

THE
**Final
Straw**

A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

The Final Straw Radio
PO Box 6004
Asheville, NC 28816
USA

thefinalstrawradio@riseup.net
or thefinalstrawradio@protonmail.com

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC). We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

To hear our past shows for free, visit:
<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org>

TOM

NOMAD

on

CONSPIRACISM

THE FINAL STRAW
JAN 30, '22

TFSR: Cool. Well, thanks a lot for the conversation and all the work that you do. I appreciate you.

Tom: Yeah, appreciate you, too. Thanks for having me!

Tom Nomad is an organizer based in the Rust Belt and the author of *The Master's Tools: Warfare and Insurgent Possibility* and *Toward an Army of Ghosts*. You can find more of Tom's writings on The Anarchist Library. Tom is **@tom_nomad@kolektiva.social** on Mastadon, and on their blog (link on TFSR).

We speak about conspiracy theories and real conspiracies, strategies of tension, the use of extremist actors to set conditions of concentrating power un-democratically and challenging conspiratorial thought patterns.

Search for this interview title at **<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/>** to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

this idea that what we are doing is fighting and creating space for new things to emerge and really explore what those new things are, while we're exploring the world that we find ourselves in. Because to be perfectly honest— This is a Neil deGrasse Tyson thing of all people, I forget the way he puts it, but I think he says it along the lines that “the only thing that we know is that we don't know anything.” And we don't know anything, we have no actual knowledge of anything. Everything that we're thinking is just our best speculation. And so the speculations have to be collaborative, we have to learn from each other. We have to get past this idea that we can know everything. And so that level of care and patience is really critical. And I really just want to encourage people out there to read, to not jump to conclusions, to really have good reasons as to why they think about things, and to not obsess about having to have a position on everything.

For example, it doesn't particularly matter what a number of people here feel about US military intervention in Myanmar. We can be completely against it, but that doesn't mean they won't do it anyways. So if we don't really understand what's happening in a place, it is okay to not have a well-formed opinion about it, because we couldn't possibly at this point.

We need to really reduce the scale of what we assume we're capable of as people. We can do really amazing things, but only within what we can touch and see. We're not transcendent beings who can see everything and so we should stop trying to pretend we are.

TFSR: I think that Neil deGrasse Tyson maybe got that from Operation Ivy: “All I know is that I don't know nothing...”

Tom: Absolutely.

TFSR: Tom, is there a place that people can find any work that you're working on right now any writings, anything that, or just the links that I am going to provide in the show notes based on what I said earlier, your prior books and such?

Tom: Just links in the show notes? I mean, I'm on kolektiva.social on Mastodon, if people want to find me, I maintain a blog every once in a great while called Into the Abyss, which you can find a link to on my Mastodon page. I just write and post places. So, if you come across stuff and you think it's interesting, then, by all means, have at it.

TFSR: We're joined by anarchist author and activist Tom Nomad. Tom Nomad is an organizer based in the Rust Belt and the author of *The Master's Tools: Warfare and Insurgent Possibility*, as well as *Toward An Army Of Ghosts*. You can find Tom's writings on the Anarchist Library as well. We're going to speak a little bit about conspiracy theories and real conspiracies, strategies of tension, and the use of extremist actors to set contradictions of concentrating power undemocratically. Thank you again for agreeing to have this conversation, I am really stoked to have it.

Tom Nomad: Yeah, thanks for having me.

TFSR: Weird world, huh? *laughs*

Tom: *laughs*

TFSR: As a bit of context, I was listening to an episode of *The Empire Never Ended* podcast, and they mentioned this BBC documentary from 1992 — that's in three parts, that's available on YouTube — about Operation Gladio, which is a stay-behind army in Europe put in by NATO and the US meant to disrupt and undermine any communist anarchist organizing or Soviet invasion. This is a subject that I've had some awareness of for a while now, but haven't really dug into, partially because so much of the cloak-and-dagger stuff can be really hard to pull back and to figure out what really happened. It's like looking into COINTELPRO in the US besides where actual documentation is thorough if redacted. There's a lot of disinformation around the edges of it. I reached out to you here because there are some important parts of strategy attention, that I know that you've written about and thought about, and some theorists that you've been studying that deal with this. And I think you're a smart dude.

Tom: *laughs* Thank you, I'm flattered.

TFSR: I wonder if we could first talk about them— I don't know if you want to go into — or I could touch on — a few points of the history, at least in the context of Operation Gladio and the stay-behinds after World War II, what that looked like and where the funding was, and what activities people engaged in?

Tom: Yeah, sure. Project Gladio often gets associated with what happened in Italy. And that's definitely the area of highest concentration for operations. But it was prior to NATO, Western Union, which was the organization that led to NATO, built this program up after World War II. And the idea was that they were going to take non-communist elements of partisan forces. I think we often think of partisans during World War II as communists and anarchists, and most of them were. But in France, for example, the Christian Democratic Union had a militia. The same thing in Italy. So they took these right-wing forces and fused them together into these—they refer to them as paramilitary groups. They were essentially — as you refer to them — stay-behind forces. The stay-behind forces mean a number of different things. And in this case, there's a wide variety of different things that happened. Most of the time, what it meant was that they were at one point training and funding and organizing a clandestine group of people whose job was to prevent communist infiltration into Western Europe and to be there in case of a Soviet invasion.

Largely, they were trained in things like sabotage operations, intelligence gathering, in the things you would do if you were a resistance fighter behind enemy lines. But a lot of those people were also really well-connected with whatever right-wing political parties existed after World War II, and many of those people rose to positions of power. Very similarly to the way that things operated with the US in Central and South America over the 20th century, where we would sponsor right-wing forces, and oftentimes, those forces would have their own agendas on top of whatever we were pushing them to do. And they would rise to power. And then we would have these allies in power. And this would lead to puppet-state governments. Similar things happened in Gladio, but not in as directive a way. There were definitely alliances that existed between, later, NATO and the offices within NATO that dealt with clandestine warfare. Some of these parties were Christian Democratic parties that existed all the way up through the late 1980s-early 1990s.

TFSR: My understanding is that the Operation Gladio name gets put on often because that was the name of the project specific to Italy, and that a bunch of these different projects in various countries had their own project names and had to some degree — although, it's hard to document it — funding from the CIA at the time. It seems pretty normal — you've got these formerly militarized forces all around, in a lot of cases, forces that maybe were clandestine far-right groups in coun-

bias to overcome our analysis. And we can't sit there and allow paranoia to overcome our sense of care. I've been doing this for a long time. I've watched suspicion and conspiracies destroy whole communities. And we can't let that happen. So patience and care and detail and focus are really critical, especially right now when the world is complicated and confusing and full of misinformation.

TFSR: Yeah, I think it's really well put. And just to tack on to— If there is someone that you have a relationship with that is acting recklessly, it's good to recognize that activity and to say, "Hey, I don't think that's a good idea. Hey, y'all, maybe don't do with that person saying." Also, chances are this person is not fed. And that's a good opportunity to have a conversation, especially if you're older and you've been doing things for a while and you've seen people, some of the mistakes that people have made or the mistakes that you've made, take this as an opportunity to take someone aside, doesn't have to be a call out, but, "Here's why I think that what you're saying is a bad idea. Here's why I think that the approach of bullying people and saying 'if you are not willing to do it this way, then you are there for a sellout or something that or not revolutionary enough or whatever.'" I think that it's a good opportunity for those conversations to happen. And it also models good behavior in our communities where if we trust someone and if we're invested in someone enough, they can be talked to and challenged on their ideas. That's a road towards building trust. And it challenges us to step up and be able to communicate our ideas and back them up, too.

Tom: Yeah, this is hard stuff. If this was easy stuff, you would solve all these problems already. And nobody knows the answers right now. And so we have to treat what we're doing not as a religion with an answer, which, unfortunately, I think, too many anarchists approach what we're doing in that way. But instead, we need to approach what we're doing as a journey, as something that we're trying to discover, as a world that exists, but that we're trying to really understand and manifest the possibilities of. If we knew the answers to all these things, if there were answers to all these things, those possibilities, that world of autonomy wouldn't exist, everything would just be dictated by those simplistic truths.

And so not only is that not a narrative that's productive, but it's not a narrative we should even hope for. We should really be focused on

Every fed that I've ever been in proximity to that's been infiltrating something acts recklessly, all of them do. It's the way that they wrap people up in the things that can they can entrap them for. They act recklessly, they often go, "Oh, I'm willing to do this, and everyone that's not willing to do this is just not as militant as me, and blah, blah, blah." But guess what? People that aren't feds do that, too. It's just as much of a problem when people that aren't feds do that, too. So really, the thing that we have to care about is the behavior. Whether or not that person's a fed is a secondary question. We need to be focused on behavior, on acting with people that we trust, and actually being able to know what trust means, which is not "I've met this person on Facebook." Trust means "I know this person, I know things about this person, I would do things with this person, I have done things with this person." That's what trust is. We need to really get back down to basics, when it comes to things like this. We need to focus on trust, on behavior, we need to get away from the paranoia.

