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Millar, Katharine; Costa López, Julia

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Conspiratorial medievalism: History and hyperagency in the far-right Knights Templar security imaginary

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Katharine M Millar**

London School of Economics, UK

Julia Costa Lopez 

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

Imagery associated with the Knights Templar appears in the public discourse and symbolism of many white supremacist and white nationalist groups. The 2011 Norwegian mass murderer cited the Templars in his manifesto, as did the 2019 New Zealand shooter. Templar crosses were on display at the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina. To understand the security imaginary behind these racialised medievalisms and their contemporary animation within right-wing extremism, this article develops the concept of ‘conspiratorial medievalism’. The Knights Templar imaginary blends a specific, racialised, and romanticised vision of history with the grammar of conspiracy theory. This is characterised by (a) a belief in the racialised decline and victimisation of a ‘righteous’ White Christendom; (b) a sense of threat posed by racialised Others and betrayal by insiders; and (c) an anachronistic view of near-omnipotent individual agency. Significantly, conspiratorial medievalism demonstrates an aspiration to not merely combat ‘undue’ agency of racialised Others, but to reclaim and perform extreme agency themselves. Agency is cast in the idiom of medieval chivalry and framed as the moral obligation of righteous White men. Although Knights Templar imagery may appear superficial, this article finds it is an important justificatory and enabling discourse for racist violence.

Keywords

conspiracy, Knights Templar, medievalism, race, security

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Corresponding author:

Julia Costa Lopez, University of Groningen, Oude Kijk in 't Jatstraat 26, 9712 EK Groningen, The Netherlands.

Email: j.costa.lopez@rug.nl

Introduction

In recent years, imagery associated with the Knights Templar (KT) – in their full name the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, a Christian military order active between 1119 and 1312 – has appeared in the public discourse and symbolism of white supremacist groups in a variety of democracies. Participants of the 4 June 2017 ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, for example, displayed numerous templar crosses (CBC Radio, 2017). In January 2020, Donald Trump Jr posed with an assault rifle emblazoned with a templar cross and an ammunition magazine depicting Hilary Clinton behind bars (Pullman Bailey, 2020). Both the English Defence League (EDL) and the Norwegian Defense League have displayed similar symbolism, with the EDL also occasionally dressing in ‘quasi-knightly garb’ (Koch, 2017: 16). Far-right groups in Brazil have also increasingly relied on European medieval imagery (Pacha, 2019). References to KT symbolism are frequent in white nationalist online chats and platforms from Reddit and YouTube to 4chan, 8chan, and the neo-Nazi site Stormfront (Perry, 2017). Medievalism, its imagined ‘European’ histories, and its peculiar aesthetics are being mobilised in the service of contemporary white supremacy.

This idea of the Knights Templar is also central to racialised security imaginaries linked to distinct violent acts. Knights Templar Order International, for example, a UK-based organisation, is suspected of having contributed material to Serbian armed militias in northern Kosovo (Cosic et al., 2018) and also claimed to collaborate with ‘migrant hunter’ groups in Bulgaria in 2016 (International Report Bigotry and Fascism (Irbf), 2016). Most infamously, the man who murdered 77 people in Norway in 2011 displayed a Templar cross on the cover of his manifesto and also dedicated it to the Templars (AnonymousB, 2011).¹ The 2019 New Zealand (NZ) shooter, who murdered 51 people in two different mosques, directly referenced the Norwegian shooter as a ‘Knight Justiciar’ in his own manifesto and claimed to have sought a blessing from the ‘reborn Knights Templar’ before the attack (AnonymousA, 2019: 13, 24).

Recent scholarship has sought to examine the international political theory of the New Right, showing both its standing as a distinctive international imaginary and its multiple historical lineages (Abrahamsen et al., 2020; De Orellana and Michelsen, 2019). However, while these scholars have emphasised the need to take it ‘seriously as a theoretical perspective and an ideological project’ (Drolet and Williams, 2018: 285–286), there have been selectivities at play in what elements of new-right discourses are examined, and therefore ‘taken seriously’. The aforementioned studies have focused mostly on structured political statements, campaign speeches, and works by intellectuals. This focus on formally political speech risks excluding not only other substantive parts of the discourse but also core aspects of its international circulation and mobilisation capacity (Bergmann, 2018; Simi et al., 2016). The KT images above are part of discourses that are frequently dismissed as pathological and marginal (Fenster, 2008: ix; Ortmann and Heathershaw, 2012: 54). Against this, we start from the premise that in order to fully capture the political projects of the far-right and their internationalisation, we also need to take into account these imaginaries and the violences impelled by them. We approach the KT as a form of discourse that, far from being ‘fringy’ or epiphenomenal to a somehow more serious far-right thought, operates socially and politically as a mode of interpreting history and expressing security claims (Ortmann and Heathershaw, 2012: 54).

We argue that KT discourses constitute a specific violent, racialised security imaginary, which we term conspiratorial medievalism. The notion of a security imaginary calls

attention to the fact that securities and insecurities are discursively produced through ‘fixing of meanings to things, an identity to ‘the self’ and others, and the relationships that are thus instituted’ (Pretorius, 2008: 100), thus enabling specific patterns of action and violence. By bringing together the historical literature on medievalism and sociological scholarship on conspiracy theory, we unpack three core moves undertaken within the imaginary of conspiratorial medievalism.

