

“The New World Order behind the green mask”: White nationalism, anti-semitism, and the Agenda 21 climate change conspiracy theory

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories abound about seemingly every aspect of our modern lives, and climate change is no exception. One of the most developed climate change conspiracy theories posits that claims of anthropogenic climate change are a cover for the United Nations and its allies to strip nations of their sovereignty and impose global governance. This paper presents an analysis of the rhetorical strategies used on the “Democrats Against U. N. Agenda 21” conspiracy theory website to frame climate change, sustainability, and the U.N. as existential threats to democracy and freedom. Using qualitative content coding via NVivo, this analysis addresses the following research questions: 1) What scientific, political, and other types of arguments the website presents against climate change? 2) What rhetorical strategies are used to make these arguments? 3) How these rhetorical strategies draw on and refer to the rhetoric of white nationalism and anti-semitism? The rhetorical strategies in use across this site--including dog-whistle terminology, type design, appeals to nationalist values, and topoi shared with other conspiracy theories--reveal the Agenda 21 conspiracy’s roots in white nationalism and anti-semitism. This research furthers rhetorical scholarship on conspiracies and their use of evidence. When these environmental conspiracy theories overlap with far-right ideologies, such as white nationalism, they present an opportunity to better understand both. Particularly given recent events in which white nationalists and anti-semites have been radicalized online and encouraged to violence, understanding these discourse hopefully will also provide avenues to combating their potency.

Introduction

Today, I'm sharing with y'all a bit of my research on an environmental conspiracy theory that targets the U.N.'s sustainable development plan, Agenda 21. Agenda 21, of course, is in reality a non-binding agreement to act on anthropogenic environmental harm, including climate change, that was adopted by more than 178 countries at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/outcomedocuments/agenda21>).

However, some conspiracists see Agenda 21 as a smokescreen behind which corporations and global elites are buying off governments, subverting democracy, stripping individual rights--all as part of a global power-grab.

Unfortunately, the anti-Agenda 21 animus has crept from the fringes to the center of U.S. conservative politics. In their 2012 platform, the Republican National Convention avowed QUOTE "we *strongly* reject the U.N. Agenda 21 as *erosive* of American sovereignty, and we oppose any form of U.N. Global Tax" (RNC, 2012, p. 45, emphasis added). Additionally Agenda 21 conspiracy theorists have sustainable urban planning efforts across the country, from California to Alabama (Hurley & Walker, 2004; SPLC, 2014; Trapenberg Frick, 2013).

In my own hometown of Lexington, KY, a colleague found a flyer last year espousing these same conspiracy theories. On the screen you see a picture of that flyer, and let's zoom in on the opening--it reads:

"Did You Know [sic] that Lexington, Kentucky City Council has signed us up as Members of ICLEI, Agenda 21, Agenda 2030, and the United Nations ? ...Did you know their plans include Controlling our access to land, water, and food?" (flyer, n.d.)

In the sea of right-wingers spreading this conspiracy theory, though, there's one figure who sticks out: Rosa Koire [CORE-ee], the founder of four anti-Agenda 21 groups and associated websites, Democrats Against UN Agenda 21, the Post Sustainability Institute, the Santa Rosa Neighborhood Coalition, and the now defunct Stop Plan Bay Area.

Koire, a self-professed feminist lesbian Democrat, calls Agenda 21 a worldwide effort to QUOTE "inventory and control all land, all water, all minerals, all plants, all animals, all construction, all means of production, all energy, all education, all information, and all human beings in the world."

From her four sites, Koire links out to dozens of other fringe sites, contributing to an expansively networked corner of the web where conspiracy theories about climate change, gun rights, pharmaceuticals, and so on butt up against and bleed into each other. Our panel today is on the far-right, and Koire technically isn't far-right, but her conspiracist take on Agenda 21 and her connections to far-right extremists makes her a prime example of the kinds of unlikely coalitions that fringe beliefs can sometimes build.

What Koire offers is a kind of discursive laundering of the extremist and bigoted views that underlie anti-Agenda 21 activism. Specifically, she provides coded versions of anti-Semitism and white nationalism, and her sites thereby provide a way for those ideas to trickle into *mainstream* discourse. And Koire's sites have enough presence that they could easily turn up in someone's naive searching for information about their own town or city's sustainability efforts.

So that's an overview of the topic at hand, Agenda 21 conspiracy theories, and a rationale for my particular focus on Koire.

Research Questions

I've been close reading Koire's writing in order to address two primary research questions:

1. First, what textual markers indicate to a reader that Koire's writing constitutes conspiracy theorizing?
2. And my second, how does the conspiracy theory draw on and refer to the rhetoric of white nationalism and anti-Semitism?

