

FORMS OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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On January 6, 2021, a mob of rioters attacked the U.S. Capitol and, in many ways, American democracy itself. QAnon, a conspiracy centered around the clandestine activities of the elite, was a key group in the attack. Since then, QAnon has featured in many headline-worthy national crimes, including multiple attempts to harm elected officials. While there is value in questioning how QAnon became so powerful, it is more instructive to consider why people are compelled to live, die, and kill for an ideology so outrageous. In this paper, I ask why pockets of mechanical solidarity exist within societies governed by organic solidarity. Following Émile Durkheim's theory of social solidarity, I interrogate QAnon's rise and conclude that QAnon exists within two large organic societies—the United States and the internet writ large. However, QAnon exists as a pocket of mechanical solidarity, and its rise is deeply connected to how people seek out and choose their communities. By comparing Durkheim's theories to those of other scholars, I find that the supposedly anachronistic presence of mechanical solidarity distills a question of trust. I posit the idea that certain people have an affinity for supported trust, naturally occurring in mechanical solidarity. Simultaneously, the unique landscape of platform capitalism exaggerates feelings of rapid change while disseminating sensational and bias-confirming information. QAnon and similar communities provide an alluring respite.

I. Introduction

A never-ending stream of information marks the 21st century. Globalization, aided by instant communication technology, leads to limitless and constant interaction with people worldwide. In the United States, cultural diversity and individuality are often touted as positive characteristics of Western democracy. Yet, somewhere in a global order seemingly governed by knowledge and personal expression, groups of people embrace singular and self-encompassing ideals.

On January 6, 2021, the world watched as the unthinkable happened—an assortment of right-wing extremists, Trump supporters, and election deniers attacked and breached the United States Capitol. As easy as it may be to characterize the Capitol attackers as crazy, idiotic, and bigoted, it is more instructive to investigate what led them to commit such a profound act of violence.

QAnon was a regular topic in the news coverage following the Capitol attack. A conspiracy theory born from the unregulated trenches of the internet chatroom "4chan" in October 2017, QAnon has been sweeping in its pull. It spread like wildfire across mainstream media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, uniting nationalist conservatives with urban millennial moms. Named for the cryptic messages of an anonymous government official with Q-level security clearance, QAnon's doctrine holds that the United States is run by a cabal of democratic government officials and celebrities who lead a satanic child sex-trafficking ring.

Conspiracy theories existed long before the creation of the internet or the presidency of Donald Trump. They also are not exclusive to people with extremist political ideologies but are tied with a specific type of social connection, independent of party platforms. In 1893, French sociologist Émile Durkheim described this type of connection as mechanical solidarity, a social cohesion derived from a shared set of values seen in conspiracies like QAnon. The United States is defined by a different kind of social cohesion, organic solidarity, which is strengthened by difference rather than similarity. Pockets of mechanical solidarity, like QAnon, arise because certain people have an affinity for supported trust, which naturally occurs in communities defined by mechanical solidarity.

II. Timeline of social solidarity

In the late 19th century, France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War created political and social conditions similar to recent American politics, defined by rapidly shifting public opinion and a polarized society. Immediately after Prussia's siege of Paris ended, revolutionary workers led an uprising and established the Paris Commune, overtaking Paris yet again. When the Commune collapsed, the French government, army, and Catholic Church pursued an *ordre moral* (moral order) which suppressed the revolutionary ideals of the Paris Commune. Tensions were high and caused great division between the conservative bourgeoisie and the political left, not unlike the polarization the United States experiences today.

The Dreyfus Affair epitomizes this conflict and contextualizes the world in which Durkheim wrote his work on social cohesion—*The Division of Labor*. In 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish man, was falsely accused of slipping secrets to the German army. After a series of public trials, Dreyfus was found guilty and imprisoned. A wave of intense anti-Semitism ensued, along with a subsequent critique of the traditional institutions that spearheaded Dreyfus's conviction. The debate over Dreyfus's alleged guilt was intense and irreconcilable, and people's deep hatred for Dreyfus or the institutions that convicted him revealed different kinds of social connectivity.

