

Knowledge and Conservative Politics in Unsettled Times

"I'm Not a Conspiracy Theorist, But . . .": Knowledge and Conservative Politics in Unsettled Times

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How does conspiracist thinking become appealing to its adherents, and with what political consequences? Drawing on fifty in-depth interviews with gun sellers from April 2020 to August 2020, this paper examines conspiracist thinking among US conservatives. We present a sociological account that follows historian Richard Hofstadter's early account in theorizing conspiracist thinking as a "style" of politics on the Right. Turning to the sociology of culture and political sociology, we examine conspiracist thinking as a tool of political sense-making that becomes particularly appealing during "unsettled" insecurity. We focus on conservative adherents to conspiracist thinking, examining how conspiracist thinking is mobilized to assert feelings of control and certainty in ways that reinforce allegiance to conservative values and repudiation of partisan opponents. Specifically, we theorize conspiracist thinking as an everyday practice of meaning-making (an epistemological practice) which responds to conditions of unsettled insecurity that reflects existing conservative "modes of thought" (e.g., anti-elitist skepticism) and also reinforces conservative sentiments through two mechanisms: epistemological individualism and epistemological othering. Extending existing accounts of conspiracism, our analysis illuminates how conspiracist thinking—as an active, and self-reinforcing, struggle for epistemological control amid contexts of information scarcity and uncertainty—has come to shape American politics from the bottom up.

Introduction

In late 2019 and early 2020, reports circulated of a potentially world-changing virus: The novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19—an unpredictably severe

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and at times fatal respiratory disease. As of early May 2022, at least 1,000,000 people in the United States and 6.25 million globally had perished from the viral disease and its complications (Dong, Du and Gardner 2020).¹ Alongside the overwhelming loss of life, the pandemic incited social, economic, and political chaos as government officials and everyday people attempted to evaluate impending impacts and to take action—or not. The novelty of the virus put an informational disadvantage on the ability to act, which was exacerbated by public officials, such as then-US President Donald Trump, attempting to downplay the virus and misinform the public regarding health and safety measures (Rutledge 2020). Indeed, apace with COVID-19 circulated another viral phenomenon: conspiracist thinking regarding the authenticity of the virus and how it was being manipulated for gain by opportunists (Calvillo et al. 2020; Kempthorne and Terrizzi 2021; Romer and Jamieson 2020). How did a previously unknown virus elicit conspiracist thinking—and with what consequences for the politics of truth?

This paper examines the appeal and utility of conspiracist thinking on the Right. Conspiracist thinking doubts the “official story” and emphasizes behind-the-scenes actors, imagined as powerful and corrupt, to explain uncertain or ambiguous events and trends (Oliver and Wood 2014). We present a sociological account that follows Hofstadter’s (2012) theorization of conspiracist thinking as a “style” of politics on the Right.² Using political sociology and the sociology of culture—specifically the culture-as-toolkit and culture-in-action literatures—we examine conspiracist thinking as a tool of political sense-making among conservatives which becomes particularly appealing during “unsettled” times when dominant cultural practices are inadequate for addressing the social problems that people face (Swidler 1986, 2001). We theorize culture as “a set of collectively available *resources* such as the skills and justifications that people deploy in their daily lives in the pursuit of various ends” (Abramson 2012, 158). We document conspiracist thinking as an everyday practice of meaning-making which responds to conditions of *unsettled insecurity* (i.e., forms of uncertainty, insecurity, or chaos that exceed existing cultural practices and responses), reflects existing conservative “modes of thought” (e.g., anti-elitist skepticism), and reinforces those sentiments through mechanisms that we label as *epistemological individualism* and *epistemological othering*. Rather than producing political withdrawal,³ conspiracist thinking resonates with existing conservative predispositions and, as such, restores a sense of epistemological control for adherents which allows them to differentiate themselves from their partisan opponents.⁴

This article theorizes conspiracism as a tool within political culture by focusing on the case of the COVID-19 pandemic—one of many “arena[s] of short-run use, reproduction, and change” (Patterson 2014, 22)—for exploration. We analyze fifty in-depth interviews conducted with gun sellers between April 2020 and August 2020. Situated at the intersection of gun culture, markets, and politics, gun sellers are generally long-standing adherents to right-leaning politics. In 2020, they found themselves on the frontlines of a dramatic surge in gun purchasing amid public fears of uncertainty. Interviews with gun sellers were conducted as 2020 unfolded, capturing how they made sense of the

pandemic and its fallout amid uncertainty and/or low information. This provided a unique opportunity to document how conspiracist thinking is mobilized to assert feelings of control and certainty in ways that reinforce allegiance to conservative values and repudiation of partisan opponents.

Complementing approaches in political science and psychology, our analysis treats conspiracism as a *sociological* phenomenon by shifting the analytical conceptualization of conspiracism from a fringe identity, category, or set of psychological attributes (e.g., the “conspiracy theorist”) and to a more broad-based epistemological practice (i.e., the “conspiracist thinking”⁵ adopted by those who admit “I’m not a conspiracist theorist, but . . .”). Analyzing conspiracism as an active, and self-reinforcing, struggle for epistemological control amid unsettled insecurity, we engage and extend Swidler’s (1986, 2001) toolkit model of culture to characterize how gun sellers in our study employ specific strategies of action in response to structural dilemmas faced in uncertain times.⁶

Existing Accounts of Conspiracism

Conspiracy beliefs have long proliferated in the United States (Bailyn 2017; Waters 1997) and beyond (Imhoff et al. 2022; Swami 2012) “to make sense of the world by specifying the causes of important events, which further helps [to] predict, and anticipate, the future” (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017, 327). Uscinski and Parent (2014, 5) note, “conspiracy theories permeate all parts of American society and cut across gender, age, race, income, political affiliation, education level, and occupational status.”⁷ Rather than a manifestation of political naiveté, “even highly engaged or ideological segments of the population can be swayed by the power of [conspiracist] narratives, particularly when they coincide with their political views” (Oliver & Wood 2014, 964).

Scholars researching conspiracism largely examine psychological and political antecedents of conspiracist ideation. Psychologists link individual characteristics (e.g., attitudes toward authority, self-assessed intelligence, and openness) and pathology (e.g., mental illness and personality disorders) to belief in conspiracy theories (Barron et al. 2014; Lewandowsky, et al. 2013; Swami et al. 2011). Psychological studies at times streamline conspiracism, operationalizing it as a one-dimensional construct or “monological belief system” (Brotherton, et al. 2013) that appeals to those with low intelligence (Swami et al. 2011) or who possess an “incapability . . . [for] exercising sufficient critical judgements” (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham 2010, 760).