Methods

I began to answer these questions by creating sitemaps for Koire's four websites to get a sense of how they're structured and where the bulk of the content on them is. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

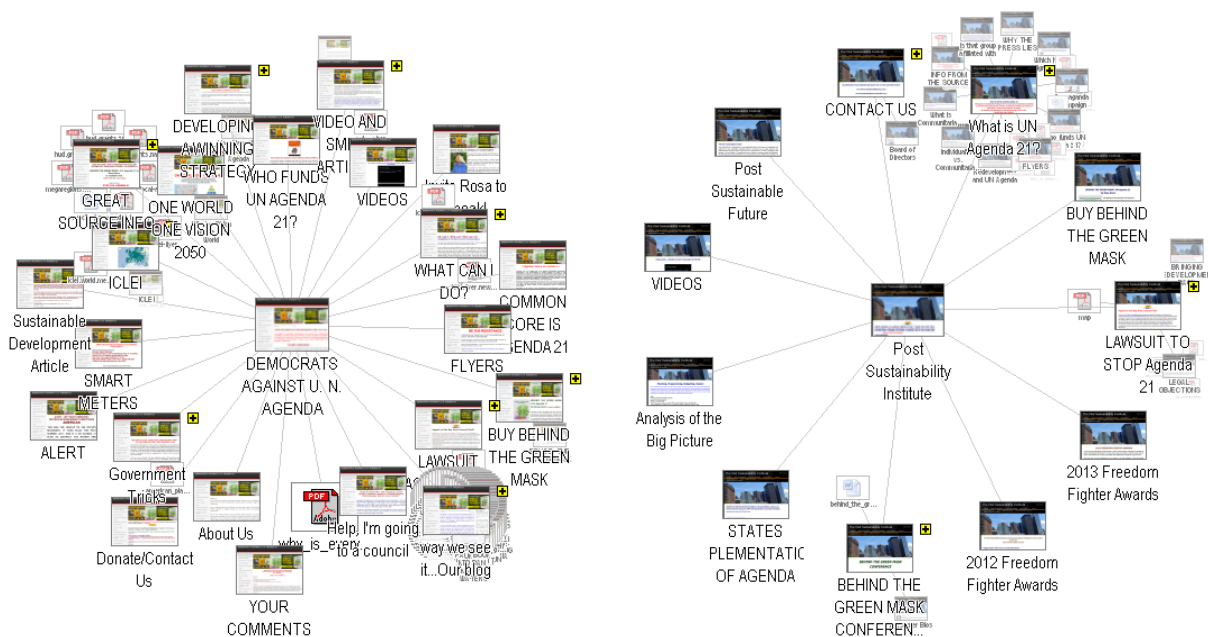


Figure 1. DemocratsAgainstUNAgenda21.com and PostSustainability.org sitemaps.

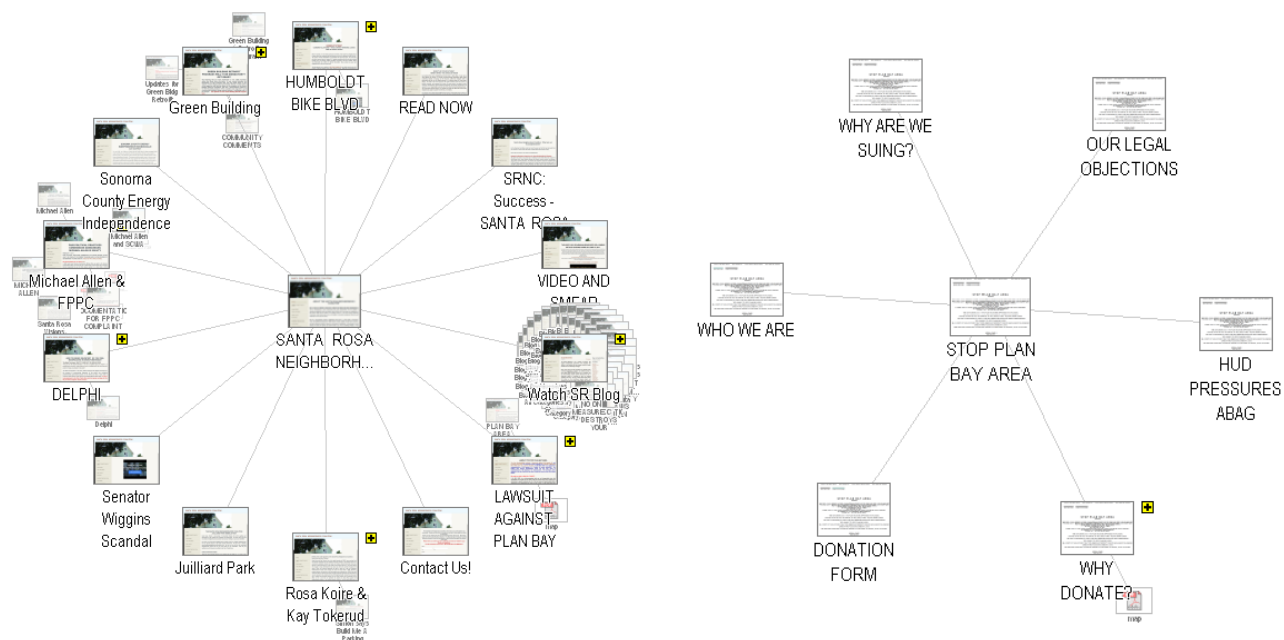


Figure 2. SantaRosaNeighborhoodCoalition.com and StopPlanBayArea.com sitemaps.

