

**Book review: Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowndes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University Of Minnesota Press, 2019. ISBN-13: 978-1517903596 (paperback). 208 pages. \$19.95.**

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The role of transracialized narratives in the development of contemporary conspiracy theories is ubiquitous, though often ignored as part of the larger continuum of racialized discourses. In reviewing the new book *Producers, Parasites, Patriots*, Shane Burley unpacks the use of underlying narratives that developed in a racialized context and have expanded beyond their original usage. To do this he analyzes the key arguments of the original text and applies them to the world of conspiracy theories, which evolved from anti-Semitic scripts and, while often erasing their specific focus on Jews, maintain the same ideological threads. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Transformative Studies Institute*. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2019 by *The Transformative Studies Institute*. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS:** Producerism, Anti-Semitism, Patriot Movement, Militia Movement, Public Employee Unions, Conspiracy Theories.

## INTRODUCTION

When I first pulled up to Zuccotti Park the camp's culture was in flux, which, in large part, was because of the sprinkling of frost from the first sub-freezing mornings of the year. In November of 2011, just a month after Occupy Wallstreet began, we thought the real test of the movement was how outdoor living would play in a New York winter. But as people started opening their tents, bustling about to the food table, a small

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entourage started running to a street corner where some lingering news cameras had started gathering around a lone person waving a sign. Standing in front of the famed golden bull statue was a man holding a placard that read “Google: Jewish Billionaires.” He was not new, he had been lingering for days, and over the next several hours people found clever ways to try and block his messaging. (Though he still got in photo after photo, article after article, and some tourists took selfies with him.)<sup>2</sup>

This wasn’t that much of a surprise. The Occupy Wallstreet Movement was rightfully exciting. The class anger of the 2007-8 financial crash was crystallizing into a true mass movement, warts and all. Like any real large conglomeration of people, organizers had a total inability to demand any kind of ideological uniformity from participants. And that was the point. Any movement that derives its praxis from its size has to compromise on the clarity of its vision. The general point of agreement was that capitalism, as we are experiencing it now, has gone astray, and that there is an elite financial class with undue power in comparison to the rest of us. Within that left populist framework, however, a different narrative started to creep in, one that was less critical of capitalism itself than it was of the specific people they suspected were pulling the strings. Sometimes these were shadowy “elites,” unnamed and unseen, sometimes it was families with familiar last names, which often start with “R.” And, at the bottom of this reverse pyramid, the named enemies were just Jews.

So I wasn’t surprised to see someone ranting about Jewish bankers at Occupy, and the overt antisemitism was swiftly dealt with, but it was the residue it left that turned my stomach. Open “naming of the Jew” was not allowed, but the “big tent” that had been formed permitted almost all other manifestations of the same story. Cabals, secret agendas, the particular degeneracy of finance capital, rootless cosmopolitans, the shadow government, and, of course, Zionism, were always there, always an acceptable objection in our ideological confederation. It wasn’t that antisemites had come in and consciously influenced the direction (they certainly tried, with more or less success), but that our disparate ideas about late capitalism, the critiques being utilized in an increasingly complicated social movement, had deeply laid narratives that transcended their original overt antisemitism, but maintained much of that antisemitism’s fundamental character. The Jewish conspiracy remained

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<sup>2</sup> This led to a string of “what aboutisms” in news coverage correlating this moment of antisemitism to racism at the Tea Party. There was no comparison. Joseph Berger, “Cries of Anti-Semitism, but Not at Zuccotti Park,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/nyregion/occupy-wall-street-criticized-for-flashes-of-anti-semitism.html>.

even if the Jews had been plucked out. And as the movement continued to struggle with their vision of exactly what the problems in capitalism are (and what the solution could be), these narratives acted as a virus, infecting discourse, confusing responsibility, and maintaining a mythology about power that has been used for centuries to pass the blame for misfortune from the class responsible to a people who shall not be named (or who shall dwell alone).

## WHAT'S IN A NARRATIVE?

One of the most common courses of discussion on the contemporary, post-Reagan American left is why the working class works against its own interests. Books like Thomas Frank's liberal classic *What's the Matter with Kansas?* contrasts rural America's past orientation with the socialist party with its current status as a bastion of conservatism, even when the free-market economics it professes is primarily at odds with the working class's own conditions of economic decline.<sup>3</sup> The neoliberal policies favored by conservative politicians are founded on meritocratic narratives that, while appealing to a rugged identity for rural and blue-collar workers, leaves them with dismal prospects. The attacks on labor unions, farm subsidies that support massive agribusiness rather than family farms, the disinvestment in rural social services, and the general dismantling of the Keynesian social safety nets all statistically hurt rural and blue-collar workers the most, while often leaving urban liberals professionals intact (more or less). So why do these voters line up around the block to support the politicians that disenfranchise them?

Frank's work is within such a narrow framework that it actually misses the mark. The question we should be asking ourselves is not why they vote against their own interests, but why do we adopt entire modes of thought that serve only to victimize people like ourselves. It could simply be reduced to political tribalism, and that is certainly a factor, but there are large questions about how narratives that dictate who is to blame can rob us of the ability to really identify the responsible parties.

