



Karla Resende da Costa

**Science as feeling: the emotions of the Flat Earth
movement and its political alignments**

Master's Thesis

Dissertation presented to the Programa de Pós
Graduação em Relações Internacionais of PUC-Rio in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Mestre em Relações Internacionais.

Advisor: Prof. Paula Orrico Sandrin

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To Galileo Galileu, who was imprisoned for
believing the Earth orbited the Sun.
Well. Here we are now, I guess.

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Abstract

COSTA, Karla Resende da; SANDRIN, Paula (Advisor). **Science as feeling: the emotions of the Flat Earth movement and its political alignments**. Rio de Janeiro, 2021. 106 p. Dissertação de Mestrado – Instituto de Relações Internacionais, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

This work seeks to investigate the emotional dimension of science denial through the case of the Flat Earth movement – a group of people who believe in a theory where the planet Earth is actually a flat disk, and the heliocentric model is a conspiracy orchestrated by scientific and governmental organizations – and the imbrications of this movement with American right-wing populism. By taking an affective approach inspired by the works of Sara Ahmed and Ty Solomon, the dissertation seeks to observe how the belief in conspiracies like Flat Earth has an emotional dimension to it, which crosses the same emotional paths as those of the affects that circulate around contemporary right-wing populism, especially the branch of it spearheaded by Donald Trump in the United States. Therefore, the work observes the interweaving between science denial and right-wing populism, and the discursive and emotional relations that these groups share, as to raise questions and discussions about the inherently political character of science, about the ways in which truth is manipulated in our current political spaces, and about how emotions are crucial to understand subjects' adherence to any political movement or discourse.

Keywords

Affective turn, science denial, right-wing, populism, conspiracy theories.

Resumo

COSTA, Karla Resende da; SANDRIN, Paula (Orientadora). **Ciência como sentimento: as emoções do movimento terraplanista e seus alinhamentos políticos**. Rio de Janeiro, 2021. 106 p. Dissertação de Mestrado – Instituto de Relações Internacionais, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

O trabalho busca investigar a dimensão emocional do negacionismo científico através do caso do movimento terraplanista – grupo de pessoas que acredita na teoria de que o planeta Terra na verdade é um disco plano, e o modelo heliocêntrico é uma conspiração de organizações científicas e governamentais – e as imbricações deste com o populismo de direita estadunidense. Utilizando-se de uma abordagem afetiva inspirada pelos trabalhos de Sara Ahmed e Ty Solomon, o trabalho pretende observar como a crença em conspirações como a da Terra Plana possui uma dimensão emocional, que opera em linhas cruzadas aos afetos que circulam ao redor do populismo de direita contemporâneo, especialmente aquele liderado por Donald Trump nos Estados Unidos. Assim, o trabalho observa as imbricações entre o negacionismo científico e o populismo de direita, e as relações discursivas e emocionais entre ambos os grupos, de forma a levantar um debate sobre o caráter inerentemente político da ciência, sobre as formas pelas quais a verdade é manipulada no cenário político atual, e sobre como as emoções são cruciais para entender a aderência de sujeitos a qualquer movimento ou discurso político.

Palavras-chave

Virada afetiva, negacionismo científico, direita, populismo, teorias da conspiração.

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1. Introduction

On February 22nd, 2020, a man named Mike Hughes died after crashing a homemade rocket in the California desert. Known as “Daredevil” and “Mad Mike”, Hughes’s goal was to fly high enough to be able to take pictures of the Earth from space – pictures that, he hoped, would prove that the Earth is actually flat, and not the globe science claims it to be (CONNOR, 2020; FREIMAN, 2020).

While tragic, Hughes’ case could be easily dismissed, at first sight, as an oddity. Scientific evidence of the shape of the Earth has not been contested in a serious way for centuries, even millennia; the heliocentric model is generally accepted and taught in schools, and it is the basis for a lot of the technology that has grown to be ordinary pieces of everyday lives, from television satellites to GPS systems. Yet, Hughes was convinced enough the Earth is flat to sacrifice his life over it – and he is not the only one with such a strong belief. The belief on a flat Earth has been a rising movement, especially on the Internet, over the mid- and late-2010s, a rise that is both surprising and worrying.

One evidence of such rise is the existence of the International Flat Earth Conference – an annual conference dedicated to the spread of Flat Earth ideas, theories and experiments. In it, most participants claim their first contact with the idea that the Earth is flat came through YouTube, where videos about conspiracy theories in general eventually led them to Flat Earth videos – and, with the YouTube algorithm being designed to make the user watch as many videos as possible, it tailors recommendations to make viewers of Flat Earth and conspiracies videos watch more and more of them, falling into a self-affirming conspiracy rabbit-hole (WEILL, 2018). Through YouTube, Flat Earth spread itself throughout the Internet, leading to the International Flat Earth Conference, and to rising public interest, not only from people adopting the theory into their personal beliefs, but also media attention and ridicule, and to the scorn of the scientific community (CLARK, 2018).

Flat Earth is, ultimately, a conspiracy theory. Beyond being a movement that questions the truth about the shape of the Earth, it questions why this truth has been hidden, and by whom, so much so that most Flat Earth content online that tends to draw in new believers focus less on showing how the Earth is flat, and more on how supposedly the idea that it is a globe is suspicious (WEILL, 2018). The

main concern is not with uncovering the supposed lie of the shape of the Earth, but the fact that there is a lie in the first place, that someone somewhere found it important enough to lie about something so big – why, it is never clear. In general, however, there does seem to be a sense of doom about the whole thing, were the obscure forces that invented the globe Earth did it to enact some type of control over innocent people, enforcing authoritarian control over truth and science, while isolating the production of this truth and this science to inaccessible marble towers controlled by tyrannical governments and evil elites (CLARK, 2018; WEILL, 2018).

This type of thinking is common among conspiracy theories – people who believe in the flat Earth, in fact, tend to also subscribe to many other conspiracy theories, such as thinking the 9/11 terrorist attack was faked, that the moon landing in 1969 was staged on a Hollywood studio, and that vaccines are dangerous and can cause diseases such as autism (CLARK, 2018; WEILL, 2018). Flat Earth is one among many, and as Weill (2018) claims, it might be the most foundational of them all, having its origins on millennia-old ideas about cosmology, and serves as a base for a worldview that allows a variety of other conspiracies to fit in neatly – after all, if the rich and powerful can lie and manipulate people into believing the Earth is the wrong shape, then they can lie about absolutely anything.

The rise of Flat Earth in the mid- to late-2010s is a product of its time. This in an age of rising conspiracy theories, Weill claims, or, as Zuckerman (2019) puts it, it is a product of an approach to reality where people create closed universes where the only information that is valid is information that reinforces itself, and dissent is prohibited within the movement. It is, ultimately, a product of a political environment where truth comes second to the creation of a reality that, according to their own perceptions, is more comfortable, that makes more sense, that has a definitive narrative, where the heroes and the villains are clear-cut, and where, if there is a villain hiding the truth, this villain can inevitably be defeated.

While Flat Earth might be understood as a foundational conspiracy theory, from 2017 forward another conspiracy theory took the spotlight and became the most influential in conspiracy communities, online and otherwise: QAnon. It could be argued, even, that Flat Earth was weakened from that year onwards, with many

of its proponents flocking to the more expansive and narratively rich QAnon (OLSON, 2020). QAnon came to public attention after many of its supporters stormed the Capitol in Washington, D.C., in January 2021, seeking to unveil proof that the 2020 elections were fraudulent, and trying to take over in defence of then-president Donald Trump (WENDLING, 2021). The movement, however, had been brewing on the internet for a while, having its origins on anonymous forums such as 4chan. It started with anonymous posts by a user named “Q”, that supposedly left hints related to a secret battle being fought on the inside of the American government, with Donald Trump spearheading it. As Q’s posts increased in number, so did the people interested in what he had to say, even if little of it made any sense to outside observers. In the end, Q and the followers dedicated to decoding his cryptic posts created a myth about a cabal of Satanist cannibalistic paedophiles that secretly control the American government, as well as the Democratic party, Hollywood, and most international organizations – a cabal that Trump is dedicated to combating in the shadows, something that explains his somewhat disappointing and incompetent presidency: he was too busy fighting evil in the shadows and trying to Make America Great Again to promote meaningful economic growth or effective measures against a pandemic, for example (HEER, 2020).

While there is no evidence of any of the claims of QAnon, or that any of the information leaked by Q is true, the conspiracy spread like wildfire throughout the internet, much like Flat Earth did – through social media algorithms that constantly feed the user with similar content to the ones that they already consumed. Much like Flat Earth, then, QAnon reached people through other conspiracy theories, and in particular, it also managed to slip through the cracks of content about child protection and healthcare, with covert rings of child trafficking and paedophilia, and the preaching of vaccines as particularly dangerous to children, being the main fuel to create a panic that spread QAnon even wider (CHÁVEZ, 2020). On Facebook, the number of groups related to QAnon has reached the thousands, totalling millions of members, and its influence has reached far enough that Republican candidates on the 2020 elections openly supported the theory and used it in their campaigning strategy; it reached as far, even, to become a topic of

discussion in the Brazilian 2020 municipal elections (CHIDI, 2020; COELHO, 2020; HEER, 2020).

QAnon feels like an exaggeration, an inevitable extrapolation of what started with Flat Earth, a fever pitch of a general environment of distrust of authority, media and science. Both theories are influenced by an undercurrent of constant fear: fear of hidden forces controlling society, fear of lack of freedom of thought, expression and religion, fear of a political and economic environment where the average person has no power or agency, where the American dream is evermore unreachable, and where promises of financial success and comfort seem everyday more like lies. In this environment where so many fears converge, the creation of an alternative reality, be it one where the president is secretly a hero, or where there is a secret group of powerful people lying about everything, including the shape of the Earth, creates hope: if there's an enemy, it can be defeated, and when this happens, everything will be normal and good again (ZUCKERMAN, 2019).

The creation of an alternative reality is also empowering – and this is particularly true for Flat Earth. Many people who believe the Earth is flat tend to seek for evidence themselves; they have trust on the scientific method, or a version of it that fits their criteria of what constitutes as truth, and are profoundly curious and sceptical. With QAnon, too, the model through which the conspiracy spreads, with Q's posts being cryptic and requiring followers to decode them, means that believers must actively participate in the creation of the conspiratorial narrative. What happens, then, is that the creation of an alternative reality that makes more sense than the one that is lived in puts the power in these people hands to dictate what their world is like, instead of simply accepting what they are told by authority figures. QAnon and Flat Earth give their believers a sense of independence, of intelligence, of knowing more and better than non-believers, and of having the tools to prove that they are right. Inside these conspiracies, the believer is in full control of their own universe, against the hopelessness of a universe where they are the ones being controlled (CLARK, 2018; ZUCKERMAN, 2019).

This dissertation, then, is the product of curiosity over this scenario, over this hopelessness that generates the creation of alternate realities where a better a

world is possible. This hopelessness exists in a specific historical context, a context also marked by the rise of right-wing populism over much of the Western world, and certainly over the United States, a right-wing populism that gathers in its scope a variety of different right-wing groups, from classic conservatism to a fascist-leaning extreme right-wing. Here, populism is defined as a form of politics where many different demands and political positions are made to match each other through a chain of equivalences that puts all of them together against a common enemy, usually personified in the form of an ambiguous, amorphous elite (LACLAU, 2005). This right-wing populism does something similar, and in the United States, where this study will be focused, the enemy tends to be the liberal, well-educated elites of the East Coast, with their control over banks, universities, and the media (BROWN, 2019).

This amorphous elite, then, with its lack of specificity, can be blamed for a variety of dissatisfactions, broadening the scope of demands and lacks that compose the field of the “us” and the “people” in right-wing populism. It is in this openness of enmity that the doors are open for conspiracies to join right-wing populism quite seamlessly. For QAnon, the elites are hiding Satanic practices and plans to control the population and the whole world; for flat-Earthers, the elites are willing to lie about anything, if it helps them keep control of the population and convince them to follow blindly what they claim to be science. The elites are the enemy and therefore, the ones who know the “truth”, the ones who have unveiled the secrets these evil masterminds tried so hard to hide, must be on the side of the people.

What will be demonstrated over the course of this work, then, is how these conspiracies, with an emphasis on Flat Earth, and their strength within right-wing populism, are a product of this era of exacerbated dissatisfaction with the establishment, which translates into more and more radical right-wing ideas, and which originates over years of building hopelessness, resentment, and loss of values and principles under neoliberalism. As Fraser (2019) and Nunes (2020) show, decades of neoliberalism have created an environment that is ever more economically insecure for the working class, an environment where the average subject is less and less capable of being financially secure and of escaping austerity, and faith in the neoliberal model is increasingly fractured. At the same time, as Brown (2019) demonstrates, the hegemony of neoliberalism has created a

discursive scenario where the basic tenets of it still have dominance on the public perception of politics, and individualism is valued above all things; freedom is the most important value, and a constant fear of authoritarianism in the form of government intervention is present. This fear translates into the rejection of community and welfare policies, as well as a lack of values to be upheld, as anything is justifiable under the basic premise of protecting personal freedom – even limiting the freedom of those seen as a threat.

So, at the same time as the steady grip of neoliberalism on politics and the economy seem to collapse, a monstrous version of its ideas is still surviving, creating a scenario where, while economic conditions keep worsening, the principles that lead to these conditions still must be upheld. The value of freedom is absolute, and the fear of authoritarianism is so great that it erases anything else – to the point where the possibility of government tyranny is seen everywhere. As Nunes (2020) and Brown (2019) point out, this scenario culminates with the type of right-wing politics that brought Donald Trump to office in 2016, and as I hope to demonstrate in the next chapters, this scenario is also the perfect brewing pot for the formation and strengthening of conspiracies that see supreme authority as the greatest evil, and individual enterprise over science and the decoding of truth as the greatest good.

If, then, things like insecurity, fear and hope are such central forces in the dynamics described in the previous paragraphs, it only seems natural that the study of emotions should take centre stage in the following pages. The goal of investigating the intersections of right-wing populism and conspiracies like Flat Earth in a scenario of hopelessness created by neoliberal hegemony will, then, be guided by an understanding of emotions as central to politics. Here, I will be following the young but promising tradition of the affective turn as my theoretical guide, putting the influence of emotions on politics in centre stage. Fear and hope seem to be the main sentiments that guide conspiratorial thinking, with fear provoking it and hope maintaining it, and the work of Ahmed (2014) on how emotions move bodies and minds will be particularly useful to help us understand how this happens. Just as well, the type of antagonistic thinking that guides not only conspiratorial beliefs, but also right-wing populism, is well explored by Solomon (2015) in his Lacanian approach to emotions and desire in international politics.

Therefore, this work will investigate the role of emotions on the intersection between right-wing populism and conspiracy theories such as Flat Earth, and in the creation of alternative realities that deny science and truth in favour of a hopeful, escapist fantasy. Hopefully, the following pages will bring about a reflection on the importance of paying attention to emotions when analysing politics, as well as the importance of taking science denial seriously, as it is underlined by deeper historical, discursive, emotional, and material factors that connect it to politics in a serious, and ever more impactful, ways.

1.1. The pandemic-shaped elephant in the room

Writing about science denial and conspiracy theories in the years 2020 and 2021 is impossible to do without a huge shadow looming over the writer. The end of 2019 saw the outbreak of a pandemic, and the months following this event were filled to the brim with instances where denying science became a matter of life and death, and where the inherently political nature of science's claim to absolute truth became more obvious than ever (AJMC STAFF, 2021; BRUM, 2021).

Writing about science denial in 2020 and 2021 without the central subject being COVID-19 is weird. This is a work about feelings, so I hope the reader will understand that I feel the need to talk about my feelings about this subject for a brief moment, if only to clarify some things. Writing this dissertation was a constant conflict between the need to talk about something that shapes our contemporary political scenario, while also being scared that writing about something so current would make my work very quickly outdated and contradictory, as events unfolded while I was writing. This meant that, while the types of political conflicts that emerged because of COVID-19 unfolded around the world, I made the firm decision to keep talking about Flat Earth – I had no idea where the undercurrent and denial of COVID-19 would go, and it would be a rash move to turn my work completely around to try to fit into current but unpredictable events.

So, writing about the seemingly harmless Flat Earth while the death count rose to millions around the world because of a different type of science denial was both reaffirming and terrifying. Reaffirming, because COVID-19 and the reaction to it reminded me that my thesis made sense, that talking about science denial in the context of a political landscape dominated by right-wing populism is profoundly

important. At the same time, millions were dying, and it was terrifying – it still is, as I write this in January 2021 and vaccines are being deployed but thousands keep dying daily. How can Flat Earth be important when this is happening? How can conspiracies promoted by a handful of people about the shape of the Earth truly matter when there is a plague outside but the leaders of two of the largest states on the world are so absolutely determined to sacrifice lives for the sake of “saving the economy”, feeding into other conspiracies that can literally kill? I kept writing, but with a constant sense of unease, like there was something very foolish about what I was doing in the grand scheme of things.

And then, November 2020 happened, and Donald Trump lost the presidential election and rejected the results, claiming election fraud without any proof. And then January 2021 happened, and his supporters stormed the Capitol, many of them believers of QAnon, in an unprecedented riot against the election results despite total lack of evidence that there was anything wrong with then. And things seemed to click back together.

This will be explored in depth further down the text, when all the pieces necessary for this puzzle are properly laid out – but this is it. There is no science denial that is more or less dangerous than the other, because all of it boils down to the same type of unreality, to the same type of escapist denial that tries to build a world that makes more sense. In the same way that QAnon believers fear a secret group of Satanist overlords, and flat-Earthers fear being lied to about everything in order to be controlled, the people who deny the gravity of COVID-19 are scared, and hoping for a world that is better, where the simple act of getting out of the house does not mean risk of death. These denials of science and reality are all cut from the same cloth, then, a cloth made out of trying to build a world that is better, even if it is nothing more than an illusion, and even if this illusion can do more harm than good.

All that being said, it is important, too, to point out what is not the goal of this work. I do not intend to make a thorough exploration of science denial and disinformation in general, nor its spreading in modern times, nor the political disputes around truth and the control of narratives – even though all of these things are a part of the context I am writing in. These are, indeed, big issues, and ones that

deserve their own spotlight in future research, but they are not the focus of the following pages. Instead, this is intended to be a study of the circulation of emotions in a specific period of history, a circulation that happens to translate into denial and escapism. As will be shown in further chapters, this is, ultimately, a work about fear and frustration being turned into hope, through any means necessary – even if these means are dangerous. Then, instead of taking on the gigantic task of investigating science denial and the disputes around truth in modern times, my task is humbler, and more specific; it sheds light to a dynamic of emotional flows that is specific to the circumstances of contemporary right-wing populism, and that generates a specific kind of reality-making and science denial. With this point clarified, we can move on to an overview of the following chapters.

1.2. Work structure

The dissertation is divided in three chapters. The first chapter, the one that follows this introduction, will provide context, by exploring what I mean by contemporary right-wing populism. In it, “right-wing” and “populism” will be defined more clearly and precisely, and an exploration will be presented of the characteristics of these two words in modern times in the United States. The chapter will also give an overview of the context saturated by decades of neoliberal ideology and policies that created the specific type of right-wing populism that can be seen in the United States today.

The second chapter will explore emotions and their role in politics, through a literature review of the affective turn in International Relations. The goal of the chapter is to build a theoretical framework around which the analysis on the last chapter will be built, and this will be done by reviewing what has been written about emotions in IR, taking mainly the work of Ty Solomon (2015) as basis to understand the role of desire in building political allegiances and discursive hegemonies. The chapter will then explore some of the erasures that were brought about by the movement called the affective turn in social sciences, specifically regarding the study of emotions in feminist and queer literature before this turn was first recognized. This is done through the work of Sara Ahmed (AHMED, 2014), whose work on emotion is crucial to complement Solomon’s framework, bringing a micro approach to how specific emotions move bodies and shape understandings of the world and of the objects in it.

Finally, the third chapter will take this emotional framework to analyse the documentary *Behind the Curve* (2018), which explores the Flat Earth movement and the media and scientific commotion that surrounds it. *Behind the Curve*'s study of the Flat Earth movement is profound, and it explores a variety of facets of the movement, from its commitment to the scientific practice – even if it is a commitment that is eschewed to their goals – to the emotional dimension that binds people together around this belief on a flat Earth. The documentary is also useful in showing how Flat Earth tends to be only one in a field of many conspiracies that flat-Earthers tend to ascribe to, and shows the motivations behind allegiance to the movement. After analysing the interviews with flat-Earthers presented in *Behind the Curve*, the chapter will explore how the Trump-lead right-wing populism of the 2010s created an environment favourable to the type of distrust of science that characterizes flat-Earth and will explore some more of the rise of QAnon in recent years, following on the footsteps of conspiracies before it. The conclusion chapter will wrap up the argument and offer a reflection on the affective power of science denial and its pervasiveness beyond the right-wing.

2. Chapter one: which right?

2.1. Introduction

There is no way around it: any work that tries to explore some dynamic of right-wing politics needs to start by deciding what right-wing even means. The separation of politics between right and left is an old one and, as such, has changed drastically over time and space. When talking about the right and the left contemporarily, especially, it is particularly important to consider the different subsections of these wings of politics, and to have a precise focus. When it comes to the right-wing in the United States, which will be my focus on the next pages, it is a vast field of politics with subdivisions that go from mainstream elite conservatives all the way to neo-Nazi movements and defenders of the creation of a white ethnostate. Putting them all under the same label without looking at them in depth first would be reckless, but it is possible to do so carefully, as I hope to demonstrate soon.

So, the goals of this chapter are multiple. First, it is important to do an overview of how the right-wing shapes itself in the United States currently, going over the aforementioned spectrum between extremists and conservatives. Of course, the definitions I use here are not universal nor consensual, but hopefully they will make it easy to understand the nuances of right-wing politics contemporarily, the conflicts between them and, mostly importantly, the similarities that make them a political force to be reckoned with.

This relates to my second goal with this chapter, towards a definition of right-wing populism, one that creates a new type of right-wing while trying to fit as many different subsections of it under its umbrella as it can. Populism is a tricky, controversial concept (STAVRAKAKIS, 2017, p. 2), and as such, it is important to be thorough in defining it, and explaining what makes the contemporary American right-wing populist at all. So, the goal here is threefold: first, to define populism in a clear, useful way; second, to demonstrate how this definition of populism is useful in understanding how right-wing populism manifested itself historically in the United States; and third, and most importantly, explore the conditions that brought right-wing populism to the fore once again in the 21st century.

This third goal is the most complex one, and the one that is crucial for the goals of this dissertation. It is extremely important to understand the context of

contemporary right-wing populism, and its historical particularities, as they can bring us closer to understanding how the right embraces science denial and conspiracies to its own benefit. In fact, I would argue, the neoliberal environment that created contemporary right-wing populism has denial of truth and invalidation of intellectuality as one of its main characteristics, which is extrapolated exponentially by nihilism and (as we will see in the next chapter) feelings of fear, resentment, hopelessness and misguided empowerment. But, as most important things do, this will come last. First, let us contextualize what the right-wing is, and build our current scenario from there.

2.2. The right-wing in the United States: an overview

Among the broad right side of the American political spectrum, different subdivisions exist and intersect with each other, but three seem to be prevalent in the literature, as divided by Durham (2003) and Michael (2015): conservative, radical and extreme right. The barriers between these three are not precise, but both authors find similar points of differentiation for analysis – it is, however, important to point out, before beginning to talk about these separations, that they are not set in stone. These groups and their allegiances flow between each other and, as will be shown, they have multiple points of intersection, making it easy for definitions to be contradictory, because these groups are so intertwined. The separations done here have, mostly, a didactic purpose, as to better understand the variety of points of view that compose the right-wing currently, and how these different perceptions can be united under the banner of right-wing populism. They should not be taken as absolute categorizations of how the right-wing organizes itself, only as a useful analysis tool.

We can begin to look at different subsections of the right-wing, then, by going from the centre and towards the more extreme fields of it. The conservative right is the subsection that is closest to the centre of the political spectrum, being a big part of mainstream American politics. Conservatives tend to defend neoliberal economic practices, low state intervention in the economy, and the preservation of individual rights. The conservative side of the right wing is typically portrayed as populated by members of the white economic elite, but it seems to have broad appeal with the white middle class as well, especially due to their conservative views of social issues, such as abortion and gay marriage (MICHAEL, 2015).