First, this imaginary calls into being a cyclical understanding of history characterised by a transhistorical fight between White Christianity and a number of racialised and treacherous enemies, both external and internal. Second, KT imaginaries are characterised by a racialised understanding of agency – hyperagency – wherein elite individuals are constituted as causally driving and controlling history. Upon this reading of agency, and in contrast to other conspiratorial thought, KT imaginaries constitute the threat to racialised Christianity as not only ontological (in terms of the ‘survival’ of White Christianity) but also epistemic. By putting forward a different understanding of history and the social world, contemporary social movements such as feminism threaten the KT conception of hyperagency. Third, as a result, to ‘defend’ Christianity and the epistemology of hyperagency, conspiratorial medievalism mobilises the medievalist image of the Knight. Constituting members and conspiratorial adherents in these ‘righteous’ terms facilitates a displacement of hyperagency onto the KT themselves, thus enabling a supposed White ‘reclaiming’ of hyperagency in order to violently instantiate a specific racist worldview.

Empirically, conspiratorial imaginaries are difficult to study. Some conspiracies are ‘real’, in the sense that a good deal of investigative journalism resembles a conspiracy theory until empirically substantiated (Fenster, 2008: 7; Rosenblum and Muirhead, 2019: 8–10). Others, like the KT, fail to proffer a singular narrative – or even conspiratorial problematic (e.g. who shot John F Kennedy (JFK)) – through which to limn the phenomenon: the enduring cultural proliferation of KT imagery across extremist groups, online chat rooms, violent manifestos, and popular culture products offers a troublesome and ill-defined corpus. To address this, we make a number of methodological choices. Most importantly, we limit our focus to explicitly political mobilisations of KT imagery. Given the stakes of violent white supremacy, we examine the discourses of groups and actors explicitly engaged in the discussion and promotion of political violence. Under this broad rubric, we look at several actors to account for the breadth of the phenomenon and illustrate its internal variation. We first examine the manifestos of the Norwegian and NZ shooters. Published online shortly before the shootings in 2011 and 2019, both manifestos include over 1600 pages of text and image. Second, we examine the online environment of two self-proclaimed KT civil society organisations: the Knights Templar Order International (KNOI) and the Knights-Templar UK (KTUK). While both present themselves as heirs to the medieval Templars, the methods they advocate range from charity events to explicit support of political violence and paramilitary organisations. We examined their official websites, blogs, daily links, video channels, and comments sections to capture both institutional and informal dynamics. The vast majority of this material is in English, which has become a lingua franca for white supremacist claims. While this introduces limitations into the scope of the conclusions, the imaginaries we examine are not limited to English-speaking countries.

To unpack this racialised security imaginary, this article proceeds in three steps. First, we show how KT imagery constructs a transhistorical White Christianity as a constantly threatened group that must be, and deserves to be, rescued from decline. Second, we

demonstrate the ways in which this romanticised, racialised medieval imaginary has converged with classical and contemporary modes of conspiratorial narrative to produce the security imaginary that we term conspiratorial medievalism. Finally, we demonstrate the ways in which ‘hyperagency’ is constituted as both a source of threat, when inappropriately exercised by racialised Others, and a source of ‘salvation’, when reclaimed by a ‘righteous’ White knight, who enacts white supremacist violence on behalf of the imagined group.

Knights Templar medievalisms

The Templars were a medieval Christian monastic order founded in approximately 1119. Originally created to protect pilgrims to the Holy Land, the order represented a particular combination of piety and military knighthood ideals in the aftermath of the First Crusade (Barber, 1994). It possessed castles and enclaves throughout Latin Christendom and over time broadened its mandate beyond faith-related activities into different areas, such as financing Popes and secular rulers. As a result of a changing religious climate after the 1291 fall of Acre and the struggle between the Pope and King Philip IV of France, the Order was dissolved in 1312 (Barber, 2002).

The Templars have not existed for over 700 years. And yet, their imagery – such as the characteristic Templar cross in red on a white background – and name are frequently invoked by white supremacists. These references are continuous with broader medievalisms, that is, social uses and mobilisations of a medieval past (D’Arcens, 2016; Utz, 2011), which range from popular culture to political rhetoric or tourism (D’Arcens and Lynch, 2014; Pugh and Weisl, 2012). Far from innocent historical accounts or banal romanticised fantasies, uses of the medieval constitute both past and present subjectivities and produce distinct political effects. The Bush administration’s repeated invocation of a ‘crusade’ after 9/11, for instance, helped facilitate the invasion of Iraq (Holsinger, 2007).