In *The Division of Labor*, Durkheim attempts to explain forms of social cohesion as they presented themselves in his own tumultuous France. The *ordre moral* and behavior of traditional institutions are representative of mechanical solidarity—a type of social cohesion that is defined by a collective consciousness. A collective consciousness is a shared set of ideas and values. It is transcendental and has a religious quality.¹ All members of a given community are expected to act following the collective consciousness. When mechanical solidarity is at its peak, “individuality is zero.”² The *ordre moral* was a collective consciousness of conservative ideals and French nationalism. Selling secrets to the German army was a violation of that collective consciousness. It was a crime not just because it endangered military operations but also because it transgressed the suprahuman, divine ideal of France itself.

Morality is a feeling and an emotion, but it is also represented by law. Mechanical solidarity is deeply concerned with morality and tied to repressive forms of law, which are penal. When the French army enacted a repressive law in Dreyfus's trial, their intent was not to correct an incorrect behavior but to publicly shame and denounce a violation of the collective consciousness.

In the 21st century, a labor scholar, Charles Heckscher, examines the breakdown of trust in a globalized world and concludes that this is similar to Durkheim's view of community characteristics. For Heckscher, trust—or the expectation that others will act in ways one thinks is morally right—is what makes a community.³ The existence of a community presupposes a shared set of values where people in that community agree on what is right and wrong. Those values should be so reliable that they are embedded into people's personalities.⁴

Heckscher's model of a traditional community is one of thick-walled worlds, thinly connected. This “small world” theory illustrates the existence of many communities with shared values or collective consciousnesses.

1 Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (Free Press, 1997), 63.

2 Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*, 125.

3 Charles Heckscher, *Trust in a Complex World: Enriching Community* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

4 Heckscher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 39.

All these communities are connected very thinly by lines of tolerance: the essential communication necessary for living beside people outside one's community.

The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 ended the Thirty Years' War and championed this social model.⁵ Each principality in the weakened Holy Roman Empire became a thick-walled community defined by mechanical solidarity. Some were Catholic, and some were Protestant, each governed by the collective consciousness of their chosen religion. However, they were still tied together by the remains of the Holy Roman Empire through language, trade, or fundamental diplomatic relations. Someone in a Protestant state did not have to agree with or understand someone in a Catholic state, but they tolerated each other and could collaborate when necessary.

Heckscher argues that this model continues, especially in the modern era. This "modern deal" is the idea that so long as everyone is polite and civil to others, they can continue to adhere to their collective consciousness.⁶ Heckscher frames democracy as a valuable tool for balancing these small worlds by dividing the power between them.⁷ Nothing greater is required from them than those thin lines of tolerance.

The similarities between Durkheim and Heckscher end there. Both Durkheim and Heckscher agree that community is dependent on reciprocal expectations among different people, but Durkheim does not believe that all communities rely on a shared set of values.⁸ Durkheim cites the division of labor as the impetus for a different kind of social solidarity strengthened by difference. Factory production arose out of the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries. With mass manufacturing, people specialized in different skills, increasing productive capacity. When one person screws and another person hammers, they can collectively complete an object much faster than if a single person makes it from start to finish. Specialization of labor relies on the concept of the individual.⁹ Instead of one collective consciousness that surpasses individual consciousnesses, the economic model of the division of labor introduces the idea of many *single* persons who come together.

This results in organic solidarity, which arises from an attraction between people who are inherently different and thus complement each other's strengths and weaknesses.¹⁰ When people specialize, they need others to complete a more significant task, causing them to come together. In this way, individuals can be pictured as different organs in one communal body.¹¹ Restitutive law represents organic solidarity instead of the repressive law of mechanical solidarity. In restitutive law, individuals have specific sets of rights and duties between each other rather than having a duty to live by a collective consciousness. These rights and duties rely on and support the unique skills and values of individual persons. Thus, organic solidarity is strengthened by difference. Durkheim leans heavily on the notion that organic solidarity is better than mechanical solidarity and protects communities from repressive law.¹² Repressive law's penal character strengthens communities by punishment and exclusion whereas restitutive law allows each person to negotiate how they want to contribute to their community. The United States is a nation broadly defined by organic solidarity, featuring diversity and individualism as defining characteristics.

However, Heckscher argues that those feelings of community, even in organic societies, are wearing thin: "decline in political engagement, the loss of confidence in government, the rise in divorce and other signs of unraveling of families, and the weakening of neighborhoods" are signs that social cohesion as a whole is fading.¹³ In the rhetoric of Donald Trump and the Freedom Caucus, the failures of the American government are symptomatic of decline. Heckscher cites the 1960s, following economic prosperity and the growth of higher education, as the beginning of the end of his modern deal, further expedited by the genesis of the internet.¹⁴

5 Hecksher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 22.

6 Hecksher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 59.

7 Hecksher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 31.

8 Hecksher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 7.

9 Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*, 102.

