

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Advers(ary) Effects? Investigating the purportedly disabling character of conspiracy theory via analysis of the communicative construction of resistance discourses in online anti-New World Order conspiracy theory discussion forums.

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Advers(ary) Effects? Investigating the purportedly disabling character of conspiracy theory via analysis of the communicative construction of resistance discourses in online anti-New World Order conspiracy theory discussion forums.

Abstract

This thesis examines how resistance is thought about and discussed within the discursive framework of the New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theory. The literature on conspiracy theories has tended to ignore or even reject the notion that conspiracy theory can be associated with political resistance; it is typically characterised as an individual, intellectual and more or less irrational puzzle-solving endeavour. Furthermore, conspiracy theory has been proposed by its very nature to be disabling (Fenster 1999: xv) and that in the face of a totalising, malevolent global conspiracy, “there is nothing you can do” (Basham 2003: 100). Such admittedly plausible conjectures are largely unsupported by empirical research, and so this thesis seeks to assess the credibility of these claims via a richly detailed discourse analysis of online conspiracy theory discussion forums. I define ‘resistance discourse’ in terms of perceived agency, specifically via discursive constructions of power and morality, across three social groups: heroes, villains and potential supporters. I further propose that these anti-NWO resistance discourses can be analysed in the same way as those of a social movement, and I employ Melucci’s (1989; 1996) concepts of ‘action system’, ‘ideology’ and ‘communicative construction’ to analyse the ways in which perceptions of agency are played out and interact with each other within online conversations. Firstly in cognitive terms, relating to perceptions of the efficacy of any proposed resistance strategy, and secondly in affective terms in relation to whether or not the resistance discourse can be interpreted as empowering or disabling. The primary contribution of the thesis is not the trivially simple demonstration that conspiracy theory *can* be associated with imagining political resistance. Rather its objective is to demonstrate that the discursive form the conspiracy theory takes, particularly in relation to constructions of the adversary’s power and morality, can result in dramatic discursive shaping and constraining influence on what kinds of strategies of resistance can be conceived, along with the extent to which they are presented as either disabling or empowering.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

...These are the kind of manics that are running our world, and they want us dead, because they believe us to be vermin on this planet, and their conviction in this belief is unquestionable. Does it make sense now what happened and is happening over the world? The millions killed during the empires, world wars and civil wars. The constant genocides around the world. The German Holocausts? People, I ask you again, wake up. They want to kill 90% of us, how do you think they are going to do it? Who do you think they are building concentration camps for? Who do you think they are training elite forces for? Who do you think they are planning WWII for?

... I could write on and on, but we need closure somewhere. What has been revealed is shocking to say the least. Secret satanic societies of the uber-rich that are based in Europe and rule our world, that commit ritualistic murders and sexualize young children, that have slaughtered many people, orchestrated every war and revolution, funded every dictator, and that want 90% of us dead. But who exactly are they? Who is capable of a millennia old evil conspiracy of poisoning, murdering and enslaving our society since the beginning of civilizations. Who gains from the destruction of our humanity? Who are our masters and gods? And without saying it, I ask you, are they even human?

(Above Top Secret Discussion Thread: “The Empire Never Ended: A Brief History of New World Order”)

1.1 The New World Order conspiracy theory

While myriad conspiracy theories exist and have existed arguably for as long as humans have had the ability to interpret events as consciously planned, the New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theory is unique in its relative coherence, acceptance, endurance and capacity to unify other conspiracies. Such a ‘grand conspiracy theory’ is far from novel of course; Wright Mills wrote in 1956 of popular conceptions of ‘the power elite’ that this elite “may be thought of as omnipotent, and its powers thought of as a great hidden design. According to such notions of the omnipotent elite as historical cause, the elite is never an entirely visible agency. It is, in fact, a secular substitute for the will of God” (1999: 16). What is new however is that the formerly vaguely-defined, all-purpose ‘they’ now have a name: the New World Order. At its heart a political conspiracy which postulates a secret, powerful elite engendering events in order to establish world domination, specifically via the creation of a single, totalitarian world government (see Chapter 2 for a historical

outline of the concept and the various ways in which the expression has been employed by different groups), it is nonetheless frequently cited as an ‘end game’ explanation for any number of popular conspiracy theories, from the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the assassination of JFK and all the way to ‘Illuminati’ secret societies and UFOs. A 2013 national opinion poll in the US on conspiracy theories found that 28% believe that a “secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government, or New World Order” (and, remarkably when one considers how many people this actually implies, 4% believe that “lizard people control our societies”), suggesting that this conspiracy theory is a lot more popular, and certainly far less ‘fringe’, than one might expect.¹ The discursive power of naming such a grand unifying theory cannot be understated; as many social theorists who trade in neologisms (for example Castells, Giddens, Ritzer, Boudrillard and many others) will testify, naming can provide novel explanatory power to a number of ostensibly disparate ideas while simultaneously creating entirely new research agendas for real-world analysis. The NWO is no different in this respect, permitting not only the unification of various conspiracy theories but the generation of a new and (more or less) coherent theoretical framework from which to (re-)interpret current and historical empirical phenomena.

When it comes to the NWO conspiracy theory however, analysis, interpretation and explanation are not the end of the story. As mentioned above, this conspiracy theory is fundamentally political in nature, positing powerful elites colluding in secret in order to enhance and consolidate their power over the rest of humanity, the ultimate goal being global domination via a single totalitarian world government. As such it would be misleading to conceptualise debate surrounding this conspiracy theory as entirely intellectual in nature, ignoring the political grievances intrinsic to such a theory. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, the academic literature on conspiracy theory tends not only to ignore, but often outright reject political grievances and any consequent aspirations as either unimportant to the main objective of conspiracy theorising (characterised primarily as a cognitive, puzzle-solving endeavour) or utterly impractical given the presumed disabling nature of such a totalising grand theory of an enormously powerful elite. I do not dispute such a claim entirely. The debates within the prolific online conspiracy theory discussion forums are indeed predominantly analytical and interpretive in nature, but they are also awash with political grievance and even moral outrage. As Castells suggests in his recent work entitled, Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social movements in the internet Age, social movements are rooted “in the fundamental injustice of all

¹ <http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2013/04/conspiracy-theory-poll-results-.html>

societies” (2012: 12) and indeed for the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, he suggests that it arose “as a largely spontaneous expression of outrage ... infused with a hope for a better world” (ibid: 185). I explore the connections and similarities between the NWO conspiracy theory and the discourses of new social movements below, and in greater detail in Chapter 8, but as I demonstrate in Chapter 2, within the conspiracy theory literature minimal attention is given to political grievance and the associated desire for a better, more just, world. Often implicit, but almost as often explicit, within the intellectual puzzle-solving discussions online is not merely the ‘is’ but the ‘ought’ of the NWO. Notwithstanding a miniscule minority of forum posts², the NWO is viewed overwhelmingly as morally objectionable if not outright evil. Despite the majority of academic literature on conspiracy theory ignoring the relevance of notions of political resistance, it is, I would argue, inevitable that discussions of morally objectionable and excessively powerful political agents, along with their morally objectionable acts - the problems - lead to discussions about *solutions*, specifically in terms of resistance against the machinations and objectives of this evil elite in order to conceive of bringing about a more just world. While I would not extend such a notion to the extreme of Foucault’s (arguably excessively-) categorical maxim that that “(w)here this is power, there is resistance” (1979: 95), at the minimum I would certainly suggest that where there is a discourse relating to excessive power, one will usually find a related discourse of resistance.

1.2 Research aims arising from the conspiracy theory literature

The overarching goal of this research from its inception has been to understand how resistance is thought about and discussed within a conspiracy theory framework; specifically the NWO conspiracy theory framework which is a manifestation of what Basham (2003) refers to as a totalising global and malevolent conspiracy. Fenster argues that conspiracy theory is, by its very nature, disabling (1999: xv). Fenster himself concedes that this suggestion is conjectural and requires empirical research, since he then writes that “(t)he notion that conspiracy theory is disabling needs both further investigation and historical contextualization” (ibid).

How does Fenster reach the conclusion that conspiracy theory is a disabling theory of power? There are three key elements of his argument. First, the populist nature of conspiracy theory discursively

² For example one AboveTopSecret discussion thread is entitled, “What’s so bad about the NWO?”: <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread770029/pg1>

constructs a distance between ordinary people and power which tends towards extreme and simplistic forms, including “fascism, totalitarianism, racism and anti-Semitism” (ibid.: xiii). Such totalising socially dichotomous interpretations of power relations by their nature tend to be disabling or at the very least require “the most desperate of measures” (ibid.: xv). Those holding the power are almost by definition (wither in terms of institutional political and economic power in the first two examples, or perceived innate genetic differences in the latter two) understood as overwhelmingly powerful, “controlling virtually all aspects of social life, politics and economics” (ibid.: xiii). Secondly, Fenster highlights the ostensible centrality of ordinary people’s “insignificance” to conspiracy theorising (ibid.). This is not just in terms of the power dynamic, in the sense that powerless people are a consequence of powerful people, but also that in a perceived totalising system, insignificance offers a relatively powerless person refuge from danger (ibid.). In a convoluted way, the kind of powerlessness resulting from insignificance can be understood as being the source of power in response to such a totalising system of elite control. Finally, he highlights the crucial importance of secrecy to conspiracy theorising. While conspiracy theories infer malevolent power structures, the ultimate ‘truth’ of these power structures is assumed to be secret, thus making it difficult to pinpoint the precise cause of the perceived problem. Overall then, Fenster’s conclusion that, despite being a theory of power, it is a rather disabling one, is eminently plausible from a theoretical perspective. What it needs, as Fenster himself agrees (ibid.: xv) and what this thesis seeks to address, is greater empirical contextualisation through research.

Interestingly, in his later (2008) edition of this text, Fenster diluted this claim significantly, presumably appreciating a decade later that such a peremptory generalisation was simply untenable:

conspiracy theory assumes a disabling vision of political power in which control is always elsewhere, and it suggests political engagement that is either vanguardist (for example, a “truth movement” attempting to lead followers to action while dismissing outsiders as knowing or unwitting conspirators) or separatist (for example, radical White Power and Christian Identity sects that remove themselves from society). Secondly, conspiracy theory suspects everyone of complicity within the conspiracy, making collective action quite different (if no one can be trusted, how safe or worthwhile is it to work with others?). At particular conjunctures, however it enables the construction of a kind of secular, shadow intellectual collective that can organize – often in contentious and stumbling steps – social and political activity (Fenster 2008: 14-15)

This constitutes a major shift from his earlier thinking about the political nature of conspiracy theorising, where he suggested that any goals by conspiracy theorists arising from grievances “seem only tangentially related to the fulfilment of specific demands concerning government” (Fenster 1999: 86) and that instead the primary objectives among them related to never-ending puzzle-solving and truth-seeking (ibid: 89). His 2008 conceptualisation of conspiracy theorists contains an admission that associated political objectives can and do exist. Despite this, he retains the view that conspiracy theory is fundamentally disabling in terms of “effective” political resistance when compared with traditionally-conceived political activists:

Activists can organize protests strategically and build collective, alternative institutions in order to effect real social change only if they can identify both the specific economic and political structures that oppress and dominate the majority of the public. Conspiracy theory, on the other hand, cannot enable effective political activity (Fenster 2008: 46)

His blanket rejection of the potential for conspiracy theory to ‘enable’ political activity appears to rest on the assumption that conspiracy theory cannot pinpoint specific ‘structures’ of oppression and domination. This assumption is anchored in a highly-stylised, and I would suggest indefensible given the content of discussions analysed in this thesis, conception of conspiracy theory as one which is only capable of specifying a vague ‘they’ as the cause of any problems. What is nonetheless noteworthy is that, whereas previously he presented conspiracy theory as a primarily intellectual ‘game’ devoid of considerations of real-world objectives, in his 2008 work he actually frames it in goal-oriented terms, specifically relating to political concerns of democracy and transparency:

Ultimately, I propose that conspiracy theory operates broadly as a political and cultural practice that longs for a perfectly transparent, accessible democracy – an end that, even if it were possible, conspiracy theory can hardly imagine and cannot attain (Ibid.: ix)

The findings from my research into this topic certainly coheres with the first part of the above statement, and a crucial take-home message here is the direct parallel between modern social movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the discourse of which not only contains elements that resemble a worldview which postulates a global conspiracy, but which make demands for a more transparent and democratic society. Chapter 8 examines in depth the parallels of both form and content between anti-NWO resistance discourses and those of Occupy Wall Street, but for now it is important to note that moral grievances expressed towards a powerful elite invariably lead to

discussions of potential resistance, even for such a plausibly disempowering worldview as contained within the NWO conspiracy theories.

So, what do I mean when referring to thinking about and discussing resistance? The following section proposes a working definition of ‘resistance discourse’ which is to be understood in terms of agency. Specifically, I suggest that conceptualising resistance discourse in this way can most simply and most effectively be undertaken via two crucial subsets of the concept of agency: power, or more specifically the perceived *capacity for action* (by different agents, whether individual or collective), and the perceived *morality*³ *of action* (by different agents, whether individual or collective). I should emphasise that my concern is on the perception of power and morality as represented within a particular discourse (see Chapter 3 for an expansion of this epistemological standpoint). This is then followed by an evaluation of just what makes conspiracy theory a unique and important framework in this regard, a framework offering significant insights into understanding the discursive shaping and constraining of thought and discussion relating to resistance more generally. I then situate this in the context of the existing academic literature on conspiracy theory, a literature whose predominant objectives have tended to be to explain why conspiracy theories exist or are believed at all, their (more or less flawed) epistemic characteristics, and which tend to ignore, or indeed simply reject as impossible in some cases, any political or resistance-related content to conspiracy theorising. It is against this dominant research agenda on conspiracy theory that I situate this thesis; I maintain that it is not only possible but moreover useful and enlightening to treat the discourses of online conspiracy theory discussion forums in the same way as those of a social movement, whose discussions of political grievance are associated with discussions of political resistance.

The justification for this methodological approach is anchored in the theoretical work of Alberto Melucci (1989; 1996) whose ideas about movements and especially about research on movements constitute a radical departure from traditional political science or even sociological approaches. Rather than concrete, visible acts of collective political resistance or the statements of movement leaders, Melucci argues that what is really fundamental, ontologically, to understanding a movement is the continually developed, negotiated and contested construction of agency, an activity

³ Interestingly, a recent paper on belief in conspiracy theories by van Prooijen & Jostmann (2013) uses the term ‘perceived morality’ in relation to authorities, which is a useful echo of my foregrounding of the fundamental importance of morality. However, they treat the perceived morality of authorities as a cause of belief in conspiracy theories, which is not a relevant issue for this thesis.

which takes place at the micro level of movement members' communicative interactions. I will outline his core ideas which are relevant to my research aims and demonstrate their methodological implications for answering my research questions, which I split into descriptive and analytical categories as follows:

Descriptive

- a) How is the central problem of the NWO presented within the discourses of online anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums?
- b) How are various ideas about the perceived agency of the adversary (villains), those purportedly controlling the NWO, in terms of power and morality, presented within the discourses of online anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums?
- c) How are various ideas about the perceived agency of the members (heroes) of the online anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums, along with that of the general public at large (potential supporters), in terms of power and morality, presented within the discourses of online anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums?

Analytical

- d) How are ideas about the perceived agency of the members of the online anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums, in terms of power and morality, shaped or constrained by the perceived agency of the NWO within the discourses of online anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums?
- e) Given how these ideas are presented within the discourses, to what extent can it be argued that conspiracy theory itself is either empowering or disabling?

Why is my research based on online discussion forums? Section 1.6 will explain this choice as one borne out of both necessity and utility. I furthermore argue that the online realm offers unprecedented access to micro-level member interactions and constitutes an optimal – from the point of view of the researcher - space in which to analyse the “communicative construction” (Melucci 1996: 71) of a movement’s “action system” (Melucci 1989: 25-30) and ideology (Melucci 1996: 348-52) via discourse analysis.

1.3 Resistance discourse

Before specifying my conceptual framework of resistance as employed within this thesis, it is crucial to clarify from the outset that what is of interest here is how resistance is thought about and discussed, not how or even whether it is carried out. What I am really examining is resistance discourse, which I define as all stated ideas pertaining to overcoming, countering or mitigating the actions and power of a stated adversary (in this case collectively defined as the elite controlling agents of the NWO). Such a definition is deliberately broad; while many scholars of social and political movements would for example dismiss the notion of escaping to the wilderness (see Chapter 4) or spiritual ascension (see Chapter 5) as forms of resistance, they are certainly conceived as such within forum discussions, given the perceived constraints of an ostensibly all-powerful and nefarious elite. Indeed such unconventional strategies are frequently proposed in the forums as far more sensible ones than direct action or confrontation. In some ways these ideas would perhaps fit more neatly into the literature on micro-level ‘everyday’ resistance, of which one excellent example is Scott’s examination of creative, cultural and hidden micro-level practices of resistance in his 1990 work, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. I do not wish, however to place this research neatly into one or another category of literature in the field of resistance per se, as my concern is not with empirical acts of resistance themselves, but on what kinds of resistance can even be conceived, and especially how such ideas are shaped or constrained by the perceived agency of the elite within a (more or less) totalising conspiracy theory framework. As will be demonstrated in this thesis, many ideas relating to resistance within the conspiracy theory discussion forums align themselves with, and mirror the goals and means of, traditionally-conceived collective social movements, while others are far more radical and unconventional. Still others can be characterised as micro-level acts of non-compliance (for example buying groceries from local suppliers rather than multinational supermarket chains). The scope and diversity of resistance strategies discussed in these forums is enormous and I want above all to avoid restricting the scope of my research by defining resistance in narrow terms, be it collective or individual, political or economic, practical or intellectual / spiritual. I choose to analyse the discussions in terms of resistance discourse rather than resistance per se, exploring how the ideas themselves are fleshed out, contested and developed collectively via communication, and in particular to establish the extent to which (specifically, the discursive conditions under which) conspiracy theory can be interpreted as disabling or empowering. My approach thus allows for the combination of micro, macro, individual, collective, traditional and unconventional approaches to combatting the perceived power of the NWO elite, all of which are important. I would further suggest that one of the most crucial insights to be gained from this research is how even subtle changes in the

discursively-constructed power and morality of an adversary can result in dramatic differences in the resistance strategies proposed, and equally dramatic differences in expressions of optimism or pessimism about the potential efficacy and morality of such strategies. At its most basic level this can be ultimately understood as a discourse of problems and solutions. The specific content of the conspiracy theory, particularly with reference to the hero / villain agency dynamic, needs to be unpacked and contextualised with the solutions suggested, before one can suggest that the discourse is either empowering or disabling. In this regard my approach seeks to overcome what Seymour argues to be a restrictive factor in the general resistance literature in relation to understanding “the fundamental issue of how individuals learn a system of cultural meanings, internalize and draw upon these meanings and, as a result, are *motivated* to act” (2006: 304, italicised in original). This thesis attempts to unpack not only how resistance is thought about and discussed within a conspiracy theory context (including the ‘why’ of resistance in the first place), but to assess the extent to which these discourses can be understood as disabling or empowering in relation to positive or negative affective and motivational expressions associated with specific resistance strategies.

The overall purpose of this approach therefore is, firstly, to counter the empirically unsupported⁴ theoretical conjectures within the literature on conspiracy theory that resistance is not, and even cannot be thought about or discussed (see Chapter 2). Secondly, the analytical approach I use is grounded in the ideas of Melucci (see Chapter 3 for an in-depth discussion of the ideas I use from his work) on movements who argues not only that research on concrete, visible acts of resistance is misleading and that these are nothing more than a consequence of deeper social and interactive processes in the first place, but that by far the most interesting characteristics of a movement are to be found in precisely how meanings about action (the discursive negotiation via “communicative construction” as it takes place (Melucci 1996: 71) of ideas surrounding “goals, means and environment” (Melucci 1989: 26)) are constructed, re-constructed and contested by the members themselves. Melucci’s ontological, epistemological and methodological approach to the study of movements breaks from the traditional literature on social movements (see Chapter 3) and his conceptual framework provides significant analytical utility for this research. Given this approach then, how are we to conceptualise thinking about and discussing resistance? As indicated above, I

⁴ A 2014 psychological study by Jolley and Douglas is the only attempt in the literature to establish empirically a link with conspiracy theory and subsequent political behaviour, and interestingly it finds that intent to engage in political behaviour decreases with exposure to conspiracy theory. There are however substantial limitations within this study which I examine in Chapter 2.

suggest that this is most fruitfully operationalised by reference to agency; in particular, two subsets of agency relating to the perception of power (specifically the perceived capacity for action), and the perceived morality of action. Of immediate interest is that power and morality are two of the three fundamental agency-based components of conspiracy theory, best exemplified in Basham's (2003: 91-2) description of a global malevolent conspiracy, with the third being secrecy or invisibility. While the postulation of elite secrecy – or, put another way, the absence of transparency in the exercise of elite power - is of course crucial for any framework to be characterised as conspiracy theory, for the purposes of my analytical approach in this thesis it can be subsumed within the notion of morality (i.e. the lack of transparency being a morally illegitimate component of elite power) and power (elites having the capacity to hide certain actions from public view). Some researchers (especially Birchall 2006; 2011a; 2001b) have tended to foreground the importance of secrecy, which usefully (and unusually, see Chapter 2) links ideas relating to conspiracy theory with the literature on transparency in state politics, but given my working definition of 'resistance discourse' below, secrecy is understood to be at a lower level of abstraction than the overarching discursive constructions of power and morality, and hence can be incorporated within them, rather than constituting a distinct third dimension.

Table 1.1 thus illustrates my approach to conceptualising resistance discourse, as something to be thought about and discussed, in the context of my research questions:

Table 1.1: Conceptualising resistance discourse

Dimension of Agency	Positive question	Negative question
Capacity for action	“What <i>can</i> be done?”	“What <i>can't</i> be done?”
Morality of action	“What <i>should</i> be done?”	“What <i>shouldn't</i> be done?”

Here we have an extremely basic, but also extremely useful, analytical starting point for examining how resistance is thought about and discussed within the forums. At its heart is a simple

problem/solution dichotomy invoking the ‘what’s, ‘how’s and ‘why’s of resistance, at a high enough level of abstraction that it can be applied with a good deal of generality for the purposes of this thesis. Of significant importance here is the overlap of resistance discourse with two of the central conceptual dimensions of conspiracy theory itself, which are also based on power and morality.

While the framework indicated in Table 1.1 is in the first instance to be understood from the perspective of those discussing the relative morality and capacity to act in relation to resisting the NWO, such that they can ask, “what can or should *we* do?” the elements apply equally to other social agents. For example, questions of what can and should (and especially what can’t and shouldn’t) be done can be asked of the other two broad social groups of concern to movements in addition to movement members themselves: the villains and potential supporters (Melucci 1996: 350). Why resistance is even considered in the first place has to be understood in relation to what the adversary is perceived as doing, characterised as what shouldn’t be done in moral terms (whether in broad terms as the establishment of a global dictatorship, or its manifestations in terms of suppression of liberty), thereby providing a justification for what those resisting should do. The perceived capacity for action of the adversary (in this case the elite agents of the NWO) shapes and constrains the perceived capacity for action of those resisting them. The (im)morality of the agents of the NWO, the acts which those opposing argue shouldn’t be done, also influences the resistance discourse, both positively and negatively: on the one hand, the moral illegitimacy of the adversary needs to be significant enough to generate the requisite level of grievance to necessitate discussion of doing anything about it in the first place. On the other hand, given the truly extreme perceived immorality of NWO agents in the online conspiracy theory discussion forums, often portrayed as utterly inhumane if not evil, we often witness hesitancy towards certain common acts of resistance like public protest, since there is displayed a serious fear of brutal, at times fatal, retribution by the adversary. As one member of the David Icke forum puts it, attending a protest march only “incites them to bust heads in. You won’t have them trembling in their hobnail boots, other than trembling with excitement over the ensuing bloodshed” (David Icke Forum thread: “so we are awake thats the first step what do we do now?”). This is an example of a practical rejection (what can’t be done) by one forum post of one particular form of resistance against the NWO which is influenced by the perception of the extreme immorality of the agents of the NWO (something they shouldn’t, but can do). For other members however, the extreme perceived immorality is so intense that the prospect of certain death is not enough to discourage resistance; indeed some consider it noble: “Rather to live free and die quickly then to slowly rot in servitude” (Above Top Secret thread, “The Second

American Revolution Has Begun! Then What?’’). This is an important point. There are no absolute causal relations between the elements in my resistance discourse framework. There exist considerable differences of opinions about feasible and ethical agency in the context of resisting the NWO in these forums; it is precisely how these ideas are collectively negotiated and contested via communication among forum members that is of interest. Nonetheless, there are very real shaping and constraining influences within these resistance discourses and these can be unpacked through analysis within this overarching framework.

I would further suggest that all these considerations, for any kind of social movement generally, precede any concrete, visible acts of resistance. The scope of this thesis is of course limited to ideas and discussions rather than empirical acts of resistance, which alone cannot predict political activity, but future appropriately-designed participant observation research (see Chapter 9) of an active social movement could very usefully seek to link up preceding online discussions with certain specific acts of resistance. Regardless, I would suggest that precisely how ideas about resistance are formed, contested and developed can illuminate far more than purely post-hoc analysis of, for example, a mass demonstration, e.g. via sound-bite slogan placards and statement transcripts from the movement’s representative(s) or leader(s). How they got to that point, how they collectively formulated and negotiated the problems and solutions, the ‘what’s, ‘how’s and ‘why’s of any visible acts of resistance, can at best merely be inferred without reference to the discussions preceding the act. And these preceding discussions – unless already analysed as part of the whole research project - would be accessible only via the fading, potentially biased memories within individuals’ consciousnesses. Ultimately, with solely post-hoc research on an established movement’s visible activities, the collective, social and discursive processes which brought meaning to and enabled the action in the first place are forever lost for the researcher, a tragic shame considering this is, as Melucci and I myself would argue, the realm in which the greatest insights into the workings of a movement can be found. Certainly much more sense can be made of a movement’s visible acts of resistance if access can be gained to the debates in which they fleshed out strategies of action beforehand. The methodological benefits for the researcher of the incredible volume and richness of online discursive interactions – accessible furthermore as they actually took place which is of crucial importance – should be self-evident in this regard (see section 1.6 below and especially Chapter 3 for a more detailed methodological discussion, and Chapter 9 for proposals on future research which can combine communicative construction and post-hoc movement analysis). I reiterate that this is well beyond the scope of this thesis; my point in bringing it up is to emphasise that even though (online or face-to-face) collective and strategic discussion

cannot predict collective action, collective and strategic discussion is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for collective action.

Returning to Table 1.1, it is important to appreciate, despite the seemingly distinct categories as presented within the table, the interrelations and indeed interdependence, between each idea contained therein. Any idea of what can be done is of course shaped and constrained by an idea of what should be done. For a movement such as Fathers for Justice in the UK for example, whose primary objectives initially were public recognition and recruitment for the eventual goal of increased access rights (their ultimate ‘what should be done?’), it makes perfect sense to plan and execute acts (their ‘what can be done?’) in which their members wear fancy dress and wave their banners via, among other strategies, the ‘photo-bombing’ of live mass media events such as outdoor news or sports broadcasting. These numerous acts of resistance were of course not spontaneously undertaken by disparate individuals within the movement; discussions will have taken place regarding the benefits and drawbacks of wearing various silly costumes while jumping around behind newscasters in relation to their goal of public recognition and recruitment, although at this point these discussions can only be inferred. However, by now the vast majority of the UK public is presumably aware of the movement’s existence, so public recognition will have been achieved, at least to a much greater extent than since the movement’s inception. Arguably, therefore, the ‘what should be done?’ questions would now take centre stage, manifested by their overarching objectives in terms of governmental legislation regarding fathers’ rights in the UK, such that the ‘what can be done?’ questions would lend themselves to acts such as formal lobbying of relevant governmental agencies. Certainly it makes more sense to devote greater resources to acts such as this rather than public recognition at this stage, even if the recognition has not yet reached ‘market saturation’ as such.

However, what if we find a father who agrees wholeheartedly with the basic premise of fathers’ rights as stated by the movement, but who holds a conspiracy theory worldview that all governments are controlled by the NWO and, furthermore, that one of the central NWO goals is the suppression of male rights via a global campaign of militant feminism? As far-fetched as this sounds, I did not conjure it up for the purposes of presenting a thought experiment. Such a worldview genuinely exists, and its most notable manifestation is located within the web pages of right-wing anti-NWO conspiracy theory author Henry Makow, whose website’s under-title is,

“Exposing Feminism and the New World Order”⁵, foregrounding the radical feminist agenda as central to the NWO conspiracy. Let’s ignore the content of Makow’s ideas for now, whose support appears to be extremely marginal in the online conspiracy theory world in any case. But for the purposes of understanding how the various elements of my resistance discourse framework interact with each other, it offers a useful illustration. Makow would certainly reject any strategies by Fathers for Justice to lobby for the goal of governmental legislation for fathers’ rights since it would make no sense to him; after all the government is controlled by elites who proactively work to suppress male rights of any kind, so no such legislation would be passed. This specific type of resistance would be considered futile. What alternative approach could be conceived that would be effective in such a case is not so clear. My sense is that nothing less than a complete revolution such that the NWO system of government control is overthrown would suffice. It is certainly difficult to imagine – assuming one postulates male oppression as key to the global conspiracy – any feasible way to convince the NWO elites to allow for some concessions to the anti-male agenda.

1.4. Conspiracy theory and resistance

The above example is a useful introduction to just what makes conspiracy theory such a unique and insightful framework in the context of thinking about and discussing resistance, particularly when treated as the discourse of a movement which considers solutions as well as problems. While the language I use in this thesis when incorporating Melucci’s ideas is to treat the discourse of conspiracy theory discussion forums as the discourse of a movement (which is certainly applicable in any case using Melucci’s theoretical framework on social movements, although it perhaps wouldn’t be for most social movement scholars), I would argue that based on the content of the online anti-NWO discussion forum threads, there are numerous and substantial similarities with the discourses and conceptions of agency of long-established, highly-active social movements. As discussed in Chapter 2, we find adversarial agency constructions which fit the classical conspiracy theory definition in movements such as the anti-globalisation/global justice movement, the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Tea Party movement in the USA. In all these cases, accusations are made within resistance discourses against extremely powerful, nefarious minority elites who plan and act in secret for their own (morally illegitimate) objectives at the expense of common people.

⁵ <http://www.henrymakow.com/> - interestingly, his website’s URL used to be www.savethemales.ca. Makow has been married three times, which may or may not be a factor in his uniquely gender-centred take on the NWO.

Conspiracy theorists are presumed in most of the academic literature not to be concerned with political solutions or any form of resistance; rather their main purpose is perceived as an intellectual exercise, to attempt - via more or less spurious reasoning and speculation - to uncover the (fundamentally unattainable, according to Fenster (1999: 89)) truth behind various events. Yet what we see in these discussion forums, whose sole premise is to exist as an explicit space for the discussion of conspiracy theories, is an enormous volume of highly political debate along with a wealth of active discussion about what can be done.

Sometimes, in fact, we find substantial overlap in content, and not just form, with the resistance discourses of established social and political movements. David Icke is perhaps the quintessential 'celebrity' example of an outlandish conspiracy theorist whose ideas, especially regarding global control by extra-terrestrial reptilians, are infamous worldwide. He frequently writes and talks about the illegitimacy of the global financial and monetary system and the discourse he employs on this particular topic is indistinguishable from that of the Occupy Wall Street movement. From the other side of the political spectrum, the discourses of anti-NWO US Patriots regarding attacks on the sovereignty of their nation by global institutions such as the UN and trade agreements such as NAFTA are virtually a carbon copy of those employed by some of the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle 1999. Indeed some anti-NWO US Patriots will have attended these anti-globalisation protests, and some furthermore will be members or supporters of the right-wing Tea Party movement in the US. Similarly, some members of the online conspiracy theory discussion forums, both Above Top Secret and especially the David Icke forum, will be members of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Conspiracy theorists are never just conspiracy theorists and nothing else, and such an overly-stylised conception of them is, I would suggest, a key flaw which results in untenable statements like Fenster's cited earlier in this chapter and in more depth in Chapter 2. They can also be republicans, nationalists, anarchists or socialists and they can certainly be found to be politically active within established social movements.

What sense, then, does it make to consider conspiracy theory at all if there is so much overlap in discourse with other anti-elite movements? There are several reasons why I suggest that it is an important and insightful sphere in which to analyse resistance discourse. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the assumption in the academic literature is that conspiracy theory is all problem and no solution. It is viewed as a primarily cognitive activity, more or less paranoid and spurious depending on who's writing about them, with minimal political content of consequence, and the overwhelming majority of academic writing on conspiracy theories and theorists has been to try to

explain why they exist at all and why people believe them, along with epistemic critiques of conspiracy theory logic (or the lack of it). As Fenster writes, at best the objectives of conspiracy theorists “seem only tangentially related to the fulfilment of specific demands concerning government” (Fenster 1999: 86). He goes further to say that conspiracy theory by its very nature is a “disabling theory of power” (ibid.: xv), though he concedes soon afterwards that this conjecture requires empirical research (ibid), and this argument is taken to completion by Basham who writes that the reason we should reject any theory postulating a “malevolent global conspiracy” is simply that “*there is nothing you can do*” (Basham 2003: 100, italics in original) when faced with such a totalising conspiracy. Given that many of the various definitions of the NWO (see Chapter 2) constitute as totalising a conception of elite agency as it is possible to imagine, the research in this thesis, which draws upon an enormous online resource of discussion about what can be done to resist the NWO, aims to reject this conjecture and encourage an expanded and more contextual academic treatment of conspiracy theory so that its political content may be given some credence, and in particular to appreciate the discursive nuances in relation to expressions of empowerment or disempowerment depending on just how elite agency is conceived, in relation to the perceived agency of those wishing to resist.

Despite the demonstration that conspiracy theorists can and do think about political resistance, as indicated by the Makow / Fathers for Justice example above, there certainly are significant discursive constraints on how resistance can be thought about and discussed within a NWO conspiracy theory framework. One of the most fascinating insights this offers is the uncovering of novel and creative forms of resistance, along with occasional outright futility towards resistance at all, given the agency-based restrictions arising from the amplified and even exaggerated perceived power of the adversary. Of course, futility and feelings of political powerlessness are hardly novel phenomena. What truly is special here however is the stark juxtaposition of extreme, intense political and moral grievance with expressions of utter futility. The existence of this juxtaposition in such a marked form is, I would suggest, unique to conspiracy theory given its extreme constructions of elite power and (im)morality. It is far from ubiquitous of course, and this thesis demonstrates that despite the discursive constraints of such an extreme conspiracy theory worldview, active debate and discussion about resistance exist in abundance. The catalyst for this whole project began when I conducted a survey seeking to explore a relationship between online versus ‘offline’ political activism when starting my MSc dissertation. The results of the survey were disastrous in research terms: I found absolutely no evidence to suggest any positive or (as I anticipated based on the literature on this topic) negative association between online and offline political activism. The only

conclusion I was able to draw with any kind of confidence, unfortunately entirely irrelevant to my research questions at the time, was that the stronger an individual felt about a political problem, the more likely he or she was to be politically active, whether online or offline. In other words, the morally outraged are more likely to resist than the mildly peeved. Hardly a groundbreaking insight.

Relatedly, Castells has recently argued that the Occupy Wall Street movement “surged as a largely spontaneous expression of outrage” (2012: 185)”, which if anything over-estimates the power of grievance to motivate action. Yet among conspiracy theorists, at least for those holding the more extreme conceptions of New World Order (I use the term ‘extreme’ here in relation to the extent of perceived elite agency rather than in any political or ideological sense), we see expressions of intense outrage coupled with expressions of complete futility, supporting Basham’s claim that nothing can be done in the context of such a worldview. While the evidence for this remarkable juxtaposition is simply not pervasive enough within the forum discussions I have researched to be considered in any way representative, its existence at all (indeed it was just such a strikingly juxtaposed survey response which led me to research the area in the first place, see Chapter 3) demonstrates the extent to which conspiracy theory offers a real and fascinating contribution to the way we can understand movements’ resistance discourse more generally. It certainly seems there is something of a ‘Goldilocks zone’ for a movement to be able to conceive of and discuss direct resistance strategies and goals. If the adversary is not perceived as excessively powerful or morally illegitimate (these two notions can of course also be conflated, for instance among people who believe that any kind of social or political domination is illegitimate), there may be an insufficient ‘grievance prerequisite’ to engender thought and discussion about resistance in the first place. When perceived as *too* powerful and *too* morally illegitimate however, it can become very difficult if not impossible to think about and discuss effective resistance. As will be demonstrated in Chapters 4-5, solutions offered in the discussion forums in this specific context tend to be in the form of escape and survival (whether physical, for example living in the wilderness, or spiritual, via transcending the physical universe entirely to attain oneness with ‘infinite love’) rather than direct confrontation. While solutions to the problem of the NWO are nonetheless proposed in such contexts, and members even express sentiments of (sometimes incredible) empowerment by recommending either physical or spiritual escape, we invariably see associated expressions of deflated agency among other forum members in terms of what can be done to fight the agents of the NWO directly, as its controlling agents are frequently cited as being simply too powerful to stop.

1.5 Melucci's approach to the study of movements

As outlined above, and justified in greater depth in chapters 2 and 3, despite the predominant research agendas within the study of conspiracy theory which constrain the boundaries of research to the realms of epistemic analysis and psychological, social, political and cultural explanations for their existence, it is nonetheless useful and enlightening to treat the discourses of conspiracy theory discussion forums as those of a movement with clear political grievances, coupled with discussions of resistance goals and strategies. Recall that the research questions for this thesis relate to how such goals and strategies, along with their legitimising justifications, are thought of and discussed within a totalising NWO conspiracy theory framework. In general, the literature on how social and political movements should be understood is somewhat unhelpful in terms of the core questions in this thesis. The dominant approaches tend to be either organisational (for example the 'resource mobilisation' school), structural (the 'political opportunity' or 'political process' schools), focused on individual and collective motivations (the 'social psychology' or 'rational choice' schools), cultural (the 'new social movements' school) and discursive and ideological (the 'collective action framing' school). While all these approaches are to be commended for the insights they offer into understanding how and why political mobilisation occurs, for the most part they tend to make limiting assumptions about just what can be considered a movement at all. Even the collective action framing school which centres on the cohesion and coherence of ideas relating to resistance, certainly highly relevant for my research questions, is concerned with these ideas only to the extent that they promote visible, concrete and therefore 'successful' mobilisation and acts of resistance. Their research invariably takes place, firstly after such acts take place and secondly, via access to ideas which have been 'pre-packaged' and communicated by movement leaders, which misses the collective, communicative processes which led to the ideas forming in the first place, and which furthermore confer a misleading stability and coherence via a 'top-down' picture of a movement's ideas. The interest of this thesis is in how these ideas are constructed, negotiated and contested by the members themselves, and especially as and when they take place, a process Melucci defines as "communicative construction" (1996: 71). Melucci further emphasises the combination of cognitive and emotional elements of such communicative construction (ibid.) which allows furthermore for analysis that unpacks the relative affective attitudes contained within the discourse, such that strategies may be understood as relatively disabling or empowering.

Melucci's approach, although falling arguably into a combination of cultural, discursive and psychological analysis, is sufficiently distinct and coherent enough on its own terms to be considered separately, and indeed his core ideas relating to agency, the construction of an 'action system' and 'ideology', which focus on the communicative interactions of movement members, provide a custom-made theoretical and methodological framework from which to answer my research questions. In opposition to the assumptions of much of the social movement literature, in terms of just what can be considered worth studying as a movement at all, Melucci argues that the processes that actually take place within a movement "differ profoundly from the image of the politically organized actor" (Melucci 1996: 115). The literature often fails to do justice to "the reality of reticular and diffuse forms of collective action" (ibid.: 4) which should be considered a "product of multiple and heterogeneous social processes" (ibid.: 20). He warns furthermore against the misleading reification of movements by researchers whereby we view concrete acts and official statements by leaders as stable, unitary empirical data; instead he encourages recognition that 'movements' are simply "objects of knowledge constructed by the analyst; they do not coincide with the empirical complexity of the action" (ibid.: 21). This complexity, at the micro level of social and communicative interactions of a movement's members, should constitute a central focus of analysis: "Constant tensions arise among ends, means, and environment: Goals no longer match means or vice versa; the environment is either poor or rich in the requisite resources" (ibid: 40). It is precisely such diversity, tension and contestation of ideas within the discussions of resistance, along with how the various ideas shape and constrain each other through communication, that I am seeking to analyse in this thesis.

