a greater likelihood that it sustains without being characterised by a leader or leadership clique (Mouffe, 2018). Thus, while much popular writing on populism views it as typically a matter of “supply” (caused by the communication activity of a leader who generates a popular mood or political grievance among their adherents), alternative approaches have also demonstrated that a “cultural demand” perspective avoids reducing the idea of populism to simplistic articulations of manipulation by demagogues, viewing it instead as a formation that emerges from within socio-cultural and historical frameworks

(Ostiguy, 2017, p. 2). In this context, populism, then, can sometimes take the form of a broad cultural expression without connection to political leadership.

One example is found in the cultural form of “penal populism,” which can be characterised as a right-leaning populism operating through a leaderless cultural movement. Such a populism emerges against what is seen as a society or governance system that fails adequately to punish activities broadly seen as crimes, seeks reparation for past and present cultural wrongdoings, or calls for protections for those seen as victims of crimes (Anselmi, 2018, p. 73). Much like right-wing populism, this particular form has the focal point of addressing the failure of existing systems and regimes (particularly judicial and policing) to protect a “majority” from what are often framed as crimes of a minority (Anselmi, 2018, p. 76), yet tends to be less conservative and authoritarian and more an “emancipatory” for that demands political or social change (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Similarly, aspects of Black Lives Matter (Hooker, 2016), the #MeToo Movement (Hillstrom, 2018), and emergent new diversities in gender and sexual identity (Cover, 2020a), among others, are forms of populism that are built on collectivised action and emanate from culture without the requirement of a centralising/polarising figure of a leader. Although many of the tactics of disruption to prompt social change are similar to those found among, say, the alt-right, the absence of a leader to fulfil this work presents a more democratised framework for progressive populisms.

In many ways, the absence of a leader works because they emerge in the context of a cultural crisis by which structural inequalities and injustices have been revealed (Gramsci, 1971). The opportunity is taken up, then, for a widespread group to present opportunities for formative rather than destructive shifts in power blocs (Hall, 1979). Although they tend to be naturally untrusting of extant authority, knowledge frameworks and institutions (e.g., policing, sexual harassment policies, transgender health services, etc.) they are much less reliant on a leader to manufacture authenticity, usually because an identity politics framework has permitted the sharing of stories of lived experience on a scale that becomes a truth formation.

Significantly, many current justice-based populisms have emerged strongly in the 21st century, not because the justice claims are new, but because they too have been able to take advantage of the capacity of digital communication to bring together disparate voices of the marginalised to share narratives of lived experience in ways which form coherent demands for political and social change (Cover, 2020a) and in some cases, form “counter-publics” to collectively resist harmful and exclusionary forms of populism (Jackson & Banaszczuk, 2016). In that context, the utilisation of online identity practices, communication, and the praxis of online and collectivised storytelling produces mutual identification. Although not necessarily egalitarian or unified, these

justice-based populisms can engage political discourse despite the absence of a redemptive, saviour-leader figure to represent, primarily because the claim is that the injustices protested by these movements are widespread enough to be based on shared experience that does not need to be fabricated. In that context, they heavily imply a second contemporary model of populism that is distinct from the familiar norms of right-wing populism, indicating the possibilities of a populist movement constituted without the “star power” of a leader.

4. QAnon and the Simulacra of the Populist Leader

We contend that QAnon populism is neither a conspiracy theory nor a populist movement in the recognisable form that adheres to and is sustained by a public figure as a “leader” in the 20th- and 21st-century exemplars. Nor does it fit within the framework of the populisms identified above that are constituted in community and justice claims and not the redemptive claims of a leader. Rather, QAnon is a populist movement built on the spectral and hyperreal presence of a leader who is neither a leader nor fully absent. As with other contemporary populisms, digital networks and social media have enabled their emergence by providing platforms for persistent communication. Yet the affordance of digital media that is most significant to the rise of this particular populism is not the capability for messaging alone, nor the manufacturing of an aggrieved community of followers, but digital culture’s practices of hyperreality itself. And to say this is to begin to apprehend the spectral leadership of Q as the logical outcome of an age of hyperreality and simulacra. This is not, of course, to suggest that right-wing populisms have a “real” leader, while QAnon (in the model of some progressive populisms) sustains a movement without one. Rather, it suggests that while all leaderly populisms have a leader who fulfils the role of an empty signifier enabling a certain kind of identification by the movement that also always excludes a portion of the population and uses that wedge to generate adversity and adherence (McKean, 2016), QAnon has benefited by having a wholly absent or “hyperreal” leader who is not merely an empty signifier but is empty of any possible signification in that absence.