The Templars have made recurrent appearances in classic and contemporary literature, from *Ivanhoe* to the *Da Vinci Code*; they also feature repeatedly in film, such as *Arn – The Knight Templar*. Templars also figure prominently in tourism advertisements and experiences throughout Europe, from medieval fairs to thematic bicycle routes and castle visits. We can therefore identify a broad set of Knight Templar medievalisms, with various degrees of relation to the historical Templars, that discursively constitute heterogeneous images of the KT and within which current white supremacist mobilisations can be situated. For example, there are direct commonalities between Templar cosplay at a fair, the selling and use of a ‘sexy templar costume’ (Amazon, 2019), and KNOI (n.d.-c) offering a ‘Full Knight and Regalia Package’ that includes a cape, gloves, jewellery, and a beret. The imaginary behind white supremacist KT references, however, cannot be reduced to these more banal (Elliott, 2017), seemingly playful practices.

White supremacist invocations of the KT must also be contextualised by a long history of right-wing, racist medievalisms. Most infamously, Nazism mobilised a variety of medievalisms in art, architecture, propaganda, and overt ideological statements (Wistrich and Holland, 1995), while the Ku Klux Klan repeatedly appealed to the imagery of medieval chivalry (MacLean, 1995). This continuity between right-wing and broader societal medievalisms is not happenstance. On the one hand, however obvious, supremacist groups are part of society and thus draw from and reproduce broader social imaginaries. On the other, the way in which right-wing medievalisms are embedded into these broader

social discourses is crucial for their promotion and dissemination, in some cases as a deliberate strategy. The concept of *Selbstverharmlosung* – ‘making oneself appear harmless’ – for instance, has gained increasing purchase among German-speaking right-wing milieus (Kubitschek, 2017). The idea is simple: by drawing on everyday, apparently harmless tropes, right-wing groups can present themselves as socially acceptable and mainstream, thus broadening their base. KT imagery conforms to this dynamic while at the same time putting forward a distinct, racialised security imaginary.

Racialised, transhistorical Christianity

This imaginary is centred on the existence of a transhistorical, White Christianity that is permanently threatened by a variety of agents. Through the constitution of this security imaginary (Pretorius, 2008), conspiratorial medievalism not only produces a specific narrative of (in)security, but also legitimises violent action. In this section, we trace how racialised Christianity is created through a process of racialised Othering that not only securitizes a number of external threats, but also uses the KT imagery to project them back in time. Through this, it creates a stable, long-standing threatened ‘self’ and a view of history as a cyclical contest between good and evil.

KT discourses are pervaded by a grammar of emergency and security that articulates both the Christian community and its various existential threats (Ibrahim, 2005). KNOI (n.d.-b), for example, state:

Western civilisation is entering a period of existential crisis. A convergence of external and internal catastrophes is leading inexorably to a time when the survival of Christendom will only be secured by dedicated Christians in the teeth of demonic evil.

The core referent identified in these discourses is a religious and cultural community – Christendom – under threat from a variety of entities that not only have different values, but also the ability to effectively impose them. For example, the white supremacist idea of the ‘Great Replacement’ features prominently in these discourses (and was the title of the NZ shooter’s manifesto). This widely circulating narrative holds that increasing non-Christian migration to Western states is threatening the survival of Western/Christian culture, as, so the argument goes, once settled these immigrants have higher birth rates that risk replacing ‘local’ populations. Alongside these explicitly racist ‘theories’, ‘non-Westerners’, and particularly Muslims, are constituted as threatening through a set of coded language and memes that circulate through extreme-right circles. The NZ shooter, for example, states he had ‘been working part time as a kebab removalist’ (AnonymousA, 2019: 7), a term that approvingly refers to the genocide of Bosnian Muslims (Cosentino, 2020: 74). Through these threats, KT discourses construct an essentially imperilled White Christian community.

While this resonates with a variety of other racialised security imaginaries (Huysmans, 2000), the mobilisation of the medieval past adds a distinctive dimension that constitutes the ‘threat’ of Islam as a transhistorical condition of Christian civilisation (Costa Lopez, 2016). In a link to a video entitled ‘Christianophobia - the oldest hatred’, KNOI (2019a) state:

Christianophobia – and a corresponding policy of supporting Islam in its wars of conquest against Europe – has cropped up again and again, from the opening of the gates of Toledo and

other Spanish cities to the invading Moors, through the same treachery in Constantinople and on until the present day.

This continuity is what makes the KT imaginary politically expedient. The same trans-historical problems require the same (tranhistorical) solutions: a rebirth of the KT. KTUK draws this connection explicitly: they are ‘attempting to fight for what the original Knights Templar, were actually formed for’. After mentioning the protection of medieval pilgrims, they project their core concern, migration, back in time: ‘Because of little or no armies and lack of defence, many European countries then hired the Knights Templar to fight against the march of Islamic migrants becoming dominant in those countries’ (n.d.-b). The NZ shooter similarly referred to the KT as ‘reborn’ (Ravndal, 2019), while the KNOI (n.d.-d) assert that ‘The first Templar’s [sic] came together to wield their swords in defence of innocent but endangered Christians, and that sword age has returned’. KT medievalisms thus epitomise a broader feature of political medievalisms: the ‘unitary nature [. . .] of the past (or, better, of pre-modernity) as an unchanging, stable space’ (Pugh and Weisl, 2012: 147).