From the late 19th century onward we can safely say that the West has entered an era of "mass politics," meaning a period in which the large mass of people is invited to participate in some fashion in the political process. In the era of fixed monarchies, justified in the "divine right of kings," there was little currency in a mediated opinion on the current state of things.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

Revolts, riots, revolutions, all happened in opposition to the existing political order, rarely within it, but today we have a range of political ideologies meant to help someone realize their best version of what we have now. Democracy is the vessel; ideas are the path to perfection.<sup>4</sup>

## EATING FROM A TRASHCAN CALLED IDEOLOGY

This has, likewise, led away from politics purely as self-interest and into an era of nuanced positions, one where the interests of a particular class of people are rarely understood with uniformity. Instead, the ruling institutions of capital are able to influence modes of thought that reframe what is important in political decision making, to recontextualize who has agency in political turmoil, and supplant class identity and antagonisms with competing identities, each with their own set of motivating values. While the nominal institutional left held much of the working class up through the 1960s (I am not suggesting this is any kind of monolith), the shift towards the popularity of social conservatism and the mobilization of the Moral Majority and other Republican vessels utilized latent bigotries to combine them into a single political thought. The incoherence inherent in William F. Buckley's formulation of conservatism was now seen as a natural and normal, as though conservative Christianity, free market economics, and aggressive foreign policy all were perfect bedfellows.<sup>5</sup> As with most eras of class struggle, bigotry was again used to replace class solidarity, and narratives that had existed for centuries were re-engaged so that people would gain complicity in their own subjugation.<sup>6</sup> The poor worker then bought into detrimental narratives about poverty, even if it meant that it would take them down as well.

It is exactly this framework that Joe Lowndes and Daniel Martinez HoSang's new book *Producers, Parasites, Patriots* attempts to understand more fully, re-approaching this dynamic in a contemporary period of rising national populism, Trumpism, and the mobilization of the political far-right. The book does this by centering a particularly strong narrative

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<sup>4</sup> This is one of the elements that really allows for the existence of a mass reactionary movement moved through populism, such as fascism, and one of the elements that makes fascism a uniquely modern construct since it requires the mass participation of people and could not have been possible in an era before politics was a system of mass (if coerced) political participation. Shane Burley, *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* (Chico: AK Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2016), 24-27.

<sup>6</sup> Shane Burley, "When They Bought Us Out," *Gods & Radicals*, September 4, 2018, <https://godsandradsicals.org/2018/09/04/when-they-bought-us-out/>.

dynamic, that of ‘parasites’ and that of ‘producers.’ Parasites are introduced as a specifically racial narrative about black people used to create mass white complicity with slavery and later eras of white supremacist subjugation and apartheid. Black people are portrayed as parasites by nature, which the whites have to take responsibility for through mass oppressive violence, for the protection of both white and black people.

Whites, by contrast, are “producers,” they make civilization while black people only feed off of it through a supposed naturally occurring binary. This image has allowed the creation of a white labor aristocracy, one founded in continually offering white labor a marked advantage and thereby reinforcing the myth of white producerism since the conditions for white success and black codependence were reproduced through force.<sup>7</sup>

The racialized categories of the “producer,” the “parasite,” and the “patriot” have long been deployed to do this work, differentiating those groups deemed self-reliant, autonomous, and worthy of social protection from those who are dependent, debased, and worthy of abandonment and disavowal.<sup>8</sup>

Patriots are then the people that look at the success and failure of the system and accept them, they protect and defend the institutions while denying the implicit stratification they produce.

This is a well understood dynamic that is fostered by capital, including early on by plantation owners, who intend to maintain their financial hegemony by destroying the class solidarity of white and black workers.<sup>9</sup> White workers were economically harmed by the slave labor that suppressed their wages, yet they were bought off with cultural, institutional, and social superiority.<sup>10</sup> They were never able to create

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<sup>7</sup> J. Sakai, *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat from Mayflower to Modern* (Oakland: PM Press and Kersblebedeb, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowdnes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 4.

<sup>9</sup> This has become a heavily exploited narrative in recent years to raise the profile of poor whites as perhaps equal sufferers of oppression to chattel slaves, an absurd comparison. While slavery suppressed the bargaining power of white workers, their complicity in this institutions allowed it to proliferate and this dichotomy continues to benefit white workers in immediate ways. Cynical attempts to deny this existing racial stratification and white supremacy should be rejected.

<sup>10</sup> Edna Bonacich. "Abolition, the Extension of Slavery, and the Position of Free Blacks: A Study of Split Labor Markets in the United States, 1830-1863." *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 3 (1975): 601-28. [www.jstor.org/stable/2777646](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2777646).

multiracial organizations strong enough to fight for a repositioning of the economy, and instead were allowed to exist as a privileged caste of workers rather than toppling the system of economic stratification.<sup>11</sup> Stoking racism within the class is the oldest tool used by a ruling class bent on destroying unions, social movements, and resistance, and it is often done by creating (or reinforcing) a narrative about who, in a given situation, produces something, and who is a parasite on those who are productive.

That producer/parasite dynamic was presented in specifically racial terms, but as time progressed and movements to undermine explicit white supremacy changed how racial caste can be publicly expressed in America, the narrative continued to exist in a less obviously racialized form. It is this particular narrative that *Producers, Parasites, Patriots* jumps on, the (somewhat) deracialized producer/parasite dynamic that was originally created to disenfranchise black people.

Any society “structured in dominance” requires a shared basis of comprehending and reproducing distinctions of merit and stigma, autonomy and dependency, and authority and dispossession. Within the United States, conceptualizations of race have always provided a legitimating vocabulary and grammar. The value afforded to various categories of labor (honorable or degraded), the status of capital (heroic or parasitic), and the relationship forged between state and market all depend upon such distinctions. Claims about dependency, autonomy, and freedom have always been constructed through racialized and gendered meaning and references. Thus, as we demonstrate, even when these claims are used to stigmatize groups of largely white workers, race still performs important political labor, as the hierarchical taxonomies of capitalism continue to be constituted through racialized distinctions and meanings.<sup>12</sup>

They identify this process as “racial transposition” to describe “a process through which the meaning, valence, and significance of race can be transferred from one context, group, or setting to another,” such as transposing anti-blackness onto later categorical construction like “public employee.”<sup>13</sup> The introduction of the book does an incredible amount of

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<sup>11</sup> K Merrit. (2017). Introduction: The Second Degree of Slavery. In *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge Studies on the American South, pp. 1-37). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> HoSang and Lowndes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

labor to lay out this concept in less than twenty pages, and the rest of the book sets out to see how this narrative has reshaped social and political relationships in contemporary America.