The core ideas from Melucci's framework which I apply to my analysis are 'action system' and 'ideology', which comprise elements of his overarching notion of 'collective identity' (see Chapter 3 for a detailed unpacking of how these terms are actually defined in his work). Put simply, an action system for Melucci is a system of ideas interactively generated by a movement's members who construct, adjust, contest and negotiate, through communication, interdependent ideas surrounding perceived a) goals, b) means and c) environmental resources (Melucci 1989: 26). This fits well with my underlying framework for resistance discourse in relation to perceptions of what can and cannot be done (means and environment) and what should be done (goals). What is missing however (although implicit to an extent) is a consideration of what shouldn't be done in moral terms. In this respect I draw upon Melucci's related notion of a movement's ideology, a highly loaded term which requires clarification to avoid misleading interpretation. While ideological considerations (whether particular political, spiritual or religious stances) as conventionally

understood are certainly relevant, what Melucci actually means by the term is nothing more than the interrelated and constructed ideas pertaining to the justification of resistance among the relevant agents or social groups within the overall framework: what should be done (by one or more social groups) as a consequence of the perception of what shouldn't be done (by one or more social groups). The quotes below, comprising the key elements of Melucci's notion of a movement's ideology, illustrate the concept's utility in this respect:

- “the undesirable situation which has given rise to the need for collective action”
- “the undesirable situation ... is attributed to an illegitimate adversary”
- “objectives, or desirable goals for which it is necessary to fight”
- “a positive relationship between the actor and the general goals of society”
- “the adversary is seen as an obstacle to the general goals of society”

(Melucci 1996: 350)

Combined with considerations of goals, means and environment via an action system we find within Melucci's approach a useful and appropriate analytical framework, consistent with my own fundamental concern with how resistance is thought about and discussed, in relation to the research questions presented above.

1.6. Methodological concerns for Melucci's conceptual framework

There are two interrelated but methodologically distinct elements of Melucci's framework upon which to base analysis. My concerns relate firstly to discourse, namely the relatively distinct set of ideas within the NWO conspiracy theory framework in terms of thinking about resistance. These ideas are of course not stable. They are constantly being developed, negotiated and contested. Furthermore they are interdependent: the severity of perceived power of the NWO can significantly constrain the perceived power of those resisting. Just what kind of conceptualisation of the NWO is assumed can have dramatic consequences in terms of what kinds of resistance strategies can be conceived. The second concern relates to the interactions between members in forming and developing these ideas and here I draw on Melucci's notion of “communicative construction” (ibid.: 71). The term simply refers to the collective and interactive meaning-making processes which occur

via discussion between members. Thus it is not merely the ideas themselves in which I am interested; after all these can never be tied down completely and a frequent complaint by Melucci against social movement researchers is the reliance on ideas communicated by movements' official statements, 'final products' as it were, or statements by leaders who "claim a unity that they seldom achieve and tend to present the movement as homogenous and coherent as possible" (Ibid.: 355). Rather, research should focus on how such apparent unity is built, which is at the level of member interactions (ibid.: 20). Given these two concerns, an appropriate research method is a discourse analysis which treats the ideas within the discourse not in isolation, but fully anchored in the context of a discussion, which comprises of statements, questions and responses. These are to be grounded within the core ideas of action system and ideology, generated via communicative construction. Discourse analysis in this sense allows for interpretation of the ideas themselves and how they shape and constrain other ideas, while simultaneously mapping the communicative construction process itself whereby ideas are seen to be developed, contested and negotiated by members through discussion.

The key for Melucci is that these processes must be analysed as they happen. As he puts it, researchers should seek to "grasp action as it actually unfolds" (ibid.: 387). Otherwise we are left with the problem of reliance on 'final product' statements or documents by those claiming to represent a stable and unitary movement. Melucci recognises the practical limitations of such a methodological goal, namely that research requires a form of participant observation so that one can be present as the micro level discussions take place. He suggests that the only viable methodological approaches for his theoretical framework are those which he labels "action research and research intervention" (2003: 58) via direct participant observation, since such an approach "directly address(es) the question of how action is constructed and attempt(s) to observe action as it takes place, as a process built by actors" (ibid.). This latter quote succinctly encapsulates the relation between theory and method in the context of Melucci's ideas and this forms the basis of my methodological approach. However, Melucci also sees dangers in using such a method, arising from the researcher's participation, namely the researcher's constitutive role in what he or she observes by being present in the first place. Such methods, he argues, tend to ignore the fact that "a researcher intervening in a field of action does not work under 'natural' conditions but modifies the field and may even manipulate it, beyond his or her intentions" (ibid.).

1.7. Online discussion forums

Of course, Melucci was writing this long before the proliferation of online discussion forums. His methodological concerns relating to accessing and faithfully representing the communicative construction processes by movement members assumed face-to-face communicative interactions. I would not suggest for a moment that face-to-face interaction is no longer the dominant form of communication among movement members. However, although within Melucci's overall framework it might be perfectly acceptable to refer to the members of the discussion forums as a movement (provided one understands the term as being a construct used by the researcher rather than referring to a stable, cohesive and empirically identifiable social unit), I wish to avoid claiming that they *are* a movement in this thesis. To do so invites misinterpretation and association with traditionally-conceived social movements. Rather I am employing Melucci's notion of movement as an analytical tool to enhance understanding of how resistance is thought about and discussed within a NWO conspiracy theory framework. For all the reasons provided earlier, I am arguing that it is possible - and enlightening, given the significant overlaps in form and content - to treat these discussions as if they were a movement's resistance discourses. Doing so offers valuable insights not only into the roles of agency and morality in resistance discourse, but also provides an expansion of the dominant and somewhat limiting research agenda assumptions in the academic literature on conspiracy theories (see chapter 2).

Even ignoring Melucci's own warning against reifying a movement as a unified empirical datum rather than an analytical concept constructed by the researcher, I would not be able to pinpoint a 'conspiracy theory movement' in the sense that traditional social or political movement scholars would accept, for the simple fact that there is no such explicitly defined political movement. Indeed, I would argue, it is extremely unlikely that there will ever exist a political movement, resembling in its activities movements such as Occupy Wall Street or Tea Party, that names itself, 'The Anti-New World Order Conspiracy Theory Movement'. There are many people I'm sure who would happily embrace the identity of 'conspiracy theorist' when discussing among themselves, but when it comes to talking about solutions and resistance, it is evident from my research into these discussions that there is an acute self-consciousness of the derogatory connotations for the label 'conspiracy theorist' such that they know they would not be taken seriously by most members of the public, the all-important potential supporters in Melucci's terminology. Members frequently emphasise, for instance in discussions about 'waking people up' via information campaigns, the importance of filtering public communication to avoid sounding crazy. In the David Icke forums in particular, we see a relatively strong consensus that, despite the (more or less) shared belief that inter-dimensional

extra-terrestrial reptilians are the ultimate controlling agents of the NWO, when it comes to informing the masses, they should obey the rule of, '*you do not talk about the reptiles*' (at least not at first). As irrational as many of these conspiracy theory ideas seem, it is clear from many member discussions about resistance that if there are practical constraints (for example sounding crazy) to a shared goal, then alternative, calculated strategies are devised in order to meet priorities.

Is it a dilemma for my research that there is no politically active group explicitly calling itself a conspiracy theory movement that could be acceptably labelled a social movement in the traditional sense? Why not just study the discourses of an acceptably labelled social movement such as the Tea Party, which contains conspiracy theory elements in its discussions? This, I would argue, misses the point. I am fundamentally concerned with how *conspiracy theory* shapes and constrains resistance discourse. The starting point thus has to be an explicit, indisputable conspiracy theory, or else it would be impossible to make any credible claims that it is the conspiracy theory itself which influences the discourse on resistance. Indeed in all the analysis I undertake in this thesis, I attempt never to treat ideas about resistance within the discussions as isolated; rather they are always anchored within the underlying NWO conspiracy theory (which make take different forms but are always understood as a conspiracy theory) in relation to the perception of agency (morality and power) of the adversary. In the case of the Tea Party, any conspiracy theories are, at best, secondary to core conservative, US-centred political and economic ideologies. As outlined in the opening paragraph of this chapter, the NWO conspiracy theory is at present the ultimate totalising (and more or less coherent and accepted within the conspiracy theory world) global and malevolent conspiracy framework. Very few, if any, people, including members of the discussion forums themselves, would dispute that this is a conspiracy theory, although of course the normative connotations of the term 'conspiracy theory' in this context would likely differ depending on who was asked. In addition, as I detail in greater depth in Chapter 8 in a comparison of Occupy Wall Street and conspiracy theory discourses and which is further represented by the 'conspiratorial continuum' conceptual diagram in Figure 2.3, the key distinguishing factor between social movement resistance discourses and conspiracy theory discourses is simply the *extent* of perceived power and (im)morality (including secrecy) discursively conferred upon the adversary.

In relation to my source of data, so that there is no doubt that my object of analysis is in fact conspiracy theory and not just a space for the expression of particular political grievances, the two online forums (Above Top Secret and the David Icke Forum) from which I obtain my samples are explicitly defined and accepted as conspiracy theory forums (see Chapter 3 for further details

relating to the existential premises of these forums). There exist popular political discussion forums such as the right wing 'Free Republic' or the left wing 'Democratic Underground', both of which contain conspiracy theory elements within their discussions, but the Above Top Secret and David Icke forums' entire existence is premised on the provision of online space for the discussion of conspiracy theories by anybody wishing to discuss them. They contain political sub-forums and numerous political discussions of course, and these are the focus of my analysis, but they are unequivocally conspiracy theory discussions forums first and foremost. Nobody signing up to, or even merely browsing, these forums can be in any doubt about what to expect. Indeed I would go further to suggest that if anybody is interested in reading about any conspiracy theory, these discussion forums (Above Top Secret more so than the David Icke forum due to its popularity and its all-encompassing coverage of conspiracy theories) are the perfect place to go.

So while there might not exist an empirically and geographically identifiable social group such as could comfortably be labelled a conspiracy theory social or political movement, there do exist specific, custom-made online spaces in which millions of people from around the world (at least those with internet access) are able, should they be so inclined, to read about and discuss conspiracy theories and furthermore to discuss potential resistance associated with any political grievance. Whether a traditionally-conceived political movement arises out of these discussions or not is not of interest to this thesis (although it could be for future research, see Chapter 9), since my research objective is focused on the discursive relationships between how problems and solutions are thought about and discussed in the context of a NWO conspiracy theory worldview. Given this, these online forums provide not merely a space for me as a researcher to access these discourses, but, I would suggest, they offer significant research advantages to the proposed participant observation method suggested as appropriate by Melucci in order to be faithful to his methodological concerns. Chapter 3 goes into more detail about these advantages, but in summary the forums offer, firstly, unprecedented access to resistance discussions among thousands of members who presumably would never have met each other in person, and providing exponentially more discussion than could ever be accessed in person for a traditionally-conceived political movement. It's no exaggeration to say that several lifetimes of participant observation would not come close to accessing both the quantity and quality of data to be found in these forums. Secondly, and more importantly in terms of the credibility and plausibility of findings, they offer access to - for the researcher and anybody wishing to corroborate, dispute or follow up on what the researcher claims - exact transcripts of the text-based communicative interactions as they occurred, with no concerns whatsoever about potential researcher interference.

The potentially constitutive role of online space in the development of what might be referred to as ‘real world’ social movements who engage in direct activism cannot be understated. Indeed Castells argues that for the mass uprisings of 2011 including the Arab Spring protests and Occupy Wall Street, wireless networks were absolutely crucial, not merely as an organising, communicative tool but the actual development of discourses of outrage and hope that framed the core of their ideologies and resistance strategies. For Occupy Wall Street he writes that “(a)s important as the material organization of the occupation was, it was the process of communication that enabled the movement to find internal cohesion and external support” (Castells 2012: 171). In more general terms, he highlights the centrality of what Melucci refers to as ‘communicative construction’ in the development of a movement from vague outrage to specific strategies of resistance and eventual mobilisation:

Social movements exercise counterpower by constructing themselves in the first place through a process of autonomous communication, free from the control of those exercising institutional power (Ibid.: 9)

Finally, although he does not go so far as to suggest that online spaces or any form of technology can *cause* social movements (I agree with him that this debate as it exists in the academic sphere is misleading, unnecessary and misses the point (Ibid.: 236)), he underscores the importance of communication via online networks in a movement’s development:

Social movements arise from the contradictions and conflicts of specific societies, and they express people’s revolts and projects resulting from their multidimensional experience. Yet, at the same time, it is essential to emphasize the critical role of communication in the formation and practice of social movements, now and in history. Because people can only challenge domination by connecting with each other, by sharing outrage, by feeling togetherness, and by constructing alternative projects for themselves and for society at large (ibid.: 236)

My research in this thesis focuses precisely on this construction of solutions to the perceived problems of the NWO conspiracy. That this contains similarities with discourses of established (particularly populist ones which postulate a minority elite in an adversarial relationship with the majority public) social movements should by now be evident, but ultimately the primary insight to

be gained from this research relates to the differing discursive constraints on solutions imposed by specific conceptualisations of the NWO. In certain contexts the conspiracy theory can absolutely be seen as cripplingly disabling within the discussions, while in others it can be seen as immensely empowering. How the problem is defined has enormous impact on the range of possible solutions and the range of positive affective attitudes towards bringing about any solutions.

1.8. Conclusion, the take-home message and the structure of the thesis

This chapter has outlined the fundamental objectives underlying the research, which relate to understanding how resistance is thought about and discussed within a conspiracy theory framework, by reference to the NWO conspiracy theory. It provided a definition of just what constitutes a ‘resistance discourse’ in terms of agency, understood for the purposes of this thesis as relating to concerns of power and morality or, alternatively, questions of what can and should be done, along with what cannot and should not be done. The analytical framework used to answer my research questions in this regard employs Melucci’s concepts of ‘action system’ and ‘ideology’ as applied to movements in his work. I argue that whether or not online conspiracy theorists can be said to constitute an actual movement is irrelevant, but that because of the substantial discursive similarities with other movements and in particular the neat conceptual fit between Melucci’s movement concepts and my specific research objectives, it is possible and indeed useful to treat the discourses as if they were those of a movement.

The overarching take-home message of the thesis, contextualised within the claims in the literature that conspiracy theory is by definition disabling, is as follows:

When the adversary is defined in totalising, all-powerful and immoral terms, and ordinary people in terms of powerlessness, we more often see affective expressions of pessimism and fear. When ordinary people are deemed to possess greater power than the adversary however, we more often find affective expressions of enthusiasm and hope. The problem with Fenster’s (1999) and Basham’s (2003) claims about the futility, indeed the virtual impossibility, of even imagining resistance in the context of conspiracy theory is that their conception of conspiracy theory is itself totalising and idealised. What I am seeking to demonstrate in this thesis is that there exist discursive cognitive and affective gradations in expressions of empowerment and disempowerment. The same

basic global conspiracy framework of the NWO can be modified, reconstructed and contested in terms of elite agency in ways that shape and constrain the perceived capacity to resist it. How the problem is defined has significant consequences for how solutions can be conceived, and in particular the extent to which enthusiasm towards thinking about and discussing resistance, rather than fear, can emerge. This is a central objective of the research. I am not seeking simply to prove that resistance can be thought about and discussed; this is trivially straightforward to demonstrate. What I am fundamentally interested in is how different discursive constructions of an adversary's agency within a conspiracy theory can shape and constrain cognitive and effective discourses of resistance.

I also suggest (see section 8.6 for a more detail analysis) that one of the central issues causing much of the relatively misguided approach in the conspiracy theory literature is the fact that most definitions of conspiracy theory are too broad and their conceptual lines are too blurred. Because of this, it becomes possible to label Occupy Wall Street movement members as conspiracy theorists (see Chapter 8); indeed their open calls for a transparent democracy constitutes a verbatim replica of the description given to conspiracy theorists by Fenster (1999: ix), and yet he suggests that they are incapable of even imagining such a democracy let alone acting to bring it about. But doubtless he would not make such a claim about the Occupy Wall Street movement, since they were acting towards this imagined objective. Ultimately I argue that the conceptual distinction between the discourse of a populist, anti-systemic social movement and that of conspiracy theory comes down simply to the discursively constructed extremities of power, morality and secrecy of the adversary. I offer no precise alternative definition because it is too difficult to delineate conceptual boundaries, but essentially I suggest that the more powerful, immoral and hidden the adversary is perceived to be, the more likely it can be acceptably understood as a conspiracy theory (as opposed to the resistance discourse of an acceptably understood social movement). As a direct comparison, it can be understood as the distinction between the perceived 'illegitimacy' of an adversary on the one hand, and the perceived 'evil' of an adversary on the other. The adversary can be seen to be enormously powerful, but not to the extent that it controls all governments and institutions. And it can be seen as often acting behind the scenes, but not so hidden that you cannot even pinpoint who is pulling the strings. The closer that discursive constructions of the adversaries resemble the latter examples in the three comparisons above, the closer it will resemble a conspiracy theory rather than a populist movement's political grievance discourse.

The thesis is structured as follows:

Part 1: Contextualising the research

Chapter 2 summarises the academic literature on conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists, presented in such a way as to demonstrate the departure of my research from the dominant research agendas in this literature, and to counter some of the unjustified and un-researched generalisations about conspiracy theory contained therein. It also outlines in depth the NWO conspiracy theory, its history and its various definitional manifestations among disparate social groups, in order to set the scene for the discourse analysis that follows, which emphasises that minor differences in the form the conspiracy theory takes can have significant consequences on the form and content of resistance discourse.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed explication of the movement concepts in Melucci's work which I employ in my analytical framework in order to answer my research questions. This framework is followed by a methodological discussion of the discourse analysis approach I employ towards online discussions about resisting the NWO, all of which is underpinned by the analytical framework. The relative benefits and constraints of such an approach are examined in addition to some reflexive discussion about the research process as a whole.

Part 2: In-depth analysis of resistance discourse within individual discussion threads

The four main chapters comprise detailed discourse analyses of individual forum discussion threads. I have selected for analysis two discussion threads each from Above Top Secret and the David Icke forum, all of which are chosen because they are explicitly premised upon the overarching question of what can be done to resist the NWO. They are not intended to be understood as representative of the forums generally (indeed as the reader will see, the disputes and diversity of opinions are heated and broad even within specific threads), but there are certainly not misleading of the forums generally. Aside from certain common important themes associated with the NWO conspiracy theory (the religious dimension, freemasons and other specific secret societies, microchipping of humans, the mass depopulation agenda, MK Ultra mind control, specific 'false flag' attacks etc., most of which are referenced in this thesis but not explored in depth as they are not mentioned in any detail within the threads I've selected), I can comfortably state that the NWO-related content within the threads, even though they have been selected for their focus on *resisting* the NWO, provides a relatively comprehensive coverage of the core themes associated with the

conspiracy theory, based on the hundreds of threads I've read on these forums over the years. From the fantastical and extreme to the sensible and mundane, in addition to outright scepticism towards the very basis of the NWO conspiracy theory, the threads analysed reveal an enormous diversity of ideas, while at the same time demonstrating consensus on certain core issues such that detailed, directed and focused conversations are able to take place at all. Above all, I have selected these four threads, which compare and contrast the fantastical and mundane discourses, in order to avoid the common accusation of qualitative research that it has "a tendency to select field data which are conspicuous because they are exotic, at the expense of less dramatic (but possibly indicative) data". (Fielding & Fielding 1986: 32).

The first two chapters illustrate the more extreme end of the conspiracy theories in relation to the perception of elite agency assumed within the particular NWO theoretical framework. By contrast, the subsequent two threads under analysis are far more mundane in content, selected so as to demonstrate the discursive impact of the gradated and nuanced definitions of NWO agency. When the elites are defined in totalising, malevolent and all-powerful terms, and ordinary people in terms of powerlessness, we see expressions of pessimism and fear with strategies being either less forthcoming or extremely 'creative' in nature; when ordinary people are discursively presented as possessing greater power than the adversary, we typically see enthusiasm and hope along with a myriad of conventional and small-scale strategies of resistance.

Chapter 4 analyses a discussion thread on the Above Top Secret forum entitled, "NWO Survival Planning", the basis of which postulates an imagined future scenario of a brutal and totalitarian NWO takeover. As the first analytical chapter, my approach here is heavily anchored within Melucci's 'action system' and 'ideology' concepts in order to demonstrate their utility in interpreting the resistance discourse contained in the discussion. In subsequent analytical chapters my analytical approach incorporates Melucci's ideas but are far more focused on the texts themselves in relation to my overarching research questions relating to agency, and whether or not the resistance discourse is empowering or disempowering.

Chapter 5 shifts to the David Icke discussion forum to a thread entitled, "Tell me EXACTLY what we can do". It is recommended that the reader strap-in before commencing this chapter, as the ideas contained therein are 'unconventional', to say the least. The controlling agents of the NWO within this thread's resistance discourse are understood to be other-dimensional extra-terrestrial reptilians who feed off negative human emotional energies. Despite such a terrifying and, one might expect

based on Fenster's (1999) and Basham's (2003) conjectures, disempowering construction of an adversary, this thread contains remarkably hyperbolic reconstructions of human agency such that affective expressions of empowerment are encountered in as extreme a form as can be imagined.

Chapter 6 crashes back 'down to earth' to examine a much more conventional and practical discussion thread in the Above Top Secret forum entitled, "Can We Stop The NWO?", the primary strategic content of which relates to informing the masses both to expose the NWO and for potential recruitment. The key insight to be gained from this chapter is that, unlike the earlier Above Top Secret thread on surviving the NWO, this thread does not provide a clear definition of the NWO, which consequently allows for a more malleable concept of the adversary's agency and greater scope for reinterpretation by forum members such that the NWO's perceived power and (im)morality is diminished which in turn results in more positive affective expressions of enthusiasm and hope towards the practical potential of resistance.

Chapter 7 returns to the David Icke forum to a thread entitled, "A strategy of peaceful non-compliance?". This thread represents a remarkable contrast to the earlier David Icke discussion in that the resistance strategies contained therein are not of the (hyper)macro form in relation to achieving spiritual oneness with the universe but of extremely small individual and collective acts of non-compliance with empirical systemic manifestations of the NWO. Nonetheless, we see (more or less) equally positive emotional expressions of empowerment at the prospect of doing something, *anything*, to resist the NWO.

Chapter 8 compares the NWO conspiracy theory resistance discourses with those of the Occupy Wall Street movement, via an analysis of agency based discourses within the latter's online discussion forum. The parallels are significant and can be understood in both directions: firstly, the Occupy Wall Street movement discourse is characterised as a problem which can be encapsulated within the classical definition of conspiracy theory, postulating as it does an illegitimate concentration of power in the hands of a tiny minority (labelled 'the 1%') who act without transparency or accountability. Secondly, while it has not been acknowledged enough in the academic literature, the discourse of the NWO conspiracy theory bears important resemblances to the resistance discourse of any populist social movement.

This comparison serves to highlight the four main contributions of this thesis:

- 1) Conspiracy theory may or may not be disabling; the key to understanding this relates to how, in terms of the discursive power / morality agency dynamics among the three core social groups, is defined and communicatively developed.
- 2) Conspiracy theory is not necessarily a purely intellectual and individual ‘puzzle-solving’ pursuit, there exist real political grievances and strategic discussions for how to resist the perceived social, economic and political injustices brought about by the form which the conspiracy theory takes.
- 3) There exist substantial overlaps in form and content between conspiracy theory and the discourse of traditionally conceived social and political movements. The perceived power and morality of the adversary shapes and constrains resistance discourses, and expressions of empowerment and disempowerment for any social movement will be influenced by the definition of the adversary in a similar manner to the discourse contained in the online conspiracy theory forums.
- 4) An appreciation of the relative discursive extremes of power, morality and secrecy is needed to avoid the semantic problems associated with the scope and definition of conspiracy theory in the academic literature.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis with a theoretical discussion of the malleability and interactive discursive nature of perceptions of agency in relation to how they inform, shape and constrain thought and discussion about resistance. It summarises the main findings of this research and offers suggestions for further research in terms of both the conspiracy theory literature and the social movement literature.

Chapter 2: Conspiracy theory in the academic literature and the New World Order

What are conspiracy theories?

Why do people believe in them?

Are any of them true? How might we assess their credibility?

What can they tell us about modern society, culture and politics?

As fascinating as these questions are, my goal is not to answer them in this thesis. Not because I don't find them interesting myself (and in fact every single question I have ever personally been asked by someone finding out that I am researching conspiracy theories can be categorised into the above four questions) but because to do so would be redundant. The above questions constitute a summary of the theoretical and empirical agendas of almost the entirety of existing academic literature on the subject. Simply stated, my contribution would merely be a drop in the ocean if my focus were along these lines of inquiry. My research represents a significant departure from these core points of debate, towards an idea which is occasionally hinted-at but rarely explored in depth: ideas about resistance in the context of a perceived excessively powerful elite adversary. The section below examines how conspiracy theories (and theorists) have been conceptualised, analysed and researched in the academic literature in order to set the scene for the research undertaken in this thesis and, in reference to its limitations, justify the contribution of my research. I stress throughout that my critique of this literature is not due to its credibility, utility or even on its various insights on its own terms, but rather the restrictive implications relating to how we as researchers can explore conspiracy theory in general, and in particular some of its consequences, rather than the constant focus upon its supposed causes. The following section explores the concept of 'the New World Order', one specific manifestation of what is referred to in the literature as a 'malevolent global conspiracy' (Basham 2003: 93-105). A nebulous concept, various definitions will be examined from sources including conspiracy theorists themselves, academics, journalists and indeed political elites who have used the term. It is difficult to overstate just how crucial the definition is in relation to the consequences of how it is discussed, and with this in mind I have proposed a 'conspiratorial continuum' of the varying definitional dimensions of the NWO. That scholars interpret the term differently from conspiracy theorists is of course to be expected; but even within conspiracy theory online forums the concept is contested, and these ostensibly minor interpretive disparities can result in substantially divergent discourses of resistance, as well as the affective responses to them.

2.1 Conspiracy theory in the academic literature

If I could summarise the goal of the majority of academic work on conspiracy theories in one word, that word would be ‘explanation’. This includes explanation at the conceptual and epistemic dimensions (e.g. Basham 2003; Brotherton & French 2014; Clarke 2002; Coady 2006; Fenster 1999; Jameson 1988; Keeley 1999; Stewart 1999; Räikkä 2009), the psychological dimensions (e.g. van Prooijen & Jostmann 2013; van Prooijen & van Lange 2014; van Prooijen et al. 2015, Wood & Douglas 2012; Wood & Douglas 2013) and the broader social, political and cultural dimensions (e.g. Birchall 2006; Dean 1998; Featherstone 2001; Fenster 1999; Goertzel 1994; Jane & Fleming 2014; Knight 2001; Locke 2009; Marcus 1999; Melley 2000; Oliver & Wood 2014; Parish 2001). In addition we find in the literature case studies of specific conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists (e.g. Birchall 2006; Castells 2004; Dean 1998; Faubion 1999; Fenster 1999; Goldberg 2004; James 2001; Mason 2006) which centre on description and analysis of the theories and theorists themselves, including more or less social, political and cultural contextualisation. Two recent notable examples of detailed historical exploratory studies published after the completion of my research are Uscinski and Parent’s 2014 work, American Conspiracy Theories, in which the authors examine over a century’s worth of texts from over 100,000 letters to the editor to major American newspapers, and Butter’s Plots, Designs and Schemes (2014) which explores the rich history of conspiracy theorising in the US, which were moreover viewed as legitimate popular epistemological approaches to understand political events until the 20th Century. Nonetheless, for the majority of these studies the goal is also explanatory in nature, the usual explanation sought being in terms of how and why the theories are believed at all. While my research agenda is more in line with this latter group in that it analyses the discourses of two specific online conspiracy theory forums, united by their (mostly) shared conception of the adversary defined as the NWO, the question of why the theories are believed is only relevant to the extent that it might enhance understanding of the discourses of resistance located within their online discussions. For instance, I attend to the various proposed justifications for the belief that extra-terrestrials constitute the key controlling force of the New World Order but not because my goal is to explain why the belief exists. Rather it is because this extra-terrestrial discourse shapes and constrains solution and resistance discourses within these forums’ online discussions. The notion of resistance is largely absent in the existing literature on conspiracy theories (notwithstanding notable exceptions, for example Castells 2004; Mason 2006), primarily, I would argue, due to assumptions about their irrational or paranoid nature, along with the assumption that they are *theorists* and nothing else. As

understandable as these assumptions are, an important consequence is that the political content of conspiracy theories is rarely taken seriously and so questions about political resistance are simply not considered worthy of research. However, within anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums we can find discourses relating to grievances about political power that overlap substantially in both form and content with those of traditionally-conceived social and political movements such as socialist or global justice movements. The presumption of irrationality when applying the ‘conspiracy theory’ label seems to preclude serious consideration of political content even though conspiracy theory forum discourses share numerous fundamental traits with political resistance groups. My research agenda and analytic approach ignore this presumption of irrationality; rather than asking ‘why do people believe X [the theory itself]?’ my analytical focus is closer to the form of, ‘What is it about discourse X [the theory itself], that shapes and constrains discourse Y [the resistance discourse of what can and should be done about the perceived problems associated with the theory itself]?’.

As will be evident in the following review of academic treatment of conspiracy theories, the presumption of irrationality is pervasive and shapes the entire intellectual and research agenda. In one of the most frequently-cited texts on the nature of conspiracy theory, Keeley offers a working definition of the concept:

a conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret (Keeley 1999: 116)

This is undoubtedly a useful, accurate and succinct definition which is furthermore broad enough to be generalisable. Certainly there is nothing within this definition that contradicts my findings. Taken at face value however, this definition could easily be applied to many discourses of political grievance among established social and political movements. An obvious example would be any Marxist movement which postulates extreme, concentrated power among a minority class-for-itself with shared interests, who make decisions (hidden from public view) which influence events to further their own interests, which in turn are contrary to the interests of the majority of people. Of course, there are many academics who would claim that a Marxist approach is fundamentally irrational (although it is worth noting that many of these academics critiquing Marxism in this manner would have no problem citing Adam Smith’s ‘hidden hand’ of the market, which, in reifying and conferring agency upon a metaphor, is arguably a more irrational conspiracy theory than the ones I am examining in this thesis). However, there exists an abundant literature on Marxist

movements and resistance, implying that despite its significant overlaps with conspiracy theory, it can be taken seriously enough to research at this level. Once the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is applied, however, the connotations of irrationality are so overwhelming that treating conspiracy theorists as any kind of political movement is almost never considered.

Instead, Keeley’s goal is “to explain why unwarranted conspiracy theories are so popular (ibid.: 119). The two key elements of this goal, the unwarranted nature of conspiracy theories on the one hand combined with an attempt to explain their existence on the other, constitute not only a Kuhnian paradigm in terms of setting acceptable constraints on research within the conspiracy theory literature but also, I would argue, they represent a Lakatosian ‘degenerating research programme’ in that the majority of subsequent research contributes little in the way of novel insight. There are, after all, only so many reasonable explanations one can come up with about why conspiracy theories are believed (in actual fact this seems not to be the case; as will be demonstrated below, there are seemingly no limits to the range of explanations that academics can conjure up!) or how many logical fallacies they can contain.

On this note, pointing out fallacies and contradictions in conspiracy theories seems to be a very popular task among academics whose intellectual agenda is rooted in the epistemic level of analysis. Indeed Birchall places this task as one of the three primary approaches within the conspiracy theory literature in general (2006: 66). Brotherton & French (2014) go as far as to dedicate an entire paper solely to the conjunction fallacy found within conspiracy theories. Wood & Douglas’s psychological study on beliefs in conspiracy theories, for example, elicited a truly remarkable contradiction: “the more participants believed that Princess Diana faked her own death, the more they believed that she was murdered” (2012: 767). At a more general level, Fenster argues that the theories “suffer from a lack of substantive proof” and contain “dizzying leaps of logic” (1999: xvii). Clarke similarly views conspiracy theorists as “victims of a form of cognitive failure” (2002: 133). Van Prooijen et al. refer to conspiracy theory as a “crippled epistemology” (2015).

It is worth highlighting the emotive and condescending tone through use of the metaphorical terms ‘suffer’, ‘crippled’ and ‘victims’ in these latter authors’ visions. Perhaps this simultaneously sympathetic and patronising-sounding language stems from a desire to appear ‘politically correct’ and avoid expressing contempt at conspiracy theorists’ lamentable stupidity, although it is difficult to interpret the tone as anything other than immensely condescending. A less patronisingly presented fallacy of conspiracy theories relates to their unfalsifiability (Basham 2003: 93). It’s

worth clarifying again at this point that I do not disagree with any of these arguments on their own terms, and furthermore share some of their views on irrationality at least in terms of much of the logic employed in certain conspiracy theories; that many conspiracy theories lack evidence and contain logical fallacies is undeniable. One particularly extreme illustration is a recent theory by David Icke (2010) which suggests that the Earth's moon was built by extra-terrestrials as a remote device to suppress human advancement. What would we gain by highlighting either the logical flaws or the absence of empirical evidence to support this theory? It is evidently irrational and it evidently lacks proof. Perhaps by pointing out such errors we may gain some general insight into "the nature of theoretical explanation" (Keeley 1999: 110). We may also gain insight into how conspiracy theories emerge and develop. We may simply gain a sense of intellectual superiority. It is clearly no burdensome intellectual task to dismiss the credibility of certain conspiracy theories. My reason for critiquing the assumption of irrationality within the literature on conspiracy theory, however, has nothing to do with its validity (it is clearly valid in many cases), nor its rhetorical condescension, nor its general insight which is undoubtedly useful and enlightening. Rather my concern relates to the implicit limitations it imposes in terms of what can be considered viable research on the topic. Once you forget the irrationality, logical fallacies and absences of evidence, it becomes possible to discover a whole new realm of interest within this subject; not the causes of conspiracy theory, but its consequences. In the case of my research, this new realm comprises the discourses relating to resistance within online conspiracy theory discussion forums.

Some of the literature on conspiracy theories falls into what I have categorised above as the social and cultural levels of explanation. A typical illustration of a social explanation can be seen in Marcus' Paranoia within reason: a casebook on conspiracy as explanation (1999):

...there are at least two broad contexts or conditions of contemporary life that make the paranoid style and conspiracy theories an eminently reasonable tendency of thought ... the cold war era itself was defined throughout by a massive project of paranoid social thought and action that reached into every dimension of mainstream culture, politics and policy. Furthermore, client states and most regions were shaped by the interventions, subversions and intimidations pursued in the interests of a global conspiratorial politics of the superpowers (Marcus 1999: 2)

Notwithstanding the somewhat patronising tone associated with employing the term 'paranoia' (which, it must be emphasised, is primarily used for the purpose of echoing and indeed countering Hofstadter's 1964 dismissive exposition of the 'paranoid style' in America), Marcus is certainly to be commended for diverting from the more traditional account of conspiracy theorising as

something borne out of irrationality and individual psychological dysfunction. Despite this, there is a clear implication in his writing that conspiracy theorising is epistemically flawed, even while stating that it is 'reasonable' (a perhaps more appropriate word for the point he is actually making is 'understandable'). Again, just to be clear about my critical approach here, I am not disputing this implication itself at all; the point I am making is that it reproduces the academic discourse and thereby sets the boundaries of what can or should be researched and analysed. The social, political and cultural context Marcus makes reference to is used to explain why people believe conspiracy theories. The fundamental research agenda behind his work is thus within the same scope as most of the rest of the literature; the difference is primarily in the explanations offered.

Marcus' macrosocial explanations are certainly plausible. People in the USA are said to believe conspiracy theories because the fundamental manifestations of conspiracy theory - powerful, nefarious, hidden elites – were continually and pervasively represented in the political and cultural spheres of American society during the Cold War. US citizens were not merely encouraged but outright indoctrinated to believe that malevolent elites from the Soviet Union were secretly colluding towards political and military takeover or even destruction to bring about their 'evil empire' (the movie 'Red Dawn' is a wonderful example, almost absurdly comical to view now, but at the time the premise of a communist invasion of America was a real threat and the movie was genuinely terrifying to many at the time). To take a 21st century example, the core premise disseminated by the Bush Administration to justify a war on Iraq in 2002-3 was that the Iraqi regime was secretly amassing weapons of mass destruction. This clearly falls under Keeley's definition of an 'unwarranted conspiracy theory', but this theory was proposed not by the usual suspects (typically imagined as irrational, paranoid or politically powerless individuals) but by the US government at its highest levels. If members of the public are being presented with and asked to believe in an official narrative of a proposed 'real' conspiracy theory in the political world, why is it unreasonable for members of the public to construct their own conspiracy theories? If that's how the Machiavellian world works, then why not apply the same agency-based causal logic to any number of world events? Obviously the answer is that it is far from unreasonable and in fact perfectly understandable even without the need for a US president to postulate a conspiracy theory. Powerful elites, and I can say this categorically and comfortably, do exist; groups of people often act collectively; unethical acts exist; unethical collective acts by groups are usually decided upon in secret. None of these conjectures are crazy, paranoid or even slightly outrageous. In fact they are so mundane when put in such terms as to be barely worth mentioning. Furthermore, there have been numerous historical events (for example any modern-day aggressive war) which, depending on

one's ideological (or nationalistic / ethnic / religious) standpoint can absolutely be characterised as powerful elites collectively deciding in secret to carry out unethical acts. Even at the non-elite level this is a real, common and unquestionably accepted phenomenon. The London Riots of 2011 is one such instance: among many other phenomena, a minority of people collectively decided and planned, in secret (via, infamously, anonymous Blackberry text messaging), to loot commercial premises. So there is nothing *necessarily* irrational about a conspiratorial explanation of events. Specific explanations may contain irrational elements of course, but the overarching assumption within the academic literature is that a conspiracy theory is by definition irrational or unwarranted. The consequence of this is that the academic agenda almost invariably gravitates towards the question of why people believe them at all, because it is deemed a mystery in itself.

This is not to suggest that Marcus' explanations are not useful, plausible or credible since they certainly are. However, this brings us to a whole new problem which I have encountered following a review of the social, political and cultural approaches to explaining conspiracy theories. Almost all of them are in some way useful, plausible and credible. Fenster for instance regards the primary motivation for conspiracy theorists as the (impossible) pursuit to know the unknowable: "conspiracy theory wants to enjoy the pleasure of control, of finding the correct answer to the riddle of power" (1999: 93). Although a desire for the pleasure of control is somewhat presumptuous and certainly not a ubiquitous phenomenon from what I have seen in the conspiracy theory forums, there is no doubt that solving riddles, 'connecting the dots' to use the oft-cited conspiracy theory lexicon and wanting to uncover 'what really happened and why', is a core driving force for conspiracy theorists. Wheen, on the other hand, in his very entertaining, and spectacularly condescendingly-entitled book, How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short History of Modern Delusions, argues that conspiracy theories, which he labels simply as 'the new irrationalism', constitute "an expression of despair by people who feel impotent to improve their lives and suspect they are at the mercy of secretive, impersonal forces whether these be the Pentagon or invaders from Mars" (Wheen 2004: 12). This explanation has some merit, although the root cause he postulates – a sense of powerlessness – has been, I would argue, a constant throughout history and is certainly not as novel a phenomenon as he insinuates. His point is echoed by Melley who suggests that "the recent surge of conspiracy narratives stems ... from a sense of diminished human agency, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action" (Melley 2000: 11). The notion of agency is of course absolutely crucial to my analysis and one recurring theme within the discourse of online conspiracy forums' discussions is precisely a sense of impotence and futility in the face of a totalising global conspiracy. However, I do not attempt to explain the conspiracy

theories by virtue of representations of agency; instead I employ the concept because it enhances understanding of the various resistance discourses within the forums, both in terms of the constructions of agency for forum members themselves (and the general public at large) and those of the NWO elites. As with Wheen however, I question the purported novelty of what Melley terms ‘agency panic’. Relatively powerless people have existed throughout human history, and in fact given the fundamentally asymmetrical nature of power, the existence of powerlessness is arguably so ubiquitous that it is barely worth mentioning as a novel explanatory factor in relation to conspiracy theory. I would assume a significant proportion of powerless people throughout human history have been conscious of and have expressed this powerlessness. Nonetheless I certainly agree that the notion of diminished agency is a key factor in explaining how conspiracy theories emerge and why people believe them. As I will attempt to demonstrate in Chapters 4-7 however, I would argue that the real insight to be gained from researching conspiracy theory resistance discourses is that a sense of diminished agency is a consequence of postulating a particular conspiracy theory, particular one which posits elite agency in extremely powerful and malevolent terms. Diminished agency may well have existed in any individuals’ psyche before he or she encountered a conspiracy theory, but I simply cannot infer this. I can however make claims about the intra-discursive relationships in terms of perceptions of such an adversarial agency dynamic (see Chapter 3 for a more in-depth epistemological discussion on the matter of what I can and cannot credibly make claims about in this research).

Returning to the literature, Featherstone claims that the key social explanation is not to be understood in terms of agency itself but rather individuals’ increasing sense of difference and otherness in modern society. Conspiracy theorising, he argues, is a “pathological effect of the dissolution of social recognition, a paranoid form of non-knowledge caused by the rise of political ideologies which foreground the rights of the individual at the expense of those of all others” (Featherstone 2001: 31). Increased feelings of otherness and alienation are, he suggests, associated with increased feelings of mistrust and paranoia. Again I have no objection to this perfectly plausible conjecture, just as I have no *prima facie* objection to Durkheim’s suggestion that anomie is a key factor in explaining variance in suicide rates. My concern is that such explanations are at once both excessively specific and excessively broad. Excessively specific because no single social, political or cultural explanation (or even a collection of specific ‘independent variables’, so to speak) can ever be ultimately satisfactory. An individual’s psychology and experiences are just as important as, and occasionally more important than, macro-social factors. On the other hand, an individual’s psychology and experiences cannot be extricated from the social, political and cultural

context. But the problem is once you start combining a number of relevant explanatory factors you are left with an explanation so broad and so far removed from what is being analysed that it cannot really be useful.