When we're researching things that are going on around the world, we need to be focused on information, gathering information, being comfortable in saying that we just don't know, we're not always going to know. But what we can't do is engage in this incredibly anxious type of discourse, where we're rushing to answers or suspicion all the time. And we're trying to have these really serious definitive answers to everything constantly. It's not the way that information works. It's not the way that our perspective on thinking can work. And it's not productive for us either in intervening in what's going on in the world, or being able to build the communities that allow us to do that.

Conspiracy theories are incredibly damaging, even if conspiracies do happen. And this is where the distinction that I always put between fear and paranoia exists. Fear is a good thing. We should be afraid. I do information security, trust me, people should be afraid, there are a lot of things to be worried about. Now, all of those things can be located, they can be identified, there can be discussions about how to mitigate those risks, those things can be undertaken in relatively simple, usually, really straightforward, pretty logical ways. And that is a really productive thing to do. We should be afraid of infiltration, we should be aware that that's possible, we should be really looking for people acting recklessly. But what we can't do is we can't assume that every single thing is either good or bad, right or wrong, trustworthy or not just based on its source. We can't sit there and say "I read this blog, and I like this blog, therefore the thing they say is right." We can't sit there and allow confirmation

tries that were either invaded by the Soviet Union or had a socialistic government or were invaded by the Allies or aligned with the Allies that were ostensibly firming themselves up and readying themselves for a communist infiltration or communist invasion. That was their greatest fear. And so for them to just be activated to do this stuff— Or they were fascists, and they were inherently anti-communist, so they were just doing the same. There are stories about Operation Werewolf in Germany. And that meme and that idea are still being pulled up by the far Right— I wonder if you would talk about what activities that we know of, that you're aware of that those groups ended up getting engaged in. They have affiliation with the policing structures, to some degree, they have a nod. This is the point that you make in some of your writing, in some of your speakings is that anarchists, and the people in general, often think of the state as a unitary structure, that the right hand knows what the left hand is doing in all cases. And I think that Gladio and stuff this is an example where that's not the case...

Tom: Yeah, Gladio is actually, according to the CIA documents, a disaster for similar reasons that every other attempt to foster right-wing paramilitary forces by the CIA was a failure. William Colby, who ended up becoming the director of the CIA, during the tail-end of the Vietnam War — he was involved in a lot of the setting up of these very specifically clandestine paramilitary forces. And there's a common pattern here, whether we're talking central South America, or Southeast Asia or Europe — there's this pattern. And the pattern is the following. The CIA has very specific goals, and in the case of Gladio, NATO had very specific goals. Those goals are often relatively straightforward, and they're relatively easy to identify.

For example, in the case of Gladio, or in the case of fostering right-wing forces in Vietnam, or Korea, or trying to do the same with the Contras in Central and South America, the goal was to prevent the expansion of a Soviet sphere of influence. Now, they talked about it as preventing the Domino Effect or preventing the spread of Communism, but really it was grounded in preventing the expansion of the Soviet sphere of influence, and later, the Chinese sphere of influence, which is where a lot of that tension exists now. In all of these cases, the CIA parachutes in — or in the case of Europe was leftover from the OSS — and they start organizing these groups together, fund them, and give them a relatively straightforward mission. They say, "Okay, we need you to use your newspaper (in the case of Italy) to promote this right-wing political party, and

we're going to give you a bunch of money to continue to run your newspaper." Or "We're going to give the Christian Democratic Party in Italy," for example, "all this money, and the CIA was the source of— Depending on the estimate, somewhere between 20 and 80% of all of the funding that they used in the 60s and 70s— We're going to do this because the communists are getting popular, we need you to win the parliamentary elections." In a place like France, a lot of that was about maintaining the power structure around de Gaulle and people like that.

Now, in all of these cases, though, these entities that were selected have their own goals. The Contras, for example, in Central and South America, were running drugs, they were aspiring to power, they had connections to all these big corporations and plantations in these countries. So they had these goals, which were economic and political. In Europe, specifically, in Italy, a lot of the people that were worked with were fascists, and they had this series of goals. The fascists in Italy were allied with the church and the business class. They had this series of goals that they could push partially through the Christian Democratic Party, but also they engaged in street actions.

Now, the question always becomes — and this is where it gets really murky — what was done at the behest of the CIA and what was not. We have a number of documents that we can rely on, and they're not all from the CIA. Some of them are, and there are plenty of records from the CIA, that just point to the more banal, more innocuous parts of these operations. There are documents from the CIA that point to less innocuous parts as well, but most of them are centered around legal political interventions and the boosting of certain political forces. But we also have documents from Italy, we have documents from France, as socialist governments took over in those places, periodically, they would release documents about what happened with the stay-behind forces. What we really get is we get this picture of a failed CIA operation. I mean, it was successful in the sense that right-wing forces were able to keep communist parties out of power. But it was unsuccessful in the sense that the CIA was not able to keep control of the forces that they themselves were promoting. And in a place like Italy, that turned into a lot of political violence. A lot of what happened during the Years of Lead — what in the US we often talk about the Strategy of Tension— Those same forces were the forces that were carrying out attacks at the behest of the State Police. There's no record, though, that those were being called for by the CIA. And this is where these operations get really murky. And this is where research skills

Tom: Always end on a high note! *laughs*

TFSR: I think this is very succinctly put in and then if you throw in the narrative, I didn't hear the Minutemen and the anti-immigrant push nationwide, thoroughly in 2005-2006. But that brings us to where we are today and the Great Replacement that's going on.

Tom, thank you so much for breaking down these ideas and having this discussion. Were there any last things you want to touch on?

Tom: Yeah, I think the other thing that conspiracy mindsets breed is internal mistrust and paranoia. As you brought up, and I've lived through this plenty of times, but it's not there haven't been infiltrators, there absolutely have been, there's been many of them. Most of them aren't very good, but they're there. And so it really leads to this problem that we face internally a lot. Which is, I would say twofold.

The first is, obviously there's this tendency to be really suspicious of people and convinced that people are Feds often for reasons of social or political disagreement. That very obviously, if they don't take your position, they must definitely be a Fed. I've seen this happen a bunch of times, that's one side of it.

But the second side of it, it prevents us from actually identifying the behavior we have to care about. It reduces this whole idea of our accountability to each other down to whether or not someone is actually an agent of the state. We have seen a number of times in the last five years — I'm not going to call specific crews out for this — crews of newer people acting in ways which are really reckless: posting pictures of guns on Facebook, talking about other trips down to the recent anti-fascist protests, live-streaming themselves, just really silly, basic OPSEC failures. And stuff that really creates this sense of risk and danger that isn't really necessary and exposes things that don't need to be exposed. In situations that, I have often been in conversations with people who are like, "Yeah, but I don't think they're Feds" and I always answer that the same way, which is "It doesn't matter." The reality is that when people do things that compromise our safety and our ability to trust each other, and our ability to act and put us in danger, those are behaviors that have to be dealt with. It doesn't matter whether that person's a fed or not. So what happens in this discourse where we become obsessed with federal infiltration, is we stop focusing on the stuff we should care about.

ing to existentially destroy you, but now they were hidden and secret and everywhere, and it was people's job to identify who that enemy was, and to tell the government who that enemy was. As time went on, we enter into the anti-war movement, that idea of the internal enemy expanded. Now it wasn't just Muslims, but there are also anti-war activists who are trying to stop America from fighting terrorism. You move forward into the Obama administration, and that takes on this very specifically racialized component. You start to move up through the Tea Party, you start to move into the beginning of the Trump administration. And you can start to see how this idea of who the enemy is to these vigilante forces changes. It now encompasses every single person that is outside of their very specific social sphere, which is something that is fertile ground for conspiracy theories.

And so now we're in a situation in which these people who now view themselves as defending the Real America, view everybody else as a deep existential threat. And the only solution to that is to use the power of the state or to use the power of the militia to eliminate those people. During the National Conservatism Conference past year, there was open talk. Josh Hawley specifically gave a speech. Josh Hawley is a senator from Missouri, for people that aren't aware of who he is. He gave a speech at the National Conservatism Conference where he was saying, "All of these people outside of conservatism are trying to destroy America. And so we need to take power." And then as he put it, "not be hesitant to use the power of the state to destroy our opponents." That is open fascism. All of that is built off of this idea of this conspiracy against the real America. And it was that same notion that led many of the people into the Capitol on January 6, including people from QAnon, because QAnon is also entirely grounded in this idea that there's a real America, and then a satanic cabal of pedophiles that run the world that's destroying the real America. And that Michael Flynn taking power in a military dictatorship is supposed to fix that or something. That's really the whole mythology here. We can start to see how a lot of these ideas of existential threat, these notions of social and political reductionism, and these logical leaps can really create these situations, which, like January 6, feel like they're the result of political distortions, but in reality, are the product of a completely parallel political reality that is built up within this world, in this stew of conspiracy theory that's been slowly building on the right-wing ever since the end of the Second World War.