While the original narrative was explicitly racialized, it now works to separate classes of workers along different, and often more complicated, social fissures. The book makes the point, largely implicitly, that the continuance of the narrative has a consistently negative effect on those who often perpetuate the narrative, such as poor whites maintaining negative views of unions and social programs that could help them if they had not been summarily destroyed.

The first chapter makes this incredibly clear by jumping into the attack on public employee unions, the perception of which has changed dramatically over the past thirty years of right-wing political and corporate attacks. Civil servants were once seen with almost universal acclaim, but the producer/parasite narrative has now been employed in a less-racialized way to present public employees as leeches on a welfare state, while private sector employees are actually producing something for the economy. Public employee unions are today the strongest sector of the labor movement, with unionized public employees making up around 33.9% of the market compared to the 6.4% of private sector unionization as of 2018.<sup>14</sup> Stories about lazy or incompetent public employees has for years create the political impetus to attack public employee compensation, and public employee unions are regularly blamed for various state and local government fiscal crisis that are largely the result of conservative tax policy. This has allowed organizations like FreedomWorks, the Right to Work Legal Foundation, and the Freedom Foundation to grow as conservative “charities,” presenting themselves as legitimate ideological fixtures rather than tools to undermine the wages of public employees so as to increasingly transfer wealth to the upper classes.<sup>15</sup> This project has been aided by the fact that union members are more likely to be of African descent, and those unions are largely responsible for moving many communities of color into the middle class, a point of which that helps cement their image as parasites in the mind of the conservative mass public.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Union Members - 2018." U.S. Department of Labor, press release, January 18, 2018. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>, accessed November 23, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Z. Marvit, "For 60 Years, This Powerful Conservative Group Has Worked to Crush Labor," *The Nation*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/group-turned-right-work-crusade-crush-labor/>.

<sup>16</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Union Members - 2018." U.S. Department of Labor, press

The image of public employees, particularly those without “heroic” jobs like firefighters or teachers, has allowed them to become political punching bags. This move has a particular effect, however. Labor federations like the AFL-CIO and labor councils are often made up of primarily public sector unions since they have the largest membership, and those institutions provide support both for other labor and trade unions as well as a range of issues that affect the lives of working people. Unionization provides economic growth and wage stability for non-union workers as well, and it is clear that an increase in union membership and bargaining ability helps blue collar and middle income workers across the board. Policies like “Right to Work” or the anti-union legislation that decimated public employee unions in Wisconsin have had a disastrous effect on people in middle income and blue collar positions, yet those are still constituencies that have continued to support the attacks on public employee unions. This discourages workers from active unionization, or supporting union representation in their own jobs, a trend that is established through this ideological mechanism of scapegoating union employees and is backed up by the lack of personal experience most workers now have with unions.<sup>17</sup> This has a disastrous effect on the majority of wage-earning people, both in destroying the opportunities for union represented employment and generally harming all workers given the positive impact that unions have on income inequality, workplace safety provisions, and left-leaning socio-economic policies. This producer./parasite narrative then buys a portion of the class into a political movement against their own interests as a sharp decline in unions and increased restrictions on things like collective bargaining rights, resulting from the political advocacy associated with this narrative trend, harms them economically.<sup>18</sup> The producer/parasite dynamic has then shifted the public’s perception in a way by inspiring some working people to declare war on the very unions that have provided them measurable workplace and

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release, January 18, 2018. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>, accessed November 23, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Studies have shown that public employee support for unions often come from workplace issues when they are in union workplaces, which could suggest that the presence of a union aids in thinking about workplace issues in an organizing context or through class identification. For non-union employees, attitudes about unions tend to stem from more cultural influences, and therefore these narratives of parasitical union employees could have more salience, impact, and influence on choices to avoid unionization. Smith, Russell L., and Anne H. Hopkins. "Public Employee Attitudes toward Unions." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 32, no. 4 (1979): 492-495.

<sup>18</sup> Kerrissey, Jasmine. "Collective Labor Rights and Income Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 3 (2015): 626-53.

economic stability.

Lowndes and HoSang then move to open up this discussion even further, including how black constituencies have been included in civic nationalist discourse, particularly in criticizing multiculturalism in black conservative political circles, despite the nature of that discourse having been forged through black subjugation. The discourse is reframed from explicit racial terms to coded nativist racial terms such as immigration, framing “real Americans” as producers and immigrants as a parasitical class coming to exploit our welfare system. This model is more correctly named as xenophobia, broad fear of others that is racialized and imbued with “foreignness” that can be expressed as a difference in religion, cultural customs, or values.<sup>19</sup> While this does not explicitly name race, and a marginalized racial group have some level of participation, it continues to reinforce racial thinking that will help maintain their oppression. Black conservatives have then been invited to participate in their own disenfranchisement if we look at it in material, rather than ideological, terms.

One of the areas that makes *Producers, Parasites, Patriots* stand out is that it walks an incredibly important line by refusing to deny accountability for white workers. While it discusses how previously racialized narratives are now being weaponized against white workers, it never makes the mistake of assuming that the white workers are in an equally marginalized situation as their non-white counterparts. It instead focuses on the necessity of white working class participation in antiracist movements by discussing how they share in the harmful effects of white supremacy, and offers up a militant antiracism that is made of solidarity rather than moralism. It never loses sight of the reality that workers of color are in a profoundly different spot than white workers, and is able to make its point about the nature of universalized racial scripts without denying the fact that white workers still see marked advantages through white supremacy and actively participate in the subjugation of people of color.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 1-16.