10 Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*, 45.

11 Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*, 143.

12 Durkheim, *The Division of Labor*, 145.

13 Heckscher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 47.

14 Heckscher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 56.

Where there were once thick-walled worlds, there are now thin-walls. Instead of tenuous strands of tolerance connecting groups, there are dozens of connections between individuals.¹⁵ In almost every facet of a person's life, from work to the media they consume in their leisure, they interact with people outside of their "small world."¹⁶ Not only do they have to accept that these people are different from themselves, they have to understand emotionally and intellectually lived experiences dissimilar from their own. These "cross-cutting" worlds have precipitated the rise of American far-right politics that champion an isolationist nationalism.

Naturally, the development of instant communication technology has exponentially increased the shift to "cross-cutting worlds." Scholars cite the 2008 economic crisis as the catalyst for a "paradigm shift" or "4th Industrial Revolution," where companies like Google and Facebook rose to prominence as immaterial digital platforms.¹⁷ Social media's global rise also led to the proliferation of their economic model: revenue for platform-based companies is generated by extracting data from users and selling that data to generate targeted advertisements. The longer a user is on a site, the more data a company can extract, causing them to keep a user online for as long as possible. Joseph Turow, a professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania, calls this "the long click."¹⁸ Facebook and other social media platforms are a goldmine for marketers because they link demographics, buying interests, web behaviors, and lifestyles in a network of information about a user that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg calls the "social graph."¹⁹ Social media platforms have employed many tools to generate "the long click," including showing users content that aligns with and opposes their current beliefs and biases, generating a very organic landscape that profits off of "cross-cutting" worlds.

Durkheim's theory suggests that organic solidarity, like the kind embodied in social media, is supposed to produce a greater sense of community with more significant differences. Instead, the sheer volume of individual experiences and diverse information the average person is presented with, along with the economic incentive to increase that volume through "the long click," creates an experience that can be overwhelming. We find that pockets of mechanical solidarity exist within societies and institutions governed by organic solidarity. In some cases, trust is fading where it should be getting stronger—this is where QAnon steps in.

III. QAnon as mechanical solidarity

First, it is helpful to understand conspiracy theories as inherently social phenomena. A conspiracy, in and of itself, is just a group of people who covertly plan to do something unlawful. A conspiracy theory is the assertion that some group has conspired against others. Some people commit conspiracy, which is a federal crime. *Conspiracy theories*, like QAnon, are assertions of improbable conspiracy that are derived from an unrelated set of unconventional details.²⁰

For example, the assertion that three people conspired together to rob a bank is technically a conspiracy theory; it is a theory that a conspiracy occurred. This conspiracy theory can be investigated, likely has substantive evidence, and can be confirmed in a court of law. Conversely, QAnon asserts that a group of Satan-worshippers who run a child sex ring have infiltrated American politics and media. This conspiracy theory does not have substantive evidence and is most likely completely untrue.

Three characteristics of conspiracy theories tie them to mechanical solidarity. The first is that conspiracy theories are inherently about groups.²¹ By definition, conspiracy requires two or more people. Two or more people constitute a group, and groups have social solidarity. Conspiracy theories form groups in two ways: first, by alleging a group of persons plans to do something unlawful, and second, by uniting a group of people believing in that conspiracy's actual existence.

15 Heckscher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 56.

16 Heckscher, *Trust in a Complex World*, 56.

17 Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 37–38.

18 Joseph Turow, *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth* (Yale University Press, 2011), 139.

19 Turow, *The Daily You*, 128-129.

20 Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Polity Press, 2021), 16.