TFSR: Well, on that very depressing note... *laughs*

become really important, and this is where understanding how conspiracy theories work becomes really critical. Because we need to be able to speak about these things realistically, and not through inference or hyperbole as they often are.

TFSR: I definitely want to get into ways of thinking about these kinds of activities that avoid those conspiratorial thinking. We should make the point that there's a difference between a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory because people conspire all the time, this is a phrase that Robert Anton Wilson used to say that I really appreciate, that anytime you've got a backroom full of bankers, or you've got a bunch of government ministers getting together making a decision to do something, anytime you got a bake sale being planned, people are conspiring to do a thing. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's nefarious, it's people agreeing to do a thing, which is why gang charges or conspiracy charges that are used against political dissidents oftentimes are like you agreed to be in a place at a time around other people, and ipso facto, you are a part of this criminal conspiracy that we can charge you with. Just blowing up— because you've been bringing up Latin America and Southeast Asian examples, as well – the idea that the US goes in and funds certain movements, certain groups... Again, to touch back on what I said that governments aren't unitary — there are also other ways that intervention happens, and sometimes with the CIA's affiliation and sometimes not.

Right now, anytime there's some unrest in a country that has a political position that is somehow in opposition or economic position in opposition to the US government, there's a lot of people on the far-right, as well, as I would say, tankies, oftentimes, that get drawn into this idea that this is a CIA op, that this is a thing that totally plays into— Cui bono, who does it benefit? This is the approach that people often take is to look at the event and say, "Aha, what part of the international spectrum of power would want this to occur in this way, or to undermine this group?" and they oftentimes point to the CIA, which takes away the agency of the people that are actually involved in the complex situation. But I've seen that pointed to, for instance, with the Otpor movement at the end of Milosevic in former Yugoslavia, this popular movement that got Western "democratic" think-tank money to help them think through their process, and also gave them books on nonviolent theory, movement theory, and also to push them in a

certain direction. You got this through a bunch of the color revolutions that happened around Europe and in parts of Asia, and Peter Gelderloos writes about this a bit. You get this today also, where, for instance, there are mass disagreements in the streets, with regimes like Nicaragua under Ortega, or in Cuba, where people are unhappy with what the government's doing at the time and there's a mass show of disagreement, and certain sectors of the media and I guess the tankie left say, "Aha, it's against these administrations, these administrations can't be doing anything wrong. Therefore, it is a CIA op."

Tom: This kind of idea, I think, is structured around a number of things, which are important to tease out. Firstly, there's very obviously confirmation-bias going out here. That's the simplistic reading. There's confirmation bias happening. We see this with tankies all the time. You see this with groups the PSL which are entirely comfortable excusing not just people's motivation, but genocide. To be really clear about this, the PSL excuses genocide, excuses states coming in and say, "Rounding up Uyghurs in China and throwing them into reeducation camps, or they support the North Koreans murdering political dissidents en masse." Now, of course, they can't come forward and say "We're genocide sympathizers," that's an unpopular position. So they have to come forward and say, "Oh, none of the genocides are happening. All these videos are doctored by the CIA, blah, blah, blah."

We see similar things with the right-wing as well. We see things this with QAnon, for example. And the thing that's fascinating about conspiracy theories now — this is a topic for a different conversation but something I think bears bringing up — is that conspiracy theories now no longer function on this level of there being a body of phenomena and then some narrative that's constructed retroactively about this phenomenon. What's happening now is that the narrative gets constructed as things are occurring, which is really different. And what it means is that conspiracy theories have become far more reactionary, even than they were before. That now, it is purely about choose a position, construct a conspiracy that can justify a position in the face of counter-evidence. We see this pretty consistently.

Now, the second part of this that I think is really important, is to recognize that part of the reason that conspiracies can exist in relation to, say, a political uprising in Cuba, or even Venezuela. There were many right-wing forces involved in Venezuela, but it wasn't everybody. A lot of

definitely did not see a lot of old, Aryan Nation, Hammerskin types, National Alliance types of January 6, either. Because what was happening on January 6, for a whole faction of the people that were there, was that they were going in to defend America from its enemies that are internal, and that they were getting called forward from a State which had suspended political norms in order to preserve its sovereignty, as all states will do. When the state provides a limitation to itself, it is merely just a facade, it's a veneer, it can go away at a point in which the further existence of the state is at risk. Those norms can go away. And they did in the United States.

We lived in a post-democratic moment for the entire fall of 2020 into the beginning of 2021. That was not a normal situation in America. And so when vigilantes are getting called out, they're getting called out as civilian soldiers. When they were attacking the police on January 6, we can hear it in the audio. If you actually watch the bodycam footage that's been released, you can hear in the audio, people telling cops, "Obey your oath, let us in, drop your batons, join us." They were very convinced that what the police were doing was against their constitutional duties, and that what they were doing by storming into the Capitol was in support of this Real America, which was embodied in Donald Trump. That really seeds the ground for conspiracy theories to become really damaging. And we're seeing this now, on the right-wing, they're starting to talk about secessionism. There's definitely more of a push into this discussion of military dictatorship, which was something that really started in QAnon, but has generalized outside of that. There are many conservatives in the United States that are perfectly comfortable with authoritarianism at this point. And all of that is the result of this grand conspiracy. And the grand conspiracy is something that was not constructed by Trump, but it was actually constructed by Newt Gingrich, of all people, during the Clinton administration.

We watched a number of things. First, a very clear definition of the real America according to conservatives. We saw this in the form of Ronald Reagan first, but also the religious right, and there was this idea that they were ordained by God to have America function as a Christian nation, we've all heard this language, and that everybody else was agents of Satan trying to destroy them. Now we move up through September 11th, when it was all about the secret internal enemy, which at the time was defined through an Islamophobic lens, but it was a secret internal enemy that could be anywhere. Not only was there this enemy that was try-

ica. You saw this narrative under Bill Clinton, you saw it under Obama, you definitely saw it around Joe Biden. Joe Biden's not an aging, crusty old man, Joe Biden is a secret representative of Chinese communism, in their minds. They're going out to defend this Real America.

From the perspective of the states, generally, normally, in most circumstances, the state would say, "Hey, you probably shouldn't do that." And in most circumstances, has really on some level or another at least created buffer zones between Oath Keeper groups and people trying to show up to oppose Nazis or something that. This happened in Pikeville and a number of other places where they were cops were keeping the Oath Keepers contained. But when the ability of the state to contain crisis breaks down, as we saw in 2020, all of a sudden, all of the political norms that typify that state fall away. And this is a really important part. This is why liberals misunderstand what the state is. Liberals assume that all of these political norms we have in the United States, in which the state limits its own power, somehow function. They never function. But there's this idea that they somehow do. The Trump administration was a wonderful exercise in watching people come to terms with the fact that just because people had always done something some way doesn't mean that people have to continue doing things that way. And whenever Trump didn't have some political norm, he just wouldn't do it. And it made a lot of them fall apart. But during the uprising, the rest of them also fell apart. And it revealed the State really, for what it was — that they were willing to call vigilantes out to the degree that those vigilantes saw themselves, as in that moment defending the state. Because, again, they saw the State and the Real America as a singular entity at that point. They were defending the State. This was a mentality that really built up after September 11, when people were called forward to "if you see something, say something," and literally, the government deputized everybody as an intelligence agent, which really constructed this military culture of the civilian defender, the civilian soldier. That's the idea that we really saw entering into the streets.

If you notice, on January 6, there were not a lot of say, Atom-waffen Division people arrested, you didn't see a lot of people from The Base get arrested. But you did see a lot of Proud Boys, you did see a lot of Oath Keepers get arrested. And that's where we can really see where some of those distinctions exist. I don't say that there weren't any Atom-waffen people or any people from the Base there, any people from any of the accelerationist groups. They absolutely were, but they definitely were not as numerous as other organizations compared to their size. And you

this falls down into simplistic narratives that are meant to describe things that are by their own nature secretive. Things which we don't know about. In a situation where we don't know something, there's a tendency to want to create an explanation. If we can't explain, for example, within our own thinking— So, say, we were a member of the PSL and we were watching.. for example, there were massive riots in Shenzhen, China this past week, where people were throwing bricks at cops, a lot of them are microworkers. They were protesting COVID restrictions and things like this. Now, of course, to the PSL, that's impossible. Just like the uprising in Hong Kong was impossible. It wasn't that there were people that were angry because it's a socialist utopia, that couldn't possibly be.

