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# Islamophobic conspiracism and neoliberal subjectivity: the inassimilable society

S. JONATHON O'DONNELL

**ABSTRACT** O'Donnell analyses the confluence of Islamophobia and anti-government conspiracy theory in the works of the far-right think tank, the Center for Security Policy (CSP). He argues that, rather than only being a contemporary form of the religious and racialized demonologies that code 'Islam' as being the constitutive outside of 'the West—irrational, religious and authoritarian versus rational, secular and democratic—Islamophobic conspiracism should also be examined in the context of anxieties over the erosion of personal and state sovereignty under neoliberalization. Mobilizing an Islamophobic demonology that constructs 'Muslims' as inassimilable to 'American' subjectivity, the CSP's Islamophobic conspiracism projects this construction of absolute alterity on to American social and state systems. In doing so, O'Donnell contends, Islamophobic conspiracism takes neoliberalization's estrangement of the state and its citizens to its logical conclusion, transfiguring the societal processes that impact on the freedom of the individual—notably the state and civil society—into something inassimilable to that individual's claims to self-ownership and self-mastery.

**KEYWORDS** autonomy, Center for Security Policy, conspiracism, Islam, Islamophobia, law, Muslims, neoliberalism, sharia, sovereignty, subjectivity

'In hell', Grant Gilmore concludes his 1977 legal treatise *The Ages of American Law*, 'there will be nothing but law, and due process will be meticulously observed'. Writing against what he saw as the 'mechanistic process[es]' of legal formalism, in which law curbs societal ills through prescriptive adherence to certain behaviours, Gilmore grounds this assertion in the claim that law reflects but does not determine a society's morality. For him, the better a society is, the less law; the worse, the more. 'In heaven', he thus claims, referencing a Utopian image adapted from Isaiah 11:6, 'there will be no law, and

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the lion will lie down with the lamb'.<sup>1</sup> Rather than having harmony imposed upon it, the lion freely chooses to lie beside the lamb, and it is the possibility of this act of autonomous will that for Gilmore not only guarantees true peace and prosperity but forms the condition of possibility for freedom itself. By contrast, hell lacks any such autonomous potential: it must follow its processes without exception, unable to suspend the mechanisms of its operations or transcend the conditions of its possibility.

Gilmore's parable may encapsulate a problematic at the heart of contemporary American political and cultural life. The constitutional theorist Paul W. Kahn cites it in his *Political Theology*: 'we understand his point', he states, proceeding to chastise liberal political theory for failing 'to recognize the character of freedom upon which modern [American] politics has rested'. In Kahn's narrative, this 'character of freedom' is linked to the US Constitution and the popular sovereignty understood as authoring it. This connection, he claims, makes 'Americans . . . resist international law' because it is produced by bureaucratic and technocratic legislative bodies, and so lacks a true bond to popular sovereign will. It is thus not a 'political arrangement within which America can survive as a nation'.<sup>2</sup> Kahn has been properly criticized for the universalisms underlying his argument, which figures the American social imaginary as identical for all Americans.<sup>3</sup> Yet the conflict he discerns in Gilmore's parable may nonetheless underlie a specific—sometimes dominant, often dominating—strand of both American politics and American religion. Found in Reinhold Niebuhr's liberal Protestantism and the neoconservative politics of George W. Bush alike, this strand distrusts the state as the enabler of social virtue, placing the task of ameliorating suffering in the hands of individuals and through them—perhaps paradoxically—'the coercion and management of sovereign and executive powers'.<sup>4</sup>

This paper interrogates this strand of American religio-politics as it has become manifest in a confluence of two contemporary cultural paradigms. These are, on the one hand, Islamophobia (and the specific ways that it is articulated in the public sphere) and, on the other, a mistrust of governmental (particularly federal) systems and structures that often manifests in anti-government conspiracist discourses. While Islamophobia and conspiracism arise from different genealogies and articulate distinct discursive frameworks, they have merged in several contemporary conspiracy beliefs that proliferated in

- 1 Grant Gilmore, *The Ages of American Law*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press 2014), 99, 97–8. Against the absolutist faith in legal societal reformation, purification or salvation, Gilmore argues, lawyers must cultivate a 'skeptical relativism' in which law is 'more modest and less apocalyptic' (98).
- 2 Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press 2011), 38, 158, 10.
- 3 See, for example, Or Bassok, 'How to investigate the social imaginary', *Jerusalem Review of Legal Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2012, 2–11.
- 4 Michael Northcott, "'An angel directs the storm": the religious politics of American neo-conservatism', *Political Theology*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2004, 137–58 (141–2).

the wake of Barack Obama's 2008 election: that Obama was/is secretly Muslim and/or abetting Islamist terrorists, and that the Muslim Brotherhood is infiltrating and co-opting the legislature and judiciary of the US government as part of a 'civilization jihad', to name the most prominent.<sup>5</sup> Exploring these confluences of Islamophobia and conspiracy belief, the article argues that, rather than only being tied to a racialized, Orientalist archive that figures 'Islam' as the constitutive outside of 'the West', contemporary American Islamophobia should also be understood as a form of anti-government conspiracism tied to notions of neoliberal subjectivity and the citizen-state relations they induce.<sup>6</sup> To this end, I analyse a pervasive and pernicious form of American Islamophobia propagated by the far-right 'counter-jihadist' think tank, the Center for Security Policy (CSP), that asserts that the United States is being overtaken by 'creeping shariah' as part of a 'civilization jihad'. I contextualize the CSP's Islamophobia with regards to both a racialized and Orientalist genealogy that constructs the figure of the 'Muslim' as inassimilably foreign to 'the West', and also to broader conspiracist discourses that attempt to mediate between a vision of the neoliberal subject and the societal and state systems that condition and conduct it. Through suturing Islamophobia to conspiracist frameworks of subjectivity, the article argues, Islamophobic conspiracism takes the political rationality of neoliberalism to its logical conclusion, wherein society is rendered inassimilably foreign to the individual: an alien body that must be resisted, rejected and reduced to ruin to ensure the survival of the neoliberal subject.

5 Aaron Winter, 'My enemies must be friends: the American extreme right, conspiracy theory, Islam, and the Middle East', in Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski (eds), *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East: A Comparative Approach* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter 2014), 35–58. Tracing links between Islamism and the American extreme right, Winter highlights how extreme-right conspiracist affinities with Islamists (over, for example, shared antisemitism and antagonism to globalization and secular modernity) that had existed since the post-war period were eclipsed after Obama's election by the anti-Islam conspiracies explored here. See also George Michael, *The Enemy of My Enemy: The Alarming Convergence of Militant Islam and the Extreme-Right* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas 2006); and the other essays in Butter and Reinkowski (eds), *Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East*.

6 This confluence of Islamophobia and conspiracism has been explored elsewhere, notably by Deepa Kumar in *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books 2012), and Arun Kundnani in *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London and New York: Verso 2014). Kumar charts the key figures and groups in this right-wing Islamophobic matrix, exposing their links to more mainstream political figures and wider discourses of Islamophobia. Kundnani, meanwhile, demonstrates how the 'Muslim' of western counter-terrorism discourses is primarily a phantasmatic figure. My argument here draws on these works by Kumar and Kundnani, contextualizing Islamophobic conspiracism in relation to neoliberalism and the modes of political rationality it fosters, a context reliant on both the phantasmatic nature of its 'Muslims' and its embeddedness in broader matrices of Orientalism, racialization and neoliberalization.

