

Project 2025, Conspiracism, and Critique

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As many readers will already be aware, the Heritage Foundation policy document and related materials called “Project 2025” form a conservative roadmap that has guided much of the current Trump presidency in the United States.¹ It should not be controversial to say that the project’s goals continue to be advanced by means of *conspiracy*, provided that the term “conspiracy” is defined by secretive agreements between powerful people, acting in concert, to undertake harmful actions. This article, accordingly, concerns the antinomies of conspiracy, the use of conspiracist rhetoric by those who would themselves conspire, and it focuses on just one of the many ways that theopolitical critiques of sovereignty are reincorporated within new sovereignties.

For the past several years, under the auspices of the Canadian Institute for Far-Right Studies (CIFRS), I have been working on a book called *Critique of Conspiracism*, with the aim of clarifying what it would mean to criticize conspiracism without simply opposing epistemological force with force (with antagonistic strategies like debate, debunking, and deplatforming). This problem of how to critique something like conspiracism, which is itself a rarefied form of “folk” critique, is part of what motivates the project of which this article presents a part. Project 2025 is exemplary of this hard problem, for reasons that will soon become clear. My aim in this project is to work toward a critique of conspiracism, where critique is something more than merely opposing the force of one kind of language with another, and where conspiracism is a name for an all-encompassing epistemology that frames the movement of history in terms set by conspiracy theories. I begin with a broad discussion of the Project 2025 document, “Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise” (920 pages, 2023), before providing an analysis of a related training video, leaked last year, called “Left-Wing Code Words and Language”² – a video that is exemplary of the aforementioned problem of conspiracism and critique.

The “Mandate for Leadership” document contains very few references to “conspiracy” itself,³ but it is shot through with conspiracist language and argumentation. Here are just three examples:

- Much of the document is predicated on the Federal Government being a “weaponized behemoth” that is intentionally being set against “American citizens and conservative values.” Here, of course, the government is not a representative body but a site of conspiracy, enmity, and war between malicious and conscious actors and a segment of the population.
- References to “cultural Marxism” position intellectuals and elites as agents who are conspiring to destroy Western society.

- The term “globalist” – a familiar antisemitic dog whistle – is used to position the establishment in Washington as an entity that wants to take power away from that populist signifier, “the people.”

Beyond its content, in its form, the document is a case study in conspiracist rhetoric: there is a constructed representation of an all-powerful, evil enemy group who are the source of all of society’s problems: a vague scapegoat, coded in terms like “the ruling and cultural elite,” “the woke Left,” “globalist elites,” “the Washington Establishment,” and “the Administrative State.” Part of this construction is yet another technique that attributes to all it rejects a sense of corruption and deceit. Legitimate democratic processes are framed as inherently corrupt, and the delegation of power is positioned as an intentional act by those in power to protect themselves from scrutiny, with all of this sowing mistrust in the social bonds of public trust that have held many institutions together for some time in the North American context.

Underneath these themes and styles is a story about a legacy that has been stolen, hijacked, or co-opted. The military and the State Department are said to have been “infiltrated,” “co-opted,” or “hijacked” by “woke culture warriors,” which leads to a convenient and highly usable story about how conservatives must “take back” the country, where language of ‘return’ imagines a golden age that never was. The heightened sense of catastrophe and existential threat is used persuasively, as in the crisis-driven claim that “the very moral foundations of our society are in peril.”

Theologically and ecclesially, the document is predicated on America being an essentially Christian nation, where secular or progressive visions are an aberration against that essence. An assumption of enmity between Christianity and all others is pervasive in Project 2025, resonating with the presence of enmity within conspiracism. Seeking to uplift what the US Constitution calls “the Blessings of Liberty” (35), the Mandate positions rights as being “endowed by

continued on page 18

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their Creator” (45) – a framing that appears in the Declaration of Independence but was omitted from the Constitution. To cite another example, the Mandate positions the “family” as a sacred institution that is part of both natural and divine order, which is under attack by those who would conspire against it.⁴ Thus the church functions as the foundational pillar of civil society that resists the “unnatural” centralization of power in government (36). But the conspiracy is such that the church is under direct threat from the state, and the supposedly totalitarian intent of the Left is trying to destroy the church. Finally, the document calls its readers to make the church a “hard target” for “woke culture warriors” by deleting terms like “sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI)” and “diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)” from federal rules and contracts.