We see similar things in the United States. We saw this during the uprising when Democratic mayors and police chiefs in Democratic cities were saying, "It couldn't possibly be because of the failure of reformism. Really, this is about professional anarchists and out-of-town agitators." It's a very similar narrative. What happens here is that we have this zone of indiscernibility, say, CIA motives, classified information, or something like this. And then we have this phenomenon, which in reality is very complex. We look at, say, the uprising in Kazakhstan, or even the uprisings in Italy in the 70s, which even a lot of anarchists, I think, see in really unitary ways, but they're really complex things. And so instead of diving into the complexity, instead of sitting there and saying, "Well, the CIA might have this motivation, but people on the ground might have this motivation. And some people might have this motivation. But other people have this motivation." Instead of really diving into the nuances and complexities, we come to simple conclusions. We say things like "Okay, well, my tankie left-wing party, for whatever reason, supports the Assad regime. Therefore, every single person fighting the Assad regime has to be working for the CIA."

TFSR: Like the White Helmets.

Tom: Yeah, I've even heard tankie say this about the YPG, which fly red-and-black flags and stuff. It's pretty obvious where their politics are. Then there's this third element here.

And the third element really has to do a lot with the fact that actually, in a lot of places, the CIA does have precedence. There's this reality in which, say, we take Otpor, it is an interesting example because I've actually been to Serbia and talked to those people. This was more than 15

years ago, at this point. And some of them, interestingly enough, were in government at the time, they were members of the Social Democratic Party. And the thing that they said is, “Yeah, the Democracy Institute came here. And they trained us in things like nonviolent protest organizing and things like that. But we already had to have the motivation to get that going. And we were the ones that had to carry that through.” And so, even if funding was sometimes coming from overseas which it wasn’t always and they said that over time, that was less and less the case, the fact that millions of Serbs are willing to show up in the streets and overthrow the government is the important part. And not all of those people were “CIA stooges”. Most of these people were people who were living through a financial crisis that was spawned by a genocidal war being waged by their government, and they didn’t like living in financial desperation. And they didn’t necessarily agree with the war. We have to remember that in the former Yugoslavia, there was an incredibly cosmopolitan space prior to this rise of nationalism, which played off dynamics that had been present. But many people in the former Yugoslavia weren’t necessarily identifying with the X, Y, or Z ethnic group in the early 90s.

And so their political conditions have led those things to happen. We have these three difficulties. We have these political biases, we have the inherent lack of clarity of things that are secretive, and we have the dynamic in which there is intervention on some level. But I think what’s really important to tease out here, and to understand is where does that intervention stop as being a motivating factor? Where does it begin?

Let’s take, just as an example of something which I think most of us would rightfully reject, that is the narrative of the outside agitator. We know that that narrative was a very powerful narrative in the 1950s and 60s that was used against the Civil Rights Movement. And right-wing politicians and pro-segregationist politicians would say, “Oh, those are outside agitators. That’s communists coming in here and riling everybody up, which of course, asserts that Black activists in the South during the Civil Rights Movement were passive agents that were pushed forward by white communists outside of their own intention, and that these white communists were able to manipulate these people that didn’t really have the intelligence to understand what was happening. It’s a completely racist and absurd narrative. And yet, people on the “left” replicate that narrative all the time, literally all the time, to justify all kinds of things, and to explain away all kinds of things. There’s also the reality that these uprisings when we see them are spectacularly complex. And we often can’t see

They were giving this tacit approval for vigilantes to intervene in the uprising. And we’re willing to provide rhetorical cover for that, to the point where Trump was openly advocating for it from the White House. We would think that that would be ridiculous. And on a strategic level, on a level of military strategy, it is ridiculous, it created a lot of problems when these people started showing up. It created a lot more problems than it contained. And in a lot of places in the US, there were cops shaking hands with these guys, a lot of them were also being “Yo, get out of the way.” Because they were creating disruption. But that wasn’t what was at issue. What was at issue was that all of these vigilantes had built up this idea that they were going to go out and defend the real America in the streets from the communists, and then the state called them forward to do so. That moment in which that’s happening becomes really fascinating on the level of statecraft.

To get back to the Carl Schmitt definition of the state, the state is nothing but an entity that can impose sovereignty, or the way he puts it, can make decisions. When he says make decisions, that doesn’t mean a bunch of people sitting in a room going, “Oh, I decided on something”, that means a bunch of people sitting in a room saying they decided on something, but then having the force of arms to force that decision as a condition of possibility of everyday life for others. It inherently constructs this political unity through militaristic police occupation. And that is fundamentally the state. You would say, “Well, if that’s the case, then telling vigilantes to go out into the streets is ridiculous.” Liberals would say, calling the police to go out into the streets is authoritarian. But once we start to understand the state is nothing but logistics to impose sovereignty, those things stop mattering. On the one hand, we have this liberal argument that this is anti-democratic. Well, yeah, it is. And that’s always inherently true. Then when we see these vigilantes coming out into the streets, they see themselves as defending the Real America, and that Real America is this structure of sovereignty.

We have this weird idea in the US, in which political autonomy and law are the same thing. It’s a really strange concept. It’s entirely unique to American political thought, really weird. But people really do attach this notion of the American state, in some form or another, to their idea of freedom. And so they don’t see themselves as vigilantes necessarily, they see themselves as auxiliary police more or less. Their job is to defend the real America from the communists. And sometimes that means attacking the government because the government is acting against the Real Amer-

thought, which was Aristotelian, largely it's Greek and Roman, classicalist, neo-classicalist thought. They were proclaiming in the Declaration of Independence, that they have identified these inherent parts of human existence, they call them inalienable rights, and that these are the things which literally typify the totality of what it means to be human and exist in the world, and that America is this utopian manifestation of those ideas. I think that sounds ridiculous to think about today. Especially probably most of the people listening to this show, most of the people that probably have read anything I've ever written, probably don't see America as a shining and glowing utopia city on the hill, and see it as a collapsing wasteland. But that's not how the people who wrote the Founding Documents thought about things. They thought about this as a very utopian project and there was a certain thread of utopianism that ran through the American Revolution.

It constructs this political ideal, which is not considered— In the Soviet Union, there was this political ideal, but it was something in the future, that in Leninism, they were going to reconstruct humanity, they called it the new man, and use state repression to do that as a way to prepare people for this coming End of History. Or with the Jacobins. There was this idea that they understood virtue. And what they have to do is slowly but surely destroy the unvirtuous in order to enter a virtuous world. Those are projects that had progression. Those are projects that were unfulfilled. The American political project is a project that is thought of as a fulfilled political project. There is no more development to happen. We saw this narrative arise after the Cold War. This is the end of history. We see this narrative pop up in presidential States of the Union, where they talk about America as a “shining city on the hill.” All of those are callbacks to these utopian ideas.

When we see a group of people beating cops with Blue Lives Matter flags in front of the Capitol while chanting “USA” and wearing Trump stuff, what's happening there is actually a very uniquely American thing. And this is really the power of Trumpism. For Trump supporters, that distinction between the American States and the real America closed completely when Donald Trump was president. I know that that sounds ridiculous. It sounds completely absurd. But that is how Trump supporters talk about it — that for the first time in their eyes, the real America was able to manifest it. Once we start to see that, a lot of other things about what happened in 2020 and early 2021 can fall into place. For example, the Justice Department was calling militias out into the streets. Literally.

the complexity. We take something Egypt, the Tahrir Square uprising, there were many political factions on the ground there. I know people that were on the ground there. I know anarchists that were on the ground there. And there were capitalists, there were conservatives. The Muslim Brotherhood was there, anarchists were out in the streets, there are lots of communists, there was no unified political vision, except getting rid of the regime. And that was a common objective. And that's all that was needed to push forward that uprising.

We can hear the words of the people that participated in these things. We don't have to explain those words away, we can hear those words. And oftentimes, what those words are, are that regardless of how this thing started, regardless of what motivated its beginning, the second that people hit the streets... And in Egypt, my friends that were over there say, the veil of fear fell away. That's when things change. And that has nothing to do with outside money, that has everything to do with people's motivation and intent. When we're looking at these things, we have to keep these complexities in mind and recognize that the Democracy Institute did trade activists in Egypt prior to the uprising. That's true, they did it at American University in Cairo, we know this. April 6th Youth Movement talked about this openly.

Often, what happens in these situations is that people are looking for something really secret and hidden, when in reality, almost everything is out in the open if you're willing to look for it. If you're willing to dig around social media, if you're willing to embrace complexity, if you're willing to suspend your own preconceived conclusions, you can gather the information that you need. We live in this amazing age where I remember, I was writing my doctoral thesis in 2010, the Egyptian uprising was happening, was just getting moving, things were going down in Syria and Libya. And we could follow what was happening minute by minute on Al Jazeera, and it was the first time we could do that, that changed everything. We don't need to rely on partial reports anymore. We don't need to rely on what documents we get. We don't need to rely on biased sources, we can get information straight from the streets.