## The Islamic conspiracy

‘Instinctively’, begins one section of the Center for Security Policy’s report *Shariah: The Threat to America*, ‘even Americans who are unfamiliar with the term “shariah” understand that it poses a threat’.<sup>7</sup> The source of this observation is never revealed but it is illustrative of the tone and position adopted by the report throughout. Written by Team B II—a reference to a Cold War era competitive analysis exercise that questioned the validity and effectiveness of détente—*Shariah* depicts a war between monolithic and incompatible ideological systems: ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’.<sup>8</sup> However, as the quotation suggests, the conflict is positioned as instinctual: it encapsulates but exceeds ideology and politics, becoming essential and existential. ‘Shariah’ threatens the nation’s sovereign foundations, the report continues: it is ‘an enemy of the United States Constitution’. Formed in an act of sovereign will by ‘We the people’ to secure the ‘natural rights and liberties’ they were ‘endowed [with] by their Creator’, the Constitution here figures the heart of ‘America’. Against the natural endowment and Creator-given liberties that constitute this ‘America’ stands ‘a doctrine that mandates the rule of Allah over all aspects of society’, an alien law that ‘holds that God did not create the mind free, but in subservience to the will of Allah’ and so makes the ‘condition of human beings . . . submission to Allah, not freedom’.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, *Shariah* declares in a stark, single-sentence paragraph: ‘Virtually every provision of the U.S. Constitution can be juxtaposed with shariah practices that are in conflict with America’s foundational laws.’<sup>10</sup>

Published in 2010, *Shariah* is the most comprehensive and arguably influential text created by the CSP. Self-styled as ‘Special Forces in the War of Ideas’, the CSP was founded as a neoconservative national security think tank in 1988 by Frank J. Gaffney, Jr. Described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as ‘one of America’s most notorious Islamophobes’, Gaffney is a former member of the Reagan administration whose recent positions have included national security advisor to the 2016 Ted Cruz presidential campaign.<sup>11</sup> The CSP has

7 Team B II, *Shariah: The Threat to America. An Exercise in Comparative Analysis—Report by Team ‘B’ II* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy 2010), 16. Unless part of an embedded quotation, in this paper I use sharia to refer to the Islamic system generally, and ‘shariah’ (in quotation marks) when discussing the specific concept constructed by the Center for Security Policy and associated groups or individuals.

8 Ibid., 1. This framing can be tied to broader narratives of encounters between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’, both Islamophobic ones and ones about Islamophobia, that situate current western antagonisms to Islam as a teleological consequence of a genealogy of hostile encounters stretching back to the Crusades or *Reconquista*. This construction has been adeptly dismantled in Nasar Meer, ‘Islamophobia and postcolonialism: continuity, Orientalism and Muslim consciousness’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2014, 500–15.

9 Team B II, *Shariah*, 119–23.

10 Ibid., 121.

11 ‘Frank Gaffney Jr’, available on the *Southern Poverty Law Center* website at [www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/frank-gaffney-jr](http://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/frank-gaffney-jr) (viewed 8 November 2017).

been shunned by mainstream news outlets and key figures on both the political right and left, including the *Washington Post*, *American Conservative Magazine*, the Anti-Defamation League, John McCain, Marco Rubio and John Boehner. This condemnation works to cast the CSP as a fringe group, outside the operations of normal American politics. The characterization is true, to an extent. Yet, as Deepa Kumar demonstrates, the think tank acts as one of the primary sources for anti-Muslim talking points that are then utilized by right-wing politicians, pundits and conservative movements broadly; efforts to cast such groups as 'fringe' thus obfuscate their influence on more 'mainstream' public and political figures, and their embeddedness in wider social discourses of American Islamophobia.<sup>12</sup>

Recent events, however, have worked to shift the CSP closer to the mainstream. President Donald Trump used it as a major source to support his call for an immigration ban on all Muslims entering the United States.<sup>13</sup> In a more conspiratorial vein, in 2012 five US Congress members—glowingly referenced in a later CSP report as the 'National Security Five'—submitted letters to the inspectors general of five government departments on the basis of *Shariah's* claims, smearing several White House staffers as Islamist agents.<sup>14</sup> In addition to Trump and the National Security Five, the CSP's ideas have also been articulated by the Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson, 2012 presidential candidate Herman Cain and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. As Peter Beinart has recently argued, although Gaffney was long a pariah in Republican establishment politics, the Islamophobic positions that the CSP espouses—especially regarding 'shariah'—found an audience among grassroots conservatives and now, with Trump's election, in the White House.<sup>15</sup> While direct influence may be

12 Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 159–92; Deepa Kumar, 'Mediating racism: the new McCarthyites and the matrix of Islamophobia', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014, 9–26 (22–3).

13 See Joel Gunter, 'Trump's "Muslim lockdown": what is the Center for Security Policy?', *BBC News*, 8 December 2015, available at [www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35037943](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35037943); Amanda Sakuma, 'Muslims face alarming pattern of being cast as un-American', *NBC News*, 15 July 2016, available at [www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/muslims-face-alarming-pattern-being-cast-un-american-n610436](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/muslims-face-alarming-pattern-being-cast-un-american-n610436); and Jennifer Bendery and Amanda Terkel, 'Huma Abedin attacks by Michele Bachmann condemned by John Boehner, Marco Rubio', *Huffington Post*, 19 July 2012, available at [www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/19/huma-abedin-michele-bachmann\\_n\\_1686557.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/19/huma-abedin-michele-bachmann_n_1686557.html) (all websites viewed 8 November 2017).

14 Center for Security Policy, *Star Spangled Shariah: The Rise of America's First Muslim Brotherhood Party* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy Press 2015), 30.

15 Peter Beinart, 'The denationalization of American Muslims', *The Atlantic*, 19 March 2017, available at [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/frank-gaffney-donald-trump-and-the-denationalization-of-american-muslims/519954](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/frank-gaffney-donald-trump-and-the-denationalization-of-american-muslims/519954). Trump's proposed 'Muslim ban' in late 2015 and subsequent election and enacting of a travel ban on designated Muslim-majority countries generated a surge in journalistic writings on the CSP and its influence, including: Scott Shane, Matthew Rosenberg and Eric Lipton, 'Trump pushes dark view of Islam to center of U.S. policy-making', *New York Times* (online), 1

waning after the departure of anti-Islam advocates such as Michael Flynn, Stephen Bannon and Sebastian Gorka from the Trump administration, the CSP and its ideas nonetheless epitomize and exert a structuring influence on right-wing Islamophobia in the contemporary United States.

Since *Shariah*, the CSP has produced a range of companion texts—mainly in its multivolume *Civilization Jihad Reader Series*—that expand on its claims. These include the claim that refugee resettlement and immigration are forms of deliberate cultural imperialism, and that interfaith dialogue is a tool of conversion, as well as alleged exposés of specific Islamic organizations and the influence of ‘shariah’ on the US legal system.<sup>16</sup> Many of these texts exemplify and thus help to elucidate the more virulent strands of Islamophobia in both the United States and Europe.<sup>17</sup> Trump’s ‘Muslim ban’, as well as the demonization of Syrian refugees, take on new meaning in the context of James Simpson’s *The Red-Green Axis*, which claims that, amidst fear of jihadist cells and ‘lone wolf’ attacks, ‘we may be missing the most certain source of danger: the rise of Muslim migration’ through federal immigration policy

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February 2017, available at [www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/us/politics/donald-trump-islam.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/us/politics/donald-trump-islam.html); Abigail Hauslohner, ‘How a series of fringe anti-Muslim conspiracy theories went mainstream—via Donald Trump’, *Washington Post*, 5 November 2016, available at [www.washingtonpost.com/national/how-a-series-of-fringe-anti-muslim-conspiracy-theories-went-mainstream-via-donald-trump/2016/11/05/7c366af6-8bf0-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/how-a-series-of-fringe-anti-muslim-conspiracy-theories-went-mainstream-via-donald-trump/2016/11/05/7c366af6-8bf0-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html); Zack Beauchamp, ‘Trump’s counter-jihad: how the anti-Muslim fringe conquered the White House’, *Vox*, 13 February 2017, available at [www.vox.com/world/2017/2/13/14559822/trump-islam-muslims-islamophobia-sharia](http://www.vox.com/world/2017/2/13/14559822/trump-islam-muslims-islamophobia-sharia); and Bryan Schatz, ‘How a crazy idea about Islam went from the fringe to the White House’, *Mother Jones*, 11 March 2017, available at [www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/03/trump-gorka-islam-not-religion-islamophobia](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/03/trump-gorka-islam-not-religion-islamophobia) (all websites viewed 8 November 2017).

