QAnon and the “Conspiracy of the pedosatanist elite”

From the Wayfair rumor to mole children, allegedly sequestered in tunnels by the cabal, the theme of the conspiracy of the pedosatanist elite is central to the QAnon movement.

Introduction

QAnon aggregates other conspiracy theories that already exist. The QAnon nebula is part of a general climate of mistrust pointed out by all observers of the exponential growth of conspiracy theories since the appearance of the term in a linguistic column in the New York Times on November 5, 1995. Adopting the hypothesis of a dictionary, the columnist situated the expression’s appearance in the seventies:

According to the first Barnhart Dictionary Companion, published in 1982, conspiracy theory "has been widely used since 1973, perhaps sparked by the many theories about the worldwide energy crisis, which began that year”.

He rightly pointed out that the term was imposed from the outside and was scornful:

When you call any expressed suspicion, especially a complicated one, a conspiracy theory: you dismiss it as nonsense, the product of an unduly suspicious or even paranoid mind.

Those who were so designated responded by pointing out the blindness of the skeptics.


An important factor in this climate of mistrust has been the abandonment of the complicit silence covering sexual violence against minors, and the interpretations given to this recognition.

The revelations of pedophilia cases that occurred in institutions whose reflex had been to ignore the victims and protect their members, even though they were aggressors, have lasting scandalized public opinion. Let us mention the Catholic Church where in France, after years of denials or half measures, the criminal conviction in 2020 of the child abuser, from 1971 to 1991, parish priest Bernard Preynat in Lyon, that followed revelations of sexual abuse in newly created religious communities (see the site L’Envers du décor), led to the creation in 2018 of the CIASE, an independent commission on sexual abuse in the Church, which marked a turning point in the institution's attitude. One can also mention the attitude of the BBC in the United Kingdom, where the posthumous revelation of the misdeeds, long covered by the BBC, of the very popular host Jimmy Savile (1926-2011) in Exposure: The other side of Jimmy Savile, a documentary broadcast on ITV on October 3, 2012, caused a national scandal.
The extreme right took up these cases. The site Égalité & Réconciliation, created by the influential populist Alain Soral, devoted nearly 10% of the YouTube videos it produced in 2014 (5,200 out of 55,900) to a denunciation of pedophilia, which Soral considers characteristic of the "new Zionist elites" he is fighting. We are dealing here with an instrumentalization, to be situated in the field of propaganda.

The accusation of an essential complicity linking pedophiles, these figures of absolute evil in the 21st century, to the political and social elites constitutes one of these interpretations, which feeds conspiracy theories. Through an analysis of QAnon productions, I will try to identify and then analyze the importance of this theme.

Appeared in October 2017 [in the wake of Pizzagate], the QAnon phenomenon is still very much alive, despite the earthquake of November 2020 which saw the defeat of its hero, forcing followers to question the heart of their belief: the forthcoming success of the crusade led by Donald Trump against the deep state.

QAnon is a movement that is built around an allegation: President Donald Trump is fighting against the cabal of the deep state composed of satanist pedophiles. The main evil that POTUS [President Of The United States]'s vigorous intervention would eliminate during the Great Storm followed by the Great Awakening was the sexual exploitation of children. Indeed, the evil elites are recharging their batteries and cementing their power through the sharing of criminal pedophile behavior. All this would soon disappear, affirmed the QAnon doxa.

The Harms of Child Sexual Exploitation, a Central Theme for QAnon

Whether in the movement's documents or in the comments of analysts, it appears that denouncing the harms of child sexual exploitation is at the heart of the QAnon movement. The first example is taken from the QAnon France website.
La traite d’êtres humains est une industrie qui génère 32 milliards de dollars. $ 32 Milliards.
Plus de 8 millions d’enfants disparaissent chaque année dans le monde.
Par exemple en France, le nombre d’enfants qui disparaissent et ne sont pas retrouvés d’une année sur l’autre est de 11,000 chaque année.

Ces chiffres sont une basse estimation des profits colossaux que génèrent ces crimes.

But their most profitable activity is by far the most sordid / Human beings trafficking, and mainly child sexual trafficking
Human trafficking is an industry that generates $32 billion $32 billion
More than 8 million children disappear each year in the world
For example in France, the number of children who disappear and are not found the following year is: 11,000 each year
These figures are a low estimate of the colossal profits generated by these crimes

In a QAnon review article published on October 20, 2020, the New York Times opens with a “lead” in which accusations of pedophilia play a central role:

Explaining the “big tent conspiracy theory” that falsely claims that President Trump is facing down a shadowy cabal of Democratic pedophiles.
In the body of the article, the key role is still affirmed, but in addition the multifaceted nature of the movement's beliefs is emphasized:

QAnon is the umbrella term for a sprawling set of internet conspiracy theories that allege, falsely, that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who are plotting against Mr. Trump while operating a global child sex-trafficking ring (Roose 2020b https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html October 20)

In a December 8 article (devoted to a forger who impersonated the identities of Trump's family circle on social networks and secured important financial gains), the New York Times once again evokes the power of the QAnon mythology:

Millions of people have been lured down dark internet rabbit holes like QAnon, a pro-Trump conspiracy theory that claims satanic Democrats abuse and eat children and is fueled by someone posing as a government official (Nicas 2020 December 8 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/08/technology/trump-family-impersonator.html?