Although often understood as a conspiracy theory, we contend that QAnon is more clearly a populist movement if understood from the perspective of the actions it prescribes and fosters. Zuckerman (2019) understands QAnon as a “big tent” conspiracy theory drawing together a metanarrative that combines racism, politics, conspiracy, and outrage. While this drawing together of disparate social factors into a worldview is, indeed, one way in which to read QAnon, we suggest that conspiracy theory may be too imprecise a label for QAnon due to the ways in which it has mechanised political, violent, and electoral action among its adherents. This makes it substantially different from conspiracy theories such as the Moon Landing hoax, the Flat

Earthers, the Illuminati, and New World Order conspiracy claims, or the *X-Files*-style “deep state” claims, all of which are about giving adherents a sense of control over things which appear outside their immediate capacity to *trust* but otherwise not calling on personal intervention (Cover et al., 2022)—That is, no one is motivated to attack NASA headquarters to expose that the moon landing was a lie; rather, they such conspiracy theories inspire a sense of mystery without outrage. In this respect, QAnon is more closely aligned with the right-wing populist movements in the form in which they have emerged in the past decade: Adherents do not merely articulate that non-adherents have been “fooled” by a conspiracy, but that they are motivated through outrage to generate action. Indeed, the alignment of QAnon with the Trump presidency and post-presidential aspirations makes QAnon more than a conspiracy theory. The liminal space in which a leaderless leadership emerges in QAnon calls not on undecidability between conspiracy and populism but on recognising the leaderly framework as the product of a culture of hyperreality and simulacra.

Baudrillard (1988, p. 167) described the late 20th century as “the age of simulations,” in which references to the real were liquidated in favour of their “artificial resurrection” as non-meaningful systems of signs. Although QAnon is constituted in the logic of digital culture, Baudrillard predicted the outcome of this logic from its seeds in late 20th-century broadcast media, pointing to the ways in which the emerging transcendence of reality will in time have an impact on civic life, political institutions, and practices of communication and meaning-making (Morris, 2021). The spectrality of the mysterious Q is, in this sense, the logical outcome of the intersection between hyperreal simulacra as a communicative norm and digital culture’s capacity to present a leaderly presence through the virality of messages (in this case, through the distribution and re-circulation of literally thousands of so-called “Qdrops”).

Like many of the other new right-wing movements, QAnon draws upon and shares several similarities: (a) an anti-elitism built on grievance claims that elites are working for themselves (in this case not so much, just sustaining the socio-economic status quo, but that they are engaged in devil worship and child-trafficking); (b) a conspiratorial suspicion of a deep state manipulating institutions (for which Q claims specialist knowledge); (c) a sense that followers have access to a truth disavowed by non-followers and are thus the gatekeepers of traditional values (including, in this case, Christianity); (d) a rhetoric of redemption and a belief in a reckoning-to-come that will radically overturn extant institutions, practices, social frameworks, and progressive developments (MacMillen & Rush, 2021). The QAnon discourse draws, then, on much older conspiratorial beliefs to present an ideological pastiche of conflicting, often-irrational, principles related to a struggle against Satanism and child abduction (Fassin, 2021, p. 132), as well as a hidden cabal or “deep

state” manipulating political institutions from the behind the scenes.

In addition to its moral panic discourse, QAnon deploys the processes of sensationalist spectacle (Debord, 1994), typically deployed through its more outlandish conspiracy theories, such as the fantasy that John F. Kennedy or his son would be resurrected to usher in a second Trump presidency (Pitofsky, 2021). As with other populisms, moral panics designed to invoke emotive responses of anxiety, fear, and outrage are sutured to practices of sensationalism that are designed to evoke pleasure in the emotive responses. Like tabloid readers and the consumers of much online fake news, the return to ever more sensationalist and spectacular stories is core to the process of retaining adherence, regardless of the unbelievability and irrationality of the stories (Cover et al., 2022, p. 54). That is, from a cultural perspective, it is not the transmission of text and content that matters but the ritual practices of readership, sharing, and communion among adherents through the consumption of QAnon sensationalism itself (Carey, 1988, p. 18), all of which stand in place of the more typical consumption of a leader’s celebrity.

QAnon is thus distinct in that its leader is spectral, anonymous, possibly non-existent, and possibly non-essential to the sustained activities of the movement. Q is a mysterious figure who first surfaced on 4Chan on 28 October 2017, claiming they had seen evidence that Hillary Clinton would soon be arrested and tied at a military tribunal for the supposed transgressions described in Pizzagate. Thereafter, Q posted regular missives or “Qdrops” that focused on claims related to former US President Barack Obama and pronouncements that Trump was on a secret mission to expose and punish alleged conspirators (LaFrance, 2020; Rothschild, 2021). The QAnon conspiracy proliferated through social media circulation as users engaged with and virally spread Q’s persistent messages. While Donald Trump serves the messianic “saviour” role in the QAnon movement, he does not fulfil its “absent” leader role, positioned as a tool of the movement rather than the person who offers the “need” for change, despite the close alignment of Trumpism and QAnon discourses among supporters. Indeed, most public coverage of QAnon identifies the anonymous “Q” in the language of movement leadership (e.g., Thompson, 2022).