- 16 See Stephen Coughlin, *‘Bridge-Building’ to Nowhere: The Catholic Church’s Case Study in Interfaith Delusion* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy Press 2015); Center for Security Policy, *Shariah in American Courts: The Expanding Incursion of Islamic Law in the U.S. Legal System* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy Press 2014); Center for Security Policy, *Star Spangled Shariah*; Ann Corcoran, *Refugee Resettlement and the Hijra to America* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy Press 2015); James Simpson, *The Red-Green Axis: Refugees, Immigration and the Agenda to Erase America* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy Press 2015); and Deborah Weiss, *The Organization of Islamic Cooperation’s Jihad on Free Speech* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Security Policy Press 2015).
- 17 The most thorough analysis of these elements of Islamophobic conspiracism in a European context is Sindre Bangstad, *Anders Brevik and the Rise of Islamophobia* (London: Zed Books 2014), although the subject is also covered in Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* and Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming!*. See also Liz Fekete, ‘The Muslim conspiracy theory and the Oslo massacre’, *Race & Class*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2012, 30–47; Nasar Meer, ‘The politics of voluntary and involuntary identities: are Muslims in Britain an ethnic, racial or religious minority?’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2008, 61–81; and Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood, ‘Refutations of racism in the “Muslim question”’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 43, no. 3–4, 2009, 335–54.

and asylum programmes.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, it is the core narrative of *Shariah* rather than those of later reports that have had perhaps the widest impact.

At the heart of this narrative is a clash of civilizations: a war not 'on terror, for terrorism is merely a tactic', but 'of ideas: it is freedom versus tyranny; liberty versus shariah'.<sup>19</sup> As the 'National Security Five' incident illustrates, however, this clash has a conspiratorial component. Both *Shariah* and the CSP's other reports issue a clarion call for the United States to recognize an unacknowledged threat. The threat is not the weapons of al-Qaida or ISIS but rather the 'stealthier means' by which its operatives, associates, affiliates and sympathizers strive to create 'a global totalitarian system cloaked as an Islamic state and called a caliphate'.<sup>20</sup> For the CSP, America is engaged 'in existential conflict with foes that have succeeded . . . in concealing their true identity and very dangerous capabilities'. These foes are not distant but have already infiltrated the country; the 'greatest danger' of groups like al-Qaida is their 'singular ability to distract our leadership away from the stealth jihad aimed at insinuating shariah into our society and legal system'.<sup>21</sup> The key group behind this infiltration, *Shariah* outlines, is the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>22</sup> 'Steeped in Islamic doctrine, and already embedded deep inside both the United States and its allies', the report claims, 'the Brotherhood has become highly skilled in exploiting the civil liberties and multicultural proclivities of Western societies for the purpose of destroying the latter from within'.<sup>23</sup>

18 Simpson, *The Red-Green Axis*, 7.

19 Weiss, *The Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Jihad on Free Speech*, 11. For an overview of the influence of the 'clash of civilizations' narrative, see Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations: Us and Them Beyond Orientalism* (London: C. Hurst 2011).

20 Team B II, *Shariah*, 16, 11, 6. Codings of 'Islam' as totalitarian ties into broader mutations of the clash-of-civilizations narrative after the Bush II era, in which liberal writers refigured 'Islamism' as a 'totalitarian political movement' against which 'the West' was locked in a war for Muslim hearts and minds (Arun Kundnani, 'Islamism and the roots of liberal rage', *Race & Class*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2008, 40–68). In the publications of the CSP and associated groups, 'Islam' and 'Islamism' blur and this framing is deployed as a rationale for stripping Muslims of First Amendment rights by reducing 'Islam' to a political ideology.

21 Team B II, *Shariah*, 11, 93.

22 CSP's idea of the Brotherhood vastly exceeds the actual Brotherhood. *Shariah* lists almost thirty organizations as being either Muslim Brotherhood fronts or ideological allies, ranging from Hamas and al-Qaida to the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim Students Association (MSA). The MSA, founded in 1962–3 at the University of Illinois, has the dubious honour of being 'first Muslim Brotherhood entity founded in the United States', which, although seeming like 'just another moderate Muslim group working on college campuses', is underpinned by 'the same ideology as defines the Muslim Brotherhood and al Qaeda' (Team B II, *Shariah*, 80, 55–91).

23 Team B II, *Shariah*, 10. The kind of demonization and conspiratorial assertions presented here are not uncommon in American political culture. From the 1798–1800 Illuminati panic to the League of Nations, Bush I's 'New World Order' and 9/11 'Truthers', fears of covert networks or illegitimate governance subverting popular sovereignty



Important to recognize about this conspiracy is the way that it is not merely conspiratorial but *conspiracist* in nature. Conspiracism here names a world view comprised of intersecting ‘conspiracy beliefs’ that posit that ‘an organization made up of individuals or groups has acted or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end’.<sup>24</sup> As Jeffrey Bale demonstrates, conspiracism differs from investigative journalism or counter-terrorism—which might identify and expose localized conspiracies by specific, limited sets of actors—by defining the conspiracy as global in reach and transhistorical in scope. A conspiracist conspiracy is ‘international in its spatial dimensions and continuous in its temporal dimensions’, virtually omnipotent in its capabilities and ‘the motive force of all historical change and development’, altering ‘the course of history, invariably in negative and destructive ways’ in ‘monolithic and unerring pursuit of its goals’.<sup>25</sup> This conspiracist framing is crucial for understanding the CSP’s Islamophobia. For the CSP, the Muslim Brotherhood’s infiltrations—aided by the ‘submission’ of multiculturalism—are not a localized conspiracy but rather ‘the 21<sup>st</sup> Century echo of the centuries-long subjugation of our European ancestors to Islamic conquest and domination’.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the ‘forces of shariah have been at war with non-Muslims for 1400 years and with the United States for 200 years’, *Shariah* claims, and, while ‘the most recent campaign to impose this totalitarian code began in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is but the latest in a historical record of offensive warfare that stretches back to the dawn of Islam itself’.<sup>27</sup> The United States thus confronts ‘an existential threat’ as ‘great . . . as any enemy the nation has ever confronted’.<sup>28</sup> Through the tools of ‘civilization jihad’, the CSP contends, this ancient, unrelenting enemy will destroy ‘the American way of life and the constitutional framework that drives the exceptionalism it sustains’ unless radical changes are made to both domestic and foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> These changes will reject political passivity and multicultural acquiescence, finally confronting

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have long been a feature of American public life. See Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf 1965); Bernard Barber, *The Logic and Limits of Trust* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1983); Vivien Hart, *Distrust and Democracy: Political Distrust in Britain and America* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1978); J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, ‘Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion’, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2014, 952–66; and Joseph E. Uscinsky and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2014).

24 Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd edn (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 2013), 3.

25 Jeffrey Bale, ‘Political paranoia v. political realism: on distinguishing between bogus conspiracy theories and genuine conspiratorial politics’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2007, 45–60 (51–3).

26 Team B II, *Shariah*, 127.

27 *Ibid.*, 16.

28 *Ibid.*, 14.