A further example of an especially broad variable-based explanation attempt is Goertzel's systematic quantitative approach to locate various 'causal' factors via a survey, the results of which demonstrated that a belief in conspiracy theories was associated with the following variables: "anomie, lack of interpersonal trust, and insecurity about employment" (Goertzel 1994: 731). At an individual, psychological level of variate analysis, Oliver & Wood concluded from a recent study that belief in conspiracy theories is "strongly predicted by a willingness to believe in other unseen, intentional forces and an attraction to Manichean narratives" (2014: 952). Finally, for the most wide-ranging explanation I have found, Parish cites La Fontaine's account of the proliferation of media stories on one specific conspiracy theory, that of Satanic abuse in 1980s Britain, and summarises the macro-level explanations claimed therein which include:

the widening gap between the rich and poor, an undermining of respect for those in authority, an increase in one-parent families and divorce and media hysteria about police corruption and government cover-ups (Parish 2001: 5)

Of course these factors are plausibly relevant, but if they are then in the case of Satanic abuse surely one should also incorporate other plausibly relevant phenomena such as the proliferation of horror movies, over-zealous priests, the consumption of psychedelic drugs and so on, ad infinitum. I would suggest that such a broad explanatory approach may be misguided from the very start especially since in some cases it can result in speculation so wild as to make conspiracy theorists themselves blush! This is actually not as facetious a point as it sounds; there is a significant overlap between conspiracy theorising and much of academic theorising in the social sciences. In fact, Soares goes even further to suggest that "(t)he rise of social science itself was based on the unveiling of the covert, the disclosure of deception, the revelation of what is hidden behind the masks of ideology" (Soares 1999: 225). Birchall echoes this point, particularly in the context of cultural studies which she suggests shares fundamental characteristics with much of conspiracy theory discourse, arguing moreover that it is "impossible to map conspiracy theory and academic discourse onto a clear legitimate / illegitimate divide" (2006: 72). Similarly, Jane & Fleming have noted that "the investigative techniques and alarmism characteristic of conspiracist debunkers often bear a startling resemblance to the epistemological orientations and rhetorical armoury of those purportedly being critiqued" (2014: 4). As has been mentioned repeatedly in this chapter, the primary goal of the

majority of academics working on conspiracy theory has been to seek explanations. Ultimately, conspiracy theorising itself is nothing if not seeking explanations, ‘connecting the dots’ as conspiracy theorists themselves put it. There is nothing inherently wrong with this goal (although it has the potential to get out of hand as illustrated with some of the examples above) and my criticisms should not be interpreted as anything resembling objection per se. Indeed the section on the NWO below, primarily a descriptive summary of how the term is understood by conspiracy theorists, also offers some explanations as to why members believe them. This is an important (and interesting) task which sets the scene for the reader in relation to the chapters that follow, but it is not a research objective in itself. My review of the conspiracy theory literature through this focus on academics’ desire for explanation has been written in order to emphasise the constraints that assumptions about conspiracy theory impose upon what kinds of research and analysis are viable.

2.2 Resistance

As mentioned earlier, one area of research in the study of conspiracy theories that has been largely absent is resistance. The main reason is simply that the core points of academic interest for conspiracy theories are explaining why they exist, what form they take, what their flaws are, why people believe them and so on. An underlying and related reason is that conspiracy theorists tend not to be given political credibility since the theories themselves are almost invariably perceived as irrational, or that conspiracy theorists are viewed as theorists and nothing else. Birchall’s summary of the conspiracy theory literature shares some of my concerns, certainly in relation to the issues of political credibility and apparent irrationality, but from my reading I would certainly foreground the task of explaining conspiracy theory/ies as constituting the overwhelmingly dominant research agenda when it comes to the topic:

The academic approaches to conspiracy broadly fall into three camps: those that claim conspiracy theory to be a form of latent insurrection; those that deplore it for its lack of political seriousness; and those that wish to monitor and correct its ‘worst’ (‘irrational’, ‘illegitimate’) excesses (2006: 66)

There is a normative component to formulating academic approaches in this way. In all three cases, she presents the literature as being unfairly critical and negative towards conspiracy theory. While I sympathise with the broad intention behind such a critique, a consequence is that she foregrounds the perception of conspiracy theory as constituting ‘latent insurrection’, which almost makes it seem as though it constitutes a roughly equal share of the literature as the other two categories (lack of

political seriousness and irrational excesses). In actuality such an approach to conspiracy theory is extremely rare, and is primarily found in the relatively outdated, and almost entirely dismissed in the recent literature, work of Hofstadter in 1964. More recent examples include Pipes (1997) and Robins and Post (1997), though they highlight the danger of conspiracy theory when used by a malevolent government rather than ordinary people. In the past decade however the only notable examples (see below) I have found in the literature which present conspiracy theory as inherently politically dangerous are in Sunstein (2014) and Sunstein & Vermeule (2008)⁶. Nonetheless, Hofstadter's essay is often presented as a (usually flawed) classic on conspiracy theory and is heavily cited in the literature of the past couple of decades. And while his essay on paranoia in America at that time is almost unacceptably polemical by current standards of social science scholarship, I share his view that conspiracy theory, at least the grander systemic forms such as that of the NWO, does at least have the *potential* to lead to some kind of 'insurrection', since as I demonstrate in this thesis, political grievance is certainly associated with ideas about how to resist and, ultimately, defeat the conspirators. It's almost a shame that Hofstadter wrote in such a derisory style (conspiracy theory was 'pathological' according to him), since modern scholars probably feel compelled to reject his work on that basis (and on that basis alone, I would agree), but I can't help but wonder if he had simply toned down the rhetoric whether modern literature would be so dismissive of conspiracy theory's 'political seriousness'.

As we can see from the quotes below, Hofstadter had no problem whatsoever viewing conspiracy theory not only as political but even dangerously so. No doubt he goes too far in this respect, and his conjectures are not only unsubstantiated but could easily be labelled as paranoid themselves. Regardless, the intrinsic link in his essay between conspiracy theory on the one hand and political grievance and resistance on the other is something which is almost universally lacking in the modern literature.

The paranoid spokesman ... constantly lives at a turning point: it is now or never in *organizing resistance* to conspiracy (2008: 29-30; emphasis added)

the paranoid is a *militant leader*. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician (ibid.: 31; emphasis added)

⁶ There is also the 2010 report by the Demos think tank in the UK, highlighting the potential links between conspiracy theorising and radicalisation or even extremism, with specific policy recommendations to government.

Nothing but complete victory will do. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated – if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention (ibid.)

The rhetoric contained in these (completely speculative) quotes is somewhat jarring, and I obviously do not share his exaggeratedly deterministic view of conspiracy theory leading to violent revolution. Despite this, he was absolutely correct on a number of points. Firstly, the interaction between conspiracy theory (the grand systemic kinds at least) and political grievance and ultimately political response is something which has far too often been ignored in contemporary scholarly work, an absence that this thesis seeks to address. Secondly, there is the theme of rejecting conventional political activity (“in the manner of the working politician” (ibid.)) is certainly prevalent in the discussions under analysis in Chapter 4-7. Finally, the extreme moral dimension of conspiracy theory, particularly in the context of the adversary, is a fundamental feature of the discourse found in the online forums and it comprises a central element of my analysis throughout this thesis, and indeed as I propose in Chapter 1, it is a fundamental link that allows discourses of conspiracy theory and those of social movements to be analysed in the same way: “(T)he enemy is thought of as being totally evil” (ibid.). Basham echoes such a discursive moral representation of the adversary as “insanely evil” (2003: 91), and I furthermore argue in Chapter 8 that such an extreme moral representation is one of the crucial factors in being able to distinguish between conspiracy theory discourse and social movement discourse. For all of the problematic elements in Hofstadter’s essay, his linking of conspiracy theory with politics, including dimensions of morality and power, should not be dismissed. Ultimately I propose an appreciation of a middle ground between contemporary apolitical illustrations of conspiracy theory on the one hand, and Hofstadter’s hyper-political, indeed revolutionary, presentation of it.

Returning to the modern context, a useful example in relation to the absence of political seriousness can be found in the work of Fenster who argues that despite the existence of grievances which are political in nature, any objectives of conspiracy theorists are at best “only tangentially related to the fulfilment of specific demands concerning government” (Fenster 1999: 86). He argues further that conspiracy theory is, by its very nature, disabling (1999: xv). He concedes however on the very same page that this suggestion is conjectural and requires empirical research, adding that “(t)he notion that conspiracy theory is disabling needs both further investigation and historical

contextualization” (ibid)⁷. One dramatic rejection of this conjecture, which echoes Hofstadter’s approach, can be found in the writing of Sunstein (a legal scholar who in recent years worked in US President Obama’s administration with the job title of ‘Administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs’ from 2009-2012) who labels conspiracy theory a ‘dangerous idea’ (2014), and moreover that governments and law should consider policies to undermine conspiracy theories, since these beliefs “create serious risks, including risks of violence” (Sunstein & Vermeule 2008: 1). In fact they go even further to suggest that conspiracy theory poses, in the context of the US, “risks to the government’s antiterrorism policies” (ibid: 3). What Sunstein and Vermeule do have in common with Fenster however is that their contradictory conjectures are just that, conjectures, with no associated empirical research to substantiate them.

There has however been one recent academic study by Jolley & Douglas (2014) explicitly investigating the relationship between conspiracy theory and *consequent* (some others, e.g. Van Prooijen et al. (2015) have looked at the relationship between conspiracy theory and politics, but only in terms of conspiracy theory itself being a consequence of political beliefs) political behaviour, or at least the expressed intent towards political behaviour. Indeed the authors found a negative association between belief in conspiracy theories and political engagement. Specifically they found that “participants in the pro-conspiracy condition ... showed less intention to engage in political behaviours than those in the anti-conspiracy condition” (2014: 40). However, there are significant methodological constraints to their study which limit just how much they can conclude; indeed their broader conclusion is simply that it is “*possible* that exposure to conspiracy theories increases feelings of powerlessness, which subsequently decreases intentions to engage in politics” (ibid.: 37: italics added). This is of course a perfectly acceptable conclusion, and some of my findings would support it, but it’s strikingly less eye-catching than the one in the paper’s title: “Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics”⁸. As a quantitative psychological study employing experimental and control groups of 168 student volunteers at a British university, it is extremely difficult to claim the representativeness which is implicit in such a clearly-defined causal claim. More importantly in the context of my research however, is the narrow scope of the authors’ operationalisation of ‘political behaviour’, which they define as “actions such as voting, talking to others to persuade them to vote for a certain candidate, donating money to

⁷ See Section 1.2 in Chapter 1 for an analysis of Fenster’s somewhat updated and diluted conjecture in this regard.

⁸ As a reflexive aside, as I note in Section 3.14 in Chapter 3, I myself was guilty for a long time in looking to establish just such a causal relationship, but the evolution of my methodological and epistemological approach, as well as the date uncovered, necessitated its rejection.

candidates or political groups, and wearing campaign stickers” (ibid.: 37). The examples of questions measuring ‘political behaviour’ that the authors provide are: “Will you vote in the next election?”; and “Do you intend to contribute money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supports candidates?” (ibid.: 39-40). I obviously appreciate the necessity of limiting the scope of a concept in order to be able to operationalise it in an experimental study, but this is clearly an extremely restrictive definition of ‘political behaviour’, which severely limits the conclusions that can be drawn. Even if they used the expression, ‘conventional political behaviour’ it would be overly restrictive since it doesn’t include social movement protest or activism, which is a conventional political behaviours, certainly compared with many of the resistance strategies I uncover in Chapters 4-7. Indeed my definition of ‘resistance discourse’ is so broad that it permits analysis of an enormous range of strategies, which in their own contexts are absolutely political. A consequence of my approach of course is that while I am able to attend to the richness, nuance, variety and contradictions of resistance discourse, I am unable to make any generalisable claims whatsoever. So I would situate this thesis not so much as a counter to Jolley & Douglas’ approach to investigating the ‘Is conspiracy theory disabling?’ question, but rather a qualitative complement to it.

It is worth noting here that there have also been some qualitative studies which have explored how collective political action arise from conspiracy theorising. Fiske examines Black Liberation Radio, specifically in terms of the ‘blackstream’ counterhistory knowledge which incorporates, among others, a conspiracy theory that AIDS is a weapon of US germ warfare-based genocide against the black race (Fiske 1994: 191-216). Knight also highlights the historical relevance of conspiracy theorising to African American cultural and political activism in the US (2000: 143); indeed in the same text he analyses the work of feminist writers such as Friedan and Wolf, whose ideas absolutely use the logic of conspiracy and yet there is no question of them not being politically enabled. Chapter 7 on the Occupy Wall Street movement echoes some of these ideas.

Returning to Fenster, the goal of conspiracy theory is purported to be a game of never-ending puzzle solving and he underscores this assertion by writing that conspiracy theories invariably “‘fail’; they do not, and cannot, adequately find a final order. The future, when the secret is finally revealed, never arrives” (1999.: 89). So even if achieving a ‘solution’ to this intellectual game were possible, it would destroy the entire purpose of conspiracy theorising! Unfortunately, as wonderfully profound as this paradox sounds, it is a rather unfair representation and easily refuted. Having experienced the somewhat unique pleasure of having read thousands of online conspiracy

theory discussion threads, I can say with a high degree of confidence that there are many, many members of these forums who absolutely claim to know the final secret/s. Whether they actually do or not is irrelevant, as irrelevant as whatever the ‘final secret’ may be. Many forum members write with peremptory authority, with most of their contributions seeking to educate, inform and correct other members (and the ‘sheeple’), along with providing expert analysis for events as and when they are unfolding in the news. Not only do some of them explicitly claim to possess full knowledge of specific individual conspiracies (knowledge which, in a minority of cases, has been claimed to be received via interdimensional or astral communication with other-worldly entities), but also of the entire ‘end game’ and clear finger-pointing towards the controlling agents of the NWO conspiracy. Secondly, even among those who could arguably be primarily characterised as cognitive puzzle-solvers or dot-connectors, we find enormous amounts of evidence of them making suggestions about formal means and goals of political resistance. When Fenster writes about what conspiracy theorists do or don’t do, what they can or cannot do, and what their goals are or are not, he is referring to a conspiracy theorist as an idealised ‘Platonic Form’ rather than any actual existing conspiracy theorist. This kind of excessively-stylised conception appears quite frequently in the conspiracy theory literature. For instance, Stewart writes :

...conspiracy theory is all over the map: it’s right-wing one moment and left-wing the next. It’s modernist and postmodernist. It’s both an open and closed form of texting. It’s heavy-handed master narratives and hopelessly dispersed mumblings about this and that. It’s ‘inside’ the system and ‘outside’ it; it speaks from positions of power and powerlessness. It penetrates the subject to the bone and leaves us cold with detachment. It seduces and repulses. (Stewart 1999: 18)

I will happily admit that I enjoy her enthusiastic and eloquent writing style but ultimately, this quote does not really provide much in the way of useful content. The fatal flaw of this list of contradictions, as with Fenster’s notion of the never-ending search for the final secret, is that it confers homogeneity to something which is in reality heterogeneous. If someone unfamiliar with the topic were to spend a few hours googling conspiracy theories then Stewart’s quote would perhaps resonate with many people’s experiences. She is absolutely correct that, under the umbrella concept of conspiracy theory, one can find all of these elements and more. But this is because conspiracy theorists are human beings who, I would humbly propose, constitute a heterogeneous group. No conspiracy theorist is a conspiracy theorist and nothing else. Some are lawyers, some are teachers, some are single mothers and some are paranoid schizophrenics. Some are more right-wing, some are more left-wing and some are a bit of both. Some of them produce water-tight master narratives and some of them produce incoherent rants streaming with non sequiturs. Stewart

however repeats the third-person singular personal pronoun throughout which gives the misleading impression that there is a core unity within conspiracy theory, with contradictions contained therein. This is an untenable claim for any social group, let alone one which is argued to fall under such a huge body of ideas as conspiracy theory in general. To illustrate my point, let us replace ‘conspiracy theory’ with ‘sociology’ at the beginning of her quote. All of her points and contradictions can apply just as appropriately, but the claims simply cannot be given any meaningful credibility because they present a misleading impression of unity within the academic discipline of sociology. This is the problem with Fenster’s idealised conspiracy theorist: he is able to make a general theoretical claim about what the goal of a conspiracy theorist is, and what the goal can or cannot achieve, only by ignoring the enormous diversity that exists among conspiracy theorists and their ideas.

Many conspiracy theorists do indeed express goals beyond puzzle solving. Some of these goals are political in nature, some are economic, some are educational, some are militaristic, some are survivalist and some are spiritual. Chapters 4 - 8 explore and analyse the various goals and resistance strategies as they are discussed in the forums in relation to varying conspiratorial conceptualisations of the NWO. An analysis of discussion about resistance becomes possible if we move away from the assumptions of the dominant intellectual agenda in the conspiracy theory literature, and treat conspiracy theory resistance discourses in the same way as the resistance discourses of movements (see Chapter 3 for a further elaboration on the applicability of this concept to my analysis), rather than solely insatiable (and more or less irrational) truth-seekers. It is worth also pointing out that in recent years in the USA we have witnessed two major political protest groups whose discourses can absolutely fall within Keeley’s definition of conspiracy theory and certainly some members of each would happily accuse each other of being conspiracy theorists. Representing vastly different political ideologies, the Tea Party protesters and the Occupy Wall Street protesters construct discourses about nefarious, secretive and excessive power of a minority elite. The former are associated with conspiracy theories about government attack on individual liberties along with theories about Obama being anything from a non-American to a Muslim to the antichrist himself. The latter are accused of class warfare, pointing the blame for the world’s problems at the elite “1%” in terms of wealth.

Furthermore, the global justice movement, formerly and more commonly referred to as the anti-globalisation movement which emerged with enormous impact in the late 1990s presented discourses which bear strong resemblances to those within anti-NWO conspiracy theory forum

discussions. As Starr (2000) noted, one of the key mobilising forces in the global justice movement, which allowed for the unification of action between vastly different smaller groups with different agendas, was the shared identification of concrete institutions (particularly the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) as conspiratorial agents upon whom blame for global problems of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation was assigned. One of the most frequent accusations levelled at these institutions furthermore was the absence of transparency in policy decisions; in other words they acted in secret, something which at its core is morally objectionable given the extent of their power. Recall Keeley's definition of a conspiracy theory. Here we find a proposed explanation of historical events (such as global poverty or inequality) constructed in terms of the significant causal agency (policies and actions of global institutions) of a relatively small group (the leaders and policy-makers of the institutions) acting in secret and in their own interests. Furthermore, it is not just the conspiratorial structure of the global justice movement's discourse but the actual content which is shared by those of conspiracy theory forum discussions. As will be demonstrated in the next section, empirical manifestations of the NWO include global institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the United Nations. The discourses of conspiracy theorists are not taken seriously as rational political grievances by most academics researching them, and yet those of the global justice movement are. In fact one of the common accusations against conspiracy theorists in the literature is that they mistakenly confer deliberate causal human agency onto institutions. As Popper wrote:

the conspiracy theorist will believe that institutions can be understood completely as the result of conscious design; and as collectives, he usually ascribed to them a kind of group-personality, treating them as conspiring agents, just as if they were individual men (Popper 2006: 15)

Melley mirrors this point, arguing that within conspiracy theories we find a "sense that controlling organizations are themselves agents – rational, motivated entities with the will and the means to carry out complex plans" (Melley 2000: 12-13). I do not disagree with these accusations at all; in fact the role of discursive agency construction (for both forum members themselves and the NWO elites) is vital to understanding how members of conspiracy theory forums talk about resistance. However, the global justice movement's discourses represented the exact same process of agency ascription to institutions. Indeed this (flawed) discursive act of personification is far from limited to conspiracy theorists or anti-systemic or populist social movements. For instance, while campaigning in 2011, US Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney responded to an audience member's cry to raise taxes on corporations with a simple rebuttal: "corporations are people, my

friend” (NY Times, Aug 2011). Can Popper’s accusation of mistaken agency be levelled at Romney and others who make the ‘corporations are people’ claim? Absolutely. However, can anybody claim with credibility that Romney genuinely believes that corporations are real, flesh and blood human beings? Obviously not. Similarly, when ascribing agency, and thus blame, to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, members of the global justice movement do not actually believe that the institutions are human beings. And yet, perhaps due to their infamous assumed irrationality, critics like Popper write as if conspiracy theorists seriously believe this error or institutional personification, rather than it being a symbolic, discursive or rhetorical act. Such an act of agency ascription was in fact a vital force in the emergence of the global justice movement (Starr 2000) and in addition Castells notes the crucial mobilising power of the collective definitional unity in the shared conception of the NWO as a common enemy by US Patriots (2004: 94), but rather than being rejected as a ‘cognitive failure’, academics have produced a wealth of literature on the resistance discourses of the global justice movement. I would therefore argue that the discourses of conspiracy theory forum discussions resemble social and political movements in important ways such that their discourses can be treated as those of traditionally conceived social movements, and we can in fact engage in meaningful analysis in relation to how they think about and discuss resistance. There is nothing intrinsic about a conspiratorial conception of elite power that precludes being able and willing to contemplate strategies of political resistance.

There are some conspiracy theorists, however, who do not express such goals. In some cases this may be because they really are simply in it for the cognitive puzzle solving. In other cases they may just not believe that any of the solutions will have any efficacy or impact. It is in fact within these latter discourses of futility that some of the most fascinating insights from this research are located. This phenomenon has actually been hypothesised (though not researched) on a couple of occasions in the conspiracy theory literature. Fenster writes that conspiracy theory is “a rather disabling theory of power” (Fenster 1999: xv) but later concedes on the same page that “(t)he notion that conspiracy theory is disabling needs both further investigation and historical contextualization” (ibid). Similarly Basham argues that the ultimate reason we should reject the ‘malevolent global conspiracy’ theory “has nothing to do with epistemic warrant. It is much more pragmatic: *there is nothing you can do*” (2003: 100. italics in original). It is striking that a professor of philosophy should suggest that the primary reason one should not believe in a totalising global conspiracy is simply that on a practical level one simply cannot resist it! It is, he argues, “far beyond our possible circle of possible knowledge or action” (ibid.). Despite this decidedly non- philosophical answer by a philosopher to a philosophical problem, it is tricky at first glance to disagree with the logic of his

conclusion. It is difficult to conceive of appropriate resistance strategies against an adversary to whom you have effectively ascribed something like omnipotence. Of course, as I hinted at earlier, there is no ideal conspiracy theorist whose ideas are representative of those of all the others, and conspiracy theories themselves are constructed and interpreted differently by different people. The actual focus of my research however is not on the conspiracy theorists but the theories, and especially the ideas surrounding agency and resistance that their discourses contain. Within the discourses in the discussion forums we find shades of grey in the nature and extent of power ascribed to the elite depending on how the NWO is defined, which results in varying degrees of affective expressions of futility or optimism towards proposed resistance strategies. I seek throughout this thesis as much as possible to refrain from making blanket claims about what conspiracy theory is or isn't and what conspiracy theorists can and cannot do or say. Firstly, my concern is not the beliefs of conspiracy themselves (which I would suggest is essentially unknowable, see Chapter 3 for a further epistemological discussion on this point) but ideas about agency, in terms of power and morality, as they are presented within the discourse of communicative interaction within conspiracy theory discussion forums. Secondly, as unexciting as it sounds, the answer ultimately is, 'it depends'. However, I would argue that much of the excitement can be found precisely in unearthing the differing discourses of solutions and resistance as they relate to the differing conspiracy theories themselves.

In terms of the notion of resistance, there are two key case study texts in the literature on what is termed the 'US Patriot movement' (Castells 2004: 87-100; Mason 2006). The US Patriot group constitutes one of the primary collective identities among anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums, so here we find recognition that conspiracy theorists can indeed be categorised and researched as a political movement, who can think about and discuss political resistance. While Castells mentions in passing the conspiratorial element of the movement's ideology (Castells 2004: 89), his characterisation of the group is primarily that of a nationalistic, right-wing, libertarian, often religious collective, mobilised in the form of armed militias (ibid.: 87-99). That the core of their ideology is in the form of a conspiracy theory – a global malevolent conspiracy no less – is treated as an almost irrelevant aside and relegated to the background in relation to their other aforementioned ideological characteristics. This is a crucially important point: there is obviously no difficulty at all in imagining a nationalist group, or a religious group, or a libertarian group, talking about resistance. And there is certainly nothing difficult about imagining armed militias talking about resistance! Yet we have been told by some academics researching conspiracy theory that such a totalising conspiratorial representation of the world, which the US Patriots absolutely express,

precludes the possibility of being able to consider resistance at all. There is no paradox here; the problem is merely a consequence of theoretical constraints in relation to academic agendas surrounding the study of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists. As I mentioned earlier, conspiracy theorists are never just conspiracy theorists and nothing else. Some of them can be armed, right-wing nationalists. I would presume that Fenster and Basham would not suggest that armed, right-wing nationalists are disabled to the extent that they believe there is simply nothing they can do. To underscore this point, it is, in my view, due to the fact that Castells relegates the importance of the conspiracy theory element of the US Patriot movement that he is able not just to view them as a resistance movement in the first place, but moreover to exaggerate the extent and impact of their resistance, likening them somewhat to Al Qaeda terrorist cells as armed, “autonomous, spontaneous networking of militia groups without boundaries” (ibid.: 94) whose influence, moreover, “can be counted in millions, not thousands, of supporters” (ibid.: 89).

A much richer, nuanced and in-depth analysis of the Patriot movement can be found in Mason’s (2006) ethnographic research. Through a combination of interviews and participant observation with members of one particular group, she presents a detailed account of collective identities, ideologies along with specific accounts of resistance while foregrounding the shared conspiratorial conception of the US federal government and indeed the NWO (ibid.: 140-158). Because her case study aims at a near-comprehensive account of the group’s ideas and actions, an account which thus understands the complexity of, and interrelations between, identities and ideologies, there is no theoretical obstacle to examining their strategies of resistance despite the fact that they define their core adversary in terms of a global malevolent conspiracy. Furthermore, because of the richness of her account which is grounded in the actual ideas and experiences of the group’s members, unlike Castells she does not exaggerate their influence or extremity in relation to the forms of resistance they undertake. Some examples of resistance undertaken among the US Patriot movement include individuals and groups bringing legal cases against the state (ibid.: 206) and indeed the United Nations (ibid.: 215), setting up common law courts (ibid.: 207), refusing to pay taxes (ibid.: 216-221), formal individual declarations of ‘sovereign citizenship’ (ibid.: 221-223), removing one’s car license plate (ibid.: 224) and even simply refusing to pay parking fines (ibid.). Clearly not even remotely as terrifying an image as the one Castells portrays in his study. Ultimately, one of the key problems in much of the literature referenced above is that all too often claims are made that are too far removed from the object of analysis itself. This is why in my analysis chapters I strive as much as possible to maintain a constant and close analysis with the texts themselves, so that any statements I make are grounded in what is actually said in the conspiracy theory forums.

2.3 The New World Order

The NWO, as discussed by conspiracy theorists, can be understood as a manifestation of what Basham (2003) terms a ‘malevolent global conspiracy’. His excellent illustration of this concept is worth quoting in its entirety:

A cabal of unaccountable, parasitic power elites virtually unknown to the public controls the economy, politics, popular ideology, and pop culture and so, by causal implication, the lives of the masses. These conspirators pursue a wholly Machiavellian program for the wealth, power, and challenge, perhaps even for the twisted entertainment and maniacal ego amplification, it provides them. Democracy is merely a status quo—maintaining media sham. Popular political ideologies are carefully constructed rationalizations that are wholly irrelevant to the real conduct and purposes of our global civilization. Right or left-wing libertarianism? Rawlsian egalitarianism? Marxist socialism? This, that, or another political-ism? All are equally putty in the hands of the conspiratorial elite. Academia with its prized intellectual freedom is nothing more than a labyrinth-like diversion, a house of leaves, for potential dissidents and competitors to waste their lives in. The conduct of nations in both peace and war, including whether they are at war or peace, is well orchestrated. The shape of our future—for the masses, a dismal future as personally isolated, intellectually crippled, emotionally shallow consumers and laborers—is largely a matter of plans put into action in the past. (Basham 2003: 91-92).

This is a wonderfully faithful picture of many of the common conspiratorial conceptions of the NWO. I am sure there are many members of the online conspiracy theory forums who would not even bat an eyelid reading this quote; some would even perhaps argue that it doesn’t go far enough. However, before indulging in the existing conspiratorial conceptions of the NWO, it is important to recognise that the term itself is used not only by conspiracy theorists but also by academics and indeed politicians. Its meaning can vary immensely. References to the term are relatively abundant in the social science literature, but in the vast majority of cases the meaning has nothing to do with a nefarious conspiracy but rather in very benign terms, as an incipient or already-existing state of global political and economic being (for example Chossudovsky 2003; Drezner 2007; Gill 2003; Lazar & Lazar 2004; Miller 2004; Rupert 2000; Schmidt 1995; Slaughter 2004; Veltmeyer 2004). In many cases it is employed as nothing more than a dramatic-sounding synonym for political and/or economic globalisation. Nonetheless, there has been some recent scholarly work on the historical origins of the NWO as a conspiracy theory. Barkun for instance highlights the rise of the NWO theory, much the same in content as Basham’s quote above and my outline below though very much anchored in the unique US-context, in terms of politically secular but also religious ideas that converged into an all-purpose kind of anti-communist Christian fundamentalism in the US,

which moreover also often incorporate anti-Semitic ideologies (Barkun 2013: 39-64). A more general historical account of the ‘Illuminati’ conspiracy theory, which is very closely aligned to the NWO theory, is found in Porter (2005) who explores the European historical perspective as well as the American, sharing the core focus of the theory as combining anti-communist, anti-Semitic and Christian right-wing perspectives. Both Barkun and Porter furthermore highlight the extraterrestrial dimension of such a conspiracy theory, particularly in relation to UFO culture but also in reference to Icke’s theory of reptilians (Barkun 2013: 98-107; Porter 2005: 231-3), more on which below.

In Birchall’s work on the cultural dimensions of conspiracy theory, Knowledge goes pop: from conspiracy theory to gossip (2006), she mentions that people often ask her, once they learn of her research on conspiracy theory, if there is “such a thing as the New World Order” (Birchall 2006: xi). I have frequently been asked the same question myself. Unfortunately, the askers’ wide-eyed expressions quickly dissipate before moving elsewhere as they are invariably disappointed with my response, which is normally something of the form, “Yes... and no. Sort of. It depends what your definition of ‘New World Order’ is...” However, in the remainder of this chapter I will outline the various empirical manifestations of the expression ‘New World Order’ as it is understood by most conspiracy theorists, in order to appreciate the starting point from which discussions about resistance emerge. It may perhaps comfort certain curious people to learn that the term is not restricted to use by conspiracy theorists, and in fact elites have used the term on many occasions. I assume that most people, no matter how cynical they are of conspiracy theory in general, would be content to believe that it ‘exists’, so to speak, when the notion is referred to by mainstream political and economic elites. With that in mind, here are some direct quotes of the expression by elites:

Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective — a new world order — can emerge: a new era, freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, east and west, north and south, can prosper and live in harmony. (George H. W. Bush, televised address to joint session of congress, 11/09/90)

This is an historic moment... we have before us the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order – a world where the rule of law, not the rule of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations.” (George H. W. Bush, televised address, 16/01/91)

“Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order... A world where the United Nations, freed from cold war stalemate, is poised to fulfil the historic vision of its founders. (George H. W. Bush, televised address to Congress, 06/03/91)

Some even believe we are part of a secret cabal working against the best interests of the United States, characterizing my family and me as internationalists and of conspiring with others around the world to build a more integrated global political and economic structure — one world, if you will. If that's the charge, I stand guilty, and I am proud of it. (David Rockefeller's autobiography, *Memoirs* 2002: 405).

My country's history, Mr. President, tells us that it is possible to fashion unity while cherishing diversity, that common action is possible despite the variety of races, interests, and beliefs we see here in this chamber. Progress and peace and justice are attainable. So we say to all peoples and governments: Let us fashion together a new world order. (Henry Kissinger, addressing the General Assembly of the United Nations, October 1975)

The New World Order will have to be built from the bottom up rather than from the top down...but in the end run around national sovereignty, eroding it piece by piece will accomplish much more than the old fashioned frontal assault. (Richard Gardner, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, Foreign Affairs, April 1974)

The developing coherence of Asian regional thinking is reflected in a disposition to consider problems and loyalties in regional terms, and to evolve regional approaches to development needs and to the evolution of a new world order. (Richard Nixon, Foreign Affairs, October 1967)

So, in a sense, yes 'it' does 'exist' and the term has not been simply conjured up by conspiracy theorists. But, as Bill Clinton might put it, it depends on what your definitions of 'it' and 'exists' are. Notwithstanding the (clearly facetious) admission by Rockefeller that he is indeed part of a 'secret cabal' conspiring to bring about a New World Order, the above quotes bear no resemblance whatsoever to the sinister, nefarious conceptualisation of the NWO as a malevolent global conspiracy. The common theme among these quotes can perhaps best be encapsulated by the expression, 'global governance', a relatively mundane, actually extremely dull, notion that is commonly employed by academics and policy makers today. The core ideological connotations in the quotes above relate to unity of action and purpose between nation states with an ultimate goal of world peace. If these quotes are to be interpreted as sinister proof of a global NWO conspiracy, then virtually every single Miss World winner in history can arguably be accused of seeking to bring about the NWO!

The problem lies in one key element of the manner in which it is assumed that such a world order can be created: a single world government. The idea of New World Order as world government was first proposed by HG Wells in his book The New World Order (1940). Writing during a time of world war, Wells advocated a New World Order in the form of a collectivist system, such that

separate governments “merge into one world state” (ibid.). Specifically, he defines the idea of a new world order as follows:

This new and complete Revolution we contemplate can be defined in a very few words. It is (a) outright world-socialism, scientifically planned and directed, plus (b) a sustained insistence upon law, law based on a fuller, more jealously conceived resentment of the personal Rights of Man, plus (c) the completest freedom of speech, criticism and publication, and sedulous expansion of the educational organisation to the ever-growing demands of the new order. Putting it at its compactest, it is the triangle of Socialism, Law and Knowledge, which frames the Revolution which may yet save the world. (ibid.)

Despite the fact that Wells frequently condemns Soviet communism throughout this text, conspiracy theorists have invariably latched on to the idea that the New World Order equates to world socialism via a single merged world government, and in the minds of many people, the term socialism is almost impossible to extricate from Soviet communism and its ultimate symbol, Stalin the dictator. Unsurprisingly, this idea is unsettling to many. In particular for conspiracy theorists in the US, many of whom grew up in the Cold War era, socialism is nothing if not the ultimate manifestation of tyranny. This idea of a single totalitarian world government (often defined ideologically as socialist although the term ‘fascist’ is also commonly used) then, forms the core of the ‘end game’ of the NWO. But who are the supposed agents seeking to bring about the New World Order? Some interchangeable names for the agents of the New World Order include ‘globalists’, ‘internationalists’, ‘collectivists’ and simply ‘the Illuminati’. However, when it comes to naming the enemy, we encounter an interesting phenomenon. Despite its grammatical structure which suggests a state of affairs, conspiracy theorists frequently personify the concept. For instance, one member of the David Icke forum writes that, in order to bring about a world government, “The “New World Order are planning for a fake alien invasion”⁹. Similarly, in the Above Top Secret forum, one member writes: “Many have concerned that the New World Order are planning to wipe out a vast amount of the human population”¹⁰. This grammatical transference of New World Order as (personified and collective) subject is perhaps the ultimate manifestation of Popper’s aforementioned complaint about conspiracy theorists’ tendencies towards ascribing agency to non-human entities. Indeed, this goes even further since the actual face value meaning of the NWO is not even an institution but a general, abstract state of affairs. Of course, as I wrote earlier, it is not that conspiracy theorists genuinely believe that flesh and blood humans literally are the NWO.

⁹ <http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=155685>

¹⁰ <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread331366/pg1>

Firstly, on a practical level this personification is employed as a convenient shorthand rather than saying ‘the agents of the NWO’ every time. Secondly, it serves a purpose as an empowering discursive act. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, ascribing agency to an adversary, in order for blame to be assigned, is crucial in order to be able to talk about resistance strategies.

Moving on to specifics, which people and institutions are seen as the agents working to bring about the New World Order? The most frequent individual people cited include state leaders (particularly those of the G8 countries) and monarchs, prominent international government officials such as Kissinger and Brzezinski, and wealthy, influential individuals such as Rupert Murdoch and members of the Rockefeller and Rothschild families. The actual number of individuals thought to be ‘on the NWO payroll’ is vast and in fact one conspiracy theorist, Robert Gaylon Ross, has gone to extraordinary lengths to publish a book entitled, Who’s Who of the Elite (1995). The book lists literally thousands of individuals, whom he terms “**EVIL MONSTERS**” (ibid.: 13, capitalised, underlined and emboldened in original), along with their job titles and affiliations. His methodology is straightforward: these individuals are New World Order elites because they are members of, or have attended meetings organised by, one of the three following organisations:

- The Bilderberg Group
- The Council on Foreign Relations
- The Trilateral Commission

These three organisations represent the core of perceived ‘New World Order institutions’ within online conspiracy theory discourses. Castells, in his study of US Patriots, mentioned the Trilateral Commission but neither the Bilderbergers or the Council on Foreign Relations. Instead he argues that the core NWO agencies are considered to be the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation (2004: 89). Certainly these latter three are frequently discussed as such in the discussion forums, including others like the World Bank, the Federal Reserve, the Club of Rome, the freemasons and smaller secret societies such as Skull and Bones, but the three I have listed above constitute by far the most commonly-cited NWO institutional manifestations within the online conspiracy theory forums, and they are very often listed together as a trio by members of the forums. However, even among these three there is a ‘conspiratorial hierarchy’ of sorts. The Trilateral Commission, founded by one of the key figures in the conspiratorial conception of the NWO, David Rockefeller, is a group whose officially stated *raison d’être* is to engage dialogue with, and foster closer cooperation between, North America (USA and

Canada), EU states and Japan¹¹. In general, from my research into the forums, NWO conspiracy theorists rarely engage in sustained discussion about any nefarious plots by the Trilateral Commission, but Rockefeller himself is discussed very frequently. Most often it is just listed as a kind of addendum with the other two. In some cases, someone will mention on a discussion thread that some political figure, who said something potentially significant in the news, has ties to the Trilateral Commission, but that has from my experience tended to be the limit of discussion. In general it certainly appears to be the least ‘popular’ New World Order manifestation of the three organisations in terms of the relative volume and enthusiasm of discussion. By contrast, the Council on Foreign Relations, a US foreign policy think-tank, is viewed as the ultimate NWO advocacy group and membership committee. It is in fact within the journal that the Council on Foreign Relations publishes, Foreign Affairs, that we can actually find frequent references to a desire to bring about a NWO. There is no need for any speculation with the Council on Foreign Relations; its members freely talk about the NWO in positive terms. Indeed their comfort level seems to know no bounds: on 13th September 2001, just two days after the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks, Gary Hart - co-chair of the Council on Foreign Relations at the time – made the remarkable comment on national television (C-Span) that “there is a chance for the President to use this opportunity to carry out ... a phrase his father used ... a new world order”¹². Given the enormous variety of conspiracy theories regarding the 9/11 attacks being a NWO ‘inside job’, I expect many conspiracy theorists’ jaws needed to be surgically re-attached to their faces after they saw Hart’s televised comment. So it is no wonder the Council on Foreign Relations receives so much ‘air time’ in the conspiracy theory discussion forums; its representatives regularly talk about, and enthusiastically advocate, a NWO. Finally, the organisation’s membership includes all the ‘usual suspects’ of the NWO elite. A rather amusing satirical chart displaying the most prominent members of the Council on Foreign Relations can be seen in figure 2.1:

Figure 2.1: Council on Foreign Relations Members: “The Monster Squad”

(Picture hosted on the Above Top Secret Forum entitled, “The CFR - Creating Enemies And Destroying Them Since 1919”¹³)

¹¹ <http://www.trilateral.org/go.cfm?do=Page.View&pid=5>

¹² Footage can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5r7htcekc-U>

¹³ <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread780183/pg1>



David Rockefeller



Henry A. Kissinger



Hillary Clinton



Zbigniew Brzezinski



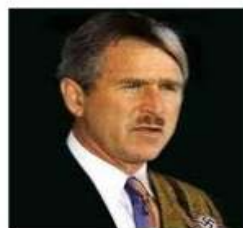
Dick Cheney



Janet Napolitano



Bill Clinton



George Bush



Rupert Murdoch

The Bilderberg Group, although not as explicitly associated with the NWO in the same way as the Council on Foreign Relations, receives the most discussion in the forums and even beyond the conspiracy theory realm. In fact the BBC ran an article entitled, “Bilderberg: The ultimate conspiracy theory” on 3rd June 2004¹⁴ stating that the group has “a reputation as perhaps the most powerful organisation in the world”. The group hosts annual conferences, inviting many of the world’s most powerful individuals, to talk about... who knows? We cannot say with any certainty, since the group never releases any record of discussions. So here we have a situation where many of the world’s most powerful people meet in secret for a few days each year and discuss whatever it is that they discuss, while never revealing anything about the discussion afterwards. It is difficult to conceive of a more caricatured manifestation of the kind of environment people imagine in terms of

¹⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/3773019.stm>

how conspiracies are plotted. Indeed the image of powerful people meeting secretly in a room is one of the most common and sarcastic rhetorical attacks used against conspiracy theorists because the idea of villains in secret room meetings is deemed an absurd one. Michael Parenti, a Marxist academic, often receives accusations (usually from right-wing critics) of being a conspiracy theorist when he talks about the capitalist class acting in its shared interests. His response to this rhetorical ‘meeting in a room’ critique is as follows:

But where else would people of power get together – on park benches or carousels? Indeed, they meet in rooms: corporate boardrooms, Pentagon command rooms, at the Bohemian Grove, in the choice dining rooms at the best restaurants, resorts, hotels and estates, in the many conference rooms at the White House, the NSA, the CIA or wherever. (Parenti 1996: 174)

We get the idea: there are indeed many rooms in the world and powerful people do occasionally meet with other powerful people in some of these rooms. In the case of the Bilderberg Group we see the height of this phenomenon, so it is hardly surprising that it receives so much attention from conspiracy theorists, even though (and indeed, precisely because, given the accusations of elites acting in secret) there is no formal record of the content of discussion at these meetings. However, Denis Healey, former UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, in an interview with the Guardian offered a brief personal account of what goes on at the Bilderberg meetings¹⁵. When the subject of the NWO was brought up, he responded with:

To say we were striving for a one-world government is exaggerated, but not wholly unfair. Those of us in Bilderberg felt we couldn't go on forever fighting one another for nothing and killing people and rendering millions homeless. So we felt that a single community throughout the world would be a good thing.

