

Pandemonium. Cyber-cults and digital fascism

Luigi Corvaglia

Paranoia is a form of diabolical mysticism

William James

It's a small world

What does a famous social psychologist have to do with *Playboy* magazine, conspiracies and cults? Apparently nothing, but there is an idea in popular culture called the "**Six Degrees of Separation**". The idea is that all people are, on average, six or fewer social connections away from each other. It goes back to **Stanley Milgram's** *Small Planet Project* (1967). Milgram randomly selected a group of Americans from the Midwest and asked them to send a package to a stranger who lived in Massachusetts, very far away. Each person knew only the name, occupation and residence of the final recipient, but not the exact address. They were then to send their package to a person they knew who lived as close as possible to the final recipient. This person was to do the same and so on until the parcel arrived at the final recipient. The packages only required an average of five to seven steps to reach the recipient. It's a small planet!

In popular culture, the concept has been adopted to also define the distance between concepts.

Besides the parcels, something else spreads in such a short sequence: a virus. In fact, we are 6 degrees away from catching the coronavirus...

So we have the first degree of separation (Milgram-virus).

There is something else that follows a similar path without the need for physical contact: Information. Nowadays, information is mainly shared online. We know that proximity is greater online. A 2011 analysis by the University of Milan and Facebook found that two people in the world on social networks have an average of only 4.74 acquaintances separating them. There are fewer degrees of separation between people on social networks.

So we can have a pandemic, but we can also have an *infodemic*. An infodemic is too much information, including false and misleading information in digital and physical environments. Misinformation does not just spread like a drop of ink in water, says Neil Johnson, a physicist at George Washington University. "It's something different. It kind of has a life of its own."

So we have the second degree of separation (Milgram-infodemic).

In a recent study, researchers fitted epidemiological models to false information about Covid and calculated R-values, which in epidemiology are the average number of people a sick person would infect. The R-value was greater than one, indicating exponential growth.

An infodemic can consist of different strains and variants of the same infoviruses. Some of these strains are apt to merge into pre-existing belief systems. Others are responsible for complex belief systems that constitute themselves as cults. In order to understand how the Covid 19 pandemic catalyzed an infodemic that fuelled sectarianism and sectarian mentality, it is necessary to analyse the breeding ground on which this happened: contemporary conspiracism.

Ordo ab Chao

In the first half of the 1960s, an absurd book was published in the name of an equally absurd figure. The book was entitled *Principia Discordia. Or How I Found the Goddess and What I Did to her when I Found Her*. The author called himself *Malaclypse the Younger*.

Principia Discordia claimed to be the holy book of a new religion called ***Discordianism***.

The core concept of Discordianism is: *the only thing that really exists is chaos. Order is nothing more than a projection of the human mind onto reality*. “Reality is the original Rorschach”, as Malaclypse the Younger used to say.

The *Rorschach test* is an instrument used by psychologists. They ask a test subject what they see in some inkblots. Since they are just blots, everything the person sees is a projection of their own inner world onto those blots.

Actually Discordianism is a bogus religion founded by **Greg Hill** and **Kerry Thornley**. They pretend to worship the Roman goddess of chaos and discord, *Discordia. Eris* for the Greeks. Their aim was to undermine the basis of pre-existing belief systems by spreading confusion and misinformation. The best confusion strategy was to spread conspiracy theories about any event. Something that would later be defined: ***Operation Mindfuck***.

In the second half of the 1960s, the editors of Playboy Forum were **Robert Anton Wilson** and **Bob Shea**. Hill, Thornley and the Discordians of the first hour began writing absurd letters to the Playboy column. Wilson and Shea got into the game and also joined Discordianism. They took the names of *Mordecai the Repugnant* and *Josh the Idiot* and began replying in the same absurd manner.

The really strange thing, though, is that it was not just Hill, Thornley and co. who wrote these letters, but complete strangers as well. Discordian ideas began to spread through Playboy. *It kind of has a life of its own*.

So we have the third degree of separation (Milgram - spoof religion and its strangeness).

Wilson and Shea came up with the idea for a series of novels, which they wrote four-handly between 1969 and 1971. These novels form the award-winning trilogy originally titled *Illuminatus*.

The plot of the book is: there is a struggle between order and chaos. The champions of order are the *Illuminati*, an organisation of intelligent beings who secretly rule the world for their own evil purposes.