On the surface, then, conservatives will not seem that different from members of the radical right. Radicals are also big defenders of neoliberal economics, low state intervention, not only on the economy but on all aspects of public and private life, and the preservation of individual rights (MICHAEL, 2015). Radicals take it a step further, however, in seeing the state as an enemy. To the radical right, the federal government does everything in their power to undermine individual freedom and, consequently, everything they stand for and all that they believe the United States and its Constitution also stand for. The exception, however, appears when it comes to public security and the armed forces: while defending the right of every citizen to bear arms and to promote self-defence, the radical right tends to be very supportive of the army and the police, seeing them as some of the only spheres of life that the state needs to act in (DURHAM, 2003).

It is in the radical right where conspiracies, especially those concerning the Democratic Party, seem to bloom and take strength. The greatest fear of the radical right seems to be the establishment of an elusive “New World Order”, a vague state of affairs where the world’s wealthiest elites would take over every country through globalization (these elites, then, being called “globalists”), installing Communist dictatorships, sending dissenters to concentration camps, and generally destroying what radicals believe to be the foundations of American identity. These conspiracies permeate many public matters and events, such as belief that the 9/11 attack in New York was a CIA plot to ensure enough fear in the population that it would make it easier for the government to install authoritarian measures in the name of national security (DURHAM, 2003). The figure of globalists is a common one among conspiracy theories, and it is usually equated with a portrayal of evil elites bent of controlling the economy and politics to the detriment of the well-being of the common people. There is a strong anti-semitic undercurrent to this, as this elites are very commonly portrayed as secret Jewish overlords who control the banks and, consequently, in conspiracy logic, everything else (FUTRELLE, 2017; WEILL, 2019). This means that, combining the wealth and the Jewishness of these supposed globalists, the radical right that tends towards these types of conspiracies is mostly both non-elite – that is, working- and middle-class – and non-Jewish, usually Christian and profoundly concerned with the maintenance of traditional Christian values.

While these conspiracies mostly inhabit the fringe of American politics, they frequently bleed towards more mainstream conservatism and, especially in the later months of the Trump administration (2017-2020), have gained strength and public attention through QAnon, an amalgamation of these theories (with many more added, such as the Clintons being a part of a child-trafficking ring of Satanists who worked in conjunction with Jeffrey Epstein¹) around the figure of President Donald Trump, hailing him as a saviour who, secretly, has been fighting the globalists infiltrated in the White House to set America free again. These conspiracies centre around an anonymous figure known as “Q”, who fueled the conspiracy at first by making posts on the anonymous forum 4chan, claiming to be an government agent releasing clues to the public about the globalists’ plans and Trump’s effort to thwart them (HEER, 2020; ZUCKERMAN, 2019).

While the radical right occasionally attempts to be subtle on the racial and ethnic identities of the villains in their conspiracies, according to Durham, the extreme right is where race comes to the forefront. For radicals, the enemy is the state; for extremists, the enemy is anyone who is not white – with Jewish people being the masterminds behind every plot to undermine whiteness in the United States. The extreme right is composed of white supremacists and neo-Nazis, organized either in small local militias or following a ‘lone wolf’ approach to organizing, where individual members try to pursue their agenda on their own, enacting violence against any ethnic group they deem as the enemy, and organizing mainly through anonymous online forums (DURHAM, 2003). Neiwert (2017) gives as an example of this ‘lone wolf’ strategy in Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white man who invaded a Black church in Charleston, South Carolina, and killed 9 people. According to people close to him, Roof talked frequently about committing an act like this, claiming he would do it and then kill himself, in order to be the spark that would ignite a full-on racial war² on the country (NEIWERT, 2017, p. 25). To

¹ Epstein was a financier who was arrested in 2019 for sex trafficking of young girls, and committed suicide in prison in that same year while awaiting trial. The conspiracies around him stem from his connection with high-profile politicians, from the British Royal Family, to the Clintons, and even Trump himself (BBC, 2019).

² This means a racial war on the terms Roof and his comrades define it as – their white supremacist point of view makes it seem like they are the victims of oppression, in comparison to the “privileges” given to Black people by the media and affirmative action policies, and that the white race is in risk of disappearing in the United States because of immigration and miscegenation. To them, the goal of this racial war is the preservation of the white race, but different manifestations of this idea of racial war have existed over time. See (VITALIS, 2015).

extremists like him, the United States are becoming unrecognizable, being swarmed by non-whites in an effort to completely erase whiteness – a movement they call “white genocide” or, in more discreet language, “The Great Replacement” – and the only way to combat the destruction of the white race is through armed revolution (MICHAEL, 2015).

If the conservative and the radical rights have intersections, then differentiating between the extreme and radical right is incredibly difficult, and seems to come down to semantics – so much so that they can both be put in the umbrella of “far right” (MICHAEL, 2015, p. 203). Neiwert treats them as the same, as well as characterizing both as populist, and while Durham and Michael set a boundary between them when it comes to race, the radical right is not necessarily anti-racist, and their fears of a global elite tend to play up to anti-Semitic tropes mentioned before, just as their disdain for immigrants and welfare dependants has deeply anti-Black and xenophobic undertones (MICHAEL, 2015). In the end, the semantic division between the radical and extreme sections of the right-wing is a division between those who are openly racist, and those who are also racist, but do not place this racism as the centre of their politics. Once again, it is important to point out how fluid these classifications are: they are useful for understanding the different nuances that can be captured within the right-wing, but they are not set in stone, they change over time, and their ideas bleed into each other constantly.

Open or not, the racism that pervades both the radical and extreme right serves as fuel to the radicalization of the right-wing in a more general sense, and it is no wonder that Michael (2015) points to the election of Barack Obama in 2008 as a turning point for radical and extreme aspects of the right to bleed into mainstream Republican conservatism, in the formation of the Tea Party. While its origins can be traced back to the Bush presidency (2001 – 2009) and a conservative dissatisfaction with a government growing in size, the rupture point that created the Tea Party in an official manner came in February 2009, with a business commentator on CNBC, outraged at the economic policies introduced by the Obama administration, exclaiming his desire to have “a Tea Party in Chicago”, “dumping” financial derivatives into Lake Michigan. His rant went viral online and was repeatedly broadcasted on cable networks all over the country, giving name to a movement that would only grow in the following years, with Obama’s economic

policies supposedly³ going against everything conservatives and radicals stood for (MICHAEL, 2015).

As Michael (2015, p. 206) describes it, “The Tea Party is an umbrella movement of more than two thousand local and national groups, best reflected in the motto ‘Limited government, fiscal responsibility, and free markets’” – but despite its proclaimed economic focus, the lack of centralized authority means that different cells, and even different individuals, project onto the movement their own ideals, going beyond economy to social and moral matters, and attracting radicals beyond the initial economically conservative character of the movement. This lack of central authority and appeal to radicalism also meant that sections of the Tea Party was open to embracing conspiracies and falsehoods coming from a variety of places to help pursue their agendas, with one of them targeting Obama as a supposed Kenyan who falsified his American citizenship in order to become president, and connecting him to Muslim terrorists despite the violence his government inflicted in the Middle East under the war on terror banner (MICHAEL, 2015).

Still, the Tea Party is mostly a conservative movement – despite moving the Republican party away from the centre and attracting the sympathy and the following of many radicals, it is still not, on its own, a representation of the far right in mainstream politics. But it does represent one side of a coin that would be formed over the early 2010s, culminating in the 2016 election and Donald Trump’s presidency. The second side of this coin, where the radicals and extremists truly converge, is the alt-right.

Much like the Tea Party, the alt-right doesn’t have a centralized leadership, making it hard to give it a precise and complete definition of goals – there is no manifesto or manual, unlike organized extreme and radical militias, and with the alt-right being an Internet product, it is also difficult to trace its origins to a single point in time. Instead, the alt-right seems to be the name given to an amalgamation of online far-right movements and communities that started growing around 2008,

³ As Fraser (2019) shows, Obama’s policies were, in fact, quite neoliberal, emphasizing saving banks after the 2008 crises and with the only policy that leaned towards welfare being Medicare, which came in the later years of his presidency. The Tea Party’s confrontational position against Obama’s policies, then, seem to be more a matter of party rivalry than actual policy.

again with the beginning of the Obama presidency; a “lethal union”, as Neiwert describes best:

The gradual coalescence of the alternative-universe worldviews of conspiracists, Patriots, white supremacists, Tea Partiers, and nativists occurred after the election of the first black president, in 2008. Fueled in no small part by racial animus toward Obama, the Internet and social media became the grounds on which this “lethal union” could finally occur, after decades of internecine bickering among far-right factions and their relegation to the political fringes. The same chat rooms and political forums and Facebook threads where trolls gathered and took over whole communities became the places where far-right-wing social dominators—many of them espousing openly transgressive worldviews such as neo-Nazism and misogyny—could come together with the right-wing authoritarians whose ranks grew with every Alex Jones⁴ convert and wannabe Oath Keeper⁵ militiaman.

That “lethal union” ultimately gave birth to the twenty-first century’s new baby: the alt-right (NEIWERT, 2017, p. 228-9).

This “baby” was given birth to on the internet and, as such, their methods of mobilization are unique to online spaces. 4chan, the same anonymous online forum where QAnon started, is pointed as the main breeding ground for the alt-right. 4chan was created with the aim of creating an online space that was as uncensored as possible, and that kept its users completely anonymous. Originally, it was created for discussing Japanese anime with fellow fans, but the uncensored and unmoderated nature of 4chan turned it into a breeding ground for anything that would be censored in any other site. This means that soon 4chan would be flooded with pornographic content and piracy, as well as become a meeting place for white supremacists, neo-Nazis and extremists of every kind (NEIWERT, 2017).

Such an odd amalgamation of different types of people interacting in the same space meant that a lot of young people were being exposed to far-right ideas through 4chan – and these ideas seemed appealing to them, because they were presented in packaging that was familiar. Extremists on 4chan produced bigoted

⁴ Jones is the founder of alt-right website and online radio show InfoWars, known for spreading conspiracy theories such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks being fake, and the U.S. government having invented homosexuality (QUIGLEY, 2017).

⁵ Oath Keeper is an anti-government militia, mostly composed by army veterans and former law-enforcement officials. Most of their ideology is based on believing the government is actively working to undermine individual freedom. Is it one of the largest militias currently active in the U.S., claiming around 30.000 members (SPLC, 2021).

content that was funny before anything else, and appealed through the transgressive feeling it gave, a pleasure generated through the act of disobeying, of going against “political correctness” – pleasure, then, generated by the excess of not doing what was expected, of doing what is forbidden and socially frowned upon (HOOK, 2017, p. 5). Laughing at a neo-Nazi meme was much cooler than being “butthurt” about it – if you can laugh at anything, it shows you do not care, and caring is something only self-righteous, boring people such as SJWs⁶ do, something that is not nearly as fun as breaking every social rule possible without being punished for it. These memes were also a way to unleash anger, especially the anger of young white men who felt oppressed by political correctness, who felt like their right to self-expression was being stifled by attempts from minority groups to fight back against bigotry. To them, they were being oppressed, and making Nazi jokes on the internet to make SJWs mad felt like release (NEIWERT, 2017).

Dylann Roof, mentioned early, was one of these young white men, who spent way too much of their time online exploring the ideas white supremacists were so eager to share – to the point where his belief in them became so strong he was willing to give his life to these ideals. Frequently, members of the alt-right will share their memes and, when confronted, will claim what they are sharing are just harmless jokes, but these jokes never stay just jokes. They became a political movement, uniting disparate groups of the far-right under the banner of memes and having fun, with the language and the skills to spread their ideas as widely as possible through online spaces. Like the Tea Party, they had no leadership; but like the Tea Party, this lack of leadership allowed for flexibility and, in 2016, this lack of leadership became an opportunity, when Donald Trump became a candidate for the presidency (NEIWERT, 2017).

Trump presented himself as an outsider in politics, as someone who was not a part of the elites in Washington – a part of the people, of the average Americans who were tired of corruption, of big government, of watching elites and immigrants and welfare dependants “sucking dry” the efforts of the middle and working class. It does not matter that Trump is none of these things, that he is not a worker, that

⁶ ‘Social justice warrior’, a derogatory term created by the alt-right to designate defenders of social equality, civil rights and affirmative action – that is, anyone who challenges social inequalities and hierarchies (BROWN, 2019, p. 28, 40).

he is not average, that he is very much a part of those elites he claims to be against. Despite his glaring contradictions, Trump's rhetoric worked (TUNDERMAN, 2017). Through a discourse that called for revolting against elites, defined mostly as cultural and mediatic elites, but rarely economic (NUNES, 2020), Trump managed to unite different sections of the right, with the alt-right and the Tea Party representing the two largest subdivisions that backed him, creating a movement that was strong enough to win the elections, despite his brash language, his open prejudices, his clear incompetence – not even *despite*, but possibly *because* of that, as he made himself seem human and relatable, making himself seem a part of the people. What Trump did, in uniting these groups, in creating an idea of “people” that fit him and many other, while excluding a large portion of the population, was become the leader of a new right-wing populist movement in the United States.

Now, the word “populism” is thrown around a lot when the American right-wing is the subject of discussion. Most of the authors I have cited so far have labelled these disparate sections of the right-wing populist on their own right, but they do so without actually giving a precise definition of what populism is. I would also argue that none of these subsections of the right-wing has the kind of mass popular appeal that the form of right-wing populism spearheaded by Trump happened to have. In the next section, I would like to present a definition of populism, one that emphasizes its capacity to embrace many different points of view under an antagonistic narrative, and to introduce a couple examples of populism of the past in American politics, as well as to show how a new wave of populism grew from the creation of a discursive equivalence between the previously described subsections of the right-wing between the late 2000s and the early 2010s, up to the 2016 elections.

2.3. Contemporary right-wing populism

In recent years, the word ‘populist’ has been thrown around frequently, like an accusation, a scandalous way of making politics, an unacceptable, irrational, crude rupture with what politics supposed to be. It is abnormal, dirty, plain *wrong*. There is an arrogance to the way intellectuals talk about populism, says Stavrakakis (2017), an arrogance that denounces a political position, one where anything that escapes the acceptable pattern of modern, globalized, neoliberal politics is seen as an aberration. It is crucial, he argues, for scholars attempting to understand

populism to be aware of how ideological the demonization of populism can be – not doing so is dangerous, as these preconceived notions of populism as unacceptable get in the way of understanding what it is and why it happens (STAVRAKAKIS, 2017, p. 2).

Something else that Stavrakakis points to as an obstacle to good research in populism is the lack of clear definitions of what populism is. Because populism is not something that is ideologically limited to one side of the political spectrum, it tends to be tricky to look at individual populist movements and try to draw patterns between them. Because of this, Stavrakakis argues, it is important to change the approach, and look at populism through a discursive lens – indeed, he argues that, when it comes to studies about populism, it is “difficult to find any other research area in which the mark of critical discourse studies has been felt so strongly in leading the way for theoretical, methodological and analytical innovation” (STAVRAKAKIS, 2017, p. 5).

With these points in mind, I believe it is wise to follow Stavrakakis advice and, in searching for a discursive definition of what populism is, also leaving behind ideological prejudices towards it. In fact, the approach that inspires Stavrakakis lends itself to this – the author takes Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, along with Laclau’s individual work on populism (2005), as a basis for his own definition, and it is a definition that understands populism as not inherently ideological at all, but a way in which a discourse develops and becomes hegemonic.

Here is an overview of how it goes – and it might sound familiar: different groups in society have different types of demands. These demands can be quite simple, like having better access to public transportation in a particular neighbourhood, or more job opportunities for a particular group of workers. These demands, however, are not all going to be met, and they linger. Over time, as they continue to not be met, dissatisfaction rises, and these demands – having in common only the fact that they have been ignored – start to become united in a chain of equivalence. In this chain, the contents of the demands do not actually matter, only their unity around the inability to be fulfilled by whatever authority is deemed responsible for them. From many different things, then, these demands become one thing: the will of the people (LACLAU, 2005).

The people become a nodal point, then, a word that by itself loses meaning, a signifier without signified: around the idea of “people”, the ideas and demands in the chain of equivalence are articulated to *become* part of what the people want, regardless of what it is. The people and their demands, then, are necessarily put into an antagonistic relationship with something else, that is seen as being the one thing that stops these demands from being satisfied (LACLAU, 2005). This *thing* is usually the elites, but Stavrakakis expands on this, and on the meaning of “people” itself, by arguing that the populism in question can be inclusionary or exclusionary. In inclusionary populism, we have the description given above, where the “people” are amorphous, without inherent meaning and with fluid demands, and the antagonism developed is usually vertical, opposing the people against elites, the establishment, the 1%, etc. Exclusionary populism, however, tends to go to a mythical past in the creation of its understanding of the people, idealizing an idea of nation, race, ethnicity, etc. The antagonism of exclusionary populism is more horizontal, as well, creating an inside/outside relationship, instead of a top/down one (STAVRAKAKIS, 2015, p. 8).

Hopefully, the reader has noticed how the description of how chains of equivalence develop is similar to how, in recent years, different right-wing groups have coalesced together around the figure of Trump. From centre-right Republicans, to conservatives, to the far-right, different demands and positions, perceived as being ignored, scorned and unfulfilled, were united under the slogan of “Make America Great Again”, they hoped so finally see their vision of what the United States was supposed to be (and, in their idealized vision, one day was) come to fruition. It did not matter that the same slogan also attracted Republican elites that were very much not ignored – that were, above all things, privileged by the status quo and decades of neoliberal policies. This contradiction did not seem to matter, as the promise of a return to better times meant a return to a previous status quo, where, sure, maybe the privileged still maintained their privileges, but at least the underprivileged had better opportunities – or, as Nunes (2020) puts, a very conformist kind of popular revolt.

This development is not unique, however, to the contemporary form of right-wing populism nor to the United States, even though American populism has its peculiarities. In a historical and systematic study of different right-wing populist

movements around the world and throughout recent history, Rucht (2019) demonstrated how right-wing populism is always profoundly ambivalent in its positions in order to draw together every subgroup within the right-wing to its side. In the following table, he shows how right-wing populism's ambivalence turns it into a point of convergence for every other right-wing position:

Table 1: Positions of four strands of the political right

	<i>Conservatism</i>	<i>Right-wing populism</i>	<i>Right-wing radicalism</i>	<i>Right-wing terrorism</i>
Human dignity	+	+/-	-	--
Equality	+ -	+/-	--	--
Nationalism and ethnocentrism	+	+/-	++	++
Liberal representative democracy	++	+/-	-	--
Social elites	++	--	--	--
State monopoly of violence	++	+/-	+/-	--

Key: ++ strongly in favour; + in favour; +/- ambivalent; - opposed; -- strongly opposed.

Adapted from: RUCHT, 2018.

While the terminology for Rucht is a little different than here (right-wing terrorism instead of extreme-right)⁷, it is possible to see how, with the exception of strong opposition towards the elites, right-wing populism tends toward ambivalence in every single matter that is important to other specific groups of the right. This allows right-wing populism and its leaders to encompass many different positions, and to pick and choose which ones to take depending on the context and what is deemed acceptable (RUCHT, 2018). This way, right-wing populism remains massively appealing, while still retaining its frontiers. Contemporary right-wing populism in the United States seems to have a double antagonistic frontier, actually, both vertical and horizontal, to use Stavrakakis' terms. Not only the "people" in this populism opposes an oppressive and nebulous elite, but also a different class of

⁷ As I mentioned before, since these categories are not set in stone, the variance in terminology is not necessarily contradictory; Rucht's description of right-wing terrorism is extremely similar to Durham's description of the extreme-right, but both of these categories, as which any of the categories explored so far, shift over time and shape themselves to their contexts.

others that is “below” the people, a class of parasitic welfare dependants, portrayed typically in a very racist and xenophobic light, two groups that, together with the government, repress the middle and working classes through taxes and public policy (NEIWERT, 2017, p. 12).

Understanding what populism is and how it develops theoretically is important so we can explore how it has developed historically in the United States – both in its contemporary form, but also in the past, as important continuities could be revealed through this exercise. Here, I think it would be interesting to explore the figure of George Wallace, a right-wing populist leader from the 1960s who, despite not having similar levels of success to Trump, had similar ideas backing him, and whose impact in the politics of the time was not small (LOWNDES, 2005).

The rise of George Wallace marks a general shift in American politics, from the Keynesian politics of the New Deal towards a growing conservatism that would become dominant in the following decades. He was a governor from Alabama (1963-1967; 1971-1979; 1983-1987) and attempted to be the presidential candidate for the Democratic party in 1964, and again as a third-party candidate in 1968. Both times he lost, but as Lowndes argues, his defeat was the success of the ideas he stood for. A segregationist, most of Wallace’s agenda was centred around this topic, but the way he articulated this was to make it seem like his politics were not about race. He appealed to the image of the poor, oppressed white Southerner, opposing desegregation of the basis of freedom and state autonomy, and arguing that forcing white and black people to share spaces was a form of federal government authoritarianism (LOWNDES, 2005). Later, he would shift his focus to anti-communism, but still targeting supposed authoritarian measures from the federal government, arguing that they “lead us dangerously close to a complete rejection of the democratic idea in favor of a form of statism embracing many of the social and economic theories of Marx and Lenin” (WALLACE apud LOWNDES, 2005, p. 154). In opposing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he would bring up with white audiences many issues that seemingly had nothing to do with race, but that were connected to it through his articulation: integration could lead to the destruction of property rights, could dictate to employers who they should hire, would undermine market freedom, would force the real-estate market to sell to anyone in any neighbourhood (LOWNDES, 2005, p. 155).

By 1968, during his second candidacy, the political climate was much more violent and polarized than four years prior, with Anti-Vietnam war activists on the rise, as well as the establishment and strengthening of the Black Panther Party – and Wallace took this uneasy, tense scenario as an opportunity to expand on his talking points. He pointed to the rising tension and violence as a sign of a certain degeneracy of American society and ran for presidency on a ticket that emphasized the reestablishment of law and order, through whatever means necessary. Of course, despite his not actually mentioning race in these speeches, it was an absent silence: the reestablishment of law and order, to the audience he targeted, implied revoking the Civil Rights Act, and restoring states’ freedom to continue practicing segregation – that is, law and order being used to curb the freedom of Black people, in favour of the freedom of white people; state intervention being seen as good and righteous when it came to the maintenance of perceived security, and nothing else (LOWNDES, 2005).

It is no wonder, then, that Wallace not only appealed to the white middle and working classes who saw their racial prejudices be validated in the words of a candidate – he also appealed to extreme racist groups, such as the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan, and their support and presence during his campaign translated into his rallies being particularly violent. He would remain on the fence on these groups to maintain some distance without alienating them; he argued that he could not be responsible for his supporters’ actions, and at the same time downplayed the gravity of these groups’ beliefs and actions, going as far as to claim that “At least a Klansman will fight for his country [...] But the Klan, it's just innocuous in size and they're just concerned with segregation, not subversiveness” (WALLACE apud LOWNDES, 2005, p. 161).

Wallace also tried to paint himself in a sympathetic light, as “man of the people”. He mentioned his background as a mechanic to remind his audience he was a worker, just like them, and he made sure to frequently make mistakes or mispronounce words in his speeches, trying to imitate the way poorer sections of the population spoke. He marketed himself as an anti-establishment outsider, with intellectuals, bureaucrats, anarchists, and lawbreakers as his enemies and, by extension, enemies of the working class (LOWNDES, 2005).

In the end, Wallace never managed to win any presidential elections, even future ones, when he came back to the Democratic party and tried to paint himself as a moderate. It is worth noting, however, that his third-party candidacy in 1968 did manage to garner 10 million votes, mostly in the South, an impressive number for a candidate that was neither Republican nor Democrat. Never winning however, as mentioned earlier, did not mean Wallace's ideas were not popular and, in fact, they remained even beyond his figure. In 1968, Richard Nixon adopted many of his talking points, such as the emphasis on law and order and opposing good citizens from unruly criminals – and he won. It was a deliberate strategy from Nixon's campaign, to take cues from Wallace's in order to draw a dissatisfied crowd against racial liberalism. In the words of Kevin Phillips, Nixon's campaign strategist:

'The emerging Republican majority', wrote Phillips after the election, 'spoke clearly ... for a shift away from the sociological jurisprudence, moral permissiveness, experimental residential, welfare and educational programming and massive federal spending by which the Liberal establishment sought to propagate liberal institutions and ideology'. 'Democrats among these groups', he wrote, 'were principally alienated from their party by its increasing identification with the Northeastern Establishment and ghetto alike' (PHILLIPS apud WALLACE, 2005, p. 163).