As with the elite quotes on the NWO cited earlier, Healey's comment appears far from sinister, the goal appearing to be simply a peaceful global community. Of course, few conspiracy theorists would accept such a face value interpretation and certainly many of them will pounce on the fact that he, like Rockefeller, has essentially ‘confessed’ that he and other elites are, in a sense, striving for a one-world government.

The preceding discussion presents a brief summary of the primary elements within the conspiratorial conception of the NWO, including some suggestions as to why conspiracy theorists

¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/mar/10/extract1>

believe it at all. The NWO as an expression has not simply been conjured up by conspiracy theorists; elites themselves have used the term. Most anti-NWO conspiracy theorists interpret its meaning as referring to setting up a single, tyrannical (typically presumed to be either socialist or fascist) world government brought about by a shadowy elite group of powerful people and institutions, and frequently refer to elite references to a NWO as evidence and even proof of it being a real phenomenon. However, it should be clear from the quotes I have cited that elites do not make any reference to a specific type of government, whether socialist or fascist or democratic, when using the term, yet this is almost always assumed by conspiracy theorists. Even if it is not assumed, many express a fundamental objection, citing the basis of the sovereignty of nation states, to the very idea of a single world government at all, no matter what form it might take. There are additional specifics relating to NWO objectives (for example a genocidal reduction in the human population, microchipping humans etc.) along with the religious dimension (for example accusations that Obama is the antichrist) that I haven't mentioned for now, but I am confident that most anti-NWO conspiracy theorists would be content with the essential definitional and descriptive aspects (if not my interpretations) of the conspiratorial conception of the NWO summarised above. Not all of them, however. There exists a further dimension to the concept among certain conspiracy theory community members, a dimension which, as we shall see, has profound consequences upon how its members can talk about resistance.

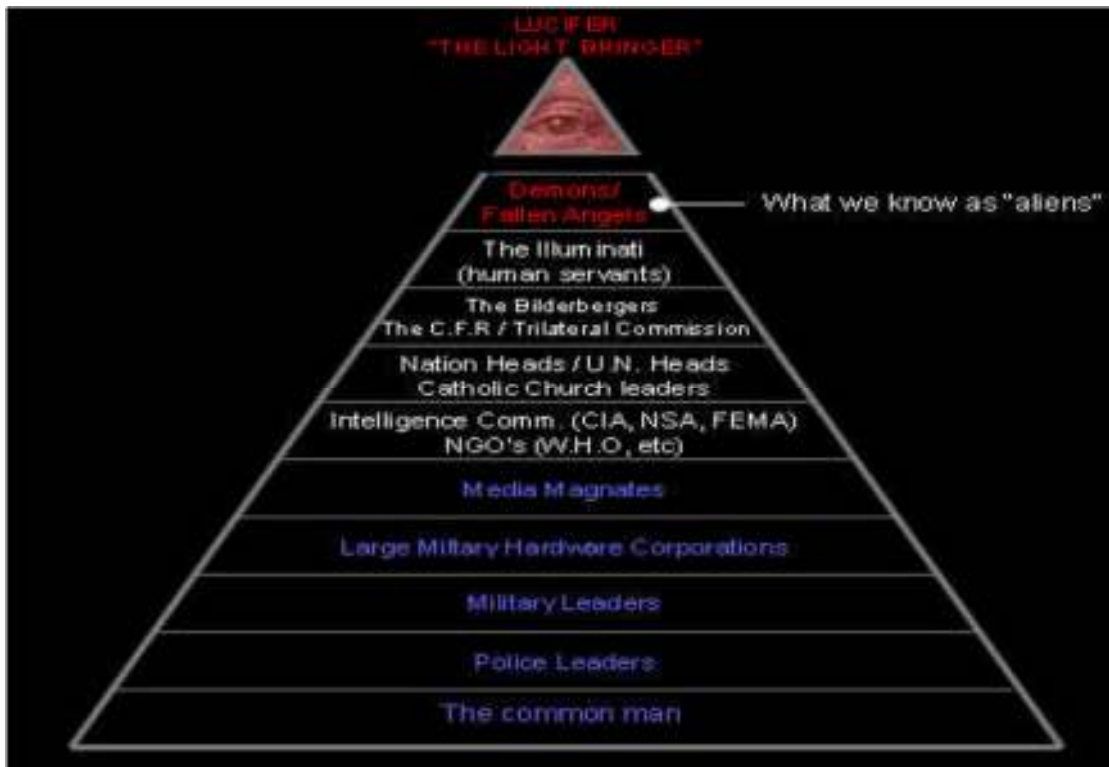
That further dimension is aliens. Not the belief that aliens exist at all, but that aliens are in fact the true hidden agents in control of the NWO. While many anti-NWO conspiracy theorists believe in the alien element and they are thus cannot be separated (analytically and certainly not empirically) as truly distinct 'types' of conspiracy theorist, for the purposes of this section I am distinguishing the discourses since there are important and radical differences despite the same overarching label of the 'NWO'. This is because the primary focus of my research relates to how resistance can be thought about and discussed within a conspiracy theory framework, and how this resistance discourse is shaped by the discursively constructed agency-based representation of the conspiracy itself, in terms of the perceived power and morality of the elite. I use two of the most popular online conspiracy theory discussion forums for this research. The primary (because it is by far the largest online forum) data source for my research is the online discussion forum called Above Top Secret, and here we find numerous accounts of extra-terrestrial elements in the NWO conspiracy theory. However, a key figure in the conspiracy community, whose ideas form the basis of the vast majority of extra-terrestrial conceptions of the New World Order, is David Icke and there is a specific 'David Icke forum' online which is an important complement as well as contrast to Above Top Secret. It is

extremely difficult to summarise Icke's ideas, partly because they are so far removed from normal experience (what Icke sometimes derisively refers to as 'five sense reality', see Chapter 5 for further elaboration on his ontological framework) and also because they are frequently being expanded or shifted. In terms of the NWO, Icke shares the basic definition and has written on everything that I have mentioned in my summary above. The core notion of the NWO as an elite conspiracy to bring about a single world government is accepted. However, the real agents behind this drive in his framework are extra-terrestrial reptilian aliens, whom he names the Annunaki (the name given to ancient Sumerian gods). They are believed to exist in the lower fourth dimension, invisible to (except when 'caught' shape shifting – see Figure 5.1 for a diagrammatic representation of this phenomenon within Icke's work) humans and they run the show (Icke 2001). Furthermore, the NWO elites mentioned above are not only understood as the underlings or frontmen, of the extra-terrestrials, but are actually physically 'possessed' by these reptilian entities, with evidence for this being numerous eye-witness accounts of elites 'shape shifting' back and forth from human to reptilian form (George H.W. Bush has apparently been frequently spotted shape shifting). While Icke accepts the stated NWO goal of a single world government, the reason within his framework is not simply political control, but because he suggests that these fourth dimensional lizard elites literally 'feed' off human lower vibrational emotional energies which include fear, anger and sadness (ibid.: 140). We see in Chapter 5 how the discourse of this particular conspiracy theory shapes the discourses of resistance among the forum members, the strategies contained in which are unconventional to say the least.

A useful visual representation of the perceived agency structure of the New World Order can be seen in Figure 2.2 below, a diagram designed by one Above Top Secret forum member with the goal of producing a 'unified theory of the New World Order':

Figure 2.2 Proposed hierarchical power structure of the New World Order

Source: Above Top Secret forum (<http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread102694/pg1>)



Although, surprisingly, this chart excludes economic and financial NWO agents such as the notorious international / central bankers, it is an impressive effort towards a comprehensive visual description of the entirety of how the global malevolent conspiracy is conceived in terms of its controlling agents. Many conspiracy theorists would disagree with the order, and many would also disagree with including some at all (atheist conspiracy theorists for instance would, I presume, reject the idea of Lucifer being included let alone being the ultimate controller), but this chart covers enough to present a general picture of agency as understood within the conspiracy theory discussion forums. To complement this in relation to the analytical basis of my thesis, I have designed a 'conspiratorial continuum', representing the varying dimensions of how the term 'New World Order' is defined both by members of the online forums, as well as its use by academics and political elites:

Figure 2.3. The 'Conspiratorial Continuum': conceptual dimensions of New World Order definitions

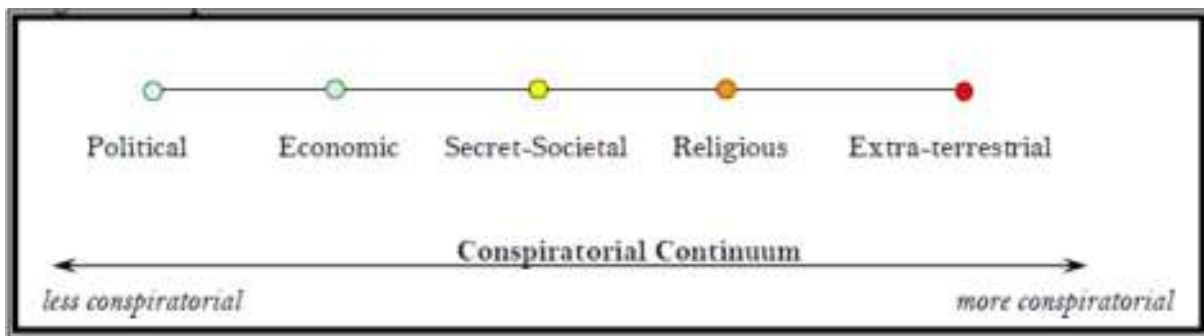


Figure 2.3 should not be understood as merely a descriptive summary of how the NWO is variously understood. Certainly I would never suggest that any single person's definition of the NWO would fit neatly into any of these categories; some definitions may include one, some or all of these categories. The purpose of this 'ideal type' is analytical, which can be understood further by the 'conspiratorial continuum' scale underneath the categories. Recall that the two fundamental agency-related concepts with which I am concerned, both in terms of resistance and conspiracy theory, are power and morality. The relative extent of these elements in any particular definition, or simply any forum post's discursive construction, results in a relatively more or less conspiratorial conception of the NWO. At the furthest extreme (and here by 'extreme' I merely mean on the continuum of (im)morality and power; no normative evaluation of ideology is implied), the NWO is understood as being controlled by aliens, a definition perceived to have the highest levels of both power and immorality (though arguably not quite as high as when referring to Satan – see below). At the other extreme, we find conceptualisations of the NWO as used in academic work and by politicians; it is seen as a political or economic state of affairs. The political and economic dimensions are also incorporated within conspiracy theories. In the case of US Patriots for example, international political organisations such as the UN, and domestic political organisations such as the federal government, are viewed by some as the key players in bringing the NWO to fruition. Such organisations are of course highly visible (more so than, for instance, the private corporate classes who are the drivers of the NWO for those who define it economically) or, to put it another way, less secretive at least in their identification. They can be deemed immoral, depending on whom you ask. They are very powerful, of course, so it may appear erroneous to have them under the 'less conspiratorial' end of the continuum. However, within a conspiracy theory framework, political institutions are typically viewed as less powerful than secret societies, Satan and extra-terrestrials (although comparing the relative power of political versus economic forces is certainly debateable depending on one's starting point).

Furthermore, a key theoretical consequence of the dimensions as they are placed along the conspiratorial continuum is that how one talks about the adversary shapes how one talks about resistance. If the core of the NWO is believed to be economic in nature, an appropriate resistance strategy would likely be economic in nature. If the problem is political, and especially due to specific political institutions, forum members might be expected to talk about resistance strategies that undermine those institutions. In the case of US Patriots, the specific problem is understood (at the bare minimum, there is much more to it of course) as international political institutions taking over the sovereignty of the USA with the goal of setting up a one-world government. Given the value ascribed to US sovereignty, along with the US Constitution, we find a very strong sense that there already exist political structures and precedents for Americans to resist and counteract the (usually foreign) forces of the NWO. Thus the 'less conspiratorial' conceptions can sometimes be seen as more empowering than the 'more conspiratorial' ones which include Satan or extra-terrestrials. Note that I have placed the extra-terrestrial dimension further along the conspiratorial continuum than the religious dimension, in contrast to the Above Top Secret member's hierarchical chart which places Satan / Lucifer at the peak of the power structure. My reasoning here is that a belief in Satan tends to imply a belief in God, which further implies a (typically) accompanying belief that God's power will eventually prove victorious. Certainly for the some of the more fundamentalist Christian members of the conspiracy theory forums, we see forum posts arguing that there is no need to resist at all, since it is all part of God's plan. Despite the frequent religious (primarily Christian but there are also many Islamic conspiracy theorists in these forums) content of discussion about the NWO in the online discussion forums, I do not focus much on it in this thesis. The reason is twofold: firstly, discursive presentations of agency (the core conceptual concern of my thesis) in religious terms are frequently rather one-dimensional and contribute very little to specific and useful understandings of the NWO. Overwhelmingly, the idea is simply that Satan / Lucifer is the overall powerful and immoral guiding force (although it should be noted that sometimes the idea presented is that the key causal agent at the top of the power chain, above Satan, is God himself such that it is all part of the grand divine plan) of all that is wrong in the world, including but not limited to the NWO. By contrast, extra-terrestrials are presented as guiding and indeed directly controlling the specific goals and manifestations of the NWO in order to achieve its overarching objective which is the control of humanity and the suppression of humanity's spiritual potential by keeping it in the 'five sense prison'.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the core intellectual and research agendas in the academic literature on conspiracy theories. The purpose of this review has not been to present a comprehensive summary of the literature; rather its purpose is to contextualise my research and thus clarify the contribution it makes. While I may have appeared critical of this literature, it should hopefully be evident that this criticism relates not to the content as such, but the consequent limitations of how one can think about conspiracy theorists, and in particular how one can understand them as more than puzzle-solving cognitive ‘failures’. I have suggested that for multiple reasons, the discourses within the conspiracy theory forums can be thought of, and thus researched as, the discourses of a social movement. As should be clear from the summary of the conspiratorial conceptualisations of the NWO in this chapter, particularly in relation to the single world government end-game, the concerns of conspiracy theorists in this context are fundamentally political and so there is no reason why their debates and discussions cannot be treated in the same way as those of a movement whose members can collectively talk and strategise about political resistance. The following chapter explores this idea in greater depth, primarily through the lens of what Melucci (1989) calls an ‘action system’, discussions surrounding a movement’s goals, means and environment.

Chapter 3: Analytical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Resistance discourse and agency

As outlined in chapter 1, the central goal of this research has been to understand how resistance is thought about and discussed in the context of the NWO conspiracy theory. I break down such a ‘resistance discourse’ via the notion of agency. Specifically, two subsets of the umbrella notion of agency: morality and power – or, put simply, ideas of what should (and shouldn’t) be done and what can (and can’t) be done. I am thus seeking to unpack discursive relationships between, at the most basic level, perceived problems and perceived solutions when talking about the NWO. There is nothing *a priori* objectionable about relating problems to solutions; indeed they are commonly thought to go hand-in-hand. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, in the vast majority of the academic literature, conspiracy theory is frequently viewed as ‘all problem and no solution’. In fact some authors go as far as to imply that not only are conspiracy theorists not concerned about resistance in the first place, but that they cannot meaningfully talk about resistance in the first place, due to the disabling nature of the exaggerated power structure they describe (Basham 2003: 100; Fenster 1999: xv). There is, I would suggest, substantial evidence to reject such claims. That evidence is the enormous wealth of online discussion within online conspiracy theory discussion forums (and the NWO conspiracy theories, no matter their specific and differing conceptualisations, constitute exactly the kind of ‘malevolent global conspiracy’ to which Basham (2003) refers) about resisting the NWO. So conspiracy theorists *do* talk about resistance, which, by necessity, suggests that they *can* talk about it. Foucault takes such an idea to an extreme level, suggesting that “(w)here this is power, there is resistance” (1979: 95), although I do not go quite so far; rather I suggest that when there is thought and discussion about excessive power, there is thought and discussion about possible resistance.

It might be tempting for me to declare ‘check-mate’ to Fenster and Basham now, but clearly it would not be much of a thesis if my research questions were of such a closed form, i.e. “Can conspiracy theorists talk about resistance?” and “Do conspiracy theorists talk about resistance?”. My research questions are instead concerned with how discourses of problems (the NWO conspiracy, its agents, their actions, and the consequent manifestations of their actions) relate to discourses of solutions (resisting, escaping or preventing the NWO conspiracy), in order to gain insight into how concepts of agency (morality and power) in the realm of resistance discourse are

variously represented, developed and contested within these discourses and how these are shaped and constrained by how the perceived agency of the adversary.

3.2 Developing a theoretical framework for analysis

My research began by employing the popular analytical framework of ‘collective action framing’ (Benford & Snow 2000). At first glance this was an obvious choice, given that it provides neat, ready-made analytical categories which fit my concerns about how meanings relating to political grievance and resistance are constructed. The three core ‘framing tasks’ within the framing approach are diagnostic (identifying the problem), prognostic (identifying the solution) and motivational (justifying resistance) (Ibid.: 615-7). So far so good. Furthermore, the approach highlights the importance of frame ‘alignment’ processes (Ibid.: 624), which relate to a strategic goal towards generating an overall coherence between the various frames used within a social movement. Again, given that I am examining the discursive links between problems and solutions, and particularly how differently defined problems can result in differently-defined solutions, this seems custom-made for what I am researching in relation to conspiracy theory discourses. Problems arose however in that throughout the research literature employing the collective action framing approach, these frames are intrinsically presented in instrumentalist terms, such that the ideas and their coherence and alignment are viewed solely in regard to their potential to promote successful mobilisation and goal achievement; as Gillan puts it, “frames are employed strategically by individual or collective agents to fulfil a variety of social movement tasks” (2008: 249). Indeed despite Gillan’s welcome theoretical and methodological proposal (via the introduction of an ‘orientational frame’ which employs a hermeneutic, multi-level analytic approach to incorporate wider social and political belief structures (ibid.: 252-61) in this article to mitigate many of the problems associated with the framing approach, it is nonetheless grounded in a view of collective action frames as strategic tools for successful mobilisation. This is simply not the research aim of this thesis. Future research which focuses on resistance practices would of course make this approach more suitable, but for the purposes of this research, whether any mobilisation occurs or how successful it might be are entirely irrelevant since I am examining the process of how resistance is even thought about in the first place, how the ideas are shaped and constrained by the conspiracy theory, and whether or not the resulting discourses can be said to be empowering or disempowering. This may seem to be a subtle distinction but it is hugely significant; I am interested

in the discourse itself and not its potentially instrumental benefits or drawbacks (although I am interested in how, through discussion, certain resistance strategies are evaluated as likely to be effective or not). I found that employing the framing approach as it was intended to be used led me to ‘need’ to think about actual, eventual, collective mobilisation. As I stated in Chapter 1, I do not wish to restrict my notion of resistance to collective mobilisation, or indeed to individual ‘everyday resistance’, but rather the entirety of scope of thought about how resistance can even be conceived within the discursive worldview of the NWO conspiracy theory – certainly, as can be seen in Chapter 5, some strategies proposed in these forums would not fit any hitherto conceived strategy of resistance in the academic literature. So, the analytical categories in the collective action framing approach, along with the related emphasis on establishing coherence via alignment processes, are absolutely and succinctly relevant on their own terms, but the main goal of framing research is not solely the construction of ideas but an evaluation of their strategic efficacy for collective mobilisation and the achievement of movement objectives. The research in this thesis certainly looks at notions of strategic efficacy, but only as they exist within the discourse of the discussions by forum members. I am not examining whether they are actually effective, but how effective (or not) they are perceived within the discourse itself, and ultimately how much the conception of NWO elite agency and members’ agency interact to result in relatively empowering or disempowering expressions.

A related issue arising from this is that framing research is invariably restricted to post-mobilisation analysis of ideas. Such research typically identifies an already existing social movement (although framing research has also been used in a much wider range of social settings including the business world) and then via one or more methods incorporating interviews, observation or document analysis (particularly published documents disseminated by movement organisers), then identifies the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames, evaluates their alignment and then assesses its relative efficacy for the movement’s objectives, which may be policy changes or simply recruiting the support of the general public. As will be demonstrated with the discussion on Melucci’s work below, such a research approach is a major restriction, in general research terms of course but especially in relation to my own research questions. I am interested in the actual process of meaning construction, negotiation and contestation, the collective and discursive fleshing out of the ideas relating to resistance discourse. This collective, communicative process occurs firstly in a ‘bottom-up’ manner, via the discussions between the members themselves and not the (usually for public consumption) discourse of movement leaders or organisers claiming to represent the movement as a whole. Secondly, these ideas about problems and solutions precede mobilisation or visible

collective acts of resistance. Resistance does not simply ‘happen’, some level of thought (and obviously for collective resistance, discussion as well as thought) about its perceived strategic efficacy has to come first. By researching an already existing movement, these collective, bottom-up meaning construction processes have been and gone and can at best be inferred after the fact. A final issue relating to the post-hoc analysis employed in framing research, a problem which has been termed by Gillan as “the Meluccian challenge” (2008: 248) is that the findings tend, firstly, to represent the movement itself as a coherent, united whole and secondly, to represent the frames (suitably ‘aligned’) as a coherent, united whole. Indeed the very purpose of alignment processes is to generate an apparent coherence among diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. To be able to identify a collective action frame and its alignment process already assumes a stable, unified coherence within the ideas. As Melucci argues, and certainly as I would argue given the findings of my research, is that there can never be anything that can be labelled a coherent set of ideas in such a context. Indeed my entire research is directed towards unpacking the – occasionally subtle but often starkly opposed – diversity and contestation of such ideas by the members themselves. I would suggest that what are most interesting, and most fruitful in terms of sociological insight, and particularly in relation to my research questions, are precisely the micro-level discursive interactions between forum members, the processes of meaning construction, the meanings themselves and the contestations and tensions contained therein, given the overarching worldview constructed in the form of the NWO conspiracy.

Melucci agrees:

no phenomenon is of greater importance for the analysis of social movements than the complexity of the relations and divisions internal to the collective actor, and the difficulties involved in building unitary action (1996: 42).

Melucci’s work on collective action mitigates many of the important theoretical and methodological constraints in much of the rest of the political science literature, in relation to the objectives of my research. The anti-NWO discussion forums would simply not qualify as movements for most social movement scholars, but as Melucci argues, what actually takes place within a movement “differ(s) profoundly from the image of the politically organized actor” (ibid.: 115). In the following section I examine his concepts of ‘collective identity’ and ‘action system’ and I assess their utility for my research, illustrating with direct examples from within the discussion forums, and concluding with some methodological implications arising from such a theoretical framework. It will become clear that Melucci’s definition of these concepts is a substantial departure from conventional

understandings and usages of the terms; he himself expresses reluctance and dissatisfaction in using them at all and his writing is replete with caveats when he uses them, particularly in relation to the notion of collective identity. His detailed formulation and development of these concepts make sense and are certainly analytically useful, but I share his dissatisfaction with the terminology as misleading. Because of this, I reject the term ‘collective identity’ in this thesis, even though the way he defines it in relation to the process of constructing an ‘action system’ is appropriate for my analysis of the online discussion forums.

3.3 The relevance of the notion of ‘movement’ in Melucci’s work

Melucci argues that traditional conceptualisations of movements fail to do justice to “the reality of reticular and diffuse forms of collective action” (ibid.: 4) which are moreover a “product of multiple and heterogeneous social processes” (ibid.: 20). Recognition of the complexity and disunity of the actions and interactions of movement members helps to avoid misleading essentialist claims about a movement. For instance, based on my analysis of the discussion forums, there is ostensibly more than enough data to support tentatively a claim which agrees with the predictions of Fenster and Basham such as, “the anti-NWO discussion forum members are frustrated by their impotence to resist the NWO”. But right in the very same discussion threads we find other members who confidently express strategies of resistance with enormous levels of optimism. The importance of recognising such really-existing heterogeneity is echoed by Flesher Fominaya, who writes that interactions among movement members “comprises different and even contradictory definitions ... actors do not necessarily have to be in complete agreement on ideologies, beliefs, interests or goals” (2010: 395). Furthermore, even on an individual basis some members who originally make claims of futility may find themselves saying, “I never thought of it like that”, adapting their ontological viewpoints and eventually expressing optimism about the potential of their own agency in terms of how to resist the NWO. The meanings are constantly being produced and re-produced through these dialogic exchanges along with new engagements with political events. This is one of the most crucial elements of Melucci’s epistemological approach. When we talk about ‘movements’, they need to be recognised solely as “objects of knowledge constructed by the analyst; they do not coincide with the empirical complexity of the action” (Melucci 1996: 21). Reification of this object of knowledge results in misleading assumptions of stability and unity (assumptions which are relatively common in the literature on conspiracy theories in addition to much of the social

movement literature), ignoring the fragmented and processual nature of interactions within a movement.

Such a recognition does not imply that reality is so diffuse that we simply cannot talk about movements at all. Where we find “a number of individuals or groups exhibiting, at the same time and place, behaviours with relatively similar morphological characteristics” (ibid.: 20), it becomes possible to study them within the framework of a movement. There is certainly nothing misleading about referring to ‘US Patriots’ or ‘members of the online David Icke Forum’. The specificity of the online spaces in which they choose to interact, along with the shared forms of language they employ and their shared ontological conceptions allow for meaningful analysis that at the very least can distinguish them from other groups, regardless of actual differences and contradictions in ideas within a particular group’s discourse. Furthermore the members themselves can be permitted to reify their unity as a movement; indeed such reification is necessary to engender a sense of belonging to the group. Melucci refers to this as solidarity, “the ability of actors to recognize others, and be recognized, as belonging to the same social unit” (ibid.: 23). The point however is that the researcher should avoid this trap and be conscious of the fact that a ‘movement’ is still a construct and not a stable, unified empirical entity.

3.4 Collective agency and ‘action system’

This is where his notion of collective identity comes in, which is central to his entire approach. It is not the case, however, that he is simply asserting the primacy of identity over other factors as may be understood when considering the phenomenon of ‘identity politics’, although he admits his own research legacy into such ‘new social movements’ may have a part to play in the importance he attaches to the term (ibid.: 84). There are movements, of course, in which the main objective is simply social recognition and acceptance of a group’s identity. This is not the central issue with the anti-NWO discussion forums however, certainly not in relation to the focus of my research. I would not suggest that any forum members’ perceptions and discursive construction of themselves as collectives is not important, especially to themselves. Nor would I claim that such identity has no role to play in shaping their ideas about agency. But these issues are firstly beyond the scope of this thesis, and secondly, thinking of identity in this sense constitutes a misreading of Melucci’s formulation.

Melucci's concept of collective identity is rather more subtle and is in fact overwhelmingly entangled with the notion of agency. He defines the term on many occasions, examples of which are as follows (emphasis added):

1. "I shall instead treat collective identity as an interactive process through which several individuals or groups *define the meaning of their action* and the field of opportunities and constraints for such an action" (ibid.: 67)
2. "The formation of expectations and the assessment of the possibilities and limits of action presuppose that the actor is able to define itself and its environment. I define *this process of building an action system* as collective identity" (ibid.: 67)
3. "I call collective identity the *process of 'constructing' an action system*" (ibid.: 70)
4. "Collective identity as a process involves cognitive definitions concerning *the ends, means and the field of action*" (ibid.: 70)
5. "Collective identity as a process refers thus to *a network of active relationships* between actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions" (ibid.: 71)

Each one of those definitions would appear to sit far more comfortably within the umbrella concept of agency. In fact he directly states that collective identity should be thought of in terms of action (ibid.: 70). Flesher Fominaya summarises the confusion, particularly in the academic literature on movements, with collective identity understood as 'product', which is what people outside a movement recognise and talk about versus collective identity as 'process', which is a phenomenon located within movement member interactions (2010: 397). Certainly it is the latter form which Melucci formulates above. So why does he use the term collective identity at all? For Melucci, the point is more subtle; it is about how individuals construct a 'we' (ibid.: 40). Without that 'we', it simply makes no sense even to begin to discuss how a group constructs ideas about resistance. The construction of these ideas is itself an action which is necessarily preceded by the perception of a 'we'. The consequently perceived 'we' allows discrete individuals to make sense of any act they undertake made in the name of the group as a whole, as opposed to separate acts of individuals. It allows them to "recognize the effects of (their) actions and to attribute these effects to (themselves)" (ibid.: 72). To illustrate, when members of the David Icke forum discuss the production of leaflets exposing various conspiracies, this discussion only makes sense if the members perceive themselves to be members of the collective. The individuals involved may have several other social

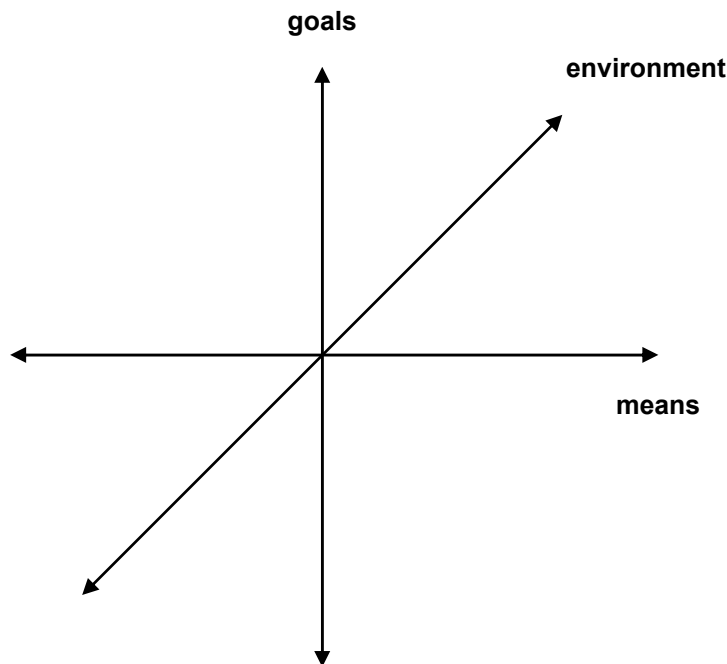
identities. In the process of sharing leaflet design ideas however, they may consider themselves enlightened anti-NWO whistle-blowers and heroes, and this ‘we’, which has been discursively and collectively constructed through communication, has to be conceived in order for the interaction to make any sense in the first place. Furthermore it only makes sense, as a researcher, to analyse their discussions if their perception of themselves as a collective is understood.

It is difficult to fault the underlying idea here; nonetheless I am uncomfortable with it. The conventional use of the term identity invariably connotes statements of “I am X” or “we are X” which, while important, is simply not the focus of my research. Furthermore the grammatical structure of the word itself suggests a level of fixity and universality which belies the heterogeneity and evolving nature of any perceived ‘we’s that can be distinguished. Melucci himself declares personal intense dissatisfaction with the term (ibid.: 72, 85), but reluctantly uses it, pending as he suggests some kind of linguistic revolution, such that the actual idea can be captured less misleadingly. He cautiously proposes the term ‘identization’ (ibid.: 77) as a way around this, a word whose grammatical form indicates that it is indeed a process he is referring to rather than any fixed label. This to me nonetheless retains the constraint of suggesting the primacy of identity over agency, which is far too misleading in the context of the phenomena I am researching.

While I reject the term ‘collective identity’ for my research, it would be rash to reject the ideas underpinning Melucci’s use of the term as evidenced by the definitions cited, since they are extremely fitting for my analysis. Melucci equates the process of collective identity with the construction of an ‘action system’ (ibid.: 70). He formulates this concept in detail in his earlier work, Nomads of the Present (1989: 25-30), suggesting that an action system is generated by individuals negotiating and adjusting, through communication, a) goals, b) means and c) environment (ibid.: 26). These orientations are understood as both interdependent and multipolar, and can be visualised as follows in Figure 3.1:

Figure 3.1: Action System conceptual diagram

Source: Melucci 1989: 26)



Such a concept is custom-made for analysing the discussions of resistance, what can and should be done, in the conspiracy theory forums in relation to the research aims presented in Chapter 1. The excerpt below from the “An open letter to all so called militias and revolutionist” discussion thread on Above Top Secret demonstrates its utility:

violence won't work.... it did in the past..but the reality is this... say you have 100,000 citizens marching towards D.C and armed.... how many soldiers do you think it would take to take them out? lets say there are 15 heli gunships..... and a few 100 troops with tanks..... who do you think has a chance? the best way to resolve it is NON COMPLIANCE ... STOP purchasing goods from corporations... abide by the constitution in its fullest and we as citizens can take back this country.. this means abandoning the fiat currency.... this means to stop supporting the federal goverment by way of the voluntary tax..... going completely barter... that means farming... Even if the revoulution is succesfull... if we dont change the underlining principles on how we live our sucesors will end up going thru the same thing..... I also say we go back to a a real direct democracy like the one that greece had... with a seperate judicial system... and all currency should be silver\gold.. no PAPER... an armed revolution simply wont work... people are too busy watching american idol to get off there ass lol....

The context of this post must be understood as a response to calls for engagement of experienced and armed militias. A major goal for this member is a “real direct democracy like the one that Greece had”. The means by which this can be achieved include retreating from the consumer market, non-payment of taxes and a complete currency overhaul. References to the environment (the sense in which Melucci uses this term is in relation to concrete resources, including those of the adversary, and the extent to which these help or hinder the proposed means (ibid.: 27)) include the military power of the Federal Government, the Constitution and the rest of humanity. As a *prima facie* thematic analysis, this is of course somewhat useful, but the insights to be gained simply by labelling goals, means and environment are somewhat limited. The really features of Melucci’s notion of action system are the interdependence and directionality of the orientations. Once they are contextualised within the ongoing communication with other members in the discussion thread, it becomes possible to examine the continual contestation, adaptation, development or rejection of the goals and means. For instance, another member responds to the above with the following:

That is not how the world works you fool. As much as I would like to show up peacefully and actually have change take place, that has been proven foolhardy time and time again. Yes yes yes!!!! Lets all stop paying taxes and not buy their goods and THAT will starve them out, you chant. Go on.....sillyness. What do you think will happen when you refuse to pay your taxes or house payment when you grow up and get one???? They will come and take your house by force if you push the issue....will you resist with force or will you stand in front of the door holding hands and singing cum-by-ya? Yeah, that will show em.. It must start with mass non-compliance backed up with any force necessary because your non-compliance will ultimately be met with force. If the voice of the masses alone was enough the world would already be a different place and we wouldn't be having this discussion.

As Melucci notes, “(c)onstant tensions arise among ends, means, and environment: Goals no longer match means or vice versa; the environment is either poor or rich in the requisite resources” (1996: 40), and the above two quotes combine to offer an excellent illustration of the contested and continually negotiated elements of an action system through communicative interaction. He also comments, importantly, that social movement research tends to rely far too much on official statements from a movement’s leaders or representatives (ibid.: 77-78) which has the tendency of presenting the movement as a unitary, stable voice. It should now be evident that the two excerpts above offer a far more valuable insight into *how* statements relating to agency are played out within bottom-up communicative interactions, compared with, say, a manufactured statement on their behalf (for example an editorial on David Icke’s or Alex Jones’ websites). The two posters are

united against the adversary that is the NWO, and furthermore the responder even agrees that non-compliance is the starting point for the means of resistance. Nonetheless, the principle of non-violence is rejected outright and the message even expresses contempt for the means offered by the first poster because of the environmental constraints, notably the perceived military power of the NWO. Fascinatingly, both members use this very environmental constraint as a justification for both violence and non-violence; one argues that force will be met with force, and the other that peace will be met with force. Moreover they both make reference to the environmental resource that is ‘the people’, but from opposing standpoints. While the first poster views the masses as a constraint because they are apathetic, the responder implies that the masses do indeed express grievance, but that this alone is insufficient due to the perceived power of the elite. Approaching the forums’ discourses via the dynamic and interacting elements of Melucci’s action system provides us with an enhanced and nuanced analysis that can examine more effectively the ways in which notions of resistance are thought about and discussed at the micro level of members’ interactions.

3.5 Communicative Construction, Cognition and Emotion

Constructing an action system entails “cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means and the field of action” (ibid). What is of interest for my research are not concrete, visible acts of resistance, which in any case are mostly “manifestations of deeper processes which in turn depend on the capacity of actors to negotiate the ends, means and environment of their action“ (Melucci 1989: 27), but rather “the communicative construction, which is both *cognitively and emotionally* framed” (1996: 71, emphasis added), of ideas about resisting the NWO. Communicative construction refers to the collective meaning-making processes emerging via discussion between members.

Motivations for resistance may have some of their roots at the individual psychological level, but it is important also to attend to their sociological influences, whereby these motivations and their meanings are developed or constrained via “interaction, negotiation and conflict” with other members (1989: 26). Such communicative construction is precisely what takes place in the many and varied discussion threads about resisting the NWO. Furthermore, Melucci argues that “tensions are continually generated: over the definition of ends, between short- and long-term ends, (and) over the choice of means” (ibid.: 40) and this succinctly captures the dialogic exchanges to be found within the discussion forums. Note that he emphasises the roles of both cognition and emotion in the process of constructing an action system. The cognitive elements tend mostly to be in relation to

the relative practicality and utility of means in relation to environmental resources, and this is of course fundamental in understanding how ideas about resisting the NWO, particularly in relation to perceptions of morality and power, are played out in the discussions.

When considering the extent to which conspiracy theory could be characterised as ‘disabling’, I suggest that answering this requires understanding elements of discourse as emotional as well as cognitive in nature. As an aside, it’s worth noting that the two are of course interrelated; Melucci himself argues that “(t)here is no cognition without feeling and no meaning without emotion” (1995: 45) and I would not deny this; expressions of optimism and pessimism are ubiquitous within the practical discussions of what can be done to resist the NWO. For example, a member can express futility at one particular means of resistance but the futility may have been shaped by practical cognitive assessments of environmental constraints. The affective elements I focus on in my analysis are limited to those which suggest positive or negative attitudes towards resistance as these are relevant for my research question on the extent to which conspiracy theory constitutes a disabling theory of power as Fenster (1999: xv) claims. Innumerable affective expressions are to be found among these discussion forums (such as outrage at biased news coverage of a perceived ‘false flag’ terrorist attack) but what is of interest here is emotional content within the text which suggests feelings of empowerment, of lack thereof, towards resistance. It is worth reiterating that, epistemologically, I make no claims about whether or not particular members actually feel empowered or disabled; I cannot. I furthermore do not pretend that the texts I analyse reflect the posters’ states of mind at that point, let alone that they reflect any generalised dispositions. What exist, my principal units of analysis, are transcripts of communicative interactions within discussion threads. The discussion threads and the texts within them possess their own reality regardless of the multidimensional and shifting identities of the members, who are human beings with lives outside the forums. If a member expresses emotional negativity towards resisting reptilian aliens due to their superior technology, this could be to incite debate or even ridicule (for example trolling), it could be acting out an online persona which has been created over time, or it could be a genuine expression of despair at the doomed fate of humanity. Regardless, any emotions – in the sense of real, measurable phenomena - felt by a particular member, and certainly with reference to any identifiable collectivity, are beyond the scope of this research.