As the sitemaps show, some of Koire's sites are much larger than others. She's a prolific blogger, which is apparent from the cluster of blog pages shown here on the Democrats Against UN Agenda 21 site and the Post Sustainability Institute site. I captured machine-readable PDFs of all of these pages on each site, and I began my analysis by reading through them in their entirety. I also did a bit of very basic concordance work, looking for specific instances of terms and the contexts of their use.

Findings

Throughout her sites, Koire is appealing to presumed U.S. values, such as freedom and democratic representation. There's a nostalgia here, and a fear of the other--shades of "Make America Great Again," in this pre-2016 discourse. The "other" in question is a decidedly un-American other. It's QUOTE "people in poorer countries" who will benefit from a QUOTE "redistribution of wealth" achieved by QUOTE "lowering the standard of living for Americans." These "others" come from QUOTE "nations that have different forms of government, most of which do not value individual rights as much as we do" (<https://www.democratsagainstunagenda21.com/>).

These "other" nations, according to Koire, are also part of the mysterious cabal responsible for Agenda 21's excessives. This idea of mysterious figures behind a global plan is one of the key indicators that we're dealing with a conspiracy theory here. Some specific elements of the site that answer my first research question, "what textual markers indicate to a reader that Koire's writing constitutes conspiracy theorizing?" include:

- The use of a sort of stock conspiracist terminology, such as QUOTE "the real meaning" which Koire opposes to QUOTE "propaganda."

- There's also repeated language about intentional deception: Koire accuses some unnamed other of "manipulation." She says they "lie," "deceive," "although they [a mysterious 'they'] will say [X], [Y]" is in fact the case, "***they*** twisted that," "this is a lie"; these are all phrases and terms that pop up across Koire's pages and sites.
- And finally, there's build-up of a shadowy controlling figure or figures through phrases such as who's QUOTE "behind it." There's also the constant use of passive voice: QUOTE "it is assumed," "you're being delphi'd," people QUOTE "should be rounded up and packed into human settlements"

In effect, the logic of Koire's conspiracy theory builds up a portrait of nefarious conspirators that hews closely to historical representations of what legal scholar Kenneth Marcus (2015) calls QUOTE "the figural Jew".

This became apparent as I read Koire's sites with my second research question in mind: how does the conspiracy theory draw on and refer to the rhetoric of white nationalism and anti-Semitism?

Anti-Semitism can fly under the radar because of an assumption that Nazism is the central example of it; in this view, anything less than literal Nazi atrocities doesn't rise to the bar of being anti-Semitic (Marcus, 2015, p. 99). However, Nazi atrocities are not, and should not be, the bar. There are in fact a number of legal and scholarly definitions of anti-Semitism that provide a much more nuanced way to identify it in the wild.

For example, President Obama's State Department used the following definition of anti-Semitism: QUOTE "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities" (U.S. Department of State).

While this definition describes anti-Semitism as QUOTE "a certain perception of Jews," what it doesn't do is then go on to describe specific characteristics of that perception. This might be surprising, as there are certainly longstanding anti-Semitic stereotypes and tropes that are repeatedly used in anti-Jewish hate speech. And knowing those stereotypes and tropes is one way to guard against allowing anti-Semitism into mainstream discourse.

But on the other hand, anti-Semitism can't be reduced, as Marcus writes, to QUOTE an "authoritative list of words or phrases that are ***always*** or ***never*** anti-Semitic. Rather, each word, phrase, or deed must be ***measured*** against its speaker's intent, its tacit meaning, its cultural significance, et cetera." (2015, p. 215). To come back to the task at hand: when we're reading a text for anti-Semitism, we can't just acontextually look for specific universal markers.

So if you run a search for iterations of the right-truncated search term "jew*", for example, across Koire's websites, you'll find instances of "jew*" on six of democratsagainstunagenda21.com's pages. It also appears in the comments of five blog posts on that site, but used by commenters who appear to not be Koire. The search term doesn't appear on any of her other three websites.