The movement is resourcing itself by incorporating the #savethechildren themes

At the beginning of August 2019, 8chan, one of QAnon's main communication channels, is taken offline by its hoster/protector. This is because it is on 8chan that, 19 minutes before opening fire, the author of a massacre that will kill 22 people in a supermarket (Walmart) posted a manifesto justifying his attack presented as a healthy reaction to the invasion of Texas by Hispanics. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/us/patrick-crusius-el-paso-shooter-manifesto.html?module=inline

The crisis will be short-lived, since in November 8kun is launched by the founders of 8chan with several pages dedicated to QAnon (Amarasingam & Argentino 2020) and the development of QAnon continues. The pandemic seems to fuel it. Thus QAnon supporters follow Trump in his hostility to the wearing of the mask. After actions via Facebook and Twitter against the QAnon pages, a mobilization campaign around the hashtag "#savethechildren" is leading to considerable developments for the movement. Researcher Marc-André Argentino, who is preparing a thesis on QAnon at Canadian Concordia University (Montreal), “identified 114 groups that bill themselves as anti-trafficking concerns, but are actually dominated by QAnon content”; he indicates that, between July and the end of September “these groups have increased their membership by more than 3,000 percent — yes, 3,000 percent — with a corresponding surge in activity. ‘It’s bringing down the average age of a QAnon follower’ Mr. Argentino said. ‘In 2019, this was mainly a boomer movement. Now we’re seeing millennials and Gen Z getting on board’”.

This activity entails the appearance of videos in which “parents sound the alarm about pedophiles brainwashing and preying on children” (Roose 2020a, September 8 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/08/technology/trump-family-impersonator.html?). And by the organization of parades and demonstrations throughout the United States that will take place throughout the summer of 2020. An article from NBC reports that more than 200 demonstrations are planned for Saturday, August
The wearing of the mask, to which Trump's supporters are logically hostile like their hero, is denounced because "letting your child wear a mask makes it harder for them to cry for help, which they will need to do, because there are evil people, right now, coming to kidnap them" (Jennings 2020, September 25).

However, this appropriation of the organization came up against an unexpected obstacle: The organization Save the Children (which dates back to 1919 and denounced child trafficking, the hashtag is not launched by this organization, however it takes advantage of its notoriety) received a large amount of funding from the enemy Bill Gates and his nefarious foundation. Some will therefore try to propose to replace #savethechildren by #saveour children. (Dwilson 2020, August 20).

Observers stress the importance of the relays offered by Internet influences. In their quest for notoriety on TikTok, they take advantage of the numerous reactions to these statements. The social network popular among teenagers has removed hashtags such as #WWG1WGA and #pizzagate, but has nevertheless hosted a great deal of this type of content:

This surprising demonization of the sympathetic actor is skillfully commented in an editorial in the LA Times:

QAnon, of course, is the goth telenovela animating dangerous political action on the right, with a story line about how the world is run by a spooky syndicate of Satanists committing cartoonishly grisly misdeeds, including cannibalism and ritual child abuse.

To qualify for one of the villain parts in the ongoing tall tale, which is serialized on the internet for the cognitively vulnerable, it’s best to be blameless.

Blameless, like Hanks, almost to the point of caricature. Clean of thought, word and deed. Ready with a quick smile and a helping hand. If you’ve spent your life meeting your marks and being of service to others, you might make a perfect Satan.

That’s how Hanks became Hanksibal Lector. He’s so good, he’s got to be evil.
This is the way to understand QAnon: It’s a series of inversions of reality. The story may seem complicated, with detours involving the ghost of John F. Kennedy Jr. and Hanks’ fictional quest for asylum in Greece.

But the logic is simple. Good is evil, and evil is good. If Hanks is lovely, he must be vile. If Donald Trump is deceitful and barbaric, he must be … the Chosen One. (Hefferman 2020, September 18 https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-09-18/qanon-tom-hanks-blood-libel-protocols-of-the-elders)

The Wayfair rumor, a first mobilization

In July, the Wayfair rumor paved the way for the mobilization of #savethechildren. It was very popular, despite its thin foundation. The rumor claimed that children were being smuggled in expensive furniture: “The theory was widely debunked, but thanks in part to amplification from various lifestyle influencers, #Wayfairgate trended on multiple platforms, arguably setting the stage for #SaveTheChildren to start trending a few weeks later” (Dickson 2020, September 2 https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-mom-conspiracy-theory-parents-sex-trafficking-qamom-1048921/)

Snopes, the American website devoted to the analysis of rumors and urban legends, presents a detailed analysis of the rumor, which appeared as a simple isolated supposition. A post published in Redditt's conspiracy section wondered about it on July 9, 2020. Beginning by noticing that Wayfair was selling some utility closets for over $10,000 the post pursued: “Is it possible Wayfair involved in Human trafficking with their WFX Utility collection? Or are these just extremely overpriced cabinets? (Note the names of the cabinets) this makes me sick to my stomach if it’s true (Evon 2020, July 10 https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/wayfair-trafficking-children/)

In an article in Newsweek of July 10, 2020 where PrincessPeach1987, the author of the post of the preceding day, is interviewed, the names of these pieces of furniture of great price are specified: Neriah, Yaritza, Samiyah and Alyvia. The article stated that the Wayfair firm, while claiming that the very high price of this type of furniture was justified, had chosen to temporarily remove the furniture from its catalog, publishing a very confused statement:

“There is, of course, no truth to these claims. The products in question are industrial grade cabinets that are accurately priced. Recognizing that the photos and descriptions provided by the supplier did not adequately explain the high price point, we have temporarily removed the products from site to rename them and to provide a more in-depth description and photos that accurately depict the product to clarify the price point”. (Whalen 2020, July 10 https://www.newsweek.com/wayfair-child-trafficking-conspiracy-theory-cabinets-scandal-1517013)

With common sense, Snopes noticed that it would be a very curious method for traffickers to do this, showcasing their atrocious misdeeds. This absurd rumor, however, had serious consequences. On July 20, 2020 a press release from the Polaris association https://polarisproject.org/press-releases/polaris-statement-on-wayfair-sex-trafficking-claims/ which maintains a national call center on trafficking in human beings reported a large number of calls related to this unfounded rumor and recalled that this had prevented the call
center from responding to real requests for assistance: “The extreme volume of these contacts has made it more difficult for the Trafficking Hotline to provide support and attention to others who are in need of help”. https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/wayfair-trafficking-children/ 10-23 juillet 2020

Mole Children

Even before the summer of 2020, which saw the mobilization described above, denunciations of the misdeeds of the powerful targeting children were frequent in the QAnon world. Thus, in the Spring of 2020 during the COVID-19 crisis, the installation of tents or the arrival of a hospital ship in New York will be interpreted as indications of a rescue operation for mole children. These victims of the deep state having escaped from it and hiding underground are thus saved and taken care of. The tents or the hospital ship operate under cover, the health reason being a decoy; indeed COVID-19 does not exist but serves to justify these rescue activities organized by POTUS. On April 2, Timothy Charles Holmseth, who seems to live largely in an imaginary realm, and presents himself as a Minnesota-based journalist, posts a question on his site on April 1, 2020: Is there a child rescue operation in New York right now?

His self-presentation underlines its importance since he claims to have integrated in 2019 the Pentagon's anti-pedophilia group (a group so secret that he seems to be the only one to affirm its existence): the Pentagon Pedophile Task Force (PPTF) - whose title paraphrases that of a very real group but led by the FBI, the Child Exploitation and Human Trafficking Task Forces (CEHTTFs). This self-presentation concludes with an ambitious claim: "Timothy Holmseth is the only reporter authorized to report original content for the PPTF. There is ONE MAN between Timothy Holmseth and President Trump".
Holmseth’s post asserts: “A recent U.S. military operation rescued 35,000 ‘malnourished, caged and tortured’ children from tunnels beneath New York City’s Central Park and other unnamed U.S. cities’.

It is through the fact-checking article of the Reuters agency reporting and denying these assertions on June 15, 2020 that we know the content of Holmseth's message, his video having been deleted. Reuters reported a cover of Holmseth's post on April 9 by Before it's news. The site reported that Holmseth had made similar allegations in the fall of 2019:

Wed. 16 Oct. 2019 that same Pentagon Pedophile Task Force reported an unbelievable 2,100 children being held in cages in underground tunnels at the California China Lake Military facility were rescued by Navy Seals and US Marines. The children and teens were said to have been sexually abused, tortured and killed to collect their adrenaline. Most were believed abducted by California Child Protective Services. The military operation involving 10,000 troops. https://beforeitsnews.com/crime-all-stars/2020/04/over-35000-malnourished-caged-children-rescued-out-of-us-tunnels-by-military-2479402.html

In both cases Holmseth was the only source, and no other evidence had emerged, Reuters concluded.

The journalists stressed that this lack of evidence only strengthened the believers in their beliefs:

Reuters was unable to find any reliable reports pertaining to the post’s central claim that 35,000 children had been found and rescued from “secret tunnels” in the U.S.’s largest city. Users on social media appear to take this as a sign of the media’s complicity in obscuring the relevance of this story, an argument often used in conspiracy theories. One example comment on the lack of reporting states: “They want this to be hidden” https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-children-rescued-tunnels-idUSKBN23M2EL
On April 2, 2020, two days after Holmseth's post, an emotional exchange about the unfortunate child moles - which was mocked by commentators - echoed on Twitter:

Vincent Fuska @VFuska · Apr 3
Please pray for the Mole Children, returning to the light, with their unspeakable trauma.

Vincent Fuska @VFuska · Apr 2
From dark to light, the children are resurfacing.
One month later, a group, the Mole Children of Maryland was formed on May 1, 2020. Its success is modest since at the date of our questioning (16/12/2020), it has only 53 members.
Both this illustration and the presentation text of this small group show that they fully adhere to QAnon mythology, although the term does not appear in the text: “We must see in the closets of the shady underground complexes in which the mole children are unlawfully detained”.

The many other occurrences of the expression on Facebook all refer to productions intended for a child audience, and are mostly cartoons. Indeed, the characters of such child types living in underground spaces are frequent in this world of happy fantasy.