29 *Ibid.*, 16.

the 'unthinkable threat of cultural obliteration via Islamization that is all-too-familiar to those who know history'.<sup>30</sup>

This prophesying of imminent perdition is a common feature of American jeremiads that foretell divine judgement lest the nation mend its ways.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, however, it illustrates how conspiracism both adopts and adapts apocalyptic conceptions of history. In his influential *A Culture of Conspiracy*, Michael Barkun defines conspiracism as an understanding of history as governed by demonic forces, an evil whose locus 'lies outside the true community, in some "Other, defined as foreign or barbarian, though often . . . disguised as the innocent and upright"'.<sup>32</sup> Tying this identification of evil to ideas of history, Brian Bennett argues that conspiracism functions similarly to traditional Christian discourses of providence, in which God is understood as guiding history towards fulfillment, but in abject form. For Bennett, conspiracism represents an 'inverted providentiality' in which ideas of God's control over history become the hidden, demonic hand of the conspirator.<sup>33</sup> In the twentieth-century United States, apocalyptic and conspiracist fears over the errant direction of the nation have often adopted anti-internationalist form, with international bodies such as the League of Nations (and later NATO, the European Union and the United Nations) symbolizing a threat to American sovereignty and/or the precursor to the End Times empire of the Antichrist. In keeping with the enmity to international law already described above by Paul Kahn, as more 'ad-hoc alliances' and 'unfettered' national sovereignty shifted in favour of increasingly circumscribed sovereignties and greater institutionalized cooperation, international institutions and legal paradigms (and those supporting and enforcing them) came to figure existential threats to the exceptionality and destiny of America.<sup>34</sup> The hostility to

30 Ibid., 131.

31 For a survey of the jeremiad tradition in America, see Andrew R. Murthy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

32 Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 3 (and quoting Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), 6). Although the causes of conspiracist thinking have been much debated, the framing of conspiracism as an attempt to identify 'evil' is commonplace within conspiracy theory scholarship. See, for example, Rob Brotherton, *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2015); Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge 2010); Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011); Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West. Volume 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (New York and London: T&T Clark 2005); and David G. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2016).

33 Brian P. Bennett, 'Hermetic histories: divine providence and conspiracy theory', *Numen*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2007, 174–209.

34 Kahn, *Political Theology*; Markku Ruotsila, *The Origins of Christian Anti-Internationalism: Conservative Evangelicals and the League of Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown

'globalism' and the championing of national sovereignty displayed by Trump in his campaign rallies and presidential speeches—of which his 2017 address to the UN General Assembly is exemplary—should be placed in this genealogy of anti-internationalism, in which cosmopolitan, internationalist and bureaucratic elites are framed as having stolen the reins of government for the purposes of subverting the popular will.

Both anti-internationalist mistrust of government and the rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia—discourses that converge in Islamophobic conspiracism—illustrate anxieties about the legitimacy of existing cultural and political authorities. Both figure fears of the subversion of the popular sovereign will, whether by elite manipulation or by compromising a body politic figured in monolithic racial and religious terms. As Bennett has contended, conspiracism adapts theological frameworks of divine providence but casts the guiding hand as illegitimate and demonic. In the context of the United States, this demonological reframing is related to broader anxieties about democratic popular sovereignty. As Ira Chernus argues, American apocalyptic discourses have often been fixated on differentiating between models of tyranny and rightful rule. Citing Jonathan Z. Smith's claim that apocalyptic discourse emerged from the desire to remove the 'wrong' king from the throne and instal the 'right' one, Chernus claims that, at 'its very beginning, [the United States] was founded on the bold and explicit claim that the wrong king was on the throne'. Moreover, the 'right ruler would be no longer a king at all, but a president elected by the people'.<sup>35</sup> Yet, if the American experiment was founded on the declaration that the only good king was no king, this rupture with monarchical sovereignty produced new instabilities. Jeffrey W. Robbins captures perhaps the most foundational of these when he argues that democracy was the 'political instantiation of the death of God'.<sup>36</sup> Removing the ontological and epistemological foundations of the *ancien régime*, Robbins argues, democracy strips the world of its sovereign guarantor, leaving it with the prospect of no directing will. Under the auspices of both secularization and democracy, the sovereign will can no longer be identical to a divine authority or human regent. This transformation creates

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University Press 2008), 1, 188–9. For the legacy of this framework for later conservative Christians and the US Patriot and militia movements, see, among others, Barry J. Balleck, *Allegiance to Liberty: The Changing Face of Patriots, Militias and Political Violence in America* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger 2015); Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*; Carolyn Gallaher, *On the Fault Line: Race, Class, and the American Patriot Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2003); Carolyn Gallaher, 'Mainstreaming the militia', in Colin Flint (ed.), *Spaces of Hate: Geographies of Discrimination and Intolerance in the U.S.A.* (New York and London: Routledge 2004), 183–208; and Erin Runions, *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty* (New York: Fordham University Press 2014).

35 Ira Chernus, 'The wrong king: apocalypse and transformation (or not) in the White House', *Political Theology*, vol. 12, no. 6, 2011, 870–93 (873).

36 Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press 2013), 6.

the possibility of radical change, of new systems of being and becoming, but also the possibility that this project of becoming might go awry or be consciously led astray.

Conspiracism gives form to this possibility. Underlying conspiracism broadly and the Islamophobic conspiracism of the CSP specifically is the fear that the sovereign will of 'the people' might be misled, that a conspiracy might direct it away from its rightful teleology towards an errant future. As the next sections of this article will outline, this fear of conspiracy exposes a tension in the idea of popular sovereignty between, on the one hand, sovereign exceptionality and, on the other, the fact that this sovereignty is dependent on the presence of community and on a legal framework that gives that community its form. This tension—between the sovereignty of subjects and the wider societal structures that produce and restrict that sovereignty—is at the core of the CSP's Islamophobic conspiracism. Analysing the CSP's dualistic construction of 'Muslim-Shariah' versus 'American-Constitution', I ask what it might mean for the CSP to have situated 'shariah' in the top echelons of US federal governance, exploring how this image of alterity articulates existing anxieties over the erosion of self-sovereignty under neoliberalization. Unpacking how the CSP transcribes an Islamophobic narrative of 'the West' versus 'Islam' on to a conspiracist framing of state-citizen relations, the article argues that Islamophobic conspiracism takes the political rationality of neoliberalism to its logical conclusion, refiguring state structures and societal processes that impact the autonomy of the individual as radically inassimilable to that individual's subjectivity.

## Bodies of law

For the CSP, 'shariah' encapsulates what Jeffrey Bale designated as the conspiracy's attempt to alter the course of history in 'monolithic and unerring pursuit of its goals'.<sup>37</sup> This is accomplished by positing an intrinsic link between violent jihad and 'shariah', and then between 'shariah' and all Islamic practice, belief and identity.<sup>38</sup> The 'jihadist imperative that derives from shariah doctrine itself', *Shariah* claims, means that 'all who know and actively follow that doctrine are dedicated to jihad for the purpose of imposing Islamic law on this country [the USA] and all non-Islamic societies worldwide'. The result: 'the enemy at war with the United States is not just al Qaeda, but

37 Bale, 'Political paranoia *v.* political realism', 51.

38 This framing fits into broader hegemonic constructions of 'Islam' that emerged after 9/11. As Deepa Kumar demonstrates, these constructions entailed a resurgence of Orientalist topoi (considered further below), creating a 'commonsense' framing that figured 'Islam'—in opposition to 'the West'—as monolithic, irrational and anti-scientific, uniquely sexist and the inherently violent wellspring of terrorism: Deepa Kumar, 'Framing Islam: the resurgence of Orientalism during the Bush II era', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2010, 254–77.

also a significant percentage of the hundreds of millions of Muslims who are dedicated to the imposition of shariah on us by violence or by stealth'.<sup>39</sup>

As noted above, the CSP acts as a key source of many of the Islamophobic ideas that circulate in contemporary conservative politics. Its constructions of 'shariah' are the clearest example. During his 2016 run for the Republican presidential nomination, for example, Ben Carson declared that all Muslims should be barred from the presidency due to Islam—whose apparent essence he situated in 'shariah'—being incompatible with American values and principles.<sup>40</sup> In 2011 former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich claimed that 'shariah' was 'a mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States'; Gingrich reprised his views in 2016, calling for everyone from a 'Muslim background' to be tested for 'belie[f] in Shariah', and deported if such belief were found.<sup>41</sup> In 2012 presidential candidate Herman Cain stated that there was a covert attempt 'to ease Sharia law and the Muslim faith into our government'.<sup>42</sup> The CSP's *Shariah* contextualizes these and similar statements. In its world view, America's true enemy is not jihadist terrorism but rather an 'Islam' figured as both chief vector and embodiment of the 'shariah doctrine'.