<sup>20</sup> As I wrote this review Noel Ignatiev, the founder of the journal *Race Traitor* and author of the book *How the Irish Became White* passed away, and I find much of his critique of whiteness in the pages of *Parasite, Producers, Patriots*. This theoretical version of white privilege traces through institutions like the Sojourner Truth Organization and the later Bring the Ruckus, and focuses on a mix of white accountability and agency in radical anti-racism. One of the key points in *Parasites, Producers, Patriots* is how white workers were ultimately harmed by white supremacist narratives, which broke up their ability to change their underlying situation through

The book's frame of reference is around the patriot militias, the hard right edges of the GOP, and the conservative black constituencies, and as such focuses on the parasite narratives that are most prescient to American political mobilizations: social service recipients, public employees, immigrants, the federal government, and so on. This format of transracialized narrative is a unique ideological commitment to blaming the most marginalized, but it is only one of many transracialized narratives that use racial scripts beyond their original formulation to destabilize political agency.

## **ROTHSCHILDS, BANKERS, TRILATERALS**

The book is specifically about how anti-blackness informs narratives beyond their original function, but it sets up a model for how to look at other scripts that began as explicitly racialized narratives and then evolved to become more coded, and thereby more diffuse in their application of harm. Where this structure of deracializing racial scripts also unpacks dominant political feelings is around antisemitism, particularly as the motivating Rosetta Stone of the broad range of conspiracy theories. Antisemitism and conspiracy theories of almost all stripes are intricately linked, sharing a common ancestral DNA so complete that antisemitism itself can accurately be called the source of modern conspiracy theories.

Antisemitism has functioned differently than other forms of racism, both systemic and interpersonal, as antisemitism has often focused on a host of religious and social practices that vary between the Jewish community and their surrounding country, as well as their universal experience as a minority without a larger nation state.<sup>21</sup> Jews were then assumed to be acting as agents without loyalty to the "host country," which created suspicion about their intentions and activities, an alien people with an alien religion and alien interests. This created the most persistent narrative about Jewish behavior: that it is in their interest to attack the Gentile populations so as to stabilize their own position. This has gone through various versions, beginning as primarily religious persecution during eras like the Spanish Inquisition, where Christian conversation was an (incomplete) antidote, to the explicitly racialized antisemitism of the

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cross-racial organizing and by having those same narratives used in their own dispossession. I'm sure Ignatiev would have agreed. Jarrod Shanahan, "Noel Ignatiev, 1940-2019," *Commune*, [communemag.com/noel-ignatiev-1940-2019/](http://communemag.com/noel-ignatiev-1940-2019/).

<sup>21</sup> It should go without saying that "different" does not imply "more severe" than other types of racism, just that it functions differently.

late 19th and early 20th century, culminating in the Holocaust. The narratives about the nefarious Jewish nature was transposed from their religion to their biology, with their religion being a manifestation of their internal genetic scripts, applying pseudoscientific extrapolations often used to racialize perceived personality types and social behaviors.<sup>22</sup> A variety of effects were then applied to supposed Jewish activity, ranging from blame for anything that happened to Gentile children to financial crisis to the eventual rise of Marxism. Jews were out to destroy proper national identity since they were a people without a state, and they did this through communism, or capitalism, or materialism, or postmodernism, or whatever ideology that the antisemitic idea makers determined was the Achilles Heel of the folk.

As antisemitism became less and less publicly acceptable the logic of the Jewish conspiracy theory shifted outward beyond Jewish identity. The internal coherence of an antisemitic conspiracy theory holds that a small Jewish population, a cabal, is controlling world events for the benefit of themselves. They do this by using *crypsis* so that the host population does not know their true intentions, and therefore they use their internal structures to undermine what are obviously the true values that make a nation successful. The notion that a secret group is using trickery to destroy important institutions, ranging from national identity to the organs of democracy, is the core of the antisemitic conspiracy theory, and the functioning logic that has been moved out of the world of explicit antisemitism and into the broader world of populist politics.<sup>23</sup> In an era of

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<sup>22</sup> This is the founding principle of the work of Kevin MacDonald, a white nationalist evolutionary psychologist who has become the central theorist of contemporary anti-Semitism. He argues that Judaism is a “group evolutionary strategy” that Jews use to outcompete non-Jews for resources by developing eugenic practices of intermarriage and manipulating ideologies of Western nations so as to destabilize their national interests in an effort to raise the socio-economic status of Jews. His explanation has become the new standard anti-Semitic script for almost all white nationalists. Kevin MacDonald, *A People Who Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy, with Diaspora Peoples* (iUniverse, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> A distinction should be made between the conspiratorial narrative and the class narrative presented in the radical left. The cabal of the conspiracy theory are specifically not just an economic ruling class, primarily because acting in class interest is understood without the covert nature of the conspiracy. The conspiratorial measures have to benefit a particular group of people not defined purely by class position, but by a different metric, one that society may no longer have a common narrative for. For Jews, this is that they benefit in terms of their *ethnic interests*, a type of interest that modern society (supposedly) has no place for. This also should not negate the fact that state and capital utilize conspiracies as a basic practice of operating. The conspiracy theory discussed here are intended to be understood as *extraordinary* to most people’s understanding of how

mass politics, populism is the anti-elitist mass movement of the people, both right and left, that seeks to challenge dominant institutions by feeding on guttural rage about the problems implicit in the current system. Because the populism is anti-elitist and built from a range of class and economic positions, this means that it drives towards emotional narratives that are not reliant on a deep understanding of history, politics, and the social sciences, and therefore is not always bound to reasoned political evidence to drive understanding of world events.<sup>24</sup> Instead the populism can go both left and right, and instead simply presents the contrast of “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” that moves beyond simple politics and instead into a psychological script that can motivate mass action.<sup>25</sup>

Conspiracy theories have then flourished as the culture’s impulse to blame the cabal, to separate and identify the Jews or other minorities viewed as alien, has continued and influenced the national discourse in profound way. The way the conspiratorial cabal is viewed has changed as the political language of the West has changed, but the fundamental structure remains the same.