Others, however, argue that a tendency toward conspiratorial thinking is not indicated by psychological predispositions as much as indicative of a “cognitive style” (Lewandowsky, et al. 2013). Accordingly, psychologists link belief in conspiracism to psychological biases such as the conjunction fallacy,⁸ intentionality bias,⁹ and confirmation bias¹⁰ (Brotherton, et al. 2013; Swami et al. 2011). As a cognitive style, conspiracism can be understood as an “anti-knowledge” (Wood and Douglas 2013) grounded in the belief that “facts” are politically constructed (Garrett and Weeks 2017). Thus, belief in conspiracy

theories may reflect an overarching emphasis on intuitive knowledge, that is, an individual's faith in their ability to instinctively recognize the truth (Garrett and Weeks 2017).

While psychological approaches find limited evidence that conspiracism is predicted by conservatism at the individual level (Oliver and Wood 2014), political science approaches situate conspiracism as an ascendant orientation within conservative politics intertwined with the resurgence of rightwing populism and the rise of Trumpism (Stecula and Pickup 2021). Whereas some psychological evidence suggests conspiracism may deplete political engagement (e.g., Jolley and Douglas 2014), political science perspectives instead suggest that conspiracism may not inhibit as much as alter the terms of political engagement. Examining why populism and conspiracism are prevalent in modern democracies, Silva et al. (2017) find that being "conspiracy-minded" is associated with two aspects of populism: people-centrism and anti-elitism. Conspiracism can motivate a "populist theory of power" (Fenster 2008, 89) in that "populism needs an enemy, and in many instances that enemy is engaged in a conspiracy to harm the people, to take from them what is rightfully theirs and destroy their way of life" (Brewer 2016, 252). Recognizing that populism has animated the contemporary conservative right in the United States, scholars examine how top-down dynamics—from Trump's tweets (Hornsey et al. 2020) to the Republican Party's embrace of conspiracist thinking (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2020)—encourage conspiracist thinking among conservatives.

This linkage between conservative politics and conspiracist thinking reflects a broader politics of knowledge. As early as the 1950s, conservative media activists justified the need for conservative channels of political discourse—newspapers, radio shows, publishing houses, and eventually television networks—as an alternative to the presumed liberal bias they saw in mainstream media. They championed a populist stance that elevated the voices of "real Americans" (i.e., white, cisgender, and heterosexual men) amid the challenges to American social order represented by the Civil Rights movement and movements for women's and LBGTQ rights. This blending of "the liberal bias story and the populist story" (Peck 2019, 15) allowed conservative media to adopt an "outsider" status despite access to economic and political power (Hemmer 2016). Some 70 years later, it also allows space for conspiracist thinking to flourish as an explanation for the ascendancy of liberalism and a justification for the dismissal of social movements and transformations. As one particularly evident case, consider conservative media coverage of the 2008 election of Barack Obama, which featured conspiracy theories, such as birtherism, to contest the fitness of Obama as president (Serwer 2020).¹¹

Against the backdrop of this media ecosystem, epistemological entrepreneurs on the Right have undermined scientific consensus by propagating misinformation, uncertainty, and suspicion regarding liberal bias in an effort to support conservative agendas on issues such as gun rights (Metzl 2019). Conservative Americans have become more likely to distrust scientific elites, oppose government funding of science, and resist the use of scientific findings to guide government policy (Gauchat 2012, 2015). Alongside long-standing conservative

campaigns against higher education (Binder and Wood 2014; Gross 2013), Mann and Schleifer (2020) find that anti-science attitudes among conservatives are driven by a distaste for scientists rather than science itself; this helps explain why anti-establishment conspiracy theories often adopt the language of “evidence” and “scientific reasoning” (Harambam and Aupers 2015).

Existing approaches agree that conspiracism represents a commonplace orientation, one that installs order on otherwise bewildering circumstances, events, or facts by appealing to belief in organized forces operating “behind-the-scenes.” However, approaches that examine the psychological determinants of conspiracism often overlook it as a social practice. Meanwhile, though political science approaches situate conspiracist thinking within broader political movements and ideologies, they do not adequately account for how conspiracist thinking becomes useful in the political lives of adherents and with what consequences. Following DiMaggio (1997, 265), we examine how conspiracist thinking become “situationally cued” and “embedded in [a] physical and social environment” (267) of insecurity. In doing so, we emphasize “the action-shaping power of the external environment and the post-hoc, epiphenomenal role of cultural reasoning” (Vaisey 2008b, 605) to theorize conspiracist thinking as a bottom-up, meaning-making tool within US conservative political culture.

Conspiracist Thinking in Political Culture

We unravel conspiracist thinking as an *epistemological practice* that mobilizes skepticism toward *elites* and/or *elite-produced claims* as a response to *unsettled insecurity*. Extending Swidler’s (1986) concept of unsettled times and recognizing that certain responses to insecurity are routine (e.g., purchasing a home alarm system amid fears of crime), we define unsettled insecurity as feelings, experiences and contexts of uncertainty, insecurity, or chaos which exceed the robustness of existing cultural practices and responses for redress. In contrast to cynical withdrawal, we find that conspiracism facilitates political engagement among its adherents through *epistemological individualism*, which reinforces adherents’ deservingness as political actors, and *epistemological othering*, which allows adherents to silence, disparage, and/or deem undeserving their political opponents.¹²

Culture shapes people’s actions by providing tools to navigate everyday life (Swidler 1986). To sociologists of culture-as-resources (Swidler 1986, Dohan 2003, Lareau 2003), culture is not “a coherent system of symbols and meanings but a diverse collection of ‘tools’ that, as the metaphor indicates, are to be understood as means for the performance of action” (Sewell 1999, 46). Lizardo and Strand (2010, 206) describe culture as “a set of heuristics, hunches and shallow . . . *practical skills* that allow persons to best interface externalized structures, contexts and institutions” (see also Abramson 2012; Swidler 2001). There is a long sociological tradition of understanding politics as culture, which includes formal regulations set by institutions (e.g., voter qualifications), informal rules governing social interaction (e.g., political civility), and “modes

of thought” characterized by “cognitive and emotional styles, skills, and habits that provide individual social actors with solutions to various problems they encounter in everyday life” (Perrin et al. 2014, 287; see also Eliasoph 1998). “Modes of thought” are analytically useful for understanding political culture where individuals interface with “competing truth-claims without the direct experiential knowledge to assess these claims” (Perrin et al. 2014, 287). Multi-faceted, contradictory, and diverse, “modes of thought” describe “conservatism [as] neither a single, monolithic ideology nor a mere coalition of convenience among disparate interest groups” (Perrin et al. 2014, 285; see also Blee and Creasap 2010).

