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“Let the tournament for the woke begin!”: Euro 2020 and the reproduction of Cultural Marxist conspiracies in online criticisms of the “take the knee” protest

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ABSTRACT

Exploring online criticisms of the “take the knee” protest during “Euro 2020”, this article examines how alt- and far-right conspiracies were both constructed and communicated via the social media platform, Twitter. By providing a novel exploration of alt-right conspiracies during an international football tournament, a qualitative thematic analysis of 1,388 original tweets relating to Euro 2020 was undertaken. The findings reveal how, in criticisms levelled at both “wokeism” and the Black Lives Matter movement, anti-white criticisms of the “take the knee” protest were embroiled in alt-right conspiracies that exposed an assumed Cultural Marxist, “woke agenda” in the tournament’s organisation and mainstream media coverage. In conclusion, it is argued that conspiratorial discourses, associated with the alt-right, provided a framework through which the protest could be understood. This emphasises how the significance of conspiracy functions to promote the wider dissemination of alt-right ideology across popular cultural contexts, such as sport.

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KEYWORDS Conspiracy; Twitter; online hate; Black lives matter; anti-white racism; Football

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Introduction

Conceived as the loss of one's rights, identity and culture, cries of anti-white racism are today sustained and characterised through narratives of victimhood, resentment and populism (Sengul 2022; Zhang and Davis 2022). Though these narratives prove adept at both containing and invigorating ongoing frustrations – the effects of globalisation; the detrimental consequences of multiculturalism and immigration; and a prevalent political correctness seeking the curtailment of “free speech” and democratic values – increasingly, such concerns are constructed and shared through conspiracy (Ekman 2022; Inwood and Zappavigna 2023). In the case of anti-white racism, conspiracy theories function to “explain” the very interests that today conspire and work against the values and beliefs of “White society”. While remaining cognizant of the various ways in which the “Other” is conceived and constructed in far-right discourses, this article critically examines the increasing importance of conspiracy in public discourses on anti-racism.

To date, the study of conspiracy theories and their plausibility remains open to a broad range of empirical investigations across a variety of disciplines, including sociology (Harambam and Aupers 2019), philosophy (Coady 2006) and psychology (Van Prooijen 2018). One important area of distinction is between the study of credible conspiracies and exaggerated forms of fantasy. Accordingly, though Allington et al. (2021, 80) “consider it advisable to avoid the term ‘conspiracy theory’ in scholarly discourse”, focusing instead on “the clearly fantastical and outlandish nature of the ideas promoted by ... [examples of] ‘conspiracy fantasy’”, we nonetheless find relevance in the term “conspiracy theory”, which remains widely cited by far-right and alt-right groups as well as criticisms of them (Mirrlees 2018). On this basis, while “conspiracy” may refer to a secret plan or strategy – a conspiracy to overthrow a government, for example – “conspiracy theory” refers to an explanation or assessment which seeks to identify a particular group working “behind the scenes” to cause harm or frustration. In this case, conspiracy theories are usually grounded in prejudice.

Indeed, despite the inherent absurdity of many conspiracy theories (not least those created and upheld by far-right groups), we seek neither to disregard nor deride their significance in studying examples of racism. Whether dismissed as “fake news”, “alternative facts”, or simply perceived as characteristic of an era of “post-truth” politics, increasingly such denouncements fail to consider how the turn to conspiracy presents a unique form of sociality – one where the very knowledge of the conspiracy presents an allyship amongst the select few who know the “truth”. Where many conspiracy theories undoubtedly follow such a path, we locate their significance in a complex coalescence that speaks to the relationship between the individual and the collective (Jameson 1995). Through examples of fear and paranoia, and in

the construction of in-group/out-group dynamics, conspiracies play a key role in identifying, constructing and ultimately demonising *the "Other"* believed to be responsible for a variety of social and political failings.

Accordingly, the following analysis explores the role of conspiracy amongst the alt-right, paying particular attention to the development of the "Cultural Marxist conspiracy" (Tuters 2018) from fringe online communities to its mainstreaming across popular social media spaces, such as Twitter, the focus of this article. Notably, we concentrate on the reproduction of this conspiracy during an international sporting event: the 2020 men's UEFA Football Championship. The 2020 tournament was notable for the inclusion of the "take the knee" protest by certain national teams and for the online hate that was subsequently directed towards members of the English national team after their final defeat. Consequently, while conspiracies associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and the English national team's decision to "take the knee" before the start of each game, are analysed as promoting examples of anti-white racism, we emphasise the fact that alt-right conspiracy theories have infiltrated football's online communities. This demonstrates the extent to which the politics of both the alt- and far-right have entered popular discussions on sport and sporting events as well as underscoring the importance of conspiracy theories in identifying and making sense of far-right prejudices as perpetuated across online social media platforms.

Anti-white racism, the alt-right and the role of online conspiracies

By highlighting the disadvantages associated with an assumed, yet widely prevalent, anti-white agenda, white nationalist concerns have promulgated across a global network of online users, with social media platforms occupying a central role in the perpetuation of far-right ideas, values and beliefs (Wahlström, Törnberg, and Ekbrand 2021). Though often promoted under slogans that emphasise the racial disadvantage of white populations, examples of white victimhood, reverse racism and anti-white racism primarily emphasise the neglect of white interests at the behest of minority groups. Increasingly, these concerns have extended their way across online platforms where the political intentions of far-right groups speak to a growing community of online users (Hosseinmardi et al. 2021). As a result, online spaces have emerged as a key site for what has come to be referred to as the "alt-right". For example, in 2017, the slogan "It's Ok to be white" emerged via the online messaging platform, 4chan, from which it was later used on posters and stickers that were shared in public spaces within the U.S., as well as University campuses in Australia, Canada and the U.K. (Ross 2017).