The production of enmity here in the term “hard target” is essential, and it is reminiscent of Carl Schmitt’s political theology wherein the friend-enemy distinction is the foundation of all politics.⁵ Under theopolitical conditions of enmity, Project 2025 and its conspiracism positions the church as something that must be made more difficult to attack through legal and policy shielding. And it is to one representative example of that bureaucratic policy shielding that I now turn.

The means by which Project 2025 proceeds are essential for understanding its political theology of conspiracism. That is why it is so instructive to look at the training videos leaked to

ProPublica last year, which are framed as resources for conservative politicians to use when they take office. They are meant to pragmatically mobilize the bureaucratic apparatus toward conservative ends – making the videos, quite literally, proof of conspiracy. The particular video called “Left-Wing Code Words and Language” begins with Katharine Sullivan, now the Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General, identifying as a “normal American woman.” But after this identification comes quickly a conspiracy theory that suggests “the Left” will want to force her to condemn herself by identifying as a “cis-gendered ethno-imperialist.” The video’s subtitle “Hidden Meanings: The Monsters in the Attic,” continues its conspiracist vision, followed by the claim that “There are monsters in Uncle Sam’s attic.” But here, the deceptive and conspiring monsters are actually “words that look like they mean one thing, but really mean another.”

Michael Barkun has famously argued that conspiracy theories are governed by the threefold idea that nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected,⁶ and the interpretation of language and its inflated interpretation of the political spectrum in Project 2025 certainly fit the bill. The conspiracist vision in the training video concerns language itself, where “the Left continually pivots and assaults definitions and phrases; they twist phrases,” and they do so “against the grain of human existence.”⁷ Readers concerned with political theology should pay attention here to the usability and abusability of this Hauerwasian language of being with or against the grain of existence (especially considering the relationship between postliberal theologians and the New Right, as described in David Congdon’s article, “Resident Arsonists,” also in this issue of *Ecumenical Trends*).

As the training video proceeds, control over language is strongly attributed to “the Left” and its supposed conspiracies, and yet the trainers task conservative politicians and

continued on page 19

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staffers with the mandate to conspire in turn by using language to change culture and gain power in America.⁸ While accusing “the Left” of using “weaponized language against the American people,” the training video explicitly calls its listeners to scrutinize their own language (and the language of those with whom they work) and make sure all of their policy documents are purged of language they deem to be damaging to their conservative agenda.

The speakers in the video are anxious that “Left-wing” language will infect policy, and so they are “trying to take back hijacked language,” in a way that will “combat their manipulative efforts, ensuring clarity of definition and conservative intention.” The irony in this is blinding, and – like everything else on the news today – its performative contradiction risks being so unbelievable to liberals and progressives that all meaningful action is paralyzed. Nevertheless, this video shows that, by virtue of our polarized environment, we are at times unwittingly engaged in *a war in language* – one that is concerted, intentional, secretive, and planned.⁹

The techniques that the training video attributes to its enemies are fascinating: “They make up a term and create, extend, and alter the definition to validate whatever ideology or position they want to ingrain and convince others is good, when in reality it’s not.” The trainers continue, saying that the Left uses “language designed to conflate legal and illegal immigration . . . to cover up the horrors of illegal immigration.” They suggest that the terms “undocumented immigrants” and “migrants” are “designed to sound softer,” while

emphasizing that the term “alien” is a legal term, and therefore legitimate (“The Left’s attempt to wash away the term alien stems from their disdain for the law”). In response, they attempt to train their colleagues “to start using more accurate language . . . pegging our language to existing law.”