Where Q performs a leadership function is in the claim to authority and specialised knowledge of the conspiracies discussed, much like the more traditional right-wing populisms. Where QAnon is more akin to the leaderless community-based populist movements is in the absence of an identified, charismatic figure offering to serve the people politically on their behalf. It is unknown if Q is a genuine person (LaFrance, 2020). We argue that even if there is a singular individual behind the “Qdrops” this figure is still pure hyperreality—or what Baudrillard (1988, p. 166) described as “a real without origin or reality.” That is, in the unknowability of Q,

the figure of the leader is an empty signifier that is not open to members' practices of signification but can only ever signify a disembodied embodiment. This, we argue in the next section, generates a movement of personalised action as followers' bodies stand in for the absent body of the leader, rather than the adherence and electoral support that characterises most right-wing populisms in the 21st century. Although the question of whether or not Q is a real person has energised some media speculation (LaFrance, 2020), the authenticity of their leadership is apparently unimportant to QAnon adherents—as one follower tweeted: “NO ONE cares who Q is. WE care about the TRUTH” (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018).

In this respect, we argue that Q is the example par excellence of the simulacra. The term “simulacra” refers to imagery with “nothing behind them”; it does not hide the truth but stands in place of truth and becomes truth (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 169). As simulacra, the spectrality of Q is the consummate digital identity: curated through presence (the regularity of messaging) and devotion (through a cultivated following of those who like, share, and support). In being distinct from the other concurrent right-wing populist movements, then, QAnon's lack of a redemptive or messianic leader is made possible by the pastiche of “Qdrops” that stands in for a leader that is enabled and amplified by digital networks and a media ecology marked by disinformation. In other words, hyperreality and simulation achieve fruition as a cultural logic not in the long-anticipated places of virtual reality and gaming, but in the very real and very serious site of political discourse.

5. Democratisation of the Saviour Leader

In this final section, we would like to address some of the ways in which the simultaneous presence and absence of Q enable a motivated, active, and engaged movement in ways seen less strongly among other contemporary populisms. The other forms of right-wing populism depend on a leader who purports to represent disenfranchised everyday people to work on their behalf, usually in reinstalling a traditionalist past or removing liberal-elite political actors. The people are called upon primarily in a sustained electoral capacity (to vote that leader into office). QAnon, however, does not put forward a figure who works for the people nor one who seeks election. Rather, Q's absence fosters a framework in which followers are encouraged to take responsibility for change themselves. This is not to suggest that Q sets imperatives for extremist action, political violence, or other activities. Indeed, according to one study, among nearly 5,000 Qdrops that were coded by the researchers, messages that were explicit “calls to action” comprised only 1.4%, and these were mostly to pray or to vote for Donald Trump (Linville et al., 2021). Rather, it is the nearly 50% that were coded as “hidden knowledge” and the nearly 25% that were “inspirational” that are most significant to

the building of an active movement, whereby followers are positioned in the absence of a leader representing them to take on board the knowledge and inspiration to guide personal, individual action.

We refer to this new phenomenon as the “democratisation of the saviour role.” That is, unlike populist movements that adhere to a messianic leader figure who makes the promise to “save” (for example, to “make America great again”), Q's absence provides the space for QAnon followers to see themselves as personally responsible for engaging with the issues, for performing messianic martyrdom and serving as “saviour.” Indeed, the QAnon slogan itself, “Where we go one, we go all” (believed to originate in the 1996 film *White Squall*, about boys bonding and finding equality during a sailing ship catastrophe), is recognised as connoting an anti-hierarchical structure that advocates lone action and the imperative to support those lone actions among the remainder of the followers (Hosenball, 2021). This fosters a sense of personal responsibility among adherents rather than mere “support.” This responsibility or action can be seen in a number of examples of QAnon activity: reading or interpreting clues and engaging in one's “own research” (Zuckerman, 2019), taking the initiative to raid spaces believed to be hubs of conspiratorial activity (Goldman, 2016), engaging in post-Trump state electoral campaigning (Pilkington, 2022), speaking at conservative conferences in the US (Cowen, 2021), and being actively encouraged or obliged to on-share the “truth” of the movement (Zuckerman, 2019).