Mole People and Mole Children

The idea of underground characters, organized in counter-society or living in isolation from the society that rejected them, is frequently found in contemporary entertainment industry productions. We will limit ourselves to the example of the contemporary revival of the Morlocks invented in 1895 by H.G. Wells in *The Time Machine*:

In *Marvel Comics*, two very different underground “mole people” societies exist: the Morlocks, a society of mutant outcasts, named after the subterranean race from H.G. Wells’ novel, that live in the abandoned tunnels and sewers beneath New York City; and the inhabitants of Subterranea, a fictional cavernous realm far beneath the Earth's surface where various species of subterranean humanoids exist. The Moloids (or Mole People) are the inhabitants of Subterranea most commonly depicted in the comics. Moloids usually serve as soldiers for the Mole Man, a human from the surface world who discovered Subterranea and subsequently became ruler of the Moloids. Mole Man is frequently an antagonist of the Fantastic Four, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mole_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mole_people)

In the 1990s, the very real subject of the homeless, many of whom were living in New York City, often in abandoned underground transportation systems and tunnels, became topical; they were referred
to as The Mole People in an article in the New York Times (Tierney 1990) and later in journalist Jennifer Toth's book The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York City (1993), which was a great success but was also accused of sensationalism. The titles of later books on this phenomenon, by Dutch anthropologist Teun Voeten (The Tunnel People, 1996 for the Dutch edition, 2010 for the English edition) and photo-journalists Margaret Morton (The Tunnel: The Underground Homeless of New York City (Architecture of Despair), 1995) and Andrea Star Reese (Urban Cave, 2015) were more neutral and descriptive.

Let's return to QAnon and the allegations about unfortunate (and imaginary) mole children. The ironic article by Robyn Pennachia, published on Wonkette, reminds us of the frequency with which undergrounds are used to denounce imaginary conspiracies.

One of the most memorable features of the investigation into McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California, were reports of underground tunnels where the McMartins brought children to sexually assault them. The McMartins, of course, were found innocent after a three year trial and no one ever found any damn tunnels. Including Gloria Steinem, who helped fund an excavation of the area around the preschool searching for them. Since the very beginnings of the Satanic Panic in the 1980s, believers in Satanic Ritual Abuse have been obsessed with tunnels.

And now, thirty-plus years later, we're back to the damn tunnels. Because the QAnon idiots have recently turned their attention to a theory that Central Park is currently teeming with mole children who had been living in underground tunnels, and who have recently been rescued by the US military, on the orders of one Donald J. Trump (Pennachia 2020a, April 6 https://www.wonkette.com/qanon-idiots-very-concerned-about-mole-children-now)

In the French case of La Rumeur d'Orléans (Edgar Morin et al., 1969), the underground tunnels were at the forefront of this complex of accusations of the abduction of young women, then targeting Jewish merchants, which gave significant repercussions to the case:

According to the rumor, which appeared in April 1969, the dressing rooms of six clothing stores in the rue de Bourgogne, in the old center of Orleans, all run by Jews, were in fact entrapments for young women, who would disappear through a wooden trap door under the dressing room, be drugged by hypodermic injections and evacuated through the many underground passages that existed under the city to be delivered to a prostitution network: the white slave trade. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rumeur_d'Orl%C3%A9ans

In an even more delirious version, the underground passages would end up on the Loire River, where the kidnapped women would be picked up by a pocket submarine to deliver them to the Middle East.

On December 31, 2020, Robyn Pennacchia returns to the subject of child moles, and points out that this accusation, like the Wayfair rumor, is based on the thinnest foundations:

Who among us can forget the MOLE CHILDREN. This was another one of those conspiracy theories, like the Wayfair conspiracy, that was pretty much based entirely on one person going "What if THIS thing were true?" and a whole bunch of other people going "Sounds about right to me!" (Pennachia 2020b, December 31 https://www.wonkette.com/here-are-just-some-of-the-85-000-stupid-things-people-believed-this-year)
The Mole People, movie by Virgil W. Voguel, 1956
Why do QAnon’s extreme allegations about child sex trafficking mobilize so successfully?

After detailing the extravagant allegations from the QAnon galaxy about child sex abuse, our purpose here will be to analyze how the extreme allegations about child sexual exploitation have strongly mobilized audiences in 2020 who have then, by contiguity as it were, adhered to all the QAnon theses.

Highly visible on Instagram through their comments, the young, white, mom influencers, mainly active in the domains of lifestyle and parenting advice, have been sensitive to the “child redemption narrative”, very present in the QAnon ideology, and have actively supported the spread of #SaveTheChildren hashtags. “What has been so seductive about the #SaveTheChildren protests is that it starts from an irrefutable premise (who in their right mind would be opposed to saving trafficked children?) and gradually umbrellas into a wide-ranging, increasingly unhinged conspiracy theory (not only are children being trafficked, but they’re being trafficked by the Clintons”. (Dickson 2020)

The QAnon galaxy was carrying a message of hope: the impending storm that the hero president would unleash against the deep state; a storm that would accompany the great awakening and the establishment of a new era ’rid’ of the pedosatanist elites. This galaxy is undoubtedly in the midst of reconstruction after the events that have followed one another since the November 2020 elections and the defeat of Trump.

A The United States

Denying the extreme figures

The QAnon galaxy circulates extreme figures about child sex trafficking, be it at the global level, in the United States or in France; it defines child sex trafficking in a very
special way presenting it as one of the major activities of the evil "elite group of Satan worshippers" that the QAnon denounce and whose disappearance they announce. In the first part of this article, we indicated that the QAnon France website evoked on a global level 8 million missing children each year and $32 billion in annual profits for the "child sex trafficking industry", while in France 11,000 children go missing each year. In the United States, the QAnon commonly cites the figure of 800,000 annual disappearances. These extravagant claims result in significant levels of approval. Thus in a survey for national public radio conducted from December 21 to 25, 2020 in the United States, the Ipsos institute asked to identify as true or false the statement: "A group of Satan-worshipping elites who organize a sexual network of child exchanges are trying to control $32 billion in profits is generated by the human trafficking industry every year.