Political culture entails people’s political orientations and actions, including how they come to accept political truths as valid (Imhoff and Bruder 2014). “Modes of thought”—conservative or otherwise—often appear as “common sense” that unremarkably greases the wheels of social initiative and social institutions. However, in “unsettled” times (Swidler 1986)—when habits and norms are not robust enough to navigate the dilemmas that people experience in their everyday lives—culture takes the form of explicit ideology, which people consciously, albeit unreflectively,¹³ mobilize “as a normative impetus to pursue some actions rather than others” (Abramson 2012, 166). “Unsettled” times (such as information-deficient environments) can activate people’s cultural repertoires to engage in sense-making practices (such as conspiracist thinking) that help them regain a feeling of security and control (DiGrazia 2017; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017).

We theorize conspiracist thinking as embedded in the political culture that people—here, conservatives—use to make sense of their political realities, affirm their political standing, and police the boundaries of political engagement during unsettled times. Expanding Oliver and Wood (2014), we understand conspiracist thinking as a style of political engagement that is endemic to “the ‘perpetual contest’ of democracy” (Fenster 2008, 87). Nevertheless, we recognize that conspiracism has made ongoing appearances in contemporary conservative political culture, arising as a means of explaining uncomfortable or unsettling political realities that challenge the prerogatives of cisgender, heterosexual, white men (and women). Our analysis focuses on the 2020 outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, which put a spotlight on science, media, and political elites who communicated truth-claims that could not be directly evaluated by everyday people, yet nevertheless shaped their experiences of stability and order. We show how gun sellers mobilized anti-elitist skepticism and experiential knowledge in response to top-down efforts by media, political, and scientific elites, and we present two consequences of conspiracist thinking that reinforced conservative sentiments: epistemological individualism and epistemological othering.

Methodological Approach

Gun rights politics are a fruitful arena for examining the relationship between conspiracist thinking and conservative politics. Since the 1970s, conspiracist

thinking within gun rights politics has taken shape as the so-called “slippery slope” argument against any gun regulation: It held that even the smallest concession to gun regulations could lead to a torrent of gun control eventually culminating in gun confiscation. Mainstream gun rights advocacy has increasingly adopted a style of political thought that was deeply skeptical toward political and scientific elites and that imputed dark motivations to seemingly benign policy maneuvers (Lacombe 2021). The pandemic’s unfolding in 2020—and the context of unsettled insecurity (described below) that ensued—intersected with these long-standing dynamics as gun sellers found themselves on the frontlines of a historically unprecedent surge in gun purchasing. In contrast to new gun purchasers who are, by definition, newcomers to American gun culture, gun sellers are typically long-standing, right-leaning gun enthusiasts themselves. Accordingly, their long-term embeddedness in gun culture can provide uniquely rich insight into conservative political culture during the multilayered crises of 2020.

Our data include interviews with fifty gun sellers in Arizona ($N = 16$), California ($N = 12$), Florida ($N = 15$), and Michigan ($N = 10$).¹⁴ See table 1 for a demographic breakdown of the sample. Intentionally planned during the early months of the pandemic, interviews with gun sellers were conducted between April 2020 and August 2020.¹⁵ A team of researchers, including the authors, assembled a database of contact information for licensed gun sellers in Arizona, California, Florida, and Michigan. Carlson used the database to establish contacts and secure interviews in tandem with collecting the primary data and transcribing interviews. Prospective interviewees were contacted via email or phone using publicly available contact information. Due to coronavirus restrictions on travel, data collection was conducted remotely, allowing for greater scheduling flexibility via the use of phone interviews and allowing Carlson to reach a larger target sample than may have otherwise been feasible.

These circumstances created unique challenges for building rapport. From the onset, some prospective interviewees—including some who agreed to participate—voiced concerns about participating in a study conducted by a professor they stereotyped as “liberal” and “anti-gun.” Interviewees frequently reviewed Carlson’s website and publications before agreeing to participate. As part of recruitment, Carlson emphasized her data-driven approach to gun politics as one aimed at understanding people’s motivations rather than adjudicating on gun policies. She also referenced her previous ethnographic work on gun carry and gun instruction to demonstrate cultural capital. Further, Carlson’s positionality as a white cisgender woman who sounds young (a few gun sellers noted her presumed age) likely helped make the interview a nonthreatening space for the largely white, middle-aged, male interviewees.

With permission, interviews were audio-recorded; for the handful of interviewees who declined to be audio-recorded, Carlson took notes and reconstructed them into a narrative. Although some interviews lasted 1–2 hr, a typical interview was 30 min, as gun sellers were busy, given the surge in business activity. Note that all names are pseudonyms. Interviews addressed the social construction of coronavirus, the gun purchasing surge, gun purchaser demographics, imputed

Table 1. Interviewee Demographics

N = 50	
Age	49 years
Race	
White	90%
Racialized minority	10%
Gender	
Male	88%
Female	12%
Politics	
Right-leaning	84%
Independent	8%
Left-leaning	6%
Centrist	2%

motivations behind purchasing, the impact of coronavirus on gun politics, and attitudes about US society and US politics. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, and interviewees raised relevant topics as they emerged in real time, including #BlackLivesMatter protests (spring/summer 2020) and the US Presidential Election campaigns (summer/fall 2020). Because of the fast-changing context, we provide the month of the interview when introducing excerpts.

Though conspiracism was not an explicit focus of the interview, discussions of information, knowledge, and truth were a pervasive topic of conversation. Accordingly, Carlson and Ramo developed an analytical approach to examine how gun sellers deployed conspiracism. Guided by the scholarship on conspiracism and the politics of knowledge, Ramo interrogated an initial sample of eight interviews, sketching out major themes in memos and conversing over possible theoretical approaches in order to develop an initial codebook. Carlson and Ramo then coded remaining interviews, elaborated the codebook, and integrated additional literatures. Abductively moving between data and literature (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), we developed an analytical frame using political sociology and the sociology of culture to examine how conspiracist claims become appealing to adherents and with what consequences.

Unsettled Insecurity

In March of 2020, US gun sellers experienced a dramatic surge in gun purchasing. For many, this was their first up-close experience with the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. We theorize this context as “unsettled” insecurity to emphasize that gun sellers not only encountered *insecurity*—that is, panicked gun buyers, many of them first-time, seeking relief from the uncertainty of the pandemic—but also that panic buying in 2020 *unsettled* the familiar cultural scripts that gun sellers used to understand previous surges in gun purchasing.