The CSP's situating of the essence of 'Islam' in the 'shariah doctrine' and its coding of all practising Muslims as 'forces of shariah' are particularly important for understanding contemporary Islamophobia in the United States. As Neil Gotanda argues—and Gingrich's call for tests of belief exemplifies—in contemporary America, Muslims are framed through a neat division between 'Muslim terrorists' (who are radically Other, permanently foreign, inassimilable, prone to 'disloyalty, espionage, and sabotage') and 'good Muslims' (who adhere passively to America's social order by shedding all cultural and religious markers of otherness and/or opposition).<sup>43</sup> Even testing negative for 'shariah', however, might not be a guarantor of safety. As Liz Fekete writes, there is a discursive construction of 'Muslims who do not signal their Muslimness (for example, by wearing religious clothing) [as]

39 Team B II, *Shariah*, 95.

40 Theodore Schleifer, 'Carson: I can support a Muslim who denounces sharia law', *CNN*, 22 September 2015, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/21/politics/ben-carson-muslim-sharia-law-presidency>; Eric Bradner, 'Carson again explains concerns with a Muslim president', *CNN*, 27 September 2015, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/27/politics/ben-carson-muslim-president-sharia-law> (both websites viewed 9 November 2017).

41 F. Brinley Bruton and Alexandra Jaffe, 'Newt Gingrich wants tests for all U.S. Muslims after Nice attack', *NBC News*, 15 July 2016, available at [www.nbcnews.com/storyline/france-truck-attack/newt-gingrich-wants-tests-all-u-s-muslims-after-nice-n609916](http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/france-truck-attack/newt-gingrich-wants-tests-all-u-s-muslims-after-nice-n609916) (viewed 9 November 2017).

42 'Herman Cain: "I would not" appoint a Muslim in my administration', *Fox News*, 28 March 2011, available at <http://nation.foxnews.com/herman-cain/2011/03/28/herman-cain-i-would-not-appoint-muslim-my-administration> (viewed 9 November 2017).

43 Neil Gotanda, 'The racialization of Islam in American law', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 637, no. 1, 2011, 184–95 (191, 194).

merely *posing* as modern, progressive and westernised. They are, in fact, camouflaged, and this makes them the more dangerous'.<sup>44</sup> Fekete is writing here about Europe, but similar patterns are present in the American context. *Shariah* devotes considerable space to the idea that Muslims have a religious duty to deceive non-Muslims if it furthers the cause of 'Islam',<sup>45</sup> and Islam-based conspiracies involving Barack Obama often hinged on a covert religious or ingrained cultural Muslim-ness that made him place 'Muslim' (or rather 'Muslim terrorist') needs ahead of those of a 'Real America' constructed in racial, religious and often sexual terms.<sup>46</sup> As sociologists Geoffrey C. Layman, Kerem Ozan Kalkan and John C. Green acutely observe, 'in contemporary politics, there may be no more effective way to "de-Americanize" a politician than to suggest that he or she is Muslim'.<sup>47</sup>

The CSP blames America's 'multicultural proclivities' and targets 'political correctness' and 'moral relativism' for effacing patriotism and Christian faith, driving an 'identity-decline' that is helping to facilitate the coming caliphate.<sup>48</sup> Yet, while the religio-racialized elements of this discourse are important, *Shariah* and related works illuminate another vector in these discourses of de-Americanization: a legal(istic) one. In the Islamophobic conspiracism of the

44 Fekete, 'The Muslim conspiracy theory and the Oslo massacre', 35.

45 This claim rests on a misreading of the concept of *taqiyya*, by which believers may conceal their faith if under threat of violence. This misreading is widely deployed in Islamophobic writings. For example, it is prominent in Joel Richardson's *The Islamic Antichrist: The Shocking Truth about the Real Nature of the Beast* (Los Angeles: WorldNet-Daily 2009); Robert Spencer's *The Complete Infidel's Guide to the Koran* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery 2009); and Glenn Beck's *It IS about Islam: Exposing the Truth about ISIS, Al Qaeda, Iran, and the Caliphate* (New York: Mercury Radio Arts 2015).

46 Team B II, *Shariah*, 57–62; Jason Dittmer, 'Obama, son of perdition? Narrative rationality and the role of the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States in the End-of-Days', in Jason Dittmer and Tristan Sturm (eds), *Mapping the End Times: American Evangelical Geopolitics and Apocalyptic Visions* (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2010), 73–96 (90).

47 Geoffrey C. Layman, Kerem Ozan Kalkan and John C. Green, 'A Muslim president? Misperceptions of Barack Obama's faith in the 2008 presidential campaign', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2014, 534–55 (535). The racial elements of this non-belonging are difficult to overstate. As Wendy Brown, among many others, has argued, democracy has 'always been limned by a non-democratic periphery and unincorporated substrate' that both materially sustains it and against which it defines itself: Wendy Brown, "'We are all democrats now . . .'", in Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Daniel Bensaid, Wendy Brown, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Kristin Ross and Slavoj Žižek, *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press 2011), 44–57 (51). Obama's election was a symbolic structural inversion of the racialized and religious underpinnings of the American social contract, symbolizing for some a reality in which 'America no longer needed white Americans to reproduce its structures of power', leading to the rise of movements whose primary aim is to return Obama (and via him, America) to his 'proper' place: Donald Pease, 'States of fantasy: Barack Obama versus the Tea Party movement', *boundary 2*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010, 89–105 (103).

48 Team B II, *Shariah*, 125–31.

CSP, the fault line separating ‘Muslim’ from ‘American’—that which allegedly makes these categories not only differentiated but irreconcilable—is ‘shariah’. This ‘shariah’ is figured analogously to a sickness in the US body politic, to be identified, isolated and excised before it metastasizes too widely; bodies contaminated by it must be expelled for the health of the body politic to be restored. Yet this ‘shariah’ is, crucially, ultimately phantasmatic. As Irfan A. Omar writes, ‘shari’a is not law . . . [It] is no different than a set of religious and ethical teachings as found in other faiths and secular ideologies.’ While it is true that, ‘at social (group) and state (political) levels, rules of governance (laws) may be derived from shari’a guidelines’, this process is both subjective and contextual: ‘there is no such thing as standard “shari’a law” that can be “downloaded” from the Qur’an and applied “as is” in a given society.’<sup>49</sup> This point has been made in more certain terms by Wael B. Hallaq, who highlights conceptual differences between sharia and structures of western nation-states to argue that the idea of an ‘Islamic state’ is a contradiction in terms. As Hallaq contends, classical sharia required the aggregation of juridical, social and governmental structures under a moral authority: this stance is radically alien to the modern nation-state, and is one that perhaps makes modern Islamist state-building ventures structurally impossible.<sup>50</sup> Such nuances and complexities notwithstanding, it is only important to note that in the CSP’s Islamophobic conspiracism ‘shariah’ is both synonymous with law and something simultaneously standardized, downloadable and applicable ‘as is’. In *Shariah*, ‘shariah’ becomes a transcendental authority of which individual Muslims are rendered little more than avatars.