The war in language continues, as the trainers argue that certain terms are now contaminated beyond reclamation: “The word ‘gender’ is no longer a polite way to refer to biological sex, male or female; the word now is completely toxic.” A little later they observe, and then command: “We should never use the word gender as conservatives. It’s not specific and it’s nonsensical. Instead, use the word sex, or biological sex, or male or female.” Underneath this terminological correction is a conspiracy theory: the idea that the term “sex assigned at birth” is “the Left’s attempt to change biological fact.” Further on, we see how their theory of language also rests on philological and etymological aspirations, as they say: “The Left is infiltrating our conservative organizations, Christian schools, and even churches; we must always be on guard, and when a new term is introduced, ask ‘what is the genesis for this term?’”¹⁰ For the trainers, “certain words and phrases, used together, have hidden definitions,” and so they respond by encouraging inquiry into the origins of certain phrases so that they can advance their agenda.

In response to the perceived conspiracy against them, as this training video makes clear, the Project 2025 approach is to implement a conspiracy against what it wrongly claims to be a conspiracy. They insist that “the noxious tenets of critical race theory and gender ideology should be excised from curriculum in every single public school in this country.” For the trainers, who are speaking to those who would become influential policymakers, the take-home message is this: wage a war using paperwork, documentation, and bureaucratic strategy by learning to “identify and replace misleading language.” They then conclude with these key statements that are revealing of their conspiracist vision of the world, and their desire to conspire by means of the bureaucratic apparatus in order to gain dominance in the war in language that they both oppose and participate in:

- “Plan to read a lot of documents”
- “I can’t stress enough the need to control all documents”
- “Do you see? The monster is in the attic, and it is layered in virtually every document... every one of these phrases or words that are not corrected by being redacted or rephrased is a failure of the presidency...”
- “Together let’s conquer the monsters in Uncle Sam’s attic.”

With this vision of enmity and conspiracy in language before us, provided to us by the training video, we also have evidence of enmity and conspiracy in language against those

continued on page 20

who would challenge the conservative theopolitical vision of Project 2025.

So, in the context of this language war with conspiracist ironies, the question is: what can be done to critique and resist without simply engaging in the same war under the same conditions? I take it as a given that a problem cannot be solved by repeating the form of the problem in reverse; so what can actually be done? It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a solution to this conspiracy against conspiracy, but I will venture a few concluding suggestions, starting with two cautions.

1) One approach is to ask questions about the ironic rejection of conspiracism and its pattern of reversal, wherein the speakers in the training video are positioning themselves as being against something that they themselves are explicitly doing. We may be curious about whether this is an “ideology” in the classic sense of the term (where they are doing it, but do not know that they are doing it), or whether it is a conspiracy of only power and political nihilism, where they know exactly what they are doing when they use an imaginary conspiracy to conspire against others. But we should also question whether or when this distinction informs the practical task of opposing and critiquing conspiracist rhetoric in the public sphere. Although it may be tempting to seek accountability through argumentation, it is clear that the engine of conspiracism – here applied to language – has deep resistance to accountability built into it (and this is despite its self-understanding that it seeks to make its enemies accountable to the true meanings of words). Given the self-sealing, improvisational, and solvent character of conspiracism, a critique of conspiracism cannot rest on classical argumentation or reasoning, nor can it rely upon the desire for accountability.

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2) Another approach is to try to separate out the spurious and paranoid idea that someone is conspiring (as in the Project 2025 vision of the world wherein “the Left” is conspiring against the public), from the legal notion of conspiracy wherein we could prove that someone is conspiring (for example, the existence of these training videos, which proves that conservative ideologues in America have been conspiring covertly to use law and bureaucracy to achieve their ends). But this litigation of proof is still too far from what is going on in Project 2025. It certainly is the case that Project 2025 is a policy agenda that reflects a greater conservative conspiracy that enacts manipulation and violence in America, but it is more interesting and productive to ask critical questions about what prevents so many liberals and moderates from insisting that this is true. Part of the reason why many are reluctant to say that there is a right-wing conspiracy in America is not just the stigmatization of conspiracy theories (no one wants to be labelled a “conspiracy theorist”) but also that liberalism largely remains within the fantasy that national politics is conducted without enmity.