Most gun sellers had already experienced gun-buying surges in the aftermath of mass shootings and/or in anticipation of an impending election and thus were familiar with cultural scripts explaining surges in terms of anticipated gun restrictions. For example, Andrew (California, April) noted, “I’ve been through gun sale surges before. The presumptive Hillary election was a huge gun surge. And then before that, Obama.... those were mostly gun owners or at least gun enthusiasts saying, ‘I better buy these... guns before they outlaw them.’” From this vantage, panic buyers were reasonable, calculated, and even rational, motivated by conjecture that gun regulations were soon to follow.¹⁶

But this familiar script proved futile in making sense of the 2020 surge, which, unlike surges of the past, lacked a clear connection between gun buyers’ motivations and impending gun restrictions. In other words, the social life of gun purchasing was out of sync with the dominant cultural toolkits available to navigate it (Swidler 1986, 2001). Absent the familiar reasoning of prior surges, gun sellers improvised a script that centered Americans’ general lack of personal experience with chaos at the scale of a pandemic. Aaron (California, April) noted, “we think we are isolated and that [war, terrorism and other kinds of instability] can never happen here. But realities of the world—and I get it, we’ve been lulled to complete peace and tranquility, I mean the last major thing like this that happened was 9/11 ... that was a long time ago.” Dave (Florida, May) agreed: “nobody’s ever experienced going to a store and not being able to get toilet paper, seeing all the meat gone, and so I think there was some fear of civil unrest because they thought people were going to go out and try to steal their toilet paper, or food, or something.”

As 2020 unfolded, and as gun sellers attempted to mobilize cultural frameworks to tame and contain their felt uncertainty (Swidler 1986), the unsettled sense that the coronavirus pandemic was a novel, once-in-a-lifetime historical event (e.g., “this is something that has never happened before in our lifetimes,” Joe, Florida, July) merged with more familiar narratives of economic collapse, government overreach, and civil unrest. Phil (Michigan, June) concluded that “it’s just scary”:

“The driving sales philosophy right now ... What’s going to happen with the coronavirus? What’s going to happen with riots? And just the unknown. That’s what’s selling firearms right now, and where people are taking action into their own hands. It’s sort of scary once you think about it. If you see all the people coming to buy guns—it’s just scary. People are very concerned about their well-being and [are] taking action into their own hands for protection.”

Phil and other gun sellers intimated a range of insecurities that motivated increased gun purchasing: heightened crime, economic precarity, election uncertainty, lack of police protection, government overreach, civil unrest, and even health consequences of COVID-19. Overwhelmed by the sheer “unknown,” gun sellers often sublimated these disparate indices of uncertainty into a generalized sense of chaos. Phil echoed a broader tendency within gun culture to reduce multifaceted social problems into one-dimensional narratives (e.g., of “good guys” vs. “bad guys”; see Stroud, 2016) that championed firearms as the only

assurance of safety and security.¹⁷ Similarly, Robert (Florida, May) described guns as the “only guarantee” during periods of insecurity:

“I’ve been using the word “fake news” for a while now, on both sides of the aisle. And I think that has caused the uncertainty, and when you have uncertainty, you have to have a guarantee, and the only guarantee in this country is the right to protect yourself.”

Two gun sellers from Arizona likewise explicitly saw guns as a way to assert “control” amid uncertainty, especially for first-time buyers:

“It’s a new, different fear that they cannot control, [and gun buyers are] doing whatever they can to gain control.” (Peter, Arizona, July)

“I think a lot of people just let that fear of *what if?* to seep into their heads … People just kind of said, I want to make sure that I’m in control of this. And I think that’s what people were doing … they were buying something because they wanted to feel like they were in control of something.” (Ian, Arizona, June)

In attaching motives to new gun buyers, gun sellers in our sample saw a profound sense of insecurity and unsettledness (Swidler 1986) among first-time purchasers which left many grasping for security and certainty in the form of a gun. From the perspective of gun sellers, new gun buyers were bellwethers in the unfolding crisis, demonstrating just how much uncertainty had driven otherwise unassuming Americans to take the action of purchasing a gun. One panic buyer exclaimed to Janet (June, Arizona), “I never wanted a gun in the house. I live alone with my kids—I want a gun. I’m scared.”¹⁸ In contrast to previous panic purchasing that gun sellers saw as galvanized by the fear of gun regulations, gun sellers understood the panic buy of 2020 as a response to a more fundamental sense of insecurity that urged would-be gun purchasers—many of them first-time buyers—to their stores in search of the security that buyers hoped a gun could provide.

Gun sellers experienced insecurity as a social fact that shaped their encounters with gun purchasers in extraordinary ways. Sellers’ understanding of new gun buyers’ motivations demonstrated what Swidler (2008) and Vaisey (2008a) acknowledge as an important feature of how culture links to action: the dual reality of what people *want* (e.g., security) and what people are able to *do* (e.g., purchase a gun). This unravels how gun sellers understood the unsettled motivations of gun buyers and, furthermore, lays a foundation for understanding how sellers themselves encountered, understood, and navigated unsettled insecurity.

The Politics of Anti-Knowledge

While gun sellers grappled with first-time gun buyers who turned to a new tool—the gun—amid unsettled insecurity, gun sellers themselves grasped for a different kind of tool—conspiracist thinking—to navigate uncertainty. Extending Rosenblum and Muirhead’s (2020) concept of “new conspiracism”¹⁹ that accounts for QAnon, Pizzagate, and other semi-coherent conspiratorial narratives, we find

that conservative gun sellers adopt *conspiracist thinking* more mundanely as they rejected mainstream knowledge claims on account of anti-elitist skepticism and presumptions of political opportunism, which, in turn, reinforced conservative sentiments. Gun sellers strategically adopted conspiracism to make meaning, “but not,” as Patterson (2014, 7-8) cautions, “in the compulsive, cognitively exhausting manner proposed by many conventional cultural sociologists.”

Reflecting long-standing anti-elitist sentiment on the right, gun sellers were skeptical about the claims and directives they heard about coronavirus. When mainstream media followed fast-changing guidance on public health, interviewees saw this not as evidence of the iterative process of scientific knowledge production but as further evidence of elites’ fearmongering and investment in the spread of false information. Dave summarized,

“Don’t wear masks. Don’t wear masks, they aren’t going to help.” “Now, everybody wear a mask. You gotta wear a mask!” You know? Which is it? Masks don’t work, or they do work? And it changes all the time. It’s just like—one year they’ll tell you [not to] eat something, the next year it is good to eat. They don’t know, they just make crap up, and people buy it until they come out and say something else.