Multifaceted and complex, the alt-right remains both a contradictory and widely cited phenomenon (Hawley 2017). Serving as an abbreviation of the “alternative right”, it is, at its heart, a far-right, white nationalist movement that has criticised both liberal and conservative politics. The movement bears no central organization, coalescing around the protection of “white identity” in accordance with the values of Western civilisation and Christianity. Though the aim of the alt-right is to achieve a white ethno-nationalist state, its hostility has been directed towards a host of apparent detractors, including liberal democracy, academics, the media, political elites, immigrants, multiculturalism, feminism, neoliberalism and egalitarianism (Neiwert 2017). Notably, what remains integral to the alt-right movement is its use of digital online spaces. Alt-right messages have been shared across a variety of online platforms, including YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, as well as amongst online podcasts, messaging boards and the creation and sharing of online memes. Drawing together various online subcultures, and through deliberate and provocative use of bad-taste humour, online trolling and conspiracy thinking, the alt-right has helped to encourage its ideas through memes and slogans that seek to provoke and exacerbate current social and political tensions. Significantly, the alt-right has successfully encouraged its slogans and messages across popular media outlets as well as political and public debates (Ekman 2022). In so doing, anxieties towards decreasing social standards and traditional fears surrounding a decline in hegemonic forms of masculinity are steered through narratives that promote a variety of conspiracy theories, each professing an anti-globalisation, antisemitic, and/or anti-establishment rhetoric. More often these conspiracies seek to promote a form of race realism, alongside right-wing libertarian values (Panofsky, Dasgupta, and Iturriaga 2021).

Certainly, “Besides the obvious observation that the internet facilitates all kinds of information to potentially large audiences” (Ekman 2022, 1132), what remains unconsidered is the extent to which these conspiracies transpose from specific online forums to popular debates (Tebaldi and Nygreen 2022). Indeed, what seems to underly the perpetuation of alt-right conspiracy theories, across a variety of seemingly disparate concerns, is the “harmless ambiguity” with which these conspiracies are expressed and relayed. While the effects of conspiracy go some way to perpetuating the ideas and beliefs associated with an evil and threatening “Other”, often, the propagation of online conspiracies function by relying on a level of justifiable sincerity. That is, it is not necessarily the hostility of the offensive online slogan or the plausibility of the conspiracy theory that results in its dissemination across news outlets, but rather the very fact that the conspiracy can be plausibly denied. Ultimately, the result is one in which the racist conspiracy or offensive statement becomes “digitally laundered” through mainstream channels (Klein 2017). It is this coalescence between the online alt-right

and the reproduction of its slogans and conspiracies in popular society that serves to encourage examples of racial ignorance and forms of dismissal and disavowal, all of which remain inherent to the claims of anti-whiteness and white victimhood (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

The modality of conspiracy: uncovering the “truth” about “them”

Across discussions on the proclivity of conspiracy theories amongst the far-right, we can determine how the effects of the conspiracy theory function to “weaponise feelings of generalised grievance by ascribing blame to an identifiable enemy, meaning they can act as a dangerous form of propaganda against particular target groups” (Lawrence, Simhony-Philpott, and Stone 2021, 12). Certainly, the contents (or target) of a conspiracy can differ, but, as Alenka Zupančič argues, conspiracy theories undoubtedly “take the category of truth very seriously” (2022, 235). Indeed, “They believe that there is Truth; they are just convinced that this truth is different or other than the official one ... *there exists another Truth*” (Zupančič 2022, 235, italics in original).

Adherence to this Truth can serve to function as its own form of social cohesion, with “access” granted to those with knowledge of the Truth. This access can take on a decidedly paranoid dimension, yet it can also reveal how a certain level of doubt underwrites each conspiracy. In fact, if the explanations provided by a particular conspiracy were proven to be objectively true, then such proof would not succeed in satisfying the conspiracy. Instead, if true, then such truth would only confirm the fact that “they” continue to deceive “us”. In effect:

The moment conspiracy theories turn out to be “right,” they also turn out to be wrong, since the (successful) deception is over. Conspiracy theories are right about the authorities systematically and deliberately deceiving us only insofar as the deception fully works. (Zupančič 2022, 241)

This speaks to the “modality of conspiracy” and the Truth it avers. In much the same way that the content of the racist conspiracy can vary – be it the Jew, Muslim immigrant, or global/cosmopolitan activist – conspiracy theories can just as easily be adapted, reinterpreted and exchanged. Ultimately, while the content of the conspiracy can change, “it is ... the modality of conspiracy”, indeed, “the fact that there is a conspiracy going on” that proves significant (Zupančič 2022, 241).

This highlights the inherent contradiction that underscores the conspiracy, as well as the effects that this can have when used in conjunction with far-right narratives. That is, as a “non-falsifiable theory arguing that the white race is under an *imminent* threat” it is “the lack of supporting evidence [that] is quickly turned around as evidence of the far reaching power of the

conspirators" (Cotter 1999, 126, italics in original). Here, the conspiracy theory "treats falsifications as additional proofs of its own truth" (Žižek 2022, 307), so that no evidence, or rather, the falsification of apparent evidence, proves to be *the evidence* that confirms the conspiracy's legitimacy.