Descriptively, Project 2025 is proof that enmity reigns in American politics today (as if we needed more proof), and yet a critique of the conspiracism within Project 2025 cannot proceed from either a normative acceptance of simplistic enmity (us-versus-them), nor a weak and toothless reticence to insist on truths (what moral philosophers call “moral abstinence,” often expressed in the phrase, “Who am I to judge?”). The greater goal of my project is to find some principles for critique that could oppose conspiracism without becoming what it opposes (not least because of my Anabaptist and Mennonite convictions which challenge the myth of redemptive violence), and I have found that critical forms of political theology are quite helpful in this search. The conspiracist war in language within Project 2025 is exemplary of a certain kind of political theology, both because the *content* of the values underneath Project 2025 are clearly Christian and right-wing (especially on issues like family, abortion, and borders), and because the form of this argumentation is also theological. Here are a few examples:

Right-wing conspiracism is predicated on revelation, which moves from the hidden to the revealed and promises justice upon disclosure. Theological structures abound: (1) the narrative of a fall and messianic return where people are told to take back language or the country; (2) the narrative of concealed evil followed by the revelation of the just; (3) the Manichean story of cosmic conflict between good and evil, and the production of enmity that follows; (4) the scapegoating mechanism and its novel combination of antisemitic and Islamophobic tropes; and (5) Christian agents of the state engaging in spiritual warfare to protectively make the church a “hard target” against its supposed enemies.

continued on page 21

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In all this, there is theological structure. But there is an even more specific theology of language beneath these examples, where words themselves have a spirit that can be twisted toward evil or turned back toward the good. This linguistic essentialism pits the righteous language user who knows the true meaning of words, against the evil agents of “the Left” who twist language “against the grain of human existence.” Project 2025 is a real and evidenced conspiracy whose subjects have learned to use and abuse baseless accusations of others’ conspiracy in the form of a theological language war. In this language war, the conservative vision is self-consciously conspiracist, because it positions itself as conserving its values against those who are conspiring against those values. It is a conspiracy that uses accusations of conspiracy to protect itself. Quassim Cassam puts it best when he suggests that, in a very specific sense, “Conspiracy theories are part of a conspiracy to advance right-wing political causes.”¹¹ But shortly following this line, Cassam is sure not to posit too much order or intentionality within right wing conspiracism, suggesting that it cannot be so simple as to say that the right is always organized or insincere.

The ironic rhetoric of conspiracism-against-conspiracism is a profound deadlock of our time; it requires a careful but persistent approach that refuses to cede ground to the ever-moving boundaries of the conversation, and that refuses to become what it rejects. This requires a coalitional response across lines of difference, wherein those who oppose conspiracist far-right rhetoric move beyond both self-satisfied self-righteousness and paralyzed disbelief, toward

hard insistence on truth that does not make enmity normative nor imply that truth is simple. Adorno observes that the tools of the far Right include exaggeration, false distinctions, and simply lies¹² – and we know it is hard to argue with all three. But the lie, or the reversal of the truth, is one of the hardest to critique. It is one thing to argue with a claim that contains some shared assumptions, but resisting a pure reversal of the coordinates of truth is extremely difficult.

It is clear that the far Right has learned that positioning itself as a victim of conspiracy is persuasive to the public, and yet it is also clear that many people sincerely believe that they are in a situation of spiritual warfare where the fight against woke language is righteous and spiritual.¹³ This means that it can never be so simple as to make those who are deceived our enemies in return, and yet, the conspiracist vision is predicated on enmity and is rarely interested in friendship. Given the important place of political theology in this discussion, I will conclude with this suggestion: the mantra-quotation of political theology from Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt is “sovereign is he who decides on the exception,”¹⁴ but I observe that so much talk of sovereignty today is laden with conspiracist narratives where sovereign decision is hidden and secret. Today, sovereignty is conspiracist, both because the sovereign has the power to conspire and because claims that one is a victim of conspiracy are powerful vessels for sovereignty.