The clearest example of this has been in the vague application of “bankers” as the orchestrators of social ill, or, more specifically, particular banking families, such as the Rothschilds or Rockefellers. The Marxist critique on the centralized power of the bourgeois ruling class would likewise highlight a class antagonism between the large mass of workers and the mentioned banking families, but there is a particular difference that makes an antisemitic conspiracy script stray from this formulation. Marxism and left social theory look at the particular actors in the ruling class as acting in accordance with class interests composed by the system. Plainly put, this means that rich people work to enhance their wealth, which is generally understood to be at the cost of the working classes who are exploited through their wage labor or other forms of accumulated capital such as housing costs, institutional fee gauging, and the veritable costs of not controlling capital. This is the result of the system, capitalism, that favors a few and allows those few to control the rules of the game.

In the early 1980s-1990s, as the militia movement was starting to explode and the Christian radical right was in ascendancy, this rhetoric of de-Judaized conspiracy mongering became the norm. Figures like Pat

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institutions operate, not the conspiracies that have been generally understood and passively accepted as the way our world operations.

<sup>24</sup> Shane Burley, *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 50-51.

<sup>25</sup> Cas Mudde, *The Far-Right in America* (London and New York: Routledge Focus, 2018), 2.

Robertson railed against the “New World Order,” citing explicit antisemitic authors as credible sources of authority while refusing to own up the antisemitic content itself. This flourished around the militia movement, where the Christian Identity factions associated with Aryan Nations continued to be pushed out, but where the broad features of their Millenarian and conspiratorial worldview remained. This served as what Michael Barkun described as a “bridging mechanism,” that would help move people from comfortable areas of the Conservative Movement (or other political ideologies, for that matter) to the world of explicit racialist extremist movements<sup>26</sup>. These narratives act as a weigh station, conditioning the convert to this line of thinking and setting the stage for Jews to take the prime role as the agents of doom. These conspiracy theories build up the perfect outline of the Jew, the secret group pulling the strings, and that transition can become seamless. This de-racialization process helped to lean the radical right more towards the GOP, in particular as radical right-wing politicians rode into office in the early to mid-1990s at the same time as the Montana Freeman were declaring war on the Federal Government and the militias were in revolt over Ruby Ridge, Waco, and the Brady gun control bill.

The conspiracy narrative, by contrast, leaves the system relatively untouched because the issue is not systemic, it is personal.<sup>27</sup> The conspiracy narrative suggests that it is a *particular* family whose motivations are more nefarious than that of any ruling class family acting out the roles prescribed by their class status. Likewise, the assumption is that they behave in ways extraordinary and secretive *beyond* what is understood as common behavior in the socio-economic ruling classes. The conspiracy narrative then sees a shrinking set of actors who use soft power, the power to manipulate and coerce people to follow their bidding, rather than hard power, the ability to enforce directives through open control such as explicit violence or financial directive.<sup>28</sup> The conspiracy narrative then relies on the notion that the system itself could function fairly if not for the nefarious actors at the center who manipulate things for their own interests and extract value from the otherwise pristine mass populace. The

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 285-290.

<sup>27</sup> Werner Bonefeld.. 2019. ‘Critical Theory and the Critique of Antisemitism: On Society as Economic Object’. *Journal for Social Justice*, current issue.

<sup>28</sup> This plays into the global shift in far-right national populist politics that suggests that many people are rejecting towards the social control of soft power in favor of the explicit authoritarian leadership of hard power. This argument could present a framework to discuss why “strong man” leadership is increasingly preferred even when, as talked about earlier, it could be detrimental to those supporting that form of leadership.

narrative can exist on multiple scales, from small regional issues to international finance and governance, but the pattern remains. A small group, bound together by something beyond modern socio-economic systems, manipulate a neutral system in their favor using crypsis.

What Lowndes and HoSang have done is not only single out how scripts functions in less racialized forms, they also draw out its consequences to the population who is actually perpetuating the narrative itself. Conspiracy theories present a harmful paradigm right from the start by undermining the ability for collective struggle against the conditions of oppression. This comes from a presentation of the actors as “all powerful,” it creates a false perception about how the institutions and systems actually work, it confuses who is responsible for the primary issues, and it shifts back blame onto people that are likewise marginalized by the complex social constructs that are at play.

The conspiracy theory is a “monological belief system” that helps to simplify the narrative about cause and consequence, while also streamlining the moral implications of the issue. It is much easier to identify particular actors than look at the whole complexity of the system, which creates massive social inequalities and whose unjust nature is systematically enforced.<sup>29</sup> This forces an understanding of the problems without a revolutionary perspective; a false consciousness about who and what is responsible for social ills, diverting it away from the structural causes that require radical transformations.

This has been particularly true in the national populist conspiracy theory circles in the periphery of the Donald Trump 2016 Presidential campaign and what came later, who, despite citing economic fears as a motivating issue, supported a controversial wealthy businessman. The legitimate anger over the effects of neoliberal policy was diverted by working class voters to a political class who, in the end, just helped to maintain the power of the powerful.

The conspiracy theory itself is a populist political meta-narrative, one that is determinedly more common in popular discourse than it is in institutions of social and political record. It is essentially the folk study of world events from common people, often informed by underlying social scripts. Likewise, they hold what Richard Landes labels as “hidden scripts,” where by the expression of these hidden truths, prohibited by official records, creates a captive audience who experiences this form of discourse as revelatory and destabilizing to the established order.<sup>30</sup> They

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<sup>29</sup> Ted Goertzel. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology* 15, no. 4 (1994): 740-741.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Landes. "THE JEWS AS CONTESTED GROUND IN POSTMODERN

are pure representations of the search for grand narratives and the inherent distrust in the elite caste, yet they refuse to go the distance of questioning the institutional roles themselves.<sup>31</sup> This relies on a model in search of outsiders, people who are flawed in intentions and who pervert the system's inherently neutral roles. Capitalism, statecraft, globalization, and other social forces are seen to lack agency and instead are affected only by the nefariousness of individuals. It could be assumed then that a pure person, who lacked unaccountable allegiances, would be able to manifest the functional legitimacy of these institutions. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and outsiders with alien interests are at the helm. The Jew is then one of the "ultimate outsiders" to Christian civilization, at least historically, and conspiracism's long memory will often connect back to these early narratives of dual loyalty.<sup>32</sup> The real narrative, that rich people control social systems to maintain their wealth, is not complex enough to conspiracy theorists explain the confusing world we are trying to make sense of.