Similarly, Craig (Michigan, August) surmised, “I just think—it’s the media, and the government trying to scare people. And keep them kind of under control.” While the fast-changing, and often contradictory, claims from the media could have compelled cynical despair and the discarding of long-standing political beliefs (as perhaps happened with first-time gun buyers), these gun sellers experienced this cacophony as a reinforcement of their anti-elitist sentiments.

Against this backdrop of anti-elitism, gun sellers used conspiracist thinking to confront uncertainty by cultivating a self-assured skepticism. Greg (Arizona, June) explained coronavirus as follows: “I guess I am probably one of them that believes that it’s too convenient that it came when it did, and whether it was intentional by China or another country that doesn’t like us or internally . . . I try not to be a conspiracy theorist, but . . .” Explicitly disavowing his own identification as “a conspiracy theorist” (Wood and Douglas 2013), Greg could be mistaken for a cynic, given his emphasis on political **opportunism**. But this emphasis is not an equal-opportunity one: Though he provided a token criticism of politicians across the political spectrum, his standout enemies—China, the Democratic Party—suggest a partisan-driven embrace of conspiracist thinking that reinforces conservative allegiances. Conspiracist thinking thus helped crowd out the uncertainty instigated by the virus and shifted focus to a more familiar threat: the opportunism of progressives, liberals, and Democrats—specifically those in media, government, and science—who wanted to seize power and control Americans.

Though gun sellers almost always started with generic critiques of elites regardless of their political affiliation, they often zeroed in on left-leaning liberals, progressives, and Democrats. Andrew (California, April) blamed the coronavirus on “botched lab controls” that China “covered up” with the help

of its “puppet organizations, including the World Health Organization … which made the spread and exposure worse.” Expounding further on his views, Andrew bemoaned the “opportunism” of “social progressives and governmental progressives … some of them, without even understanding … the endgame of their own agenda,” in addressing the pandemic. He admitted at one point: “I’m sorry to sound like a tin-foil hat-wearer.”

Others were more euphemistic in decrying the opportunism behind the pandemic by echoing entrenched conservative talking points that stereotyped leftists, liberals, and Democrats as driven by a desire to expand government in order to control Americans. Frank (Arizona, July) admitted he was “one of those people that they talk about that’s definitely a risk for serious complications and probably death.” He said that after the initial shock of the pandemic wore off, his view shifted: “you know it’s really, really being used as a tool to manipulate the population and get people more and more open to government controlling the little things in life.” Dave (Florida, May) worried less about the virus and more about “immunization camps” that could follow: “I think it really is very similar to what the Nazis did to the Jews—they acted, nobody knew what was going on, and they acted like it was all for their good, and they were given these things, we’re going to take you to take care of you, here—and nobody knew that they were getting slaughtered.”²⁰ For Frank, Dave, Andrew, and others, conspiracism did exactly what any tool in a cultural toolkit is supposed to do: tame unknown terrain into the terrain of the known. Talk of an “immunization camp” or government control over “the little things in life”—fit into a familiar template of conservative thought which has long deemed government tyranny a central threat and liberal propaganda as a principle means by which that threat takes shape.

Adopting conspiracist thinking to illustrate the opportunism they believed characterized their political opponents, gun sellers short-circuited the unnerving lack of firm facts and vetted knowledge regarding coronavirus and instead asserted skepticism as a stance that reinforced the malfeasance of leftists, liberals, and Democrats. Rather than a belief in elaborate fringe theories (i.e., old conspiracism) or an all-out withdrawal from politics (i.e., cynicism), gun sellers’ conspiracist thinking took the form of heightened skepticism that indicted their political opponents. This partisan-driven, anti-elitist skepticism did not emerge from whole-cloth in 2020 but had taken shape in the decades leading up to the pandemic. By 2016, Trump’s presidential campaign slogans, “Drain the Swamp” and “Make America Great Again,” explicitly intimated Washington politicians as elites who threaten everyday Americans. In tandem, Trump’s disparagement of journalists and his regime’s coining of the phrase “alternative facts” resonated with efforts already long underway by Fox News and other conservative outlets to cultivate skepticism toward so-called “mainstream” media.²¹ By 2020, anti-elitism was a dominant “mode of thought” among conservatives, which was readily deployed as news of the coronavirus spread. Refracting the structural conditions of the pandemic and its attendant uncertainties through the lens of anti-elitism, gun sellers engaged in conspiracist thinking to make sense of the unsettled insecurity of the pandemic. In embracing conspiracist thinking, they not only reflected conservative sentiments but they also reinforced them.

Epistemological Individualism

Conspiracist thinking did not just transform anti-elitism into a tool for making sense of unsettled insecurity. It also buttressed the conservative ethos of rugged individualism as everyday practitioners of conspiracism deemed themselves to be more reputable and reliable sources of knowledge than political, media, or scientific elites. Specifically, conspiracist thinking validated alternative sources of knowledge—for example, experiential knowledge and knowledge-gathering practices—for gun sellers looking to reject the claims of elites, thereby reinforcing an embrace of individualism—what we call “epistemological individualism.”

While gun sellers echoed the narratives of political opportunism long propagated within conservative circles, these well-worn narratives became sensible to gun sellers largely because they resonated far more with their first-hand experiential knowledge than the accounts they associated with scientists, politicians, and media elites. Those who did not contract the virus—or who did but made a complete and swift recovery—could point to their experiences as evidence of elitist chicanery; as Richard (California, June) said, “I’ve been around thousands and thousands of people, shaking hands, never worn a mask, nothing—and I couldn’t be better.” Craig explained that, rather than rely on experts in the media, he consulted with a nurse who compared COVID-19 to the “common cold” and assured him that “the vast majority of people are going to get sick and have a really bad cold or a mild flu.” Craig explained, “after him telling me that, I never worried about it again.” In his view, a credentialed layperson—a nurse—known to him was a more persuasive source of knowledge than scientific elites:

“The virus is real, I’m not going to deny the virus. But I feel like the media hypes it up way more than it is . . . I think it’s way overblown. Like looking at numbers, it’s highly survivable.”

While Craig eventually contracted coronavirus and survived it, this first-hand knowledge of the virus only reinforced his views. Rather than recognizing that his luck could have turned out differently, or that the virus varied in terms of its seriousness and lethality, Craig used this first-hand experience to call out the “hype,” concluding that if he did not get that sick himself, there could not be that much to worry about, save for the actions of the government and media.