In this respect, what underpins the conspiracy is the perception that there remains a "them" willing and working to deceive "us". If we consider this "them" in far-right conspiracies, then, outside of the conviction that this agent is, in some form or another, working to orchestrate a decline in white civilisation, in the end, the underlying motivations of this agent are never clear nor justified. Rather, it is the deception enacted by this agent (and their associated group) that seeks to further cement the existence of anti-white racism. Moreover, this agent functions beyond the usual power structures or positions of government, occupying instead a position "behind the scenes" (Žižek 2008). These convictions provide a "compensatory delusion" to the wider social, economic and political changes which are believed to be working towards the detriment of white groups (Sharpe and Boucher 2010, 149). While such compensation points to more sinister forces, for the alt-right, the social, political and economic detriment of "White society" is made sense of through conspiracies that explain and emphasise the expansion of what is typically referred to as "Cultural Marxism".

The Cultural Marxist conspiracy: perpetuating the "woke" agenda

Though its origination can be found in the Nazi's anti-Communism, the term Cultural Marxism has come to denote a far-right, antisemitic conspiracy, centred upon the conviction that the work of Marxist intellectuals, most notably The Frankfurt School, continue to undermine Western "white" civilisation. Today, the conspiracy is more commonly used as an alt-right criticism of progressive political movements, directed by "the Left". As Davies (2022) highlights, "The far-right circulated their theory internationally, particularly via the Internet", whereupon the alt-right has capitalised upon the term as part of its conspiracy discourse.

Certainly, the term has proven to elicit real-world effects. In 2011, Anders Breivik killed 77 people in Norway, citing "Cultural Marxism" as a key proponent in eliciting white genocide (Davies 2022; Lawrence, Simphony-Philpott, and Stone 2021). The term was also used by members of the Trump administration, most notably former Chief Strategist, Steve Bannon (Mirrlees 2018). In the U.K., criticisms of Cultural Marxism have found their way into the popular press, where "in 2007, Paul Dacre, the then editor of The Daily Mail (a mainstream, mass market newspaper) claimed the BBC had been captured by Cultural Marxism" (Davies 2022). In 2019, current Home Secretary, Suella

Braverman, referred to the Conservative party's "battle against Cultural Marxism", advocating for the party to defend free speech and other liberal institutions (Davies 2022). Later, in 2022, she referred to diversity training as "woke witch trials" (Beckford 2022).

On this basis, one important distinction between the U.S. and U.K.'s use of the term has been a greater focus within the U.K. on fears regarding "cancel culture" and instances of "no-platforming". Accordingly, free speech and the sharing of alternative or contrarian perspectives are being nullified due to a decline in the possibilities for free speech, as well as the institutional spaces endowed to host public debates. Thus, the threat of a Cultural Marxism seeking to perpetuate "white genocide" or a "great replacement" is itself driven by a secret cadre of political or Jewish elites using Muslim immigration, BLM protests, LGBTQ + rights and feminist activism in order to control and manipulate white populations (Ekman 2022). Similarly, we trace the intersection of alt-right conspiracy discourses and wider public and political reinterpretations of a Cultural Marxist agenda in the increasing prevalence of the term "woke" (Davies 2022).

Emerging within the U.S., the term "woke" was adopted as a means for signifying an awareness amongst Black Americans towards day-to-day examples of racist discrimination. The term gained wider global recognition in light of protests by the BLM movement, which were subsequently organised around incidents of police violence towards Black citizens. Since then, the term has taken on more pejorative associations, with many criticising its transference to the U.K. as reflecting an ongoing "cultural war" on British values, beliefs and practices. In particular, woke conspiracies offer a framework through which examples of white victimisation and anti-white racism transpire in debates on white disadvantage (Young 2022). Following the modality of conspiracy, the anti-woke conspiracist is positioned as the defender of free speech and moral enlightenment. The very innocuity of this neutrality further entrenches the prevalence of conspiracy in public discourse and media debates. While such innocuity underscores the online practices of the alt-right, it also helps engender a sense of colourblindness towards the very real effects of racial inequality. In what follows, we look to situate such discussions in relation to BLM protests in sport.

BLM and the "take the knee" protest

Following in the wake of the 1960s civil right protests, in 2016, American footballer, Colin Kaepernick, a then quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, and teammate, Eric Reid, took the knee during the playing of the American national anthem – a gesture which they perceived as both a respectful and peaceful protest against racial discrimination, racial inequality and police brutality faced by black citizens in the U.S (Doehler 2023). The protest would later

garner global attention following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis Police Officer in May 2020, and Breonna Taylor in March 2020 by Louisville Police Officers. In solidarity with the BLM movement, many major sports leagues chose to follow Kaepernick's protest, with professional athletes kneeling at the start of sporting events.

In its attempt to draw attention to racial inequality, the English Premier League (EPL) permitted players to take the knee before the start of each match, a sign of solidarity that continued throughout the 2020/21 and 2021/22 seasons. During the European Championships in 2021 ("Euro 2020"), national teams including Belgium, England and Wales, chose to kneel before the start of each match – a gesture that was continued by the England national team during the subsequent 2022 FIFA World Cup. Here, England manager, Gareth Southgate, openly proclaimed the team's support in "taking the knee", stating that, "It's what we stand for as a team and have done for a long time. We understand in the Premier League that the clubs have decided to only do it for certain games, big occasions. We feel this is the biggest" (cited in Bengé 2022). Despite England's ongoing support, the protest received a mixed reaction from other national sides, with teams such as Hungary, Russia and the Netherlands (Holland) choosing not to take the knee, while others left it to the players themselves to decide. Notably, in Italy's group-stage match against Wales, five Italian players chose to take the knee, while the rest of the team did not.