This understanding of history is partly made possible by the racialised underpinning of both Christianity and its external Others, as it gives it a purportedly biological and unchanging foundation. Racialisation operates along a continuum between overt and implicit racial claims. On the one hand, racialised language articulates Christendom explicitly as White and sees it as threatened by a variety of Others, who are articulated in racial-cultural terms. The conceptual collapsing of religion and race into a single category (i.e. the racialisation of religion) (Gilkes, 2010) is frequent. For instance, on a YouTube video entitled ‘The Establishment’s Disdain for Christianity’, a user makes the connection explicit by arguing that ‘the white race is under attack’ (Collet, 2019). The Norwegian shooter, similarly, argues against ‘race mixing’, declaring that the United States, France, and the United Kingdom have ‘a considerable Jewish problem’ (AnonymousB, 2011: 1159–1164, 1166). The racialised entity that is created in KT discourses is put even more starkly in the NZ shooter’s assertion that immigration is an ‘assault on the European people’ and ‘white genocide’ (AnonymousA, 2019: 5).

At the same time, however, this association between race, religion, and culture is used by some groups to deny their racist nature, most commonly by references to a ‘Western’ mode of existence that attempts to reduce racism to overt claims of superiority, domination, and/or hate. Indeed, the construction of an external, civilisational threat paired with the corresponding vulnerability of ‘Europe’ is frequently used in order to couch white supremacy in terms of ‘reasonable’ concerns around victimisation and necessity. The Norwegian shooter’s assertion below illustrates this dynamic:

Preserving your tribe, cultural and demographical, is a basic human right and has nothing to do with ‘white supremacy’. After all, we do not seek to enslave or in any way harm or exploit Africans, Asians or their respective countries. (AnonymousB, 2011: 1159)

Racism and white supremacy are reduced to an explicit claim of domination, and thus disavowed in an imaginary that sees White Christian Europe as a victim. This produces a world ‘naturally’ constituted by distinct (and separate) races. KTUK (n.d.-a), for example, explain in their website that they ‘believe that anyone has the right to follow their particular faith, so long as it does not infringe the rights of other faiths. We seek to help all lawful religions to peacefully co-exist without hindrance’.

These appeals to moderation, and apparent disavowal of racism, are a crucial feature in the self-description of both civil society organisations. KNOI (n.d.-a) includes a disclaimer at the beginning of all of its pages that explains that they are a

Christian Organisation and as such we reject all forms of racism as anti-Biblical and reject all forms of political hatred no matter from what end of the political spectrum it comes from. We firmly believe in the dignity and humanity of all people regardless of colour creed, ethnicity or political persuasion.

The denial of racism is thus also articulated through appeals to widely acceptable, often universalist principles, such as ‘humanity’ or ‘basic human rights’. The articulation of these disclaimers, however, works to reinforce the racialised imaginary of Christianity, through the association of these principles with Christian values. Christianity and its core doctrines are (implicitly) credited with creating these universalist, agreeable principles of toleration and non-discrimination. The apparent rejection of hatred and discrimination works to reinforce the appearance of reasonableness and with it shield these groups from criticism, as *their* beliefs should also be tolerated. In so doing, KT discourses participate in a broader turn towards medievalism within post-Holocaust far-right discourses, which refer to a (Western) group identity beyond explicit biological racism in an attempt to appeal to a broader audience (Wollenberg, 2014).

Betrayal fantasies

In contrast to other right-wing medievalisms (Elliott, 2017; Gardell, 2013; Koch, 2017; Wollenberg, 2014), however, the KT imaginary is distinguished by its emphasis upon betrayal. The imagery of the KT that has circulated since their 1312 abolition reveals two complementary yet distinct narratives (Barber, 1994). One casts the KT as an all-powerful organisation of heretics (and traitors) who through corrupt means gained control of territory and rulers, thus bringing about their rightful demise at the hands of the Pope. This common narrative, however, is countered by a second, in which the Templars were devout Christians betrayed by the petty yet powerful interests of the Philip IV and the Pope. This association of the Templars with betrayal persists beyond far-right groups. When the Vatican published the documentation of the trial of the Templars, an article in *The Independent*, for instance, referred to the episode as ‘a demonstration of the power of realpolitik to trump justice’ (Popham, 2011).

In the KT imaginary, this betrayal constitutes an additional, internal threat to transhistorical Christianity: betrayal by its own people, and more specifically, its own governments. In a 2016 video allegedly shot at the Turkish–Bulgarian border, for example, KNOI founder Jim Dowson claimed that ‘the borders of Europe are being protected more by these people than they are by our governments’, referring to a ‘migrant hunter’ group (Irbf, 2016: 25). The feeling of betrayal is echoed in the comments, where a user comments ‘marvelous work, thank you all very much for helping when our governments have betrayed us’. This articulation of internal betrayal constructs transhistorical Christianity as incapable of defending itself, thus requiring the intervention of the KT. The NZ shooter mentions ‘traitors’ over 20 times, referring to the media, politicians, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Internal betrayal – framed in supremacist terms as ‘blood traitors’ – is presented as a central motivation for the attack: ‘give the traitors what traitors deserve:

a traitor [sic] death' (AnonymousA, 2019: 71). The Norwegian shooter goes further, outlining a 'Traitor Classification System' intended to identify enemies and inform imagined 'future "Nuremberg trials" once the European cultural conservatives reassert political and military control' (AnonymousB, 2011: 938).