21 Joseph Uscinski, *Conspiracy Theories: A Primer* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 29.

Secondly, conspiracy theories exhibit the Paranoid Style. Prominent 20th-century historian Richard Hofstadter describes the Paranoid Style in an essay of the same title. Hofstadter tracked the rise of right-wing American politics from the start of McCarthyism to Barry Goldwater and found a standard set of behaviors and beliefs: “. . . the central image of a gigantic conspiracy that had seized control of all history; a frightening view of the opposition as the superhuman incarnation of perfect evil, endowed with superhuman powers of deception; and a beleaguered view of themselves as a redeeming remnant, bloodied but unbowed.”²² Essentially, conspiracy theorists find themselves on the opposing side of some great moral debate—or, more acutely, on the defense against a tremendous moral attack. The *other group*, the group that commits the conspiracy, is the darkness to their light. Thirdly, conspiracy theories are transmitters of information. Modes of communication—print news, the internet, word of mouth—are all considered intermediaries that carry information from a transmitter to a receiver.

The greater the number of intermediaries between transmitter and receiver, the higher the likelihood of miscommunication.²³ QAnon distrusts mainstream forms of communication because they believe the gap between transmitter and receiver is too large, allowing bad-faith actors to manipulate the truth. Naturally, QAnon would want to diminish the number of intermediaries as much as possible.

Counterintuitively, QAnon is named for its defining aspect: Q drops. Q drops are coded messages, formatted into near-unintelligible fragments and acronyms, and posted on internet forums, first 4chan and then 8chan. These Q drops are purportedly from an anonymous government official with Q-level security clearance, giving the conspiracy its name.

Communicating in code creates a massive gap between transmitter and receiver. However, this does not matter because anons (QAnon believers) are not acting as receivers in these forums at all. Hofstadter proposes that Paranoid people are *only* transmitters of information; they do not facilitate communication with the outside world.²⁴ Essentially, a conspiracy theorist, or otherwise Paranoid person, continuously collects “evidence” to support their ideology and shares it with others. In that case, they never have to listen to an opposing view.

QAnon is considered unique among conspiracy theories because so much activity is generated by anons that actively decode Q drops in collaboration with each other.²⁵ Anons infinitely create content to transmit within their own community, reaffirming the collective consciousness’s validity.

Each of these three characteristics aligns with the definition of mechanical solidarity. Conspiracy theories are about groups held together by belief in a conspiracy. The conspiracy is the collective consciousness—for QAnon, that collective consciousness is belief in the oligarchic cabal of Satan-worshipping sex traffickers. This collective consciousness is both transcendent and moral or religious in quality. People who participate in an oligarchic cabal of Satan-worshipping sex traffickers are the most heinous evil. The people committed to ending that evil are of the highest good. Collective consciousness is conducive to enforcing the dualistic morality Hofstadter describes in the Paranoid Style. Finally, transmitting is an act of exclusion: when a person transmits continually, they block themselves from the thoughts and perspectives of others, effectively excluding outsiders from engaging in their community. The people allowed to engage must also contribute to the act of transmission, which strengthens the collective consciousness. QAnon is defined by mechanical solidarity.

IV. QAnon and repressive justice

QAnon’s approach to justice through the use of repressive law supports this argument. Repressive law is an expression of mechanical solidarity and it holds that those who violate the collective consciousness should be punished. Those satan-worshipping celebrities or anons’ family members who deny the existence of an evil oligarchy become the enemy; no one is going to punish them except for those faithful, crusading anons ready

22 Sean Wilentz, foreword to *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, by Richard Hofstadter (Vintage Books, 2008).

23 Onora O’Neill, *A Philosopher Looks at Digital Communication* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 6.

24 Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Vintage Books, 2008), 38.

25 Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19* (Routledge, 2022), 4.

to pick up a firearm. Already the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) has identified over 130 QAnon-associated crimes since 2016.²⁶

START's database begins with the first appearance of QAnon's collective consciousness, nearly a year before the first Q drop was published. In early October 2016, WikiLeaks published emails from Hillary Clinton's campaign manager John Podesta; shortly after, a theory called "Pizzagate" started circulating on 4chan, alleging that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex trafficking ring out of a D.C. pizza shop. On December 4, 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch, believing this ring was real and feeling compelled to stop it, transported a loaded AR-15 and pistol from North Carolina to Comet Ping Pong pizza shop in Washington, D.C., where he shot his AR-15 into a door and startled an employee. Another "Pizzagate" radical, Ryan Jaselskis, set fire to Comet Ping Pong three years later on January 23, 2019.

Anons continued exacting repressive justice on high-profile politicians, kidnapping Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer in October 2020 after she initiated COVID lockdown policies. Two years later, David DePape, another vocal supporter of QAnon, broke into Nancy Pelosi's San Francisco residence and was charged with attempted murder.