The opposition created here, then, is one between the people and the elites and, at the same time, between tradition and social liberalism. An equivalence is created between “experimental residential, welfare and educational programming” and “the ghetto”; federal spending is a form of spreading harmful ideology, and at the same time, both the poor ghetto and the rich Northeastern elites are equals in their threat towards the people, the “emerging Republican majority”. This shift toward an anti-elite and racist conservatism would only grow, Lowndes argues, with the election of Nixon in 1968, and become consolidated with Reagan's presidency in the 1980s. While the figure of Wallace himself would eventually be forgotten, what he brought to the table was discreetly absorbed, to become a part of mainstream American politics for years to come (LOWNDES, 2005).

What Wallace created was certainly a form of populism, even if one that did not manage to grasp power directly, despite its massive popularity in the South. Wallace created a movement around himself that collected multiple identities and positions, from white workers worried about keeping their jobs in a desegregated society from white supremacists and Nazis bent on pursuing absolute segregation

and violence toward Black people. The creation of this chain was impactful enough to last beyond Wallace's presence in politics, to bleed into the mainstream, to become hegemonic through other leaders, and despite the losses in terms of re-establishing segregation, the double enemy, the two-headed hydra of elite and ghetto that is a treat to the people, seemed to remain throughout the century and beyond.

Lowndes makes the importance of talking about Wallace clear, since populisms, being a product of discursive disputes, cannot be understood in isolation:

Thus the emergence of right-wing populism can be reduced neither to historical determinacy nor to a radical contingency of the political moment. It is the product of both, and continually shaped by both. So both older political identifications and new political events must be studied together in order to understand the way that this given political identity emerged over time. In order to do so, attention must be paid to the context in which a hegemonic movement emerges (LOWNDES, 2005, p. 148).

It is because of this, then – because it is necessary to understand right-wing populism beyond its own confines, in its own epoch – that I believe it is important to look back at Wallace, to watch the patterns his movement created, the ways in which his mobilization created a chain of equivalence, and what remained after it was mostly demobilized. Wallace's posture and positions sound very similar to what we see in contemporary right-wing populism, and at the same time, they are very different. Wallace is a product of his time, after all, his fight focused on dismantling the Keynesian policies of the New Deal (the “massive federal spending to propagate liberal ideology” Philips mentioned) and repelling desegregation and civil rights. These are the points of contention that created enough dissent and dissatisfaction in large swathes of the population to create a new populist movement in the 1960s, and that intensified to the point of bringing Reagan to the office in 1981, bringing with him an era of austerity and almost complete erasure of welfare policies – in fact, a complete rupture with the status quo of the New Deal. What is, then, the context that created the right-wing populism we see in the 2010s?

To start, it would be useful to go back to the start of this section, to the words of Stavrakakis. Populism is seen as an abnormality in politics, an aberration, an unacceptable deviation of the norm – and this vision prevents us from

understanding what it is, and why it happens. But what is this norm considered to be, after all, and what are the consequences of taking it for granted? Mouffe (2005) and Wodak and Krzyżanowski (2017) both argue that, at least in Europe, right-wing populism never ceased to exist, and remained alive in the fringe of politics for decades before coming back to the mainstream in the 21st century. This existence on the fringe, however, remained largely ignored, as it did not fit into a certain vision of what contemporary politics has become.

This vision is largely a perceived post-Cold War consensus, a supposed end to the conflict between left and right, a post-political liberal world where antagonisms do not exist anymore, and where politics are a practical affair, existing for the maintenance of two main pillars: free markets and human rights⁸. Politics is so extremely practical in this scenario, and has such clear-cut goals, that even popular sovereignty becomes obsolete – it could, in fact, be a hinderance to the achievement of these very goals. This is, in fact, a purely liberal view of politics, where democracy and popular participation is merely an afterthought, as long as individual freedom and markets are kept intact (MOUFFE, 2005).

It is no wonder, then, that in a scenario where popular participation is seen as more of an obstacle than a requirement, that *populism*, with its emphasis on the *people*, is seen with horror. Not only that, but populism is built on at least one fundamental antagonism, between the people and those in power, and antagonisms are unacceptable in post-politics. Contemporary right-wing populist parties and groups, Mouffe argues, attempt to bring back popular sovereignty to politics, to create identifications and try to make people care about politics, and not simply accept the liberal order as something inescapable. Sure, right-wing populism can be extremely excluding, only accepting certain types of people as part of *the* people – but it saw an opportunity of the emptiness of democracy in the current liberal order, and took it quite efficiently, promising change that the liberal order tried to paint as impossible (MOUFFE, 2005).

⁸ This will be addressed in further detail later, as Brown (2019) portrays this neoliberal order quite differently; but Mouffe's choice to put human rights on the centre of neoliberalism is one that can be criticized heavily, as it seems contradictory that the neoliberal order would care about human rights when it does not care about social justice, and these things are intrinsically linked to each other.

The response of the liberal order to right-wing populism has been to condemn it – to create an antagonism of its own, where liberals are good and populists are evil, in a combative moralism that refuses to engage with what causes populism to even happen and to address the faults of the liberal system that made people engage and identify so strongly with ever more extreme right-wing politics. Again, arrogance is the name of the game, and it is no wonder that the average worker feels a pull towards right-wing populism, in opposition to the type of elitist politics that not only excludes them but deems as absurd, evil and immoral any politics that even try to revert this exclusion (MOUFFE, 2005).

And while Mouffe's argument is useful in bringing light to how liberalism's dismissal of popular sovereignty, political antagonism and the right-wing fringe has only strengthened contemporary populism, it is also important to understand in further detail how this right-wing populism was shaped by neoliberal order and ideology itself, during the late 20th and the early 21st centuries. For this, Brown's (2019) exploration neoliberal rationality and its influences on contemporary right-wing movements can be incredibly useful.

When talking about this right-wing, mainly discussing how it developed and operates in the United States, Brown classifies as authoritarian and anti-democratic, and there are three main forces that shape it: neoliberal rationality, intensifying nihilism, and growing (and mainly white and male) resentment (BROWN, 2019). Let us look at these forces one by one.

2.3.1. Neoliberal rationality.

Before diving deeper into the weight neoliberalism has for current politics, it is important to establish definitions. This is, after all, one of these elusive, huge concepts that float above our heads with constantly changing definitions, such as democracy, capitalism, socialism, fascism, and other words that seem to move mountains. Brown takes a definition that considers primarily neoliberalism's policies and effects, that is, what neoliberalism as a concept produces. In other words, neoliberalism is connected to certain types of public policies that emphasize the preservation of private property, and promote privatization of public enterprise, the reduction of the welfare state and of labour rights, the deregulation of capital, and the creation of a friendly environment, tax-wise, to foreign investment. The

Chile lead by Augusto Pinochet and his military dictatorship was pioneer in the implementation of these policies, almost like a neoliberal laboratory, and they would go on to spread throughout the Global South and, eventually, the Global North, with the International Monetary Fund as their main mediator and preacher, and with Ronald Reagan, in the U. S., and Margaret Thatcher, in the U.K., as its main figureheads in the 1980s (BROWN, 2017, p. 18). These policies, when applied together and firmly established enough, become the governing principle of every aspect of public policy: everything becomes subservient to the goal of preserving the freedom of the markets, even if this means using state intervention to do so. Not only that, but every aspect of life under neoliberal politics become “marketized”, everything, from schools, hospitals, public spaces all the way to the free time of individuals, starts being managed through market principles and market rationality, constantly subjected to a dynamic of competition, and of seeking the enhancement of human capital (BROWN, 2019, p. 20).

Despite its first manifestation in concrete public policy being spearheaded by a brutal dictatorship, there really is nothing authoritarian about neoliberalism in the intentions behind its creation. The intellectuals that first envisioned neoliberalism – Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman being the most important ones, here – did so as a response to fascism and its horrors. Neoliberalism was invented to avoid anything like that to ever happen again, by limiting government power over markets and trying to avoid the possibility that the type of popular manifestation that supported fascism and Nazism could ever have as much impact again. Neoliberals were not very democratic, of course, as they dreaded the “irrational” way ignorant citizens tend to make decisions, which seemed to inevitably lead to demagoguery and authoritarianism, but it is important to admit that their fight was against tyranny before anything else, even if that meant trampling over popular sovereignty (BROWN, 2019).

That plan did not exactly work as they expected, however, and the ideal neoliberal world drawn up by these intellectuals ended up feeding into the ideologies of ever more extreme manifestations of the right. It is important to look, then, at this ideal, to understand how it shaped our world and how it was co-opted for goals that go against everything Hayek and Friedman seemingly stood for. It

might be good to start this by looking at something they were firmly against: society itself (BROWN, 2019, p. 28).

To neoliberalism, society is a false concept, even a dangerous one. It represents an illusion of collectively and shared purposes among individuals, and all too easily becomes a tool for tyranny. Social justice, directly linked to it, is another dangerous falsehood, and pursuing it is “the gravest threat to most other values of a free civilization” (HAYEK apud BROWN, 2019, p. 30). All of this comes from an understanding that society as a concept is too vague and forced; it implies a union between a mass of individuals that simply does not exist, and leads to the belief that this mass can be collectively moved toward something – and, consequently, be manipulated through totalitarian means. The idea of society, then, is one that forces individuals to act according to the will of an illusory mass, or whoever is manipulating that mass, therefore curbing individual freedom. This abstract idea of a collective that has a separate will than that of individuals also seems to imply that it was constructed that way, constructed as to have an impartial will in comparison to the selfish wants of individuals, and that it was constructed fairly – that it is, then, the holder of justice, in comparison to the biased perception of what is just that individuals have. To Hayek, this conception of justice opens the way for intervention of markets and moral codes according to what is considered “socially just”, what inevitably would lead to authoritarianism, in forcing individuals to behave in certain ways to preserve social justice (BROWN, 2019, p. 32).

Markets and morals, this implies, are the only two forces that should actually matter, eliminating completely any idea of society or justice. Supposedly, markets and morals discipline human behaviour in a “spontaneous” way, that is neither rational nor irrational, and not at all planned by any higher power. It simply happens, and if there is no interference in either one of these spheres, human interaction should run smoothly over time. This also solves the problem of justice, which is defined as correct principles according to the implicit moral rules that have been established naturally. This eliminates completely the need for social justice: justice relates to how people behave, not to some concept of merit or need. The only thing that can give people any “rewards” is the market, and according to the contribution of each, nothing more and nothing less – not even effort is important,

really, as how useful the contribution in question is seen by the markets is the only thing that truly matters. It does not matter that not all people would be able to be successful, or even survive, under such circumstances, as sacrifices must be made to keep civilization running in a free way, and trying to establish equality would bring about much worse results in the long run (BROWN, 2019, p. 35).

With this theoretical background, empirical neoliberalism's main goal became the dismantling society as much as possible. This meant denying its existence, with Thatcher's famous "there is no society", and the dismissal of concerns with growing inequality; it meant dismantling and privatizing public and welfare services as much as possible; it meant challenging the defence of equality in the judicial system; it meant challenging social justice, making it seem like a ridiculous idea; and it meant turning people away from the collective, individualizing and capitalizing on every aspect of life and turning the family into the only social unit that matters (BROWN, 2019, p. 37).

The consequences of this are massive. Dismantling society itself and turning individuals and families into the only units that matter means denying completely the existence of structures and hierarchies that dictate the lives of millions:

The neoliberal assault on the social, together with its exclusive identification of power with coercion, enacted a consequential reformatting of liberalism. As it saturated state and popular discourse, the neoliberal attack on social justice, social reform, and social provision challenged equality, reframed the culture wars, and produced massive disorientation for the Left. If there is no such thing as society, but only individuals and families oriented by markets and morals, then there is no such thing as social power generating hierarchies, exclusion, and violence, let alone subjectivity at the sites of class, gender, or race (BROWN, 2019, p. 40).

This means that anyone who dares to complain about structural violence, about economic inequality, about racism or misogyny, is nothing but a silly SJW, incapable of contributing individually to the markets and getting rewards in exchange, and who therefore must demand to be fed, clothed, educated and taken care of like a spoiled baby. Anyone who questions such a lack of society is weak-willed, lazy, whiny, or a parasite begging to survive off the work and effort of others. Under neoliberal rationality, attempts to reduce inequality and exclusion are seen as tyrannical, as they force the individual to act according to what the society,

or the state, demands, instead of doing everything on their own. In other words, anything other than absolute freedom to worry about no one but oneself is state coercion, and state coercion can all too easily turn into authoritarianism. This reduces freedom to complete lack of regulation of the individual, reduces freedom to “a pure instrument of power, shorn of concern for others, the world, or the future” (BROWN, 2019, p. 46), resulting in an environment where the privileged (white, male, cisgender, American) will hold their privilege as a weapon in the name of freedom, while being absolutely terrified, and even furious, of the possibility of their privileges being extended to anyone else through social justice.

This is, after all, the paranoia of the contemporary radical right, where anything that even remotely expands the role of the state is terrifying, where life is a zero-sum game where, if someone else gains something, it means that you are losing something consequently – where if anything even remotely threatens this individual freedom that is nothing but yielding of privileged power, the result will be, inevitably, the United States turning into a horrible dictatorship. This is a paranoia that, to some degree, is grounded on reality. To many people, life *does* seem like a zero-sum game, as most people need to choose between working themselves to death or simply dying, and where every opportunity lost seems like a huge loss, and a loss that happened because *someone else* took it. What the right-wing discourse does, then, is mobilize this sentiment of constant competition and loss towards concrete enemies, in the form of minorities on one side, and the state and the elites on another, diverting attention from the type of neoliberal and increasingly austere politics that do, in fact, create this environment of constant and ruthless competition (NUNES, 2020).

All this also goes directly against the concept of democracy itself. Democracy, according to Brown, necessarily implies political equality. If political equality is absent, then power will necessarily be wielded by those with the most privileges and will be exercised in favour of these same subjects. Of course, it would be like that ideally, and Brown points out that capitalist democracies have never been complete because of this lack of equality. Still, what neoliberalism does is completely erase the idea that political equality is a necessary, or even desirable goal – on the contrary, trying to force equality is necessarily bad, and goes against the concept of freedom neoliberalism is based upon (BROWN, 2019, p.).

And, really, ignoring democracy is not enough for neoliberalism – politics should also become irrelevant. This echoes Mouffe’s earlier argument, where politics becomes such a technical matter, so (seemingly) devoid of antagonism and with only the preservation of market dynamics and morality/human rights⁹ that popular participation would simply get in the way. That was, after all, the greatest fear of the creators of neoliberalism, that popular will would create demagoguery, and totalitarianism along with it. Again, as with Mouffe, neoliberal dismissal of the popular in politics does not mean that it simply goes away; what it does instead is return with a vengeance, and in the form of right-wing populism. So, the effects of neoliberalism, beyond the exclusion of people from the political, such as growing inequality and economic insecurity, generates the opposite of the self-regulating utopia Hayek dreamed of, creating instead populism that is vicious in its anger and in the choice of its leaders. Ironically, it is the very ideological package of neoliberalism that feeds right-wing populism, with its absolute fear of totalitarianism, into a totalitarian movement. Right-wing populism is a response to the harmful effects of neoliberalism that nonetheless believes in it wholeheartedly. In its attempt to avoid authoritarianism, neoliberals created its own monster over years of inequality, antidemocracy and indifference (BROWN, 2019; MOUFFE, 2005).

Of course, this reaction is not simply ideological. The expansion and domination of a neoliberal model of economics and politics since the 1980s brought with it increasingly worse conditions of living and labour for the working-class, as increasing austerity and decreasing welfare policies, along with the dismantling of labour rights and an increase in the wealth gap, made it so that living conditions for the poorer worsened over the years, and also made it so the improvement of these living conditions became harder and harder over time. So, this fear of the curbing of freedom that feeds right-wing populism is not simply paranoia or the influence of neoliberal discourse – even though that is an important part of it. It is also about the worsening material conditions that create increasing dissatisfaction, and this

⁹ As mentioned before – this is Mouffe’s interpretation, and it can be criticized. To be fair, her argument is European focused, which contrasts with Brown’s focus on American politics, however, I would side with Brown in general – neoliberalism disregards social justice completely, and much of human rights cannot be held up without the enforcing of some kind of social justice that addresses inequalities and systemic oppressions.

dissatisfaction is translated in anger and revolt, a revolt that was masterfully crafted so as to not target neoliberalism itself (FRASER, 2019).

As Fraser (2019) argues, the neoliberalism that was founded and implemented by Reagan can be classified as a progressive-neoliberal hegemony. What this means is that, in collapsing the type of New Deal welfare policies that still survived in the 1980s, the type of raw, financial-oriented neoliberalism that was coming needed to be packaged in a more friendly way, and the path to this was by attaching progressivism and social causes that were growing in importance at the time to it. While the implementation of neoliberal policies started with Reagan¹⁰, it was expanded through the co-opting of progressivism in the Clinton administration, in an alliance between a version of progressivism that was less about social justice, and more about giving spaces for minorities to succeed in the neoliberal system – it was a version of progressivism, in other words, that values meritocracy, where the disadvantaged that deserved it managed to rise to positions of privileged through their own merits inside an ever-more austere and oppressive economic system.

This pairing of progressivism with neoliberalism would grow to have consequences decades later, as right-wing populism, in its dissatisfaction with worsening material conditions would not target the neoliberal policies that generated them, but the minorities that seemed to benefit from them, the women and immigrants and Black people who succeeded in the system because this system preached them as deserving, regardless of the fact that these people were the exception to the rule – regardless of how they were probably even worse impacted by neoliberalism. Still, as mentioned before, the discourse of right-wing populism speaks to the dissatisfaction of the lower classes in the direction of competition, of giving validity to the feeling that there is a constant dispute between groups of people to see who will win in the battle for better conditions, masking the systemic causes of increasing poverty and precarity. In this, neoliberal thought thrives, unquestioned, and maybe even stronger (FRASER, 2019; NUNES, 2020). As we

¹⁰ Fraser makes it clear that while this movement started with Reagan implementing neoliberal policies, his period was not progressive, and lists him along Hayek as a “neoliberal fundamentalist”; it was with Clinton that the meritocratic perception of equality and progressivism really took off, making the continuation of the austere reforms implemented during the Reagan era seem more palatable and inclusive.

will see further, however, this dominance of neoliberal thought does not stop at competitive economic dynamics.

Neoliberalism, despite what it might look like so far, is not all about destruction – it also promotes expansion and creation, in this case of the personal sphere. This is where the value of traditional morality comes into play most strongly. Moral tradition, in Hayekian terms, are sets of rules that are spontaneously created among individuals, and mutually agreed upon. They are the only restraints that should ever be put upon individuals, and are not understood as coercive, as they are supposedly agreed upon. These sets of rules are completely necessary for liberty to exist, that is, it is within the confines of these absolute rules of tradition that liberty can be exercised, that anything can be done as long as morality is not harmed. Really, it is supposed to work almost exactly like markets: spontaneous rules are made up at some nebulous point in history, and they discipline individuals to behave and develop without necessarily using reason, only responding to that environment, and if they follow those rules, they can do whatever else they want (BROWN, 2019, p. 97).

It is a bit of a Darwinian approach to social order, since these rules are not imposed by anyone, but rather evolve over time, with experimentation and gradual conformity as more and more individuals recognize the benefits of adhering to the rules that “survive” this “natural selection”. To the goal of creating a moral tradition that is functional enough, anything goes, including religion, which is highly contradictory considering how much the Hayekian approach despises any type of authority. Yet, if religion is useful at keeping moral and traditional order, then it is not that bad after all. It can be a tool for making traditions incontestable, and it also serves to limit the political, which cannot get it the way of tradition, as it cannot have more authority than God does. Tradition and religion are interlinked, then, and in Brown’s better words:

The political, divested of sovereignty and the public interest, is confined to generating universally applied rules (themselves best when they are codifications of norms emanating from tradition) and *techniques that have the status of being practical, rather than true*. Tradition secured by religion, on the other hand, acquires the mantle of incontestability and *symbolic truth at the same time that it serves as a limit on the political*. This formulation explains a strand of the rationality organizing our current predicament:

truth withdrawn from political life is rolled over to moral and religious claims rooted in the authority of tradition. The effect is to sever truth from accountability (a recipe for authoritarianism), to contest equality and justice with tradition, and to eliminate the legitimacy of popular sovereignty (BROWN, 2019, p. 102, emphasis mine).

The above is extremely important for the purposes of this dissertation: *truth does not matter in the face of tradition*. The political, as well, only exists to serve the purposes of tradition, and the state becomes limited to providing the basis for this purely moral organization of life to exist in its ideal form, that is, granting freedom, property, certain rules of justice, and making sure it will never step the boundaries of tradition. More important than limiting the sphere of what the state needs to do, is defining clearly what the state *cannot* interfere in at all, and it is here that we see the expansion of the personal sphere to unprecedented levels. It is not only about protect property from the coercive power of the state but protecting *as much as possible from it*. It means protecting the traditional family, patriarchal traditions, the accumulation of wealth over generations, and the divisions between classes, races and genders. All of these, after all, are traditions that have stood the test of time for centuries; trying to interfere on them is unacceptable, even dangerous, regardless of the inequalities they might produce and/or reinforce (BROWN, 2019, p. 106).

It is no wonder, then, that right-wing populism finds so much support within religious sectors of society, especially fundamentalist ones. The neoliberal order has dictated this expanded personal sphere in such a way that it actually goes all the way around and becomes extremely politicized, a weapon to be wielded against those who do not conform to tradition or question it as unfair. The defence of the family and of religion become yet another authoritarian weapon. It is a double-edged sword of privatization, on one side economical, and on the other moral, where everything *must* become private, by force if necessary. The state itself becomes a family unit, with its leader as the all-powerful father, and its morality universal. Protecting the nation becomes a metaphor for protecting the family and opens the doors to ever more dangerous nationalism. Instead of evolving “naturally” to become a perfect organizational principle, finally, the morality as envisioned by Hayek instead becomes aggressive, forceful – coercive, even at the hands of the state, as nothing in Hayek’s ideal world should ever be (BROWN, 2019, p. 118).

2.3.2. *Nihilism and resentment*

This is a good point to shift the focus to the second and third forces of antidemocratic politics that Brown points out, as values are still a crucial point in the argument. First, it is necessary to turn from religion to science and reason, as Nietzsche would argue this is where nihilism begins. The argument is that reason takes away the authority of God, and the authority of meaning itself – it reveals everything to be without essential value, that is. In other words, “the highest values devalue themselves” (BROWN, 2019, p. 161), and everything that is important loses their foundation, become superficial and easily manipulable.

Not only is God toppled, then, but the power of man is too because, after all, it is the meaning that man constructs that becomes empty. In this scenario, Brown cites Schmitt to point out that power loses all concentration and becomes diffuse, held by all against all. This is also a scenario that breeds resentment from those who lose power and privilege, and those who, even in this new world, remain oppressed. Resentment is everywhere, and nothing is meaningful anymore. This scenario of hopelessness and meaningless holds hands with the rise of neoliberalism, then, and economises everything: nothing has meaning anyway, so everything becomes monetized as much as possible, and “as we become human capital all the way down and all the way in, neoliberalism makes selling one’s soul quotidian, rather than scandalous. And it reduces the remains of virtue to branding, for capital large and small” (BROWN, 2019, p. 163). This also resonates with the type of feeling of constant competition Nunes (2020) points to, where there is always an enemy to be competing against, where my loss is necessarily someone else’s gain, and where there is no choice but to accept the dominance of capital and of the need to sell yourself to survive.