In sum, the mobilisation of KT imagery and rhetoric constitutes a specific security imaginary in which transhistorical White Christianity is constantly under internal and external threat by powerful actors. This imagery is entangled with an understanding of history that projects this dynamic back in time, creating an (ostensibly) normative superior entity worth saving while also reinforcing the idea that, thanks to internal betrayal, it is victimised and unable to save itself.

Conspiratorial narratives

This sense of transhistorical 'double suffering' (Hofstadter, 1964) points us towards the defining characteristic of the KT security imaginary vis-à-vis other medievalisms: its entanglement with logics of conspiracy. Following the resurgence of interest in conspiracy theory within Politics and International Relations as meaningfully political, rather than pathologically epiphenomenal (Aistrope, 2016; Aistrope and Bleiker, 2018; Greenhill and Oppenheim, 2017), we examine the way in which conspiratorial thought contributes to not only constitution of a particular, racialised historical imaginary, but also the conditions of possibility for exclusionary, often violent, action.

Conspiracy theory, briefly, is 'an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role' (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 205). This logic is immediately evident within KT discourse. KTUK (n.d.-a) exhibits a concern that contemporary society is manipulated by powerful elites, including the media, at the behest of governmental agencies. KNOI (n.d.-b) presents educating the public and lawmakers 'in the nature and origins of the chief [. . .] scourges of the "modern" world: liberalism, globalisation, and the Satanic agenda of the New World Order, international finance, social Marxism and Islamism' as one of the organisation's key aims. Each presents a vision of contemporary events as determined – purposively – by a coordinated body of global elites (Keely in Rosenblum and Muirhead, 2019: 24) who, again, betray an idealised, White Christian Europe.

This narrative of secretive elites controlling global events is articulated via reference to a variety of other broadly-circulating conspiracy theories. The Hidden Templar, a political commentary YouTube series linked to KNOI (2019d: 1'19"), for example, taps into existing climate change conspiracies (Uscinski et al., 2017) by explaining that 'the idea of a worldwide climate crisis was concocted by ideologically committed internationalists to provide the excuse for a radical shift away from national sovereignty to global governance through the United Nations'. Conventional right-wing conspiratorial tropes also appear: the 'New World Order' is attributed to everyone from the Freemasons to the Illuminati, underscored by enduring anti-Semitism (Rupert, 1997: 116 fn.18). 'Cultural Marxism' operates as a shorthand for left-wing political values and actors (Mirrlees, 2018: 49). KT discourse thus reflects a classic conspiratorial grammar that is intent on 'exposing' the threat powerful elites pose to transhistorical Christianity. Crucially, here, despite the mythologising of the KT, they are not themselves the conspiracy, but its investigators – or, rather, its champions.

Hyperagency in conspiratorial thought

The centrality of conspiratorial thought to the KT security imaginary, however, goes beyond the identification of powerful elites. It also constitutes a distinct understanding of how history progresses, and with it, vision of human agency. History in conspiratorial thought is not only stable and cyclical, as we saw in the construction of transhistorical Christianity, but also *mechanistic*. It is imagined to reflect ‘general laws of cause and effect that are universally operative throughout all of history’ (White, 1978: 70–73).

And yet, there is a tension in this account of history. While events are viewed as cyclical and inevitable, their presumed causes are agential rather than structural (Fenster, 2008: 11). In the absence of belief in complex and contingent social causes, as evidenced by the aforementioned preoccupation with elites, conspiracies attribute historical change to deliberate human action. The Norwegian shooter, for example, explains that a traitor is ‘an individual who has deliberately used his or her influence in a way which makes him or her indirectly or directly guilty of the charges specified in this document’ (AnonymousB, 2011: 938).

This understanding of agency differs from the conventional social-scientific account of agency as the purposive actions of individuals and groups under a particular set of facilitating and constraining social structures. Instead, the conspiratorial notion of agency – which we term *hyperagency* – more closely approximates the understanding of social reality found in early modern, secular Enlightenment thought. In this view, moral responsibility and social efficacy lie entirely with free-acting, socially unconstrained individuals who have unfettered, heroic control over their actions and environment. Absent the possibility of Divine will or coincidence, events were understood to be caused by men – leading to the conspiratorial assumption that if intentions (and immediate causes) for a given event could not be determined, deception must be at work (Wood, 1982: 409).

This interpretation of history as produced by hyperagency accounts for the threat attributed to ‘cultural Marxists’, feminists, ‘globalists’ – an antisemitic codeword – and Islam. The perceived decline of the Christian West is not the result of liberal progress, large-scale structural social transformations, or contingency, but active malevolence. Early Enlightenment hyperagency is projected into the present and constructed as a source of threat. Melley (2002: 62) refers to this epistemology as reflecting ‘agency panic’: ‘an intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else’. A comment on a 2019 video ‘Globalism is a Code Word for TYRANNY’, linked by KNOI (2019b), encapsulates this sentiment: ‘We are being slowly erased’.