Most notably, an angry mob of rioters violently attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021, during Congress's certification of Joe Biden's presidential win. Four people died during the attack which was led by right-wing extremist groups and spurred by the rhetoric of former President Donald Trump. START estimates over one hundred attackers were linked to QAnon.

Following the Capitol attack, QAnon violence became more lethal. On August 7, 2021, Matthew Taylor Coleman drove his two children from Santa Barbara to Baja California, Mexico, where he killed them both. After being radicalized by QAnon and Illuminati conspiracies, Coleman came to believe his wife had serpent DNA and that he had to kill his children to prevent them from becoming monsters.

QAnon has touched nearly every headline-worthy national crime in the past five years, including three attacks on high-profile, elected officials. While conspiracy theories are often ridiculous fodder for popular culture, they are dangerous. People die; more importantly, people kill. From the perspective of the anons who commit these crimes, they are on a righteous crusade to save American children, often their own, from a fate they believe to be worse than death. They will do anything to cement the collective consciousness and edify it as a divine mission—even if they need to drive across the country, go toe-to-toe with one of the most powerful governments in the world, or murder their family.

V. Universal aspects of mechanical solidarity

QAnon is a unique conspiracy theory due to its effect on the American government, the amount of continuous violence it produces, and also for its wide reach. Extremist views constitute pockets of mechanical solidarity by definition; extremist views are extreme because they are all-encompassing and demand commitment without nuance. However, conspiracy theories—QAnon included—reach across the political spectrum indiscriminately.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, QAnon expanded into an umbrella theory that included broad sentiments around government overreach in lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccines.²⁷ In a phase called "Pastel Q," QAnon content was papered over with cute graphics and viral memes, and set loose on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, often under innocuous hashtags like "#savethechildren."²⁸

Just as with conspiracy theories, pockets of mechanical solidarity can be found in a variety of communities—even in societies dominated by organic solidarity, many of which are not as dangerous or violent as QAnon. These more ordinary examples further illustrate how mechanical solidarity produces social cohesion and how some people may come to expect it.

26 "QAnon Crime Maps," National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, accessed November 27, 2023, <https://www.start.umd.edu/qanon-crime-maps>.

27 Birchall and Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19*, 121.

28 Christophe Hauberson, "The Instagram aesthetic that made QAnon mainstream," *Vox*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/videos/2020/10/28/21538763/save-the-children-qanon-instagram>.

Religion can be a form of mechanical solidarity, especially if people abide by religious law. The collective consciousness is the beliefs of that religion, and believers are expected to live their lives in alignment with those beliefs. A commune can be a pocket of mechanical solidarity. The collective consciousness is the shared belief in a lifestyle that centers human community and shared resources. Certain work environments can also have mechanical solidarity. If there is a culture that prioritizes the company over all else, employees may find themselves working eighty hour work weeks and checking their emails during dinner.

The same can be applied to tight-knit neighborhoods or nuclear families. Heckscher's "modern deal" invokes the sense of a collective consciousness defined by American family values: people dream of a house, two and a half kids, and an SUV in the driveway. Parents send their kids to a good college or to soccer or to piano lessons. Families are together for the holidays. They believe in things like generosity and volunteerism and keeping up with the Joneses and the Joneses next door believe in the same things. Kids get married and have kids of their own and the cycle repeats itself behind white picket fences endlessly.

Adherence to this traditional ideal of American family life is a type of mechanical solidarity that is not inherently bad, but it is increasingly difficult to maintain. Maybe the Joneses moved out and an immigrant family who does not speak English moved in. Maybe their children choose to be childless. Maybe parents lose their jobs due to market transitions away from extractive industries. Heckscher's "modern deal" dissipates with globalization because mechanical solidarity is threatened by otherness. The dissemination of new ideas, cultures, and people turns homogenous communities into "cross-cutting" worlds. Those who lived their lives expecting continuity in their community and lifestyle are left without familiar structures and routines.

VI. Supported trust

Mechanical solidarity creates supported trust: trust that is regularly reinforced through shared activities. Heckscher defines trust as "confidence that other people will act, in the future, in ways [one thinks] is right."²⁹ While this definition is accurate, it misses out on an emotional aspect of trust. Trust is a *feeling* of security and familiarity in another person or institution. It is perfectly normal to desire this feeling. A person engages in activities that cement the collective consciousness *with* other people. This generates trust in two ways.