As the American right stakes its claim on white anxiety around non-white immigration, the narrative surrounding racial and religious outsiders is even more present, even when the narrative is deracialized on its surface. Now it uses "dog whistles" to effectively communicate the same narratives about Jewish conspiracies, yet it also hides behind plausible deniability.

These are how some of the most popular and prevalent conspiracies of the Trump era operate. Q Anon, which erupted from the offensive web forum 8Chan, posits that Donald Trump is secretly the savior of the American people, but the entrenched bureaucracy of the "Deep State" is running counter to his efforts to kick out the evildoers and pedophiles. Pizzagate used rudimentary conspiracy charting to assert that those associated with Hilary Clinton are a part of a child sex trafficking ring and satanic religious order based in the Washington D.C. pizza parlor, Cosmic Pizza. Both of these create outrageous narratives, more complicated and less verifiable than most ideological narratives, making them almost impossible to disprove since they are fundamentally disconnected from reality. In both of these, images of the endangered child are used to drum up an emotional reaction and harken to the days when child blood sacrifice was ascribed to Jewish religious rituals.<sup>33</sup> Alex Jones and *Infowars* have

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CONSPIRACY THEORY." *Jewish Political Studies Review* 19, no. 3/4 (2007): 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Henry L. Feingold. "Finding a Conceptual Framework for the Study of American Antisemitism." *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3/4, 1985, pp. 313.

<sup>33</sup> Nina Burleigh, "#Pizzagate Resurfaces an Old Anti-Semitic Slander," *Newsweek*, December 6, 2016, [www.newsweek.com/pizzagate-resurfaces-anti-semitic-slander](http://www.newsweek.com/pizzagate-resurfaces-anti-semitic-slander)

created a cottage industry of peddling outlandish claims, all of which are intended to reframe the responsible parties away from a Marxist and leftist critiques of capitalism and back towards a nefarious cabal that behave for extraordinary reasons, sometimes satanic, sometimes pedophilic, and sometimes totalitarian, but never fully visible and understood through a reasoned analysis of social systems.

The conspiracy theory also ensures material instability in the communities in which it supplants the proven narrative, creating real world results. The massive increase in preventable illnesses in the U.S., particularly around childhood diseases like the Measles, are directly correlative to the refusal to vaccinate because of the effects of the anti-vaccine movement that presents vaccines as unsafe despite significant evidence to the contrary.<sup>34</sup> Science denialism takes a number of forms, particularly in undermining legitimate health treatments and replacing them with unproven and unsound “alternative medicine,” which has become especially deadly when it comes to the refusal to undergo treatments for cancer or “AIDs denialism.”<sup>35</sup> This growing world of anti-science medical decision making is creating a public health crisis along a number of axis, and exists both on the left and the right as people try to come to terms with the very real problems presented by the American healthcare system. The anti-science movement, such as in AIDS denialism, do not provide viable alternatives to the American healthcare system, but instead simply obscure the actual problems in the healthcare system and what we can do about them. Instead of seeing systemic inequality in how healthcare and social services are administered, the cause for the proliferation of HIV or Measles is a complex nefarious actor, and that blame shift obscures how to solve the problem. Conspiracy theories tend to have a viral effect, so when an individual accepts a conspiracy narrative on one particular issue, they tend to become more receptive to conspiracy thinking on other issues, making anti-science conspiracy theories a particularly common pattern for those accepting conspiratorial narratives about state power.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Varun K. Phadke, MD, Robert A. Bednarczyk, MS, PhD, Daniel A. Salmon, MPH, PhD, and Saad B. Omer, MBBS, MPH, PhD. “Association Between Vaccine Refusal and Vaccine-Preventable Diseases in the United States: A Review of Measles and Pertussis.” *JAMA* vol. 315,11 (2016): 1149-58. doi:10.1001/jama.2016.1353.

<sup>35</sup> Didier Fassin. "The Politics of Conspiracy Theories: On AIDS in South Africa and a Few Other Global Plots." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2011): 39-50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24590791>.

<sup>36</sup> Anna Merlan, *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 241-250.

What the conspiracy theory framework also does is allows the perpetuation of antisemitism by maintaining the ideological narrative framework that is necessary for antisemitism to exist. Antisemitic narratives created the structure of the modern conspiracy theories, and for antisemitic ideas to persist that framework has to be used to reinterpret events and apply meaning to them. The conspiracy theory then kept that framework alive even past its original antisemitic intent, meaning that when people are again exposed to antisemitic ideas they can simply slot these figures into the well-crafted conspiracy narrative they are well acquainted with. For this reason, even when people are exposed to a conspiracy theory that is not explicitly antisemitic, it leaves them more easily prone to antisemitic thinking in the future since that framework has now been integrated into the way they make sense of the world.