Indeed, the decision not to take the knee has been echoed by current and former EPL players, most notably, the former Crystal Palace player, Wilfried Zaha, who referred to the protest as "degrading" (Ingle 2021), and Queens Park Rangers's Director of Football, Les Ferdinand, who stated that the action had become "diluted" (BBC 2020). Outside of football, Conservative MP, Kwasi Kwarteng, referred to the protest as nothing more than "gesture politics" (Forest 2021). Such criticisms have not gone unnoticed amongst football fans, with the protest leading to boos from some at both EPL and international games – including England's Euro 2020 qualifying games. Across digital media platforms, the protest has also received a mixed response. Amongst anti-woke campaigners, the protest reflects an insidious "woke agenda" (Davies 2022), with some labelling it as part of a BLM, neo-Marxist conspiracy. Such concerns were echoed by Conservative MP, Gillian Keegan, who, while appearing on the BBC's topical debate programme, *Question Time*, stated that BLM stood for "defunding the police and the overthrow of capitalism" (White 2021).

Here, we draw specific attention to the convergence of a Cultural Marxist conspiracy in criticism levelled at both "wokeism" and the "take the knee" protests. Rather than perpetuating the adage that sport and politics do not mix, we conceive of the "take the knee" protest as embroiled in alt-right conspiracies that sought to deride an assumed Cultural Marxist, woke agenda in

the tournament's organisation and mainstream media coverage. Certainly, efforts to dispel anti-racism movements have a long history of being associated with "communist influences" as part of efforts to discredit anti-racist activism. Yet, what becomes apparent from the connections drawn between cries of anti-white racism, the alt-right, and the preference for conspiracy amongst advocates of the anti-woke agenda, is the extent to which these discourses have become embroiled in discussions on sport. Framed as a "cultural battleground" amongst conservative and alt-right news platforms, "a unique configuration of identity politics, geopolitics and national renditions that define the contemporary alt-right movement" has emerged in both the reporting of sport and in online discussions regarding particular games (Falcous, Hawzen, and Newman 2019, 606). While this centres upon narratives of "White victimization, reverse racism, and alleged White systematic advantage" (Kusz 2007; 81 cited in Falcous, Hawzen, and Newman 2019, 593), we seek to locate these examples in analyses of digital media and sport – specifically, online discussions of political events that occurred during an international sporting event, Euro 2020. To date, there is much that has been written on the topic of race, racism and sport (Carrington, Fletcher, and McDonald 2016; Fletcher and Hylton 2016; Hylton 2009), with wider research examining the links between racism and football and the political activism of fan cultures. Therefore, in conjunction with previous research that has addressed fan groups/fan activism against extremism (McGlashan 2019) and the prevalence of racist memes associated with BLM and "take the knee" (Dickerson and Hodler 2021), this analysis pays specific attention to examining how examples of anti-white racism were, in the context of Euro 2020 and the "take the knee" protest, subsequently reproduced in accordance with alt-right conspiracy theories. For this reason, we do not focus on the political efficacy of the protest, but instead, undertake a novel exploration of how emerging discussions on the alt-right were constructed and shared through online racism.

Methodology

Importantly, what we seek to expose is the extent to which the modality of conspiracy formed an important part of the criticisms levelled towards the "take the knee" protest. Accordingly, while we are not concerned with debates regarding the political effectiveness of "taking the knee", or whether fans were for or against it, in what follows, we focus specifically on how criticisms of the protests were constructed and framed through online social media posts that drew heavily from conspiracy discourses. Whereas this helps to situate sport within wider political debates on racial inequality, we draw attention to the very ways in which the claims of the alt-right gain greater traction in public discourse, in this case, social media posts related to Euro 2020.

As we have emphasised already, some social media is more receptive to conspiracy than others. For this reason, we are interested in exploring the mainstreaming of conspiracy across social media and, specifically, Twitter. Twitter was chosen for a number of reasons. First, Twitter is a large, open social network where most interactions are in the public domain, thus providing an effective medium for information diffusion (Son, Lee, and Kim 2013). During 2021, Twitter reported over 217 million monetizable daily average user volumes (Twitter 2022a). At the end of that period, Statista reported that the U.K. accounted for over 18 million Twitter users; well over 25% of the national population. Twitter is a popular medium used by football fans, and the football conversation on Twitter has experienced substantial growth in both the number of users discussing football and the volume of tweets (Twitter 2022b). Second and relatedly, Twitter is used by football fans, not only to discuss football but to express and discuss social and political views (Kearns et al. 2023). Third, Twitter's functionality (including search and hashtags) enables connections between users known to each other and strangers, as well as those with similar or opposing interests and views. In particular, hashtags have been found to be a useful mechanism for forming and coordinating ad hoc and calculated publics (Bruns and Burgess 2015). In this study, Twitter lends itself to research as the hashtags and keywords for both taking the knee, Euro 2020, and each match were distinct.

The following qualitative analysis examined a dataset of 1,388 original tweets in the English language relating to Euro 2020 posted by 691 discrete Twitter user accounts from 10th June (the day before the commencement of Euro 2020) to the 17th July 2021 (one week after the Euro 2020 final). Tweets that featured the hashtag #takeaknee, word stems or keywords referencing the act of taking a knee and variations e.g. "take a knee", "kneeling" etc., and manifesting any expression of dislike or unfavourable opinions in relation to taking a knee, were extracted manually sourced from Twitter and analysed in Microsoft Excel. As per Agudelo and Olbrych (2022), we do not analyse retweets and replies, as our focus is identifying *how* the conversation and counter-narratives emerged over the period of the tournament. While there are no limitations on the geographic location of the tweets, the overwhelming majority focus on national teams within the U.K. (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales) or references to the U.S.