I can however make claims about the texts themselves, along with the discursive meaning-making statements and interactions contained within them. Emotional statements towards goals, means and environment are plentiful in these online discussions, and they invite further emotional responses

which combine with the cognitive statements to provide a rich textual resource from which to unpack the ‘whats’, ‘hows’, ‘whys’ and, in some cases, the ‘we’re-all-gonna-dies’ of ideas about resistance. To illustrate how emotions and cognition can combine within an action system, here is a quote from the Above Top Secret discussion thread entitled “Can We Stop The NWO?”.

People have tried to expose the NWO to the public but the public is stupid. JFK was murdered because he was supposedly working to expose the NWO. There are even some quotes that he has said that hint the idea of the Illuminati and the NWO. A revolution in Amerika is the only way to "illuminate" the people about the NWO. But soon, if anyone so much says the word revolution he'll be thrown into jail. The government knows that Amerika is ripe for a revolution and they are doing their best to prevent this with their laws. And, revolutionaries have been murdered for this. Malcolm X, Black Panther Party, Che Guevera, etc.

Certainly the argument within this forum post lends some support to Fenster’s suggestion that conspiracy theory is disabling. The post is dense with pessimism, futility, misanthropy and fear. These affective attitudes do not exist in a vacuum however; it is easy to empathise with the member’s line of thought, given the environmental assumptions about the extent of the NWO’s power and malevolence, along with the perceived unreliability of the masses. We see here a fascinating interplay of constructions of agency in terms of the perceived capacity for action: of the movement in general (powerless), of the elite (powerful), and of the public generally (implicitly powerful but apathetic and stupid). Because of these environmental barriers, even though the goal (an undefined ‘revolution’) is mutually agreed upon, the means suggested for the goal are considered useless. By contrast, the post below from the same thread shares the general ideas regarding means and environment (and, implicitly at least, goals), but presents a significantly more optimistic tone about the scope of the members’ agency along with that of the NWO agents and the public generally:

With all the bull# planning and strategizing that these fools have done they have ignored one key aspect of human nature - WHEN WE GET KICKED DOWN WE BOUNCE BACK 10x HARDER... You talk about what can we do but what the heck are you doing? You have a mouth and a voice? If people refuse to listen then start getting aggressive, dont let people make you believe your some wacko conspiracy theorist, give them everything youve got, hammer the crap into them 24/7.

This post cannot be assumed to reflect the member’s state of mind; certainly the level of belief in the capacity of humans to resist domination is so exaggerated for rhetorical effect that its credibility

is arguably diminished. This meaning of this message has to be understood in its context: as a communicative, emotional *response* to the pessimism which preceded it. It is an attempt to renegotiate how the movement's collective agency is discursively constructed. Whether the proposed aggressive approach to the common means of resistance – that of spreading information about the conspiracy to the public – is likely to result in positive outcomes is debateable, but the key point here is that various affective and rhetorical exchanges emerge in the online discussions which can encourage, discourage, qualify and modify the cognitive definitions of proposed means of resistance – and vice versa.

3.6 Ideology: Heroes, Villains and Supporters

In the latter quote above, the member is encouraging what Melucci describes as “one of the fundamental tasks ... that of making evident the illegitimacy of the adversary ... in the eyes of both neutral observers and potential supporters” (1996: 352). A clearly-defined villain, or set of villains, is critical within a movement's resistance discourse, a core point made by Starr (2000) in her study of the global justice movement. Indeed Melucci argues that “(w)ithout the identification of an adversary, of another social actor in conflict with the group for control of certain resources of values, discontent and protest will not engender a movement” (ibid.: 293). This is an extremely critical point in my analysis, as agency-centred definitions of the NWO within the online conspiracy theory forums are constantly shifting and vary in the extent of their precision, which places differing constraints on the means of resistance that can be discussed, and the discursive consequences of such variety and meaning shifts can be seen in the differing resistance discourses analysed in Chapters 4-7. For now, however, the notion of the adversary should be contextualised within Melucci's conceptualisation of a movement's ideology (1996: 348-52). Before continuing, I would like to clarify the use of the term ‘ideology’ for my analysis, since it is one of the most nebulous, loaded and contested concepts in all of social science and its use inevitably results in misinterpretation. As will be evident from Melucci's actual formulation (in much the same way as his somewhat misleading label of ‘collective identity’), what he means by the term is absolutely relevant and moreover extremely useful in terms of my research objectives. What he refers to as ‘ideology’ in this context is no more than the collection of interrelated ideas, collaboratively constructed by members, pertaining to agency and morality and especially on legitimising and delegitimising both people and actions, in order to justify resistance. Within the formulation is the

identification of the three core social groups within a movement's discourse. As he puts it, "At its most general level, the ideology of a movement always includes ... a (more or less clearly articulated) definition of the actor her/himself, the identification of an adversary, and an indication of ends, goals, objectives for which to struggle" (Ibid.: 349). Thus understood, it is worthwhile incorporating it simply as an expanded and nuanced extension of the concept of an action system, bringing into play the various agents, how they are perceived to interact within the discourse, and the relative ideas about morality ascribed to them. It is crucial to note that whenever I refer to 'ideology' in relation to Melucci in this thesis, I am referring to legitimising ideas surrounding power and morality across the three social groups, whom I refer to as heroes (the members themselves), villains (the NWO elites), and potential supporters (the public at large).

To illustrate how the idea is actually employed in Melucci's formulation, he suggests that, within a movement's 'ideology', the fundamental ideas which are constructed can be summarised as follows:

- "the definition of the social group in whose name actions are undertaken"
 - "the undesirable situation which has given rise to the need for collective action"
 - "the undesirable situation ... is attributed to an illegitimate adversary"
 - "objectives, or desirable goals for which it is necessary to fight"
 - "a positive relationship between the actor and the general goals of society"
 - "the adversary is seen as an obstacle to the general goals of society"
- (ibid.: 350)

These certainly make sense intuitively and fit neatly with my conceptual concerns regarding power and morality. Combined with the action system's concepts of goals, means and environment, this provide a useful framework for analysis to assist in answering the research questions listed in Chapter 1. The key here is how ideas about resistance, which for the purposes of this research I define as encompassing the extent and interaction of agency in terms of perceived power and morality, are constructed for three social groups: the heroes, the villains and potential supporters. From the standpoint of perceived strategic efficacy within the discourse, how the agency of any one of these groups is constructed is crucial for the perceived viability (along with positive or negative effective expressions of empowerment) of specific ideas for resistance. The villains need to be constructed as morally objectionable in order to justify the grievance required to engender thoughts

about resistance in the first place. This moral characterisation of NWO agency is a very rare instance where there is overwhelming consensus among the various members of the conspiracy theory forums. The elite are viewed as megalomaniacal, ruthless and bloodthirsty. There seems however to be an optimal level of moral outrage, as bizarre as that may sound, in terms of the impact upon the perceived agency of the movement, specifically the power of the heroes to defeat the villains. One can surely sympathise when a movement member hesitates or is less than enthusiastic, should he or she suggests that something as ostensibly benign and commonplace as a public demonstration “incites them to bust heads in. You won't have them trembling in their hobnail boots, other than trembling with excitement over the ensuing bloodshed” (David Icke Forum thread “so we are awake thats the first step what do we do now?”). If villains have no qualms about using violence – or even, as in this case, they can hardly contain their excitement at the prospect of spilling blood, they are presumed to possess an enormous tactical advantage in the realm of face-to-face confrontations. The power of any movement is thus constrained by the (lack of) morality of the agents of the NWO and so alternative means would be invited.

Similarly, the perceived extent of the NWO's power shapes members' perception of their own collective power to resist. While a conspiratorial conception of the NWO only makes sense by assuming extreme levels of power on a global scale (which, it should be noted, can also be understood as a moral issue, as a threat to human liberty and thus a justification for grievance) and proposals for appropriate action, from a strategic perspective if the elite is attributed anything resembling omnipotence then viable forms of resistance that are discussed are often limited to strategies of escape, rather than confrontation. Perceived NWO power does not consist merely of resources of violence, but also control of governments, finance, media and of course the capacity for surveillance of dissidents, as illustrated by the following quotes:

they have all the money, they have control of the armies, they make the rules, and they have control of the media. It's fool hardy to think that they can be opposed in any way (Above Top Secret thread “We Need A Global Anti-New World Order Alliance!”)

what is the easiest way to get info on just about everyone in the world now? The computer of course. They monitor every page we go to and every thing that is sent out. As we speak we have been put down in a little black book of those to watch out for (Above Top Secret thread “Can We Stop The NWO?”)

This discussion is important because it adds somewhat unexpected caveats to Melucci's approach to the construction of an adversary. He certainly does recognise that the perceived extent of the adversary's power can shape or constrain a movement's ideas about action. Indeed he suggests it is crucial: "the response of the adversary, the tolerance or repression of collective action ... constitutes the decisive factor in a movement's pursuit of its objectives" (1996: 324). However, he writes this in the context of an already mobilised movement engaging in concrete action. In terms of the communicative construction of the adversary (which is what I am concerned with), he implies that it is enough simply to characterise them as illegitimate and an obstacle to goals (ibid.: 350). This is of course understandable; for most movements the enemy needs to be painted in negative terms – but precisely how negatively is not likely to be critically important. The NWO can be perceived not just as morally degenerate, but as Basham suggests when referring to the concept of a malevolent global conspiracy, "insanely evil" (2003: 91). For instance, activists protesting a multinational corporation's sweatshops may well employ the term 'evil' when referring to them. They would nonetheless struggle to argue that Nike can compete on the scale of evil with a Satanic, child-raping, reptilian-hybrid warmonger whose family funded Hitler - all of which have been attributed to George Bush Senior by David Icke (2001). The Nike activists are unlikely to fear being murdered en masse for speaking out against the corporation's activities. Furthermore, when considering the other element of agency with which I am concerned, that of power, the perceived extent of it matters. The anti-Nike protesters undoubtedly believe that the corporation wields significant power, mostly financial and economic. Nevertheless, they presumably also believe that the corporation is subject to labour laws and conventions on human rights and so their campaigns advocate legal action to curtail any such transgressions. For those in the conspiracy theory forums who argue that those running the NWO also control the world's governments and institutions, it would be difficult to suggest with any credibility that a worthwhile course of action would be to lobby a government to create a law forcing the record of discussion in the annual Bilderberg Group meetings to be made public.

The role of constructing the heroes, in this case understood as the conspiracy theory forum members themselves, is in order to legitimise moral claims about the perceived grievances in addition to claims about what kinds of goals and means are appropriate, given various perceived environmental constraints. As mentioned earlier, I am not concerned with the various identities, whether individual or collective, of conspiracy theory forum members for their own sake. Indeed identity is considered only when it is relevant to understanding constructions of the members' agency in terms of resisting the NWO. However, a brief summary of how members perceive themselves within the framework

Melucci provides is nonetheless useful, and can be characterised in two ways. Firstly, they present themselves as ethical, especially in contrast to the agents of the NWO. The core attacks on a single world government are not merely political objections to their expectations that such a government will take a socialist form (see Chapter 2), but they are fundamentally about the sanctity of human freedom. For members of the David Icke forum, suppression of the human spirit tends to be foregrounded over concerns about any perceived flaws in any specific political system. Secondly, members often consider themselves as intellectually (and often spiritually) enlightened. They know about huge secrets about the history of the world and how it is run, of which the majority of the public (the ‘sheeple’) is assumed to be ignorant. I criticise Fenster in Chapter 2 for his exaggerated characterisation of conspiracy theorists as being on a never-ending search for essentially unknowable knowledge (Fenster 1999: 89, 93), because this is not the whole story. Nonetheless, this search for knowledge, puzzle-solving and connecting the dots is certainly the most fundamental ‘calling card’ activity among conspiracy theorists in the online forums. My research focuses on discussions of resistance, but such discussions constitute a minority of the online discussion. The vast majority of the hundreds of thousands of discussion threads comprise research, analysis, explanation and speculation. It is a shame somewhat that my focus is so narrow, because some of the most fascinating threads in the discussion forums are those where members engage in intense, intricate analysis of events in the news. It is also worth pointing out that despite the assumption of rife speculation among critics of conspiracy theory, much of the discussion in these forums cannot be described as the mere conjuring up of ideas. Many of its members are impressively well-read and regularly reference their claims. I have personally learned an enormous amount in relation to subjects such as the global monetary and financial systems due to links provided to primary sources in the discussion forums. Of course, we find the frequent and inevitable “leaps of logic” (Fenster 1999: xvii) that accompany a ‘connecting the dots’ approach to knowledge acquisition, but it would be unfair to characterise conspiracy theory as pure fantasy; more often than not they provide evidence (of varying relevance and credibility) for their claims.

The third group that Melucci mentions as important for a movement are the potential supporters, who in the case of anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussions can simply be understood as the general public. This group is considered important because it contains not only potential supporters but potential recruits to join the cause. In the conspiracy theory forums we frequently see a love/hate sentiment towards the general public. Often the members make declarations, in line with Melucci’s suggestion, that the primary resistance task should be informing the general public. This is usually (sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly) accompanied with the notion that if enough

people learn the secrets about the NWO conspiracy, there will be a spontaneous revolution. This - perhaps overly optimistic - assumption contrasts starkly with the ubiquity of the term 'sheeple' to describe the general public. The connotations of this derisory expression not only relate to the idea that most people simply follow the drone-like rat-race of existence in ignorance of what is going on around them, but also that they are wilfully ignorant and furthermore utterly apathetic towards the NWO tyranny that is encroaching upon the world. Of course, to state a claim such as, 'conspiracy theorists view the general public as sheeple' is to commit the same generalisation fallacy as Stewart (1999: 18) in her whirlwind of ostensible paradoxes about conspiracy theory. Some conspiracy theorists do express contempt towards what they view as the unthinking masses but others don't; indeed within the discussion forums I have seen intense criticism by some members towards usage of the term at all. Nonetheless, the emotional dynamic we can see in the online exchanges of optimism and pessimism in relation to the potential support or assistance from the general public (the potential of their perceived power and morality) provides some fascinating debates. Despite the prevalence of expressions of contempt towards the masses, some of the most enthusiastic discussions revolve precisely around the belief that humanity is finally 'waking up', giving hope to members of the forums that the NWO may yet be defeated.

3.7 Methodological implications

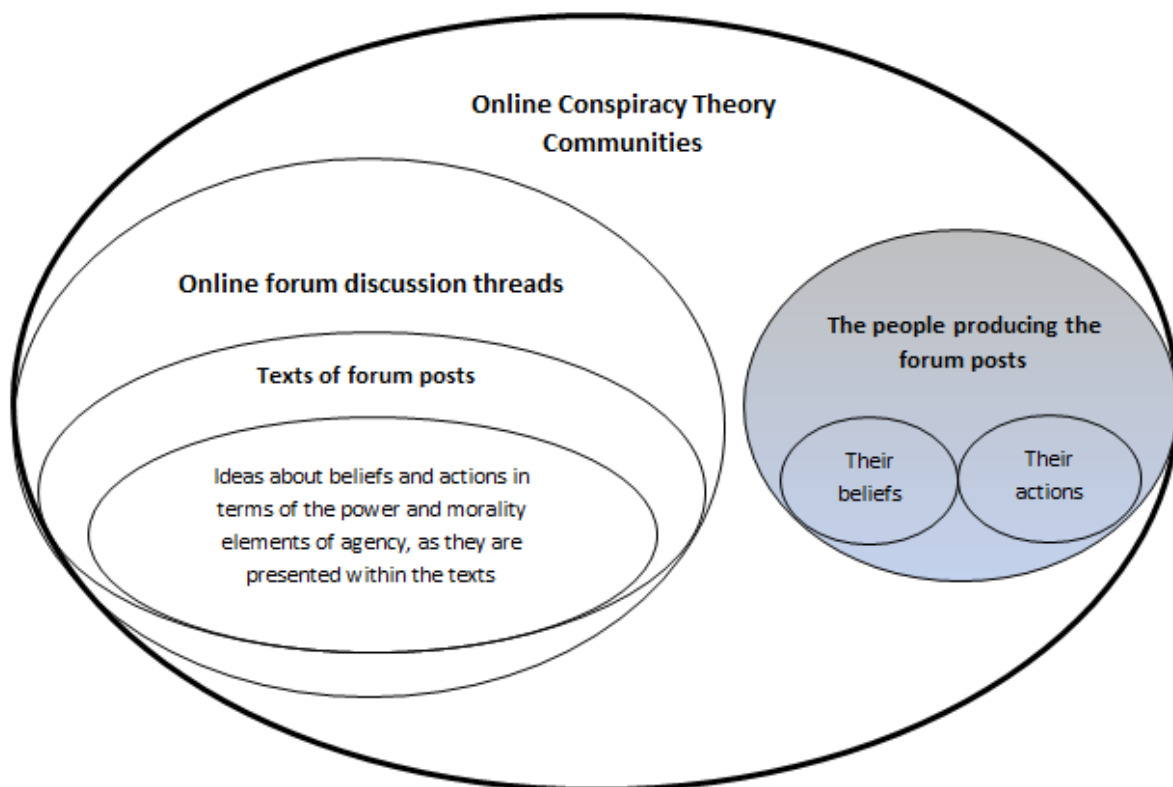
One of Melucci's primary complaints about the social movement literature, even where the focus is on the meaning of the movement's activities or ideologies, is that its analysis usually relies upon statements by movement leaders who "claim a unity that they seldom achieve and tend to present the movement as homogenous and coherent as possible" (Melucci 1996: 355). Such statements are 'final products', but for Melucci the key research aim should be "to understand how this unity is built" (ibid.: 20) via the communicative construction of goals, means and environment preceding the final product. These are messy, contested and continually negotiated in a process of collective communicative exchanges. The key, he suggest, is for researchers to "grasp action as it actually unfolds" (ibid.: 387; emphasis added). The problem with this, of course, is methodological. Absent a researcher acting as participant observer in a movement during the process of constructing its ideas, it is difficult ever to access it. Fortunately, the online discussion forums provide a custom-made solution to this methodological problem: there exists an exact transcript of all the discussions that make up this process as they occur within the text-based conversations.

In writing about the notion of resistance in relation to the NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums, it is important to reiterate that I refer only to ideas presented within a discourse, rather than any visible acts of resistance by members of these forums. My interest is in how resistance can be thought about and discussed in the context of this conspiracy theory, not in how or whether or not resistance actually takes place. In Chapter 2 I laid out the context of my research in relation to how conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists are usually understood in the academic literature, suggesting that the contribution of this thesis can be seen to add a further dimension to analysis in order to be able to think about conspiracy theory in terms of possible political resistance and not simply cognitive puzzle-solving. Basham (2003: 100) and Fenster (1999: xv) argue that conspiracy theory by its very nature is disabling, a conjectural claim that I suggest should be rejected. One may thus assume that an appropriate methodology to justify this rejection could be to study empirical collective acts of resistance by conspiracy theorists. This is indeed possible and Mason (2006) in her ethnographic study on the US Patriot Movement has provided precisely such examples. Furthermore the recent Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements in the US could be seen as resistance movements whose core discourse in terms of agency can be interpreted through the lens of conspiracy theory. We thus see plenty of evidence of people believing conspiracy theories and engaging in collective acts of resistance against the supposed conspirators.

However, there is a fundamental epistemological objection to such an approach, which has been hinted at earlier in this chapter in relation to the fallacy of reification. Such an ‘empirical’ methodological approach assumes that a researcher can pinpoint causal chains between beliefs and actions. Demonstrating an empirical relationship between belief and action is, I would argue, impossible. I would go further to argue that I cannot know what conspiracy theorists truly believe, individually or, especially, at the collective level. I could conduct a quantitative sample survey asking conspiracy theorists about their beliefs and actions and claim associations, but this would of course be hugely misleading. Who is to say that the respondent’s belief at the time has always been that way or will remain that way? Who’s to say the respondent can even say with any certainty that the box he or she ticks represents his or her belief at that time? Who is to say the respondent even knows what he or she believes at that time? Who is to say the respondent isn’t choosing an option to make himself or herself look better to the person asking the questions? Who is to say that the respondent isn’t just making it up on the spot or ticking a random box either out of apathy or for a bit of fun? Finally, how could any meaningful claim about respondents’ actions be related to their responses on beliefs?

So what claims can I make in my analysis? I can analyse, interpret and make claims about textual expressions of perceptions about the NWO along with related ideas about the perceived power and morality of both the NWO agents and the forum members (in addition to the public at large) as they exist in the online discussion forums. These texts exist. Figure 3.2 below is a Venn diagram of the ontology of what I am actually studying, specifying what the objects of analysis are in this thesis and what they aren't. The shaded areas on the right are phenomena which are excluded from consideration. I exclude these firstly on the epistemological grounds that I cannot make knowledge claims about them in the first place, and secondly, as will be explained in the following paragraph, my research questions relate to the ideas about resistance discourse, notions of power and morality and what can and can't, and what should and shouldn't, be done, in the context of NWO conspiracy theories, and how these ideas shape and constrain each other within the discourse itself.

Figure 3.2. An ontological Venn diagram of my objects of analysis



3.8 Discourse analysis

Since what I am interested in are the texts of the discussion forums themselves, it should perhaps be self-evident that the analytical method I employ is a form of discourse analysis. However, what do I mean by discourse, and furthermore what do I mean by discourse analysis? The term ‘discourse’ is, of course, enormously loaded and contested even within sociology, let alone in contrast to the ways in it is employed in other disciplines such as linguistics. Given that my analytical approach is one that is clearly and carefully guided by Melucci’s theoretical framework via his concepts of ‘action system’ and ‘ideology’ (see above for the precise definitions of how these terms are used), a review here of the ways in which the highly loaded and contested term ‘discourse’ is used in the academic literature would not only be redundant but would obfuscate the entire analytical approach. That said, the method I employ, that of close textual analysis focused on the ideas constructed and presented in the discussion forums and how they relate to each other, is unquestionably an analysis of discourse, focused on the domains of meaning and interaction and guided by what I define as ‘resistance discourse’ in Chapter 1 and broken down further into Melucci’s conceptual framework. Recall Melucci’s emphasis on the importance of the continually contested and negotiated communicative construction (Melucci 1996: 71) of an action system in relation to goals, means and environment (Melucci 1989: 27). The discussion forums provide transcripts of meaning constructions via the interaction of different members’ forum posts exactly as they occurred. I therefore undertake an in-depth analysis of specific discussion threads in order to capture how various meanings of anti-NWO resistance (in relation to goals, means and environment) are constructed, how they develop, how they are contested and negotiated within the conversation thread, and how cognitive and emotional elements play a role in this meaning construction. The analysis is always contextualised in terms of the specific form that the NWO conspiracy theory takes in the discussion thread. Capturing these processes would of course be extremely difficult for an outside researcher; even a participant observer would be unable to record and transcribe all the detail and nuance of meaning construction and contestation. The discussion forums, however, provide an ideal research setting for the analysis of these processes and allow for substantial insights into intra-discursive relationships in the context of Melucci’s framework.

3.9 The online space

Of course, Melucci didn't have in mind new media when he wrote his ideas. Before discussing the online nature of my research, it would be useful to outline Melucci's objections to traditional methods used in movement research in the context of what he views (a view I share in relation to this research) as the importance of understanding movements in terms of collective meaning construction, specifically "how action is constructed ... as it takes place, as a process" (Melucci 1995: 58). What is of most interest for Melucci is that "there is always an active negotiation, an interactive work among individuals, groups or parts of the movement ... (which) ... does not consider only the visible forms of action of the leaders' discourse" (Melucci 1996: 77-78). How does this differ from traditional methodological approaches to studying movements? Melucci refers firstly to a common methodology which seeks to explain a movement's visible behaviour in terms of macro-level structural conditions (Melucci 1995: 55-56), which he objects to partly for what he perceives as a flawed "actor-system dualism" (ibid.: 55) and partly because it removes agency from the movement's members and confers it instead upon some generalised social condition (ibid.: 56). The second research method he discusses relates to a more meaning-centred approach looking at "perceptions, representations and values of actors" typically via a survey in order to "delve into the motivations of individuals to participate" (ibid.) though also includes analysis of documents produced by movements. While the latter appears at first glance to resemble my approach, what Melucci is in fact referring to are final, 'packaged' documents usually produced by movements' leaders who have their own ideological goals and cannot be assumed to represent the movement as a whole; the result is a misleading impression of unity and stability (ibid. 56-57). However, even a survey of all of a movement's members, which could arguably 'represent' members in the aggregate as opposed to just the leader(s), would result in a claim that reduces collective action as merely the sum of its individual members' beliefs (ibid. 57). Again this fails to account for the processual and interactive nature of meaning construction in terms of how ideas about resistance are really thought about and discussed.

Ultimately, Melucci argues that the only viable methodological approaches for his theoretical framework are those which he labels "action research and research intervention" (ibid.: 58) via direct participant observation, since such an approach "directly address(es) the question of how action is constructed and attempt(s) to observe action as it takes place, as a process built by actors" (ibid.). This latter quote concisely summarises the relation between theory and method in the

context of Melucci's ideas, and it forms the basis of my methodological approach. However, Melucci also sees dangers in such a method which arise from the researcher's participation, namely the researcher's constitutive role in what he or she observes by being present in the first place. Such methods, he argues, tend to ignore the fact that "a researcher intervening in a field of action does not work under 'natural' conditions but modifies the field and may even manipulate it, beyond his or her intentions" (ibid.). On a related note, many other research students and academics wonder why I do not conduct interviews in order to get at the ideas I am interested in for this research, since it is assumed to be the obvious choice (certainly it is the most common and, indeed popular, research method for qualitative sociological studies). My answer is threefold: firstly, as mentioned earlier, I do not believe that I could make credible claims about respondents' beliefs based on the words that come out of their mouths, for the same reasons that I do not see survey responses as capturing people's actual 'beliefs'. Secondly, such an approach would be useless in terms of analysing the communicative construction of resistance discourses via Melucci's action system framework as I'd only be speaking to one person at a time. Thirdly, as Melucci suggests about participatory research, the interview is also not a natural situation. Far from it in fact; notwithstanding some researchers' outstanding skill in generating a level of rapport that allows respondents to open up and provide rich insights, an interview is a somewhat forced social interaction, a 'fake' conversation in which the goal is understood by both parties as being primarily for the researcher's own benefit. In addition, there is always the danger of the respondent distorting or even fabricating his or her responses based on his or her perception of the interviewer, whether positive (for example a desire to impress or help the interviewer) or negative (for example providing irrelevant or deliberately misleading answers). Finally, interview responses are dependent upon the interviewer's questions. Questions may be leading or loaded and ultimately the researcher may involuntarily 'contaminate' the data. For my research, there is no such contamination. All my data, the texts produced in the discussion forums, are wholly untouched by me; my role is that of pure observer. These discussions and the discourses contained therein are truly in their 'natural setting', which is very rare in observational research. Furthermore, there is the added bonus of pure transparency in relation to the data that I am using. Whereas participating observers need to rely on memories or note-taking from observation which can result in data loss as well as bias in how the data are represented, all transcripts of the communicative interactions I use are freely accessible online for anybody for anybody wishing to corroborate or question my findings (links to all discussion threads used can be found in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 below).

While I am not directly concerned with any supposed mobilising power of online discussion forums, as this thesis is focused on the interactive discursive relationships in discussions of resistance with regards to agency among the three core social groups, it is nonetheless worth noting Castells' 2012 work on social movements including Occupy Wall Street and the 'Arab Spring' uprisings of 2011. In particular, he repeatedly highlights the constitutive role of online spaces of communication in the emergence and development of these movements. In the first instance, he suggests that online spaces permitted disparate and geographically distant individuals to share grievances and strategies for resistance, echoing Melucci's emphasis on the importance of what he terms 'communicative construction':

social networks on the Internet allowed the experience to be communicated and amplified, bringing the entire world into the movement, and creating a permanent forum of solidarity, debate and strategic planning (Castells 2012: 169)

As important as the material organization of the occupation was, it was the process of communication that enabled the movement to find internal cohesion and external support (ibid.: 171)

He further argues that these spaces allowed movements to exercise "counterpower" against their adversaries via the autonomy of communication networks, outside the control of the elites (ibid.: 9). At times it does feel that he gives too much credit to the causal role of online communication spaces, suggesting for instance that the Occupy Wall Street movement simply movement "surged as a largely spontaneous expression of outrage" (ibid.: 185). However he does concede later that no technology can be a sole or even primary source of causation in the context of social movements, but emphasises the utility of online communication because "people can only challenge domination by connecting with each other, by sharing outrage, by feeling togetherness, and by constructing alternative projects for themselves and for society at large" (ibid.: 229). While there is clearly much of relevance for my research in Castells' ideas here, it is neither necessary nor important for me to confer upon online spaces any kind of mobilising power. I underscore the movement-relevant nature of the discourses in the conspiracy theory forums (specifically the resistance discourse questions relating to what can, can't, should and shouldn't be done) in order to be able to analyse the resistance discourses and especially how the ideas interact with each other, along with offering a contribution to the literature on conspiracy theory which has tended overwhelmingly to neglect any political or resistance-based content to the subject. But my analysis is focused entirely on the ideas themselves and how they are fleshed out within these online discussions; whether these discussions

do or don't lead to collective action is irrelevant to this thesis. And in some cases, for example in relation to the strategies advocating spiritual ascension to become one with infinite love as in the David Icke thread analysed in Chapter 5, it would be impossible (for all kinds of reasons) to know if anything happened at all in the 'offline' realm!

3.10 The research process

While the previous discussion has related to the methodological principles underlying my research in order to justify epistemologically the approach used to answer my research questions, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the 'nuts and bolts' of the research process. I start by providing an 'audit trail', specifying the data I have used and how I selected them along with an account of the analytical process itself. This is followed by some reflexive discussion of the evolution of this project in terms of how it began, developed, adjusted and even stopped dead in its tracks at times. The aim is to provide readers with an account of my own experiences and interactions with the project such that they may be able to 'put themselves in my shoes' to gain a stronger understanding of how and why I reached some conclusions rather than others and thus be better placed to evaluate the credibility and plausibility of my findings.

As indicated in the introductory chapter and expanded upon in Chapter 2, the two online discussion forums from which I selected my data for analysis are the Above Top Secret discussion forum and the David Icke discussion forum. It should be noted that the discussion threads contained therein, which are employed for the precise purpose of answering my research questions since they are the spaces which contain the "communicative construction" (Melucci 1996: 71) in which I am interested, constitute only a small minority of the material I have examined for the duration of the project. I have read many discussion threads unrelated to the NWO and unrelated to discussions about resistance, in addition to other online sources linked from the forums. In addition I have read published books written by conspiracy theory authors such as David Icke and Jordan Maxwell in order to try to understand more fully the content of the forum discussions. Finally, I have watched many of the most popular online videos relating to NWO conspiracy theories. It is important to emphasise that the discussion threads that have formed the core of my textual analysis represent a narrow focus of discourse for the purpose of answering the research questions specified in Chapter 1, but my understanding, interpretation and analysis of them has been informed by a much wider range of material.

3.11 The data sources

Above Top Secret (www.abovetopsecret.com) is by far the most popular and active online conspiracy theory discussion forum. The site's 'About' page states the following and is worth reading in its entirety as an brilliant summary of the conspiracy theory mindset (albeit what Melucci would describe as a final product produced by 'leaders' of course):

AboveTopSecret.com is the Internet's largest and most popular discussion board community dedicated to the intelligent exchange of ideas and debate on a wide range of "alternative topics" such as conspiracies, UFO's, paranormal, secret societies, political scandals, new world order, terrorism, and dozens of related topics with a diverse mix of users from all over the world.

With 251,128 members generating 13,040,007 posts of substance (minimal contributions are not allowed) that cover 780,085 topics in 166 different discussion forums, you could say "the truth is in here."

And new content, new ideas, new speculation, and new theories are being generating at an astounding pace with 4,485 members creating 53,821 new posts during the past seven days. Also, in that same time span, we welcomed 622 new members and enjoyed visits from 10,144 registered members as well as 1,115,840 guests.

The simple yet effective motto of our membership is "deny ignorance", which signifies an effort to apply the principals of critical thought and peer review to the provocative topics covered within. More than a slogan, our members have embraced the motto as our collective cultural standard, demanding all to aspire to a higher standard. These simple two words have galvanized a broad membership that spans the spectrum from highly speculative conspiracy writers to staunch doubters. The result is a unique collaboration of diverse individuals rallying under this simple statement to learn from each other, discover new truths, and imagine new ideas that expand our minds.

This motto has life. It has purpose. It demands Above Top Secret members to think.

It is a state of mind.

It is a sense of purpose.

It is a statement against the paradigm.

It is a rage against the mindless status-quo.

The idea of "deny ignorance" isn't a goal that Above Top Secret hopes to accomplish.

Instead, it's a challenge. A call to all those who come here to aspire to a higher state of awareness through informed discussion and debate.

Deny ignorance is what we do.

It's how we think. It's how we talk. It's how we listen.

Ignorance is the social disease of history. Is the evil that men do, the reason history repeats, and the cause of intolerance.

We deny it. it's not welcome here. Within these boundaries, it has no strength.

Here, ignorance is denied.

(Above Top Secret 'About' page, accessed 7th January 2012)

Obviously there is a wealth of fascinating ideas in this text in relation to what I have previously referred to as the perceived intellectual superiority that often manifests itself among texts produced by conspiracy theory forum members, in addition to lending support to Fenster's suggestion that the quintessential task of conspiracy theory is a cognitive, intellectual pursuit, to know the unknowable (Fenster 1999: 93). However, as stated numerous times in this thesis, as fascinating as these phenomena are, I am interested in them only where they contribute to an understanding of discussions about resistance. It is nonetheless useful to know the stated agenda of the Above Top Secret website.

It is worth highlighting at this point the relative US-centric nature of the ATS forums. It is evident in Chapters 4 and 6 that much of the discussion is contextualised in the USA, given the numerous references to the Constitution, the Federal Reserve and so on. In this thesis I deliberately avoid making inferences about the authors of forum posts, since my units of analysis are the texts and related ideas within the forum conversations. I do not seek to examine ideas through assumptions (and they could only be assumptions) about individual posters' biographies as this is outside the scope of the research. Nonetheless it is interesting to note the predominance of uniquely American discourse in these discussions, given the relative prevalence of conspiracy theory in American culture compared to elsewhere which Knight attributes in part to the "American obsession with ruggedly individual agency" (2002: 11).

The David Icke forum is a sub-site of David Icke's own website (www.davidicke.com) which sadly does not contain an overall 'mission statement' as Above Top Secret does, although the website's present under-title is "exposing the dreamworld we believe to be real". While it would be unfair to insinuate that members of the David Icke forum, who discuss an equally wide range of conspiracy theories as can be found on Above Top Secret, are 'followers' of David Icke, or even just 'believers', it is impossible to avoid linking the forum members and David Icke simply due to the practical necessity of having to refer to this specific forum in this thesis. Certainly within the discussion forums can be found intense disagreement with many of Icke's theories and Icke himself frequently rejects the claim that he has aspirations of being some kind of cult leader; indeed in a 2011 video directed at the Occupy Wall Street protestors¹⁶, he repeats his conviction against centralised leadership of any form. Rather he frequently describes his role as simply putting the information out there, as can be illustrated in the following quote at the start of his book entitled, Children of the Matrix: how an interdimensional race has controlled the world for thousands of years – and still does:

Please remember that what you read here is simply information. It is not compulsory to accept it and the last thing I am trying to do is persuade you to believe anything. What you believe is your business, not mine. Have I got all the answers? Of course not. Do I have some of them? See what you think. (Icke 2001: xvi)

Despite this, I will by necessity refer to discussions by members of the David Icke forum in the context of (more or less) shared beliefs about the NWO and strategies of resistance to the it which are for the most part informed by David Icke's own theories. In comparison to Above Top Secret, the David Icke forum is, as expected, much smaller, but nonetheless extremely active with 3,414,685 forum posts by a total of 65,512 members as of January 2012. It too contains its own sub-forum focused on the New World Order, in addition to a dedicated 'resistance' sub-forum entitled "The Awakening / What we can do".

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 below list the sample of discussion threads that I have examined for this thesis. These threads were selected via a purposive sampling method, based on their relevance in relation to discussions about resisting the NWO. At the start these threads were located via searching the forums for terms such as "resist + NWO", "defeat + NWO" or "fight + NWO" and so on, and this allowed for a relatively quick immersion for me as a researcher into the kinds of resistance

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV9A2IGShuk>

discourses that can be found when talking about the this particular conspiracy. In addition I have also selected threads which do not contain the most obvious key words but which deal precisely with resistance strategies (for example the Above Top Secret Thread, “NWO Survival Planning”). There are of course thousands of additional threads relating to the NWO in general within the two forums, which contain valuable insights into how the phenomenon is defined and interpreted by forum members, but the final sample of threads I have selected for analysis is ultimately organised in terms of content relating to resisting the NWO directly.

Table 3.1: Sample of Above Top Secret Threads

Thread title	URL Link
8,366 people to change this world	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread448527/pg1
An open letter to all so called militias and revolutionist	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread433433/pg1
Anti-NWO Organizations???	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread127968/pg1
Are We Just Going To Let NWO Happen?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread460706/pg1
Can We Stop The NWO?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread796/pg1
Difficulty in waking others up	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread448351/pg1
How can true protest be peaceful?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread505127/pg1
how can we stop the new world order	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread450543/pg1
How to resist NWO in 10 Easy Steps	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread465945/pg1
How will you fight the NWO?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread497090/pg1
If it all fell apart tomorrow... ARE YOU READY?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread459918/pg1
If the Govt. imposes Marshall Law, I'm joining THEM	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread444768/pg1
I'm going to PUNCH somebody in the face because of the NWO.	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread502361/pg1
Is The War Against The NWO Already Lost?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread364841/pg1
is there anyway we can stop Rothschild	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread468173/pg1
is there anyway we can stop the new world order	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread451932/pg1
It is time for Action! Above Top Secret Needs You! *points finger*	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread469835/pg1
Leaving the United States...Is there a place to live outside the reach of the NWO ?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread324972/pg1
NWO Survival Planning	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread86617/pg1
NWO: Talk versus Action	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread456240/pg1
Okay, we all know the NWO is here, Whadda ya gonna do now?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread442853/pg1
"Resistith No Evil"	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread470050/pg1
The myth of successful armed resistance in the US in case of martial law	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread262971/pg1
the official im goin to do something!!!	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread460673/pg1
The Second American Revolution Has Begun! Then What?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread473737/pg1
The United States of America is now a dictatorship!	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread362811/pg1
This is my personal declaration of War.	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread459753/pg1
To try and fail is better than failing to try (revolution)	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread463547/pg1
Wake up and take it like a MAN!	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread505081/pg1
We can't fight them.	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread76170/pg1
We Need A Global Anti-NWO Alliance!	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread455281/pg1

We The People Will you fight for your Freedom or sit back and take it?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread457856/pg1
What are your plans????	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread482964/pg1
What You Fight Is What You Become	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread496312/pg2
What's so bad bout the NWO?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread770029/pg1
Will you accept the RFID chip or die in a FEMA camp?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread467205/pg1
You don't want NWO - but do you have something better to offer?	http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread464613/pg1

Table 3.2: Sample of David Icke Forum threads

Thread title	URL Link
101+ Ways to Fight the New World Order	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=45167
A Call For Organization	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=78346
A strategy of peaceful non-compliance?	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=73576
Awakening help ...	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=77988
Awakening Leaflets thread...	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=13202
Cuddles!!!!	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=61512
Dont worry about bad things happening	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=85141
If the plan is for Socialism, why Capitalism?	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=152303
Just ask for protection against the negative force	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=47141
Make up your minds as to what you want	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=84302
nationalism vs globalism	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=183636
NWO vs. Humanity	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=91958
NWO in Action?	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=187624
OK, Lets Go!	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=36614
One way to defeat the NWO but will never happen	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=53710
Paradism - new word for a new century	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=80011
Powerful method used to 'awaken people'- @READ@	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=75280
Right, here's something we can all do, right now!	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=84882
Setting up groups to do public demos	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=46639
Silence	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=75162
Tell me EXACTLY what we can do	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=54858
The Conspiracy Movement HAS to step it up NOW!	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=11216
we need a woodstock	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=77727
What Have You Done Lately?	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=53248
What have you done today to fight the nwo??	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=84408
When's it gonna happen sheeple?	http://forum.davidicke.com/showthread.php?t=78877

These thread titles alone provide a fascinating insight into the different ways in which David Icke forum discussion threads explore ideas of resistance in relation to those of the more ‘mainstream’ anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussions in Above Top Secret, which also serves as a useful illustration for why I am treating them as analytically distinct for this thesis. These differences are a direct consequence of the differing constructions of the NWO itself, despite the fact that both forums share fundamental conceptions of it in terms of the drive by elites towards global domination via a single world government. Among the Above Top Secret discussion thread titles we see a greater preponderance of aggressive rallying cries for direct action against the NWO which is understood rather more in political terms as a drive for tyrannical control and suppression of the world’s population. By contrast, given the generally shared assumptions about the key agents behind the NWO being interdimensional extra-terrestrials who feed off negative human energy

(Icke 2001: 140), in the David Icke forum discussion thread titles we see more positive, peaceful tones relating to spiritual and cognitive awakening. In some cases the acts of resistance proposed are as benign as setting up a music concert and, my favourite of them all, proposing an increase in cuddling in order to minimise the diffusion of negative energy on which the reptilians can feed.