Kenneth (Arizona, July) also contracted the virus and relied on his first-hand experiences and that of his friends to reinforce his skepticism of elite claims:

“My wife had the COVID-19 in early April, and then I got it in late June. I got it in late June . . . I want to say I know 30 people who have had it in Southeastern Arizona, and their symptoms [were] very similar to ours, so we’re hearing news reports . . . and it doesn’t jive with what our experience is. We’re not saying it’s not real, it’s not deadly—it’s just that it is different. And so—it makes it hard to understand what’s really going on with the coronavirus. And certainly, I feel like as a business owner, as an American, that there is some government overreach, and I’m very concerned about the idea that the state of Arizona has a law that suspends the state legislature when there is an emergency like this.”

Rather than view his and others' experience as corroborating evidence that the overwhelming majority of people who contract the coronavirus suffer mild-to-moderate symptoms, Kenneth put more stock in his own experiential knowledge, and the experiential knowledge of others he knew, to take a skeptical stance toward the knowledge claims of elites. Ultimately, Kenneth's personal experiences and the experiences of his friends left him concerned about government overreach—"as a businessman, as an American."

Without a proverbial "smoking gun"—a clear and present danger that linked coronavirus to death and destruction rather than to sickness and survivability—even gun sellers who had a first-hand brush with the virus found it sensible to downplay its severity and embrace a skeptical stance toward scientific and political elites. Drawing on their own first-hand experiences and leveraging conspiracist thinking as an epistemological tool, gun sellers asserted themselves and their peers as more reputable sources of knowledge than the credentialed elites fumbling their way through the coronavirus pandemic. Gun sellers engaged in epistemological individualism by privileging their experiential knowledge (or borrowed lay knowledge) and declaring their value as knowers, a process that shaped gun sellers' knowledge-seeking practices.

Gun sellers resisted accepting at face value the information circulated on social or mainstream media and as well as by experts within media, government, or the scientific establishment. For interviewees who believed "our biggest threat right now is the media and its ease and power to manipulate huge amounts of masses of people" (Rodrigo, Florida, May), embracing a conspiracist stance was tantamount to resisting manipulation—and, by proxy, asserting control over themselves as *deliberate knowers*. To illustrate, these gun sellers both avowed an intentional unwillingness to consume mainstream media:

"Quite frankly, I don't even watch the corporate media. I just have no interest in that nonsense and that propaganda. I don't care if you are watching Fox News or CNN, it's all lies." (Carl, California, June)

"I don't watch the alphabet channels, or CNN, but you know, I do catch some news, on talk radio and also on TV with Fox News." (Leonard, Florida, May)

By rejecting top-down knowledge, Carl and Leonard (and others) affirmed their capacities as discerning, judicious consumers of knowledge. They echoed Hofstadter's (2012) insight that conspiracism provides adherents with feelings of superiority due to their unique knowledge—with a twist. Instead of asserting themselves as uniquely "in the know," these gun sellers distinguished themselves as deliberately "out of the know," removed from what they see as distortions and lies emanating from the major knowledge-producing institutions within American society.

But gun sellers did not just reject top-down knowledge in a discriminating fashion; they also proactively sought out knowledge from the bottom-up. Rather than relying exclusively on mainstream media outlets, gun sellers in this study gathered knowledge by sifting through the Internet for relevant historical anecdotes, policy whitepapers, and statistics. Typically a term to describe the work of

trained scientists, interviewees at times used the word “research” (Schrade 2019; Tripodi 2018) to describe their deliberate acquisition of knowledge in contrast to (a) the unthinking consumption of information via government dictates and media headlines and/or (b) the all-out rejection of elite-produced information typically associated with cynicism. Rather than cynically disengaged, interviewees were epistemologically active—but on terms they defined. One referenced looking up archival CDC reports; another mentioned tracking down crime rates since the early 1990s; still another discussed learning about gun laws from YouTube and other Internet-based crowdsourcing technologies. As such, gun sellers positioned themselves as calm, knowledgeable, and fact-based decision-makers, leveling the scientific playing field by asserting themselves as equally capable of distilling fact from fiction as opportunistic, power-hungry elites.

Adherents to conspiracist thinking restore a sense of control by making sense of unsettled insecurity and enhance feelings of empowerment by asserting an epistemological individualism that celebrates their status as individual knowers. Put differently, conspiracist thinking encourages conservatives to see and celebrate themselves as independently assessing knowledge claims without reliance on external sources of validation such as mainstream media, science, or government. Thus, conspiracist thinking both reflects conservative sentiments (e.g., anti-elitism) and reinforces them (e.g., individualism) for its adherents.

Epistemological Othering

Finally, conspiracist thinking allowed its adherents to engage in *epistemological othering*. As gun sellers distinguished themselves against liberals, leftists, and progressives viewed as epistemologically impoverished, fact-averse, and duped by elites in the media, politics, and science, they mobilized epistemological fitness as a means of discounting those who might threaten the conservative status quo.

Gun sellers often treated liberals, leftists, and progressives as uncritical and gullible people who have been “fed a bunch of malarkey by,” as Leonard said, “their so-called [liberal] handlers.” Ron (Arizona, June) stated: “I certainly think that the liberals are crazy, but that’s my opinion [laughs]! If I have to generalize, I just don’t see a lot of rationality in terms of what is being said … they thrive on feeling and emotion. So, if they feel it, it must be real.” According to Ron, this emotive impressionability enables the “selective” recognition of facts, a selectivity that he believes has been empirically verified as a source of liberal opportunism:

“I feel that the left, or the liberals, are more selective on what’s gonna immediately benefit them. And it’s been shown! And that’s where I believe that this is only for their own personal benefit, their agenda, or their views, or their political stances—they are ultimately not going to change.”

Likewise, Steve (Florida, May) bemoaned liberals’ inability to face the “facts”:

“For some reason, they don’t look at real science. Now, they’ll scream all day long ‘Believe scientists!’ But when you point out some piece of science to them, they run and hide their head in the sand.”

Appealing to a stylized notion of “research” (i.e., “it’s been shown!”; “real science”; Schradie 2019; Tripodi 2018), Ron and Steve define themselves against their liberal political opponents through an epistemological distinction: Not only do conservatives hold differing views than liberals, but also *how* they come to these views fundamentally differs in ways that reinforce conservatives as more discerning, and reasonable, less gullible, and thus more legitimate knowers than their liberal counterparts.