QAnon supporters take up the movement's imperative for personal responsibility in a number of ways. During the 2020 US presidential election, many QAnon advocates engaged in the production of disinformation, including particularly people who had never before been involved in online political work (Thomas, 2020; Tollefson, 2021). Individual QAnon followers have been implicated in public violence, both acting in concert (such as their involvement as an organised group in the January 2021 capitol riots) but more often independently, again in ways which can be read as taking on the saviour-leader on their own. For example, since 2020, there have been several North American cases of QAnon followers arrested for kidnapping children they erroneously believed were at risk from satanists, paedophiles, and child traffickers (Beckett, 2020). In March 2019, a 24-year-old adherent of QAnon was arrested for murdering a prominent crime family member because, as noted by his lawyer, he believed the victim was “a prominent member of the deep state” and therefore “an appropriate target for a citizen's arrest” (Watkins, 2019). Through his engagement with QAnon rhetoric, he had formed the belief that he would be personally protected by Trump and QAnon operatives (Watkins, 2019). A notable precursor to the figure of the QAnon adherent acting in a personal saviour-leader role is the December 2016 case of Edgar Maddison Welch, who was arrested at a Washington, D.C. pizzeria after entering the premises

wielding a rifle. He claimed he was in search of what he had, through QAnon disinformation, believed was the basement headquarters of the paedophile and child trafficking ring headed by Hillary Clinton. Having heard the story, he felt compelled to take it upon himself to “save” the children he believed were imprisoned beneath the restaurant. Drawing on the saviour rhetoric normally reserved for a populist leader, Welch claimed in subsequent interviews that his heart was “breaking over the thought of innocent people suffering” and had, therefore, felt compelled to “rescue” the children (Goldman, 2016). The case of Welch and the conspiracy on which he drew merged with QAnon conspiracy theories, arguably as much for the modelling of saviour-leadership as the theory’s compatibility with QAnon’s “big tent” convergence of disparate sources (Zuckerman, 2019).

Again, the contemporary affordances of digital culture to produce a reflective community not only enable the formation of a group perceiving itself as an outsider group but, in the case of QAnon, radically alters the sensibilities of non-belonging, hierarchical displacement, and disenfranchisement from the political elite by constructing a conceptual framework for affiliation that does not replicate hierarchical thinking and managed strategic action (as most political parties do). Rather, the spectrality of the leader simultaneously authorises the pastiche of beliefs while producing a form of identification that differs from the “following” of a leader and, instead, manufactures a performative subjectivity in which adherence means becoming QAnon itself. That is, the radically different structure of QAnon as a movement and its natural emanation from the digital-cultural logic of hyperreality encourages its adherents to identify themselves not only as members of an egalitarian, mutually supportive community, but to fulfil the saviour-leader function that remains unfulfilled by Q’s spectrality.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that QAnon fits neither in the framework of right-wing messianic or charismatic leadership populisms nor in the community populisms that respond to crises of justice. Rather, by suggesting that concepts of hyperreality and simulacra help provide an approach to understanding it as a cultural formation, we have begun the complex process of critically engaging with ways in which to make sense of this movement.

Arguably, the hyperreality of QAnon that gives it a natural fit with contemporary digital culture presents the greatest crisis for contemporary political engagement, producing a shift in practice that, given the complex difficulties of debunking conspiratorial thinking in an era of disinformation, stems the possibility of addressing the movement through discrediting the leadership (Daniels, 2018). Here, the democratic distribution of the leadership functions resulting from the spectral nature of Q does not produce fragmentation of the movement’s ideology—as often happens with justice-oriented

populisms—and instead makes it impossible to fully apprehend what QAnon is as a cultural form. Locating QAnon (and Q) as the hyperreal simulacra of contemporary postmodern digital culture positions the movement as something that cannot be fully apprehended in the rationalist logic by which assessment of all other political and activist movements are judged and evaluated.

Indeed, it is only by turning to a cultural critique that accounts for how a seemingly “alien” political movement emerges from the logic of contemporary digital culture that we can begin the process of locating it, and its risks, within the everyday. If we are to apprehend and dissuade future conspiratorial populisms, then understanding the conditions for the emergence of a leaderless-led right-wing populism is essential. We have argued that looking to the political discourse (to label it wrong) is as fruitless as suggesting that digital networks and polarised digital practices—a techno-pessimistic and technologically-determinist assumption—are causal to the rise of QAnon. Rather, we have suggested that the digital culture itself that embraces hyperreality and simulacra has, as predicted, created the conditions in which the authenticity of a movement’s leadership is no longer material among its adherents, establishing a framework in which an absent or anonymous figure can generate a movement.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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