La traite d’êtres humains est une industrie qui génère 32 milliards de dollars. $ 32 Milliards.
Plus de 8 millions d’enfants disparaissent chaque année dans le monde.
Par exemple en France, le nombre d’enfants qui disparaissent et ne sont pas retrouvés d’une année sur l’autre est de : 11,000 chaque année.

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our politics and our media". Only 47% answered "it's not true"; 37% did not know if the statement was false or true and 17% thought it was true. (Newall 2020)

Michael Hobbes, journalist who since May 2018 has been hosting "You're Wrong About", a blog that analyzes and denies the collective fears and urban legends of yesterday, the first episode of which was devoted to the satanic panics of the 1980s, has analyzed these appalling figures. (Hobbes 2020)

A first difficulty is that of definitions because nobody talks about the same thing when child sex trafficking is mentioned. Thus, the American legal definition is very broad since the paid meeting of an underage prostitute (or prostitute) constitutes trafficking even if its duration does not exceed one hour. While this is a distressing social fact, it is far from the worst-case scenarios that still feed contemporary blockbuster films describing the global networks of kidnapping of young virgins to order.
In *Taken*, the heroic Lian Neeson saves his kidnapped daughter from Albanese networks ready to sell her in the Middle East. Released in 2008, the movie has been written and produced by Luc Besson; it played for 23 weeks in the U.S., receipts $145,000,989 and for 11 weeks in France, 1,018,518 entrances; two follow-ups, in 2012 and 2015, and a TV series in 2017-2018 will prolong its success (Wikipedia https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taken_(film). This account of the film’s career shows that this kind of story - which all connoisseurs say is hardly anchored in reality - always has a great impact, even if the entertainment/information frontier here remains hazy and uncertain.

A second problem comes from the quality of the figures circulating. They are often based on poor quality studies that extrapolate to the entire population basing themselves on results obtained from a small, biased sample (100 girls recruited through volunteer work, for example). In addition, they are made to tell what is not. Thus the 800,000 'disappearances' assumed to occur annually in the United
States correspond in fact to a figure half as high of 424,606 reports of disappearance; a very high figure, however, most (99%) are resolved by the return of the child. The number of actual disappearances (stereotypical kidnappings corresponding to the French disparition inquiétante) was 115 per year in 2011 according to NISMART (National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Throwaway Children). The revised figures do not correspond to a smooth and harmonious reality and parental abductions or runaways are indicators of much suffering. Hence the persistence of fantasy narratives of the Taken type, which have the advantage of attributing the ills to external and all-powerful sources.

The QAnon accusations have led all commentators to refer to the 1980s in the United States, which were already mixing the very real problem of child sex abuse with the largely imaginary problem of satanic pedocriminality.

The 1980s in the United States: (a) Missing Children

The theme of the fight against the sexual exploitation of children is not new one, but has been around for forty years in the United States. The missing children movement will be the first to mobilize public opinion. The dramatic abduction and murder of two 6-year old children will play a major role in this movement's construction:

Etan Patz will disappear in 1979 in New York on his way to his school bus and Adam Walsh in 1981 in Hollywood (Florida) in a shopping mall. Etan Patz will never be found (a conviction after a confession will take place in 2017); Adam's head will be discovered two weeks later in a drainage canal; his murder will only be attributed to Otis Toole, a serial murderer who died in prison in 1996, in 2008. In 1983 the television documentary Adam will be seen by 38 million spectators at its first screening.

Adam's father, John Walsh, was an active advocate for more responsive public policy and was instrumental in the creation in 1984 of the NCMEC National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a federally funded center dedicated to combating child disappearances and exploitation during the Reagan era when federal disengagement was a major focus of public policy.

The missing children problem surged in a period: “featuring considerable discussion about the victimization of children. The same newspapers and magazines which printed articles about missing children also explored child abuse, child prostitution, child pornography, Halloween sadism, incest, child molestation, satanic cults, and harmful rock lyrics” (Best 1987:117).

Joël Best, a sociologist who has devoted several articles and books to this problem, reminds us that this is about the setting-up of arguments designed to move people; activists who want to change things brandish numbers without always sorting them out; it's all about persuading: “The debate over stranger abduction reveals the importance of statistics in the discussion of social problems. Three principles seem clear: big numbers are better than little numbers; official numbers are better than unofficial numbers; and big, official numbers are best of all” (Best
Thirty-three years later, the recipe remains the same except for the preference for official figures that have fallen victim to the considerable progress of the rejection of institutions.

The 1980s in the United States: (b) Satanic panics

At the same time, the Americans of the 1980s were alarmed by the existence of a satanic cult with more than a million followers and some 60,000 baby sacrificed every year. Ignored by the serious press, these allegations were the talk of the town on television programs, where they sometimes peaked to large-scale audiences, and on radio; they inspired documentary books and fiction. Training seminars were offered to law enforcement - the highly decentralized organization of the American police force made it more sensitive to such allegations; therapists helped survivors to recover - often under hypnosis - memories of the abuse they had suffered and these survivors successfully sued their abusive parents in civil court.