When we can do that, we can start to see these complexities that exist in ways that I think were really difficult in, say, the 1970s, where a lot of these narratives about the CIA being the secret hand behind everything really built up in the American, specifically authoritarian, left but those built up at a time when there wasn't necessarily that information. And very specifically, those built up at a time when, as we know now, Soviet

disinformation campaigns were a thing. And they were laundering this information through the American left-wing media. And we know this. Actually, a wonderful example of that, if you want to get back to Gladio really quick, is what's referred to as the Westmoreland Field Manual. The Westmoreland Field Manual is the basis that a lot of people use to connect Project Gladio to the Strategy of Tension. And the term "Strategy of Tension" appears in this document. This document was supposedly a counterinsurgency manual that was signed by General Westmoreland, supposedly, and explained how you carry out false flag attacks and blamed left-wing groups for it. That was published in a Turkish newspaper in 1975. That's the first time anybody saw it. After the fall of the Soviet Union, we have come to find out that that was a forgery, as were many things that were passed around at that period of time, including documents from the CIA talking about AIDS in Africa. That conspiracy theory started with Soviet disinformation, too. And so when we're getting into this world in which we're starting to talk about intelligence agencies, information is key. And hyperbole can be the death of whatever understanding you're trying to build because you're starting to move outside of the realm of demonstrability. And losing the patience necessary to dig into that from an information-first perspective.

TFSR: Thank you very much for that and for pointing out the Westmoreland document too. There is the confirmation bias thing where when you get information that the CIA was conducting bombings and then blaming it on left-wing groups or claiming to have been left-wing groups or infiltrating left-wing groups, then you see the document, you're "Aha, see, well, this must be true, because this is embarrassing to the CIA."

I want to talk a little bit more about some of the other examples of intervention and the complexity that it brings. But also, — maybe this cart before the horse moment — as you said, the information's there, you can dig into the information, one of the things that I feel is that there is so much information out there. It used to be, I guess, at a certain point, — unless you are a "researcher," and that doesn't mean professionally, but what you put your passion and your time into at least — that you would dig into stuff and then interface with other people to "bake out the crumbs" into some picture that makes sense of the world. And that's the glut of information and the glut of disinformation, that people are pulling from is, that little reference to QAnon.

Tom: Yeah, I think there's really a number of factors and a number of different factions end up resulting from this that makes sense to break down.

First, there is a distinction to be drawn between a group like the Proud Boys and a group like the Atomwaffen Division. They come from the same roots, if we draw it back to the history of American colonialism, but in a more contemporary sense, they derived from slightly different roots. A group like the Atomwaffen Division does view itself as a revolutionary organization. They're not necessarily pro-America, they view the American state as degenerate. The precursors to groups that are people James Mason, but also groups the Order, the Aryan Nation falls into this category, the National Alliance. People like Tom Metzker, White Aryan Resistance, those kinds of groups, a lot of the skinhead movement in the 80s and 90s was in this realm, and they didn't view themselves as good Americans, they viewed themselves as fighters for the White Race. These are the people that showed up at Ruby Ridge, these are white separatists. White separatism is a distinct tendency within the broader White Power movement, where their goal is to start a separate nation, it is not necessarily to exalt or affirm America, it is to leave America. And in the case of William Pearce, to destroy America. The Oklahoma City bombing is a wonderful example of that mentality, where Timothy McVeigh goes and blows up a federal building in the service of the White Race or whatever he was considered himself doing.

Then you have groups the Proud Boys. The Proud Boys come from slightly different roots. And those roots are very similar to the Minutemen who were an anti-communist pro-America militia in the 1960s, their roots come from things like the mass resistance campaigns organized by Southern governors against desegregation, their roots come from groups like the KKK, as opposed to where a lot of their actual cultural norms come from — from the skinhead movement. But their political norms come from this hyperpatriotic tendency within American politics, which views the American states and America as different things. You see some manifestation of that in really extreme versions of Sovereign Citizen Movements, where they have this whole narrative about how in the 1870s, America became a corporation, and no longer was a republic, and there's only been 12 presidents or something. And they have to return back to the Republic because the Republic was the real America.

There are all of these narratives that exist about a real America. They derive from a common root, which actually is American Founding Documents, and the philosophical foundation for American political

down oftentimes because they were plotting something and it could be provable. Maybe sometimes it was an instance where the government threw the idea out to them and to Cleveland 4 or the NATO 3 case instance, where, in those two instances, anarchists were talked into and propelled. Or the Eric McDavid case where folks were propelled into this position where they say a thing and then it gets used against them. That was used against tons of Muslims in the US, during the whole war-on-terror era. But it's also been notably used against the far-right in some instances.

And the far-right has also been instrumentalized, such as the second and third KKK might argue the first KKK because it was attached to the southern power structure, which eventually, the federal government ceded back to the white power structure in the South after the Reconstruction failed. But the second and third Clans had FBI involvement and also infiltration and were allowed, in certain instances, to do the things that were wanted to be done. More recently, just on a police level, police in Kenosha dealing friendly with the militia that had come there to counter Black Lives Matter protests, or the Greensboro Massacre, there were cops that knew what was happening and allowed for that motorcade to go and kill all those communist organizers. Or more recently, the Proud Boys leadership, Enrique Tarrio being known to be an FBI informant and somehow getting himself arrested right before J6. On the right, there's been this claim that Patriot Front, for instance, is a government op, which I think-

Tom: I really want to encourage people on the right-wing to think that. Please do.

TFSR: I think it is important to note that they are often the dupes of power. Also, for some people, that's interesting who do— Not seeing that necessarily, they'll say "Okay, well, how are these people with Blue Lives Matter flags stabbing their flag poles at cops on January 6, or how does Siege or James Mason talk about the system and attacking police and government agents when there's this shamanistic up-swell for law enforcement, for military, for this masculinist position of force of white supremacy that is the US?" Can you talk just briefly about how those two things can exist simultaneously? And are they existing simultaneously in the same person? Or is it more nuanced?

This is what people are trying to do, ostensibly, but they're missing the mark. And maybe there's a degree of knowledge for a lot of people that are doing that because it feels like a game because it feels fun because they're upping the ante with each other. But how do people who are not engaged in that game extricate themselves or recognize when they're starting to do that and starting to over-complexify issues that maybe Occam's razor would nix?

Tom: A lot of it comes down to understanding how conspiracy theories are structured. And they're all structured with a very similar epistemic architecture, if you want to put it that way. Conspiracy theories often start around something that is inexplicable or confusing or difficult to make sense of. Right now, we're seeing this proliferation of conspiracy theories often because the categories that we used to use to make sense of the world, say, in the 90s, or the early 2000s, don't really work anymore. Concepts like nation-states, notions like capitalism. Things like this are all getting challenged in ways that make a lot of people really uncomfortable is a very dramatic understatement. They make it really difficult for people to locate themselves in the world. And one of the responses to that is the rise of right-wing nationalism. And one of the responses that arise to conspiracy theories and that's part of the reason why they're deeply, deeply tied together.

The question becomes, "Okay, how do we then start to locate ourselves?" One of the things that have happened in the world is that it's become really obvious that our understandings of the world in the past were tragically simplistic, not just on the level of categorical understanding, but on the level of how we understand how things function, how we understand communities work, how we understand that social dynamics function, or institution success. All of these things have changed as a result of the post-structuralist turn that happened in the 1970s. There's this open field right now, in which this change of normativity, this collapse of former norms, and the process in which we're reestablishing notions of sense tend to lead to what is often not a bad thing, but it tends to lead to this notion of self-empowerment. People are now tasked with coming up with their own understanding of the world. And they do this. Now the question becomes how and what is the epistemic structure of what that looks like.

Let's just jump back quickly to QAnon. If you really pay attention to QAnon people, they don't consider themselves uninformed. In fact,

they consider themselves profoundly well-informed. They do what they call research, which means that they go around on a bunch of blogs that get linked to from Facebook, and they find a bunch of articles that confirm things they already think. And then they cite them. And we look at that, and we go, “That’s ridiculous and absurd and silly.” But then you can read academic papers and academics do a very similar thing a lot of the time. They find sources that agree with what they already want to conclude, and they cite them.

In conspiracy theories, this leads to something really interesting, which is what I refer to as a logical leap of conspiracy theory. Which means that you start off in a realm of observability. We can even take, say, the 2020 election conspiracy theory, just as an example. The observable fact here is Trump lost the election. That’s the observable fact, if you looked at the numbers on the television, Donald Trump lost. Then a lot of those people are combining that with a second observable fact that they’ve talked about this openly on the internet, which is that they didn’t know anybody that didn’t vote for Donald Trump. How could he have lost? Which I’m sure is the way a lot of people in cities felt about 2016. Everyone knew that voted for Clinton, or didn’t vote at all, and I literally don’t know a single Trump supporter, where I live, not a single one. And so, this is that idea that Donald Trump is deeply unpopular, and people feel that the things that he’s doing are potentially going to lead to the downfall of everything that they know and potentially their death, feels really out there for people that live in areas surrounded by Trump supporters.