First, activities offer a structured opportunity for people to meet and get to know each other. For QAnon, those activities are engaging with other anons on 8chan or Facebook. Anons meet other anons by collaborating to decode Q drops or to raise awareness for child trafficking. By observing how other people interact in these collaborative spaces, a given person creates a conscious historical record of how others have acted in the past. As this record grows, that person builds confidence in their ability to predict how people will act in the future, generating trust between that person and those around them.

Secondly, that nascent trust is continually tested and positively reaffirmed in those activities. Every time an anon logs online, they are inundated with other anons engaging with Q. Every time people act in alignment with the collective consciousness, they validate their commitment to the collective consciousness and become increasingly familiar to other people in their community.

Collective consciousness affirming activities generate trust quickly and easily, because people in communities defined by mechanical solidarity have ample opportunity to find predictable people. For example, trust is created in religious communities by regular attendance of services or congregational activities. In a tight-knit neighborhood that fits Heckscher's "modern deal," people build trust by observing their neighbor's daily routines of getting mail and walking the dog. Alternatively, in high-octane, corporate environments closing deals and earning praise from an executive is what builds trust. However, if someone's identity or beliefs violate a collective consciousness, they will be ostracized. Supported trust is not important to everyone, especially when weighed against the exclusive nature of mechanical solidarity. LGBTQ+ individuals are shunned from the evangelical church community. Black Americans continue to be segregated from trendy, gentrified neighborhoods in housing markets. Even more simply, an investment banker who strongly believes in a forty-hour work week is

probably going to get fired. The people who are shunned are left with a choice: find a new pocket of mechanical solidarity that better aligns with their values or seek out community through organic solidarity.

Specifically, if a person has a negative experience with mechanical solidarity, they may be less likely to seek out that kind of social cohesion in the future. The excluded, having been harmed by absolute devotion to a collective consciousness, likely will not engage in a community where that devotion has the capacity to harm others in the same way. For some people, the supported trust found in mechanical solidarity cannot outweigh the promise of diversity offered by organic solidarity.

VII. Unsupported trust

While organic solidarity is strengthened by difference, the trust implicit in organic solidarity is tenuous at best, and derives from necessity rather than similarity. Organic solidarity is predicated on the idea that people *need* each other when they specialize economically. Enthusiastic consent to being a part of an organic community is not required. Because the division of labor requires specialization of the individual, there is no structured space or set of activities where trust is generated and reaffirmed collaboratively. In organic solidarity, trust appears most visibly in negative circumstances. Restitutive law is contractual, based on duties and obligations set forth by individuals or groups of individuals between each other. Contracts include consequences for when those duties and obligations are not met. It is then that society intervenes through legal institutions to arbitrate disputes. Trust is singled out in society only when it is broken. By nature, organic solidarity presupposes an easily-broken trust and does not provide structures that strengthen it.

The best example of unsupported trust is the internet writ large, especially in online public forums like social media platforms. Mainstream social media, with its infinite amount of content, ideas, opinions, and people, is governed by organic solidarity. Frequently, people who feel excluded from pockets of mechanical solidarity find their community on the internet, tapping into that never-ending well of human difference. Instagram accounts for queer youth of faith, children of immigrants, or BIPOC food activists have all carved out dynamic and supportive communities online for people who struggle to find that community elsewhere.

That being said, the volume of accounts and content focusing on different lived experiences can be incredibly overwhelming when coupled with misinformation, performative and real activism, an endless news cycle, and influencers trying to sell any manner of products. Accordingly, it is very difficult to know who is trustworthy and it is very easy to trust the wrong people or decide not to trust anybody at all. There are people for whom this unsupported trust is insufficient to generate feelings of familiarity and security. These people may value the supported trust of mechanical solidarity more highly than the diversity of organic solidarity. The opposite of trust is betrayal and this feeling of betrayal leaks into feelings about the government and other social institutions, leading to more general frustration and bewilderment about modern society. While these feelings are valid, they align strongly with the Paranoid Style. It is not that far a jump from feeling betrayed by society to believing societal actors are actively working against you in mysterious and malicious ways.