For sociologists studying the phenomenon, the contrast with the missing children's movement was striking because there was no evidence of the allegations' reality (Best 2001). Rumors attributing cattle mutilations to satanists (which appeared in 1974 but were rejected by investigations into the matter that claimed the mutilations were accidental); other rumors accusing McDonald's president Ray Kroc of satanism in 1977 and the logo of the firm Procter & Gamble in 1981 were then indications of a concern generally attributed mostly to the considerable success of the book Michelle Remembers (1980) co-written by Canadian psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder and his patient Michelle Smith, whom he will marry after his divorce. The book presents Michelle's memories of the atrocious mistreatment she endured when at the age of 5 she was delivered by her parents to the satanists and tortured as a slave for many months (because of her attachment to the Christian faith, the satanists freed her and she forgot everything for 20 years, later recovering her memories through hypnosis in Pazder's office).

I have discussed this collective fear, which had spread to the United Kingdom but had spared France, proposing an interpretation of it:

Contemporary legends often arise in conflictual social contexts that they modify, playing a political role of control and interpretation of ambiguous and anguishing situations. The appearance of a legend is [...] the embodiment of fears that are very real even if the story seems unbelievable. We know Mrs. du Deffand's words about ghosts: "I don't believe in them but I am afraid of them". This is no doubt the case with the extravagant statements circulating in the United States about satanic sects. (Campion-Vincent 1993:120).

The craze for the idea of a bloody satanic cult was short-lived: investigations launched by skeptics led to the denial of dramatic allegations; sociologists spoke of moral panic, i.e.
collective fear without foundation; psychologists denounced false memories induced by suggestive hypnotic therapies: (see Elisabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham 1994 The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse, French edition 1998, 2012 paperback); the survivors' parents organized themselves and created the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (1992-2019); finally some survivors sued - always in civil courts – their hypnotherapists for implantation of false memories.

**B_ Evolution 1980-2021**

**Child sex abuse, Satanism**

Forty years later, it is striking that we find the two themes associated; however, with important differences: traumatic amnesia following sexual abuse, long questioned because of the excesses of suggestive hypnotic therapies, is quite widely recognized although debates remain among professionals; if the term satanists is still used, it is as a simple attribute of the elites, a dreadful trait (but not developed in the hypothesis of organized worship) which is part of the evil essence of these elites that nothing stops in their unbridled quest for power and transgressive pleasure; as for the accusations of murders of young children, always present, they are technicized since it is to obtain a rejuvenating substance, anedochrome, that these murders are said to be perpetrated.

**The growth of conspiracy theories is linked to the lies and intrusions of the States**

The rise of conspiracy theories can be explained by many factors other than the hypothetical progression of the irrational that some denounce. In the United States, historian Kathryn Olmsted, whose study covers a long period, since 1917, *(2009 Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11)*, points out that, as the federal government has grown, so has the mistrust towards the authorities, and the surveillance of the population they have conducted through an expanding set of secret services. For a more cynical European observer who is not surprised by the lies of the authorities, which he considers inevitable and structural, Olmsted's criticisms sometimes seem based on a typically American 'naivety', such as when she asserts that: “Americans have always believed that every citizen has as much right to discover and affirm the truth as government authorities” (Olmsted 2009: 235). However, when, after acknowledging the useful role played by these truth seekers in opposing official lies, she details the evils of the systematic and generalized conspiracism that dominates today, one cannot but approve of her vigorous denunciation of official lies:

In some ways, these citizen researchers do help to keep American democracy healthy and inform the public debate. [...] Oliver Stone’s JFK proposed some absurd theories, but it prompted Congress to demand the release of thousands of documents related to the Kennedy assassination. [...] In this sense, conspiracy theories can constrain increasingly centralized executive power. [...] Yet the costs of conspiracy theories far outweigh their benefits. [...]


When citizens […] cannot trust their government to tell the truth, when they are convinced that public officials routinely conspire, lie, and conceal their crimes, they become more susceptible to that dread disease, conspiracism. They become less likely to trust the government to do anything: to conduct fair elections, say, or spend their tax money, or protect their children or their planet. The result is a profoundly weakened polity, with fewer citizens voting and more problems left unaddressed for a future generation that is even more cynical about the possibility of reforms. (Olmsted 2009 : 235-239)

Olmsted, who remarks: “Of course, the U.S. government can never be completely open, for a modern state needs to keep some secrets to survive.”, concludes by recommending that citizens exert a constant vigilance towards their leaders: “Citizens of a democracy must be wary of and alternative conspiracists alike, demanding proof for the theories. Yet Americans should be most skeptical of official theorists, because the most dangerous conspiracies and conspiracy theories flow from the center of American government, not from the margins of society”. (Olmsted 2009:239)

Internet and later the social networks have radically transformed the conditions of appearance and diffusion of the social problems denounced by activists

To appreciate the major role played by the Internet and social networks in the dissemination of QAnon's "children" themes, it is useful to look back a few decades. Kathryn Olmsted, who closely studied the two founding episodes of the Kennedy assassination and the September 11 attacks, episodes marked by numerous official lies that sparked passionate communities of truth seekers, recalled in September 2018 (Palma 2018) how difficult it was in the post-Kennedy era in the 1960s and 1970s to identify those who, like yourself, wanted to denounce abuses by the authorities. Letters from readers published in the press were thus sifted through. Then you had to write or call each other and meet in person at each other's homes. Then you organized yourselves into small groups publishing dedicated newsletters, from stencils to digitalized bulletins. With the Internet and social networks the identification and sharing of ideas and data is immediate.