The Islamophobic construction of Muslims as avatars of the ‘shariah doctrine’ represents both the articulation of an archive of racialized, Orientalist constructions of ‘Muslim culture’, formulated in relation to a (first Christian, later secular) ‘West’, and a reduction of Islamic cultural and juristic systems to objects that can be named, comprehended and finally dismissed entirely in western terms. As Brian Klug notes, Christian polemics has long used the juxtaposition of the *lex talionis* found in Exodus 21:23–5 and the Qur’anic

49 Irfan A. Omar, ‘Keeping shari’a and reclaiming jihad’, *Political Theology*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2011, 706–12 (707–8).

50 Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press 2014). Hallaq’s position here helps illuminate the CSP’s citations of Islamic and Islamist authors. In *Shariah*, the CSP deploys quotations from Qur’anic and Hadith sources, statements by Islamist figures such as Abul A’la Maududi, Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna and Ruhollah Khomeini, and the writings of classical Muslim scholars such as al-Misni, ibn Taymiyya, ibn Rushd, ibn Khaldun and al-Shaybani to construct an image of unbroken continuity in Islamic/ Islamist thought (45–51). *Shariah* thus relies not only on the Orientalist fantasy of a homogeneous ‘Muslim world’ but also on how Islamists have adapted this fantasy for their own anti-colonial struggles; see Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 2017). That is, the CSP reflects back Islamist reflections of the Orientalist fantasy of Islamic homogeneity.

Sura 5:45 to Jesus' teaching to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38–9) to create a persistent binary opposition, 'with Christianity on the side of the angelic—the loving, the forbearing, the forgiving—and Judaism and Islam occupying the other side: the legalistic, the vengeful, the merciless'.<sup>51</sup> As such, there has long been a tendency in the West to figure Muslims, in Ivan Kalmar's words, as 'slaves, soldiers, and terrorists of Allah: fanatical devotees of a remote and terrifying sublime power'.<sup>52</sup> This figuration is apparent throughout contemporary Islamophobia, but discourses of sexuality and violence are exemplary. As Saba Mahmood demonstrates with regard to discourses pertaining to 'honour killings', man-on-woman homicides in the United States are usually viewed as resulting from individual passions and pathologies, while 'honour killings' are figured as symptomatic of 'Islamic culture': Muslim men 'are understood to be compelled by "their culture," irrationally and blindly acting out its misogynist customs and traditions'.<sup>53</sup> This same paradigm is present in discourses pertaining to terrorism—not merely in how terrorism becomes figured as the unique province of 'Islam', but in how this 'Islam' reinforces conceptions of legitimate (political/state) versus illegitimate (religious) violence. Analysing the US government's own *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, for example, Jasbir K. Puar contends that not only is Islamist terrorism viewed as springing fully from religious motives rather than economic or political grievance, but that religious belief is cast, 'in relation to other factors fueling terrorism, as the overflow, the final excess that impels monstrosity: [a] "different attitude towards violence" signaling these uncivilizable forces'.<sup>54</sup>

*Shariah* and its companion texts drink deeply from this Orientalist genealogy. The CSP conjures a figural 'Muslim' as signalling unreasoned and unreasonable violence, a cultural and legalistic automaton irreconcilable to American sociopolitical norms.<sup>55</sup> In Islamophobic conspiracism, the

51 Brian Klug, 'The limits of analogy: comparing Islamophobia and antisemitism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2014, 442–59 (453). As Gil Anidjar has observed, the reinvention of Christianity as 'Judaean-Christianity' permitted the shifting of Judaism to the other side of this binary pair, assimilating it into the Christian West's journey towards secular modernity while relegating 'Islam' to the space of enduring (irrational) religiosity: Gil Anidjar, 'The forgetting of Christianity', *ReOrient: The Journal of Critical Muslim Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, 27–36.

52 Ivan Kalmar, *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and the Notion of Sublime Power* (London and New York: Routledge 2012), 2.

53 Saba Mahmood, 'Religion, feminism, and empire: the new ambassadors of Islamophobia', in Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo (eds), *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2011), 77–102 (90).

54 Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press 2007), 55.

55 The figural nature of this 'Muslim' is important. As Klug discusses in relation to the limits of analogy between antisemitism and Islamophobia (regardless of the analogy's use in other respects), the 'Muslim' of Islamophobia is as much of 'a figment, a figure of



'Muslim' is transfigured into an avatar of law and the 'Muslim' body into a body of law. Compelled by 'shariah', 'Muslims' become figured as capable only of working out the processes of their legalistic programming. The only solution—as Gingrich proclaimed—is thus to test for the presence of this program and expel those bodies in which it is found. Rather than just being a form of anti-Muslim prejudice, the CSP's Islamophobia sees 'Muslims' as threatening *precisely because* it renders them as mechanistic nodes of a cultural force named 'Islam', not as autonomous subjects of freedom. It articulates, at least overtly, not a fear of Muslims per se but of the 'Muslim' as a modality of 'Islam'.<sup>56</sup> To return to the parable with which I began this article, Islamophobic conspiracism here mirrors the structures underlying Gilmore's soteriological parable in Orientalist form: 'shariah's' infernal legalism contrasts the heavenly freedom enshrined in the Constitution.

Constructed as radically at odds with America's constitutional essence, the 'Muslim' forms 'America's' constitutive and self-consolidating Other in a war of 'freedom versus tyranny; liberty versus shariah'.<sup>57</sup> Yet, while CSP's 'shariah'—as Omar and Hallaq help to contextualize—is phantasmatic, it is crucial to recognize that so too is the a priori free moral subject that the CSP opposes to it. As Wendy Brown demonstrates, the promise of democracy is at root the promise of self-legislation, often coded as the capacity to be arbiter of one's own destiny. However, democracy's normative presumption is that this ability is 'attained through shared rule of the polity; the sovereignty of the subject is linked to the sovereignty of the polity, each securing the

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fantasy or myth' as the 'Jew' of antisemitism. Both are social representations of people, not people as such. Klug, 'The limits of analogy', 449–50.

- 56 As literature on the ties between religion and racialization in Islamophobia demonstrate, clear distinctions between anti-Islam and anti-Muslim prejudice are impossible to maintain in an unproblematic way. I seek only to clarify that anti-Muslim prejudice is herein framed via a reduction of Muslims to infernally legalistic automata pre-programmed by 'Islam' in opposition to the autonomous subject of US liberal democracy. See Gotanda, 'The racialization of Islam in American law'; Nasar Meer, 'Racialisation and religion: race, culture and difference in the study of antisemitism and Islamophobia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, 385–98; Meer, 'The politics of voluntary and involuntary identities'; Meer and Modood, 'Refutations of racism in the "Muslim question"'; AbdoolKarim Vakil, 'Who's afraid of Islamophobia?', in S. Sayyid and AbdoolKarim Vakil (eds), *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives* (London: C. Hurst 2010), 271–8.
- 57 Weiss, *The Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Jihad on Free Speech*, 11. *Shariah's* narrative as ostensibly constructed is one of a totalitarian Islam against the secular social order. However, it attempts to draw direct links between Christianity and the secular doctrines of the US Constitution. The 'principles of the American founding were derived from a combination of reason and revelation', the report claims. Moreover, Team B II declares, concepts of mutual toleration and the separation of Church and State are rooted in Christian doctrines, exemplified by Jesus' statements that one should 'Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men' (1 Peter 2:13) and 'Render unto to Caesar that which is Caesar's' (Mark 2:17): Team B II, *Shariah*, 120.

other'.<sup>58</sup> Individual freedom is thus (perhaps paradoxically) contingent on placement in a community of similarly free subjects. Crucial to recognize here is that this construction of freedom has normatively been constituted by reserving it for some and denying it to others: both to an 'occluded inside' in the form of residents marked as alien (slaves, women, the poor, ethnic and racial minorities, the foreigner, the infidel), and a constitutive outside in that of the barbaric Other.<sup>59</sup> Yet, in addition to this is a problem contained in the very notion of subjectivity on which this vision of liberal democracy relies: the 'a priori free moral subject', one that embodies (in sexed, gendered, racialized and religious form) the promise of personal freedom that lies 'at the heart of the normative supremacy claimed by democracy'.<sup>60</sup> This image is that of the classical liberal subject—the *liber* or 'freeman', the self-lawed, self-sovereign, self-contained subject—and its construction is foundational not only to the ideologies and edifices of western political liberalism, but also (therefore) to conspiracism.