Thematic analysis, following an inductive coding process, was used to identify, organise and categorise data (Meggs and Ahmed 2021). Initially 32 codes were generated, and following a process of analyses, these codes were grouped and categorised into eight categories – "Black Lives Matter", "Left Wing Politics", "Wokeism", "Virtue Signalling and Gesture Politics", "White Victimisation", "Anti-Police", "No Politics in Sport" and "Other" (i.e. other unfavourable opinions on taking the knee). Finally, these tweets were

further analysed to identify dominant themes related to conspiracy theories regarding the BLM movement and references to Cultural Marxism. With the aim of reflecting critically on the role of conspiracy in criticisms of the “take the knee” protest, the following presents our analysis of key tweets relating to the above categories.

“Who are they trying to kid?”: kneeling for the left and the perpetuation of anti-white sentiment

Across many of the tweets, which served to criticise the protest, were messages that sought to situate the protest as following a strictly leftist agenda:

No politics in sport. It was right then and it should apply today. England team in 1938 forced to make a gesture to the extreme right. Don't now kneel for the left, it's never belonged in sport.

100 MILLION people killed by socialism, yet the England team will be taking the knee for an extreme left wing cause while calling you racist if you oppose it
That's some incredible subversion from those kickball people #Boo #ENG #ENGCRO

While previous research has commented on the extent to which criticisms of the left follow an alt-right rejection of political correctness and the existence of racial inequality (Dickerson and Hodler 2021), in criticisms directed towards the “take the knee” protest, attempts were frequently made to uphold the fact that sport and, specifically, football, should remain non-politicised:

The same people who make a fuss that wearing a poppy for remembering the war dead is “too political” insist on kneeling for black supremacists ... Part of a wider assault on British society, not everything needs to be political #nopolitic-sinfootball #EnglandvsCroatia #ENG

Taking the knee is a political gesture @rioferdy5 don't try and twist it. Fuck the racist BLM #footballnotpolitics #bootheknee #ENGvCRO

Together, observations that the protest belonged to “black supremacists”, and the fact that not everything needs to be politicised, served to support the contention that racism does not exist, or, as evident in the reply to the pundit and former professional footballer, Rio Ferdinand, that the protest's politics should remain separated from football – a position reflected in the hashtag #footballnotpolitics. It is widely noted that attempts to depoliticise the significance of racial protests function to deny the existence of forms of racial inequality (Lentin 2020). While such denial has been used to redirect examples of racism towards the ongoing effects of anti-white racism (Sengul 2022), in various cases, examples of anti-white racism were clear in highlighting that the protest, and those behind it, most notably BLM, presented an

outright “attack” on white society. The act of taking the knee was perceived as lending support to an organisation “who hate white people, [and] want to defund the Police”. Before England’s semi-final game against Denmark, the following tweets were made:

As a Englishman I say come on Denmark. Beat the knee taking virtue signalling muppets. I can't support England. A team who kneels for a movement who burns war memorials attacks people for being white and wants to defund the police. Come on the Danes #EURO2020 #eng #den

England deserve to lose for their traitorous gesture in support of black supremacy. Taking the knee was made popular by American black supremacist Colin Kaepernick. I hope Denmark wins. #euro2020 #ENGDEN #englandvdenmark

As evident in the reference to Kaepernick, other tweets were clear in linking the protest to the efforts of BLM, who were positioned as supporting and legitimising anti-white sentiment. In such examples, specific attention was directed towards England’s black football players:

Footballers did not take the knee before the death of a career criminal so they shouldn't do it now. The BLM cult are the true racists with their hatred of white people and police. Fans want to support black and white players but England's stance is turning their own fans away

Those stupid players that are kneeling at the @EURO2020 and those domestic terrorist movement supporters are legitimating this anti-white behavior. Must end this madness.

A perceived anti-whiteness was enveloped in criticisms levelled at the “take the knee” protest. In addition to BLM’s “hatred of white people and police” and efforts at “legitimising ... anti-white behavior”, other tweets served to assert the England players’ “submission to anti-white racism”. Echoing other alt-right slogans, such as, “It’s okay to be white”, references to the hashtag, “All Lives Matter” (an alt-right rejoinder to the “Black Lives Matter” movement), could also be found:

I'm very happy to support any racist or Marxist football team taking the knee either, with or without their national anthem playing in the background, with the very best #booing I can muster. No place in sport for politics or racism. #BLMisRacist #AllLivesMatter #ENGvsGER

While the innocuity of the hashtag lends further credence to the perpetuation of alt-right discourses on online platforms, we draw attention to the fact that the language associated with the far-right and white supremacy was specifically used to expose the protest’s anti-white sentiment. In this case, booing – a response which was widely reported by certain sections of the crowd at the start of England’s games (The Independent 2021) – was

itself consistent with a racialised “tit-for-tat”. This suggested that the protest was, in some form or another, given preferential treatment when compared to other forms of commemoration, notably the victims of terrorism or the wearing of the “poppy”:

The England team were encouraged to do the Nazi salute in support of unity once, and now they are kneeling in unity with a Marxist cult. It is sad that #Scotland are joining in this madness and yet couldn't wear a poppy for those that gave their lives for England and #Scotland ...