A long-standing issue, but always in mutation

Concern around child sex abuse is – in the United States but mostly in France – an evolving issue. After the centration, reassuring, upon the danger caused by the outside aggressor one arrives at the recognition of the ubiquity of aggressors who are our close ones, our kin, like us.

Exaggerations will be denied. But such exaggerations accompany all emergences of social problems, all identifications and problematizations of situations that until now have been denied or ignored.

At the same time, the demonization of the elites seems to be progressing, with the denunciation of their complicity in sexual abuse in the broadest sense, also targeting women and the weak: this is the explosion of #MeToo hashtags from 2017 onwards. The success of the accusations in the QAnon galaxy can be explained by the merging of these two issues.
. Pedosatanist elites: an utmost

In the long run, the threats yesterday attributed to foreigners and minorities are now totally transferred to the corrupt elites and the misdeeds attributed to them seem to prove their profound abjection by their enormity. These misdeeds constitute an utmost, since these pedosatanists attack children, the heart of the group's life, with the help of the figure of Evil Satan (finally, satanists because the supernatural is very little present in the accusations of satanism of the 21st century). Certainly the external enemies of yesterday are not forgotten and the complicity that unites "them" and "ours" often evoked, however the emphasis is placed on the enemy within.

C In France

The recognition of child sex abuse is, in France in 2021, a hot topic in rapid evolution.
VANESSA SPRINGORA
Le consentement

"Récit d'une emprise, un texte cathartique qui fera date."
Le Monde
Two recent books, who have had major impacts, have questioned the complicity and the selfishness of the elites: *Le Consentement* (2020) denouncing a writer who had long boasted about his liaisons with young teenage girls while remaining appreciated and protected by public authorities and intellectual circles, Gabriel Matzneff; *La Famillia Grande* (2021), revealing a "secret" known but buried as early
as 2008, while the book in 2021 will lead to the demolition of a major figure of the elite with repercussions on the “Science Po” institution, a breeding ground for leaders of which the accused was one of the gems.

Its description would be beyond the scope of this article, that will limit itself to highlighting aspects that may make the French public receptive to the extreme allegations presented by the QAnon movement on child sex abuse.

From the May 1968 attitude (unlimited sexual liberation) to indignation

It is over a long period of time that, marked by what is commonly referred to as the May ’68 attitude (i.e., an unlimited sexual liberation, normalizing homosexuality and describing children as desirous and accomplices), public opinion in France seemed to accept the legitimacy of adults' sexual relations with children and adolescents. Published on the occasion of the opening of a trial, the petition ending by the sentence: “Three years of jail for kisses and cuddles that is enough!” published in *Le Monde* on January 26, 1977 - and in *Libération* the following day - dates from 9 years after May 1968; Daniel Cohn-Bendit's statements on the joys of erotic games with 5-year-olds on the TV program *Apostrophes* date from April 23, 1982. These statement pick up on memoirs published in 1975 and which will be exhumed again in 2001, provoking an “self-examination” issue entitled “Génération provoc [Bravado Generation]” in *Libération* of February 23, 2001. As for the exchange between Gabriel Matzneff, complacently questioned by Bernard Pivot in *Apostrophes* about the multiple adolescent conquests listed in his latest opus, and the Canadian journalist-writer Denise Bombardier, who expresses her rejection, which leads to sneers on the set and then to an outcry against the protester, it dates from March 2, 1990. More subtle than the intellectuals who derided her, President Mitterrand, anxious to distance himself from Gabriel Matzneff which he had received, invited Denise Bombardier to the Elysée Palace. She will tell the story of their exchange ten years later:

> So , this Matzneff, you have pushed him around, he told me with a complicit smile. It is true, he went on, that once I recognized him some talent and a certain culture. Unhappily (his voice became theatrical) he has descended into pedophilia ... and the orthodox religion!

> — I added: In my country he would be jailed, Mr. President.

> Ah! Said he, with a sweeping arm gesture, you know as well as me these Parisian intellectuals. They are so obsessed to seem liberal, especially in these so delicate matters, that they stray. (Bombardier 2000).

The debate around the merchant networks

Iconic faits divers play a major role in the recognition of abuse. In the book *Comme un abus d'enfance* (2008), I showed how the Dutroux (1996, Belgium) Alègre (2003,
Toulouse, France) Outreau (2001-2005, Boulogne, Northern France) criminal "cases" overcame these complacent attitudes. However: "One of the negative consequences of the recognition of child sex abuse has been the adherence to the theses of a pedophile conspiracy of the powerful" (Campion-Vincent 2008:53).

The existence of merchant networks is very real, and the growth of the Internet, which has created a lucrative market for child sex abuse images, has greatly increased their occurrences (Dance & Keller New York Times 2019-2020). But beyond these real cases, the existence of merchant networks involving elites continues to be a matter of debate. This hypothesis is so firmly rejected by a French judicial institution scalded by the mistakes committed during of the Outreau case that the institution sometimes denies obvious complicities. On the other side of the fence, some children's defense associations firmly maintain the most extreme hypotheses: Marc Dutroux was "the provider of fresh flesh for orgies involving the Belgian Gotha" (Garde, Sellier and Zéro 2020 : 30), Patrice Alègre supplied the sadomasochist network in Toulouse, the accused declared innocent in Outreau were indeed guilty, last but not least Jeffrey Epstein was present in Paris when - from 14 to 16 June 2019 - a meeting of the "sulfurous Trilateral" was held (Garde, Sellier and Zéro 2020:39).