This panic is entangled with the gendering and racialisation of the hyperagent. Just as the liberal subject of history reflects the universalised characteristics of the elites of the time – White, European, heterosexual men (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995; Spelman, 1988) – so too does the conspiratorial hyperagent. The characteristics associated with hyperagency – particularly rationality (or calculation), extreme autonomy, public engagement, and a potential for violence – reflect the enduring tropes of privileged Western masculinity that characterise the abstract political subject (Brown, 1998). This gendering of agency is literalised in the membership criteria of the KNOI. The organisation states that it ‘believes passionately in the defence of the traditional respect for women in European society’, noting the complementarity of men and women ‘in healthy families and in properly ordered society’ (KNOI, n.d.-b). As such, KNOI explicitly rejects ‘the divisive and

anti-Christian dogmas of feminism’, such that while women may be members, ‘no woman is permitted to hold a position of authority over our male brethren’. Furthermore, the KNOI (n.d.-b.) state that they ‘have no regard for the usurped and un-Christian ‘authority’ of female clerics in corrupt and liberalised churches’.

Epistemic threats

Conspiratorial medievalism as a security imaginary is characterised by (a) a mechanistic historiography that constructs a transhistorical conflict between Christianity and its enemies and (b) the production of a ‘hyperagent’ as the moral and causal driver of history. In this section, we trace how this produces a double (in)security dynamic that not only articulates a purportedly ontological threat posed by Muslims, immigrants, and/or cultural Marxists, but also a parallel sense of epistemic threat.

On the one hand, as we have seen, KT discourse holds that cultural Marxism, feminism, and liberal multiculturalism have actively targeted the integrity, values, and material viability of the transhistorical White Christian community through the promotion of progressive gender roles and sexual norms, the protection of religious minorities, and an embrace of racial equality. As argued by KNOI (n.d.-a), ‘the ‘modern’ West [is] infected with various virulent strains of atomised and selfish individualism, cynical and ugly anti-idealism and subverted by the worship of False Gods – from Allah to Money and on to Satan’. From this (racist, sexist, Islamophobic) perspective, the ability of the transhistorical White Christian community to reproduce and govern itself is at risk.

As alluded to by the derogatory reference to the ‘modern West’, however, this is not quite the entire construction of threat. Liberal modernity is itself framed as the downfall of the transhistorical Christian community and agency of ‘righteous’ White men. KNOI (n.d.-a) argues that ‘the final blow to chivalry’ was ‘the new socio-economic conditions’ and the replacement of ‘the concept of truth’ with ‘the concept of wealth’ under capitalism. Rather than acknowledging the role of historical contingency and structural factors in producing social outcomes, the conditions of liberal modernity are transmogrified into a conspiracy and attributed to multicultural/global/Western ‘elites’ (Gardell, 2013; Kundnani, 2012). The power of hyperagents, then, is their ability to disguise their control through not only progressive ideologies, but also through impersonal structural accounts of power, cause, and social change.

This anxiety pervades the KT security imaginary: fears of racial replacement are articulated not only in cultural terms, but through tropes of brainwashing and control, through which the conspiring elites work to modify the worldview of unwitting Christians. KNOI (2019c), for example, claim that:

To achieve world government, it is necessary to remove from the minds of men, their individualism, loyalty to family, traditions, patriotism, religious beliefs and ‘revise’ our history and disrespect our culture, whilst idolising Islam and liberalism. In order to subjugate and control people you first destroy anything they value, love or take pride in.

Here, White masculine Christendom – embodied in the contemporary era by the would-be KT – exists at not only at the centre of history, but also of knowledge and reality. The existential threat to Christendom is linked to a deeper threat: that of an alternative account of reality where the work of modern hyperagents constitutes an epistemic threat

to the medievalist KT imaginary and its notion of hyperagency. This threat resides in both the inappropriate exercise of (ostensibly) normatively White hyperagency by racialised Others (and ‘inappropriately’ White insiders) and the denial of the existence (or desirability) of hyperagency at all. It is, in other words, a threat to White ability to act, and in so doing, manifest a particularistic imaginary of the world.

Conspiratorial medievalism: Hyperagency and the modern knight

In this section, we demonstrate that the conspiratorial medievalist imaginary involves a displacement of hyperagency from its traditional association with conspirators to, instead, the agent(s) revealing the conspiracy. As observed by Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019: 31), ‘the new conspiracists imagine that the plotters they expose have an effective organization and an indomitable capacity for action. But they evidence none of that themselves’. The KT security imaginary, however, is not passive, but consistently leveraged to communicate and justify white supremacist violence. It simultaneously expresses deep epistemic insecurity and a vanguardist view of the KT as nearly omnipotent agents of White security. In this way, the ‘Knights Templar’ attempt to performatively recapture the hyperagency they view as usurped from White men. To bring our argument full circle, medievalism is central to this political move. The image of the knight provides a ‘reformist’ project that can be enacted.