Nihilism also affects how the moral values so dearly defended by neoliberalism work. As nihilism decreases the value of values, it also decreases the strength of a value-bound conscience. The main effect of this is the desublimation of the will to power – or, in other words, the weakening of self-restraint, as will to power no longer is set against the self and its desires, but is sent outward, releasing the subject from any constraints. In this scenario, the subject becomes cynical, arrogant, and cares not for anyone other than themselves. Brown mentions Marcuse to explain that, beyond this cynicism, the desublimated subject also becomes

dependent on the fulfilment of their desires, which in a post-war capitalist society, means that they become easy targets of marketing and consumerism. The constant search for pleasure is co-opted by capitalist forces as consumption, creating a “happy consciousness” that is, also, ever less conscious, and ever more individualistic and unconcerned with ethics and politics (BROWN, 2019, p. 166).

This happy consciousness has even more negative effects, as the subject becomes more entrenched in its search for immediate material pleasures and is so constantly satisfied superficially that certain survival instincts become obsolete, as well as the demand for intellectuality and comprehension. The subject becomes free and pleased, but lacks critical thinking, and does not feel the need for it, satisfied as they are by material pleasure. Again, neoliberalism makes it worse, as it attacks both the social, which the desublimated individual does not care about anymore, and intellectual knowledge, as truth becomes irrelevant if it goes against moral tradition, even if this moral tradition is increasingly meaningless. This is a bizarre combination of factors where obsession with freedom on neoliberal terms, freedom of meaning and from power in nihilist terms, and freedom from conscience caused by desublimation create a subject that, as rebellious and transgressive as it may seem, is still dominated by the status quo, a subject that is acritical and passive in its belief of being absolutely free (BROWN, 2019, p 168).

This belief in absolute freedom creates the type of extreme violence we see embraced by right-wing populism today, also, as fear of being deprived of this freedom manifests itself in the face of any challenge to the neoliberal order. A combination of obsession with a neoliberal understanding of freedom, a lack of regard for others and a fear of loss of privilege that feeds into anger, all create this extremely vicious group of wounded subjects, mostly white men, who have no idea how to deal with this situation other than to lash out at the most vulnerable, seen as one of their worst enemies, along with the elites that crush them. In this scenario, racial and gender violence increases, and everything that goes against the meaningless traditions defended by the neoliberal order is seen as a horrible threat – even as these traditions are instrumentalized in opportunistic ways by its own defenders. Nothing has meaning and everything is scary, and the only answer, then, becomes destruction (BROWN, 2019, p. 171).

The meaninglessness of morality, despite its continued relevance, also results in its relativization when it comes to the privileged. The more powerful a subject is, the more they can break all morality rules and suffer no consequences. In other words, traditional values only exist as a tool of the powerful; under nihilism, the powerful do not even have to pretend to subscribe to these values truly and breaking them only emphasizes how powerful they are. It is easy to see it when we look at American right-wing populism, at Trump's crude conduct, at his crass language and sexual impropriety towards women – none of these things devalue the way he is seen by the right-wing as a hero of traditional American values, even if he subscribes to no values at all. To someone as privileged as him, moral values do not have to have any meaning, and the more he disobeys tradition, the more evident his power is (BROWN, 2019, p. 173). Not only that, but he skilled in talking the language of dissatisfaction that surrounds current discourse, by targeting the feeling of constant competition and enmity towards others (Nunes, 2020) and, as Fraser (2019) puts it, turning old progressive neoliberalism into an enemy on the progressive side, transforming right-wing populist ideology into one that she classifies as reactionary neoliberalism – a version of neoliberalism that addresses the frustrations and discomforts of those affected by neoliberal policies by targeting their anger not at neoliberalism itself, but at the progressive forces that were decoratively co-opted by it.

What we have, then, is a right-wing populism that unites both the ideological pervasiveness of neoliberal discourse and ideology, with dissatisfaction with the material effects of this very same neoliberalism through the targeting of progressive forces instead of neoliberal policies themselves. It is almost as if the type of traditionalist neoliberalism envisioned by Hayek and Reagan finally reached its ideal form, with no progressivism or social justice to be seen, and only pure competitiveness, personal freedom and traditional values upholding a life that rejects any sense of community or collectiveness. Only, this time, instead of being spearheaded only by intellectuals, politicians, and market forces, it is supported by the very victims of a system that collapses any type of social or labour security and concentrates wealth and privileges in remarkable levels, victims that see in it their only salvation towards a better world that they see in a distant, mythical past.

2.4. Conclusion: the slow death of truth

So, this is the scenario we are left with. Right-wing populism rises in the United States in the 21st century as result of these intense forces brought upon, and intensified by, neoliberal politics and growing nihilism. The paradoxical relationship between a philosophy that emphasizes morality, and a collapse of morality itself towards meaninglessness created what Brown calls neoliberalism's Frankenstein monster, an amalgamation of different forces that resulted in anti-democratic forces that grow ever more resentful and violent. In this scenario, truth does not matter, and it is only logical that science does not matter, as well. In fact, I would argue that science is engulfed by the expansion of the private sphere that neoliberalism preaches, by the vicious, pleasurable consumerism of desublimation, and by the hopelessness and lack of meaning of nihilism. Science becomes undesirable when it denies tradition, but it becomes a product for consumption when it can be used to justify actions or create a version of truth that is more pleasurable. Science becomes a matter of personal belief, of what is considered valid and useful and comforting to the individual subject and trying to force them to accept a universal understanding of truth or science is coercion, is a breach of personal freedom, is uncomfortable, it interrupts happy consciousness – it is, ultimately, unacceptable.

Right-wing populism is not discreet about its rejection of truth and science, and this denial seems to only get stronger with time, as it starts to bleed into every aspect of political life. I mentioned QAnon earlier, and it might be useful to bring it back, as an example of the pointlessness of truth under right-wing populism. I mentioned it before as an example of the type of conspiracies the radical right tend to create to fearmonger and to feed their own fears of authoritarianism, but I believe it is also a good example of how these radicalisms are blurring into the mainstream, through the influence of the umbrella of populism and growing nihilism – more and more active members of the Republican party have endorsed the theory, or hinted at doing so, Trump himself included, and online spaces allow for the conspiracy to reach ever more the middle class bases of the more centre-right core of the Republican party (CHÁVEZ, 2020; CHIDI, 2020; HEER, 2020).

The absurdity of QAnon theories and the absurdity of the fact that it even has proponents running for offices with the conspiracy as part of their campaign¹¹ gives the conspiratorial right a lot of space in the media, which sees itself in a conundrum, between reporting on something absurd and giving it visibility, and not reporting and being seen as complicit to their antics. As this happens, these conspiracies and their proponents gain ever more space in the public debate, and as their popularity increases, they start to shape how the public discourse is operated, as other political agents feel the need to address their positions, or even come closer to them, in order to capture some of that popularity. This phenomena is what Ruth Wodak (WODAK, 2015; WODAK; KRZYŻANOWSKI, 2017) calls the right wing *perpetuum mobile*:

this implies that such parties and politicians have developed discursive and rhetorical strategies which combine incompatible phenomena, make false claims sound innocent, allow denying the obvious, say the ‘unsayable’, and transcend the limits of the permissible. Usually, they get away without being sanctioned and, even if they have to apologize, they do so in a calculated and ambivalent way (WODAK, 2015, p. 42).

This happens in politics in a more traditional sense, as Republicans in general seem to feel a need to radicalize themselves to capture some of Trump’s popularity, for example, while sections of the Democratic Party are fearful of leaning into the left and losing part of the electorate. But for our purposes, the right-wing *perpetuum mobile* also means that more and more lies become mainstream, and other lies are emboldened to come to the fore, and the media is powerless to stop this influx of conspiracies and untruths. We see it with QAnon becoming more and more popular and politicians endorsing it, overtly or not; we see it with the rising visibility of anti-vaccine activists, something that only grows with the COVID-19 crisis, and we see it reach its most absurd limits with the denial of the shape of the Earth itself (DASTAGIR, 2019; KRAUSS, 2016; PICHETA, 2019; SPINNEY, 2020). It is crucial, then, to observe this aspect of right-wing populism, to see how it operates and how and why it spreads, in an effort to more efficiently combat the absolute collapse of truth. Before, however, there is another step we need to take.

¹¹ Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican nominee for Georgia, is a notable example (CHIDI, 2020).

So far, maybe the reader will have noticed a pattern in the way that I, and the authors that I cite, talk about the appeal of right-wing populism – a lot of it has to do with feelings. Resentment, anger, fear, entitlement, anxiety: these words show up all the time in the literature about populism, and as such, it is impossible to understand right-wing populism, and the way it spreads, without understanding the feelings that underline it – and the same, I argue, applies to the type of science denial that permeates this populism. As such, I believe it is important for us, in the next chapter, to theoretically explore in further depth what role emotions play on politics, so we can then bring this understanding to our exploration of how right-wing populism draws science denial towards it.

3. Chapter two: The centrality of emotions

3.1. Introduction

As we have seen, the literature about right-wing populism repeatedly mentions the role of emotions in swaying people one way or the other on the political spectrum. But these feelings themselves, seemingly so important to the populism of our contemporary days, are often taken for granted and not scrutinized with too much depth. This nonchalant use of emotion by populism scholars opens a gap – and a path and an opportunity. Here, I would like to explore the role of these emotions, and to do so, it will be useful to explore the literature on the so-called emotional or affective turn.

Studies on affect can be traced back to the 17th century with the work of Spinoza, and range in scope and method from philosophy to neuroscience. Affect is generally understood a form of experience that is both psychological and physical in varying degrees and that are not fully articulated in a conscious way and it is, frequently, defined in opposition to emotion, which can be better articulated and understood as happening in the internal sphere. Much of contemporary affect studies are influenced by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), which sought to challenge the centrality of language and communication in favour of emphasising the corporeal and sensorial (GILBERT, 2013).

While this turn to affects and emotions spread throughout the social sciences, it took a few years for International Relations to catch up to the trend, but when it did, this type of study became a quickly growing subfield of the discipline. While IR traditionally tends to lean towards rationalist explanations of the behaviour of actors, the introduction of emotions sought to challenge modern assumptions of how politics happen and of the centrality of rationalist in decision-making. As it expanded, the work on emotions in IR faced theoretical challenges, but also started to present new and fresh solutions to old problems, and bring new possibilities to the scope of IR itself (BLEIKER; HUTCHISON, 2014).

It is this recent turn in IR literature that will primarily guide this chapter then, towards a better understanding of emotions. Taking seriously the role of emotions in right-wing populism is important to understand their origins, their

discursive and material effects and the way these emotions can be mobilized in certain directions. When not delving deeply into these points, the literature on U.S. right-wing populism discussed in the previous chapter makes it sound like it is the irrationality of the masses that leads them to be swayed by cunning populist leaders. It is important, then, to understand better exactly how this supposed “irrationality” operates in the social field – and how widespread it is – to avoid harmful generalizations and stereotypes, and for a better framework to understand how populist movements gain momentum.

3.2. Politics of feeling

Questioning the supreme authority of rationality in social, political and economic relations is not a necessarily a new movement, but this “emotional turn” is certainly a new phenomena in IR, emerging and blossoming only in the 21st century. Despite its newness, however, the fact that these theoretical explorations of the connections between emotions and politics eventually bled towards IR scholarship should come as no surprise. Mentions of emotional attachment to the nation and charismatic leaders, to fear, and to the role of ‘passions’ in politics and war, are all over classic IR literature, as Hutchinson and Bleiker (2014), Solomon (2015), and Clément and Sangar (2018) all point out, deviating from the stereotype of realism as a field of IR theory that, in its whole, only considers rationality as a relevant factor. Beyond realism, feelings show up in other fields of IR theory: liberals mention “mutual sympathy” as a factor for multilateral cooperation, constructivists point to “pride” as an important point in formations of identity and recognition between states, and foreign policy analysis calls attention to how emotions can change perception of what rationality even means (CLÉMENT; SANGAR, 2018).

This unexamined presence of emotions all over IR was also accompanied by absence, a denial – emotions only exist in opposition to rationality, which is the truly important factor of politics. Emotions are either too personal to matter to public life, or irrational responses that should be ignored or fought against. Fear and anger, permeating realism ever since Thucydides, are obstacles to rational action and the best possible outcome, for example; similarly, trust is present in liberalism as a result of successful cooperation, that comes through rational evaluation of the best possible outcomes. In short, rationality was valued in IR for a long time,

perceived as ideal, and emotion was relegated to the background, or to a nuisance that got in the way of sound policy decisions (HUTCHISON; BLEIKER, 2014).

Even earlier attempts to bring emotions into IR still centred rationality. The introduction of political psychology in the 1970s tried to take into account the particularities of specific individual actors in the decision-making process, focusing on the individuals that engage in international politics and their own biases, cultural practices and ideas (HUTCHISON; BLEIKER, 2014). The focus would be in psychoanalysing individuals, usually leaders or diplomats, to profile them and try to identify the causes of their actions (SOLOMON, 2015). The problem with these attempts to bring the emotional into IR is that they never really contested the centrality of rationality, as the emotions being detected were still seen as obstacles to rational choice, that undermine acting in the most efficient way possible (HUTCHISON; BLEIKER, 2014). Going deeper, these studies understood the subject as full and complete, with an objective, coherent, fixed identity. As such, political psychology never really went beyond what came before it, taking emotions to still be something individual and personal, instead of possibly collective, and always as a hindrance, instead of taking their possibilities seriously. Instead, not only individuals, but states are taken as having complete identities that are unquestionable, without taking the care of looking at processes of production of identity, meaning, belonging and Otherness (SOLOMON, 2015).

Emotions took a few more decades to be taken seriously in IR but works arguing for the exploration of emotions in international politics started to come up in the turn of the 21st century. This initial effort came in the form of defending that the exploration of emotions was *worth it*, not only because of their importance in how world politics happen, but also pointing out the constant but neglected presence of emotions in IR theories all along (CLÉMENT; SANGAR, 2018). Jonathan Mercer and Neta Crawford were among the pioneers of this push towards emotions, and their effort went towards questioning the importance given to rationality, the division between the rational and the emotional, and pointing to how reductionist the typical IR view of emotions can be. Their work had substantial influence over what would come next, with the blurring of the barriers between emotion and rationality becoming crucial (HUTCHISON; BLEIKER, 2014).

Work on emotions and IR bloomed since then, and as these things tend to go, went in a variety of directions, categorized differently by different authors. Hutchinson and Bleiker (2014) point to divisions such as between cognitive or affective, latent and emergent, and micro and macro approaches. Clément and Sangar (2018), on the other hand, point to two main debates to be considered: debates around the definitions of the terms “emotion”, “affect” and “feeling”; and debates on the processes through which emotions become political. Solomon (2015) tries for a more author-centric division, introducing a Lacanian view of emotions and desire, in opposition to a Deleuzian one. All of these distinctions can be useful to understand the broad state of the art when it comes to emotions in IR, but they can also be misleading and excluding, and because of that, I believe it is important to look at all of them in order to properly ascertain the contributions and gaps of this recent, but highly productive field of study, trying as much as possible to give it a broad and fair portrayal, and also to introduce what my position intends to be within this field.

In the dichotomy between cognitive and affective, work that goes in the cognitive direction understands emotion as a form of evaluation of a situation – fear or anger, for example, are reactions to something bad or dangerous, and therefore, these are feelings that can help the individual make political decisions based on what is good or bad. This resonates a lot with earlier work on political psychology, observing individual behaviour of coherent subjects to understand why they act the way they do (HUTCHISON; BLEIKER, 2014). A relatively recent example of this approach would be van Hoef’s (2018) study of the friendship between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt during World War 2, and how this friendship affected their decision-making processes. On the opposite side of this spectrum, affective studies reject the idea of emotions as a form of judging a situation, but as bodily reactions that are not reflected upon, that just happen without any thinking. This is closer to a Deleuze-inspired tradition, with Brian Massumi’s work being very influential on this field, as we will explore later. For now, Hutchinson and Bleiker also point to the existence of a “hybrid approach”, where neuroscience opens the doors to seeing emotions as *both* cognitive and affective, where a mix of bodily reactions and mental processes produces emotions in a myriad of different ways – that is, the division between body and mind is irrelevant, and reason and

emotion do not need be enemies (HUTCHISON; BLEIKER, 2014). Even in this hybridity, however, there are conflicts, with some arguing in favour of seeing emotions as social and collective, and avoiding reducing humans to “nothing but brains” (JEFFERY, 2014), while others argue for the emphasis on the role of the body on the production of emotions, as emotions have no other empirical basis for existence beyond the body, even when they become collective (MCDERMOTT, 2014).

The latent vs. emergent debate is complementary to the cognitive vs. affective one. Here, different approaches will either assume emotions are always present, and come before any bodily reaction or conscious action (latent), or that the way emotions manifest is more complex than a neat order of factor where emotions come first – emotions are, instead, a part of a system that mixes individual bodies and minds with social and cultural forms of understanding and reacting to the world. When looking at these categories, however, Hutchison and Bleiker opt for introducing an alternative, offering a broader division between macro and micro approaches. Instead of following categories inspired by psychological debates of how emotions are manifested and processed, they suggest an IR-focused categorization for IR studies, separating works by how they understand the processes through which emotions become public and political, and how they can shape the social realm – understanding this, they claim, is the key challenge facing emotions-focused IR studies (HUTCHISON; BLEIKER, 2014).

The division between micro and macro, then, relates to the scope of emotions being studied. Macro approaches try to look at how emotions, in a general sense, come to matter in world politics, evaluating the relationship between emotions and other important concepts, such as rationality, nationalism, identity, sovereignty and power. Micro approaches, on the other hand, looks at specific emotions, and how they come to become relevant collectively and politically, and focuses less on establishing generic explanations for how emotions affect politics in general. Micro approaches admit emotions as unique and complex, and different emotions will operate differently in different contexts. Working together, macro and micro approaches tend to complement each other, as macro approaches tend to be universalizing and leave behind much of the complexity on which emotions operate; incorporating micro perceptions of emotions can help mitigate this

problem. On the other hand, micro approaches' specificity makes it hard to take theoretical conclusions from them, especially not without generalizing emotional phenomena based on just a few examples, and maybe taking a more macro approach in conjunction with the micro might help to draw conclusions about how emotions impact politics beyond specific cases, in a way that helps facing the challenge of understanding *how* emotions become political (HUTCHISON; BLEIKER, 2014)

Clément and Sangar (2018) also emphasize this conflict, raising questions about how and when do emotions leave the private sphere and become public, or whether emotions are even private to begin with. They point to a few attempts to answering this dilemma: Mercer's approach is that emotions must be studied along with identity, necessarily – individuals identify with the group, they become the group itself, and to him, that is the key that separates individual emotion from group emotion and, consequently, private from public, personal from politically relevant: “[g]roup-level emotion can be more powerful than the individual experience of emotion because one experiences it as objectively true and externally driven, rather than as subjective and individually constructed” (MERCER, 2014, p. 526). On the opposite side, some argue that trying to separate between individual and collective is not important, that there is nothing inherently individual about the way bodies react emotionally to things, as the way bodies react is necessarily tied to a social construction of emotions:

emotions are intersubjective social phenomena as much as they are biological subjective ones. The reason, neuroscience teaches, is that emotions are not ‘things’ that humans just ‘have’, They are experiential capabilities that we acquire as the ‘neuroplastic’ human brain co-evolves with social environments. [...] The brain’s neuroplasticity implies a theoretical solution to the levels of-analysis problem for it suggests that emotions are encoded in the social contexts of world politics as much as they are in individual biology (MATTERN, 2014, p. 590).

This debate – about bodies and minds, the socialization of emotions, and the contributions of neuroscience – leads to another relevant debate, where the concepts of emotion, feeling and affect are discussed, differentiated, or blurred together. Typically, the differences are traced like this: affect is the instant reaction to something, what comes before the body has any time to process what is happening. It is described as almost the “purest” form of emotions, potentially unaffected by external, psychological or discourse factors. Emotions, however, are the result of

cognition after affect. Emotion is cultural, intersubjective, discursive, it is shaped by the environment and by the neuroplasticity Mattern mentions above. A feeling, lastly, is defined as the awareness of the emotion, the final step. Feelings are affect given a name and a meaning by the conscience, and like emotion, they are influenced by culture and discourse (CLÉMENT; SANGAR, 2018).

Of course, while these definitions are the most common ones, they are not necessarily agreed upon, nor does every work on emotions considers that the separation is even necessary. So far, I have used emotion as an umbrella term, following Clément and Sangar (2018, p. 5), but clarifying what they mean, and what the differentiation implies, becomes important here. There seems to be a consensus on IR emotion studies that emotions have a social dimension to them, that they are shaped by culture and politics and history, and that they can help shape these things too, in turn. How this shaping happens, and how emotions go from something that is felt to something that is politically relevant is the question that has millions of possible answers, but emotions are generally accepted as not purely individual, as we have seen. It is the introduction of the concept of affect that makes things a bit more complicated. As Hutchison and Bleiker (2014, p. 502) point out, using affect signals a step away from looking at specific emotions, in the micro-level, and towards a more general understanding of how unconscious dispositions might connect and affect individuals, transcending individuality itself, in the macro-level. Affect allows one to observe broader shifts in cultural currents that go beyond specific emotions, creating what Ross (2006), inspired by Brian Massumi and Gilles Deleuze calls “circulations of affect”:

My argument also reflects a selective concern with the specific challenges posed by nonconscious and corporeal dimensions of emotion. Recent work inspired by Gilles Deleuze has shown how nonreflective habits and moods, or ‘affects’, tinge our intellectual beliefs and judgements and prepare us for the identities we come to hold [...]. Circulations of affect prefigure, for example, public enthusiasm for nationalist mobilization or military intervention. Whereas feelings are subjective ideas, affects cut across individual subjects and forge collective associations from socially induced habits and memories (ROSS, 2006, p. 199).

Following a similar path, Mattern (2014) argues that it is problematic to try to separate emotions into neat categories, and in fact, the inherent connection between emotion and cognition turns the concept useless. It reduces emotion to a

brain function, and as such, with this focus on individual cognitive processing of emotions, becomes politically irrelevant. Affect, however, relates to the non-conscious, bringing to the fore another dimension of emotion that is not limited to just a thing brains do. While Mattern admits to the flaws of affect as a central concept – can we even theoretically apprehend affect, without processing it cognitively and, therefore, turning into emotion? – but still insists that it is necessary to go beyond cognition and emotion, if we are to truly understand how affect affects the social and the political (MATTERN, 2014).

I would argue that no, we cannot theoretically apprehend affect without processing it cognitively and, therefore, letting it be affected by discourse. This is an argument that is better developed by Solomon (SOLOMON, 2015), who draws on Lacanian theory to point in a direction that shows the impossibility of expressing affect beyond the trappings of discourse. Here, the path that is taken is not the one taken by some IR scholars, of conflating emotion and affect into one thing only for simplicity sake¹²: emotion and affect are, in fact, different, but affect's amorphous, unconscious, and corporeal nature makes it impossible to be actually captured. Affect exists separate from emotion, but it can only be processed and understood through cognitive processes. This means that our understanding of affects is never going to capture them perfectly, because the lenses of discourse will always have to be used, and these lenses necessarily change the nature of affect itself when it is translated into language (SOLOMON, 2015).

In this scenario, emotions can be deceiving, as they are the manifestations of affect into discourse, and are influenced by it. Affects and discourse necessarily overlap, then, and are mutually dependent on each other – that is, discourse is affective, as there is emotional investment of the subjects towards it, and what it means for them to express their affects with language. Solomon (2015, p. 47) brings a metaphor from Lacan to illustrate this, through the way rivers are channelled into electric energy. We may be aware of the energetic potential of a river, for sure, but we can only work with it once a hydroelectric dam is built, and some interference

¹² Both Clément and Sangar (2018, p. 5) and Hutchinson and Bleiker (2014, p. 503) do this in their overviews of the debate, which is understandable, as neither text intends to have a final word on the subject. Hutchinson and Bleiker (2014, p. 500) do, however, point to the use of “emotion” as an umbrella term as a widespread practice in IR emotion studies.

is made to make that energy accessible – but this interference is also responsible for changing that energy into something else, different from the raw energy of the river currents. In a similar vein, affect is a raw energy that only makes sense to us when it is transformed into emotion through discourse, but this energy is inevitably changed by the process, and cannot be reached in its original form. This argument goes against Ross' circulation of affects, for example, as it is exactly the transformation of affect into discourse that gives it political power, instead of a diffuse sense of unconscious action moving individuals forward as a group. Discourse channels affect into politically relevant signifiers through emotion, giving affect a shape and a purpose (SOLOMON, 2015). What this means, in simple terms, is that while affect and emotion are indeed different things, separating them rigidly, or creating a hierarchy of which one is best when studying international politics, is not necessarily a productive exercise, as the inevitable interference of discourse on our understanding of affect makes the separation, in practice, empty.