Koire's use of "jew" occurs in three different contexts:

1. First, she analogizes the Nazi genocide of Jews to the UN's supposed endgame for Agenda 21. For example, in one blog post, titled "Visiting a Concentration Camp on September 11," Koire

writes that QUOTE “collection centers were used to concentrate Jews into central areas of Europe so that they could be moved more easily to the murder locations...People who were being relocated, Jews, could believe that they were just being taken to a new town or work site where they would be treated decently, and there would be no need to fight against the relocation...Is Smart Growth just another name for a collection center?”

(<https://www.democratsagainstunagenda21.com/the-way-we-see-itour-blog/archives/09-2013>)

2. Second, Koire mentions Jews twice in the course of arguments about who’s involved in the Agenda 21 conspiracy; she somehow makes Jews both the victims and the perpetrators of the conspiracy. In one post, Koire uses a Jewish historical figure, Arthur Eichengrun, to justify her claim that Bayer, of Bayer aspirin, is a Nazi company; this is part of a bigger argument she’s making, that many of the corporations that stand to profit from Agenda 21 were, and are, Nazi companies (<https://www.democratsagainstunagenda21.com/the-way-we-see-itour-blog/oh-no-they-wouldnt-do-a-thing-like-thatwould-they>).

In tension with that, though, is her accusation that QUOTE “the 20th/21st century religious ‘community’ is dominated by UN Agenda 21,” including “Christians, Jews, and Muslims [who] have joined together in the the [sic] Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development”

(<https://www.democratsagainstunagenda21.com/the-way-we-see-itour-blog/jussie-smollett-and-un-agenda-21>).

3. Her final use of “jew” occurs in two blog posts in which she’s objecting to being categorized as a conspiracy theorist. These are meta-reflections on what textually counts as conspiracy or hate speech. For example, as she’s railing against Facebook for “censoring” Alex Jones and other conspiracists, she lambasts “the media” for informing readers that the word “globalist” is code for “Jewish.” She calls that QUOTE “an attempt to shut down political discourse and to silence us. Just equating 'globalist' and 'Jew' IS anti-Semitic!” (<https://www.democratsagainstunagenda21.com/the-way-we-see-itour-blog/facebook-to-ban-maxine-waters-and-ilhan-omar?view=full>)

With the possible exception of her mention of the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, Koire doesn’t refer to Jews as responsible for Agenda 21. And yet, her discourse nonetheless echoes anti-Semitic versions of this conspiracy theory, such as those promulgated by anti-Semitic white nationalist websites RealJewNews and Stormfront.

The term ‘globalist’ is an anti-Semitic dogwhistle, no matter what Koire says. And she uses it on DemocratsAgainstUNAgenda21.com over 70 times. She uses the similarly tainted conspiracy term “New World Order” about 150 times. George Soros, a progressive Jewish billionaire vilified by anti-Semitic right-wing conspiracy theorists, is namechecked 10 times.

It would seem that Koire’s anti-Semitism is simply dressed up in coded language. One might ask whether we should take her at her word that, say, “globalist” just means “people who support global capitalism or global governance.” But, to return to Marcus’s point about measuring words and phrases against their contexts, it’s hard to take Koire’s objections seriously when she’s appeared on internet radio shows such as “The Unsolicited Opinion,” whose website links out to the Sons of the Confederacy.

Ultimately, though, we don't have to judge authorial intent or naivete. Rather, we can assess discourse based on its function and outcomes. Anti-Semitism can crop up via what Marcus calls the *memetics principle*, which describes how QUOTE "some speakers transmit anti-Jewish cultural stereotypes and defamations, without either conscious or unconscious intent" (Marcus, 2015, p. 178); in other words, anti-Semitic terms and tropes can become "memes" that are transmitted through the shared norms of discourse communities. In Koire's case, that might mean her memetic adoption of anti-Semitic tropes and terminology puts them in front of readers who would never visit sites RealJewNews or Stormfront.

As moral philosopher Kate Manne has recently argued in relation to misogyny, we don't have to discern someone's truest intentions to label their acts--including speech acts. Rather, we can contextually analyze their acts, which is what I've attempted to do here. Koire's dogwhistles, the shape of her conspiracism, the networked coalitions she's built with avowed white nationalists make her work clearly anti-Semitic.

Implications

Koire's sites, and the sites they link out to, form an echo chamber in which, as Roberts-Miller writes, QUOTE "the data is both excessive and empty" (Roberts-Miller, 2015, p. 466). Digital media is full of these excessive empty spaces, and conspiracy theorists are expert at making use of their affordances to spread disinformation while building the appearance of credibility (see e.g., Tillery & Bloomfield, 2019).

When these online echo chamber networks wed environmental conspiracy theories to far-right ideologies, like white nationalism, they present us with an opportunity to better understand both. And when, as in the case I've described today, they're bringing in a third element: a sympathetic, but not far-right, party, we need to pay even more attention. White nationalists, anti-Semites, and other bigoted extremists are radicalized online. And we need to understand their discourses in order to limit their reach and combat their potency.

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