3.12 The process of analysis

The initial work of discourse analysis of these discussion threads was via a theoretically informed, but nonetheless broadly open-ended thematic coding approach using the qualitative analysis software package ATLAS.ti 5.0. I certainly did not pre-define certain themes before coding the texts; however after a while some patterns began to emerge along the themes of grievance, morality and elite agency and objectives, strategies and constraints which allowed for the linking of certain ideas within the discourses and relating them to conceptions of the NWO. My overarching conceptual framework of ‘resistance discourse’, how members of online conspiracy theory discussion forums talk about resistance in terms of its justification and with proposed goals, strategies and barriers was derived inductively, directly from the texts themselves. It is important to state that the way this thesis is ordered and written gives a somewhat misleading impression that my starting point was Melucci’s theory of collective action and the concepts contained therein were then applied to the data, as if I were employing a hypothetico-deductive model of research, testing if the data fit the theory. Far from it; the analysis chapters are merely the ‘final product’ of several iterative stages of analysis. My preliminary ideas about how conspiratorial conceptions of the NWO shape and constrain the ways in which resistance can be thought about and discussed constituted the central ‘value-added’ insight into the realm of conspiracy theory literature, an examination of the very rarely hinted-at, and certainly unresearched, area of how conspiracy theorists talk about resistance. As it stood however, this insight was nothing more than my inductively generated, somewhat vague understanding of the resistance discourses as they were presented in the discussion forums.

My initial coding in Atlas.ti was two-layered so that I could distinguish the fundamental categories relating to agency, so multiple codes were created in the format of ‘act-X’ or ‘value-Y’. To illustrate, here is the full list of initial codes from this initial exploratory analysis in 2009 for the

ATS thread entitled, “The Second American Revolution Has Begun! Then What?”, the numbers referring to the number of instances that code was applied for that particular discussion thread:

Act-beatsystemfromwithin - 2
Act-civildisobedience - 5
Act-evacuate - 14
Act-IndependentEconomy - 5
Act-inform - 11
Act-letsystemcollapse - 2
Act-military - 20
Act-network - 4
Act-SeparateRepublics - 1
Act-survivalist - 22

futility - 26

NWO-falseflagop - 3
NWO-NOTPowerful - 4
NWO-powerful - 17
NWO-propaganda - 10
NWO-secrecy - 3
NWO-surveillance - 2
NWO-violence - 3
NWO-goal - 21

optimism - 4

rhetoric-dosomething - 24
rhetoric-lifeordeath - 15

sheeple - 7
suspicion - 2

value-anticommunism - 2
value-christianity - 2
value-constitution - 15
value-democracy - 3
value-legalrights - 3
value-militarism - 15
value-nonviolence - 13
value-patriotism - 16

An example of the resulting output from that thread’s coding can be seen in Figure 3.3:

26 quotation(s) for code:

futility

Report mode: quotation list names and references

Quotation-Filter: All

HU: 2ndamericanrevolution
File: [H:\PhD\coding\2ndamericanrevolution.hpr5]
Edited by: Super
Date/Time: 16/10/09 17:25:47

P 1: The Second American Revolution Has Begun.doc - 1:7 [inability of the Patriots to o...] (13:13)
(Super)

Codes: [futility]
No memos

inability of the Patriots to over come high tech weapons and that any patriotic forces will face the full fury of the armed forces of this nation

P 1: The Second American Revolution Has Begun.doc - 1:66 [Another violent revolution wil...] (76:76)
(Super)

Codes: [futility] [value-nonviolence]
No memos

Another violent revolution will just continue the cycles of tyranny and oppression, replacing one group of psychos with another

P 1: The Second American Revolution Has Begun.doc - 1:71 [you'll just find yourself shoo...] (76:76)
(Super)

Codes: [futility] [value-nonviolence]
No memos

you'll just find yourself shooting at family and firends, and that serves the elitist agenda fine

P 1: The Second American Revolution Has Begun.doc - 1:74 [You're not saving the USA, you...] (80:80)
(Super)

Codes: [futility] [value-nonviolence]
No memos

You're not saving the USA, you're putting it right where the elitist want it.

Figure 3.3 Screenshot of Atlas.ti quotation report for 'futility' code during initial analysis

Following this initial exploratory and inductive analysis, I felt I needed to ground the insight into some form of established sociological theory in order for my research to go beyond simply an ad hoc case study and provide a theoretical contribution to the sociological literature in addition to an empirical one. The result of this perceived need was a rather painful (though occasionally enlightening) period of mostly fruitless exploration of a vast array of social theory texts, ranging from political science approaches to resistance and social movements, the individual and social

psychology of resistance, collective action framing, Discourse (with a capital D), hegemony, cultural movements and technopolitics. Among these, although there was rarely a core idea that wasn't in some way relevant for the broad research questions and preliminary findings I had at the time, the relevance was invariably tangential to the central points I wanted to make.

With Melucci's work I hit the theoretical framework jackpot. While I had encountered his writing before (during a taught master's course on 'alternative and community media'), I had at first dismissed his ideas as being excessively abstract and dense, and in particular he seemed overwhelmingly focused on the notion of 'identity' which is of minor importance to my research objectives. It wasn't until I seriously read his work in depth that I realised that his notion of 'collective identity' was far removed from what most would understand as identity and in fact his definition is fundamentally linked to agency. In particular, Melucci's concept of an 'action system' offers a usable construct which he suggests can be viewed as a result of communicative interactions of individuals negotiating ideas about goals, means and environment (Melucci 1989: 26), with the term 'environment' referring to perceived resources, both those of a movement and its adversary. The insights I had gained from my preliminary analysis, in relation to my own agency-focused definition of 'resistance discourse', underpinned by the questions of what can and can't, and what should and shouldn't, be done (see Chapter 1) are neatly characterised by concerns about goals, means and constraints. Melucci had thus provided a custom-made theoretical framework for precisely the ideas I wished to examine. In addition, my concern has always been how ideas about resistance in the context of a totalising conspiracy theory were fleshed out, as opposed to concrete, empirically identifiable acts of resistance, since I was seeking to assess the conjectures of Fenster (1999: xv) and Basham (2003: 100) that conspiracy theory, especially one so all-encompassing and malevolent such as that of the NWO, by its very nature is disabling to the extent that it ostensibly precludes discussion about resistance at all. Melucci proposed a significant epistemological shift in the research agenda towards movements, emphasising the continually negotiated and contested meaning construction that takes place via communication of a movement's members (Melucci 1989: 26) as the key point of interest, since it is out of these interactions that the movements construct a 'we' in the first place. Not only does such an approach fit my research agenda, but furthermore the online discussion forums provide a unique space in which a researcher is able to access the actual processes and content of communicative construction as they take place.

This is not to say, however, that my analytical approach is a robotic application of Melucci's ideas; rather they have guided and enhanced my analysis. In fact I reject two of his core terms, 'collective

identity' and 'ideology' as being overly loaded and ultimately misleading for my research objectives. The ways in which he uses the terms however, relate precisely to my concerns about agency (what he labels 'collective identity') and the relationship between discursive constructions of the enemy, the forum members themselves and general society. In practical terms this allowed me to go back into the discussion threads that I had selected and re-analyse them with this framework in mind.

A final point needs mentioning regarding the forum quotes I use throughout this thesis, which are always copied perfectly verbatim from the discussion forum itself. While the number of typos contained in these quotes can be jarring to the eye, I am reproducing them exactly as they were written in the discussion forums, firstly because I do not wish to 'contaminate' in any way the data that I present and secondly for transparency purposes so that anybody reading this thesis can easily search for the thread via Google. A typical piece of social observation research would not provide such easy access for the reader to the raw data. Finally, given just how many there are, if I were to write "(sic)" after every typo in the quotes I use, it would probably use up at least a chapter's worth of my word count. The reader can be assured that if a forum quote is either in quotation marks or indented and in a smaller font, any errors are as they are in the original online forum post.

3.13 A note on ethics

This paper takes the consequentialist approach to research ethics; that is that ethical considerations be framed in terms of minimising harm to subjects (Capurro & Pingel 2002: 30). Although my role is as pure observer and I have not spoken with or interacted with any of the members of these forums, which may be interpreted by some as constituting 'deception' as the members have never been informed about my research, it is important to understand that in posting a response to a topic in a discussion forum, the resulting text is willingly made public, a public online space that doesn't require registration to view. In terms of issues of confidentiality, for obvious reasons there will be no identifiers in this paper. Although quotes will be included, they will be to illustrate certain key theoretical themes and will never make reference to the original author. In any case the 'original author' will be a 'screen-name' (for example "Lizard_Puncher2012") and so even if the name were included there would be no possibility of identification of the human being authoring the text and thus, I would argue, no harm to the subject. While some researchers argue that online forum members do not expect their words to be 'eavesdropped' by 'outsiders' when they contribute and

thus the very act of observation could be seen as causing harm by invading their expected privacy (King 1996), this seems to me to be an excessive and distorted view of privacy. The forums from which I have obtained my data are viewable by anyone in the world with internet access and the inclination to view them. Not just academic researchers like myself, but government officials and other elites. In the context of fully accessible conspiracy theory forums, the discussions in which seek to expose the evils of governments and elites, it is bordering on absurdity to suggest that the forum members expect that nobody other than the forum members themselves will read the posts. Indeed the possibility of NWO elites reading the forums has frequently been mentioned by members, as illustrated by the following quotes:

I don't want to freak anyone out but if you will think about it what is the easiest way to get info on just about everyone in the world now? The computer of course.”(Above Top Secret thread “Can We Stop The NWO?”)

you bet the people that have posted on this site will be high on the to do list.
(Above Top Secret thread “We can’t fight them)

They monitor every page we go to and every thing that is sent out
(Above Top Secret thread “Can We Stop The NWO?”)

Many of them clearly do understand that outsiders may read their posts. Nonetheless they are clearly comfortable making them, in vast numbers. I would expect that if they were that worried about privacy, firstly they would not post on a highly visible online forum which is viewable by billions of people in the first place, and secondly, they would arguably be far more concerned by the idea of someone like David Rockefeller reading their posts than an academic researcher like myself, whose thesis is destined to end up untouched and caked in dust in the basement of the LSE library. Ultimately, I would argue that they likely feel comfortable posting due to the anonymity of discussion forums, such that any personal or identifiable information is never linked to them. Of course, to sign up to be a member of any online discussion forum one normally needs to provide an email address and so technically there is the possibility of linking the content of a forum post written by a screen-name to the real human being behind it. However, firstly it is becoming increasingly common to use a secondary email account precisely for registration of various websites (to avoid spam emails for example) and indeed online services exist that generate temporary ‘fake’ email addresses to be used for such registrations for those who do not wish to link their primary emails. Secondly, not only am I never going to submit a request to the owners of the websites to reveal private information (a request that would obviously be refused anyway), but as stated

multiple times in this thesis I am not even interested in the individuals posting, even in terms of their anonymous usernames, but rather the texts of the conversations themselves.

3.14 Some reflexive comments on the research process

The conception of this entire project began somewhat serendipitously way back in 2006 when I was exploring ideas for my MSc dissertation. The research I actually had planned related to the debate about online and offline political activism in the literature on social movements and information and communication technologies (ICTs), specifically informed by Dean's "fantasy of participation" (2005: 60-66) thesis, the idea that online political activity actually promotes political passivity. Briefly, her claim is that political use of ICTs, for example through blogging or online petitions, "enable(es) us to go about the rest of our lives relieved of the guilt that we might not be doing our part and secure in the belief that we are informed, engaged citizens" (ibid: 63). The ostensible consequence of this anodyne sentiment is the absence of 'real', offline political activity. I posted a short, open-ended survey via www.thesistools.com to various mainstream political discussion forum websites (Indymedia, DemocraticUnderground, FreeRepublic) as a starting point to explore how these users themselves thought about the issue. The questions presented to them related to users' perceptions of the main problems facing society / the world, what they thought needs to be done to resolve them, and the extent of their online and offline political activity. In other words, quite similar to this thesis, just without the conspiracy theory slant. The 118 responses I received were an extremely mixed bag. I found no obvious link between online and offline political activity; some said they were almost entirely online, some rarely online, others combined substantial web use with extensive offline political activities, including party campaigning, leafleting, volunteering, working with charities and NGOs and organising demonstrations. It seemed that the strength of the person's feeling about political problems was the major influence on the extent of offline political activity. Not exactly a shocking finding.

One response, however, constituted a fascinating aberration. A long, furious diatribe against elite power, termed the NWO, resulted in the following response to the, 'What do you think should be done to resolve these problems?' question: "its foolish to think you can do anything. the nwo will get their way, they always have..." The sense of utter futility juxtaposed to the preceding intense expression of grievance was startling. Of particular interest was that the person appeared to be

naturalising unequal power relations (“they always have”), a normative strategy of symbolic power usually employed by ruling classes. This idea was so striking to me that I instantly dropped my original research project idea and dove head-first into the fascinating world of conspiracy theories online, specifically the global conception of elite power termed the NWO. While I had certainly heard the term before, and was familiar with many well-known conspiracy theories such as the individual incidents like the assassination of John F. Kennedy and broader references to powerful secret societies such as the freemasons, I was astonished to discover such an abundance of shared ideas about ‘who controls the world’, resulting in a more or less coherent core of ideas about elite power. As someone with left-leaning political tendencies (perhaps an understatement; I had in my younger days been active not only in anti-globalisation, anti-war and indeed anti-capitalism protest campaigns but was also an active member of the Workers’ Revolutionary Party in the UK during the years 2001-2. The younger me would almost certainly now berate my ideological shift as I have aged towards a more moderate support of social welfarism within a regulated market economy...), I was accustomed to being accused of being a conspiracy theorist myself, since I was conferring blame for the world’s problems at the transnational capitalist class, and would frequently become enraged at being compared to a crazy conspiracy theorist. Indeed while completing my MSc dissertation this pre-existing condescending characterisation of conspiracy theorists was evident despite my attempts to write objectively when discussing them. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the central thesis of my MSc dissertation was precisely that conspiracy theorists disable themselves from being able to talk about resistance by their own constructions of reality. I could not extricate my mind-set from the idea that was contained in that single response to my survey about online and offline political activism, that this quote represented all conspiracy theorists. I was restricting my way of thinking about the topic in much the same way as the authors within the academic literature on conspiracy theory, whom I am now criticising for the very same reason.

Thanks to some epistemological nudges from my supervisor, I have since expanded how I think not only about conspiracy theory, but about the notion of resistance in relation to conspiracy theory. Resistance does not have to take traditional forms of public demonstrations, political campaigns and lobbying or indeed via democratic elections (it should be noted of course that some conspiracy theorists, such as those within the Tea Party movement in the USA, do indeed take part in such forms of resistance) but can comprise communication (spoken and written), refusal to participate in the established political system (or even society itself), and indeed via the simple cognitive act of reconstructing one’s view of reality by contrast to what are perceived as ‘dominant ideologies’. While this change in thinking about my topic allowed for a far more complex, nuanced and

enriched appreciation for the ideas I was exploring, it also meant that I couldn't clarify exactly what it was that I wanted to say. I found this somewhat frustrating for a while as I had been far more comfortable being able to say "X causes Y" when my way of thinking about the topic was more one-dimensional. This desire to be able to declare a relationship between an 'independent and dependent variable', so to speak, was perhaps a reflection of the methods training via compulsory taught modules which I had undertaken during my master's degree. Not only was the dominant approach to methodology in these courses primarily quantitative in nature, but in particular I was trained for a way of thinking about research in social science with an emphasis on the 'science' part. Specifically, the idea that was engrained in my consciousness was that research should be thought of as empirical testing of falsifiable hypotheses, even if the research is qualitative in nature. Suddenly I had found myself in an epistemological crisis where my claims could only be of the form, "X can sometimes be understood in relation to Y but not necessarily. Sometimes Z is a factor, although not always. In conclusion: it depends". Even though I knew deep down that reality was indeed this messy (messier in fact), I found it a struggle to understand the point of the project at all if I'm unable to lay claim to a mind-blowing sound-bite 'discovery'. Fortunately I have since learned to embrace the messiness of my object of study. I can now position the contribution of this thesis in relation to the restrictive mindset (a mindset I shared for some time) found in the academic literature on conspiracy theory, proposing that what is needed is precisely an appreciation that there is nothing deterministic about conspiracy theory itself and although a conspiracy theory can constrain ways of thinking about solutions, it can also shape and encourage them. It certainly doesn't necessarily preclude them.

Chapter 4: Action System in Action: Surviving the New World Order

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I undertake a discourse analysis of one Above Top Secret online discussion thread, anchored in the conceptual frameworks of ‘action system’ and ‘ideology’ in Melucci’s work (see Chapter 3 for a detailed examination of these ideas). It is the first of four chapters analysing individual discussion threads in-depth from the two online forums, all of which are selected because they are explicitly premised upon the overarching question of what can be done to resist the NWO. This and Chapter 5 illustrate the more extreme end of the conspiracy theories in relation to the perception of elite agency assumed within the particular NWO theoretical framework. By contrast, Chapters 6 and 7 are far more mundane in content, selected so as to demonstrate the discursive impact of the gradated and nuanced definitions of NWO agency. The selection of threads is in order to compare both the ‘outlandish’ forms that ideas about resistance take within the context of conspiracy theory, along with normal, everyday approaches. Even though in all cases the NWO is the adversary and ideas are invited on how to resist, the responses can be radically different, depending on just how the perceived agency among all groups is defined.

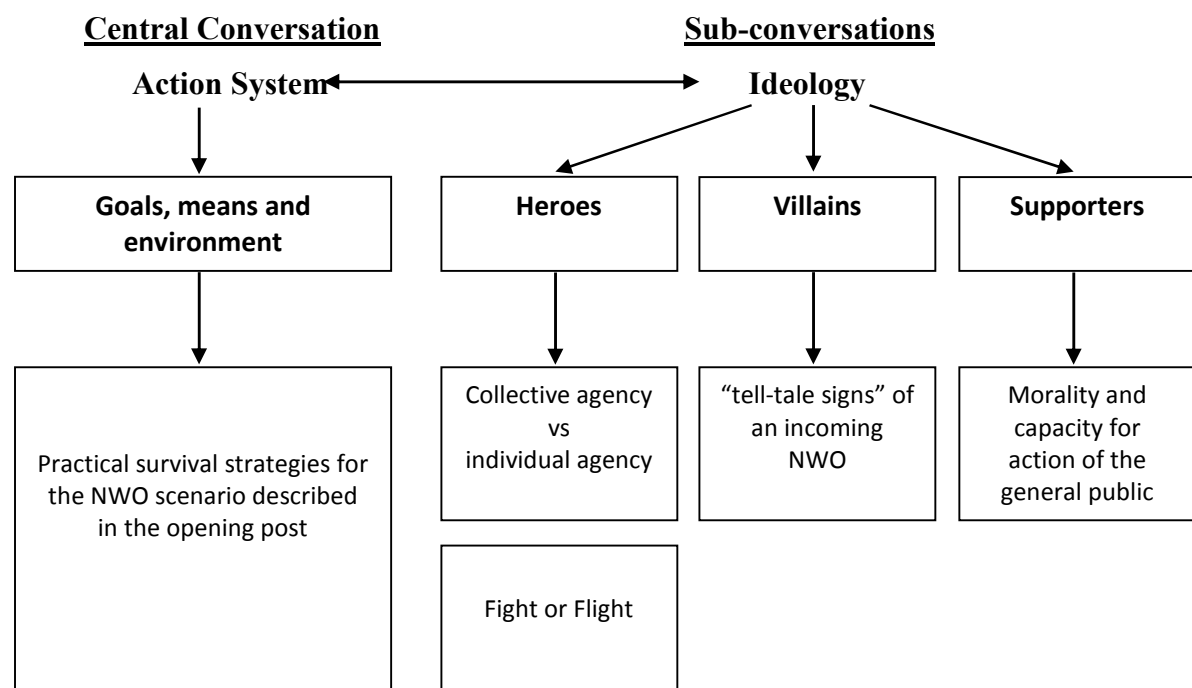
As I outline in Chapter 1, the primary research objective of this thesis is an understanding of how resistance is thought about and discussed within a NWO conspiracy theory worldview. I defined such a ‘resistance discourse’ in terms of agency, specifically two elements of agency: the perceived morality of action and the perceived capacity for action or, put more simply, what should (and shouldn’t) be done and what can (and can’t) be done. These cognitively and emotively constructed notions manifest themselves from within the discussions and can be applied not just to those seeking to resist but also the adversaries themselves and indeed the general public at large. These indeed constitute the three core social groups or collective agents as elaborated by Melucci in his conceptualisation of a movement’s ‘ideology’, a notion concerned ultimately with the perceived moral legitimacy of action by the movement themselves (the heroes) in direct opposition to the perceived moral illegitimacy of action by the adversaries (the villains), fitting neatly with the conceptual concern of moral agency in the context of my definition of resistance discourse. In relation to my second core concern, the perceived capacity for action, I draw upon Melucci’s notion of a movement’s ‘action system’, a discursively constructed framework comprising ideas about goals, means and environment. This is the realm of discussion relating to strategies of resistance. It

should be understood that despite the seemingly distinct nature of these conceptual categories, I use them primarily to enhance analysis and I certainly do not argue that they constitute a representation of reality within the discourses; they frequently overlap and are fundamentally interrelated and shape and constrain each other in the discussions as will be demonstrated below.

Nonetheless, this overarching framework is extremely useful for analysing the online discussion threads, providing significant insights into how resistance is thought about and discussed in terms of perceptions of morality and power across various social agents within the discursive realm of a NWO conspiracy theory. The thread from Above Top Secret selected for this chapter is entitled, “NWO Survival Planning”. I chose this particular thread as the starting point of analysis in this thesis because it is a rare instance of a discussion stipulating an explicitly defined problem from which potential solutions are canvassed from other members. Whereas most discussions usually assume characteristics about the NWO, which are to be inferred from the subsequent debates about resisting it, here the problem of the NWO is defined and laid bare at the start so that we have a clear and (more or less) coherent discussion structure from which to examine relatively unambiguously how a problem within a resistance discourse shapes and constrains proposed strategies of resistance. I treat this thread as a pure transcript of the interactive and dynamic ‘communicative construction’ of an action system, thus seeking to be faithful to Melucci’s methodological recommendation that research should analyse this interactive process “as it actually unfolds” (Melucci 1996: 387; see Chapter 3 for further methodological discussion in this context). We witness in this one thread precisely the continually constructed, negotiated and contested ideas relating to goals, means and environment, along with varying perceptions of moral agency and the capacity for action conferred onto heroes, villains and potential supporters. Communication takes place within the online discussion thread format via statements, questions and responses from members. The structure of the thread can furthermore be understood as one central conversation from which several sub-conversations branch out, which themselves can be conceptualised within Melucci’s notions of action system and ideology. I identify these sub-conversations as agency-related debates discussed in both cognitive and affective terms towards the collective, communicative construction of the NWO conspiracy theory problem and potential solutions. In these conversations my analysis focuses primarily on the contested nature of the debates, rather than seeking to present ideas as representative in any way, a goal which, as Melucci frequently suggest, is fundamentally misguided and ultimately impossible. Indeed it is within the contested debates about agency and resistance strategies that the most fruitful insights emerge; specific resistance strategies themselves tend to provide the ‘what’s and ‘how’s of resistance, but the arguments between members about various

strategies often shed light into the ‘*why*’s (and ‘*why not*’s), which allows for enhanced understanding of the underlying thought processes and discursive relationships between perceived problems and solutions. Whether the sentiments expressed are positive or negative, in the entirety of the discussion these conversations are shaped and constrained by the perceived extent of power and (im)morality of the NWO and its controlling agents. It must be emphasised again that despite the ostensible distinction of concepts and sub-conversations presented in Figure 4.1 below, the ideas are interrelated and indeed interdependent; specific discursive manifestations of goals and means within the thread only make sense, for instance, because they are informed by perceptions of opportunities or constraints by environmental factors along with concerns of morality and power for the members themselves and the other core social groups existing within the overall imaginary of the NWO conspiracy theory.

Figure 4.1: Conversation structure of the thread



The structure of this chapter aims to mirror Figure 4.1 via these theoretical concerns by an analysis of the sub-conversations within the central conversation of surviving the NWO scenario. The research aim of this analysis is an understanding of how notions of agency are played out within these discussions in terms of what I define as ‘resistance discourse’ in Chapter 1: what can and can’t be done, and what should and shouldn’t be done, for the three social groups. I should make clear from the outset that the ideas contained within this thread, whether in terms of the

conceptualisation of the NWO or the proposed strategies of resistance, are far from representative of the discussions within the forums. The thread presents a vision of NWO agency in one of its most extreme forms of power and (im)morality; as will become evident in later chapters, far less (occasionally even more) extreme visions are constructed. Furthermore, even though this is one specific discussion whose primary goal is to debate specific, practical strategies of surviving the brutalities of the incoming NWO, it also offers a richer and more nuanced understanding of just how the conspiracy itself is understood by the members themselves, in contrast to a broad overview coming from either someone claiming to represent them such as Alex Jones, David Icke or Jordan Maxwell, or indeed as per my own overview in Chapter 2. Therefore, while my approach in this chapter consists primarily of direct discourse analysis of the text itself, informed by Melucci's theoretical framework and my research objectives, I also frequently relate the ideas to the bigger picture of how the NWO conspiracy is variously conceived and how different conceptions shape and constrain thought and discussion about resistance.

4.2 Solutions to a New World Order scenario

This discussion thread comprises 304 posts by 118 different members of the Above Top Secret discussion forum. Among these, 48 members contribute at least two posts with 16 contributing at least 5 posts (the highest number of contributions by any one member is 32). As a self-contained, focused online discussion thread, it is especially enlightening for the purpose of analysing the discursive impact of a NWO conspiracy theory on perceptions of agency and how resistance can be thought about and discussed. The very first post postulates explicitly one conception of the NWO and asks other members for solutions, given the content and boundaries of the problem provided in that first post. It thus allows for relatively clear links within the discussion to be identified for goals, means and environment, along with associated perceptions of power and morality across the three fundamental social groups based on this particular conspiracy theory framework. This is not to suggest however that there exist easily discernible cause-effect relationships within the discourse; the problem itself is contested, as are the various means suggested even when members agree on the core problem. Sometimes even the minutiae of specific means result in heated, emotive debate (for example the conversations on the relative benefits and drawbacks of swords versus guns for self-defence). Nonetheless, the overall discussion is very clearly one which only makes sense within a specific conspiracy theory conception of a global, malevolent NWO.

The thread begins with one member's dramatic declaration that he now has "no choice, but to prepare" for the oncoming NWO onslaught and invites other members to contribute useful, practical advice to help survive it when it occurs. Of immediate interest here, of course, is the assumption that the key task facing the community's members is *survival*. There is no question in this particular post of preventing, through any kind of direct, 'traditional' resistance, the NWO from taking over in the first place. Already we see here an interdependent, dialectical construction of perceived inflated agency (in terms of the capacity for action) for the agents of the NWO, and a consequently perceived diminished agency (in terms of the capacity for action) for members of the conspiracy theory discussion forum, and indeed for humanity as a whole. The opening post is especially enlightening when viewed through the lens of Melucci's action system, including not only cognitive but emotive elements, by inviting other members to "combine minds and devise strategies" (*means*) ... "to be able to cope with all the horrors" (*environment*) with the ultimate *goal* being to "maximise your survival potential". It is important to note that the assumption that there is no stopping the NWO takeover from taking place is not only contested but outright dismissed in (admittedly a

minority of) responses further along in the discussion, but I will attend to these responses later on. For now, the initial boundaries of debate have been set by the opening post of the discussion such that the agents of the NWO are assumed to possess sufficient power to achieve their objectives without obstacle. A spectacular scenario of the way in which it might happen is detailed in this opening post, and offers valuable insights into the perceived power and morality of the NWO villains:

I know something very dire, tragic, catastrophic is going to happen in the world in the near future that will impact the whole world...

The constitution and the bill of rights have been dissolved after a staged nuclear attack somewhere in the western world. Martial law is declared and police keeping forces flood the streets while dozens of black helicopters hover over the skies ...

America is at war with the people. Many people on the streets are forced into concentration camps...

Helicopter raids are made to locate the free americans, and police forces search every household, while at the same time loot the goods of it's owners , finding many Americans still in their living rooms, in basements or hidden under floorboards. The police are inhuman to them, tease them, humiliate them. Some are even executed.

The first issue relating to the perceived agency (as the capacity for action) of the NWO I wish to address is the “staged nuclear attack” mentioned in this proposed future scenario. What does this mean? Clearly the idea is not that it would be an imaginary, non-existent attack. What is being referred to is what is labelled in these forums a ‘false flag’ event: an act secretly carried out by the NWO but which is intended to appear as though it were carried out by a separate state / organisation / individual. A key goal of false flag events is to generate mass public support for the perpetrators’ goals. Indeed David Icke coined his own expression for the way in which this takes place: “problem, reaction, solution”, abbreviated to P-R-S (Icke 2001: 7-8), the rough framework for which can be summarised as follows in the context of the NWO scenario above:

- a) the agents of the NWO want to do X (dissolve the constitution, install a global government etc.) but the public would not accept X ordinarily
- b) the agents of the NWO covertly enact Y (for example blow up a city), creating a problem, and make it appear as though it were enacted by some other agent(s) (for example terrorists, rogue states)

- c) the agents of the NWO, through their assumed control of mass media institutions, issue an official press release condemning Y with the public expressing outrage (the reaction) and they propose a solution, X, to prevent it from happening again
- d) the public agrees to X

So, given the core assumption that the villains, the NWO agents, want a complete global takeover in order to establish their ultimate objective of a single world government (see Chapter 2), it makes sense within this picture of the global malevolent conspiracy for them to bring about a global catastrophic event in order to precipitate it (as we shall see later on in the discussion there is a debate over what the likely ‘tell-tale signs’ of the NWO takeover about to take place would be, as alternatives to the staged nuclear attack suggested here. This particular debate actually has a practical purpose in the context of this discussion, namely for people to know when to start – literally - heading for the hills). It is worth also noting that for the most extreme conspiratorial conceptions of the NWO, where the perception of the elites’ capacity for action nears something like omnipotence, such an attack would only ever be ‘staged’. This is because, in this particularly extreme conception, the agents of the NWO are understood as infiltrating the political and economic power structures of the entire world and indeed they control and initiate the majority of, if not all, major events. An especially succinct illustration of this kind of extreme perception of agency can be found in Jordan Maxwell’s oft-repeated (and unashamedly circular) argument to explain everything that happens as being an intended consequence of conscious, planned action by elites: “the government gets what it wants” (Maxwell 2000: 9). In other words, if something happened, it’s because the government wanted it to happen. On this point, in the forums as a whole even though it’s beyond the scope of this thesis, it’s truly remarkable how no major newsworthy event, including natural disasters, can escape being interpreted as a ‘false flag’ engineered by governments or the NWO, at least by some members of the forum. I would even go as far as to suggest that ‘False flag’ interpretation of events within these forums could constitute a viable thesis on their own, situated within the epistemic analysis approach in the conspiracy theory literature (see Chapter 2).

Returning to the thread, we also see in this post an indication of how the NWO would be manifested once it arrives, going far beyond my basic outline in Chapter 2. The key themes, invoking images of Soviet or Nazi totalitarian state repression, are a) martial law and b) concentration camps, both enforced by the police who are conceived as the NWO's willing underlings. It is important to note that neither martial law nor concentration camps are a priori necessary features of a conspiratorial

conception of the NWO, understood at its core as drive towards a single world government (socialist or otherwise). Yet the image of armed police (national or foreign) roaming the streets and citizens herded into concentration camps is perhaps the most ubiquitous that I have seen in all online forum discussions about the NWO. Part of the reason for this is, I would suggest, the association of the NWO with socialism (see Chapter 2) which in turn is usually associated with brutal totalitarianism, invoking Stalin's Soviet Union as the model. While opposition to a world government is often expressed as an opposition to the sanctity of state sovereignty, the form of government is nonetheless usually conceived in these oppressive and violent terms. The other reason is arguably rhetorical, what Melucci describes as a key task for any movement, negating the legitimacy of the adversary (Melucci 1996: 352). This ties in to the other dimension of agency in which I am interested, the morality of action; specifically the immorality of agents of the NWO. The mere fact that NWO agents would be happy with initiating mass murder via the 'staging' of a nuclear attack in order to pursue their goal of creating a global government is presumably evidence enough of their perceived moral illegitimacy. But this immorality is amplified by shifting the focus to a more micro level in the description of police officers being cruel and inhumane to innocent people hiding in their own houses. The reason I mention this is again that this level of evil is not a necessary component of the NWO conspiracy at all; there are presumably already more than enough justifications to oppose a single world government. However, adding and exaggerating this dimension reinforces both the illegitimacy of the villain and the legitimacy of the members themselves.

4.3 Negotiating goals, means and environment via communication

Given the nightmare scenario of the NWO takeover, members of the Above Top Secret forum community are asked to contribute practical advice (various means in the context of environmental resources and constraints) on how to survive (goal) the violent attacks and public roundups. The thread certainly delivers; numerous forum members offer not only core strategies, primarily of escape (whether to the woodlands, the mountains, other countries or even 'hidden in plain sight' in city buildings) but incredibly voluminous advice on the minutiae of living off the land in terms of shelter, food and water, medication and self-defence (whether against wild animals or NWO agents searching for dissenters). I wish to emphasise that these practical strategies are not of interest to this thesis for their own sake, or merely to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to talk about solutions despite the severe perceived constraints of such a totalising conspiracy theory, but rather for what

they can tell us about the various cognitive and affective discursive consequences of a particular conspiratorial conception of the NWO on perceptions of the members' own agency along with that of humanity more generally. In particular, I argue that what we find is a (more or less) interdependent relationship between the power of the NWO (what they are capable of doing) and the power of people (what they are capable of doing) opposing it. Nonetheless, Table 4.1 below provides a summary descriptive overview of the various means mentioned in this thread in order for the reader to acquire a snapshot picture of the kinds of practical strategies suggested given such a scenario:

Table 4.1: Summary of means suggested in the Above Top Secret “NWO Survival Planning” discussion thread

Goal	Environment (resources)	Means (illustrative quotes)
Escaping / hiding from the NWO takeover	Woodlands / mountains / jungle / other countries	<p>“Which would be the most appropriate terrain to go to. The countryside, the woods, the jungle or the mountains. All have their advantages and disadvantages”</p> <hr/> <p>“i was thinking of planning my escape route now and laying supplies along my route beforehand so that when it all goes down i'll be able to travel light”</p> <hr/> <p>“Eric Ruldolph was on the run from the FBI for 5 years in the mountains before beng caught. Imagine what you could do when they're not looking for you.”</p> <hr/> <p>“the technology exists to easily pick up anyone trying to hide out in the wilderness. in fact you may have a better life expectancy trying to hide out in a rad infested city ”</p> <hr/> <p>“I would take a long look at a more realistic idea of going to the Canadian wilderness. It is a larger country with many times smaller population.”</p> <hr/> <p>“South America might not be the best choice. Remote parts of S America in the countries you named are very dangerous perhaps more so then the US”</p> <hr/> <p>“The jungle itself can be a horrible place for someone that is not trained to survive there. The jungle is parasite central im talking the stuff of nightmares”</p>
Survival after the NWO takeover	Shelter / food / social	<p>“finding a cave,sewer or other underground structure is your best chance”</p> <hr/> <p>“build a sort of ‘nest’ in advance. A hole, that’s then built up and covered over in the dirt that you can shut of. Just to hide and keep goods in, but also for you to hide in if need be/maybe even sleep in.”</p> <hr/> <p>“the battle will come from your neighbors in search of your food and jewelry. Because their would be massive food shortages and paper money will be worthless with the hyper inflation. People will form into misfit gangs and wage war within your own community.”</p> <hr/> <p>“You must also consider whether the site ...Provides concealment from enemy observation...Has camouflaged escape routes....Is suitable for signaling, if necessary....Provides protection against wild animals and rocks and dead trees that might fall....Is free from insects, reptiles, and poisonous plants.”</p>
Confrontation al resistance (before or after the NWO takeover)	Weaponry / agents of the New World Order	<p>“Dont be a coward, dont abandon your warrior sprit, I would rather die with my hands wrapped tightly around the throat of the enemy, than die cowering in a cave.”</p> <hr/> <p>“I will never sit down and put my head between my legs and cower. Worse comes to worse, I'll sit on the roof of my house and shoot anyone that comes near my family”</p> <hr/> <p>“in a perfect world we would all be able to be armed to the teeth with the best and latest weaponry, but for people in certain countries it just aint possible. If</p>

		<p>you have a sword or a bow you will always be armed, and you can make arrows pretty easily”</p> <hr/> <p>“if it comes to the point where your only option is to fight or die, you are probably going to die. You may take a couple with you, but you will still be dead. As I said, all the handguns and rifles and shotguns and automatic weapons in the world are not going to help you against a tank, or against mortars, or artillery, or airstrikes.”</p> <hr/> <p>“rather than focusing on obtaining guns to fight back in a heroic, patriotic and ultimately very fatal last stand, it would be wiser to concentrate on learning elements of escape, hiding and survival skills. The first thing I would do is run away. There may be more people than elites, but the elites have the guys who know how to use the guns and have other weapons against which you are defenceless.”</p>
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Despite the prolific, practicality-centred debate which ensues, the discussion doesn’t get off to the most optimistic start as the very first reply in the thread to the scenario described suggests facetiously, “if any of the above happened I would just put my head between my legs and kiss my ass good bye”. A forgivable response, no doubt. Most anti-NWO debate in the discussion forums focuses on events and acts assumed to be caused by the elite which serve to progress *toward* the ultimate future goal of a tyrannical single global government. Here however, members are asked how they will react when the NWO end-game finally arrives, with an explicit restriction in the scope of that reaction stipulated by the opening post, namely that the ultimate goal is simply not to get killed. This is an exceptionally illustrative discursive manifestation of how a perceived problem constrains perceived solution within resistance discourse, and especially how the perceived agency of the villains shapes the perceived agency of the heroes. This relationship is hinted at by Melucci who writes that a movement is restricted in its capacity to resist in large part by the assumed future “response of the adversary, the tolerance or repression of collective action” (Melucci 1996: 324), although it is doubtful that Melucci had in mind anything as extreme as the NWO scenario described in this discussion thread when he wrote this.

Notwithstanding this immediate condescending reaction however, the pessimistic initial responder continues, taking the debate somewhat more seriously, if only marginally more optimistically:

But if I was thinking of surviving something like that you would either need lots of money to build a self supporting bomb shelter/underground ark or pure look out side in the elements! ... The people that survie will be the rich fu****s with underground arks that will come back to take over the world again and screw it all up again for GREED

It is interesting to note here that despite the persistent futility expressed towards the nightmare imaginary scenario presented, the response is nonetheless thoughtful. The severity of the scenario is not treated as so absurd as to be dismissed, which may have perhaps been expected given the initial comical response from this member. There is a plausibility and credibility toward the scenario implicit in this response. The futility is still there, but rather than death being presented as inevitable, there is the prospect of some scope for survival. The futility however is now being framed in terms of environmental constraints (specifically, wealth) towards survival means (shelter). The elite, who can afford shelter, are the ones who will survive. Rather depressingly, the futility is underscored by the final nail in the coffin, the notion that even after this catastrophic event, elites will then repeat the cycle of devastation in future. Humanity is seen to be inescapably doomed by the very existence of elites whose greed leaves destruction in their wake.

The conversation continues with the original poster responding with sympathy, rather than offence, to this extreme pessimism:

That is a very natural reaction ... it will really take someone tough, resilient, special to continue to live on ... The odds of survival are against us. If the NWO do not get us, then the colds, starvation and dehydration could ... It really will take a lot of LUCK to survive.

Now we begin to witness some intriguing insights into the perceived agency of the members themselves. Many authors in the conspiracy theory literature have suggested that a feeling of diminished agency actually explains the existence of conspiracy theories in the first place. I do not wish to engage with this particular explanatory debate, though I would agree it is a highly relevant, if neither necessary nor sufficient, factor in the construction and reconstruction of some conspiracy theories. What is of interest to me in this thesis is the notion of perceived diminished agency as a *consequence* of this particular conspiracy theory. Specifically, the consequence from the perceived inflated agency of the elite conspirators themselves. Firstly, note the conjugation of the expression, “If the NWO do not get us”. As discussed in Chapter 2, despite the ‘state of affairs’ grammatical structure of the expression ‘New World Order’, members frequently ascribe agency to it, personifying the notion such that it is understood as a collective noun for the elite agents of the NWO themselves. Indeed this discursive transference is an extreme example of a key criticism of conspiracy theories, conferring human agency onto non-human entities, usually institutions (Melley 2000: 12-13; Popper 2006: 15) yet in the case of the New World Order it is even further removed

ontologically in that the expression taken at face value refers to a (future) system of global governance. Fortunately enough for analytical purposes, were it not for the conjugation error in the quote above of pluralising the verb (“do”) for a singular (intended to be collective) noun (“the NWO”), it would require significant speculation on my part to assume agency ascription here. The expression “if the NWO *does* not get us” contains no necessary element of human agency in terms of the adversary (although it could of course be intended); it can be understood perfectly acceptably as humanity being devastated by the (non-human) state of affairs following the acts of the agents of the New World Order. The pluralisation however makes it clear that ‘they’ are out to get ‘us’. How does this perception of New World Order agency shape agency of the members themselves? There is certainly a strong feeling of helplessness; the member stresses the importance, emphasised by capitalisation, of luck as an environmental resource for survival.