Victims' associations and activism around disappearances

The numbers of missing minors in France are high. We find the same distinction as in the United States, not always easy to explain, between reports of disappearances (51,287 in 2019) and disturbing disappearances (918 in the same year, supplemented by 524 parental abductions, often by a parent living outside France). Since 2012 the public authorities have been subsidizing a telephone number - which exists at the European level - 116 000. However, the associations, which are numerous and often created after the loss of a loved one, deplore the lack of coordination between all the players in this multifaceted and complex field. France does not have the equivalent of the American NCMEC.

These disappearances sometimes correspond to murders, and when the murderers are repeat offenders, politicians join grieving families in attacking the judicial institution. For the past thirty years, the families of victims, or those whose cases are closed and remain unsolved, have complained about the indifference of the public authorities and have organized themselves into associations. This activism is hardly to the liking of the judicial institution, and the presence on the "Mur des cons [dickheads'wall]" of two fathers of young, murdered women who had criticized the judicial institution is not at all anecdotal.

Discovered by chance in April 2003, the "Wall of Cons" on which, in their offices, members of the Magistrates' Union pinned and ridiculed their enemies, gave rise to a long procedure, initiated and won by one of the two fathers of the murdered young women, General Philippe Schmitt - whose daughter had been the victim of a recidivist. Jean-Pierre Escarfail, president of APACS (Association for the Protection against Assault and Sexual Crimes) is the father of a young girl murdered in 1991 by Guy Georges, a serial killer who was not arrested
Many closed cases, abandoned by the courts, have been taken up in recent years in France. The name of lawyer Corinne Herrmann is associated with these reopening. Her most recent success is to have obtained the reopening of the investigation that led to the confession of the serial killer Michel Fourniret, who confessed to the murder of Estelle Mouzin, who was 9 when she disappeared on her way back from school eighteen years earlier on January 9, 2003. Her body has not been located, however.

American memorials and their presence in France

The dramatic murders that launched the initially American movement of missing children have left traces that maintain their memory, including in France. The memory of Etan Patz is evoked each year on May 25, the anniversary of his disappearance, which is the day of the missing children, created in 1983 and internationalized in 2001 (the 116000 Missing Children system coordinates the events around this day in France). If the Code Adam (kidnapping alert system adopted by Walmart department stores in 1994) is not very present in France, the kidnapping alert (l’alerte enlèvement), a coordinated alert system following disturbing disappearances of minors, operational in France since 2006, is an adaptation of the Amber Alert, named in 1996 in memory of Amber Hagerman, kidnapped at the age of 9 in 1996 and whose body was found 4 days later (murder still unsolved).

To conclude

Kidnapping of children by a network of powerful corrupt people acting on a very large scale? It is a phantasm, a delusion, but a recurring one, exploited by a whole sector of these scary fictions that we all consume. The phantasm is also indirectly used by activists who want to change an opinion they consider indifferent as they present their causes by matching their demands for redefinition of a state of affairs with appalling (but fortunately rare) examples that are likely to stir up the public they want to convince. Thus, the demand for a more active fight against child sex abuse will be introduced by atrocity tales intended to persuade, which are rhetorical arguments, quite legitimate. These atrocity tales remain and subsequently play a central role. Joel Best indicates that this was the case in the 1980s in the United States for missing children: “This analysis of the missing children problem suggests that rhetoric can play a central role in claims-making about social problems. In particular, atrocity tales gave shape to the missing children problem.” (Best 1987:114) Cases, much more frequent (and this was recognized), of runaways and parental abductions were ignored, to focus on the danger of abductions and murders by strangers, on the figure of the evil predator randomly choosing its victims.

However, the advent of the Internet has led to a development that everyone agrees is exponential in the trade of images of sex abuse. Raping children can be very lucrative, and it is tempting to choose those children readily available, to rape your children. Activists and journalists are, for the moment, the only ones to talk about this situation, about which the authorities do not very talk much:
The distinction between the intra and extra-familial has become tenuous at a time of cyber-criminality, live streaming ... The rape of a kid, at home, by a relative may be shared in several countries via a webcam (Garde, Sellier and Zero 2020:27).

Tech companies are reporting a boom in online photos and videos of children being sexually abused — a record 45 million illegal images were flagged last year alone — exposing a system at a breaking point and unable to keep up with the perpetrators, an investigation by The New York Times found.

The spiraling activity can be attributed in part to a neglectful federal government, overwhelmed law enforcement agencies and struggling tech companies. And while global in scope, the problem is firmly rooted in the United States because of the role Silicon Valley plays in both the spread and detection of the material. […]

As the technologies lower people’s inhibitions, online groups are sharing images of younger children and more extreme forms of abuse. “Historically, you would never have gone to a black market shop and asked, ‘I want real hard-core with 3-year-olds,’” said Yolanda Lippert, a prosecutor in Illinois who leads a team investigating online child abuse. “But now you can sit seemingly secure on your device searching for this stuff, trading for it.” (Dance and Keller 2020)

To reject the delusional phantasm of a world-domineering pedosatanist elite must not mean being blind towards the seductions and harsh realities of evil

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