In the KT imaginary, the conspiracy of the elites is highlighted at the same time as the ‘theorist’ themselves is constituted into a conspiracy of their own. While history is a cyclical contest between transhistorical Christianity and its enemies, it evolves through specific hyperagential acts. These need not be limited to enemies, but can also be undertaken by the ‘theorists’: KTUK (n.d.-a), for example, explains that ‘We do know though, that as with most things in life that are done, they can also be undone’. In most conspiratorialism, uncovering the conspiracy is the way the theorist seeks to effect change. As Fenster (2008: 125) observes, ‘through the interpretive act of conceiving a “proper” history that constitutes an acceptable final outcome . . . the hero inserts himself into the real social and political order presented in the conspiracy narrative’. Extremist KT discourses go beyond this. KTUK (n.d.-a) describes itself in terms of a ‘Fifth Column . . . where any group of people, undermine a larger group, such as a nation . . . *from within*’. The idea of a ‘Fifth Column’ displaces hyperagency from elites to the ‘theorist’, constituting him as a (hyper)agent of change.

The image of the knight and the associated notion of chivalry are essential to this displacement. Chivalry and knighthood have an actual medieval history and are used in a variety of historical sources to describe social practices of the 11th–15th centuries (Kaeuper, 2016). Modern, lay interpretations of knights, however, originate in the 19th-century Romantic movement. In a context of broad social changes, Romantic nationalism looked back to the Middle Ages as a moment marking the strength of the different national characters, and thus providing the basis for reformist projects of society.

The historiographical reacquaintance with chivalry provided a template for constructing a new image of how individuals should conduct themselves in society. This vision, not unlike many KT discourses today, was individualist and violent, highlighting the importance of Victorian norms of moral conduct. In this reimagined chivalry, ‘fighting was deemed a necessary and indeed glorious activity, but its potential barbarity was softened by putting leadership into the hands of men committed to high standards of

behaviour' (Girouard, 1981: 179). This was articulated through a highly gendered image of the knight, who 'distinguished by inherent virtue provide[d] muscular enforcement of proper morals and behaviour . . . [and] present[ed] the ideal model toward which all male should at least strive' (Kaeuper, 2016: 13).

This 19th-century image of the knight pervades conspiratorial medievalism. KNOI (n.d.-a), for example, explain that they 'welcome into membership people who are natural leaders and . . . are prepared to make a stand to defend all they hold dear regardless of the cost'. They also offer a code of Chivalry to which members must adhere. Similarly, KTUK (n.d.-b) proclaims its mission as 'helping to reclaim our once great nation and to help our most vulnerable'. At the same time, this is articulated in clearly agential language: 'the world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them, without doing anything' (KTUK, n.d.-b). The transhistorical knight is a masculine, agential, and violent individual attached to a strong moral code concerned with protecting society and the vulnerable.

The knight thus resonates closely with the epistemology of hyperagency. The specific meanings projected onto the knight, however, enable a more detailed differentiation of social positions within the security imaginary. Paralleling contemporary conspiratorial anxieties regarding capitalism and globalisation, 19th-century notions of the knight proffered an individual ideal through which 'excessive and soulless materialism . . . might be purged' (Kaeuper, 2016: 16). The knight therefore anchors a contrast between the 'bad' hyperagency that is usurped by 'inappropriately' White elites and racialised Others, and the 'good', 'righteous' hyperagency of the KT. This vision of agency, in contrast to the more implicit, universalised racialisation of the liberal political subject, is actively produced as explicitly exclusionary, particularistic, and White (Wynter, 2003). This collapse of particularistic White agency and morality within KT discourses both make self-interested and socially responsible hyperagency possible – while limiting its exercise to White Christian men.

This distinction between 'good' and 'bad' racialised hyperagency crosscuts the KT security imaginary. Critiques of modern individualism and self-interest are ubiquitous. KNOI (n.d.-a) claims that 'Collectivism is a category opposite to the prevailing individualism of today. Individualism, as the legacy of bourgeois society, is nothing more than a hypertrophied egotism, which stems from pride'. The NZ shooter similarly denounces 'a society of rampant nihilism, consumerism and individualism, where every individual is a competitor and the rights of the individual override all notions of responsibility. In this hell, the individual is all and the race is worthless . . .'. (AnonymousA, 2019: 44). Illegitimate individualist hyperagency is thus not only behind the threats to White Christianity, but more fundamentally is a threat to the epistemology of conspiratorial medievalism. It threatens not only the legitimacy of racist White violence on behalf of transhistorical Christendom, but also the ability to exercise hyperagency at all. The White knight, as a violent and ostensibly moral actor, is presented as the 'righteous', and historically necessary, solution to this problem.

Performing violent hyperagency

This chivalric imaginary allows for the assumption of hyperagency by the knight-theorists themselves, who may then (violently) act to causally drive history. KNOI (n.d.-d), for example, state:

We take particular exception to the claim that *the age of the fundamentalist sword wielding knight has long gone*, when we look around the world and see Christians being marginalised and isolated by atheists and spiteful ‘minorities’, persecuted by the liberal-left Establishments of the West.