## **PATRIOTS**

In the final case study of the book, the authors move into the 2016 Malheur Standoff where patriot militias, led by the Bundy ranching family, supported two Oregon ranchers who were ordered to return to federal prison for arson. The standoff was the second after the Bundy's own standoff in Nevada with federal law enforcement over a dispute ostensibly about grazing fees, but more substantially about the role of the federal government over public land and the way that a radical right grassroots movement was cultivated as a response to the economic deprivation of rural America.<sup>37</sup>

The issue with public land is a large motivator for the "wise use" movement that opposes the nationalization of land by the Bureau of Land Management and wants to see it turned over to local authorities so that it can be exploited by extractive industries.<sup>38</sup> Using settler colonialist narratives about "traditional" living, they have fought back against federal environmental efforts by painting federal control of lands as tyrannical and conservationism as a scam.<sup>39</sup> The patriot militia movement, which traces its history back to the white supremacist Posse Comitatus movement of the 1970s, sees itself in opposition to a tyrannical federal government that is acting in opposition to the interests of the people, which is protected by

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<sup>37</sup> John Temple, *Up in Arms: How the Bundy Family Hijacked Public Lands, Outfoxed the Federal Government, and Ignited America's Patriot Militia Movement* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Reid Ross, *Against the Fascist Creep* (Chico: AK Press, 2017), XX.

<sup>39</sup> Lorelei Hanson. "Turning Rivals into Allies: Understanding the Wise Use Movement." *Alternatives* 21, no. 3 (1995): 26-31. [www.jstor.org/stable/45031684](http://www.jstor.org/stable/45031684).

entrepreneurship, regional authorities, and strictly observed federalism.

Posse Comitatus evolved alongside the radicalization of American racist movements, which may seem redundant but represents a unique synthesis. The KKK, while intensely racist, was not owed to the same degree of antisemitic conspiracy theories that the neo-Nazi movements had post-WWII, and it wasn't until David Duke "Nazified" that Fourth Era Klan in the 1970s that it took on the level of antisemitism you would see in today's KKK organizations.<sup>40</sup> Posse Comitatus built on the increasingly antisemitic world views that were foundational to the burgeoning Christian Identity religion that saw Biblical eschatology and millenarianism as an explicitly racial apocalypse. It was in this period that antisemitism was forged as the central ideological explanation of the problems Posse Comitatus found in the current system, whereby Jews (Zionist Occupation Government) controlled the federal government and financial systems, perverting them from their previously positive nature and using them to destroy true Americans.<sup>41</sup>

Over the years Posse Comitatus faded, Christian Identity was further marginalized because of its radical beliefs and its connections to terrorism and organized crime, but the movement that they helped birth continued in the various stages of the Patriot, militia, and rural armed libertarian movements. Within those movements, particularly the ones that exist today, the conspiracy framework continued, while the explicit antisemitism was removed. Chip Berlet and Spencer Sunshine have labeled this "rural consciousness" as bound together with this producer/parasite binary and with multiple strains of ideological radicalization, and while racism and xenophobia undershirt the acceptance of these narratives, those racialized narratives have extended far beyond their white supremacist foundations and now affect populist discourses even in communities of color. Antisemitic narratives, which are essential to far-right populist and fascist movements, are also present in the underlying mythologies that these patriot militia communities offer about the government.<sup>42</sup> When it comes to the antisemitic conspiracy narratives, more vague explanations are used for how and why the federal government was "captured," with those responsible ranging from bankers to "globalists." The names have changed, but the ideological infrastructure

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<sup>40</sup> "David Duke," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/david-duke>.

<sup>41</sup> Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, XX.

<sup>42</sup> Chip Berlet & Spencer Sunshine (2019) Rural rage: the roots of right-wing populism in the United States, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46:3, 480-513, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2019.1572603.

has remained. Today it is clear that the defining ideological motivator is the "ardent belief in the need to protect individual rights from encroachment by the federal government" and the perception of encroachment, responsibility, and culpability for institutional oppression and violence is informed by the earlier antisemitic script.<sup>43</sup>

This, along with the millennial eschatology of many of the intersecting fringe interpretations of Christianity that permeated these areas (i.e. radical traditionalist Catholics or heretical versions of Mormonism) helped to create a consistent strain of radicalization, as well as create the ideological justification for the increasing hostility about the role of the federal government in overseeing public lands. Various ideologies based on the fundamental illegitimacy of the government increased and justified everything from protests over grazing rights to acts of terrorism.

Cliven Bundy was the spear's tip of this long history, incorporating radical Mormon eschatology into a confusing mix of "sovereign citizen" ideas resting on settler colonialist entitlements to the "land" as a pseudo-mystical, transhistorical concept.<sup>44</sup> His belief in the illegitimacy of federal land control led to him to refuse to pay grazing fees that he is required for his ranch's cattle to graze on federally owned land in Nevada. This led to the BLM essentially holding the cattle as payment for hundreds of thousands in unpaid fees, a conflict that was predetermined by Bundy's act of protest (the refusal to pay the fees). This moment was then used as a point to contest the Constitutional authority of federal land use protocols, and the BLM in particular, in a standoff that was widely supported by the patriot and militia movements and brought hundreds to Bundyville to face off with federal authorities. With guns trained on officers, the federal government backed down and handed back the cattle, effectively emboldening Bundy's ideology and entourage and encouraging an escalation of armed attacks on federal officials.<sup>45</sup>

This led them to Harney County, a small rural area in Southern Oregon with just over 7,000 residents that, like Nevada, had a large proportion of federal land. Dwight and Steven Hammond were two ranchers that, like the Bundys, had a long history of antagonism with federal authorities, and

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<sup>43</sup> Polesky, Joelle E. "The Rise of Private Militia: A First and Second Amendment Analysis of the Right to Organize and the Right to Train." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 144, no. 4 (1996): 1593-3.

<sup>44</sup> Kyle Boggs, "The rhetorical landscapes of the 'alt right' and the patriot movement: Settler entitlement to the land," in *The Far Right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication*, Ed. Bernhard Forchtnerer (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 393-399.