Chaos is defended by the Discordians, the good guys who want to prevent the world order imposed by the Illuminati. This is the birth of modern conspiracism!

The Illuminati are a kind of prototype for all conspiracies, for every *New World Order*, be it the *Deep State* of **QAnon** or the *Reptilians* of **David Ike**. Updating the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy, with which, however, it continues to mix (the Illuminati are Freemasons and the NWO is a project of the Rockefellers and George Soros). They are responsible for the official truths, they are behind Big Pharma and so on.

The Discordians are the archetype of the truth seekers, the pseudo-“libertarians”, the anti-vaxxers, the eco-fascists and other populists.

So we have the fourth degree of separation (Milgram - conspiracies).

It can be noted that it was just a satirical novel. Yes, and Discordianism was just a joke, but it started a true religion. The truth is that the genesis of mythology always eludes the initiator to become a new entity created by a collective intelligence. The initiators are like a kind of Wizard's apprentice.

But what does this have to do with cults and pandemics? A lot, and we can understand it with the help of the spiritual guidance of **Jack Angeli**, also known as the *QAnon Shaman*. He was the guy we all remember for his outfit (horns and all the rest) from the January 6 riots on Capital Hill.

He was there because - in his words - "Q sent him there". So he was a follower of the QAnon conspiracy theory. But if we look at his tattoos, we can see, for example, an "Odin's knot" and a "Thor's hammer". These are symbols from Norse mythology, which show that he adheres to a neo-pagan spirituality. Indeed, today we are witnessing the confluence and cross-fertilisation of conspiracy and spirituality. Something we can call *conspirituality*.

Fifth degree of Separation (Milgram - spirituality).

Conspirituality offers a comprehensive political-spiritual philosophy based on two core beliefs:

1. *A secret group covertly controls or attempts to control the political and social order.*
2. *Humanity is undergoing a paradigm shift in consciousness.*

What unites the two visions are two beliefs:

- a) *everything is interconnected*

b) nothing is as it seems

We will see that this is the core of *neo-gnosticism*.

Swarm cults

When we observe a flock of birds moving in the sky, or an ant colony, or a swarm of bees, they appear to be guided and organised. But they are not. This is what is called *hive mind*. This is the collective mental activity expressed in the complex, coordinated behaviour of a colony of social insects such as bees and ants, and is comparable to a single mind controlling the behaviour of a single organism. Each agent follows very simple rules, sometimes random behaviours, but the interaction between such agents leads to the emergence of intelligent global behaviour unknown to the individual agents.

This is strongly reminiscent of the *Pandemonium* model used by neuroscience in the field of perception (Selfridge, 1959). In this model, the various neurons are likened to demons that scream and cause a great deal of confusion (a pan-demonium, 'place of all demons'), but in the end the cognitive functions manage to perceive structured figures that emerge from the confusion. This is interesting given the assonance with Pandemic, with its reference to the chaos of the Discordians and the chaos caused by Pandemic itself, as well as the connection with the conspiracy theory of recent years that imagines groups of paedophile Satanists at the top of the world.

Be that as it may, this kind of collective mind is all the more possible the more proximity there is between individuals. And we know that proximity is greater online, leading to the formation of conceptual "clumps" thanks to the algorithms that decide which post is read. When the swarm is made up of individuals who share the same beliefs, a kind of "**swarm cult**" is created.

We could call it a "pulviscular cult". *It kind of has a life of its own.*

These are not cults in the traditional sense. And when I say traditional, I mean "analogical". There is no leadership exercising a high degree of control over the followers, and there is no enforced isolation from the outside world, but rather

- They are extremist belief systems.
- They involve a self-induced disconnection from mainstream society.
- They are the gateway for cults and often reinforcers of the cults' beliefs.

Let us take a look at the QAnon conspiracy theory and its relationship to the pandemic for evidence. Before the pandemic, this was the theory:

- President Donald Trump is fighting an evil, Satan-worshipping paedophile ring led by prominent Democrats who allegedly kidnap and abuse children and even suck their blood to use as a recreational drug to stay young.
- President Trump will lead to a day of reckoning with mass arrests of politicians and public figures. Among them George Soros, Bill Gates, Tom Hanks and Oprah Winfrey.
- This day will be called the Storm.