In other examples, frustrations were expressed towards the then U.K. Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. In one example, it was noted that:

I couldn't care less what Johnson says who the hell is he to tell me who and what I can do he says not to boo the England football team for taking the knee to extreme far left domestic masked terrorists antifa under the guise #BlackLivesMatter ill be booing loud

While many of these tweets proved ignorant of the inherently political nature of their frustrations – a strictly non-leftist political position – they nonetheless revealed the extent to which the protest had been overtaken by the far-left, and as suggested in the reference to Boris Johnson, a “political elite”, who was clearly perceived to be in support of a far-left political agenda. Though the absurdity of associating Johnson with the far-left may suggest political confusion, as opposed to a coherent understanding of racial politics, what underscored the protest's association with leftist politics was a clear sense that the protest was being orchestrated to deceive, as well as hide, more sinister motives. In one tweet, the protest's apparent support for “racial equality” was found to be unconvincing:

Taking a knee at a football match and claiming it's just for “racial equality” and not everything else #BLM stands for is like doing a Nazi salute and claiming it's just because of Hitler's positive environmental positions. #engcro #EURO2020

Accordingly, the aims of the protest and the motives of BLM were being deliberately misconstrued; that the public were in fact being lied to.

“#BlackLivesMatter is a Marxist organisation”: alt-right suspicions towards political elites and left-wing media

In accordance with alt-right attacks against an assumed Cultural Marxism within Western liberal societies, it was clear from the twitter responses that a perceived enemy – in this case, BLM – was seeking to use the protest as a way of promoting a Cultural Marxist political outlook. Here, tweets alluded to, or rather, outright proclaimed, a relation between the BLM movement and the expansion of an avowedly Marxist political agenda. This linkage echoes previous efforts amongst the alt-right, which have sought to produce

an alternative path to the BLM's desire to destroy white society through undermining "traditional" white institutions, such as, the Church and nuclear family (Lawrence, Simhony-Philpott, and Stone 2021). What proved apparent from derisions of the protest was the conviction that any support for the movement was not a genuine attempt to highlight examples of racial discrimination and inequality but a more profound and overriding example of the indisputable division between an all-encompassing and all-powerful Marxist BLM and a "white society" standing to defend democracy. Such animosity was, once again, fuelled by attempts to highlight BLM's anti-white sentiment, for example, using the #WhiteLivesMatter hashtag:

... #BlackLivesMatter is a Marxist organisation and if you take the knee you deserve to lose. #WhiteLivesMatter too. Fk u England.

Elsewhere, the association between Marxism and BLM was explicit:

... We have a RIGHT to protest when our National team "take the knee" (I detest the phrase) to support a Marxist led organisation which is making things WORSE.

Taking the knee has nothing to do with racism. It is pro BLM which is a Marxist anti police, anti democracy org.

Despite holding no formal political position, either in local or national government, it was evident that the efforts of BLM had proved successful in forcing many to support and partake in the protest. Accordingly, suggestions that BLM were in fact being run by a "political elite" and a "Marxist-led media" helped to compound a sense of conspiracy in criticisms of the "take the knee" protest. In the following examples it was noted that:

F*CK off @BorisJohnson English people are peed of with the likes of YOU telling us what and when we can do things. You are so disconnected with the English people, it's disgraceful. England does NOT kneel down to a MARXIST regime that IS BLM.

Guaranteed behind the scenes, Sturgeon is trying to get the S.F.A to reverse the decision, and get the Scotland team kneeling to the Marxist organisation.

Though it was never detailed exactly how political elites sought to control democracy via the protest, other examples drew heavily from the concern that the protest was being promoted by media outlets, who were either being controlled by, or in "secret" support of, BLM's Marxist agenda. There was evident frustration aimed towards both the BBC and Sky Sports coverage:

It must really anger the Marxist bosses at @SkySportsNews @SkySports @BBCSport that majority of teams at the Euros won't take the knee. England

only doing it because players dare not refuse in case the woke media Brand them racist

The Marxist BBC now down to covering up the TV screens on Euro 20 when they think the players are NOT kneeling. Can confirm neither Italy or Turkey knelt before kick off. Lineker & Southgate will ensure England bends the knee – National Traitors!!

It has been widely noted that the alt-right maintains a paranoid suspicion of media discourses, where mainstream coverage is usually perceived as pushing a liberal media agenda (Falcous, Hawzen, and Newman 2019). In certain cases, alt-right initiatives have sought to deliberately provoke the media in providing coverage on anti-white issues and, specifically, media biases that, in their view, remain anti-white (Brooks 2020). This media coverage has itself been criticised for providing space in which right-wing discourses can be promulgated to wider populations (Klein 2012). What we see in the above examples, however, are suggestions of a conspiracy between the mainstream media institutions and the Marxist BLM movement. Whether this centred on “calls for evidence” or calling out Marxist media bosses seeking to “cover up” (or rather, not include in shot) the fact that certain players were not kneeling, derisions towards the protest evoked an element of conspiracy at play. Such conspiracies were further emphasised when matched with wider criticisms of “wokeism”.

“Let the tournament for the woke begin!”: identifying the woke conspiracy

In accordance with those tweets which aligned with a Cultural Marxist conspiracy, efforts to denounce were clear in highlighting that the tournament had succumbed to a woke agenda that had subsequently taken control of the Euro 2020 tournament:

Let the tournament for the Woke begin! Woke-left media-conformists get ready to receive your instructions on what to do. #euro2020 Anyone but the Woke-land Kneelers from Engerland.