VIII. Affinities for supported and unsupported trust

Having an affinity for supported trust is not morally good or bad. Modern organic solidarity is overwhelming to everyone at a point. Information is accessible limitlessly, but it is also presented to people in a continuous stream. That information includes opinions, experiences, and people with disparate backgrounds, without a roadmap to navigate the expanse of organic solidarity, unsupported trust is untenable for certain individuals.

These individuals then seek out supported trust, which occurs naturally in pockets of mechanical solidarity like QAnon. It is for this reason that an average person finds themselves trapped in a web of extremist thinking. There are certainly kinds of mechanical solidarity that are not so blatantly harmful, but the structure of social media and modern forms of communication have a penchant for pushing people to extremes.

The amount of content on a social media platform may be limitless, but a person's individual feed is controlled by a social media algorithm. These algorithms are designed to produce "the long click" for individual

users, and they do so by creating “filter bubbles.”³⁰ If a user interacts with content from a certain source Google search results or the next Instagram reel is likely to include more content from that same source. The more a user interacts with a certain type of content, the more the algorithm will show them similar results. While the internet is, in and of itself, governed by organic solidarity, the slices of internet that people interact with most frequently create confirmation bias.

For instance, a hypothetical person sees one Pastel Q post that falsely claims the Democratic Party participates in child trafficking, and three other posts: one from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime that highlight other regions of the world where child sex-trafficking is highest, one that describes a large fiscal spending bill the Democratic Party is trying to pass in Congress, and one that criticizes Hillary Clinton’s policies as Secretary of State but does not make any mention of clandestine activities. This person has been presented with information from a variety of sources—not all complimentary, but certainly not supportive of a conspiracy.

In reality, a person who sees one Pastel Q post that falsely claims the Democratic Party participates in child trafficking is going to have a strong emotional reaction. They might share it with a friend out of disbelief or leave a comment asking more questions. The platform will identify the Pastel Q account as one the user interacts with and will continue to recommend it to the user. Instead of other perspectives, the next three posts might look like this: a stock photo of sickly children with misleading statistics that describes sex-trafficking in the U.S., a photoshopped picture of Nancy Pelosi drinking blood, and an anti-semitic post that claims to have financial records tying Hillary Clinton to the Jewish billionaire George Soros. This person has been presented with information from a set of similar sources, exactly as algorithms are designed, that is likely to produce a strong bias in belief of a conspiracy.

While seeking out supported trust is a natural expression of the desire for feelings of security, the desire for supported trust can lead people to dangerous communities.

IX. Creating supported trust in organic society

While supported trust exists naturally in mechanical solidarity, it can also be built into organic solidarity. Shared activities can be intentionally created in ways that celebrate individuality and difference.

There are institutional spaces of supported trust in community organizations, nonprofits, and schools. Leveraging the resources of these institutions can revitalize communities that are missing supported trust. Holding cross-cultural events, teaching people internet literacy, and creating spaces that facilitate positive and frequent human interaction are all buttressing activities. By creating supported trust in societies defined by organic solidarity, people with an affinity for supported trust may be less inclined to seek it out in extremist pockets of mechanical solidarity like QAnon.

X. Conclusion

Social solidarity is present in any community. In the United States, political and cultural polarization is represented by pockets of mechanical solidarity in a society otherwise defined by organic solidarity. Some of these pockets include QAnon and other extremist groups that commit acts of violence against the American government and the American people.

The people who engage in these acts of violence do so to cement the collective consciousness of QAnon or their pocket of mechanical solidarity. People are drawn to mechanical solidarity, because they desire supported trust. Supported trust is naturally found in communities defined by mechanical solidarity, but has to be intentionally created in societies defined by organic solidarity.

The internet has expanded the scope of organic solidarity without offering activities that buttress trust. Thus, people with an affinity for supported trust become overwhelmed by disparate information and seek out that supported trust in pockets of mechanical solidarity. Models of platform capitalism incentivize social media

30 Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia and Filippo Menczer, “Biases Make People Vulnerable to Misinformation Spread by Social Media,” *Scientific American*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/biases-make-people-vulnerable-to-misinformation-spread-by-social-media/>.

platforms to engage users as long as possible, by presenting them with information that confirms their biases. This confirmation bias has the ability to push people towards extremist ideologies.

As a preventative measure, it is possible to create supported trust in organic solidarity. When people are able to achieve feelings of security and familiarity through shared activities, they may be less inclined to seek out supported trust in potentially harmful pockets of mechanical solidarity.

XI. Bibliography

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