This post doesn’t go quite so far in terms of assuming diminished agency however. Luck is important, but it is not the only resource available. We find in this post a positive assumption of the power of non-elite people to act in the face of such a catastrophe, although they must be tough and resilient in order to survive. This is not quite enough however; they also need to be “special”. What this means is far from clear, though the assumption seems to be that only a minority of even the tough and resilient will be able to get through. I cannot help but get the impression from this member that this fantasy scenario (and it is explicitly a fantasy as the member concedes in the opening post, regardless of its perceived eventual likelihood), is something to be excited about, an ultimate challenge akin to a post-apocalyptic Hollywood movie or video game in which the hero must escape bad guys coming from all sides. Indeed a couple of members point out the similarities with specific video games, one pointing out that “(t)he first level of half-life 2 offers a good representation of what might happen in a NWO” while another asks, “Has anyone ever played the game freedom fighters? JUST like what you guys are talking about.” Certainly there are many occasions in the thread where this member and others seem to relish exaggerating the fear and (more or less) certain doom awaiting them. In one sense this exaggeration is rhetorically beneficial in terms of juxtaposing the evil ‘they’ versus the good ‘we’, a vital constructive, discursive process for movement members as suggested by Melucci. Nonetheless, at times in the thread we see genuinely enthusiastic emotions expressed towards the prospect of returning to some form of primeval existence.

This particular idea of the importance of being a ‘special’ human being also hints at the continued tension within this and other discussions of resisting the NWO between collective and individual

agency for the members themselves. Melucci emphasises the crucial process for a movement of constructing a 'we' (1996: 40) in order for members to construct and make sense of *collective* action. In the context of this particular thread, a 'we' certainly is constructed, understood in opposition to the 'they' of the NWO. Yet the dominant resistance theme proposed by the opening post is understood in terms of discrete individuals seeking to survive the NWO onslaught, going "lone wolf style" as one member puts it. Within this particular discussion thread, there exists a continual sub-conversation, starting from one member's comment that "(t)he decision between a group existence and going it alone is rather important", in relation to the benefits and drawbacks of collective action versus individual action in the face of the scenario presented. In the context of survival, even when an overall 'we', understood as those opposing the NWO, is expressed, and points are made in favour of collective over individual action, the tendency is to conceptualise themselves as small, geographically isolated collectives (whether as armed militias or simple communities living off the land). Table 4.2 provides an illustration of the key themes within this sub-conversation in the form of concerns about means and environment in the context of the goal of survival:

Table 4.2: Perceived strategic efficacy of individual vs collective agency

Individual agency	Benefits over collective agency	Illustrative quotes
	Invisibility	“groups stand a much better chance of being targets of hunts, since they are more of a threat than a lone person in the woods, plus tracking a group is far easier than a single person.”
	No competition for resources / inability to trust others	<p>“the only fight you could really hope to win would be against other people trying to survive, who want to take what you have.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“I think that people would be at each other's throats”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“how you decide who is enemy? how you know who to join or let join?”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“Do you trust that one of these people would not try to harm you in your sleep, or steal your resources?”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“You will not be able to trust people you run into in your journeys (assuming you are fleeing into the wild), particularly if they have nothing to lose.”</p>
Collective agency	Benefits over individual agency	Illustrative quotes
	Political resistance before NWO scenario takes place	<p>“if the people make sure any "government" authority knows it WILL be held accountable, then the main battle will be won, and a world where anyone need hide won't develop”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“despite what some people might think, organized resistance and free thinking does cause them trouble. Given enough trouble, they can be stopped. If not, they would have fully realized their agenda long ago. But no lone person can do it.”</p>
	Self-defence	<p>“I do think any group of people can win armed or not. It would be possible, if they knew how and built a small scale base”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“Safety's in numbers - especially if we all become highly trained.”</p>
	Socialisation	<p>“Man is a social animal. This means we, as human beings, enjoy the company of others.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“Sticking with other like-minded individuals (whom you trust with your life) is a good idea because you will have people to talk to, in order to discharge the anxiety.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“Very few people want to be alone all the time! As you are aware, there is a distinct chance of isolation in a survival setting”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“I give myself about a month before I go completely insane. I need people.”</p>
	Collaboration / division of labour	<p>“I would say a group is better. That way you can have people spread out, one focus on water, two on protecting the camp, one on food, etc”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“Ideally, we need at least a group of 5-10 people ... More minds are better than one.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“once everyone realized it was a permanent change, there would be more cooperation”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“we can use each others strengths to overcome one another's weaknesses”</p>

		<p>-----</p> <p>“if you get injured - it’d be over, on your own”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“How long can you last, physically and psychologically, in isolation, winter after winter? At some point, social organization and cooperation will have to come into it. I think it is best to seriously consider that up front and to plan for it.”</p>
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Returning to the main conversation, following the initial pessimism of the first response we find rather more enthusiastic contributions from other members expressing solidarity both with the original poster and the specific fears raised by the initial post. The thread quickly (in online discussion forum timescale terms at least, i.e. within a few hours of the original post) develops with discussion about self-defence against NWO forces when the time comes. The first response relating to self-defence isn’t especially thoughtful, simply suggesting sitting on one’s roof and shooting at anybody who comes nearby. The subsequent post, however, contrasts enormously and appears to have been written by someone who has done this kind of thing before, or at the very least read or talked about about doing this kind of thing before. We see a remarkably nonchalant response containing advice on researching the legality of types of firearm (“blackpowder weapons”) in different states, avoiding “exchanges with weapons” with police forces, “procuring food” and “learn(ing) the land and how to navigate it day, night, rain and snow” and the acquisition of a “go-bag or a bugout-bag” containing essential survival tools (which are listed at length). This posts contains none of the fear or moral outrage of those preceding it; in fact it is utterly devoid of emotion from start to finish. It certainly seems to inspire the development of the thread towards concrete, practical means for survival and we find in the thread numerous similar posts later on. However, as mentioned earlier such concrete, practical advice itself is not of interest for its own sake. The discussion about the multifunctional benefits of condoms (which can apparently carry up to two litres of water without bursting) for instance is irrelevant for this thesis unless it tells us something about how the perceived problems of a conspiracy theory conception of the NWO shape the proposed strategies to resist it, and furthermore how these ideas are developed, negotiated and contested by the members themselves. A substantial proportion of the content of this thread contains practical survival ideas, many of which seem sensible in such a scenario and which are uncontested by other members. The truly interesting ideas (for me if not the members of the discussion forum) about survival means are the ones which are hotly contested, and contested specifically for reasons relating to the interrelated perceptions of agency of the NWO and the forum members (as well as the public at large).

4.4 Fight or flight

One such hotly contested sub-conversation in this thread relates to self-defence and direct confrontation in the context of the scenario detailed in the opening post. As Melucci argues, within communicative interactions between members in movements, “tensions are continually generated: over the definition of ends, between short- and long-term ends, (and) over the choice of means” (1989: 40). The ‘fight or flight’ sub-conversation in this thread is a perfect illustration of how goals and means are communicatively constructed and contested in the context of environmental resources and constraints and especially the constraints imposed by the NWO and its agents. The vast majority of discussion about direct confrontation in the thread relates to self-defence in the case of being discovered (once out in the wilderness or elsewhere) by NWO forces, while some argue that direct resistance (whether peaceful or violent) against these forces should take place before the actual takeover scenario occurs. In relation to thinking about and discussing resistance against a malevolent, all-powerful global elite, this sub-conversation is extremely enlightening both in terms of the perceived morality of, and the capacity for, action among the three core social groups. We can see continual arguments about what should be done from a moral perspective, which are rejected by others due to perceived inefficacy. Conversely, practical suggestions are often rejected as immoral, or impractical for other reasons. A central point of contention surrounds whether or not the overall goal should be to survive the NWO or to resist it from taking place at all. Despite the clearly stated purpose of the thread seeking survival strategies, some members reject the notion of ‘taking it lying down’ at all. Furthermore, even for those who are concerned with post-NWO survival there is fierce debate relating to the pros and cons of direct confrontation over hiding. The constant theme underscoring all these debates is the perceived power of the NWO. In all but a tiny minority of instances, this power is expressed as superior and indeed overwhelming. Even in cases where members argue for a categorical imperative of fighting the NWO, there is often an acceptance that they are unlikely to defeat them or even make it out alive. Table 4.3 illustrates this phenomenon among the ‘fight’ proponents:

Table 4.3: Fight

Core justification	Efficacy	Illustrative quotes
Survival	Positive	<p>“they fear us ... I can’t blame them. If we were to unite ... we would give them a run for their money”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“there are more people than ELITE'S so what's the fear”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“Many Jews also fought back when the Nazis put them in their concentration camps. If I remember correctly one big concentration camp got overthrown, the Jews in the Polish ghettos in Warsaw also organized quite a resistance with the limited resources they had.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“the so called nwo is losing a war to iraqi insurgents right now, i'd love to see them try to bring the pain on our soil.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“the only defence is an aggressive offence, wait and you become dominated, so dont let it happen in the first place.”</p>
	Negative	<p>“when they come i will resist even if my campagian last 10 minutes they will not take me alive. “</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“i think its better to fight than hide. a bullet will end ur life in a matter of minutes . but hunger and starvation will slowly kill u”</p>
Moral imperative	Positive	<p>“rise up and take over is my survival plan. &*\$ the establishment and whatever they might bring “</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“most freedom loving people in the US will take as many of the bastards with them as they can if it comes to going down in a fire fight”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“just know one thing that youll never give in and that they had to pay a DEAR price for taking your life. More will follow from your courage and thats what we need.”</p>
	Negative	<p>“I would end up joining a resitance force, even if we'd end up being obliterated. At least I'd be able live the rest of my life free and fighting for it.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“the problem is youre still running, and thats not good. People shouldnt run fom the enemy, thats no way to die.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“there are many people on this site who would tell you that you can do absolutely nothing when the NWO takes over. These are the same people who will die in a fetal position or the same people that will let the NWO murder their families before their eyes. It is better to die fighting than on one's knees. “</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“fight and die or lose it: freedom is not free. “</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“Dont be a coward, dont abandon your warrior sprit, I would rather die with my hands wrapped tightly around the throat of the enemy, than die cowering in a cave.”</p>

By contrast, the vast majority of the ‘flight’ arguments eschew considerations of morality and focus entirely on the negative efficacy of direct confrontation, given the constraints imposed by the

perceived superiority of the NWO's resources combined with their perceived ruthlessness. It can be equally enlightening to consider what is not said in addition to what is said in these discussions. While in numerous other discussion threads (particularly in the David Icke forum but also in Above Top Secret) we find frequent moral objections to suggestions of any form of violent resistance, in this thread the 'anti-violence' arguments are wholly practical in nature. NWO forces are simply seen as too powerful to be defeated, as table 4.4 shows:

Table 4.4: Flight

Core justification	Illustrative quote(s)
New World Order military superiority	<p>"Let's be realistic here. You have guns and rifles? They have armies, tanks, helicopters, fighter jets and hi-tech weapons ... This is why it is foolish to fight, because all that guarantees is certain death. "</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"There may be more people than elites, but the elites have the guys who know how to use the guns and have other weapons against which you are defenceless."</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"What are you going to do? Say 10,000 Americans, armed with guns, gather on streets to challenge the NWO might. This is how easy it is to disperse them; hit them with sonic weapons ... the people will run in every direction in absolute hysteria. Not one casualty will be inflicted on the NWO. "</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"Those of you who want to fight need to grow up. You would die trying and you would die fast"</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"talking about fighting and taking guns to the forests thats just begging to be carpet bombed, with todays technology your just making your group an easy target."</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"An armed citizenry is no real defence against a fully equipped modern army, which I assume the NWO would be using"</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"Hiding, does not mean you are a coward, it means you are wise."</p> <p>-----</p> <p>"A sure way to die, is to do what you say, go out there and fight them, in an obvious display of bravado. That only works in movies, not in reality. The moment you step in the NWO's line of fire; GAME OVER"</p>

Tables 4.3 and 4.4 highlight not only the cognitive but also the emotional dimensions of communicative construction (Melucci 1996: 71) within this 'fight or flight' sub-conversation. The majority of quotes in these tables contain rhetorical, affective utterances directed against opposing or alternative viewpoints by other members within the conversation. The ideas are being contested here in the form of responses to proposals, rather than being offered simply as practical proposals devoid of any communicative characteristics. The opposing discourses indeed actively ridicule each other; on the 'fight' side one member sarcastically proclaims that his 'survival' strategy is to "rise

up and take over” while another derides the cowardice of dying “on one’s knees”. On the ‘flight’ side the derision takes the form of accusations of stupidity, arguing that those wishing to fight “need to grow up” and are living in a fantasy world since such a strategy “only works in movies, not in reality”. The most extreme illustration of the perceived omnipotence of the NWO in this context can be seen in one member’s suggestion that even if a 10,000-strong American populace (let alone a small resistance group or ‘lone wolf’) tries to engage in direct, military confrontation against them, it would quickly and easily be dispersed, with the further prediction that “(n)ot one casualty will be inflicted upon the NWO”.

4.5 The masses

This latter quote, dismissing the potential efficacy of a group of 10,000 American civilians fighting NWO forces, brings us to another sub-conversation relating to agency in the general population. This third social group, defined within Melucci’s ideology framework as society at large, the masses, often treated in terms of their potential support or even recruitment (1996: 350), is expressed in both positive and negative terms in relation to their perceived agency (both their capacity to act and their perceived morality). A recurring theme within conspiracy theory forums is a general contempt for unenlightened, apathetic ‘sheeple’ who cannot be relied upon. Despite this pessimistic attitude towards the general population, one of the most (if not the most) common answers to questions of what can and should be done to resist the NWO is that of informing the general population about the conspiracy, to ‘wake them up’. The assumption behind this answer, sometimes expressed explicitly but more often implicitly, is that once the masses are awoken and aware of the evils of the NWO, there will be an uprising or revolution. This is also implicit in the notion of ‘false flag’ events discussed earlier; the NWO agents go to extraordinary lengths to generate public support for their goals by means of cover-up and media distortions, the implication being that they depend upon public support and they fear public reprisal for their actions without it. The perceived importance of the potential of the masses in overcoming the NWO is always at least under the surface in the discussion forums, yet it does not sit too comfortably with the ‘sheeple’ label. This tension over the perceived agency of the public in the NWO Survival Planning thread can be seen in Table 4.5:

Table 4.5: Perceived agency of the general public

View	Agency dimension	Illustrative quotes
Positive	Morality	<p>“I , for one, can't see americans cowering in corners because someone on a loud speaker told them to”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“how are they going to convince hundreds upon thousands of people from each nation to go commit genocide and herd their people into death camps?”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“I am pretty sure that those men and women ordered to do such horrible things would refuse because they'd basically be doing it to themselves and to loved ones”</p>
	Capacity for action	<p>“the masses would move on Washington, all the officials causing the atrocity you describe would be hanging from lamp posts on street corners before the week was over.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“if the people make sure any "government" authority knows it WILL be held accountable, then the main battle will be won, and a world where anyone need hide won't develop.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“most freedom loving people in the US will take as many of the bastards with them as they can”</p>
Negative	Morality	<p>“I know so many people, many who claim to be spiritual or god-loving people, who say they would just give in to the NWO ... It is wrong. It is wrong not to stand up for what you cherish.”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“Society as we know it are sheep, they follow thy leader”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“People are far too immersed in their sad little lives to give a sh it that the goverments are spending their money surpressing another country rather than feeding 1000's that are dying through starvation in Africa.”</p>
	Capacity for action	<p>“for a switch over from our normal ways to a true NWO control system, I think for the most part it will go unnoticed among the general populace”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>““getting more people to think for themselves is another battlefield and one where we face a battle like no other”</p> <p>-----</p> <p>“we want ppl to wake up but few do if any”</p>

4.6 The New World Order and its agents

The final sub-conversation I wish to attend to is the discussion about the ‘tell-tale signs’ of the incoming NWO. While, as mentioned earlier, this particular debate has a practical purpose, namely to provide members with information on when to start packing up and escaping, it offers significant insights into how the NWO, defined not just as a future state of affairs but as the elite controlling agents themselves, are perceived. While the majority of discussion in this thread is imaginary in nature (though nonetheless taken seriously by the majority of members) based on the hypothetical nightmare scenario described in the opening post, the debate about what signs to look out for

merges the imagined fantasy with the reality of geopolitical events. One member writes (NB this post was written in October 2004):

I'm counting the days...just saw an article about Syria *supposedly* firing at US troops. If we go into Syria, I'll be on the move right away. I'm just worried that they will instill martial law before I can move...

Note the emphasis on the word “supposedly” when referencing the news story at the time. While scepticism towards news media is hardly an unusual phenomenon, particularly in this case given the nature of the build-up to the Iraq war two years earlier, within a NWO conspiracy theory worldview such stories are usually perceived as teleological in nature. They are understood overwhelmingly as propaganda for public consumption in order to justify furthering the NWO agenda, in the context of the above quote another ‘false flag’ event to justify military invasion of Syria by the US. While most of this discussion assumes that the US government will be the catalyst for the NWO via a foreign war, some members dispute this and suggest that it could be initiated by other states, since the agents of the NWO are conceived in transnational terms and believed to infiltrate every government in the world (“Russia, China, etc. - don't matter who hits first.”, as one writes). Indeed one member suggests that the NWO will be initiated by the combined efforts of all the traditionally perceived political enemies (from a US Patriot standpoint at least) of the United States, although rather than being a pro-US state-centred ideological stance, the assumption by this member is nonetheless that the US government would be complicit since it all serves to bring about the ultimate goal of the NWO:

This is one of the plans that the Russians have had since the 50s, to attack the US, and if anything does happen remotely like this, which i think it will, it will be done by the Russians, with the aid of the UN forces, the Chinese, and the help of terrorists...

Within the highly teleological NWO conspiracy theory worldview, military attacks and wars – including world wars – are never understood in traditional terms of competing states. Rather they are seen as events engineered for the greater goal of a single world government. The First World War was apparently designed by the elites for the establishment of the League of Nations, while the Second World War was designed for the establishment of the United Nations. Given such views it makes sense that the ultimate goal of a single world NWO government could be precipitated by a further world war. One member writes that “there will be a war to end all wars” while another

offers a more detailed account of how it would be initiated, based on the diminishing geopolitical influence of the US as military superpower:

The rest of the scenario follows from the logical destabilization of US foreign policy and domestic policy, giving other countries leeway to settle their own disputes. Which could lead into a Third World War: US, UK, vs Russia; Iran, Syria, Egypt vs Israel and US; Taiwan vs China vs India vs Pakistan. Every country in the world would come into it wraps. US is the major stabilization force in the world. It stabilizes China/Taiwan, Israel/Middle east, India/Pakistan etc If it was significantly off-set, it would destabilize the entire world.

A military world war is not the only global catastrophe considered in this thread as the way in which the NWO will come about. Some members suggest that “chemical warfare will happen and so we can expect to be exposed to all types of diseases that our bodies have never had to deal with before. For example smallpox”. Again it is worth noting the time of this discussion (2004-2005), a year following the SARS epidemic. One of the (non-essential but relatively ubiquitous in the forums) assumed goals of the NWO is the extermination of the majority of the human population. A world war is of course one method for achieving this goal, but deadly viruses are frequently cited as an alternative. In this particular thread, the idea of a “directed epidemic” is considered a viable approach, not just for the goal of mass-murder but, as one member asks, “can the government use diseases as a reason to keep everyone in?”, in other words as a control tool to keep citizens from escaping once martial law is installed. As with the example of war, mass disease is viewed teleologically within these forums as deliberately engineered by NWO elites to further their agenda, underscoring both their extreme power and extreme inhumanity.

However, these assumptions about the nature of the NWO, and in particular the assumed power of its controlling agents, do not go uncontested in the thread. As demonstrated in Table 4.5, there still exists some faith in the power of humanity to resist such that NWO agents are not viewed as omnipotent, even in the context of accepting the possibility of the scenario described in the opening post. Furthermore many members dispute that they possess anything like the power that other members propose:

I find an NWO to this extent to be very unrealistic ... I just don't think it's possible that these leaders of the NWO could manage the sheer amount of people because it takes manpower to do that.

This thread is testament to the idea of a NWO being ludicrous. It goes to prove why such a concept would lose. The population will not be controlled.

One member questions the supposed unity of purpose of transnational elite agents, suggesting that “(t)he NWO are globalists of different stripes.. and depending on which faction is sitting during the final round of musical chairs will determine the kind of world we end up living in”. Another argues that “It would be impossible for the N.W.O. to exist in every nation, so they'll probably have to go to war and take over these other nations”. This view is echoed by another member who argues that “the united states will use the missile defence system to protect itself and other allied nations” in the event of a world war, suggesting that individual states – and by implication their power elites – are still concerned with state-centric interests of security in competition against other states, rather than the dominant view that, as one member puts it, “(t)he NWO control all governments”.

At times even the assumed evil of the NWO is tempered somewhat, with one member arguing that “there would be no nuclear war because the NWO would be interested in controlling the people, not completely destroying them”, suggesting a primarily political conception of the NWO rather than comprising the inhumane, bloodthirsty group presented elsewhere. Another member questions the entire premise of herding civilians away in concentration camps:

As to the idea of locking up civilians in detainment camps.....why? I mean, what is gained by moving people from one location to another ... It seems like you guys are seriously considering the outcome of something that is totally remote

Another member expands on this point, arguing that political, economic and social control over humanity is the true goal rather than mass murder:

What is the point of taking over a bunch of prisoners? Wouldn't you rather control "productive" people who would contribute to "society"? Basically, "they" want compliant sheep.

These quotes provide a useful illustration of how a perceived problem shapes perceived solutions in terms of thinking about and discussing resistance. As I suggest in Chapter 1 in terms of the moral dimension of agency in my definition of resistance discourse, and as Melucci argues in his conceptualisation of a movement's ideology, there needs to be some level of moral grievance against the adversary in order to justify resisting in the first place. However, reducing the extent of

evil of the adversary from the extremes common in the thread allows for greater options for thinking about and discussing resistance more generally. One member in this thread even goes as far as to reject the whole basis of the thread, writing simply that “(s)urvival is not needed”, the reasoning being that NWO elites are not, and cannot be, as bloodthirsty as people imagine:

THINK. When the same power is controlling both sides do you think that the one power will make one of the sides pull the plug. Holocaust action. Nuclear attacks!!!! No that will never happen. These people want to survive and live.

This rather more practical understanding of the NWO, as elites who pursue control rather than outright devastation since it would risk their own lives, is mirrored by another member who writes:

The problem I see in that is how can there be a new world order with nothing to rule? Is all the secret NWO societies suicidal? They will nuke themselves and have no one left to rule and nothing left to rule.

4.7 Conclusion

So we see here that even when there exists a general acceptance about the fundamental form of the New World Order conspiracy theory, as a secret political drive by elites towards world domination, the more extreme elements of the discourse, both in terms of power and morality, do not pass by uncontested. As will become evident in subsequent chapters, differing perceptions of NWO agency in these terms result in significant variation in how resistance can be thought about and discussed within the forums. The ‘NWO Survival Planning’ thread set the boundaries of debate in the opening post, painting a vivid picture of an evil, all-powerful elite against whom the only supposed resistance strategy is escape and survival. Far less extreme visions exist within the discussion forums (and occasionally far more, particularly when extra-terrestrials are believed to be the true controlling agents), which allow for a wide range of resistance strategies to be discussed and in which we find expressions of empowerment and optimism at the prospect of defeating the NWO before any such scenario even takes place.

Chapter 5: Positive thinking

“there is absolutely nothing to fear from the New World Order, the worst they can do is kill us.”

(DI Thread, “Tell me EXACTLY what we can do”)

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter analysed an ‘action system’ discourse of potential resistance in the context of an imagined future incarnation of the NWO, drawing on the movement theoretical framework of Melucci (1989; 1996; see Chapter 3). That thread, “NWO Survival Planning”, is located in the Above Top Secret discussion forum website. This chapter shifts the focus to the David Icke discussion forum, examining a thread entitled, “Tell me EXACTLY what we can do”. Recall that the central research aim of this thesis is to unpack how resistance can be thought about and discussed within the context of a NWO conspiracy theory framework, and in particular to assess Fenster’s conjecture that conspiracy theory, by its very nature, is “disabling” (1999: xv), a conjecture which Fenster himself concedes requires empirical research to be supported (ibid.). I break down the notion of resistance discourse as a problem/solution dichotomy, in terms of questions and ideas of what can (and can’t) be done and what should (and shouldn’t) be done, given the supposed nature of the NWO (see Chapter 1). Such a conceptual framework permits analysis of both the cognitive elements of resistance discourse, for example strategies and their relative perceived practicality, and the affective elements such as the perceived morality of particular strategies and / or their perceived empowering or disabling discursive characteristics. My analytical approach employs the conceptual frameworks of ‘action system’, the ideas about goals, means and environment, and ideology, the interrelated normative ideas surrounding the core collective agents with which any movement is concerned (Melucci 1989; 1996, see also Chapter 3). While I reject formally labelling the subjects of my research as a ‘movement’, the discourses contained within the discussion forums are such that they strongly resemble, in important ways, those of traditionally-understood social or political movements, and so Melucci’s ideas provide a useful basis from which to analyse the discussion threads towards the goal of answering my research questions.

As with the thread analysed in Chapter 4 as well as those in Chapters 6 and 7, the fundamental *raison d’être* of the thread examined in this chapter is an invitation to forum members to suggest and debate macro-level solutions to the problem of the NWO. Indeed one could hardly imagine a more appropriate title for a discussion thread relating to my “what can be done?” resistance discourse

question than this thread, which is entitled, “Tell me EXACTLY what we can do”. As we shall see, however, the discourse in the David Icke thread forums is radically different to that found within the Above Top Secret thread from Chapter 4. This is because, despite the NWO being accepted as the label for the core adversary and problem facing the world, and despite the definition and understanding of it fitting those within the Above Top Secret forum in almost every important way, in the David Icke forum, anchored overwhelmingly in the writings of David Icke, we discover an entirely new dimension (literally!) to the concept of the NWO. This requires some discussion before continuing, as the discourse under analysis in this chapter will probably not make much sense to the reader without it; with it however, the debate can absolutely be understood as a resistance discourse of what can, can’t, should and shouldn’t be done about the NWO.

This chapter begins by summarising the key ontological framework of David Icke’s conspiracy theory, incorporating the basic NWO world government conspiracy except that the controlling agents are assumed to be non-human (reptilian) entities. On top of this, the entire nature of reality itself is questioned in Icke’s framework, suggesting that empirical - or what Icke calls ‘five sense’ reality – is pure illusion and that true reality is ‘infinite love’. The discursive consequences of such an ontological and agency-based framework are striking and so we see extremely unconventional resistance strategies being proposed in this thread, along with unexpected affective expressions of hope and empowerment. In particular, given the assumption that the reptilians literally feed off negative human emotions, a primary strategy is in fact simply being positive in order to starve the alien elite. While typically one might present hope and enthusiasm in instrumental terms (for example, as Castells (2012) repeatedly points out) to provide courage for resistance, in the context of the David Icke conspiracy theory, negativity itself is reified as the adversary to be defeated. The resistance-based discussion is thus dominated by – in such a context decidedly practical - strategies of individual consciousness-raising and positive thinking in order to ‘re-create’ reality and defeat the adversary. However, as will be demonstrated, such an approach receives far from anything resembling a consensus in this thread, and passionate, wild insults abound as other members deride the positive thinkers for their supposed inaction and cowardice. Finally, as with each of the four analysis chapters in this thesis, the ‘necessary evil’ of humanity at large is discussed, both as potential recruits and potential supporters. As Melucci argues, acquiring at the very least moral support from society is a fundamental goal of any movement and such strategies are prevalent in these discussion forums.

5.2 Inter-dimensional extra-terrestrial entities, ‘five sense reality’ and infinite love

One might guess from the above section heading that we are dealing here with a somewhat unconventional ontology. The central practical elements of understanding the NWO are still defined as an overarching goal by malevolent elites towards a single, tyrannical global government. Icke’s ideas however, go much further by suggesting that the ultimate controlling agents of the NWO (he also frequently refers to this elite as “the Illuminati”) are not (merely) the human elites most frequently represented collectively by reference to organisations such as the Bilderberg Group, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission, and occasionally by reference to individuals such as the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, the Queen, George H.W. Bush and so on. All of these are frequently labelled as agents of the NWO in Icke’s framework. But, as outlined in Chapter 2, the power hierarchy is extended such that the true controlling agents behind the scenes are inter-dimensional reptilian aliens (the Annunaki gods referred to in ancient Sumerian tablets) who have been ruling humanity for millennia, as detailed by Icke in his 2001 book entitled, Children of the Matrix: How an Interdimensional Race Has Controlled the World for Thousands of Years -And Still Does. Icke argues that these extra-terrestrial entities have bred with humans to form reptilian-human hybrid bloodlines, and it is precisely those bloodline members who have made up the ruling monarchs, the ‘demi-god’ rulers of ancient civilisations, the ‘nefilim’ of the Bible and today’s political elites (Icke 2001: xxi; 2-3; 31-32). He further suggests that these hybrid bloodline elites are ‘possessed’ by the ‘pure breed’ reptilian aliens (ibid.: 135), who themselves exist in the “lower fourth dimension”(ibid.) and are thus invisible to humans, except for those rare instances where political elites have been claimed to ‘shape shift’ to and from reptilian form (ibid.: 139; 233). In his 1998 work entitled, The Biggest Secret, Icke provides a sketch illustration of what this possession and shape-shifting looks like based on claims by people who say they have witnessed it in action:

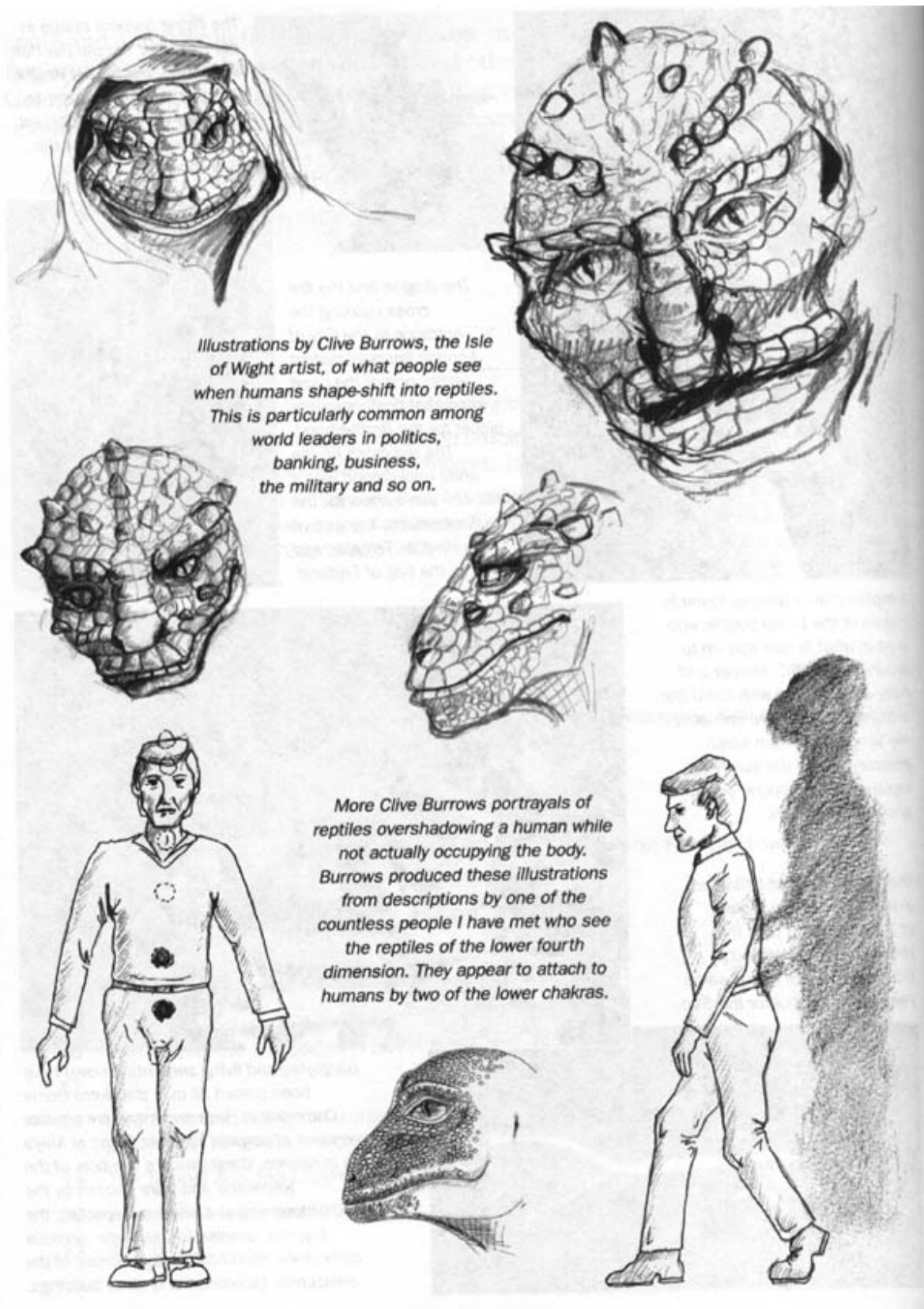


Figure 5.1: Artist's impression of inter-dimensional possession and shape-shifting (Icke 1999: 198)

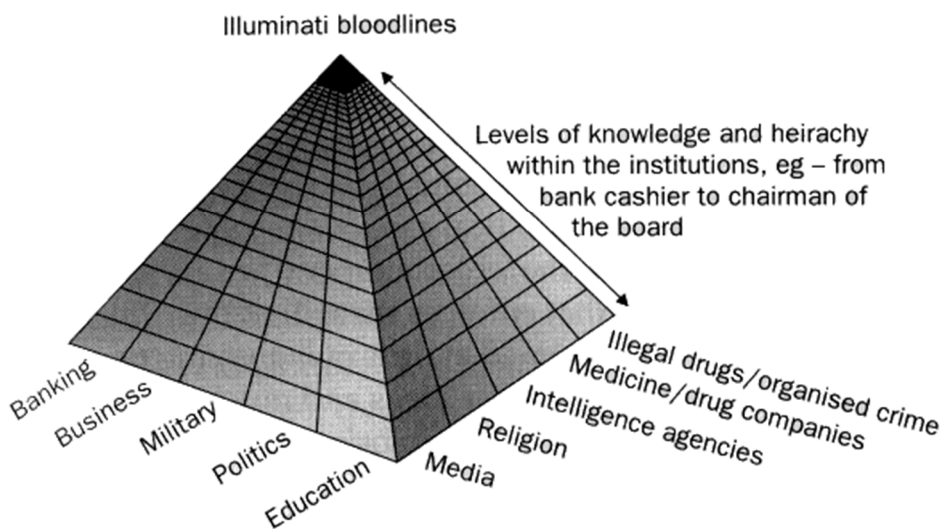
Following the publication of these two texts, Icke has both clarified and expanded upon his core theory, most notably with his 2005 book, Infinite Love is the Only Truth; Everything Else is Illusion, in which he - almost derisively - refers to “five sense reality” (2005: 6), suggesting it to be an illusion while the true reality of the universe transcends this physical realm, and is ultimately a state of high-frequency vibrations manifested as “infinite oneness” and “infinite love” (2005: 42). The goal should therefore be to eschew five sense reality and ascend consciousness towards a state of pure love and especially away from fear, which he claims is “the energy that powers the Matrix” (ibid.: 78). Specifically, he argues that the extra-terrestrial entities literally ‘feed’ off human lower vibrational energies which are argued to be produced by fear, anger and sadness (2001: 140). One solution, therefore, is to ‘starve’ them by not being afraid, angry or sad. Indeed in his earlier 2001 text he concludes with a truly remarkable statement, remarkable in the context of the brutal ‘five sense’ horrors described in the preceding several hundred pages:

...when I open my heart to the love vibration and open my mind to acknowledge the illusion, the frustration dissolves because it's just a game, just a ride, just a movie of our own making. We can make it a nice picture or a horror film. That's our choice. It is, always was, and will always be. So I love you Richard Warman; I love you Bernie Farber; I love you Jason Cowley; I love you George Bush, Queen of England, Queen Mother, Prince Philip, Henry Kissinger, David Rockefeller, Edgar Bronfman, Rothschild dynasty, Lord Carrington, Al Gore, Ted Heath, Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson, Billy Graham, and all the others named in my books. If I don't love you, I don't love myself, because I am you and you are me. We are different aspects of the same infinite whole. No, we are the infinite whole. (Icke 2001: 425)

This idea is absolutely vital to understanding much of the content of the discussion thread analysed in this chapter, an example of a valid resistance strategy or in Melucci's terminology a ‘means’ towards the ultimate ‘goal’ of love, ascension, infinite love and oneness, given the constraints imposed by how the problem and adversary are defined. Icke nonetheless does not dismiss entirely the importance of the physical realm and argues that “the world is controlled on a five sense level by a structure of pyramids within pyramids ... from there they manipulate and impose their agenda for centralisation of global power” (ibid: 6). He represents this power structure via the following diagram:

Figure 5.2: Icke's representation of the current global power structure (Icke 2005: 8)

The Pyramid of Manipulation



All the major institutions and groups that affect our daily lives connect with the Illuminati, which decides the coordinated policy throughout the pyramid.

People in the lower compartments will have no idea what they are part of.

He furthermore provides a detailed illustration of how the NWO will eventually manifest itself, a representation that on its own is no different to the one used in the Above Top Secret discussion forum:

Figure 5.3: Icke's structural diagram of how the New World Order will manifest itself (Icke 2005:

6)

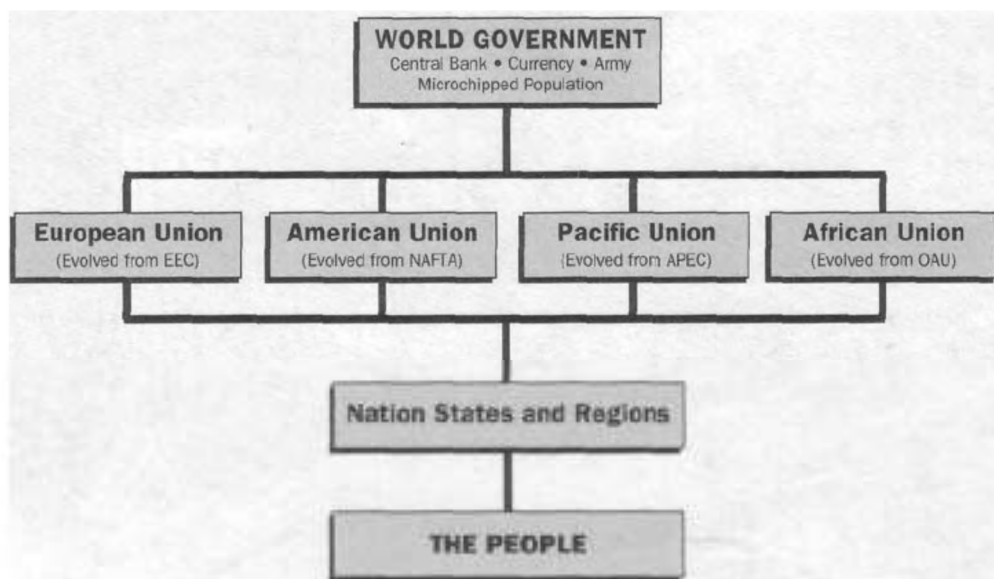


Figure 2: The Illuminati global fascist state. The plan is for a world government dictatorship that includes a second tier of superstates like the European Union. What we now call 'countries' would be merely administrative subsidiaries controlled by the world government, central bank and army. This structure would allow a few to impose their will on the global population

5.3 Defeating the New World Order with positive thinking

The above outline of Icke's core conspiracy theory should thus be understood as one describing the "malevolent global conspiracy" (Basham 2003) referred to throughout all the conspiracy theory forums as the NWO, but within Icke's framework it is only part of the story. In Chapter 1 I explain that one of the primary theoretical aim of this thesis is the examination of how different definitions of a particular conspiracy theory, especially in terms of how the problem and the adversary are defined, result in often dramatic differences in potential solutions proposed. The discussion thread on which this chapter is based is an excellent representation of how Icke's understanding of the NWO discursively affects what can be envisaged as appropriate and effective resistance strategies. As with my analytical approach in Chapter 4, however, I do not wish to claim that the discussion is representative of forum members' ideas; rather the focus of my analysis is on the negotiation and especially the contestation of ideas, the oppositional debates from which the 'why's (and not merely the 'what's) of the resistance discourse can effectively be unpacked. The goals and means of ascension, infinite love and positive thinking seem to be the main take-home message from the discussion as a whole, but we see frequent objection, even outrage, expressed at such ideas by other members of the forum. Is this particular conspiracy theory disabling? I expect a number of social movement scholars would say 'yes'. The members of the forum who attack the 'love bombing' approach of David Icke would also probably say 'yes'. But the cognitive, and especially the affective, elements of much of the discourse within this thread suggest that this form of resistance is represented in enormously empowering terms when anchored in Icke's ontological framework and strategic approach. The key is closing the perceived 'power gap' within the discursively constructed adversarial agency relationship; when the elite are assumed to have extreme levels of power, and those wishing to resist are assumed to have very little power, it becomes difficult to conceive of empowering solutions. In the context of this thread however, not only is the gap closed, but in fact the perception of the agency of the members overtakes that of the adversary, resulting in hope and enthusiasm towards the prospect of defeating the NWO.