Now, this observable reality leads to a huge question. And this is always the second step. We can see this with UFO conspiracy theories. People see something they can’t explain that leads to this big question of “what is that?” And then you start to try and answer the question. But when we try to answer the question, we run into what I would argue is a very simple epistemic problem. And this is an epistemic problem that goes back to the very concept that we can know something that we call “truth.” To do that, to engage in that enterprise, where we try and find something that’s true in all possible moments, not only do we have to assume a perspective, which can encompass all of these possible variables, for total information in all possible ways, in all possible moments, but we already have to assume that the universe is logical and explainable and unitary, and that therefore, there already is something true before we know what it is. Now we run into the problem of, once we’ve made that assumption, we

TFSR: There’s a fundamental difficulty with the mindset that says if I speak truth to power, I will change power. That misunderstands power and our relationship to it. As someone who participated in the anti-war movement in the 2000’s, I remember hitting that wall of “Okay, cool, there are millions of us in the streets. Oh, it’s happening around the world. Oh, this is great. They can’t possibly— Oh my gosh, they’re bombing. Okay.” They didn’t care. I wonder why.

Tom: Literally four days after the biggest marches ever happened?

TFSR: Yeah. Because literally, when we were in the streets on the day when the bombing was scheduled to start, it just continued. I think that there’s one thing that people— And this is a way that the education that we’ve gotten — not just by the institution that has incorporated and swallowed up movements of resistance into itself and made it a part of its own narrative, but also the way that the remnants of those movements have explained how they succeed and how they want and how they “stopped the war in Vietnam” and whatever else — there is a concession from power based on the righteousness of the cause, as opposed to “No, it’s because they are actually afraid that you are going to hurt them or take them out of power.” The reason that you march and are a crew of people that show up in a place is not because you have righteousness’s numbers, it’s because you can do more damage in those numbers.

I want to touch on a couple of things really quickly. I brought up Gladio and we’ve talked about US intervention internationally to support the far-right, usually and almost always in these instances to stabilize the economy for the extraction or to support some other proxy force that’ll be a bulwark against the spread of Bolshevism, whatever around the world. As you said, there is truth to that thing, but it’s more complex than that. And oftentimes saying that it’s all is CIA takes away the agency of the people that were involved in the complicated reasons for their involvement. But also, I mentioned COINTELPRO earlier, and the US does have a series of examples of domestic intervention by law enforcement and federal intelligence into social movements, in some cases to infiltrate & undermine leftist and social justice organizing, anti-racist organizing, labor organizing, and also in a lot of cases, there has been a lot of infiltration of the far-right that’s occurred in the US, there have been strings of Nazis or militia that have been taken

We see this a lot in the 1970's in left-wing politics, where political positions that people took became really reductionist and simplistic and able to be boiled down into slogans. And as a result of that simplicity, we're watching the fallout from that today. If we look at organizations that started in the 70's, that were meant to be these radical groups and have instead become reactionary nonprofits. Or where I live, there's a neighborhood where all the SDS people move, and they moved there to start the new world in the early 70's and instead, it's the most gentrified neighborhood in the city. All of that was a result of the fact that they didn't develop an analysis, which was complex. Instead, they were willing to fall into and fall back on really simplistic understandings, such as "everything the US government does in foreign policy is the CIA plot," or "every single thing that the Soviet Union or China or Cuba, depending on what faction you were a part of, did was inherently justifiable and all bad information about that was a CIA plot." Those narratives still absolutely infest a lot of what we do and have led to a period of time in the last 10 or 15 years where we have really had to build an understanding of what is happening in the world.

Then, when we just leave that realm of imprecision, of course, the other side effect becomes this sense of always engaging with things in a position of extreme vulnerability. Those conspiracy theories are all grouped around an idea that in reality, we're very powerless in our lives, that when we're engaging in something when we're engaging in politics, we're almost doing that from a point of futility. That this all-powerful group of people, depending on the conspiracy theory, really are the people that are running the show. And they're able to really control the minds and actions of millions. And so really, any resistance you put forward is this futile effort that you're only doing to bring forward the truth.

You hear this from Alex Jones people all the time. But you also hear this on left all the time. The anti-war movement was full of people like that who were coming to marches going, "Yeah, I don't know if anything's gonna change, but I'm going to sacrifice myself for the Truth." And they'd have these T-shirts about how whatever thing they thought was right was some absurd thing from some weird right-wing blog that they picked up that was pretending to be anti-war. These understandings can be combated, though. And that is actually a really important task for us, not just when we're talking about the right-wing. We have to combat that thinking in our own circles as well. And it's really important to check people on stuff like this because it can do a lot of damage.

don't know how to find the thing that's true. Because if we already knew how to find it, we already know what it is. We have this cloudy space. This space of thought, where there is this profoundly important question that you want to answer for yourself, and absolutely no way to begin to do so. And it deepens the sense of being lost.

Now what happens here, and you can see this with people like Alex Jones all the time, they then make the logical leap. In lieu of information, they start to fill in details between a point A and something they posit as a point B. In the election conspiracy theory, point A would be "every single person that this person knows voted for Donald Trump," and point B is "Donald Trump lost." What happened in the middle there?

This is where it gets really interesting. And this is where misinformation can insert itself into this discussion. This is where a lot of people's Boomer parents on Facebook have decided that coronavirus was caused by Italian space satellites or something that. This is the realm in which people like Alex Jones and before him Bill Cooper used to operate in, and it's this space in which you can concoct relatively elaborate narratives to explain things that then start to build on each other and start to fuse together.

Let's take global financial cabal theories, for example, the observable fact is that you don't have any money. And you're really desperate, and so is everyone around you. And the conclusion is those people have a lot of money and seem to have a lot of power as a result. How do we get there? And in lieu of trying to understand what the International Monetary Fund does or trying to understand what the World Bank does, or trying to understand even what an organization like the Bilderberg Group, which is a real thing, does. People start to make these assumptions: "This is where all the rich people go, rich people have a lot of power. Therefore, they're making these decisions that are directly controlling, not impacting, but controlling my life." There's no discussion about the nuances of this.

And so we see this emerge all the time. We see this with things like Gladio, we see this with even something like the JFK assassination. Back in the 1950's and 60's, the period of time that we're really talking about, and with Gladio into the 70's and 80's, we're really talking about a period of time in which many records that existed are lost, in which many things aren't digitized, in which stuff that's not even classified isn't able to really be found, because it's shoved in some file box in some government warehouse somewhere. And it creates this lack of information and this big

open space for fiction, for stories, to fill in. Now the stories can start to connect to each other. And this is really where it gets dangerous.

This is really where the all-powerful hand of the CIA conspiracy theory really emerges. We see all these things happening in the world. And depending on your politics, you read those in different ways. In my case, I'm reading these all as various acts of the expansion of the US zone of influence, largely for economic gain, sometimes military intervention as a part of the stabilization of financial circumstances, etc. For tankies, they see this as a CIA plot to suppress the truth of Marxism-Leninism or something that. And so from there, if you don't have information, you can start to really fill these things in and you can say, "Oh, well, there's this uprising in Hong Kong. And there's also this thing that's going on in Russia, and there's this uprising in Kazakhstan, and there's this thing happening in Syria, and they all must be connected because the CIA controls everything." When we hit that point, we've left the realm of the actual narrative. We've started to jump and apart from a point of assertion and hyperbole. And this is really the operative point of inflection that I want people who pay attention to conspiracy theories to start to identify for themselves. Where's that point of inflection? Where's the point in which we leave something that's observable and start to enter something which is hyperbolic?

Generally, whenever someone says, "There's a secret government program, but I know about it" and it does this, you already know, you've entered the realm of hyperbole for a very basic philosophical reason. If it's a secret program, how does some random person know about it? And so when we can start to break things down epistemically like this and ask very basic questions, we can start to see where these logical leaps start to get made. And that's the point in which we all need to step back and we need to leave Chomsky books and start to actually gather as much information from as many places as we can. Because it's there. If you don't have the time to do that, well, there are plenty of people that do and those people often write. It does mean at times overcoming something which I think people on the "left" suffer from just as much as the right-wing does at this point, which is an almost allergic reaction to sources that come from good information. Those sources are often what is referred to as mainstream media sources, or academic institutions.