It is hard to imagine a more American narrative. It is a kind of horror B-movie for a good-natured, gullible and childish audience.

After the pandemic, QAnon has crossed the ocean and joined forces with other anti-establishment movements in Europe, especially the far right and movements that are sceptical of medicine and science. In this new version, the pandemic is a plan by the bad guys to control the world and bring about the New World Order. They are "the Illuminati" of whom the Discordians spoke years ago. Conspirituality has brought the raft from the USA to Europe.

A swarm cult is pulviscous, that is, vague, nebulous and plastic, it is shape-shifting. Now the deep state can be the World Health Organisation, Big Pharma, the mainstream media, Bill Gates with his vaccines and the EU. There is now a super-conspiracy with QAnon as its backbone. With this you can connect the dots between all the different conspiracies.

There is even something called *Pastel Q*. In fact, some web influencers use a feminine coded aesthetic, a pastel colour palette, aspirational images, fonts, design, language and phrases that are widely used in marketing products and services aimed at women- I mean lifestyle, celebrities, influencers, fashion, beauty, fitness, dieting, pregnancy and so on. Well, Pastel Q uses coded messages about child protection, child trafficking, health (including 5G technology, Covid 19 refusal and vaccines) and other issues and frames them using language that is familiar to women. They are gateway messages into this super-conspiracy or parts of it.

Nazi hippies

Our spiritual guide, Jack Angeli, refused to eat non-organic food in prison. This may seem like a curiosity of a quirky character. In fact, there is a kind of link between conspиритuality and

attitudes calling for a return to healthy living, healthy eating, nature and environmental awareness, and there is a link between the latter and fascism. Indeed, the fascist movements of the XX century, especially National Socialism, were linked to traditional agrarian romanticism and hostility to urban civilisation. The National Socialist concept of 'blood and soil' holds that the nation has a mystical connection to its homeland and as such is obliged to take care of the land. These 'holistic' aspects resonate strongly with New Age thinking, while the political aspects overlap with conspiracy theories. Today, conspiracy theorists strive for purity in nature and in race. They believe that modern and industrial society has weakened the links between race and territory. When the pandemic forced the lockdown, there was no shortage of people who welcomed it as a blessing for the planet. A good example of this is the *Anastasianism of the Ringing Cedars*, a Russian cult, now widespread in Germany that mixes Slavic neo-paganism, environmentalism, racism and ethnic nationalism. This is *eco-fascism*.

Redpill

The term "red pill" refers to a scene in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, referring to the choice between being willing to learn a potentially disturbing or life-changing truth by swallowing the red pill, and living quietly in ignorance with the blue pill. In the film, Morpheus, the leader of the resistance, like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, proposes to deliver knowledge in this way:

You take the blue pill and the story is over. You wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. If you swallow the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.

"**Rabbit hole**" is the same expression used by the followers of QAnon. In fact, they behave in real life as if reality is a fiction, but a certain kind of fiction, namely the one depicted in this film, which is considered the pop manifesto of modern **Gnosticism**. Whereas ancient Gnosticism was a complex philosophical system based on the idea that the material world was a product of a sub-god, the Demiurge, and that everyone could recover their inner divinity through knowledge (gnosis), modern Gnosticism is based on only three propositions:

- The reality we know is false.
- This reality is constructed by evil entities.

- Only knowledge will save us.

These basic ideas are shared by all conspiracy theories and, coincidentally, by New Age spirituality.

So democracy is false, the deep state is the evil entity behind it, and the information "drops" (called Qdrops) of Q are the knowledge that will lead humanity to the "Great Awakening".

The same applies to other cult-like swarm belief systems, such as the *Incel* community. "Incel" stands for involuntarily celibate. It is an online subculture of men who define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner, even though they desire one. More than other subcultures, they define themselves as 'redpilled', i.e. aware of the hidden reality. Indeed, it is not true that women are in a subordinate position, because we live in a regime of female tyranny. So the evil beings are the women and only awareness of this can save the men. Incel members are responsible for many terrorist attacks around the world.

So we have the sixth degree of separation (Milgram - Swarm Cults).

In other words, swarm cults or, as we should call it, "cult-like swarm belief systems" interpret chaotic reality by projecting an imaginary order onto it, as one does with inkblots. Reality, then, is the original Rorschach.

The Discordians were right!