This is a good point, I believe, for us to return to the question of how emotions become political, because Solomon's approach has interesting answers to that, which connect to this understanding of discourse as central to the political relevance of affect and emotion. The question Solomon is trying to answer focuses on why some discourses are more effective than others in the political field, and he frames this question as to put emotions (and desire, specifically) as a central factor on how discourses are disputed. Desire, here, is defined as "the basic dynamic driving the social construction process in general and the social construction of subjectivity in particular" (SOLOMON, 2015, p. 2), as desire for a complete identity is the driving force of action behind any subject. Identity has been a relevant theme in IR for a long time, with it being mostly understood as mutable and unfixed, but without going deeper into the mechanics of *how* identity is unfixed and, more importantly, asking why subjects continue to seek this fixity. Introducing the concept of desire can help bring light to this question, as well as serving to illustrate how certain discourses and narratives take advantage of desire for identity security for political goals (SOLOMON, 2015).

This approach has a starting point that, today, is familiar in IR: that is, understanding that we cannot access reality outside of discourse and, therefore, as subjected to the power of language in every aspect of life (and, consequently, of

politics). This assumption is shared by poststructuralists throughout the discipline, and by the populist theories that I presented in the previous chapter. In a universe commanded by language and where nothing can be said to have an accessible essence, “politics is the process through which identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed and through which discourses struggle against other discourses to achieve dominance” (SOLOMON, 2015, p. 27). These discourses centre themselves around key signifiers – or master signifiers, for Lacan – that anchors discourse around a meaning and an emotional investment in a concept. This is very much the same dynamic described before to explain populism, where certain demands or dissatisfactions become central to a discourse that unites many disparate identities and wants. Subjects’ desire to have their demands be met is related to their desire to be complete¹³. They create an emotional investment to these demands, believing that their completion will bring their own completion, and this investment bleeds over to the other demands in the chain of equivalence¹⁴, creating the type of emotional investment we see in right-wing populism today (SOLOMON, 2015).

Here, then, Solomon’s exploration of Lacan complements what we presented before. Discourse alone cannot account for the investment that subjects make towards chains of equivalence and their constitutive nodal points, nor to the consequent investment towards populist movements in general. There is an affective and emotional dimension to it, where the desire to be complete compels the subjects to translate that desire into something, and the discursive environment they are surrounded by influences this desire, being translated, from affect, into attachment to political signifiers and symbols. Desire has no fixed object, which

¹³ Solomon, as well as many other scholars who take psychoanalysis as their theoretical starting point, can be criticized for this point, because of how universalizing it is. Subjects’ motivations are certainly affected by desire, but that is not the only force driving them, and assuming so can be dangerous, ignoring political and historical contexts. Here, I do not assume a posture that takes desire as the only relevant affective force on subjects, and this is the reason Solomon will not be taken alone as the theoretical basis for this work; this is another reason why I choose to, later in this chapter, add Ahmed’s perspective to this work, to complexify our understanding of how emotions move subjects.

¹⁴ An example of this can be easily seen on the introduction, when I mention how people who believe in one conspiracy theory tend to believe many of them: someone might start believing vaccines are dangerous, for example, due to their worry over the health of their children; as they learn more about anti-vaccine conspiracies, they get tangled on the chains of equivalence that connect most conspiracies and put them against a secret elite hiding the truth from people, and start caring about other points in the chain, such as Flat Earth, 9/11 being faked, and etc.

turns this movement even more fluid – depending on the context, a lot of different things can be translated into the object of desire, and since it will never be truly fulfilled, as the subject will never be complete, it can switch from one signifier to the next and, in reality, the choice of object of desire is severely modified, depending on how discursive movements reach the subject:

This leads to a paradoxical situation: the subject desires a signifier that it can assume as its own, yet none fully represents the subject. Desire, then, remains unsatisfied, a fully stable identity always remains out of reach, and the search for identity stability continues. This quest for a sense of fullness leads to perpetual processes of identification rather than the construction of fixed and conclusive “identity” (SOLOMON, 2015, p. 29).

This constant instability of identity also creates an emptiness that affects Others. The inherent lack of meaning of anything, because signifiers are never fixed and their meanings slide around according to different contexts and different relationships between signifiers, means that the self can project almost any meaning to things outside of itself. Not only is the subject constantly trying to complete itself, but it also tries to give meaning and wholeness to everything that surrounds it. None of these meanings are complete, and none of them satiate desire. This is frustrating, of course, and this frustration can be translated into creating an Other that is the one responsible for “stealing” the subject’s completion, for being an obstacle towards the fulfilment of desire (SOLOMON, 2015; STAVRAKAKIS, 2007). Again, this echoes what we already explored about populism, with this creation of an enemy being the catalyst for the antagonistic cut, between the people and the elites – between the self and the Other than interrupts desire.

I bring us back to populism to show how Solomon’s approach of desire through Lacan is helpful in the specific case explored in this work, but his general goal – of explaining why subjects continue searching for identity completion, and why some discourses are more effective than others – is also very well fulfilled by this Lacanian approach. It is the search to fulfil desire that makes subjects continue to search for meaning, to slide from one signifier to the next in the search of completion, and what makes discourses effective is how good they are at mobilising these desires. Discursive hegemony is achieved by whatever discourse promises best to bring about the identity security that subjects strive for, and this is something populism does excellently and broadly.

By pointing in the direction of desire as the main driving force of subjects' emotional investment towards political discourses, Solomon does present us with a framework that, in Hutchison and Bleiker's terms, could be understood as macro-levelled. His goal is to use this framework, this focus on desire, to explore American foreign policy, but it is a broad framework that puts desire on centre stage and creates a general explanation for many different political phenomena related to emotional investment. While it does provide explanations that are incredibly useful for our exploration of populism, I think Hutchison and Bleiker give sound advice when they point to the danger of universalising in macro-level approaches, and how it can be useful to come down to the micro and look at emotions in more specific ways. While Solomon gives us an excellent tool to understand how populism works and mobilizes desire and affect in general, I think it is also important, for the goals of this thesis, to look at how specific emotions are mobilized through discourse in contemporary American right-wing populism¹⁵, and how these emotions relate to desire. To do this, I believe it useful to leave IR for a few pages, and explore emotion studies beyond the confines of what has been produced in international politics so far. Here, we go back to the seminal work of Sara Ahmed, who explores in depth how culture and discourse influence different emotional responses, and how these emotions influence culture and discourse in turn.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Ahmed claims that her book originally was not one that she saw as a part of a so-called affective turn, but despite that, it became a seminal work in this field. Her goal, she claims, was to explore emotions in order to “explain how worlds are reproduced; in particular, I wanted to reflect on how social norms become affective over time” (AHMED, 2014, p. 204). Her approach is one that refuses dichotomies and divisions. There is no questioning of whether emotions are individual or collective, or how they go from individual to collective. It is not even a matter of them being both, it is a perspective where emotions are constitutional of psychic and social spaces – they are not a part of one or the other or both, they are crucial to their mere existence as objects in the world (AHMED, 2014, p. 10).

¹⁵ See Solomon (2015) for a similar approach, but with a specific focus on the war on terror and the rise of neoconservatism during the Bush II era, and its consequences for American foreign policy.

To Ahmed, emotions are not mere reactions that come from individuals or groups – emotions themselves *do* things. Emotions orient us towards or away from things; they dictate how we make judgements about the world and others¹⁶, they create narratives and rules. These things are in themselves actions, they themselves result in something. There are very concrete examples of this in her book, such as hatred causing moving away¹⁷: she presents us with an account of racism on a subway, where racial hatred causes a person to try and move away from another. In this way, one emotion (hate) creates an action, and action that positions bodies in a certain way, and that creates a world (a world where the hated object is distant), shaping both social and physical space at the same time (AHMED, 2014, p. 209).

There is an echo, here, to what Solomon developed: in what Ahmed presents, feelings shape the world around us, but they shape us as well. If this is the case, then both subjects and objects are necessarily shaped by the perception of the one who is perceiving – that is, they are not whole or objective at all, and their existences and identities are incredibly contingent (AHMED, 2014, p. 8). And if we take it a step further, as Ahmed does, and admit that emotions are a product of the social as much as they are a product of the body, and are subject to history and discourse, this is not much different from how, as we have seen before through Lacan, emotions are always going to be filtered through discourse in their expression. Here, Ahmed rejects emotions as something internal (rejecting a separation between inside and outside, to begin with), but as social and cultural practices. Not only that, but these separations are created by emotions themselves (AHMED, 2014, p. 9). The social aspect of the production of emotions also means that, over time, objects and subjects become saturated with the affects that flow towards them: they become “sticky”, as she says, and this type of saturation can extend over time as to seem natural, so the emotions that an object draws on people seem to be intrinsically linked to them, when in fact, they have only been associated

¹⁶ This sounds similar to cognitive approach to emotions in IR mentioned earlier in this chapter. The difference is in how these judgements are formed by emotions, however: while cognitive approaches treat the judgements emotions make as almost instinctual, Ahmed makes it clear these judgements are socially, historically, discursively produced.

¹⁷ Ahmed could be criticized for avoiding binarism but maintaining one binarism where bad feelings mean moving away, and good feelings mean moving towards. While an interesting critique, I believe this to be a limited interpretation of her work; in my reading, her approach allows for the moving of bodies in any direction, with no values being necessarily attached to specific feelings. Anger might move towards (in the direction of physical violence, for example) just as much as it can move away, and this applies to any feeling.

with that feeling for so long, it is not even questionable anymore. In other words, value is added to objects over time, and the history of the production of this value disappears; only the lingering feeling remains, with no explanation to why it is there, and it becomes naturalized (AHMED, 2014, p. 11).

This is a perspective that goes beyond a lot of the questions raised by IR emotions studies in previous moments of this chapter. Wondering about the collective manifestation of emotions, or the possibility of their political impact, or whether affect or emotion is more important, are questions that do not fit into Ahmed's framework; instead, emotions are responsible for creating these very boundaries, between body and mind, public and private, political or not. The mere existence of the body, she argues, is a result of the impressions left by emotions, and bodies as separate entities between each other only exist insofar as they affect each other, and emotions circulate between them. At the same time, it is a perspective similar to the Deleuzian-influenced "circulation of affects" presented by Ross, and to the Lacanian perspective where the psychic is necessarily shaped by the social, and vice-versa, and bodies and their affects cannot be reached without the interference of this social, as it is always a product of interaction – intentionally or not, it is like a bridge is created between these two points of view (AHMED, 2014).

This happens, perhaps, because while Ahmed has a vast pool of theoretical works that she borrows from to build her argument, she does not claim to belong to either a Deleuzian or a Lacanian tradition – instead, she belongs to a feminist and queer one. Ann Cvetkovich (2012) talks about this in more depth, as the affective turn that seemed to be blossoming in the early 2000s, at the time of publication of the first edition of Ahmed's book, does not "seem particularly new" (p. 8) to her, as she is familiar with the way feminist and queer literature had been blurring the barriers of body and mind, and between rational and emotional, since much earlier, with the feminist mantra of "the personal is political" being a poignant symbol of this. Feminist confrontations against women being supposedly more "emotional" (and therefore, less rational and inferior) and embrace of sentimentality in cultural studies, as well as queer explorations of negative feelings and rethinking of positive ones are important examples, as both these fields of studies cannot dismiss the links between gender, body and emotion so easily (CVETKOVICH, 2012; KOIVUNEN,

2000). Cvetkovich points to how emotions have been front and centre in feminist and queer studies¹⁸ for long before the affective turn not to diminish its importance, as the critical contributions brought about by affect studies are certainly extremely relevant, but to remember the origins of it, and to point to a certain discomfort in trying to place herself, and her work on depression, inside this new movement (CVETKOVICH, 2012). What I gather from this is also theoretically relevant to understand where these authors, and Ahmed after them, are coming from: there is no point to hammer on the distinctions between affect and emotion if the tradition that is being followed is one where the separation of mind and body was questioned from the beginning. Cvetkovich uses feelings and affect interchangeably, acknowledging the Deleuze-inspired weight of the word affect but giving to it her own meaning, that encompasses both bodily impulses, desires and feelings as they come, but also their historical construction beyond the body itself. Her preference for this usage is ambiguous on purpose:

I favor feeling in part because it is intentionally imprecise, *retaining the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences*. It also has a vernacular quality that lends itself to exploring feelings as something we come to know through experience and popular usage and that indicates, perhaps only intuitively but nonetheless significantly, a conception of mind and body as integrated (CVETKOVICH, 2012, p. 4, emphasis mine).

What Ahmed points to, then, in bringing up the type of feminist affect approach that Cvetkovich presents, is a similar position, the following of a similar tradition. She uses emotion as her primary term throughout the book, and she claims it is not a choice to undermine affect, but simply an effect of her following this aforementioned feminist tradition, and of the fact that ‘emotion’ is simply the most commonly used term for the things she was trying to talk about. But here, to some degree, the affective turn and the feminist tradition seem to clash. Ahmed points to how some work on affect acknowledges feminist and queer work as precursors to the affective turn, but seem to dismiss them as no longer *part* of this turn (p. 206), and she also points to how the seminal work of Brian Massumi to show how the turn to affect puts this concept in a privileged position with clear-cut frontiers,

¹⁸ For a few of the inspirations Ahmed herself mentions, see Alison Jaggar (1996), Elizabeth Spelman (1989), Sue Campbell (1994, 1997), Marilyn Frye (1983), Arlie Hochschild (1983), bell hooks (1989), Audre Lorde (1984), Catherine A. Lutz (1988, 1998), Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) and Ruth Leys (2011).

assigning to affect a ‘different logic’ than emotion, putting both concepts against each other, where affects are unmediated while emotions are – an opposition that, to Ahmed’s feminist sensibilities, sounds incredibly gendered. An opposition between a concept that is impersonal and mobile (affect) and another that is personal and contained (emotion) seems to bring up some old dichotomies.

To some degree, we can understand that, to Ahmed, the theoretical is political. Not only does she have clear conceptual explanations to why she uses the term emotion on the way that she does, and chooses it instead of affect, but it also seems to be a choice against the erasure of the feminist and queer tradition in emotion studies, a choice that I intend to follow from now on, along with the choice to follow Solomon’s Lacanian-inspired approach to these concepts. Here, theoretical explanations and political choices blend very nicely together to create a perspective that refuses, time and time again, to accept uncritically a division between mind and body, that understands that emotions can be both visceral and mediated, both bodily reaction and a part of a larger, discursive, and historical context, and that attempting to separate these dimensions undermines our understanding of how emotions can be relevant for politics.

Here, then, we have through Ahmed an approach that blends the material (the body) with the discursive and the emotional, and this resonates, I believe, with what was shown on the first chapter. After all, we have seen, through Brown’s work, how neoliberal economic policies that benefit the rich in detriment of the poor and that slowly deteriorated labour rights and welfare policies (material factors) connect to a nihilistic world where values and symbols lose meaning and float around to be appropriated by whoever can apply meaning to it best, creating new and empty nodal points around which to organize (discourse factors), and relate to a sense of resentment, anger and fear coming from those who feel slighted by this neoliberal order that took away their economic safety and their moral grounding (emotional factors). Through Ahmed’s approach, then, and the refusal to separate these three fields of politics, we can better understand contemporary right-wing populism and its multiplicity of nuances.

What Ahmed’s approach does for us, beyond this, is a complementary micro framework to Solomon’s macro-level approach. With this theoretical basis in mind,

she does exactly that: understanding and pointing out the role of emotions in creating social and political barriers between bodies, she explores the role of specific emotions in doing this in certain situations. I have mentioned before the subway example, but another interesting one is on her chapter about love. In it, she explores how white supremacist groups justify their actions through love. White supremacism is, here, a very family-centred ideology, where proponents of it justify their actions through the love and kinship they feel for their families and their race. They do not do the thing they do because they hate non-white people – they do it to protect the livelihoods of the white people they love. The point, here, is not to define love, but to look at the effects it can create:

I want to consider how the pull of love towards an other, who becomes an object of love, can be transferred towards a collective, expressed as an ideal or object. I do not want to suggest a one-way relation of transference (when love for the collective, or when love for a collective ‘stands in’ for the particular other). Rather, I want to examine how love moves us ‘towards’ something in the very delineation of the object of love, and how the direction of ‘towardness’ is sustained through the ‘failure’ of love to be returned. We could ask: What are we doing when we do something in the name of love? (AHMED, 2014, p. 124).

Again, we can see how a particular emotion can delineate objects and barriers, and establish a certain social space between bodies, as well the creation of an ideal related to that emotion¹⁹. This is a very good example of how certain emotions can be approached through Ahmed’s lenses, and how her perspective can be useful in the next moments of this dissertation, in observing emotions mobilized by right-wing populist discourse. Before we do, that, however, I believe this is a good moment to conclude this chapter by approaching some methodological concerns.

3.3. Conclusion: discourse and methodology

This chapter has demonstrated a fairly firm position on one point: when it comes to emotions, discourse is inescapable. To be fair, discourse is inescapable in general, as we cannot apprehend reality without language, but this is a position that is especially important to be made clear when it comes to emotions, as they tend to

¹⁹ This could also relate to the concept of desire, with emotions pulling subjects toward an ideal that could, maybe, bring fulfilment.

be blurry and sometimes seem to escape even the sticky webs that language weave around us.

Because of this position, I see it as quite productive to unite this perspective that centres discourse with a methodology, in our next steps, that does the same. Discourse analysis is one of the most widespread methodologies used in emotion and affect studies in IR, with social (and discursive) character of emotions taking centre stage. Among these works, Koschut's (2018, see also (KOSCHUT et al., 2017) introduction of emotion discourse analysis seems to be particularly useful, as it tries to unite the specificities of studying emotion with more traditional discourse analysis approaches. Discourse is that through which emotion and its expression is shaped and can shape the world, and with this in mind, Koschut establishes 3 main guidelines for the analyst to observe discourses around and within emotion: first, understanding that discourse exists in various types of texts, that do not limit themselves to spoken or written language, and each dimension of discourse needs to be evaluated within its context. Second, it is important to map out the emotions that can be identified in the texts, and third, it is crucial to pay attention to context and history in the interpretation of discourse and the emotions related to it (KOSCHUT, 2018).

Koschut makes an interesting suggestion when presenting his concept of emotion discourse analysis:

While EDA adds considerable strength to traditional discursive methods, it also allows for possible synergies and cross-links with other methodological approaches such as process tracing and narrative analysis. Since narrative analysis equally emphasizes the historical, cultural, and social contextualization of language, the way emotions impact on, enrich, and enable certain narratives to 'stick' with audiences as well as how emotions become the subject of storytelling can be easily combined with EDA (KOSCHUT, 2018, p. 297).

This is an interesting suggestion, and following Kleres (KLERES, 2011), the introduction of narrative analysis can complement well the approach introduced by Koschut. In narrative analysis, discourses are seen through the stories they shape – discourses create narratives that are almost literary in their format, with plots, protagonists and villain. Narrative analysis helps identify the way subjects position themselves and others within a story, similar to how Ahmed describes emotion

creating spaces where subjects go toward or away from each other or other objects. Narrative analysis also help to show how these positions can change depending on the perspective of the subject, where the narrator frequently is more sympathetic towards itself, crafting a story that tends to put the self as a hero that works towards an ideal (KLERES, 2011). In the next chapter, I believe it will become evident how right-wing populist discourses put the self in a heroic and victimised position, something that is reinforced massively by the way populism creates antagonisms and a concept of community and ‘people’, and this can have interesting contrasts and overlays with science denial and their quest towards truth that proclaims itself as rational and objective, never emotional, but that certainly creates a narrative with villains that manipulate and heroes who fight back through their scepticism.

The interaction between narrative analysis and discourse analysis, then, is one that complements quite well the theoretical framework that was developed in this chapter. Solomon’s macro-approach of how emotional investment in discourses that promise to fulfill desire of a stable and complete identity drives certain discourses to the forefront of politics can be explored further with more detailed analysis of these discourses with an emotional emphasis, while narrative analysis considers the type of me-against-the-world narrative that frustrated desires and incomplete subjects tend to develop. Similarly, Ahmed’s micro-approach where the social, spatial and political positionings of subjects are shaped by certain emotions can be complemented by looking at how these positionings create a narrative – in Ahmed’s words, emotions create worlds, and I would argue that these worlds have histories and stories to them.

So, we have reached a point where, along with this brief methodological overview, we have enough of both historical-political contextualization and theoretical framework to move on to more specific waters. We now have the tools to, in the next chapter, look at the relationship between emotions, science denial and right-wing populism, through the case of Flat Earthers. There is something particularly absurd in the belief that the Earth is actually flat, which gives us space to explore the relationship between truth, feelings and politics in one of its most extreme manifestations, enough to show how, if even these outlandish beliefs can be held and mobilized emotionally with political consequences, there really must

be very few spheres of life that can't – and reducing both politics (international or otherwise) and science to pure rationality might be a dangerous oversight.

4. Chapter three: Shaping the Earth

4.1. Introduction

Flat Earth is not that big of a movement. The Flat Earth Society's official website does not give numbers on its membership, but their discussion forum has about 20,000 members (THE FLAT EARTH SOCIETY, 2020). On YouTube, where most Flat Earth content converges, the most popular Flat Earth channel is Mark Sargent's²⁰, which has around 90,000 subscribers, and his most watched video gathered over 1 million views (YOUTUBE, 2020). These numbers are not that big, on the grand scheme of things – certainly not on the grand scheme of American politics, with a population of over 300 million (UNITED STATES CENSUS BUREAU, 2021). But for a version of reality that is so contrary to a science that has been consensual for millennia, there is certainly something curious about such a big number of believers, even if it seems like only a drop in a large pond.

So, why Flat Earth? Science denial and conspiracy theories are not exactly something that you have to look very hard to find: climate denial, anti-vaccine, the recent backlash against COVID-19 science are all examples of science denial have much more obvious and dangerous political consequences to their mere existence. But the point, here, really is to go toward extremes. If something as huge as the shape of the Earth can become a matter of heated discussion and gather the firm allegiance of large groups, then there is little to no limit to how far science denial can go, and how far people will go to deny reality in order to create a vision of the world that is more satisfactory for themselves. The more reality can be shaped by ideas, discourses, and emotions, the more it is necessary to look at how this shaping happens, and to the consequences this shaping has in our collective lives.

It is important to point out that, despite being relatively small, flat-Earthers are not an isolated movement. They might be ridiculed by the absurdity of their beliefs, sure, but, as I plan to show later, their conspiratorial tendencies tend to intersect with a lot of other anti-science beliefs. Investment in conspiracies tends to overlap, as their similar narratives are similarly attractive, offering a way for people

²⁰ Sargent is one of the most influent Flat Earth content creators online currently; many members of the movement credit his videos as what made them start believing the Earth is flat. As the protagonist of the documentary that will be analysed in this chapter, more about him will be introduced later.

to build a version of reality that fits their vision of what the world should be like, or explanations as to why things are so unsatisfactory. As will be shown in this chapter, Flat-Earthers tend to follow this description, and many of them also follow other conspiracies, such as anti-vaccine, climate change denial and 9/11 conspiracies – a lot of them converging, in 2020, around QAnon.

So, this chapter will try to explore this relationship between flat-Earthers' vision of the world, the emotional side of the construction of this world and attachment to it, and how this worldbuilding intersects heavily with many themes and narratives that are built around right-wing populism, as pointed out in chapter 1. Feelings are central here: contempt, fear, shame, pride, hope, belonging – both feelings that are perceived as positive and as negative are important in moving people such as Flat Earthers to seek alternative explanations for the world they live in. Narratives are also crucial, as this creation of an alternative world needs to exist in a context where this ideal reality is being denied by someone else. Here, Solomon's description of how desire moves subjects is crucial, as the lack of completion of the desired ideal world is blocked by an enemy, a secret conspiracy that intends to hide the reality from people in order to keep authoritarian control and curb freedom – circling back, then, to right-wing populist themes.