Now, the arguments — and this falls into the realm of conspiracy theory — the reality is, obviously, every journalist has a perspective, they're humans, they've lived experiences, they understand certain things

run into these situations in which we take something like Gladio. Conspiracy theories about something like Gladio really distort our ability to analyze intelligence operations for what they are. To use a really practical example of that damage, we can take the Snowden leaks. The Snowden leaks were complicated for people that aren't technical. They were very complicated for people that were technical. I can tell you that for a fact, as a technical person that does computer stuff — the Snowden leaks are complicated. The things that were happening, the things that were talked about, were complicated, but the documents were right there. What we get from those documents is a picture of the National Security Agency, which is trying to build "total information awareness" — being the term that they use, to use the term that General Michael Hayden used to use — and that they were being completely overwhelmed by the amount of data that they were picking up. That there was no way for them to analyze the amount of data that they have. In reality, what they were doing is they were writing all these filtering algorithms to filter the information based on known variables, making it impossible for them to identify unknown variables or to look at patterns that might indicate an anomaly. Because they could only filter based on known things. That's what we really get from the Snowden leaks. We actually get a picture of the NSA as an institution that aspires to be powerful, but it's actually really overwhelmed. But that's not the story we got from Snowden.

TFSR: Literally biting off more than it could chew.

Tom: Right! The story we get though is the NSA is inside your phone, stealing all your contacts and your bank details, and none of us should use technology. The amount of people I know that just cut themselves off from politics as a result of the Snowden leaks is almost immeasurable. People got really freaked out. A lot of that getting freaked out was the result of not really understanding fully what was happening, being really scared of it, justifiably, and then going online and finding sources that confirmed that fear. As opposed to gathering information, listening to cryptographers that were writing articles at the time, listening to information security people that were writing articles at the time, that were talking about how this wasn't the sky-is-falling situation, and really, this information is good. Instead of being able to use all of that to build better operational security, what happened for a lot of people is that it became a source of paranoia as opposed to a source of justifiable and productive fear.

carries forward. We have this notion of confusion, we have this notion of dispossession, which exists. I'm not saying that dispossession is always justified, that feeling of dispossession, but that is part of this, it is a feeling of dispossession. And the lack of information. When we combine those three things together, we get conditions that are absolutely perfect, for lack of a better term for charlatanism. For people who can "fill the gaps in".

I know a lot of anarchists, most of us don't do religion for a lot of reasons. And for a lot of us, it has to do with the authoritarianism of the entire concept of religion and the certain notion of this interface of the divine and how that distorts concepts of knowledge. But what is happening here, except that as well? If we take tankies, for example, it no longer is a question of what information they're getting and repeating. It is purely a question of the source of the information at that point. If the source of the information is Sputnik, then it's good. If the source of the information is some anarchist blog that disagrees with them, then it's bad. For Trump supporters, if the source is CNN, then it's bad. If the source is Fox, it might be okay. If the source is OAN, then you know it is right. What that does, though, is at the tail end of the conspiracy narrative, we go from confusion to threat. The threat really constructs this notion that there is an easy-to-identify singular adversary that's trying to destroy you, as part of this bigger group. And that then leads to this attachment. Sometimes that attachment is a to the concept of the nation. Sometimes that attachment is to a concept of race. Sometimes it's to a group of people, like in cults, for example. Or the religious right in the United States, for example. It's held together entirely by the idea that every single person that is not an evangelical Christian, is some horrible heathen satanist who's trying to destroy the world. It's not just that those people disagree with you. It's that they are conspiring to destroy you.

And this is where conspiracy theories stop being just epistemically damaging and start becoming genocidal. It is when we start to enter this phase in which the threats and the solidarity that threat produces ends up constructing this conflict, in which the only possibility is eliminationism. That's what we're seeing with the American right-wing right now. We're seeing that narrative rising. That's what we saw in a place like Rwanda, or in a place like Bosnia, it was a similar narrative arising. In Nazi Germany, you had a narrative this arise, in Italy, it was slightly different. But there were still a number of conspiracies that were constructed in order to justify this uniting of a mythological Italian nation, that was the core epicenter of Mussolini's politics, the building of Italy as a unitary object. And so we

from the mean words, there's no such thing as neutral journalism as a result. And so everybody is putting forward a perspective. There's also a reality that the vast majority of those perspectives are relatively what I would consider to be perspectives that fall within the realm of capitalist liberal democracy, not conservative or liberal, but they all reinforce a capitalist line. This is the world that we live in, this is the world we are going to continue to reform and therefore assume the legitimacy of that world. That's all easily observable. Where it becomes a conspiracy theory is when people say "All the journalists work together, and they're not covering XYZ story, or they're covering XYZ story in this very specific way because they're trying to achieve XYZ thing." Now with some media outlets like The Post Millennial, which I would barely call media, that is true, the Gateway Pundit, which is just a conspiracy theory rag at this point, that is also very true. But for something like The New York Times, that's not necessarily the case.

We need to really start to do a couple of things. The first is, we have to actually find information from people that have access to information. Now, sometimes that's us, and increasingly, what's happening is that normal users of the internet are far better at putting information out there than traditional media or academic institutions. And so you can rely on sources on the ground, but generally, resisting the attempt to always have an answer or an explanation is really critical here. Things are confusing. The world is a complicated, confusing place, we're not always going to know what's happening. And that is okay to say. I think we have this obsession in American political discourse of always being able to know the answer. But that isn't necessarily, in most cases, the case. And we always have these very partial understandings. Really, it's this question of patience and time and trust and being able to trust information. Now, sometimes when you can't trust information from certain sources, the response is to get it from a variety of sources. These are research skills that I think many of us know, but at times are willing to suspend, especially when it starts to lead to a conclusion that we don't like. And that's something we have to be incredibly cautious about.

TFSR: I totally agree, I think that we need to be able to say, "I don't know, I need to think about this or look more into it." There's some crossover there with toxic masculinity, which is culture-wide of just "I need to have an answer, I need to control the situation."

A little bit of a sidebar here. When I was going to college, I was

a part of Project Censored at Sonoma State University. I was never in the class, but I participated in some of the judging ceremonies. I got some funding for them to travel. I was at the beginning stages of the radio project, which got shelved for a while, but they sent us to the DNC in LA to cover it. Yeah, it's fun, that was my first podcast.

One thing that was interesting and that broke me from Project Censored as a project was that— For listeners that aren't aware they published a book in 1972, we would get a class in the sociology department of Sonoma State University together and they would have the students read through a bunch of different stories and just constantly be reading newspapers and magazines, print media, “legacy media,” as they call it, to pick out stories that that they're not finding in the mainstream sources, but they were finding in the smaller sources, do some research on them, find out about the authors of them, find out about what moneyed interests are involved in that specific thing that might be critically covered, and then look at connections to mainstream publishing outlets, and those moneyed interests because— As working off of Chomsky's idea of Manufacturing Consent, and that there's a concentration of media ownership, and also David Barsamian and other media theorists talking about how, as media is concentrating, as there's less voices out there, and the voices are also being influenced by the investors that own the newspapers, or whatever publishing house magazine. So, if you are getting funding from General Electric, you're going to put pressure on your editorial boards maybe to not report stuff about arm sales, or Westinghouse, or any of these companies, since they're so intertwined. Mapping the corporate networks and saying, “If one of our subsidiary newspapers reports on this thing, that is a giant arms sale to Turkey, or whatever, and Turkey is getting these weapons from Boeing, and Boeing is owned by this company, which also owns our newspaper, maybe have the editors suppress that story, or have it written in a way that's not going to piss off their funding source.” I think that was an approach towards the idea that journalists may have a bias or there may be bias in the way that a journalist published, which I think makes some sense.

However, as a sidebar to the sidebar, also, the editor when I was working with a Project Censored did his doctoral thesis on Bohemian Grove, which is based in Sonoma County. Then after 9/11 happened, when I was in college and working with the project, they started going Left-Truther. And I was like “Well, maybe I don't know.” I started

is wrong. If you have to start to concoct alternate explanations, you have to start to leave the realm of observability or believability, if you have to start to posit things as articles of faith, you've already drifted away from anything that could be considered to be properly an argument for a conclusion, you've started to drift into fantasy.

TFSR: It makes sense at this point to just throw in the term ‘syncretism’. Just see what reaction that gets. That's what the use of holding multiple contradictory ideas within your head at one time, within your belief structure and being able to still move forward and make a story that unites these things is considered one of the prime elements of fascism, according to certain definitions. This is not to say that everything that's bad is fascism or that fascism is everything that's bad or whatever.

Tom: Yeah, I think the thing that becomes really important about conspiracy theories, though, is why? I touched on this a bit, but the “why” is actually really critical for us as radicals to start to understand. Because the “why” indicates something really critical for us. Conspiracy theories arise from situations of uncertainty, necessarily. We saw huge explosions of conspiracy theories around the advent of the printing press, for example. A lot of the wars between Protestants and Catholics happened during that period of time were being driven by conspiracy theories, were being driven by this idea that “XYZ faction was going to come steal your children and forcibly convert them and blah, blah, blah.” The stories that were told, that carried down in written text in that period of time, sound eerily very similar. They start with these vast changes and these kinds of uncertainties, and then they piggyback off of a sense of threat or disempowerment. It's not that we have conspiracy theories right now, because everyone in America feels super politically empowered and stuff that. No, it's that conspiracy theories arise in situations in which people can no longer explain why they feel like their lives are out of control.