For example, the conspiracist trope of “what they don’t want you to think” is a theatrical obfuscation of sovereign power. Conspiracist sovereignty hides its power in theatricality, drama, false humor, and scandal, all while incorporating critiques of conspiracism within real conspiracies. The use of conspiracist rhetoric by those who are conspiring is persuasive because it deflects and distracts. The language war in Project 2025 is just one manifestation of this pattern, and without attention to theopolitical structures of conspiracist sovereignty and persuasive styles that reabsorb critique like a solvent, we will be unable to respond to those who have learned how to use legal and bureaucratic strategies of management for violent ends. 

Notes

1. *Mandate for Leadership 2025: The Conservative Promise*, 2023. PDF: https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.

2. “Project 2025 Private Training Video: Left-Wing Code Words and Language,” a conversation between Bethany Kozma (a conservative activist and former deputy chief of staff at the U.S. AID in the Trump administration) and Katharine Sullivan (Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General), August 10, 2024, <https://youtu.be/ob2nmb97OkY?si=8b8-NRSnqULksb6r>.

3. One notable exception is the claim that COVID-19 was intentionally released from a Chinese research lab. The selection reads: “. . . many were quick to dismiss even the possibility that COVID-19 escaped from a Chinese research laboratory. The

continued on page 22

reality, however, is that the PRC's actions often do sound like conspiracy theories – because they are conspiracies" (*Mandate for Leadership 2025*, 180).

4. With reference to both "creatureliness" and the "givenness of our nature as men or women" (37), *Mandate for Leadership 2025* makes a theopolitical argument, and its resistance to "ungodly" overreach uses theological language to imply the existence of an ever-conspiring anti-Christian enemy. From its anti-abortion stance, to its positioning of a cosmic battle between good and evil, the document is based on the idea that its enemy is both weak, and also incredibly powerful, where progressives are weak, yet strong enough to make conservatives "bend the knee" (48).

5. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 26. Cf. Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* (Yale University Press, 2003).

6. Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2013), 3-4.

7. Elsewhere I provide a detailed treatment of the notion that words and ideas can be considered violent: see Maxwell Kennel, *Ontologies of Violence: Deconstruction, Pacifism, and Displacement* (Brill, 2023).

8. The conspiracism in language continues as they argue that "the Left" engages in "constant subliminal advertising through their narrative." The video suggests that the Left has engaged in a long-term linguistic conspiracy to replace the term Marxism with the term Socialism, and then to replace the term Socialism with Democratic Socialism, and then to replace that term with Social Justice and Equity. Cf. A. J. A. Woods, *The Cultural Marxism Conspiracy: Why the Right Blames the Frankfurt School for the Decline of the West* (Verso, 2026).

9. The speakers in the video talk in anticipatory terms, suggesting that they cannot predict how "the Left" will co-opt language in the future: "We do not know what they will call men and women" in the future, they say. For them, the enemy is engaged in "the art of deception; [where] words and definitions are their weapons of choice." They suggest that "language is used to control culture," while calling phrases "controversial" in order to discount them. The trainers state plainly that "the progressive Left is controlling language... and ruling the world," citing examples of terminological change as evidence ("the Left got very creative years ago and started using different words to make abortion sound a little less like murder"). Beyond the tired tactic of collapsing an expansive definition into one attribute, the trainers want "to ensure definitions are correct" in their work, while at the same time arguing that the "ultimate goal" of their enemy, "the Left," is "to control people" ("the Left seeks to permeate every dimension of life through their skewed terminology").

10. Their response is that if a staffer sees a "bad term" they are told to delete it, such that a political appointee is there to "implement the president's priorities and agenda," not to serve the public. But this requires a host of spurious conspiracist attributions, from the notion that "gender affirming care" really means genital mutilation, to the idea that "the Biden Administration has infiltrated equity into everything."

11. Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Polity, 2019), 9.

12. See Theodor Adorno, *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Polity, 2020 [1967]).

13. See André Gagné, *American Evangelicals for Trump: Dominion, Spiritual Warfare, and the End Times*, trans. Linda Shanahan (Routledge, 2024).

14. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

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