If the figure of the 'Muslim' is foundational to Islamophobic conspiracism, that of the *liber* is similarly required, not only for Islamophobic conspiracism but for conspiracist discourses more broadly. Conspiracism places significant emphasis on notions of intentionality and agency; it reduces the operations of complex and often unpredictable social systems to the machinations of specific unseen agents.<sup>61</sup> This emphasis on agency has often been central to explorations of conspiracism's epistemological or psychological dimensions.<sup>62</sup> Here, however, I am

58 Brown, "'We are all democrats now . . .'", 52.

59 As Maryam El-Shall demonstrates, membership of 'We the people' has and continues to be figured primarily in terms of a self-ownership understood in racialized and gendered terms: Maryam El-Shall, "'Yes, 'who' can?" Who "we" are in American liberal discourse', *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2011, available on the *Simon Fraser University* website at <http://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/article/view/el-shall> (viewed 10 November 2017). See also Julian Go, 'Myths of nation and empire: the logic of America's liberal empire-state', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 139, no. 1, 2017, 69–83.

60 Brown, "'We are all democrats now . . .'", 52.

61 As Gray outlines, this fixation was emphasized by Karl Popper in his defence of the 'open society': Matthew Gray, 'Explaining conspiracy theories in modern Arab Middle Eastern political discourse: some problems and limitations of the literature', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2008, 155–74 (164). It was also central to Hofstadter in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*.

62 Lee Basham, 'Malevolent global conspiracy', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2003, 91–103; Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French, 'Belief in conspiracy theories and susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2014, 238–48; Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French, 'Intention seekers: conspiracist ideation and biased attributions of intentionality', *PLoS ONE*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2015, available on the *PLoS ONE* website at <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0124125> (viewed 10 November 2017); Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011); Matthew R. X. Dentith, *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014); Mark Featherstone, 'The obscure politics of conspiracy theory', *Sociological Review*, vol. 48, no. S2, 2000, 31–45.

interested in its religio-political and sociocultural ramifications. If, apropos Robbins, democracy politically instantiates the death of God by removing history's sovereign guarantor,<sup>63</sup> then conspiracism can be read as an attempt to mask the resultant fear of directionless (non-telic, ergo meaningless) history. Exploring the narrative function of conspiracy, Mark Fenster contended that the 'unseen hand' of conspiracy acts to resolve the 'formal problem of a seemingly meaningless history'. That is, history remains directed after God's death, but by nefarious conspirators, by what Brian Bennett identified as the demonic hand of inverted providentiality. However, Fenster continues, key to conspiracism is what follows after this resolution: if the unseen hand is identified by the conspiracist in the present, then the conspiracy itself must still 'be revealed, resisted, and unraveled in the future'.<sup>64</sup> Central to images of inverted providentiality, therefore, is the possibility of reversal, of the restoration of true teleology determined by and embodied in popular sovereign will. To defeat the conspiracy and elude its efforts at deception, its signs must be recognized and the future it signals rejected. A priori free individuals must reclaim their freedom from those forces (of 'shariah' or otherwise) that would constrain them.

If the Islamophobia in Islamophobic conspiracism is embedded in a genealogy of Orientalism and religio-racialized stereotyping, this is inextricable from its second component: a 'conspiracism' grounded in certain conceptions of liberal subjectivity. As the closing section of this paper will explore, in the suture between its constitutive halves, Islamophobic conspiracism transcribes an Orientalist narrative of a clash of civilizations—'the West/America' against 'Islam'—on to a conspiracist framing of state-citizen relations. As Hallaq notes, in liberal democratic political theory the state serves as the material instantiation of the popular sovereign will, which it crystallizes in a juridico-political code.<sup>65</sup> It is this code (the Constitution qua condition of America's possibility) that Islamophobic conspiracism constructs as under threat. For the CSP, infiltration by the Muslim Brotherhood had marred both the legislative and judicial branches of the US government; numerous Obama conspiracies extended this projection of alterity to the executive. Yet, if there is no more effective way to 'de-Americanize' Americans than to suggest they are 'Muslim', what might it mean for this figure of inassimilable otherness to be transposed on to America's governmental structures: for 'America' (at least at the federal level) to be or have become 'Muslim'?

### **The inassimilable society**

The CSP's narrative is founded on an essential and transhistorical clash between free, sovereign subjects and the forces conspiring to constrain and

63 Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology*, 6.

64 Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, revd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008), 141.

65 Hallaq, *Impossible State*, 19–36.

destroy that sovereignty. However, crucially, this 'hidden hand' is also directed, also willed. For the CSP, it is the Muslim Brotherhood's hand; for others, it was Obama's. Ultimately, however, in the world view of Islamophobic conspiracism, it is all the 'forces of shariah'—all 'Muslims'—who are the co-conspirators, tied together in a plot to subvert and invert the proper providence of 'America'. Figured as the spectral image of all 'America' is not or should not be, the CSP positions the 'Muslim' and its seditious sympathizers as figures that must be purged from the body politic. Only then might the nation be restored, be exceptional, be (to cite Trump's campaign slogan) 'great again'. At the same time, however, the model of alterity that underwrites this Islamophobic conspiracism highlights the paradox of a vision of history as a contest of would-be sovereign wills. For if the 'Muslim' is an avatar of 'shariah doctrine', an infernally legalistic figure following its due processes without exception, then there cannot truly be an agent or will that is consciously misleading 'We the people' towards perdition.

The problematic presented here is often found in conspiracist discourses, and is one ultimately rooted in the figure of the *liber* on which both conspiracism and liberal democracy are grounded. As Brown demonstrates, the '*a priori* free moral subject' of democratic liberalism is ultimately a 'conceit', one that falls away once we begin to appreciate 'the panoply of social powers and discourses constructing and conducting us'.<sup>66</sup> Many critical theoretical paradigms, including queer, postcolonial and critical race theories, have arisen to work through this unsettling of subjectivity, but so too has conspiracism. As—in Fredric Jameson's sympathetic reading—a desperate, flawed and ultimately futile attempt 'to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system', conspiracism can be read as one attempt to negotiate the paradox that arises when the conceit of the *liber* must confront those social forces that ineluctably condition it.<sup>67</sup> Rather than destabilize the subject's privileged position, however, conspiracism hardens its boundaries. It reduces history to a clash of agencies: a popular sovereign will pitted against the unseen hand of the conspirators. In short, conspiracism reifies the '*a priori* free moral subject' of political liberalism by coding all societal forces as modalities of that subject and its actions. Rather than only reflecting an imperfect attempt to rationalize the condition of the subject under the contemporary 'world system', conspiracism might also be framed as the subsuming of all historical processes under the logic of (neo)liberal subjectivity.