Such sentiments were reinforced by the #BlackLivesMatter protests in the late Spring and early Summer of 2020, which shifted coverage of coronavirus to topics of racialized police violence and the need for reform. Already skeptical of “mainstream” media, many gun sellers found the focus on the #BlackLives-Matter movement suspect,²² believing that the protests were amplified by virtue of biased media coverage. As Liam said, “I don’t want to be that conspiracy theorist guy, but I think a lot of things are dictated by the media. Because now you have these riots going on, and all of a sudden you aren’t hearing anything about COVID . . . it all of a sudden seemed like—well, now we have to force race, racism as an issue. And now we have to spread these riots and panicking.” Carl sarcastically quipped, “the corporate media is telling you that the virus can’t infect you if you protest, but it can if you go have lunch . . . somehow the virus skips protests.”

Amid this skepticism, gun sellers also raised doubts about the protests themselves. Phil (Michigan, June) found it unnerving “for riots to sprout across the country . . . and [turn] to violence” in places like Grand Rapids. Phil ominously outlined the uncanny synchronicity of the protests:

“There’s [pause] clearly a perception that there is some kind of underlying dark force behind them, right?
 [You mean behind the riots?]
 Behind the riots.
 [Do you mean, some kind of organized, there’s funding or sort—]
 Yes. That’s what people feel like.”

Phil’s description of an “underlying dark force” resonated with historical characterizations of anti-racist activists as enemy-insiders (Butler 2021). The phrase activates a popular, if unconscious, association of Blackness with evilness (Grewal 2017; Haney-López 2015), positioning the uprisings more as domestic threat than as legitimate protest (Oliver and Wood 2014; Phillips and Milner 2021). Hedging his beliefs by appealing to mass opinion (“that’s what people feel like”), Phil illustrates how conspiracist thinking can assist in transforming protests from acts of political voice to stunts orchestrated by an “underlying dark force.”

In condemning political, media, and scientific elites, conspiracist thinking both validates alternative sources of knowledge and helps silence oppositional voices. Epistemological othering reinforced the conservative embrace of traditionalism by providing an epistemological basis on which to disregard the agents—for example, racial justice activists—who threatened that traditionalism. For gun sellers making sense of uncertainty in 2020, liberals, leftists, and progressives

were deemed as knowledge-deficient dupes who had fallen victim to power-hungry “experts”; protesters for racial justice were players in a plot to benefit the liberal establishment. Conspiracist thinking endorsed a traditional vision of American life: that of “a silent majority, the people who are just taking care of the family and enjoying time with the friends and family—we’re just wanting to live our life” (Ben, Michigan, August).

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout 2020, conspiracist thinking became increasingly visible in US political life. By the beginning of 2021, some fell so deep into conspiracist thinking that they embraced “big tent conspiracy theories” like QAnon, united by the “false claim”—as the *New York Times* describes—“that former President Trump [was] facing down a shadowy cabal of Democratic pedophiles” (Roose 2021). People like Jake Angeli—the so-called “QAnon Shaman” who rioted on January 6, 2021 at the US Capitol Building with a headdress of fur and horns and who was later described by his attorney as having “a pre-existing mental vulnerability of significance” (Lynch 2021, 1)—reinforced the stereotype of conspiracy adherents as unhinged and aberrant.

This stereotype, however, misleadingly suggests that conspiracist thinking is fundamentally fringe to US politics. Instead, we consider conspiracist thinking as an everyday epistemological practice which empowers those who engage in it, particularly during periods of unsettled insecurity. We examine gun sellers to make sense and demonstrate the pervasiveness of conspiracism as an everyday practice, showing how conspiracist thinking allows conservatives to respond to experiences of unsettled insecurity by amplifying and reinforcing conservative modes of thought, such as anti-elitist skepticism, rugged individualism, and social traditionalism.

Our data suggest an elective affinity between gun politics, conservatism, and conspiracist thinking. Much like conspiracism pulverizes an array of disparate knowledge claims into insistent skepticism, guns—as articulated by gun sellers—are used to respond to disparate kinds of insecurities, fears, and anxieties to assert a sense of control. Conspiracism and guns transform a defensive posture into one of empowerment—whether anti-elitist skepticism or armed self-defense. The individualistic ethos of gun culture and the epistemological individualism of conspiracism thus resonate with one another: Both promise control over uncontrollable, chaotic, and uncertain contexts. In doing so, they privilege some but crowd out other ways of knowing and other ways of responding to the social problems that shape and sustain insecurity.

That conspiracist thinking and conservative politics are aligned suggests top-down campaigns exclusively aimed at correcting falsehoods with facts may backfire by reigniting the sentiment that motivates people to reject elite claims in the first place. As long as US society remains deeply unequal and the US state remains largely unresponsive, conspiracist thinking will appeal to those looking to make sense of the socio-political relations around them—especially if they lack alternative tools with which to do so. However, sociologists have developed

alternatives to conspiracism that more accurately, and less hazardously, critique elite power (e.g., Mills 2000a). The gap between everyday experience and elite claims must be bridged with a sociological imagination—but one that differs from the classic formulation from Mills (2000b). Given that conspiracist thinking reinforces a political myopia that celebrates personal experience as the bedrock of awareness, this sociological imagination would encourage everyday people to recognize that their private troubles represent important but only partial manifestations of public issues. Now is a crucial time to transform sociological know-how from what Chief Justice John Roberts called “sociological gobbledegook” into the common sense of everyday life.

This study presents possibilities for future sociological inquiry, especially work that deliberately intersects conspiracism and conservative US political culture with race, gender, class, ability, and other axes of inequality and marginality. A fruitful project for researchers of conspiracism might extend our work on the mobilization of conspiracist thinking to develop a processual model identifying phases and factors critical to *becoming* a conspiracy theorist. Further, while our analysis concerns conservatives, conspiracism has broad-based appeal across the political spectrum, throughout history, and across the globe. Future studies might examine the cultural mechanisms by which conspiracist thinking becomes appealing to non-conservatives (i.e., leftists, progressives, liberals, and non-partisans) and with what consequences. Finally, our study suggests that conspiracist thinking may deepen political partisanship and make more palatable illiberal styles of governance which silence dissenting voices. Sociological interventions should investigate how conspiracism interlocks with transformations both in modes of thought and in modes of governance. While abandonment of conspiracism at scale is unlikely without resolving underlying conditions of distrust, false information, and power asymmetry, a first step requires understanding conspiracism as an epistemological practice of everyday meaning-making embedded in political culture.