<sup>45</sup> Temple, *Up in Arms*.

were eventually convicted of arson for setting a brush fire on federal land. They were sentenced below the legal minimums, and after they served their sentences and were back at home the prosecutors appealed the sentence and they were ordered back to federal prison to serve out a much longer stay. The Bundys led a caravan down to Harney County, and despite a lack of participation from the Hammonds and support from the people of the county, led an occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge for 41 days. This resulted in arrests (though failed prosecutions), the desecration of sacred Paiute tribal land, and the death of rancher-turned-patriot LaVoy Finicum in an altercation with law enforcement.<sup>46</sup> The driving narrative of the Bundy campaigns, both in Nevada and in Oregon, was a conspiratorial vision of federal overreach in the form of land management, despite what Patriot groups (and many right-wing politicians) argue is a clear Constitutional prohibition on this. This narrative rests on a number of assumptions about the motivations of the federal government, ranging from a desire to exploit the hard working “producers” to a more sinister cabal of controlling interests. This conspiracy of government malfeasance rarely has any statistical or factual corollaries, which is to say that the malicious behavior and oppression is rarely proven to exist in any meaningful way.

During the same period there were a number of profound episodes of *actual* government malfeasance, the cause of which is the state’s facilitation of the interests of capital in ways that, while echoing some of the anti-elitist claims of the Patriot movement, are both verifiable and explained by a leftist framework that understands late capitalism and white supremacy. The Flint water crisis, where the source of drinking water was switched in Flint Michigan to the heavily polluted Flint River has resulted in 12 deaths, severe cognitive injuries and health problems comparable to an epidemic, and safe water is still elusive for the region. 2014 also saw the growth of the campaign at Standing Rock to resist a dangerous oil pipeline that traced through sovereign indigenous land. Oil companies were supported by state actors as law enforcement attacked protesters in an incredibly brutal fashion, particularly when compared with the light touch at Bundyville. This is part of an ongoing systemic state of violence against people of color, particularly through extra-judicial police violence

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<sup>46</sup> Part of their lack of support came from the way that public land was administered in the county and the presence of federal public employees undermined the narratives presented by the militias. Peter Walker. *Sagebrush Collaboration: How Harney County Defeated the Takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2018).

and mass incarceration, which led to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement. These are all verifiable and explainable acts of governmental misbehavior that has resulted in quantifiable injury, which can then be compared to the abstractions offered to the Patriot movement about the harm and intentions behind federal land ownership.

The story of No DAPL or Black Lives Matter have a cogent political analysis behind them, one that puts the state in proper context. Systemic racism plays into policing, police structures perpetuate inequalities, militarized policing inspires escalated acts of violence, and so on. Likewise, Standing Rock exists at the intersection of the energy market's power, the state's role in facilitating market monopolies and extractive industries, and the ongoing legacy of colonialism. When it comes to the patriot narratives about how and why federal land ownership is a problem, there is no verifiable claim that rests on empirical data, long-standing structural analysis, or social movements with common narrative understandings of the issue. Instead, the problematic behavior in patriot narratives is less verifiable and is instead merely assumed, believed, or suspected, and that is enough for participants to construct a narrative of oppression. The unverified claim, the belief that malfeasance is taking place based on rumor rather than study and history, is at the foundation of the conspiracy theory, a construct that puts matter and meaning behind unverifiable claims. It requires a radically different value see to believe ranchers and farmers are exploited by the government, while people of color are not.

Antisemitism is central to this thought process, one that refuses to see the source of power in the verifiable and instead rests on the irrational. Antisemitism acts as a form of unverified mythology, a belief held closely because of its narrative power rather than its evidentiary presentation. Antisemitism is one of the oldest and most enduring forms of narrative explanation, a story that is told to explain "all bad things" that an institution, or confederation of institutions, does, not out of a structural analysis, but by a suspicion of motivation and particularity of agency. For the conspiracy theory, it is the *who* rather than the what, how or why that take predominance, and the resulting behavior is less important than the perception that there is nefariousness that remains unseen.

To properly confront this dynamic we have to unpack the narratives we use about enemy agents, replace conjecture with verifiable facts, and refuse to participate in the wild speculation that relies on antisemitic narratives that underskirt these lines of thinking.

## DERACIALIZING OUR CRITIQUES

What *Producers, Parasites, Patriots* does is to deconstruct the narrative structure of the nationalist populist trend, a profound task given the dramatic rise of movements in Europe (Alternative for Germany, Austrian Freedom Party, Front National, Brexit), in India (BJP), in South America (Anti-indigenous and anti-socialist movements in Bolivia, Alliance for Brazil), and various other parts of the world. The book focuses on a really broad form of white supremacy, centered on anti-blackness, whereby certain classes of workers are separated from others using a narrative of parasitical behavior. This ideology was developed explicitly to forge strong white identity against black sovereignty and destroy cross-racial solidarity, but even as the narrative moved away from explicit anti-blackness it maintained the same structure that sought to split the working class when it was advantageous to whoever was holding the rhetorical hammer.

The same model of ideological construction is taking place in the interplay between antisemitism and conspiracy theory, as the model for conspiratorial critiques of power (that individuals/groups have corrupted a system rather than the system being suspect as a whole) has continued antisemitic narrative structures even when Jews are not consciously identified. This is not the main focus of their book, but *Producers, Parasites, Patriots* offers a conceptual framework even beyond its key analytical focus.

There is a language war that plays out in social movements, both to clarify direction and to close ranks against infiltration from ideological opponents. If the left means to go after the inequalities embedded in capitalism, and orchestrated by moneyed classes, then it does so because inequality is in and of itself a motivating problem. Within that framework, using antisemitic devices, which can further marginalize Jews, creates a problem for meeting that higher goal, and creates an ineffective strategy since it confuses who has actual agency in the problem. Lowndes and HoSang identify the intentionality with which narratives of anti-blackness were applied to broad sectors of the contemporary working class, particularly unionized workers in the public sector, as a way of dividing popular support for labor. This is the long story of white supremacy, the way it has been employed to buy out white workers and distort the kind of bonds necessary to create truly liberatory movements. The same is true in the murky world of antisemitism, where conspiracy theory is stoked as a shield for those embedded in power, and the only way to break through that smoke screen is to consciously attack this narrative construct whenever it emerges.