I show these intersections and realities by analysing the documentary *Behind the Curve* (2018), directed by Daniel J. Clark, where he explores the lives and ideas of popular personalities on the Flat Earth movement. The documentary is an excellent portrayal of the Flat Earth movement, as it shows a variety of facets of the movement and its members, from their personal lives to the experiments they conduct to prove the Earth is flat, and to their relationship with the group. Clark's lens is relatively generous to flat-Earthers: it takes them and their motivations seriously, without brushing them aside as pure ludicrousness, but without falling into the trap of buying into the conspiracies they present. It is, overall, a portrayal that is incredibly useful as a microcosm of what Flat Earth, specifically, and conspiracy theories, in general, are like, and as such, is a useful analytical tool for a work that does not have the scope to present a comprehensive exploration of flat-Earthers in the style of an ethnography or something similar. From Clark's portrayal, then, and the different nuances of the Flat Earth movement he exhibits, we can observe how flat-Earthers speak about their beliefs and about the movement

itself, the intersections with other conspiracies, the type of idealistic worldbuilding that is behind the adherence to the group and, most importantly, the affects that circulate among them, justifying and maintaining their allegiance to the group and to the theory.

Before diving into the documentary and the analysis of its subjects, however, it is important that we address the concept of science. I have been mentioning science vaguely throughout the chapters so far, but it would not be fair to either side of this dispute to continue treating it without definitions. Science is not an absolute holder of truth or an unquestionable authority – but believing in this does not mean that I adopt an absolute relativism so sceptical that believing that the Earth is flat suddenly becomes acceptable. It is a delicate position, and one that must be addressed carefully, as I will do in the next section.

The following section will, then, analyse *Behind the Curve* and its characters. After that, I will relate much of the worldbuilding structure of Flat Earth to the way Trump and his particular brand of right-wing populism also views science and, beyond it, truth in general. Finally, the conclusion will talk about the recent developments in conspiracy theories on right-wing populism and the rise of QAnon.

4.2. Notes on science

The main goal of this work is to investigate the power and influence of science denial, with a specific look to Flat Earth believers, from an emotional point of view. That is – I want to understand how feelings are a central part of how these beliefs are adhered to, maintained and circulated, and how these same feelings navigate between science and politics, and shape people's allegiances to certain groups and worldviews. It is, then, an investigation about how truth, even scientific truth, is constructed through feelings, rather than through rationality or objectivity (two concepts that can be, and are, contested), and mobilized for political goals and movements.

Talking about truth, however, and specifically truth about science, requires us to go deeper into what these words mean. Western modernity inserts us into a world where science is supposed to be the ultimate authority for interpreting reality, but the rise of science denial in the last few years breaks the illusion that this

authority is all-encompassing. But the critique of science as the only source of truth is not something new or reserved to those who believe the Earth is flat and vaccines are unhealthy. Western science has been a force for violence throughout centuries of colonization and war efforts, and has been constructed specifically to uphold certain worldviews as right and certain forms of civilization as superior (HARDING, 2015).

This means, then, that I am putting myself in a delicate position. Taking science denial seriously as a political force means, here, to take a position that is pro-science, but it is necessary to do so without abandoning critique of it. It is accepting that science is not a flawless venture, but is filled with cracks, holes, and alternatives. These cracks can be, and are, exploited, as Wark (WARK, 2015, p. 193) and Latour (LATOUR, 2018, p. 22) point out, and the critique of science needs to be balanced and prudent in order to not give fuel to those who seek not to truly engage meaningfully with it, but to undermine it.

It is with this in mind that, in this section, I plan to present a few ways in which a balanced critique of science can be built, defending it against the reactionary forces that attempt to weaponize relativism, but without denying that science is not absolute. To do this, a starting point can be considering the contingency of a concept that is a pillar in the understanding of science as truth – the idea that science is objective. Objectivity is a concept as malleable as any other, prone to changes of meaning through discourse, and as Sandra Harding (2015) demonstrates, must be cultivated to be truly useful. She develops and defends the concept of “strong objectivity”, in an attempt not to deny objectivity in its entirety, but to question taking it from granted, and to make it better, to make it deliberate instead of a given.

Harding does this by emphasizing who does science, as well as when and where. She explores different aspects of these questions to slowly build *strong objectivity* – which, put into the simplest terms, means an approach where the scientist pays attention to their own biases to increase their own capacity to look at the world without prejudice:

Knowledge is always socially situated, as standpoint epistemology argues, and some social situations are better than others for producing the kinds of knowledge that are needed by

particular social groups. Yet we can still aim for objectivity in research — indeed, for even stronger standards for maximizing objectivity than the value-free stance required (HARDING, 2015, p. 150).

What Harding argues is that this “value-free stance”, which is the basis for basic objectivity, is filled to the brim with values that are taken for granted. These values come from many different aspects of the subjectivity of those who make science: values related to being male, or white, or western, or to the religion the scientist follows. She also points to historical contexts, like the post-war scientific rush between the US and the Soviet Union, which financed specific types of science with a political agenda in mind. Harding also points to the supposed secularity of science – a secularity that is rooted in Protestant philosophy and practices, but that is taken for granted due to a lack of reflexivity in Western science (HARDING, 2015).

Strong objectivity, then, points to how all these pre-set values have an important role in the way science is made, and by going unquestioned, they actually undermine the capacity of scientists to look at reality and draw conclusions from it. It is crucial, for strong objectivity and for Harding, that the scientist take themselves into account, as well as the scenario they’re inserted in, instead of assuming their own view as universal. Admitting that the scientific practice is not value-free is not a move to undermine scientific legitimacy, but a way to make science better, more inclusive and multiple, and to see the world through wider, more encompassing lenses (HARDING, 2015).

So, Harding gives us a way to defend science and its capacity to construct knowledge while still maintaining that it is not perfect, and that criticizing a supposed value-free science that is always objective is important. She does this both in relation to the subject, to the scientists themselves, but also in relation to the context the subject is inserted in, from the discursive environment that creates a certain understanding of what secularity is, for example, to the material conditions of the financing of certain fields and studies. To move further, however, I believe it is important to look deeper into aspects of the scientific practice itself.

Here, McKenzie Wark’s (2015) work on scientific labour might be useful. By bringing Feyerabend, Barad and Haraway to the fore, Wark points to the

necessity of a *media theory* of science – that is, a theory that looks at the way science is produced, at the *means* through which we reach scientific methods, and how these means themselves matter when it comes to what knowledge is being created. It is what she calls a humanist style of thought, that centres the labour of the scientist, trying to find a balance between an extreme constructivist position that relativizes all of science, and pure scientific realism.

I would argue the centre of Wark's argument lies on her exploration of Karen Barad's idea of apparatus. Barad's inspiration comes from the physicist Niels Bohr, and his understanding of the way matter behaves sometimes as waves and sometimes as particles – to him, these different and complimentary forms of matter are a consequence of the kinds of experiments being made: that is, the scientific apparatuses being used, quite literally. Bohr's formulation challenges a Newtonian view of matter, where objects simply exist in a certain way in the universe, and it is the scientist's job to understand and describe it. To Bohr, the scientific practice itself, the way the scientist approaches the object, changes the object itself.

As with Harding, there is a concern over objectivity here. Also similar to Harding, this is an approach where objectivity is constructed:

Objectivity means producing a certain kind of cut in the world, over and over again, and getting comparable results. But the results are always the product of a particular apparatus, which makes this cut in the world in a particular way. What is measured is not the world, it is rather the phenomena produced in this particular apparatus. Actually, this approach is more, rather than less, "realist." *It's a realism of the experimental medium itself* (WARK, 2016, p. 172, emphasis mine).

And, as Barad expands on it:

Apparatuses are the conditions of possibility for determinate boundaries and properties of objects and meanings of embodied concepts within the phenomenon. Indeed, *this embodiment of concepts as part of the apparatus is ultimately what secures the possibility of objective knowledge* (BARAD, 2007).

Through Barad's apparatus, Wark brings us to an emphasis on a reality that is only accessible through tools that are, in the end, arbitrary. This keeps science grounded in reality, but at the same time admitting its non-universality. While reality exists, it is only through the apparatus that we can reach it – we construct our reality through the apparatus, then. Paying attention to what the apparatus is,

then, be it laboratory equipment or theoretical approach, reminds us that, while science does not have absolute answers, some can still be provided in a useful way.

Wark also mentions a goal of making her theory democratic, something that speaks volumes to the goals of this dissertation. It denies science absolute authority, and reminds us to be humble in our search for knowledge:

Let's reorient critical thought to a kind of comradely practice, where each kind of labor or science produces its own specific worldview, extending via substitution from its particular encounters and sensations, and where none claims to be the master discourse with authority over them all. It is a low theory approach, moving between scientific knowledges, not a high theory flying high as a drone above to adjudicate, legislate, or police them (WARK, 2015, p. 137).

In a work that looks at science denial that is being produced by groups that identify themselves as marginalized by authority, I believe it is important to not approach this from a holier-than-thou position. Instead, taking an approach that humbles science itself, and its necessary subjective dimensions, is crucial, not only to not patronize the group being analysed, but also to think better future strategies to fight back against those who seek to exploit insecurities towards traditional science.

All these discussions happen with a spectre surrounding it – the spectre of data. Chris Anderson (2008) declared the “end of theory”, claiming that in a world with a never-ending deluge of data about all sorts of things, theory would become obsolete – science has spent too much time coming up with models to explain the world, models that inevitably get proven wrong and are replaced by new ones. With massive amounts of data, however, it is possible to simply create correlations that are much more precise than any models. The human factor, that pesky little obstacle that always gets in the way of objectivity and impartiality is gone, and in its place, we have nothing but numbers.

There is something tempting about this argument in a context where science needs to be defended from attacks from all sides – after all, if we can reach pure objectivity through numbers, relativism is gone, and science can finally be affirmed as the absolute truth. It is, however, a flawed argument. As Bowker (2014) helpfully points out:

Just because we have big data does not mean that the world acts as if there are no categories. And just because we have big (or very big, or massive) data does not mean that our databases are not theoretically structured in ways that enable certain perspectives and disable others (BOWKER, 2014, p. 1795).

That is, the systems that generate the supposedly raw data that is objective and requires no explanations are still made by humans – they carry along with them the biases of the humans who built them. They are still apparatuses, as Barad would call them, and still perform cuts in their portrayal of reality that are specific, that have a role in creating the meaning of that reality. As Wark puts it better:

If we are to avoid a commodity or corporeal fetishism of such things [data], then critique has to inquire as to how data is produced. Data are the product of a whole series of labors, of observing, recording, collecting, transmitting, verifying, reconciling, storing, cataloguing, and retrieving. In each of these processes, human labor and the apparatus intra-act in all sorts of ways (WARK, 2015, p. 186).

Here, as Wark points to the fetishism of data, she sheds light to how the idealisation of this neutral source of knowledge creates an illusion, where the ideal data replaces what it is representing, in a ‘clean’ version of it. Chris Anderson’s (2008) article presents an interesting example of this, by pointing to algorithms “discovering” a new species of bacteria in the Atlantic Ocean – a bacteria that no scientist has actually come into contact with, but that is treated as real. By erasing the theory from science, then, and relying exclusively on data, we replace reality with an idealized version of it, made by code – a code that is, again, biased, built by humans through human processes and prejudices, creating a fake world of impartiality.

Besides observing the human element of the production of data, it would be rash not to point out how discarding explanations and meaning altogether can be dangerous. And Wark’s use of the word *commodity* can take us further in this direction: reducing science to pure information, to correlation of random points in data, is an almost consumerist view of reality, as it is this same model that surrounds us now with social media algorithms whose sole purpose is to shape us as buyers, always through correlation. In this world, explanations do not matter – what matters is that the data sells to the consumer the view of the world they want to have, and

in a consumer-driven system, anything goes. The customer is always right, and if they think the Earth is flat, then so be it.

So, this ideal scenario, where models are unnecessary and neutral numbers can guide us forward towards impartial truth, is not only naïve and impossible, but could be dangerous. Usage of algorithms in police operations have already raised concerns, as the codes themselves reinforce biases and very human patterns of discrimination (BURGESS, 2018), and continuing to blindly trust big data as the sole provider of knowledge, abandoning models and theories, could drive us further into oppressive territory.

Again – balance is necessary. Here, I believe both Harding and Wark provide tools for us to take science seriously without abandoning critique. They are not perfect tools, and they can still be heavily questioned, specially by those with goals in mind that seek to bend truth to further their agendas. Still, while truth can be a fuzzy concept, in times of uncertainty, searching for ways in which we can be more objective towards it is crucial. At the same time, these discussions shed light to some of the flawed ways we can see science, objectivity, truth and the importance of raw data – and these flaws, as we will see on the following sections, reproduce themselves of the Flat Earth movement, one that prides itself on being science enthusiasts, and doing science with their own hands. A lot of the traditional assumptions about how objective science is, and new conceptions of how accepted theory can be dismantled by data that seems to show obvious patterns, repeat themselves in Flat Earth flawed conception of how science should be made. In this scenario, individual interpretation of data collected experimentally becomes a tool to create any type of reality that seems convenient – a move that, as will be shown later, has proved dangerous enough to cost lives. With this in mind, then, let us explore the Flat Earth.

4.3. Flattening the Earth

There is no better place to start than with *Behind the Curve* (2018). The documentary was my first introduction to flat-Earthers that took them even remotely seriously, and it was through it that I stopped looking at this group as an internet joke and started considering their political significance – therefore, it was a major inspiration for this work. Acclimating the reader with flat-Earthers and what

they stand for through the work of Clark, then, seems only appropriate. Here, I will present a few scenes of the documentary²¹, to demonstrate certain aspects of the group that I believe important to be highlighted, as well as to analyse some of the things they say, and why they say them.

The documentary opens with a man, staring into the horizon at a lake beach, wearing a black t-shirt with “Flat Earth Army” printed on it. As an animation of the solar system plays, he narrates:

So, where are you, right now? You think you’re on a globe spinning a thousand times an hour. That globe is spinning around the sun at 60,000+ miles an hour. That solar system is flying sideways through the galaxy at half-million miles an hour, and that galaxy is going through the rest of the universe at millions of miles an hour. *And you feel nothing*. In reality, you are actually in a giant planetarium, slash terrarium, slash soundstage, slash Hollywood backlot, that is so big that you, and everyone you know, and everyone you’ve ever known, never figured it out (In: CLARK, 2018, emphasis mine).

Right from the start, it is possible to see a theme that will repeat itself through the movie: how the lack of possible human perception of the spherical shape of the earth and its movement through space raises the doubt about the truthfulness of these facts. The fact that we cannot feel the speed at which the planet, and the solar system and the galaxy move through the universe is questionable, odd. From there, the conclusion is seemingly obvious: since we cannot feel the Earth moving, it means it must, in fact, not be moving.

The man in question is Mark Sargent, introduced to the spectator as the “King of Flat Earthers”. While this title is an exaggeration brought about by his fame, as he is not an official leader in any capacity, Sargent manages a YouTube channel where he divulges his discoveries about the existence of the Earth as a flat terrarium, and his videos are the most popular in the genre. Sargent is portrayed as the protagonist, here: we are introduced to his home life, first, to his doting mother and to his hobbies and interests. He claims to love movies, and compares himself with the protagonist of *The Truman Show*, where a man finds out that his whole life, and everything he ever known, was actually just a reality show, and he has

²¹ In some cases, some of the speeches transcribed here were presented originally while interspersed by other scenes and speeches. In some cases, for the sake of clarity and brevity, I have transcribed them in their entirety without interruptions; when relevant, interruptions are kept.

always been lied to. To him, the lie of the spherical Earth is just a massive version of the Truman show, scripted to trick billions, instead of just one man (CLARK, 2018).

The comparison is followed by another evocation of human senses. This time, Sargent leads the camera to a lake, and points to the faint silhouette of the city of Seattle on the other side of it. He claims that it should be impossible for someone to be able to see Seattle from so many kilometres, that the curvature of the round Earth should make it impossible; and yet, there it is. How can a curvature exist if it cannot be seen?

This is reinforced right after, when Sargent starts explaining how his movement is fighting back against the lies of science:

The reason why we're winning versus science, against science, is science just throws math at us, whereas we go "Hey, by the way, there's Seattle. You can see it right now with your camera." That's it. A picture says a thousand words (In: CLARK, 2018).

Again, there is a few interesting things about his word choices. There is a clear us vs. them antagonism, science portrayed as an insensitive, cold, data-addicted villain. Flat-Earthers, on the other hand, are the relatable heroes, who clearly show the truth in the simplest way possible – and the simplest answer, in his logic, is always the best one. Human perception, human feeling, is the ultimate ruler of truth, in Sargent's universe. In it, in the end, a matter of choice, between believing in yourself, or being a blind follower to the cryptic enigmas of science.

Sargent mentions, afterwards, how he is a conspiracy enthusiast who believes just about anything, but who felt doubtful about Flat Earth for a long time – even for a believer like him, it just sounded too absurd. This is also another theme that repeats itself throughout the documentary, with other Flat Earth proponents expressing a similar perception, which paints the Flat Earth movement almost as an underdog even in the world of conspiracies, something so completely absurd even people who habitually believe in absurd things have trouble believing in. It is the act of not believing at first that leads them to believe, eventually: "everyone who tries to debunk Flat Earth becomes a flat-Earther" (In: CLARK, 2018), Sargent claims.

The second Flat-earther character the spectator is introduced to is Nathan Thompson, who is shown performing “brain training exercises”²² as he talks about his turn into the Flat Earth belief. He says:

And then the more I researched it, and then I found out that it’s actually the biblical cosmology is a geocentric cosmology, then I realized why they’re hiding the truth. It’s because they don’t want anyone to know anything. They want people dumb, blind, deaf to the truth, so they can inject you with their vaccines, and their public schooling, and this heliocentric model, which is basically forced sun worship (In: CLARK, 2018).

It is interesting to see how he repeats an unnamed “they” as perpetrators of lies and manipulation. He is questioned on this by the documentary production team:

Thompson: Did you know they made up dinosaurs?

Producer: Who?

Thompson: People in the school system to, uh, perpetuate this six-billion-year-old Earth. Oh, wait, the math doesn’t work out. Fourteen-billion-year-old Earth (In: CLARK, 2018).

Thompson is portrayed as a goofy, eccentric character, different from the normal, relatable, homely Sargent. His absurd conspiratorial speeches are interspersed with footage of him being kicked out of a Starbucks coffee shop for harassing a NASA employee and randomly asking strangers on the street about Flat Earth, everything surrounded by cheerful music that is meant to convey quite clearly that he is one of the extreme, weird ones. Still, it is pointed out that Thompson is the founder of a Facebook group dedicated to Flat Earth that, at the time of production, gathered over 50,000 people. While he says and does odd things, many of his arguments are repeated throughout the movie: there is a nebulous “they” out there, manipulating education and information to convince people of lies that will make them compliant to absorbing just about anything that comes from authority figures, and people like him, like Flat Earthers, are heroes fighting back.

Thompson also brings up some very interesting points:

²² The exercises consist of bouncing a ball against a hammer while reciting the names of the 50 American states, and all elements of the periodic table. He does not explain how one thing relates to the other, or why these exercises are beneficial.

The idea people have of flat-Earthers is totally wrong. They think they're total idiots, and they live in their mom's basement and they believe everything anyone tells them. It's quite the opposite. We test everything. We're all either super successful or doing our own thing, and I've met hundreds of Flat Earthers, and none of them are living in their mom's basement, so... (In: CLARK, 2018).

Let us unpack this slowly. First, there is an affirmation of independence and competence in his words: there is an unfair stereotype of flat-Earthers as gullible idiots who are easily convinced of everything, and Thompson denies this, affirming them as smart, inquisitive individuals. He is not completely wrong when it comes to this, as later scenes will show – a lot of what flat-Earthers do is, in fact, question everything, test all their thesis. They are very much stuck in a web of confirmation bias, and are constantly denying the results of the tests they themselves make – but reducing them to simple idiots is a very superficial way of seeing their phenomena. It is interesting, however, how Thompson tries to counteract this perception of his fellow flat-Earthers as idiots by reaffirming two things: first, their success, which, by his mention of living conditions, seems to imply both financial and personal success, or both as the same thing – a very neoliberal perception of what makes a person worthy, or smart, or “not an idiot”, that is, what validates someone's perspective over something.

Second, the emphasis on a “mom's basement” is curious, especially when we look at how, at least through Clark's portrayal, most flat-Earthers are adult men, and how these words show up in contrast to the way Sargent is portrayed, living with his mother, and constantly asking for her input in the interviews with the crew. Both images create a dissonance in the movie, as the presence of Sargent's mother gives the spectator a sense of normalcy in his life, but at the same time, Thompson's rejection of the motherly figure, with the dismissive and insistent way he speaks about it, seem to be also a rejection of weakness, of emasculation, of infantilization – in Ahmed's terms, it is like the mom's basement is sticky with negative connotations, a symbol of failure and naivety. He is not an idiot who depends on his mother, he is an independent, financially stable man who can think for himself and questions everything. Sargent does not seem bothered by the presence and exposure of his mother, however, or what she does for his image. As we will see later, his friendship with one of the few relevant women in the movement, along

with the portrayal of his mother, seem to make him the exception to the rule, and that Thompson in particular seems to have a lot to say about gender.

Thompson's emphasis on his financial independence is also relevant when talking about the figures behind the globe Earth conspiracy. While it is vague in his words in whose interest it is to hide the truth about the shape of the Earth, other interviews with members of Flat Earth do point to a pattern in their targets: the elites. Again, Flat Earth intersects with a lot of other conspiracy theories, and like many of them, the rich and powerful are the ones behind everything, and in Flat Earth's specific case, there is an extra layer of antagonism, as these rich elites are also perceived to be more educated and having vast influence on the scientific community (PICHETA, 2019). While it is not clear why it would be particularly beneficial for the rich and educated elites to hide the shape of the Earth, it does point to a confrontational position that is quite common in populism, and when Thompson talks about his financial independence, there is a sense of reaffirmation of his value as a competent and hard worker, in opposition to the type of wealthy privilege that personifies the side of science and globe-believers. His financial independence and hard-working nature are linked to his intellectual independence as a sceptical, and his unwillingness to follow the masses in blindly accepting the rule and the lies of the elites.

In a scene shortly following Thompson's introduction, Sargent shows the camera his collection of Flat Earth paraphernalia, from a wristwatch with the Flat Earth model on it, to the license plate of his car, that says "ITSFLAT". Talking in front of a coffee table with the Flat Earth model illustrated beneath the glass tabletop, he says:

That's what makes this community different. Because with every other conspiracy – I'm not gonna rattle them off – it's always this dark, sinister evil. People feel bad about it. This thing, it really makes people – gives people a lot of positive energy, so much enthusiasm, matter of fact, that they make things. I mean, we've got songs. When it's the last time someone made a happy folk song about 9/11? (In: CLARK, 2018).

Here, it is possible to start to see the more explicitly sentimental side of Flat Earth. Once again, Flat Earth is portrayed as different from other conspiracy theories, special – whereas before there was suspicion with this absurd conspiracy,

now there is endearment, fun, happiness. Flat Earth gives people energy, enthusiasm, creativity. It is a positive movement. If anything, the happiness that Flat Earth brings should be reason enough to remain within this group, Sargent seems to imply, as he claims constantly throughout his interviews to love the group, to feel welcome and happy among them. Other people interviewed echo his sentiment, of being happy, fulfilled, of finding a family amongst these people, even at the cost of losing contact with their own loved ones, who do not accept their subscription to such an absurd group. Here, in Ahmed's terms, love both draws people close and push them away: towards the group, away from those who would question the flat Earth. Flat Earth, and the objects related to it, the art and merchandise that is produced in support of it, all become objects of affect, where feelings circulate around, symbols of unity and acceptance to anyone who recognizes them in a stranger.