KT is presented as counter-hyperagents to the illegitimate ones threatening White Christianity – but its performative ‘chivalry’ goes beyond these oppositional rhetorical claims. The NZ shooter claimed to want to ‘add momentum to the pendulum swings of history, further destabilizing and polarizing Western society in order to eventually destroy the current nihilistic, hedonistic, individualistic insanity that has taken control of Western thought’ (AnonymousA, 2019: 8). Racist violence is thus recast as a form of individual action adhering to a community-oriented moral code, ‘protecting’ both White Christianity and the agential epistemology of conspiratorial medievalism. The importance of ‘recapturing’ and performatively ‘proving’ hyperagency is often explicitly articulated. The NZ shooter claimed a purported desire to ‘show the effect of direct action, lighting a path forward for those that wish to follow’ motivated the attack (AnonymousA, 2019: 8). Similarly, KNOI (2018) links the enactment of chivalry to a particular worldview:

. . . Taken in a broader sense, the phenomenon of chivalry represents a certain perception and understanding of reality, as well as acting in this reality, with all the auspice of the integrated ideological system.

The impetus to preserve a hyperagentially driven world by performing it is also apparent in the justification of particular acts of violence. The NZ shooter explains his use of firearms with reference to this goal: ‘I could have chosen any weapons or means. [. . .] I chose firearms for affect [sic] it would have on social discourse, the extra media coverage it would provide’ (AnonymousA, 2019: 14–15). Recapturing ‘appropriate’ hyperagency, and with it White masculinity, through symbolic performance is implicitly constructed as the justification and motivation for violence. The racist murders of 51 people are presented as instrumental, rather than central, to a larger goal – of producing a white supremacist worldview as ‘truth’.

Conclusion

Conspiratorial medievalism is frequently dismissed as pathological, epiphenomenal, delusional, or simply silly. From the perspective of a modern liberal political sphere, it is not hard to see why. Various KT actors make false claims not only about racialised Others and shadowy global elites, but also their own membership numbers, power, and control. The KNOI falsely claimed to have sent ‘migrant monitors’ to Hungary in 2015 (ASA, 2015). The Norwegian shooter’s manifesto contains multiple claims to working within KT organisations and secret societies in the United Kingdom (AnonymousB, 2011), but there is no evidence that this was the case (Gardell, 2013). What these liberal analyses of racist, historicised conspiracy miss, however, is that it is precisely the vernacular of conspiracy that makes them politically effective and dangerous.

To catch these politics, we have to pay attention to a security imaginary where not only White Christianity but also a particular, hyperagential epistemology is under threat. KT security concerns and political violence are ultimately a matter of (re) claiming the existence of hyperagency itself, and with it, the White capacity for action

and worldly control. As a result, simply claiming that White hyperagency exists, claiming that agential acts are indeed possible and being undertaken, is enough. It is not the specific content of false assertions as to membership, threat, or heritage, but the making of the false assertions per se that should be read as a political intervention. In KT worldview, the appearance of racist violence and actual conduct of racist violence are empirically levelled and politically conflated in the service of substantiating White hyperagency.

The seemingly irrational, ‘fringy’, or silly nature of conspiratorial medievalism is precisely the point. This has two important political consequences. First, the fact that the point of the KT security imaginary is performatively instantiating a White Christian polity – and White capacity for agency and control – through illiberal insistence that it is already true suggests that simply attempting to ‘mythbust’ their claims, or sideline particular actors or groups, will not work. It may even play into their implied strategy of vanguardism and fundamental disavowal of structural accounts of social change. Second, there is a risk that the hyperbolic and extreme claims of the KT, conspiratorial medievalism, and other (re)imagined White European histories – such as the neo-Norse allusions seen at the January 2021 insurrection in Washington DC – come to define our contemporary understandings of white supremacy.

The KT’s conspiratorial imaginary simultaneously facilitates a denial of racism through appeals to culture, tradition, and cartoonish aesthetics and a reduction of white supremacy to these overtly racist and violent actors. Conspiratorial medievalism, and other far-right White histories, provide an alibi, via perceived irrationality and extremism, for the continuity of white supremacy across contemporary political institutions and much of right-wing politics. They both claim reasonableness and make the rest of the white supremacist political constellation look reasonable by comparison. Though we may have very real political and analytical concerns about indirectly legitimating white supremacist groups by interrogating their politics and worldviews, it also seems irresponsible to look away.

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ORCID iD

Julia Costa Lopez  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7932-7772>

Note

1. In keeping with contemporary journalistic practices designed to avoid the publicisation, dissemination, or inadvertent valorisation of these shooters, we decline to name them. Manifesto references are either noted as ‘anonymousA’ for the New Zealand (NZ) perpetrator and ‘anonymousB’ for the Norwegian. We have referred to the perpetrators as ‘shooters’, rather than ‘terrorists’, in part to resist framing the shooters as embedded (as they desired to be viewed) in an empirically existing large, organised, and coordinated campaign of political violence. We recognise, however, that this choice has political implications, as the uncoordinated violence of racialised men, particularly Muslim men, is frequently a priori labelled as ‘terrorism’.

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Author biographies

Katharine M Millar is an Assistant Professor in International Relations at the London School of Economics. Her research examines the relationship(s) between politics, violence, gender, sexuality, and the making of political community.

Julia Costa Lopez is Senior Lecturer in History and Theory of International Relations at the University of Groningen. Her research interests include the history of international political thought, late medieval and early modern international relations, and contemporary politics of history.