We can take a really common example of a really absurd contradiction that arises in the situation. If we talk about white nationalists or white supremacists in general. White supremacy is based on this notion that there is a singular thing called the White Race, which is for some reason superior to everybody. Yet, at the same time, they're horribly oppressed by everybody else, even though they're the strongest, most powerful people. It makes no sense. It is an entirely illogical narrative. Yet, it

Tom: Fact, absolute fact. Alex Jones was running around the G20 in Pittsburgh yelling about how we were all feds as we were getting tear-gassed by the National Guard. Basically observable things.

We can follow narratives point by point from different data points and concoct an understanding. Where we start to fall off the realm of believability is often when we start to try and impart motives to other people. And this is a really common failure in human discourse, where we sit there and we go, “Okay, this happened. Therefore, the secret motivation of this person that I don’t know, is this other thing.” That is almost always where we run into trouble. That is where we leave observability. We can see these things play out in things like Gladio, we can see these things on the right-wing: January 6 is an FBI op, or it was done by us, or something. For some reason, we all dressed up Trumps supporters or something. Not really quite sure how that theory tracks. But all of this, all of these conspiracy theories start to add up to one thing.

And this is really the important part. They all wrap back around to the conclusion that we started with, and this is the ultimate point to really guard yourselves from, for everyone to be aware of. As the narrative progresses, we’ll see the logical leap occur. And if you’re really attentive, you’ll start to see where that happens. You take UFO conspiracy theories and the difference between early UFO conspiracy theorists and Bill Cooper. For people that don’t know, Bill Cooper wrote a book called Behold a Pale Horse. It’s probably the Penn ultimate contemporary conspiracy book. It’s the reason we have Alex Jones. Bill Cooper is the precursor to that. And he was the first person to start to say, it wasn’t just about the government hiding the fact that UFOs exist. It’s not just that they took the UFO from Roswell and they’re hiding it at area 51. It is that in reality, there’s a secret global cabal that is working with the aliens, and they’re taking this technology, and in exchange for that, they’re giving them human children to experiment with. And he concocts this whole narrative about it. Now, of course, as time goes on, “leakers” start to show up, which corroborate parts of that, retroactively. When they don’t corroborate parts of it, he changes his narrative. And so one of the things that are really unique about conspiracy theories, as opposed to other types of narratives, is the way that they will shift and change sometimes in contradictory ways to maintain their narrative arc.

I was trained in philosophy formally. And one of the things that you learn in that process is that if you have to engage in mental gymnastics, to maintain your conclusion, it’s probably because your conclusion

reading responses by other people who were a little better-grounded in conspiracy thinking and thinking, “Actually, what you all are doing is a lot of promoting disinformation, you need to stop doing it.” That’s when I started moving away from Project Censored. I don’t know where they’re at right now. But that’s when looking at the biases in the publishing patterns, not necessarily the editorial patterns, not necessarily in the journalist patterns, jumps the shark. But I think that there is some worth in looking at what is the nature of the institution that’s publishing a thing and what biases— As you said, when I read something in The New York Times, I’m not expecting to hear — and I am sometimes surprised — an article about an anti-capitalist alternative to the poverty or a banking crisis that’s occurred in this one place that people are promoting. But it happens,

Tom: Yeah, rather than on a Chomskian level, we have to think about it more of a Foucaultian level. Manufacturing Consent is one of those books — and I feel this way about a lot of Chomsky’s work — that gets so close to heading in the right direction, and then veers into this world that’s very informed by late 60’s, early 70’s radicalism. In reality, we’re looking at structuring of what counts as knowledge, rather than the nuanced management of the individual things that are said.

Again, let’s think about this. And I want to bring forward a mathematical formula, I forget exactly what it is. But someone in the 70’s concocted this, I think, but essentially, what they said is that every single time you multiply the number of people involved in a conspiracy, you exponentially increase the chance that it gets revealed. The example I always use when talking about this is this example that a lot of former FBI people that have been interviewed for 9/11 documentaries I have talked about, but apparently it was 2002, the US government got their hands on the satellite phone number for Osama Bin Laden, meaning they could track his movements, which for the US military is probably a relatively important thing in 2002. And that information was held by an incredibly small group of people. Under a hundred people knew that information. It might be the single most important piece of intelligence data they had at the time. It took less than a day for the media to find out a report on it, less than a day for potentially the single most important intelligence secret that the US had at that point. If we were talking really about a world, which I think a lot of people on the left imagine, where there’s some evil guy in a suit stroking a cat on a black leather chair, calling up journalist

going, “You should report this way. Go report this way. Don’t report this.” It’s not just people on the left, people on the right-wing feel this way about the media, too. Not only is that spectacularly work-intensive to the point of being impractical, especially with online media. But it also is one of these structures, which, with almost absolute certainty, people would be talking about on some level or another, especially now on the internet, just mathematically, that would be true.

So what we’re looking at is something a bit more insidious in this case. It’s not even that individual messages are being controlled, or stories are being censored or something that. It is more about the social construction of what counts is important and what counts is valid. Oftentimes — and this has changed in the last 3-4 years, I would say, and around where I’m at, it’s been a little bit longer than that — but in the past, journalists used to say things like “Well, if you don’t give me your name, then I can’t consider this a legitimate source.” Well, why? And I’ve asked journalists why and they’re like “Well, if you’re not willing to put your name to it, then I’m just going to assume that you’re lying,” which is a really silly understanding. But it is really tied to this notion of individuality in a capitalist liberal democratic sense and the exchange of information. And that normativity got carried over into that journalistic norm. We see this with any number of things as far as what’s considered to be “realistic”. How many times have journalists said, “A profound change in society is probably really important, but it’s not realistic. So let’s focus on reform.” That’s not because some editors sitting there going “Well, we’re gonna focus on reformism”. It is that the editor hired reformists because reformists are considered legitimate. These kinds of things, we can read through these that what’s happening here is we’re getting a portrayal of information in a specific way.

And we are able to reinterpret information, we do it all the time. In fact, I would say everyone does it constantly. But as radicals, very obviously we have chosen to do this as something that we do. We have chosen to reinterpret the things we were taught as children, we have chosen to look at the world really critically. And with that, comes a healthy dose of skepticism. And there should always be a healthy dose of skepticism. But there’s a difference between that and what I would argue is the Chomskian Claim and this Chomskian Claim carries through into other forms of inherent mistrust, in which, for example, on January 6, this happened consistently. Now, I’m sitting there watching what’s going on on January 6, and I’m saying, “Okay, well, very obviously, they underestimated how

serious people were. Because it’s not they didn’t see the threats online, they were all over the place.” Anyone that was paying attention to literally any anti-fascist Twitter account at any point leading up to January 6, was seeing screenshots from Parlor of people saying things like “They are gonna storm the Capitol.” I’d been talking to people about it for weeks before that, it was really obvious it was happening. There was very clearly a sense in which that risk, that threat was underestimated, that definitely impact coverage patterns in the Capitol complex that day. But then, when it became really clear, that the police were about to get overwhelmed, they fell back and retreated back into what, as someone who’s who studied DC police tactics a lot, is a really normal pattern, which was fall back and cover points of interest, evacuate important people, and then amasse force and move decisively, which is what they did. And they did that at about 5:45 pm. 15 minutes for the curfew went to place. All of that is explainable. You can sit there and you can say, “Okay, we can see data that explains this thing, see data that explains this thing.” And you can follow the data points all the way through that explanation.

Now, what is the narrative that we got from a lot of people? “The police intentionally let people into the Capitol, because someone saw a couple of pictures of some cop shaking people’s hands. So of course, every single cop just gave up and let all these people into the Capitol. That this was part of a conspiracy by the DC police. That it was intentional, that it happened that way. And that the justification for that is that they dealt with protests really differently in the summertime.” Ok, so we can look at all the data that we have from January 6. And we can see individually when decisions were made, how they were made, what the factors were. All of that’s been documented, all that’s been released. People have talked about that. All of the different explanations corroborate each other. There’s one single outlier, which is the Pentagon report from that day. All the other sources corroborate each other. None of those sources talk about how the DC police intentionally tried to help a coup attempt. All of those sources talk about exactly the narrative that I’m talking about from that day. We can see similar things from the J20 protests. During the J20 protests during Trump’s inauguration, I kept hearing from my parents, friends who were reading on Facebook that every single person that got arrested during Trump’s inauguration was a secret white supremacist or an FBI agent trying to make the #Resistance look bad.

TFSR: Fact.