After Sargent shows his collection, we are introduced to a third character, Patricia Steere, titled as "The Interviewer", and the only woman who is a part of the movement to be given a spotlight during the movie. We are first told that her father worked on broadcasting, that she loves music, is a vegan and owns multiple cats, a homely, warm portrayal. She is introduced as the "Flat Earth reporter", due to her work interviewing Flat Earthers on her podcast. Eventually, her involvement in the movement led to a podcast in partnership with Mark Sargent. Steere echoes some of the sentiments expressed before by Sargent and Thompson:

It's what you can observe. You don't need complicated math formulas to figure out where you live, but the powers that should not be have told us so, and "Trust us. Believe us." And we have. I did. We all did (In: CLARK, 2018).

Again, shadowy, unclear figures are behind a manipulation to convince the people of the lie of the global Earth – and Steere uses her broadcasting skills to speak (almost in a performance, really) about it in a particularly ominous way, making it as clear as possible that "they" are the enemy, that "they" are scary, whispering her words as if "they" could be listening and could do something to her. It is not specified, once again, who these people are, or why they need the population to believe the Earth is a specific shape, but the presence of an enemy, of an overwhelming force capable of manipulating millions that needs to be fought

against, is repeated. Sometimes, the enemy is manifested through science – and in this battle, Flat Earthers are winning, as Sargent claims:

Science should have wiped us out literally in the first month, and it's the exact opposite. We're not just winning. We're crushing them, because they don't know how to address it. Because they're not convinced they can knock it out, they don't wanna get into the ring. We've got questions out there which they can't answer (In: CLARK, 2018).

The antagonistic way of speaking is very clear here – Flat Earthers are “winning”, scientists are being “crushed”, very much perpetuating a narrative where this is a fight, as if both sides were on equal footing. Science here is portrayed as both confrontational, because they want to win, but also as cowards, who do not want to “get into the ring” for fear of losing. Sargent emphasizes, through these words, the role of Flat Earth as heroes, and victorious ones at that, something that reinforces the positivity of the movement, the happiness that he constantly says it brings its members. At the same time that Flat Earth is victorious, however, science still exists as an enemy – an enemy that can never truly be destroyed, an antagonism that is necessary for the identification of the group. Science is the Other that stops the desire of Flat Earth being recognized and accepted from being fulfilled, but if it ever disappeared, the movement around Flat Earth would cease to make sense. In this narrative, as well, not only is science, as an institution, the enemy, but scientists, as individuals, are victims. There is a belief between flat-Earthers that there are scientists out there who believe on the Flat Earth, and have proof of it – but these scientists are not willing to go on record with their findings or beliefs due to institutional constraints. “Once you get to a certain level of education”, Sargent claims, “the education system more or less owns you” (In: CLARK, 2018). It is not that individual scientists are evil (especially because, as they themselves point out, the conspiracy is so deep that you cannot point to a single person as the culprit – there will always be another, darker, more powerful force behind it), but the system is, the “powers that should not be”, as Steere likes to say. And she says more:

Well, I think of all these conspiracies or belief systems as a spider's web. And from what I can see the flat Earth is the centre of it all [...] They, the powers that should not be, are doing whatever they can with the vaccines, with the GMO foods, with the chemtrails [...] Even the fear, the fear that there will be hijackers taking a plane and putting it through a building (In: CLARK, 2018).

Here, once again we see the presence of a variety of different conspiratorial and anti-science views, all connected to a shadowy force that cannot be named, and will never be named, because they hide themselves so well. The actual goals of these forces are never stated, but at this point, hopefully the reader might have gathered that a lot of the things they say seem to point in the direction of a vague authoritarian populational control, something similar to the fears the populist, neoliberal right have when it comes to government interference. Public education is bad, because it puts ideas on children's heads that are government mandated; these ideas are shaped to alienate kids from biblical cosmology, as Thompson points out, by inventing an Earth that is round, billions of years old, and once had dinosaurs, denying the intelligent design of biblical teachings. This public education is also supposed to make children passive and gullible (different from the independent, questioning flat-Earthers, as again Thompson mentioned), and they will accept any type of manipulation or interference to their lives and bodies: from taking vaccines that will actually make them sick, to eating toxic GMO foods without questioning, to accepting the idea of a supposedly absurd terrorist attack from airplanes to make people so afraid they will never question the government that claims to protect them. Flat Earth is only one piece of a huge puzzle, that starts with hiding something as gigantic as the shape of the planet itself, and that has complete control of innocent lives as its end goal.

Because these conspiracies are so intricate, so deep, so impossible to completely unravel because the powers behind them are so well hidden, the people who believe in them have no choice but to believe only in themselves:

Man: what sources do you trust?

Steere: Myself. [long pause] That's it. [laughs] I've jokingly said if there's an event like a – I'll just use Boston Bombing again – I'm not going to believe any of those events are real unless, myself, I get my leg blown off (In: CLARK, 2018).

It is, in a way, an extreme form of individualism. As we pointed in the previous section, with Wark – it becomes a matter of picking and choosing what type of data to believe in, individually, according to what seems more convenient. Any attempt to prove these individual views as incorrect is authoritarian, it is an attempt to control and limit individual freedom, and is therefore unacceptable, and

only serves to reinforce the conspiracy, reinforce the idea that there is an attempt at control and censorship of ideas.

I have hinted before at how gender appears in this documentary, now that we have been introduced to Steere, it is a good moment to explore this briefly, as it links to some of these points about individuality. Conservative tendencies towards gender relations and gender identity are vaguely hinted at during most of the run of the documentary, but they are there, with a relevant example being Thompson pointing to the myriad of the conspiracies that are being orchestrated behind the scenes and mentioning “the transgender push in the media, they’re trying to turn all the guys into girls and girls into guys” (In: CLARK, 2018), an expression of fear and wariness towards transgender identities and the media portrayal of them. But a sharper demonstration of gender relations in the movement than this brief mention is how Steere is the target of misogynistic treatment among the Flat Earth community. Being in the spotlight in the movement due to her partnership with Sargent turns Steere into a target, with conspiracies turning against her: she is a CIA spy meant to steer the movement away from its goals by seducing the men in it, she is a reptilian, she is transgender (as if that was a thing to be held against her, if true). Thompson even points out his distrust of Steere, not with any actual arguments for it, but just a vague “I don’t know”, a general sense that there must be something wrong with her. Her body, read as female, is reason enough for distrust – her existence is historically, discursively, affectively saturated with the idea that female equals bad, untrustworthy, deceiving, and manipulative.

This puts Steere into an uncomfortable position, and almost brings her to a moment of clarity. She monologues to the camera, in a car drive:

So... anybody can believe whatever they want to believe about me. But I wonder if in their hearts, people who do that know they’re lying, or are they so conspiratorial that they actually believe it? Then it makes me worry about maybe things I believe in. Am I like another version of them? But I know I’m not (In: CLARK, 2018).

So, we have a situation where distrust of her due to her existence as a woman turns into conspiracy, targeting and isolation, with misogynistic stereotypes being latched onto her in disbelief that a woman could be interested in science and truth without ulterior motive, or without being forced to by superior forces. Her response

to this is to wonder, if they are not picking and choosing information about her that fits into a narrative that is convenient to the reality they choose to believe in – and then, to wonder if she is not doing the exact same thing with the conspiracies she believes in, if she is not also choosing the information she wants to absorb in order to keep herself convinced of her truth. Despite this, Steere never loses her resolve: others might be delusional, but she is not. She knows what she sees, she trusts her senses and her feelings, and she knows she is not like them.

More characters are presented to us after Steere, some of them going towards the more explicitly experimental side of Flat Earth. Jeran Campanella, introduced as the experimenter, and Bob Knodel, introduced as the engineer, are presented to talk about their YouTube channel, Globebusters. Knodel describes them as a “grassroots group of engineers and scientists”, who claim to use the scientific method to try and prove the Earth is flat and claim to be successful at that. It is important to note the emphasis they put on how scientific they aim their work to be. Campanella points out that “I think that the scientific method is the best way to get to the truth and I just want to feel comfortable in things that I believe” (In: CLARK, 2018). Both Campanella and Knodel constantly emphasize their commitment to experimentation and objectivity, and their surprise at how difficult it is to try and prove their thesis empirically. They are respectful and committed to their version of the scientific method, fully trusting its ability to prove the truth, at the same time as they refuse to accept the results of their own experiments when they do not match their expectations. Once again, despite a supposed commitment to experimentation and proving Flat Earth through the “proper” means, the data that is valid is chosen according to what seems convenient to them. They claim to be objective, without ever addressing the biases and previous judgements that could interfere on their interpretations of the results of their experiments. The very meaning of objectivity and the scientific method is completely erased, in a movement similar to Brown’s description of how values lose all meaning, and anything can become “objective” and “scientific” enough as long as it is convenient.

All of this is clearly demonstrated when Knodel explains some of the experiments they conducted, giving spotlight to one that was meant to measure the rotation of the Earth. His explanation goes like this: if the Earth really is spinning around itself in a complete rotation every 24 hours, this means that every hour

represents a 15° turn. With this, a device called a gyroscope should be able to measure this 15° turn by being deployed anywhere on Earth; if it does not, this would mean that there is no rotation, and possibly no curvature. A laser gyroscope, Knodel explains, is one of the most precise types of gyroscopes, and would be able to show once and for all this lack of rotation, and through contributions of the community, 20,000 dollars were gathered to buy one and conduct the experiment. To their disappointment, however, the gyroscope did indicate a 15° turn, pointing towards the existence of a rotation. Instead of accepting these results, however, Knodel mentions how they hypothesized that the rotation being registered was not the rotation of the Earth but, rather, the rotation of the sky. To prove that, they decided to encase the gyroscope in a zero gauss chamber, to try and isolate it from the energies coming from the supposed sky rotation. It did not work, and a 15° turn was still registered. The next step would be to isolate the gyroscope even further, in a bismuth case. This plan would require even more money, and the promise was for the results to be released on that year's International Flat Earth Conference.

Despite not actually being able to prove that the 15° turn is the rotation of the sky, that is the information Knodel presents in front of a full crowd on the conference, at the end of the documentary. Knodel is fully aware that he is lying, but he chooses to do so anyway, refusing to break the illusion that their belief is real. His supposedly scientific role in the community is not scientific at all, but is the role of reaffirming Flat Earth, of giving it legitimacy – if I am an attendee at the conference, and the man who is supposed to be the scientist of the group is telling me that Flat Earth is real, then I will believe him, because he is doing science, and science is objective. There is an interesting contradiction here, where Science with a capital S, the institution of science, is the villain – but science the art, the activity, is a useful tool, a way of reaffirming truth. It is not that science itself is evil, but the powers using it to lie are. The in-group, however, can use science to lie all it wants, as long as the lie reaffirms their beliefs. This echoes something else from the first chapter: when Brown exposes the hypocrisy that circulates around right-wing morality, where traditional values of family and decency are upheld for everyone, except for right-wing leaders like Donald Trump. The power to break self-imposed rules is the ultimate power, in the end: everyone else needs to follow the rules, but we do not have to. If we believe strongly enough in our traditions or our form of

science, what is right or what is real does not matter. Science, the evil institution, must prove its thesis with evidence, evidence that is always unreachable because it will always be false or manipulated. The science that Flat Earth produces, however, is always righteous, even when the data contradicts their own conclusions, as new and unproved explanations can be given – the 15° rotation is the rotation of the sky, not of the Earth – to patch the holes and keep moving on with the illusion.

There is an underlying insecurity in this, however, especially among the two experimenters, as they admit that not only one experiment is sufficient to prove a theory and gathering many different types of evidence is better to defend their thesis. Another experiment is introduced, then. Three posts are set up through a canal that stretches 3.88 miles. A laser is shot through the first post, checking to see where the light hits on the second and third posts. If, for example, the laser is pointed 8 feet high on the first post and hits the other two posts at the same height, then this indicates a lack of curvature. If in the middle posts the laser hits a lower point, however, it means the middle post is elevated – it is located on the higher part of a curvature that exists. The experiment does not work, at first, due to technical difficulties, but adjustments are made, and the very last scene of the documentary shows the light being cast at one of the poles from a different height than the first, clearly showing a curvature. When this happens, Campanella stares at the camera viewfinder when it registers the image, repeating the word “interesting” with a stunned expression, before the credits start rolling. The spectator is not informed of what Campanella does with these results, but his incredulous reaction is very telling of how he expected the experiment would work. Even after being a part of previous experiments that proved his views wrong, there was a clear hope that this time, there would be irrefutable evidence of the flat Earth, and he seems genuinely surprised that it did not. Despite knowing that previous results were fake, there is an insistence in believing the opposite of what they point to, evident in his surprise, a clinging to a sense of control of his own reality.

Campanella and Knodel are not the only ones being shown scientific evidence of a round Earth and choosing to ignore it or give alternative explanations that fit their vision. There is a sequence about a solar eclipse, where Sargent goes to a gathering in an open field to watch the eclipse live. He displays awe at the scene, watching the moon moving in front of the sun directly, without protective

sunglasses on, and afterwards, we are shown a clip of him being interviewed by Steere. In it, she asks how it felt to see the eclipse, and he claims that it seemed like there was no three-dimensional object moving in front of the sun; instead, it looked like the sun was eclipsing itself, shrinking. This reinforces his belief that the sky is just a domed display over the supposedly flat Earth, the sun and moon only two-dimensional images being projected towards the ground, and the appearance of two-dimensionality confirms it, for him. Once again, personal perception comes above everything else – it *looks* like the sun is a two-dimensional image, so it must be. It *looks* like the sun is shrinking, not being eclipsed, so it must be so. Any explanations are subsumed by the raw data of what is being seen, and the fact that Sargent’s view is biased and saturated with expectations is ignored by him.

This same sequence about the eclipse also talks about press coverage of flat-Earthers and their reactions to the eclipse, and Sargent points to billboards on the highway “recruiting” people to the movement, which he claims he did not know about before seeing them first-hand, both signs of the spread of not only the movement, but interest in it. He comments, in a related scene, on the rise of the interest on the flat Earth on YouTube, his main channel of communication with other flat-Earthers: from 50,000 results on a YouTube search on 2015, to 19.4 million in 2018 – a sharp increase. Noting this rise on the popularity of Flat Earth, this is a good point for us to turn perspectives around for a bit, as *Behind the Curve* does not focus only on flat-Earthers themselves, and scenes following figures like Sargent and Steere are interspersed with interviews with physicists and psychologists. Spyros Michalakis, a physicist from Caltech, gives an important statement: “The problem I see is actually not from the side of the conspiracy theorists. It is actually from own side, from the side of science. Very often it is difficult not to look down” (In: CLARK, 2018). This is then followed by a Flat Earther in a meet-up with Sargent, where he says: “I was so frustrated about getting told I was an idiot. So, I decided to say ‘Laugh at me all you want! Science is different than the shit they’re believing. I’ve already lost friends and stuff [...]” (In: CLARK, 2018). Then, back to Michalakis:

My friend say ‘you know, the only way to change somebody’s mind is to shame them, and I say, I don’t think that is the last resort, ever. This is the same as saying that if a kid doesn’t get a particular subject, it’s not your fault as their teacher, it is their

fault. I do not believe that. It is you who haven't developed your empathy to see from their point of view where they're getting stuck (In: CLARK, 2018).

There is also a scene, shown alongside the Flat Earth meet-up, where scientists are gathering at a bar, with some of them giving speeches and stand-up comedy-style performances. Among them, Lamar Glover, physicist, is given the spotlight on the movie, as is introduced before his speech as “dismantling the scientific superiority complex”, as he starts talking about flat-Earthers:

[...] We can blame it all on them being delusional, or the ‘C’ word, which is the ‘crazy’ word. I think a lot of times we say crazy, and it’s a scapegoat, it’s an umbrella term. [...] Truthers, flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers, when we leave people behind, we leave bright minds to mutate and stagnate. These folks are potential scientists gone completely wrong. Their natural inquisitiveness and rejection of norms could be beneficial to science if they were more scientifically literate. [...] So every flat Earther shouldn’t be held with contempt, but serve as a reminder that of a scientist that could have been, someone that fell through the cracks. And we as ambassadors of science are called to do more. Right? So scientists of varying degrees of professionalism, seriously consider becoming a mentor who’s coming from a non-traditional point of entry to the sciences (In: CLARK, 2018).

There is then a montage of people telling the camera about the personal relationships they severed due to their belief on the Flat Earth, including marriages and strained relationships with children. We then go back to Michalakakis, who claims that “the worst-case scenario is, you just completely push these individuals at the fringe of society, and then society just lost them” (In: CLARK, 2018). There is, then, a sequence of people in the aforementioned meet-up, talking to Sargent, giving him gifts and showing their appreciation for his work. One of them becomes teary-eyed as they talk, and Sargent offers him a hug.

This alternation, between scientists talking with regret and guilt about how science failed in reaching these people, and flat-Earthers’ emotional expression of appreciation for the movement and for Sargent, shows quite a few interesting points. Both perspectives have an emotional side to them, with scientists propagating a violence that is almost automatic in their dismissal of something that, to them, seems so obvious and ridiculous. As Glover points out, the tendency is to label flat-Earthers as crazy and scientists view them with contempt, and as Michelakis says, the view is that it is necessary to shame them into changing their

mind. Even Michelakis' more sympathetic view is still full of condescension, reducing flat-Earthers to a comparison with children, still putting scientists in a position of superiority and authority. This shows a tendency towards instant rejection, with scientists being so comfortable on their owning of the truth that they push those that disagree with them away, almost a textbook example of Ahmed's description of how emotions move bodies. Contempt is the keyword for these scientists, while shame is central for flat-Earthers – and the first generates the second. When scientists laugh at flat-Earthers, call them crazy, label their beliefs as ridiculous, they are generating a web of affects that only strengthens the one being generated among flat-Earthers, where shame binds these people together, and where they share comfort, belonging, hope, positivity. At the same time as flat-Earthers are pushed away from science, they are pulled closer to it in their attempts to use method in proving their beliefs. They attach their hope to scientific method, to their version of it, and their biased version of science dances around the science that rejects them, in a constant confrontation. At the same time, both wish to be closer: scientists wish to close the gap and erase these beliefs that they deem absurd, while flat-Earthers desperately want to have their views be accepted and legitimate.

As the spectator approaches the end of the documentary, we are shown a variety of commentaries by different attendees of the International Flat Earth Conference, all of them with heavy emotional content:

Sargent, backstage, to the documentary crew: It's their escape. I'm in a room with people who absolutely will not judge me.

Unidentified, onstage, as the camera pans over the audience: So many of you have been through so much pain [...]

Knodel, onstage: My entire life I've felt kind of separate, like nothing was quite right.

Darryl, onstage: We never really fit in. we find ourselves to be somewhat isolated. And, um, we want to talk to people about this thing, but nobody wants to talk to us.

Sargent, backstage, to the documentary crew: You are not this little speck of dust flying through space in incredible velocities. You are the centre of the universe, as a matter of fact. You are the star of the show (In: CLARK, 2018).

This last Sargent line, especially, encapsulates much of what was demonstrated so far, and much of what is behind the investment around Flat Earth.

There is this constant frustration, about being perceived as stupid, ignorant, uneducated. There is, also a context of general hopelessness, in a political context where individuality is emphasized and a sense of community is crushed, where constant fear of authority and curbing of freedom is spread like wildfire, where people feel isolated and alienated from each other, from politics and from knowledge. In this scenario, Flat Earth is empowering. Flat Earth tells people that they can do science and seek knowledge by themselves, that there is a community that is willing to accept them, flaws and all, and that they do not need to be alone. That, yes, the general sense that there is something wrong with the world and with the elites that command politics is real, it is not just paranoia, and there is reason to be suspicious of them. Flat Earth tells them that they have the power to shape reality the way they think they should, and if something feels wrong, is because it is wrong, and there *is* an enemy.

What Flat Earth does, then, is take disillusionment and turn it into power. Frustration and exclusion, a sense that we are being lied to, that those in power do not have the best interests of the people in mind, is translated into an attempt to take control of something, *anything*, to keep people grounded, and to generate hope that the evil manipulating the people can be defeated through the individual efforts of these truth-warriors. It is a movement remarkably similar to the way Brown describes the contemporary right-wing, alienated and isolated by neoliberalism and nihilism, seeking anything to take back power and a sense of control of self. It is just that, in this case, the shape of the Earth is the focus – but, as the connection to other conspiracy shows, it could be about almost anything, as long as a sense of control and hope is taken back and, in contemporary right-wing populism, science happens to be an incredibly easy target. Let us now, then, look more closely at how right-wing populism embraces science denial in similar ways to Flat Earth.

4.4. Flat Earth and right-wing populism

Even though conspiratorial thinking seems to be prevalent among the right-wing in the United States, as I have shown in chapter 1, Flat Earth does not exactly have an explicit political allegiance. There is a general acceptance in the movement that the science that they make is apolitical, and their utter distrust of institutions do seem to stop them from pledging their absolute trust in either side of the political spectrum. More than explicit allegiance to one side or another, however, it is

important for the goals of this work to investigate how the affects that circulate among both conspiratorial flat-Earthers and right-wing populism are similar, and how right-wing populism rhetoric is built in a way that embraces the types of beliefs that flat-Earthers in general hold, attracting them to that side of politics and to similarly held convictions. While it is difficult to have a firm grasp of the demographic profile of flat-Earthers, Clark's account of the group does show a majority of middle- and working-class white individuals, a demographic that sharply coincides with the one that agglomerates around right-wing populism. But, beyond this, it is possible to identify intersections much more through the way they speak and feel, and the context in which the movement saw its peak in popularity.

It is quite easy to notice how a lot of Flat Earth beliefs do lean conservative and right-wing. Beyond previously mentioned demonstrations of misogyny²³, for example, much of their rhetoric brings the Bible into the fore, in a mix between science and dogmatic divine authority – so much so that the argument, for some, goes in the direction of claiming that part of the globe Earth conspiracy is meant to undermine Christian faith by contradicting a supposed description of a flat Earth on the Bible²⁴ (WEILL, 2018). Another point of similarity with certain right-wing positionings, this time leaning more extreme, is how anti-Semitic²⁵ Flat Earth conspiracies can be. The world of conspiracies is very anti-Semitic in general (GREENSPAN, 2020), and Flat Earth is no exception, with Jewish people being frequently pointed to as the masterminds behind all sorts of manipulations to control science and truth. There are even examples of flat-Earthers being vocal about their beliefs in neo-Nazi communities (FUTRELLE, 2017; WEILL, 2019) – in 2017, for

²³ This is not to say that misogyny is a field exclusive to the right-wing and to conservatives. But it is useful to bring Fraser (2019) back here: contemporary right-wing populism goes against a previous status quo of progressive neoliberalism, and this progressiveness is anti-misogynistic, even if just on an extremely superficial, meritocratic level. The reaction to it, then, is to attack these progressive aspects of a previous order that brought about the current hopeless scenario that conspiracies try to escape from.

²⁴ As Weill (2018) demonstrates on her report on the International Flat Earth Conference, this is not a consensual position among flat-Earthers or among Christians, but as she and Olsen (2020) show, there is a tendency to reduce the Flat Earth movement to an inherently Christian belief. While the influence of Christianity is certainly prevalent and has an effect on how dogmatic Flat Earth tends to be, I believe it would be reductionist to limit it to the *only* factor that leads to adherence to the movement and doing so would erase other affective forces that influence the worldview of flat-Earthers. Therefore, to avoid this reductionism, and it while it would be interesting to be explored in another circumstance, the link between Flat Earth and Christianity is not a focus of this work.