The '(neo)' of this (neo)liberalism is important, not just due to the economic conditions of the subject under contemporary capitalism (Jameson's 'world system') but rather due to the political rationality that economic neoliberalism

66 Brown, "'We are all democrats now . . .'", 52–3.

67 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1991), 38. See also Matthew Gray's discussion of Floyd Rudmin's framing of conspiracy theory as 'naïve deconstructivist history' (Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World*, 31–2).

discursively and materially enables: the transmutation of liberal democratic subjects into neoliberal ones. Reflecting anxieties articulated by anti-internationalist conspiracists and wider contemporary fears of government surveillance, this mutation of subjectivity serves to heighten and make visible the structural dependency of self-sovereign, self-contained individuals on the social structures that constitute them, and thereby compromise their claims to self-sovereignty and self-containment. Joining the conceit of self-legislating subjects to the mechanisms of market risk, neoliberal governmentality disseminates sovereignty among increasingly individualized members of society, outsourcing the pastoral capacities of the state to the (in)action of its subjects while simultaneously regulating them through highly adaptive regimes of biopolitics. Filtering individual agencies through networks of coercive regulation that reduce the individual to a node in bureaucratic networks of cost and benefit, neoliberalism fosters a particular formulation of state-citizen relations. As Saskia Sassen argues, neoliberal processes of privatization and globalization, which blur boundaries between states in favour of a solidification of borders between individuals in a market democracy, are 'not just a matter of shrinking social rights and shrinking state obligations'. Rather, by reducing 'the number of relations/interdependencies between citizens and their states', such processes foster a disconnect between the state and its citizens and thereby destabilize the democratic notion 'that state and the people are one'.<sup>68</sup>

This conceptual severance of individuals from the societal processes that produce and inflect them (even and perhaps especially when those forces are denied) is significant for understanding contemporary conspiracist cultures, and Islamophobic conspiracism specifically. As ascendant ethnonationalist populisms in the United States and Europe demonstrate, current de-democratizing processes (enabled by the erosion of state sovereignty, the borderless flow of capital and the growing disconnect between the state and its citizens) have become increasingly projected on to democracy's occluded insides (foreigners, ethnic, racial and religious minorities) and its constitutive outside (the barbarian). In the contemporary politico-cultural climate, the 'Muslim'—at once inside and outside—has become the most frequently deployed of such projections.<sup>69</sup> The Orientalist framing of Muslims as

68 Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon: Princeton University Press 2006), 319–20. The rise of the acceptability of dual citizenship and the growth of professional armies instead of military service are two examples Sassen identifies: the first signals 'a diffuse shift away from citizenship as exclusive allegiance to one state', the second 'dents hallowed notions' that citizens are willing to die for their state, on the one hand, and 'that a state's wars are the people's wars', on the other (320).

69 Charting connections between European and American anti-neoliberal ethnonationalist populisms is beyond the scope of this paper. However, for relevant discussions of such movements in the French context, most notably the Front National, see Gabriel Goodliffe, 'From political fringe to political mainstream: the Front National and the 2014 municipal elections in France', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, vol. 34, no. 3,

terrifying agents of sublime power, whose condition of possibility is 'submission to Allah, not freedom', herein serves a double role. On the one hand, the 'Muslim' acts as a scapegoat on to which the destructive effects of neoliberalization can be cast; the inassimilable foreignness of the 'Muslim' inside the nation is constructed as the primary cause of the loss (real or imagined) of national sovereignty and economic and sociocultural stability. On a more ideological level, however, the 'Muslim' also serves as the self-consolidating alterity that enables a discourse of American subjectivity as conditional on 'freedom, not submission'—whether 'to Allah' or any other transcendental authority—thus allowing for the occlusion of neoliberalization's de-democratizing effects broadly. Or, as Brown dryly remarks: 'the figure of "Islamicism" comforts democrats that they are such'.<sup>70</sup>

Understanding Islamophobic conspiracism as bound up with neoliberalization (both in terms of reflecting the structural anxieties it evokes and of its simultaneous reinforcing and unsettling of the subjectivities it produces) permits a critical reframing of growing right-wing populist movements that join Islamophobia to (rhetorical, if not always actual) opposition to neoliberal 'globalism'. Trump's rhetoric as both candidate and president, if not his policies, is an illustrative example, combining a conspiracist anti-internationalism, which accused urban elites of relinquishing national sovereignty and exceptionality, with an Islamophobic and xenophobic ethnonationalism, which demonized religious and racial minorities for contravening the alleged 'purity' of (white, Christian/secular) US culture. Despite Trump's explicit citation of the CSP, it is impossible to determine any direct influence the think tank may have had on the 2016 presidential election. Nonetheless, the links the CSP's world view constructs between opposition to neoliberal governmentalities and Islamophobic fixations on national identity help illuminate the ways that these paradigms reinforce and destabilize one another. Islamophobic conspiracism transposes anxieties over regulatory systems that restrict the autonomy of nations and of those citizens constructed as 'authentically' embodying such nations on to racialized, Orientalist discourses that have already figured certain populations as being representative of the regulation and submission of all autonomy. The CSP's consequent image of the 'world system'—a 'global totalitarian system cloaked as an Islamic state and called

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2016, 126–47; Aurelien Mondon, 'The Front National in the twenty-first century: from pariah to republican democratic contender?', *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2014, 301–20; and Jens Rydgren, 'France: the *Front National*, ethnonationalism and populism', in Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (eds), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2008), 166–80.

70 Brown, "'We are all democrats now . . .'", 51. For examples of how western powers use the spectre of Islam to occlude their systems of inequality through construction of barbaric Others, see Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, and Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon: Princeton University Press 2015).

a caliphate',<sup>71</sup> wherein popular sovereignty is subsumed into the infernal regulatory logics of structures that exceed it—reflects the neoliberal order under which parts of the modern United States have languished as much as it does the caliphate they extract from selective readings on Islamic governance and Islamist political theory.

To observe this parallel is not to argue that the CSP's 'shariah' is merely a stand-in for the laws of the market, for globalization or bureaucratization or the erosion of national and individual autonomies. 'Shariah' encompasses these but it also exceeds them. The Islamophobia of Islamophobic conspiracism ties it to a politics of identity, much as the politics of identity have always dictated who has held the right to be part of 'We the people' and who has been forced to embody the occluded insides and constitutive outside on which that people feed. In the CSP's Muslim Brotherhood conspiracies, as well as those around Obama's alleged un-Americanness, it was the alleged 'submission' of an America that had been compromised by 'multicultural proclivities' that led to the porosity of its borders and the election of a commander-in-chief who denied the exceptionality of the nation. It was this alleged 'identity decline' that permitted an elision of 'freedom' into 'tyranny', 'liberty' into 'shariah', and 'America' into 'Islam'. This politics of identity—as much as the effects of neoliberalization—is fundamental to Islamophobic conspiracism, which thus cannot be reduced to a xenophobic superstructure built on a base of material insecurities and economic anxieties.

What marks the CSP's Islamophobic conspiracism as distinctive and illuminating for America's present moment is not its constitutive halves but rather what emerges from their union. The CSP's conspiracism combines a vision of essential, irreconcilable difference between 'America' and 'Islam' with one that constructs abstract societal systems—especially governmental ones—as at best suspect and at worst evil. It not only points towards a foreign alterity to mask the instabilities and imperfections in an American selfhood (although it does do this), but takes this figure of radical alterity (the 'Muslim') and transposes it on to the structures of American society and neoliberalized governmentality. Suturing Islamophobia to conspiracism's imperfect attempts to mediate between the '*a priori* free moral subject' of political liberalism and a societal order that comprises and compromises that subject's claims to freedom, Islamophobic conspiracism might be said to take neoliberalization's estrangement of the state and its citizens to its logical conclusion. It transfigures the societal processes that impact on the freedom of the individual (here, the state and civil society) into something radically inassimilable to that individual's subjectivity. Societal processes become not the foundation of the subject's autonomy—a sovereign polity that secures a sovereign subject—but its antithesis, as that which must be rejected or even destroyed for the preservation of the *liber* and its arbitration of its own destiny. The figural image of the Islamic State constructed by the CSP and those that its

71 Team B II, *Shariah*, 6.

texts inspire constitutes the quintessential image of this inassimilable society. Terrifying and totalitarian, this IS symbolizes the end of all sovereign capacity, of the exception as tied to American exceptionalism. Under its legalistic processes there can be no possibility of paradise, no liberty for the lion to choose freely to lie down with the lamb, only the slow, meticulous procedures of a system without exceptions, that cannot suspend the mechanisms of its operations or the conditions of its possibility.

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