Notes

1. See the full report: <https://www.who.int/data/stories/global-excess-deaths-associated-with-covid-19-january-2020-december-2021>.
2. We present our framework, methods, analysis, findings, and discussion in the context of our specific case concerning conspiracist thinking and conservative US political culture. However, we note that that conspiracism as a political and epistemological tool is not inherently limited to conservative political ideology or to the toolkits of members of the political Right. Imhoff et al.’s (2022, 392) analysis spanning 26 countries (total $N = 104,253$) concludes that “conspiracy mentality is associated with extreme left- and especially extreme right-wing beliefs” and that the relationship may be strengthened but not fully explained by what party has political control. It remains an empirical question whether and how our analysis of conspiracism extends to liberal or leftist adherents.

3. Although cynicism and conspiracism may be linked psychologically (Einstein and Glick 2013; Swami et al. 2010; Swami et al. 2011), we suggest that, at the level of political culture, they are analytically distinct. Cynicism is passive and politically disengaged, while conspiracism has become an active, proactive, and stylized political practice (e.g., the QAnon conspiracy appears to have motivated—rather than dissuaded—dozens of Republican politicians to run for office; see Zitser and Ankel 2021), and conspiracism (as opposed to cynicism) appears to be more intertwined with partisanship, on the one hand, and populism, on the other (Fenster 2008; Stecula and Pickup 2021). This may be a new or novel relationship between political engagement and conspiracism, given previous findings that conspiracism depletes some forms of political engagement (Jolley and Douglas 2014).
4. We use grouping labels (e.g., “conservatives” and “liberals”), but we do not theorize conspiracism vis-a-vis models of culture as small group experience or participation (see Eliasoph and Licherman 2003 on *group style*, i.e., boundaries, bonds, and speech norms).
5. We distinguish this from “conspiracist ideation,” which refers to the tendency to endorse conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2011; Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013).
6. Abramson (2012, 156) endorses the reintegration of “competing” models of culture; we find the toolkit model particularly useful for analysis. As Sewell (1999, 46) writes, tools are “discrete, local, and intended for specific purposes, [and] can be deployed as explanatory variables in a way that culture conceived as a translocal, generalized system of meanings cannot.”
7. Waters (1997, 122) explains conspiracist thinking among Black Americans by understanding conspiracy theories as “ethnosociologies,” noting that “treating conspiracy theories as invariably mistaken is unrealistic in societies where concerted and secretly planned social action is an everyday accomplishment of industries and government agencies.”
8. This describes “the idea that many disparate and ostensibly unrelated facts are in fact causally related by a conspiratorial plot” (Brotherton and French 2014, 246).
9. This describes the tendency to infer intentionality to ambiguous events (Brotherton and French 2015). Oliver and Wood (2014, 952) find that a strong predictor of conspiracy theory beliefs is beliefs in “unseen, intentional forces” such as religious narratives.
10. This references a tendency to adopt beliefs that reinforce existing beliefs (Swami et al. 2011).
11. Leaders of the Republican establishment (e.g., Mitch McConnell) engaged a rhetoric of racialized threat, secrecy, and non-belonging in the name of disparaging, discrediting, and silencing Barack Hussein Obama as a presidential candidate and later as president.
12. Birtherism is an example of *epistemological othering*; see endnote 11.
13. As Abramson (2012, 165–166) argues, “Some individuals use consciously articulated ideological frames as a central part of their decision making process,” which are conscious because “the actor is aware of their presence

and content” but unreflective because “they may seem uniquely true given the individual’s life experiences.”

14. Fifty-three gun sellers were interviewed; three did not yield substantively rich data necessary for qualitative analysis and were not included in our analysis is based on fifty interviews.
15. During these and many subsequent months, knowledge of coronavirus was limited. Information scarcity and unpredictability contributed to the overall environment of unsettledness and insecurity; interviewing gun sellers as they responded to that environment in real-time allowed for an analysis of how conspiracist thinking is mobilized in response to uncertainty.
16. The script that Andrew and other gun sellers used to explain surges in gun purchasing prior to 2020 appears to be historically long-standing. Based on preliminary analysis of national news coverage of debates surrounding gun bans, gun rights proponents have long engaged in panic buying as a response to fears of stricter gun regulations following high-profile acts of gun violence. Additional details on this preliminary research are available by request from Ramo.
17. Toolkit theory helps explain gun sellers’ reliance on straightforward or simplistic narratives; as [Lizardo and Strand \(2010, 205\)](#) note, individuals do not internalize “highly coherent, overly complex and elaborately structured codes, ideologies or value systems” because they are too mentally burdensome: “People simply wouldn’t be able to remember or keep straight all of the relevant (logical or socio-logical) linkages.”
18. Janet also noted an increase in shotgun purchases because they are “the best guns for home defense”; again, while this reflects gun purchasing motivations in general, it is distinct from how gun sellers have typically understood gun *surges* in terms of pending gun control legislation.
19. “Old conspiracism” focuses on coherent alternative explanations—that is, “conspiracy theories”—for events and trends, while “new conspiracism” ([Rosenblum and Muirhead 2020](#)) is driven more by antipathy toward elites than an attempt to construct a persuasive theory of ambiguous happenings.
20. See [Harcourt \(2004\)](#) on Nazi imagery.
21. Gun sellers’ attitudes on coronavirus resonated with the cues emanating from the Trump administration that downplayed the severity of the virus ([Hornsey et al. 2020](#)). Reflecting elite cues theory, which predicts that people adopt the views of elites with whom they agree ([Gilens and Murakawa 2002](#)), gun sellers may have embraced the Trump administration’s messaging to circumvent the “informationally demanding” process of navigating the pandemic by their own wits. However, gun sellers complicate elite cues theory. *First*, gun sellers largely understood Trump as a political outsider. Trump’s ascension depended on rallying anti-elitism, but in doing so, he risked becoming part of the elitist structure that he campaigned against. Gun sellers appeared to manage this contradiction by emphasizing Trump’s cavalier and uncouth style. *Second*, the emphasis that gun sellers place on doing their own “research” (described below) suggests that conspiracist thinking does more than simplify complex problems into more tractable political opinions. Rather, conspiracist thinking both *reflects* preexisting

conservative sentiments and also *reinforces them* through epistemological individualism and epistemological othering.

22. This social pattern (Mondani and Swedberg 2021) echoed a Civil Rights-era belief among many white people that the Civil Rights movement was a communist conspiracy, a belief that “allowed whites to more easily justify their opposition” to efforts at integration (Sokol 2008, 86).

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