Due to England taking the knee. I am now supporting Ukraine. A proud Christian country where the left and woke mob have no power. More chance of aliens touching down than Ukraine ever taking the knee. Come on the Ukraine always loved them #EURO2020 #ukraine

We interpret the reference to “Ukraine” and its framing as “A proud Christian country” as echoing other attempts to draw attention to anti-white racism. The apparent decision by the Ukrainian national team not to kneel is reinterpreted as a politico-religious gesture, one that stands opposed to forms of

racial inequality and anti-racist protest. In tweets referring to Scotland's (late) decision to take part in the protest, many sought to frame their frustration as part of a political pandering to "woke demands":

Scotland have pandered to the woke demands of Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP, and are now taking the knee. I hope both teams are loudly booed at Wembley. #EURO2020

So Scotland are going to take the knee in the England game but not the other games. Shows how meaningless the gesture is if they're treating it like a pick n mix where you choose when and when not to do it just for a few woke points, the absolute state of them

Perceived as nothing more than a form of performative activism, one tweet asked: "Whatever happened to freedom of expression?". In fact, in light of "the global woke trend of kneeling", frustrations towards the very ways in which "wokeism" was undermining the tournament, were subsequently directed towards the England manager, Gareth Southgate:

#Euro2020 We are going to lose now and in penalties ... Fu**k Southgate the woke lefty cunt ... all that taking the knee and not enough football ... I always said it ... blimmin lefties. I would like to see him fly a Spitfire

I dont care, he's managed to turn the national side into virtue signaling losers kneeling for s Marxist anti police cult, I am not watching to suporting England while they kneel "England manager says goodbye to winning three piece suit ahead of Euro 2021"

In conjunction with those criticisms that sought to highlight the fact that the tournament and the protest were being used to promote a Cultural Marxist conspiracy, were those that referenced antisemitic conspiracy theories, most notably, the concern that a secret Jewish elite were at the vanguard of a globalist conspiracy controlling bankers and prominent politicians. Accordingly, alongside references to BLM's Marxist politics and a wider woke agenda were uses of the term "globalist". Indeed, the term itself has been cited by the right-wing news channel, GB News, as well as Conservative politicians, Grant Shapps and Suella Braverman. Here, the term "globalist" or "globohomo" is used to draw attention to the apparent "feminising" of Western/white societies by encouraging and expanding liberal values associated with sexual equality, transgender rights and feminism (Zhang and Davis 2022). In this sense, anti-globalist sentiments are usually espoused by those seeking to promote far-right nationalist agendas, with the reference "globalist" denoting an antisemitic and anti-Socialist outlook, both of which are perceived as diluting national boundaries and national populations (Kochi 2023). For this reason, uses of the term "globalist" have helped support conspiracy beliefs, founded on the

concern that there exists a “globalist elite” (usually Jewish) working “behind the scenes” to control society:

Bravo Italian football team not to have kneeled to the pernicious Globalist and Genderist ideology! The @UEFAcom @UEFA should apologize for carrying out propaganda and politics in name of EU/UN. Our nations reject it and will fight it if provoked too much #ItalyAustria #UEFA

Croatia Refuses to ‘Take a Knee’, Says It’s a Political Gesture Against UEFA Rules ... I’m very very proud of Croatia and Hungarians not kneeling for that utterly bull shit coming from these corrupted Globalists. Western Europe is rotten to its core.

As is clear from the nationalist tone of the above examples, efforts were made to distinguish between those national teams, who chose not to take the knee, and a globalist elite, for whom the act of taking the knee was seen as a sign of support for the further demasculization of white society.

Amongst the alt-right, the source of this decline is often levelled at Jews, immigrants, and feminists, all of whom remain in the contradictory position of controlling, as well as seeking the downfall of, Western (white) society. To this extent, what underpinned the “globalist” references was a clear sense that the tournament, players and team administrators had been hijacked by the Marxist BLM and “woke mob”. This coalesced in a mode of conspiracy that specifically sought to emphasise the anti-white biases secretly controlling the tournament, and the media. Ultimately, such concerns were brought to bear in references to the alt-right phrase, “cuck” or “cuckold”:

Are Swedish cucks going to kneel against Spain today? #EURO2020 #EspanaNoSeArrodilla

All that cucking, kneeling, shoehorning, anti-English rhetoric etc etc etc didn’t stop the backlash against the forced diversity when they let the team down lmao. Imagine how hard they’ll go at the World Cup next year. #England #EURO2020

The term “cuckold” refers to a pornographic genre, where a married man submits to watching his wife have sex with another man, or, in some instances, group of men. Typically, the genre aligns with examples of racist fantasy, whereupon the white man watches his wife have sex with a black man (or group of black men). To this extent, the term deliberately draws upon and signals a degree of fear and paranoia towards the racial “Other”.

Denoting an apparent weakness amongst certain political institutions, the term “cuckold”, or the shortened, “cuck”, has been incorporated by conspiratorial discourses with a number of cuckolded “white” politicians being

singled out as submitting to Jewish interests and, as a consequence, undermining “white interests” in favour of promoting a multiculturalist agenda. To this extent, the term “cuck” is associated with anti-white discourses where, for the alt-right and other white national movements, it serves as a pejorative term, used to denounce ulterior motives and conspiratorial objectives amongst conservative politicians (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022). This was especially apparent during the 2016 Republican Presidential nomination, when the reference, “cuckservative”, gained traction amongst alt-right forums seeking to denounce Trump’s Republican rivals (most notably, Jeb Bush). Though the term “cuckservative” is frequently used to denounce white Republicans, its adoption was also used to refer to the British politician, Boris Johnson:

Boris Johnson backs the England players taking the knee. Boris Johnson wants a more gender-neutral and feminine’ way of post-COVID economic recovery. Boris Johnson set to delay UK’s June 21 ‘Freedom Day’ by a month until July 19. Never vote for The Cuckservatives.