²⁵ Similar principles from note 23 apply here: anti-Semitism is not exclusive or universal to the right-wing, but progressivism is one of the targets of right-wing populism and, as such, any minority group becomes a potential target.

example, an editor of an alt-right website posted a video mocking Flat Earth, and many supporters who believe the Earth is flat were outraged. One of them sarcastically commented: “If Jews and masons tell me I’m on a spinning ball moving through the universe at near lightspeed, I believe them because they are experts and my eyes are lying to me” (FUTRELLE, 2017). Another user, nicknamed SouthernFascist, commented:

They lie about the holocaust, they lie about the bible, they lie about every single war, they constantly change history, the pretend to be part of the European diaspora, they lie about the control their banks have, they shovel race mixing propaganda down our throats, so if any of this flat earth stuff has any merit at all, it wouldn’t be a surprise if the jews were lying about that too (FUTRELLE, 2017)

It is a matter of common sense, to them: if Jewish people have been manipulating politics, the economy, and the media, what is to say they are not manipulating science as well? But, at the same time, there is a significant majority of flat-Earthers that push forward the opposite position: that the NASA is a propagator of Nazism, and the globe Earth is part of a conspiracy to turn the United States into a similar fascist dictatorship to Nazi Germany (WEILL, 2019). There is a spectrum, then, of right-wing radicalism within Flat Earth, one that parallels the one that can be seen on contemporary right-wing populism: anyone, from Christian conservatives to neo-Nazis can belong. If there is one thing that unites this spectrum, then, one nodal point to gather these groups, is the distrust of science, be it because science undermines belief in a Christian god by denying the Bible, be it because science is controlled by Jewish elites trying to manipulate the (white) people into submission.

This common theme resonates in right-wing populism at its peak in the United States: it is not that hard to see that, under Trump’s administration, science does not have the privileged position of holder of truth it used to have. From 2016 onwards, there was systematic dismantling of research on climate change, and explicit actions to show the administration’s disregard for actions against climate change. 2020 and the COVID-19 breakout brought this dismissal of science to a whole new level, with the purposeful spread of misinformation on the gravity of the virus, a combative posture towards the World Health Organization, promotion of alternative treatments that do not work, and undermining the authority of the FDA

(Food and Drug Administration) in an attempt to lessen the trust people would have in an eventual vaccine approved by the institution (NATURE, 2020; REARDON et al., 2017; TOLLEFSON, 2020). Some specific sectors of science are exceptions to this rule, and received budget increases and incentives, especially towards development of artificial intelligence, and NASA efforts for another mission to the moon – this second one resounding nicely with the “Make America Great Again” slogan, reaching out for a past glory from 1969 (MERVIS, 2020; TOLLEFSON, 2020).

Trump’s attitude towards science resonates with the one we see in flat-Earthers in two major and more explicit ways. First, there is a constant resort to feeling and individual perception. When questioned about the urgency on climate change action, he claims “I don’t see it”, emphasizing his own perception above evidence and expert consensus (POLMAN, 2019). When confronted about the fires that ravaged California in September 2020, he gave an obvious explanation, one anyone could see with their own eyes: “When you have years of leaves, dried leaves on the ground, it just sets it up. [...] It’s really a fuel for a fire. So they have to do something about it” (LEMIRE et al., 2020). When confronted on climate change’s role on the fires, he claimed with full confidence that the planet will start getting cooler and added that science does not know much about it when it was pointed to him that his perspective was not shared by experts. (LEMIRE et al., 2020). His own perception comes above everything else, and the supreme authority for deciding what truth is becomes individual decision-making and a fuzzy understanding of common sense.

Secondly, he shares with flat-Earthers an attempt to deny science to create a reality that is more positive than the one science points to. Trump’s position towards science is one where the priority is giving simple and easy explanations to everything, explanations that make sure the world is right and good and hope is on the horizon. There is no reason to be scared of climate change, because the fires in California were simply caused by dry leaves, and it will get cold soon; there is no reason to be scared of COVID-19, it is just a light flu, and no one should be forced to stop working or wear masks or have their personal freedom violated because of it (GOODELL, 2020). There is evidence that Trump does not do this because he actually believes that diseases like COVID-19 are harmless and action against it

curbs freedom – he knew full well the gravity of the situation, and chose to ignore it and, in his own words, play it down (GOODELL, 2020; THORP, 2020). His playing it down resonates with the type of discourse his supporters tend to shift towards, however: an emphasis on individual freedom and little government intervention above all things, and the creation of a reality where each person has full power to decide what to do or what not to do with their lives, with no fear of consequences. It is, ultimately, an anti-fear mobilization of affects, where everything is done to push fear and insecurity away and create a world where this feeling does not belong. It is fear exacerbated to the point where it becomes intense denial of the things that are feared, fear so intense it turns into carelessness.

This is, again, not a position that holds science accountable in a critical manner, or questions absolute objectivity, or tries to make science more inclusive, open, or nuanced. This is a perspective that uses and manipulates scientific data according to what is convenient, while denying it without any sort of basis when it is inconvenient. Science is good when a few studies suggest that hydroxychloroquine might be useful in preventing COVID-19, allowing for preventive measures such as quarantine to be avoided; science is bad when it contests these studies as invalid or imprecise, or when it says that the planet's temperature has been rising at alarming rates and the economy needs to change because of that. Science is good when it says nice, hopeful things, and bad when it says scary things.

The point of both Trump's rhetoric and Flat Earth's science denial is to simplify the world, put the blame to anything unpleasant that happens to a secret group responsible for manipulating all of us into blindness and alienation. The point is also to reaffirm that we are special, that there is a purpose to human existence – the Earth being the centre of the universe means we are not just a speck of dust floating aimlessly, but that we are the most important thing that exists. If we are so important, then, all our hopes and fears are important as well, we are the heroes of our own story, and all our misery is just the trials and tribulations every hero must go through before reaching the climax of the story and achieving success and happiness. Pointing to the fact that this is not so, that the Earth is not flat, that climate change is real, that COVID-19 is dangerous, that the problems that surround

us are structural and not just a matter of fate or conspiracy, is frustrating, and leads those who denounce the conspiracy to become the enemy.

This wilfulness to deny reality in favour of something better is exactly the type of rhetoric that makes right wing populism so attractive, especially in the era of Trump. It is, to some degree, a matter of desire – desire to reach an ideal reality, one that erases uncertainty and fear and introduces a world that makes much more sense than the purposeless, hopeless, chaotic one we exist in. It is a desire to be special, to have an existence that is meaningful, to have answers that tell you that everything will be okay in the end, despite any current suffering. It is a desire to put the blame of everything on shadowy elites that are rich, powerful, and greedy – different from us, hard-workers, who think for ourselves and do not follow blindly. It is a desire to have control over a world that is uncontrollable – and is there a more extreme way of controlling the world than deciding for yourself even the *shape* that it has?

And this need to escape, to create a better world, does not come from nowhere, as the context given in chapter 1 shows. This is not a wish for escapism that appeared out of thin air – it is a wish for escapism from a world that is, in fact, despairing, and for very good reasons. These frustrations and fears come from existing in a world where rampant austerity and precarity makes it ever harder for people, especially the poor, to have comfortable lives; a world where most people grew up with a myth of a meritocratic economy where hard work would lead them to their dreams, but saw that their work would not, actually, lead them to anywhere other than bare survival; where everything makes it seem like life is a constant competition for the smallest privileges, or even for the smallest life essentials (FRASER, 2019; NUNES, 2020). It is a world where we are told that our freedom and our contribution to the economy are the most important things we have to give, and that our dedication to these principles will eventually pay off (BROWN, 2019) – but then, the payoff never comes, and it is easier to blame shadowy forces working against us in the background than to admit that this belief in freedom and hard work might be wrong.

This is intensified, as we will see in the next section, by the context of the late years of the Trump administration, where the promises of a better life under his

version of right-wing simply fell flat, and the economic and societal collapse brought about by COVID-19 only made these feelings of hopelessness, fear, frustration and denial even stronger (NUNES, 2020). It is no wonder, then, that the creation of alternate realities that seem to make more sense, and put the blame of every inconvenience on unseen villains, would intensify, culminating on the rise of QAnon.

4.5. Conclusion: the decline of Flat Earth, the rise of QAnon

In *Behind the Curve*, when talking about how Flat Earth is only part of a huge conspiracy to control the minds and hearts of Americans, Nathan Thompson says something that feels like foreshadowing: “And I think what’s really scary is what they’re actually doing isn’t just hiding the Flat Earth. It’s the fact that they’re still doing human sacrifice and blood rituals” (In: CLARK, 2018). A little over two years after that, QAnon is a force strong enough to elect representatives (MARTINS, 2021) and fuel an invasion of the Capitol in the name of preserving Donald Trump’s presidency after a lost election (WENDLING, 2021), and one of the many things they strongly believe in is that the mysterious powers that govern the world behind the curtains do, in fact, perform human sacrifices and blood rituals, not only because they are Satanists, but also because they are reptilian creatures who obtain sustenance through a substance that is produced by the human body only in moments of great distress, and torture and human sacrifice is the best way to harvest it (HEER, 2020; ZUCKERMAN, 2019). There is absolutely no evidence to any of this, of course, and this is one of the many conspiracies that form the complex scheme of QAnon. Still, when Thompson mentions blood sacrifices, and when we keep in mind that he, along with most other flat-Earthers, subscribes to a variety of conspiracy theories, the link becomes obvious.

In a video essay on Flat Earth, Olson (2020) points more explicitly and systematically to this link. As someone who, as he points out, always had an interest in observing Flat Earth content despite not being a flat-Earther himself (the essay starts with him debunking the theory, in fact), he noticed a noticeable decline in the interest on Flat Earth on YouTube, its main platform for divulging their theories and gathered evidence, with new videos from popular Flat Earth channels getting progressively less and less views. At the same time that Flat Earth was declining, it was QAnon that was rising, with theories with many similar themes of dark forces

lying to the population in order to establish authoritarian control, but this time with Donald Trump in the centre as a heroic figure trying to dismantle these hidden groups (OLSON, 2020).

QAnon contrasts heavily with Flat Earth in a few points: first, it is much more explicit in its basis on fear. Flat Earth is not that fearful of a movement – there is wariness over the “powers that should not be”, but the movement tends to emphasize positive action, gathering of evidence for Flat Earth, and the fearmongering that does exist is vaguer. Most flat-Earthers struggle to explain to you why the globe conspiracy exists, what is the point of it, what does the powerful stand to gain from it. It is a generic, vague fear of authoritarianism that is barely articulated, and is easily overwhelmed by the determination to prove the truth, and by the embrace of the sense of community Flat Earth brings.

QAnon thrives on explicit fearmongering, and it targets the most vulnerable and universally accepted fears. QAnon’s main dog whistle on the internet is the Twitter hashtag #SaveTheChildren – a tag that has existed for years, in fact, but that has been taken over by Q believers who defend that the world is being controlled by Satanist paedophiles – and there is nothing scarier than children in danger (CHÁVEZ, 2020). At the same time, QAnon also emphasizes hope much more – there is always the expectation that something will happen. Having Trump as the hero of QAnon, as the man on the inside of the conspiracy who is working on a grand plan to expose the evil villains who have been stealing children and torturing people, makes it so there is constant hope that he, in his position of power, will finally bring it all to light, and prove them right. And every time these hopes are not met, another goal is set, another date or moment or milestone that will be met and will finally bring the narrative to its climax, and the previous wrong prediction is not the fault of Trump, but of Q followers not having interpreted the clues properly. Hope is always running high with QAnon (THOMPSON, 2021).

Another interesting similarity with Flat Earth that QAnon takes to another level is the emphasis on gathering information by yourself – but QAnon turns it into almost a game:

If the Q movement had a slogan, it would be “Do your research.” The conspiracy is designed like a game. Discovering clues that clarify Q’s cryptic missives produces a eureka effect, which

offers a hit of dopamine and improves memory retention. It's the same satisfaction that comes from solving a puzzle or finding the answer to a riddle.

Believers apply the same approach to everyday news: Find information that confirms any existing beliefs, then use it to augment their understanding of the conspiracy. Reject facts or information that counter the existing beliefs (THOMPSON, 2021).

That is, QAnon also incentivizes taking the power of knowledge and information into your hands – it gives the empowering feeling of deciding truth for yourself, of creating your own narrative, one that makes sense and closes the nonsensical plot holes of the narrative of the real world. QAnon gives everything, even suffering and betrayal at the hands of a horribly incompetent president, and the unfulfillment of the promises of a better life they believed in in 2016, a meaning, and a possible, hopeful conclusion. In a context of crisis in a country led by a president that rose with a populist movement without actually delivering any improvements in the lives of the working- and middle-classes that elected him²⁶ (HALTIWANGER, 2021; LONG, 2020), the disappointment is turned into hope by a conspiracy like QAnon, and it is no wonder Flat Earth lost some of its steam in favour of it, as the promises QAnon makes feel much more achievable.

The rise of QAnon, when one looks at what came before it in terms of conspiracy, is not that surprising, then. It is a part of a pattern of discourses and affective attachments, a pattern that I have shown in this chapter through Flat Earth, but that runs through most conspiracies, and runs through most of what we see in right-wing populism today. While these conspiracies claim that their quest is to search their truth, ultimately, they are about comfort, about avoiding suffering, despair, fear, and anxiety in a world where the ever-worsening material and political conditions produce these negative feelings and give no concrete perspective of change. They are, then, about seeking a version of reality that makes sense and brings hope. This hope, however, is vulnerable and fragile, and can very easily turn back into anger and frustration, and the mentality of taking things into your own hands leads to the type of insurrection that shook the Capitol in January 2021.

²⁶ Trump left office in January 2021 leaving behind an unemployment rate of 7,9%, and the ongoing recession during the COVID-19 pandemic has created a noticeable widening of the wealth gap (LONG, 2020).

Trump's loss in the 2020 election might seem like a relief to anyone who looks at right-wing populism with distrust. But the types of feelings that lead people to invest in conspiracies and on populist leaders like him do not disappear overnight, just as the contexts in which they rise will not change abruptly. With QAnon, this logic becomes explicit: there might be initial disappointment with expectations not being met, but new interpretations of the conspiracy can always be built, and new expectations can be created. It is only a matter of time, then, for us to find out how this fight between fear and hope will fold out in the future.

5. Conclusion

While Flat Earth was portrayed by Weill (2018) as a the foundational conspiracy theory, the spaces it created online were quickly and powerfully taken over by QAnon, as Olson (2020) shows. This is because, as I hope to have demonstrated throughout the previous chapters, these conspiracies work in similar ways, and they belong to the same historical context which encourages this type of thinking. That is, both the 2010s version of Flat Earth and QAnon are products of the time they came to exist in, a time of fear and discomfort that these conspiracies seek to placate with hope and a narrative that seeks to construct enemies that can be defeated.

Flat Earth and QAnon come into being in the culmination of decades of neoliberal policies that have created constant crises and a state of austerity that seems never-ending. In this context, the average person is asked to constantly sacrifice their wellbeing and happiness towards their mere survival through work, with ever-diminishing possibilities of improvement. Economic crises and political instability have their uncertainty reinforced by natural threats such as climate change and pandemics, and in general, it does not seem like things are getting any better any soon (NUNES, 2020). In short, it feels like the world is ending, and there is absolutely nothing anyone can do about it.

In this context, conspiracy theories provide an escape by offering the possibility of giving people the power of creating their own realities, tailor-made to be comfortable to them. Conspiracy theories create a black and white world, where heroes and villains are in opposite ends of a dispute (even if these villains are frequently loosely described as “elites” that are not particularly specified), and where, once this dispute is over, the truth will be out there, and things will get better. It is, ultimately, a hopeful fantasy, where the current misery is substituted by the possibility of a bright future.

Escapist fantasies like Flat Earth also give the people who believe in them a sense of power, of being able to build their own world. As I have shown, Flat Earth puts the emphasis on the figure of the human as special; it reminds people that the Earth is the centre of the universe, to give it, and consequently, the people who live in it, a sense of cosmical important, a sense of purpose and of being extraordinary.

These fantasies are also much of what is behind allegiance to contemporary right-wing populism. As we have seen, right-wing populism operates in much the same logic of creating antagonisms and villains as conspiracies do – and conspiracies belong right inside the chain of equivalences of right-wing populism, with their denial of reality and embrace of alternative realities that seem more comfortable. Just as well, right-wing populism values individual freedom above all things, and a lot of what is appealing about Flat Earth and QAnon is a sense of fear towards authoritarianism and population control, a fear that is fought back by denying authority and taking the control of the construction of truth into one's own hands, refusing any interference.

So, where can we go from here? How can the appeal of conspiracy theories and custom-made realities be pushed back? Before we conclude towards these questions, however, once again, like in the introduction, I ask the reader for a bit of patience as I enter another detour towards personal experiences and feelings, but it is in the interest of reaching an important conclusion.

Social media has, in recent decades, popularized what is called the “body positive” movement. It is a movement that advocates for the acceptance of all types of bodies, and for the rejection of standards of beauty. It is a movement with origins on feminism movements of the late 1960s, and that has as a main tenet the defence of the right of fat people to exist and to have their bodies respected and included. The movement addresses a lot of daily struggles of fat people that frequently go unnoticed: how public transportation, for example, is designed for thin people and does not accommodate fat people; how discrimination is rampant, including in the workplace; how media portrayals of fat people tend to be overwhelmingly negative and ridiculed, causing severe self-esteem and mental health issues on fat people, especially fat young people; and how healthcare for fat people tends to be biased against them, denying them treatment in many different fronts and reducing every issue to obesity, even the ones that have nothing to do with being fat (OSBORN, 2021; PETTY, 2018).

I have been fat all my life. I have never known really known what is like *not* to be a fat person. My mother is fat too, and I have no memory of a time in my life that was not surrounded by the concern with fatness, be it mine or my family's. I

exist as a fat person in a world that rejects them and is constantly telling them that they should not exist, that they are ugly, lazy, disgusting, unhealthy. I was taught from a young age that my body is wrong, that I should feel guilty about eating, that I should diet and exercise and try to be as thin as possible. I was always taught that, as a girl and as a woman, I should be beautiful, and to be beautiful, I cannot be fat. As a human, as well, I need to be healthy, to live as long as possible, and to be healthy, I also need to be thin.

Somehow, I never really wanted to be thin.

It is a weird statement, I think, because the narrative is always that every fat person wants to be thin. And, really, no one can blame them – I do not mean to put myself on a superior position for not falling into the traps that pressure fat people, especially fat women, in shrinking themselves. It just happened to be this way. I think it happened because I grew tired of watching how much my mother suffered because of her weight, not because of her physical health, but because of the mental strain it put on her. Maybe, also, I got scared when I saw stories on television about girls with anorexia or bulimia starving themselves to death, and I did not want to be like them. So, I never really wanted to be thin. I never really thought by body was ugly or disgusting, despite the world telling me that it was. I knew I was alone in feeling like this, and my refusal to bend down and try as hard as I could to lose weight led to a lot of conflict with my family, as they worried about my health.

So, I felt alone in this. And then, in my late teens, I found the body positive movement, and it felt like a huge relief. I also found out, in the same period, that I suffered from hormonal imbalances that, while not solely responsible for my constant weight gain, made it incredibly hard for me to lose weight, and easy for me to gain it. It felt like validation in two fronts: I do not need to be ashamed to be fat, because fat is beautiful; and I do not need to feel guilty about being fat, because it was never my fault anyway – there was nothing I could do to stop the hormones running wild on my body and making me like this. This also happened when I was on my first years of university, living away from my parents from the first time and with the freedom to do, and eat, as I desired, with no one there to worry about my health because of it.

Here is the problem: while it is true that there is a problem with healthcare workers dismissing fat people's concerns in the basis of their weight, and that the research on the relationship between obesity and a diversity of diseases is not definitive, some subsets of the body positive movement take this criticism in a very specific direction, which is the one that denies that obesity is a disease at all, or that it is as dangerous as doctors make it seem to be. This subset is small, and is usually reserved to personal blogs that rise to mild prominence on online spaces, much like what happens with Flat Earth; they are not experts, but they show up online making absurd comparisons between fat oppression and homophobia (CAMPOS, 2012), for example, while completely denying the overwhelming research that relates obesity to a higher rate of heart disease, even when obesity is combined with a healthy diet and regular exercise (CERNIK, 2018). It is very much a form of science denial, albeit a small one that has not a lot of notoriety, and it is a form of science denial that I believed in wholeheartedly when I first encountered it.

My intention here is not to give a negative portrayal of the body positive movement – in fact, research shows that on average, exposure to body positive content leads to healthier lifestyle choices, and not the opposite, as people feel more confident to exercise in public, for example, and the incentive to love their own bodies moves them towards taking care of themselves (COHEN; NEWTON-JOHN; SLATER, 2020). But this tiny subset of people who deny the health dangers of obesity and its connection with diabetes and heart disease reached me, eventually, and despite their lack of evidence, I believed them, because they provided me with an alternative reality that I could escape to. Doctors telling me I was at risk of diabetes were just biased and prejudiced; I was perfectly healthy the way I was and did not need to change myself. All the suffering I watched my mother go through trying to lose weight as I grew up was pointless; I will never need to suffer like her, because this new reality was presented to me and now, I knew better than others, than the unilluminated who simply accepted everything their doctors told them to do and lived miserable lives while pointlessly dieting and exercising when weight loss is not a guarantee of a healthy life.

And really, I was in university at the time, already seeking a career in academia. I was not going to believe something like this with no evidence, and I remember vividly one day, when I found a blog post with a link to study claiming

that there was no significant evidence that obesity was related to heart diseases, and overjoyed with my discovery, I sent the link to a friend of mine who was in medical school – she would be better able than me to navigate the jargon and check if the article had any merit to it. And I remember her telling me that the article was not particularly good, that the journal it was published in was not a relevant one, and that it contradicted a lot of preestablished research. And, while priding myself in seeking evidence of my belief, I ignored her words and chose to keep believing obesity was harmless.

I hope the reader will already have identified why I chose to share this personal story. The way I thought back then resonates a lot with the type of logic that works behind conspiracy believers – and, like them, I chose to believe an alternative reality after years of being inserted in a context that made me hopeless and miserable. The scale of the problem is different, of course, because the tiny subset of people on the internet who believe obesity is not a disease is not big and influential enough to incite a riot on a national Congress demanding to be heard, for example. Still, the logic behind then is practically the same, and can tell us a lot about how it is feelings that lead the way when it comes to choosing to believe one version of the world over another.

This also means that science denial and conspiracy theories are not an exclusive property of the right-wing, even if this side of the political spectrum tends to concentrate a lot of it. Body positivity leans very much left, with its origins on feminism, and even it falls into the danger of buying into the type of denial of science that puts lives at risk. Science denial and conspiracy theories gain strength not because of a supposed lack of education of the people being co-opted by it, but because they tap into very real feelings that need attention, and the fact that the right-wing is more connected to the spread of these theories is not a matter intrinsic to right-wing ideology, but instead a reaction to a world that disregards people's feelings of being left behind:

if the far right has managed, through the use of disinformation or otherwise, to mobilize the anti-systemic feelings of people who feel they have been failed and left behind, it is because those sentiments exist. It is only because many people sense that there is something profoundly wrong about the existing economic and political system that the far right's message can take hold. *Combating this message, therefore, is not just a matter of fighting*

deception; it is ultimately about addressing the issues that are at the source of those feelings. This cannot happen, however, for as long as we are in denial about those issues (NUNES, 2020).

This means that reinforcing truth alone is not enough, because truth will always have the potential of being skewed one way or another – and the same applies to science. Sure, there is fear about the way science is disregarded today, about the way its authority is being deteriorated, but science is not the absolute holder of truth or fairness, as we have seen at the start of chapter 3. Beyond recovering science's legitimacy, it is necessary to address the origins of the feelings that make people run away from reality in the first place.

At the same time, however, the defence of science still needs to be a reality, at the right times and places, as simply turning away from it, as COVID-19 has demonstrated, could prove literally fatal, and as Wark (2015) points out, science critique has been appropriated by the right to justify measures that go against the very survival of humanity; while science must be criticized, then, progressive forces need to be careful about how and when to do it, as to not fall into the trap of denying it all over again. What is necessary, then, is a double effort: understanding and addressing what causes the denial of reality and science in the first place, before trying to reaffirm truth stubbornly against ears that do not see themselves contemplated by this truth; while defending a form of science that is less authoritative, without running into the risk of making it vulnerable to attacks from the forces that wish to undermine it for their own gain.

This is not at all a simple task, as science denial seems to grow stronger and big conspiracy theories such as QAnon seem to retain their convincing power even as their thesis are proved wrong again and again (HEER, 2020; THOMPSON, 2021). Still, it is important to keep an eye (or several eyes, really) on the further developments of conspiracies such as these – it is only by taking them seriously that we can try to fight back their wave of misinformation, and it is only by understanding their strength in the power of emotions and the desire for a better life than we can even remotely hope to revert this wave of denial and dangerous alternative realities.

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