The phrase, in accordance with the “globalist” reference, served to support a conspiratorial discourse, predicated largely on a sense of insecurity and a worrying conviction that the “take the knee” protest promoted and upheld an anti-white agenda. Next, we provide a final precis on the importance of conspiracy in organising and determining anti-white discourses in online discussions on sport.

Conclusion and discussion

Beginning with a discussion of anti-whiteness and its online proliferation by the alt-right, this article has served to expose how alt-right discourses, most notably, those aligned with conspiracy, underscored the frustration, animosity and criticism levelled at “take the knee” protests during Euro 2020. With examples of anti-whiteness being characterised by the concern that public institutions deliberately seek to benefit non-whites, a characteristic that both elicits and depends upon fears of the racial other, what we draw attention to is the very way in which these characteristics are projected through a perceived loss of control or, in the perception that minority groups are being used by some hidden ulterior “elite” to promote divisive forms of racial aggression – a key proponent of which is the emergence of conspiracies associated with BLM. What our data reveal is that sport is not excused from these concerns. Rather, in protests directed towards highlighting racial inequality and discrimination, sport became a key site for conspiratorial discourses to be enacted and shared online. We have thus developed upon previous studies that have considered the link between far-right discourses and sport in the context of major sporting events (Dickerson and Hodler 2021;

Falcous, Hawzen, and Newman 2019; Kusz 2019). In doing so, we highlight the following key themes.

First, in opposition to the alt-right, it was clear that both the protest and BLM were positioned as supporting a leftist political agenda. For many, the capacity of BLM to elicit such control over both the tournament and the English national team was akin to a “cult”. These concerns followed a path of racialisation which often sought to position the protest as promoting anti-white biases within sport. What was clear from these tweets was the underlying sense that ulterior motives were being hidden and that the “public” were not being told the “real” reason for the protest’s adoption. Second, amongst much of the derision directed towards BLM it was evident that this was exacerbated by concerns that the movement’s underlying objective was to promote a Marxist political agenda. Here, criticisms of the Marxist BLM were situated in accordance with alt-right conspiracies regarding Cultural Marxism. Third, the promotion of an apparent Cultural Marxism was itself promoted by a number of agents working “behind the scenes” in order to promote a decidedly “woke” agenda. In this case, certain political elites, such as Boris Johnson; popular media institutions, including the BBC and Sky Sports; and team officials and media personalities, notably, England manager, Gareth Southgate, were perceived as deliberately promoting the protest as part of their submission to “woke demands”. Finally, we draw attention to the use of both the “globalist” and “cuck” references, popular amongst alt-right discourses, which were used to suggest a nationalistic, antisemitic agenda, marked by a racialised white submission, predicated on fears of the racial “black” other.

Across each theme we emphasise the conspiratorial nature of these discourses: the fact that, for many, examples of anti-white bias were being promoted and distilled through the “take the knee” protest. Accordingly, while we make no assumption as to the political allegiance of the above tweets, we underline the extent to which conspiratorial discourses associated with the alt-right provided a framework through which the protest could be understood. Specifically, it was through the modality of conspiracy that examples of anti-whiteness were perpetuated in online (Twitter) discussions of Euro 2020 and “take the knee”.

It is for this reason that we consider the centrality of conspiracy to a wider dissemination of alt-right ideology across popular cultural contexts, such as sport. We position this turn to conspiracy, and the relative success of the alt-right in proliferating conspiracy theories, as reflecting a broader “cognitive inertia”, which, according to Salecl (2020, 5), presents “an increase of indifference to what is truth and what is a lie”. Certainly, while “This indifference is linked to an inability to know and not a simple lack of willingness to learn” (Salecl 2020, 5), we also point to those instances where such an “inability to know” was not necessarily disavowed, but instead supported by a certain conspiratorial conviction that assuaged those with the knowledge

of the conspiracy that one does in fact “know” *the* Truth (a Truth that remained “beyond” the relative awareness of the general public).

Importantly, what underscores such conviction is not necessarily the legitimacy of the conspiracy or even the failure of the evidence to support or corroborate the claim(s) being made. Instead, such indifference is compounded by the fact that conspiracies are “couched in disingenuous concerns about objective knowledge production” (Milders 2022, 188). With regards to the fetishisation of “free speech”, Milders locates such disingenuity in relation to “the vulnerabilities, weaknesses and contradictions of whiteness” that ultimately become obscured and ignored in “free speech” debates (2022, 188). Indeed, such indifference and disingenuity can be enveloped “in layers of faux-irony, playfulness and multiple cultural nods and references” (Nagle 2017, 62). Importantly, it is with regard to this multiplicity that the inconsistencies underlying conspiracy, as well as their adoption amongst claims of anti-whiteness, are exposed. Here, the “true conspiracy” lies not in the *content* of the conspiracy that is proposed, but in the very *form* of the conspiracy itself: to the levels of obfuscation that seek to uphold the conspiracy’s ongoing persistence, and which stand in the face of it ever being proven “true”. From the above analysis, what we draw attention to is the very *space* that our digital media platforms provide in allowing for the appropriation of conspiracy to be “mapped”. This points to the systematic organisation and administering of online spaces that allow the racial conspiracy to be proposed and examples of racism to be exacerbated.

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Ethics

The project was granted ethical approval by Dublin City University.

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