As with the Above Top Secret thread analysed in chapter 4, this thread begins with a post setting the parameters of debate, specifically seeking solutions to the problem of the NWO:

I am saddened by the fact that there is honestly nothing we can do. I know most of us don't want to acknowledge that and probably we shouldn't, since it's better to

always be optimistic... But whenever you come up with even one small solution, you find another problem that is bigger than the last.

Icke says: "They can only control us because we allow ourselves to be controlled". Yeah, like it's that simple. How can you NOT let them control you, when they take away all of your necessities? If they tell you that you can only get meat at Walmart, where will you find yourself? Walmart.

And the other saying: "If no one shows up to war, there is no war." Do you guys honestly think this works? I know it might work on a few smart people, but let's be real here. It doesn't work on everybody. "You're fighting for Your country!" One smooth talker and he/she will talk you in to anything. This is how it works.

Informing other people changes what? Nothing. They know, but then they ask you the famous question: "What can we do?" And you say: "Uhh....LOOK! A bird!" And then you run away. I get this question asked all the time and I always say: "Just inform other people. It's good to know." But really, why is it good to know when we don't have a solution? I certainly don't and it angers me. Even Icke doesn't have a solution. "Don't let them control you." HOOOOOOOOOW can I not when the system is everywhere? Move to a farm? Give me money! I'll be there in a nano-second! No money? WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

This first post in the thread is undoubtedly a striking illustration of how a totalising conspiracy theory can be perceived as disempowering. We see here intense emotional expressions of frustration, sadness and anger given the assumption of overwhelming control by the ruling NWO elite. It is furthermore replete with sarcasm towards Icke and those agreeing with his ideas that people can simply 'choose' not to be controlled or that merely exposing the conspiracy is a goal in itself. In Chapter 2 I contested Fenster's claim that conspiracy theorists are not concerned with practical solutions but are rather seeking merely to solve intellectual puzzles and to uncover and expose secrets. Not only is there an abundance of evidence in these discussion forums that conspiracy theorists are concerned with, and do discuss and strategise about, solutions, but I would argue further that it is inevitable to do so; in arguably any other field of human experience discussions of problems are likely to be coupled with discussions of solutions, yet according to Fenster in the realm of conspiracy theory this simply doesn't happen. However, the range and extent of possible solutions is of course constrained by how the problem is itself articulated, and how such constraints discursively manifest themselves is the key analytical objective of this thesis. This thread in particular is an excellent example of how problems and solutions are communicatively constructed, contested and interact with each other in the context of a very specific conception of the NWO along with how the members' own perceived agency, specifically their capacity to act in this context, is represented.

The acute pessimism of the first post, based primarily on the perceived omnipotence of the NWO elite, is echoed by the following four responses from other members early in the discussion:

Ever since learning what's happening , I've been frustrated by the certainty that there's no point knowing if you're not going to do something about it. trouble is, I've no idea what.

In my view, they're so far ahead it's almost impossible to do anything. It would take almost everybody refusing to comply with the system, but that will never happen.

What we need is a damn miracle ...

since knowing all this shit I feel I am in limbo myself. Some days better than others, but when I do think about the concept of what can we do about the situation we are in. I take a look a round and realize we can do very little... They have got us by the balls.

Fenster and Basham (See Chapters 1 and 2) would not be surprised in the slightest by these expressions of powerlessness. The sheer density of affective expressions of disempowerment is immense in the first two quotes (“frustrated”, “no point”, “no idea”, “impossible”, “will never happen”). Melley and Wheen would go even further and suggest that this sense of diminished agency, “a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action” (Melley 2000: 11) or “an expression of despair by people who feel impotent to improve their lives” (Wheen 2004: 12) is actually a cause of conspiracy theorising. While the ideas of Melley and Wheen may seem plausible enough on an intuitive level, and indeed they may well be correct if there were any way of proving it, their claims are by definition speculative and neither author offers any evidence. Fenster’s and Basham’s claims however, that any sense of diminished agency is a consequence of conspiracy theory (particularly when expressed in such totalising terms as with the NWO), are not only plausible but there furthermore exists a wealth of evidence within the conspiracy theory discussion forums that their conjectures have substantial merit. Indeed the first and last quotes above demonstrate that the sense of powerlessness only arose “since” discovering the conspiracy theory. Some might argue that conspiracy theorists may be rationalising and justifying ‘inaction’ as a consequence of their pre-existing ‘agency panic’ and sense of powerlessness, but I can never know if this is true and do not wish to engage in speculation in relation to any individual subjective beliefs.

5.4 Pessimism is the enemy

However, what is particularly fascinating about this thread is that in the specific conception of the NWO as formulated in Icke's work, the phenomenon of pessimism or negativity actually takes centre stage as the core problem to be solved, indeed the core adversary to be defeated. This is not to be understood as a metaphor, nor as a merely pro-active motivational strategy for resistance; negativity is actually reified in this thread's discourse as the enemy itself. In large part this is based on the claim by Icke that the extra-terrestrial reptilians feed off negative human emotions, an idea which is drawn upon by the following post which provides a 'means', in Melucci's terms, to resist the NWO:

you can do something raising your vibration is the starting point which in turn raises the vibration of the planet thats the way to get these things. Educate yourself which we are all doing , know whats going on we are going from a third dimension entity into a fourth dimension entity it will be worth it in the end i assure you they feed off the negativity of this planet so dont give them any thats starving them in a sense when the planet reaches a certain point which it is doing at the moment they can no longer function and the balance will be on our side. its all about positvety and not giving them our energy to feed off

The point cannot be overstated; the 'positive thinking' ideas in this thread are not merely rhetorical attempts to feel empowered in the face of a malevolent global conspiracy. Some posts probably are just that of course. For example, the following platitudinous, sound-bite responses in the thread, all of which are standalone comments which do not expand the idea any further (and which are ruthlessly attacked by other members in the forum as we shall see later on), may well be informed by Icke's framework, but I cannot infer this from the comments alone:

DON'T WORRY... SMILE... BE HAPPY

Everything is going to be alright

Good always triumphs over evil

Dont let the bastards get you down

You Can Bring a Lit Candle Into A Dark Room, and Light It Up, Making the Darkness Run. You Can't Bring Darkness Into a Room and Expect The Light To Dash Away

By contrast, the long quote above provides a relatively detailed justification that simply possessing a positive mind-set is a genuine and concrete resistance strategy against the elite, given the perception of that elite's power. Thoughts are understood as energy, and positive thoughts are argued to resonate at a higher vibration of energy, which directly combat the extra-terrestrial entities who feed off lower-vibrational forms generated by negative emotions like sadness and fear. Goals, means and environment in this context are all ontologically grounded, so to speak, in the realm of positive and negative energy vibrations. It would be easy for casual observers (or, say, social movement scholars) of this discourse to dismiss the positive thinking recommendations in this thread as airy-fairy, new-age nonsense devoid of political content, but given the discursive constraints imposed by Icke's conception of the NWO I would suggest it can absolutely be understood as an empowering discourse of resistance as defined in Chapter 1. Here we see an example of positive thinking employed as a weapon to "vaporise" the NWO elite:

The NWO feeds on fear... they will be vaporised with love ... And the more people that live in the love vibration, fear will dissolve.. and we can start to be truly free. Change yourself.. change the world

Conversely, negative emotional energy is viewed as a weapon of the NWO:

By controlling the media and stirring up fear they get us all to direct huge amounts of fearful negative energy into thoughtforms they want energized

It is important to understand that however bizarre this discussion may seem at first glance, it maintains an overall coherence such that it can be analysed in the same way, using Melucci's notion of an action system, as the survivalist discussion thread analysed in Chapter 4, or indeed, I would argue, the 'what can and should be done' resistance discourse of any social or political movement. The problems and solutions are constructed, developed and contested communicatively in the discussion thread in exactly the same way as in Chapter 4. Indeed we also find practical, direct resistance strategies being suggested, certainly more 'direct' in terms of confrontation than the strategies of escape which are dominant in the discussion in Chapter 4:

If the world is run by people under the influence of evil and negative entities then the only way you are going to overcome this state of affairs is to take on those entities by creating a positively charged spiritual atmosphere around the earth. I also think it is something we can all do. How hard is it for every person in here to, say, visualise the earth surrounded by dark clouds which are then broken up by rays of light and love? visualisation acts upon the unconscious so why should it not

work? every act that a person performs is created in the same way, you see yourself doing it then energy flows into it and it begins to take shape.

An immediate response to this from another forum member suggests scepticism at the efficacy of such a strategy, as they ask, “do you agree that there is a very big chance that absolutley fuck all will happen if people did this ??”. Nonetheless, throughout the thread there is a strong sense of optimism and empowerment when citing Icke’s ideas, to the extent that the ruthless, murderous malevolence of the NWO elite, on which there is almost universal consensus in the forum, is nothing to be afraid of, not even the prospect of being killed by them:

When you get the direct experience that you are consciousness beyond all form, either through meditative experience or through a teaching plant - you'll realize there is NOTHING THEY CAN DO TO YOU. What is the worst they can do to you? Kill you? No they can't. Your consciousness will merely shift to a different dimension. They can't do anything to you.

This makes for a fascinating contrast with the conceptions of agency represented in the Above Top Secret thread analysed in Chapter 4. The arguments there centred around whether the agents of the NWO are indeed capable of murdering the masses and if so whether the strategy should be one of fight or flight. Certainly no Above Top Secret member declared that being killed is both likely and nothing to be afraid of, a concept which is unique to the David Icke forum (although arguably one may imagine someone with strong religious beliefs regarding the immortality of the soul to express something similar). In the David Icke thread, agency for the members and humanity in general is constructed in almost ‘all or nothing’ terms; what most people might assume to be practical, empirical strategies of resistance (protests etc.) are deemed ineffective since it doesn’t solve the real problem, so instead the way forward is simply to transcend the entire known physical universe such that one becomes omnipotent and thus untouchable by the malevolent elite. As I mention earlier, the key is in discursively constructing a reduction in the perceived ‘power gap’ between the heroes and villains. Presented with such a totalising, all-encompassing global malevolent conspiracy, while Basham (2003) argues that there is nothing you can do about it, this thread demonstrates that it is possible provided you construct your own agency in even more totalising terms than the elite. Some might argue that spiritual ascension is in fact a strategy of escape rather than direct resistance per se, and in that way is no different from hiding in the woods. It could be, deep down of course, but I can’t possibly know that. What is certainly clear from the affective nature of the discourse is that a strategy of spiritual ascension is presented, at least in some of the posts, as an empowering act to defeat the Annunaki, as well as an ultimate goal for humanity in itself. Furthermore, if ‘real’ reality

is a state of ‘infinite oneness’ and the physical realm is purely an illusion as Icke argues, then physical or ‘five sense’ dangers do not pose much of a threat. As one member puts it, “death is not the end, we are spiritual beings, We are spirit endowed entities in electromagnetic bio-acoustic bodies and spirit never dies”. This is clearly not a typically religious conception of the soul’s immortality as one might expect at first glance. Although I shan’t pretend that I fully understand the theory or mechanics underlying such a definition of human existence, it is based on Icke’s ideas around the nature of reality rather than those of any mainstream religion. Icke himself frequently describes the human body as being merely a ‘spacesuit’, that human experience exists primarily in the third, ‘five sense’ dimension. The ultimate goal is consciousness ‘ascension’ to a higher dimension of existence. Figure 5.4 illustrates this idea:

Figure 5.4: Icke’s visual representation of the reality of the human body (Icke 2010: 2)

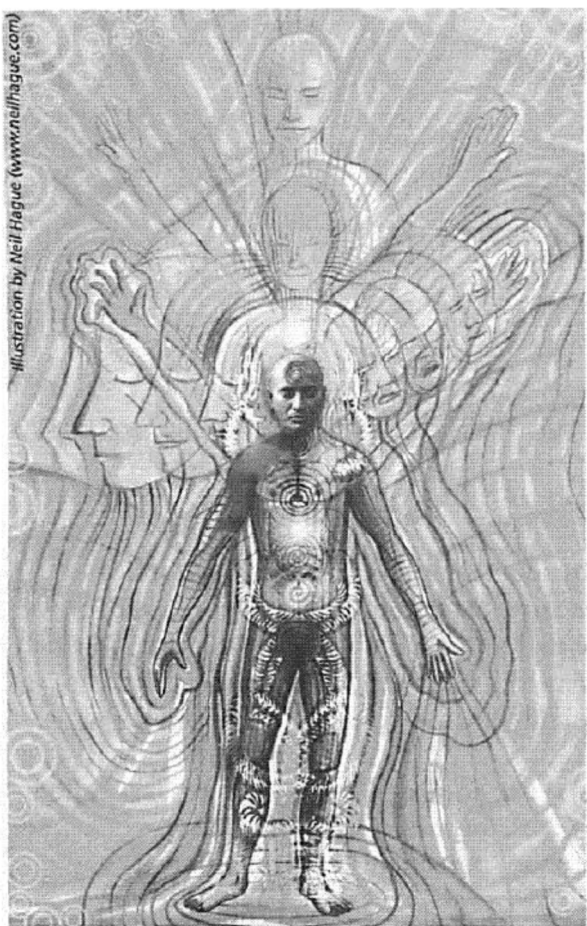


Figure 1: *The human body is only one level of our Infinite Consciousness. The body is not who we are, it is a vehicle to experience this virtual-reality universe.*

One of the most important goals according to Icke of the NWO elite, and especially the extra-terrestrial entities at the controls behind the scenes, is not merely a tyrannical single global government to control the masses, but rather to suppress humanity from achieving infinite consciousness as multidimensional spiritual beings. This is an important difference in comparison with many of the other NWO threads especially in the Above Top Secret forum. There the problem is defined wholly (notwithstanding Above Top Secret members who also espouse Icke's ideas, of which there are many) in 'five sense' terms: wars and bloodshed, concentration camps, diseases, microchipping and so on. Icke agrees with all of these, but the ultimate reason behind it all is to keep humanity in this low-vibrational energy frequency, preventing them from ascending to infinite consciousness. One forum member echoes this idea:

We must first see that we have been 'programmed' into seeing ourselves as 'useless beings....totally powerless' and then begin to see ourselves anew until this identify becomes part of our DNA. This will be a long (probably over 3,000 years) and complex but enjoyable process.....as more and more light and joy flows into us as we 'remember' what we are truly are... These are the ideas that I believe the Elite have hidden for centuries because they know that once people start UNDERSTANDING and using them they'll see what a fucking MAGICAL universe we are really living in

I cannot say whether any of this is true or simply delusional; what I can say is that there is nothing about the above quote that suggests that this particular conspiracy theory is perceived as 'disabling' in affective terms. Another member similarly notes that "it will only be through the realization and release of the divine power within us all that will beat this once and for all", while another agrees that "we are powerful beyond our comprehension". Conversely, the supposed power of the NWO is nothing of the sort and "their power is an illusion that we allow them to have". The adversary in this context is understood to have suppressed both the (incomprehensible) divine power within all of humanity, and the knowledge of it in the first place. The mechanism of this suppression is via keeping humanity at a low vibrational energy, which in turn is achieved by emotional experiences of fear, anger and sadness. In other words, negativity itself is a weapon of the conspiracy.

To further underscore the notion of negativity as the central problem to be overcome, members are told simply to ignore others' pessimistic posts, as they are as much to blame as the NWO, since thoughts are argued to create reality:

Stop reading all these people who vibrate at the lowest rung of negativity. You'll find lots of them on this forum who will tell you that we are all fucked and life is

shit. That is their belief so that IS the reality they will and no doubt right now are experiencing. But it does not HAVE to be your reality.

Why are you letting all these negative, we're-all-fucked scenarios dominate your life and steal all your attention. You can get so terrified by these images of the future that your life NOW passes you by.. There will always be the pessimists who will predict the worst of everything. Don't let them draw you into their negative downwards spiral or you will experience their reality. In truth, there is NOTHING to be depressed about.

5.5 Five sense reality

However, the positive thinking approach does not go uncontested in this thread. Far from it. One member agrees with the importance of spirituality and positivity encouraged by others in the discussion, but the response indicates the greater importance of 'five sense reality' in the context of the NWO:

I have had first hand experience of everything starting to go right by altering my emotion, and I believe that's at the core of what you are talking about... But the problem is if I'm in Dresden I still get killed, don't I?

Another member puts the point across much more starkly:

Just clear this up for me, YOU think that all those millions of people that got murdered and gassed and starved and died the most horrific deaths imaginable wouldn't of went through that experience if they didn't have negative thoughts ?? Is that what your saying ??

Throughout the thread the (extremely heated) debate hinges upon the discursive battle between 'five sense reality' and 'infinite consciousness' as detailed in Icke's writings. Posts promoting positive thinking emphasise such action in primarily general, abstract and even metaphorical terms (although in many cases these are of course still presented as practical goals and means). By contrast, the posts condemning this approach frequently cite concrete, 'real-world' examples such as people suffering at the hands of NWO actions. While many posts in this thread clearly and deliberately conflate thoughts with reality, others draw a fundamental ontological distinction and this thought / reality dichotomy is employed for rhetorical effect numerous times in the thread:

while you daydream and procrastinate, youre prepared to let the NWO to carry on murdering and plundering us all?

Very easy to lose yourself in the whole concept of consciousness from the comfort of your own home sat there using the Internet not caring about if a bomb is going to land on top of you any minute or where your next meal is coming from... Tell ya what you say what you have just said to someone from Iraq that knows about the NWO and Illuminati but he has experienced full on what these sadistic cunts are capable of. Tell him to go and sort his life out and then he wouldn't have the desire to murder those cock suckers even though he knows that they are responsible for the death of his family. See how that would go down.

your view seems to have no concrete endgame... and therefore it's hope and faith... which isn't good enough in my book as people are being killed right now as others have said

I have studied all the spiritual stuff, seen the docs and yeah it's a great concept. And I do get the whole message. But sorry, it isn't the answer to the problems that are facing us and it's most definitely no solution. Somewhere along the line some of us are going to have to get our hands dirty and fight this shit

Some people on this forum are just more anchored in reality than you are... That's not negative, it's just acknowledging the truth for what it is, without looking away and making up a fantasy world to believe in where everything is puppies and kittens and ice cream cones

the looking at yourself shite, does not apply to this present situation on this planet, even the elite are restricted to arming, and operating on a very physical level, on this level, so the answer is to disarm them on a physical level period

The 'five sense reality' proponents in the thread reject the consciousness-based strategies primarily on moral grounds, deriding it as inaction compared to the alternative suggestions which advocate a more direct, physical approach (for example citizens' arrests of key Illuminati members). Insults are thrown towards other members of the forum. While expressions of immorality in the context of anti-NWO discussion forums has been overwhelmingly on the controlling agents of the NWO themselves, which is hardly surprising since as with the thread analysed in Chapter 4, such moral outrage statements are often amplified to characterise the elites as pure evil, but at certain points in this thread we witness more anger expressed towards other forum members than towards the NWO!

these 'people' anger me more than the elite, i am sick of their selfish and cowardly ducking and diving its part of the reason, why the elite are running wild

It's all the pie and sky concepts and the " oh everything will be ok " attitude of people that are supposedly " AWAKE ". That makes me want to puke

The cowardice insult is certainly reminiscent of the discourse used in the survivalist discussion thread on Above Top Secret. The difference here is that in the Above Top Secret thread the 'flight' proponents drew upon arguments of realism and rationality in the context of the overwhelming military might of the NWO, such that any direct confrontation would result in certain death. In this thread however, those accused of being cowards argue that a positive mindset is in fact a means to combat the NWO. The insults even extend to David Icke himself:

If Icke truly believed that statement then why would he give two flying fucks about Illuminati, NWO, reptilians controlling the planet etc etc etc. And I am a great fan of Icke, but after hearing one of his talks does it leave you with a feeling that it's a great time to be alive ?? Seriously. No it doesn't.

It is difficult from my perspective to disagree with this comment. The horrors of the conspiracy Icke describes are so much more severe than the typical representations of the NWO. The NWO described in the Above Top Secret thread in chapter 4 is doubtless comprised of ruthless, bloodthirsty, evil elites set on controlling the world. But in Icke's work we read of satanic, blood-drinking, paedophilic and mass-murdering reptilian aliens who have controlled humanity for millennia and who literally possess human political elites and literally feed upon our fear and sadness, and who furthermore cannot even be seen in the three-dimensional world (notwithstanding the witness reports of these elites 'shape-shifting'). This last sentence probably sounds absurd to the reader and to an extent that is my intention, but Icke would certainly not disagree with any of the core elements contained therein, although he would probably suggest that the way it is summarised is misleading and cherry-picked, a suggestion which I concede. But the point is that to describe Icke's framework for the conspiracy as the stuff of nightmares would be a monumental understatement. New World Order militia rounding up civilians into concentration camps, as imagined in the Above Top Secret survival thread, is several orders of magnitude less frightening than what Icke describes. Yet his conclusion is that it's all actually nothing to be afraid of because it's all a 'virtual reality' illusion since we are multidimensional beings comprising a 'real' reality that is simply infinite love and consciousness. Even if what he claims is all true (and if it is then the solution of spiritual ascension would make sense as a valid strategy of resistance within such a discourse), the contrast between the horror of the conspiracy and the conclusion that there is nothing to be afraid of means that the negativity of the above quote is certainly understandable.

5.6 Direct confrontation and the power of the people / sheeple

While many of the quotes cited in this chapter can be understood as ideas of direct resistance, given the nature of reality presented in Icke's work, we nonetheless see plenty of suggestions for resistance of the 'five sense' variety. Many posts in the thread, much like the dominant discussion in the David Icke thread analysed in Chapter 7, suggest strategies of simple non-compliance with the system, for example:

Tell me EXACTLY what we can do? Easy just say "NO"... How can you have a Army if there are no willing soldiers which prefer jail instead murdering? How can they have a Democratic elected President if no sheep Votes for them? How could you poison the population by Vaccines if no one excepts them? How can they make trillions if you don't buy stuff from there super Malls & instead buy all your stuff from small private shop owners? How can you build weapons if people refuse to work in the weapon industry? How could the MSM brainwash you if you don't follow the MSM. How could you be chipped if you don't except it?

While earlier comments quoted in this chapter demonstrate a perception of human agency that is powerful (in some instances so powerful as to be "beyond comprehension"), I imagine a social movement scholar, or authors on conspiracy theory such as Fenster, Basham, Melley or Wheen, could argue that such a discourse is merely a (more or less) delusional attempt to redefine a sense of purposeful, personal agency, a search for a feeling of control in an existence which is perceived ultimately to be "at the mercy of secretive, impersonal forces" (Wheen 2004: 12). However, the above quote offers eminently practical and traditional suggestions of resistance via non-compliance and 'voting with one's feet', so to speak. Here we find a much more optimistic view of the 'five sense' power of the masses, with the clear implication that the elite depends for their power on the collaboration of those masses. This is certainly in contrast to the perception of the masses throughout most of the rest of the thread, as the following quotes illustrate:

thats all good and well but if you haven't noticed about 98% of the population are well and truly sheepled

We are going to have to wait till the sheep wake up

The odds of nearly every single person on the planet who is not part of the elite simultaneously refusing to serve the elite at any given time, are so low, they are effectively infinitesimal

I have mentioned several times elsewhere in this thesis about the problematic nature of the use of the term 'sheeple' to describe the majority of the human population. There is a contradiction implicit throughout the entirety of the conspiracy theory discussion forums, where the unenlightened masses are derided as unthinking and (more or less willingly) subservient and yet I have found that by far the most dominant strategy to defeat the NWO suggested in these forums is simply to 'wake people up' by exposing the conspiracy, with the belief that if enough people are awake to the reality of the NWO, a spontaneous uprising would take place that would defeat their plans. One post in the thread makes this point very effectively:

People, not "Sheeple" (I hate that word) because how can you make someone aware by insulting their intelligence like that straight of the bat. If you see yourself as not a "sheeple" then you see yourself better than someone else who is simply unaware

In fact there is a far stronger belief in the potential of the masses in the David Icke forums than on Above Top Secret, due in large part to the overwhelmingly positive outlook on existence and the nature of humanity as being part of the reality of infinite love. The following post still cannot resist using the contemptuous 'sheep' label yet the content of the post itself certainly views humanity in a positive light and endowed with the ability to overwhelm the NWO:

it only takes a spark to make a fire and as yet I don't think we have seen the event to make the spark. Everyone makes mistakes, tptb are no different - I'm waiting for them to make the mistake that will expose themselves to the sheep then lets see what will happen

The particularly interesting element of this quote is a phenomenon I have also described earlier in this thesis, the notion of deferred responsibility, that defeating the NWO by humanity will just occur at some point. Here it's just a matter of "waiting" to "see what will happen" when, presumably, the masses will rise up as soon as the NWO stumbles or the people become awake. In other instances, the very act of awareness is viewed as a goal in itself, as opposed to being a precursor to direct resistance by the masses:

It's starts in your mind. It starts with a conscious effort to be aware. Society is trying like all heck for you to be unaware. You willfully choose to not accept the status quo. You willfully choose not to live in fear. You willfully choose not to "buy into" what they tell you to buy into. You willfully choose to love and accept and also reject that, which you know with hinder you in being the free individual

you were born to be in this dimension.

all we need is a CRITICAL MASS of people to really understand and LIVE OUT these ideas and they will spread automatically throughout the entire collective unconscious.

However, more often awareness is understood as a tool towards overcoming the NWO. Another post about the 'five sense' power of the masses is, without giving away too many specifics, nonetheless much more specific than the above 'wait and see' quote:

if we ALL gather together in our masses, we will be unstoppable and we can physically remove, and dismantle them completely

Here, rather than waiting to see what will happen, the concept of the power of the masses relates to the physicality of overwhelming numbers of humanity and the implicit potential to remove the elites physically from political power. This same forum member expands on this idea with the following strategy of direct confrontation, drawing upon the notion of the masses outnumbering the elite and furthermore using the legal system to do so:

I am talking about shutting down the illuminati families, and their puppets and oppo's which number a few thousand globally at the most, Its simple but obviously terrifying for most people even the awake ones. Firstly we ALL in our millions citizens arrest them, then we investigate them all, then we charge them, then we convict them, and then we lock them all up, or prefferbly execute them dont you think these scumbags have serious price to pay for all the crimes they have committed on our people globally? So that means it is the 'awake' peoples responsibility to bring these scumbags to book

Such a suggestion is roundly rejected as doomed from the start due to the perception of (military and political) power among NWO elites as the following quotes show:

Storm the Rothschilds etc you got no chance they'd blow your balls off! Or you'd end up in prison for the rest of your life.

Trying to fight them directly will give them something they want, a rebellion and a reason and excuse to impose martial law and deploy the military against their own countries.

This of course echoes the 'flight versus fight' arguments in the Above Top Secret thread in Chapter 4. Direct physical confrontation is no solution because it would be ineffective, as (at least in the five

sense realm) the elites have overwhelming force on their side. However, in contrast to the fight or flight debate analysed in Chapter 4 where fighting is dismissed on the grounds of realism, that the agents of the NWO are simply too powerful in this regard, in this David Icke forum discussion non-violence is cited overwhelmingly on ideological grounds based on Icke's ideas about the power of positivity energy and infinite love, and summarised most succinctly with his frequently-quoted slogan, "you do not fight for peace, you peace for peace" (2003: 238):

The only battle we have to fight is with our own egos, and learn to listen to the voice from our higher selves aligning us into a vibration of unconditional love and the realisation that we are all one.

just keep smiling because eternally you are better than the victory a fight would give you.

Love never uses hate to produce more love. Until we realize this there will always be conflict with those who think they are good with those that know they are evil, both are negative because both are fighting

In addition, fighting of any kind is not just viewed as misguided whether in five sense reality or otherwise, but moral arguments are made such that fighting the NWO makes one no better than the them:

Have you even ever BOTHERED to read anything that Icke writes on this subject... I mean you're on HIS forum - yet you think that killing all your enemies is the solution. So if that is YOUR mentality - how do you differ from the Elite, who have the exact SAME mentality.

your plan is to just have them killed in some way? That would make us mass murderers, and even though they might be evil, I sure wouldnt kill any of them

When asked, contemptuously, how they would react if the NWO stormed their house and attempted to take their loved ones away, one forum member responds:

As for what I'd do if someone I love is being dragged out the door - try and stop it happening with words, then put myself in the way (literally they'd have to take them over my dead body). If I were to kill the person trying to take my loved one away, I'd be taking someone else's loved one away instead. Why would that be better? Sometimes it's better to let go of this existence willingly than perpetuate the system

As is expected, such a response does not go down too well with the member who asked the question:

So i guess that you have capitulated, and that youre going to live up your own asshole, when the going gets tough. Thats sad i'm afraid that youre a coward

As is also expected, there is no resolution to this particular debate in this discussion thread. The fundamental ontological perspectives and moral values are simply too far at odds with each other, even though members of this forum are (broadly) united in the fact that they are there to discuss Icke's theories. On the one hand are ideas about five sense reality being an illusion, while on the other hand the horrors of five sense reality as perpetrated by the NWO are the focal point of the problem, not just ontologically but morally. One side of the debate invokes solutions relating to love, spiritual ascension and positive thinking, while the other argues that violent justice and a dismantling of the entire political power structure is needed.

5.7 Conclusion

That is not to say, however, that consensus on any form resistance is unachievable in the David Icke forums. As we shall see in Chapter 7, which brings the resistance discourse 'back down to earth' via a discussion of concrete, micro level non-compliance strategies against institutional manifestations of the elite, we see a remarkable level of agreement and enthusiasm towards the idea that simply 'saying no' to the system can defeat the NWO. The most striking contrast is that whereas in this thread the agency (in terms of power) of the members had to be constructed as even more totalising than the already totalised elite's agency such that humans are perceived as "consciousness beyond all form" and furthermore immortal, in the non-compliance thread analysed in Chapter 7 there is no need to spiritually transcend the physical universe. Micro-scale non-compliance is deemed effective in that thread because the construction of elite power is such that the capacity for the NWO to act is dependent upon the masses complying with the system; as one post puts it, "The system relies on you using it to feed it". In this thread the members needed to be at one with infinite love in order to attain greater power than the elites, but in the thread examined in Chapter 7, the elite's power is significantly diminished and moreover is represented in a zero-sum exchange dynamic with the perceived power of humanity. As long as the perceived 'power gap' is reduced, it becomes possible to think about and discuss detailed resistance strategies with enthusiasm and hope. How one

achieves this discursive power gap reduction is not as important; one can construct oneself as possessing greater power than the adversary in multiple ways. In the David Icke forum this is typically achieved by reference to the immortal multidimensional nature of the human spirit and consciousness, but when the elite's power is defined as requiring the consent of the masses, then the solution is far easier: just say no.

Chapter 6: Informing the masses

lets do it! ppl we can! all we gotta do is conspire against them the same way they are conspiring against us. They arent god that im sure... so as humans they can be made to fall the same way they are making us fall

(Above Top Secret Thread, "[Can We Stop The NWO?](#)")

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I return to the Above Top Secret discussion forum, to a thread entitled simply, "Can We Stop The NWO?". In Chapter 4 the thread under analysis began with a detailed and specific conceptualisation of an imagined future NWO scenario, seeking responses from other members for strategies of survival given this initial frame of reference. Recall that one of the primary research aims of this thesis is not merely to demonstrate, contra Fenster (1999) and Basham (2003), that conspiracy theory is not necessarily disabling and that discussions of resistance go hand in hand with discussions of political grievance, but that differing conceptions of the problem shape and constrain the range and types of possible solutions. In short, the perceived agency (which I define in terms of power and morality; see Chapter 1) of the NWO elites affects the perceived agency of those seeking to resist them, including society at large. The opening post of the "NWO Survival Planning" thread analysed in Chapter 4 framed these elites as more or less omnipotent and ruthlessly malevolent. In such a discursive context it is hardly surprising that many of the most optimistic and empowering-sounding posts in that thread were still anchored in strategies of escape and survival, rather than containing any hope that the machinations of the NWO could actually be truly defeated. With the discussion thread analysed in this chapter however, there is no predefined concept of the NWO to start the discussion off and thereby shape the subsequent debate.

Consequently, we see greater flexibility in relation to the perceived capacity for action and the perceived morality of action, both for the members themselves and for the masses or potential supporters, and of course for the controlling agents of the NWO themselves. Expressions of pessimism and futility are nonetheless prevalent throughout the thread, but due to the more malleable and unrestricted conceptualisations of the conspiracy there exists a stronger affective sense of empowerment in the discourse contained in this Above Top Secret thread compared with the one in Chapter 4. In particular, the goal of exposing the conspiracy to the general public is presented as a significant and effective means towards the goal of overpowering the NWO, a notion that would not curry much favour in the "NWO Survival Planning" thread given the brutal and totalising conception of the adversary's power and (im)morality.

This chapter analyses a thread which contains three central discursive themes of resistance strategy: consciousness-raising, bridging the gap between the online discussions and the ‘offline’ world, and reducing the perceived ‘power gap’ between the villains on the one hand and the heroes and potential supporters on the other. The overriding objective throughout is recruiting the support of the masses, whether via getting them at the very least to agree with the problem at hand, or mobilising towards a political uprising. The chapter begins by exploring the perceived agency of the NWO elites in relation to power, morality and secrecy as contained within the discussion thread, before linking these ideas with proposed viable strategies of resistance. In contrast to the thread analysed in Chapter 4, the difference in the perceived agency of the elites results in proposed strategies of resistance that are far more ‘conventional’ in relation to traditionally-conceived social movements, including a strategy which suggests mobilising just such a movement. It continues by examining the shaping and constraining influence of the perceived (im)morality of the NWO on the efficacy of proposed resistance strategies along with perceptions of empowerment that accompany them. There exists a relatively solid consensus within this thread, as indeed in many others within the forums, that a primary goal should be to inform the masses, to ‘wake them up’ to the reality of the conspiracy. An underlying assumption of such a strategy, again a common theme throughout the forums, is that being informed is assumed to be a vital prerequisite for ‘offline’ resistance. The perceived importance of the ‘offline’ realm in relation to resistance is then analysed in more detail, and we see remarkable expressions of empowerment and optimism whenever such discussions arise (see Chapter 7 for a similarly enthusiastic discourse in the David Icke forum when discussing extremely minor acts of offline resistance). However, as with all discussion threads under analysis in this thesis, there is never any real consensus on the perceived efficacy and empowerment of resistance strategies and we see expressions of fear, apathy and futility particularly when the perceived ‘agency gap’, in terms of both power and morality, between the villains and the heroes and supporters is inflated to extreme levels.

6.2 A call for strategies to defeat the New World Order

The opening post of the thread provides no framework or definition of the NWO at all; instead it merely references it as the problem before asking other members to offer solutions:

While there may not be a way to stop it, we can expose it somehow. We should be calling the news stations with information, or calling someone in the government. We

could do SOMETHING. I for one think the NWO is evil. Does anyone have ideas? We could also make info packets on it. I would be willing to do that If you guys would take them and pass them out or leave them where people will see them.

Despite the absence of any definition of the NWO here, and despite it being a very short paragraph, the post is nonetheless remarkable in its density of recurrent themes relevant to the research questions of this thesis:

- (Im)morality of the New World Order: “I for one think the NWO is evil”
- (Positive) power and morality of the members themselves combined with the powerful emotional emphasis on the importance of resisting at all, via capitalisation: “We could do SOMETHING”
- Disempowerment: “While there may not be a way to stop it”
- Desire to communicative construction of solutions: “Does anyone have any ideas?”
- Goals: “we can expose it”
- Means: “We could also make info packets on it”
- Environment: reference to both government and media institutions as viable environmental resources
- Potential supporters: the “info packets” suggested are designed for the consumption of the general public

All of these themes can be found in this short post despite no details whatsoever being provided about what the NWO is actually perceived to be; it is simply assumed that other members understand the underlying problem. This indeed constitutes a more natural and informal conversation in comparison to the survival thread in Chapter 4 which set very clear terms of reference for the debate, and which consequently imposed tight restrictions on the range of acceptable responses from other members. One consequence of the absence of precision regarding defining the NWO in this thread however is that some responses note the difficulty of even conceiving of strategies of resistance without something resembling a clear and tangible definition of the adversary:

How can we stop the NWO when most of us have our own ideas of what it could be

we don't know who to fight against”

You can't stop ANYTHING until you know what it is

This also echoes Fenster's suggestion that political activists can “effect real social change only if they can identify both the specific economic and political structures that oppress and dominate the majority of the public” (2008: 46), something which conspiracy theorists apparently are unable to achieve since they can't even identify the problem. Perhaps the forum members who posted these responses would agree with him in that respect. For the most part however, the flexibility arising from the lack of a clearly defined NWO provides scope for a wider discussion about resistance. Of particular interest is that whereas conventional political and economic resistance strategies are largely absent within these forums, due to the intense mistrust of formal institutions as they tend to be perceived as under the control of the NWO elites, the thread contains multiple ‘traditional’ means of resistance towards the goal of overcoming the conspiracy.

6.3 Conventional activism

It is extremely rare in the conspiracy theory discussion forums to find any expression of faith or trust in the system of representative democracy. Indeed the discourses of many modern, traditionally-conceived, social and political movements argue that such a system in its present manifestation is illegitimate; Castells notes that for Occupy Wall Street and the various ‘Arab Spring’ movements of 2011, “the movements ignored political parties, distrusted the media, did not recognize any leadership and rejected all formal organization, relying on the Internet and local assemblies for collective debate and decision-making” (2012: 5). In this thread however, voting is recommended as a legitimate means to overcome the NWO:

Elect someone like Ron Paul. You may not agree with everything this man says but he would try to restore the constitution. If we could restore the constitution it rids the government of the corporation and the federal reserve. At that point the united states becomes a soverien country again which puts the brakes on the north american union. Foiling thier plans. You do not even have to know who the people are who would have the NWO. All you have to know is they can not do anything in the united states while the constitution is being enforced.

Recall my analysis in Chapter 2 of Castells' study on the US Patriots; while he made reference to their belief in a NWO as their primary adversary, this aspect was overshadowed by his representation of them as right-wing, nationalistic libertarian militias. The literature on conspiracy theory tends to ignore the notion that conspiracy theorists can also be political activists. But as I have emphasised a number of times, conspiracy theorists are never just conspiracy theorists and nothing else. They can be right wing libertarians or socialists or express any number of traditional political ideologies. It's perfectly reasonable to expect a nationalist libertarian to think and strategise about resistance, yet authors on the topic have usually ignored the fact that conspiracy theorists may share such political viewpoints. The 'ideal type' conspiracy theorist is presented in the literature as a lone puzzle-solver and dot-connector, obsessed with the purely intellectual pursuit of discovering the hidden truth of the world, and although I would not suggest that this isn't extremely common from my research, my point is that no human can ever be so perfectly pigeon-holed into one dominant identity. There is nothing intrinsic about believing in conspiracy theories that precludes someone from possessing any number of other identities, including political ones.

With that in mind, let's examine the above quote more closely. What is extremely rare compared to the vast majority of threads I have read on these forums is an expression of faith in an institutional power higher than that of the controlling agents of the NWO, namely the US constitution, which allows for a substantial sense of empowerment in relation to thinking about resisting. Basham's (2003) claim that there is simply nothing that can be done when faced with a malevolent global conspiracy is based on the assumption that the agents of the conspiracy control every aspect of political life. In this quote however, the NWO elites are perceived as powerless in comparison to the power of the constitution: "they can not do anything in the united states while the constitution is being enforced". Of course, a caveat here is that this member is concerned only with the potential impact of the NWO on the USA whereas typically the NWO is conceived as a global phenomenon enveloping all nation states and their governments. Nonetheless, it is striking that a mere document of ideological governing principles is reified and indeed glorified to such an extent that it is presented as possessing the power to stop the conspiracy completely in its tracks. However, this capacity can only be substantiated via a leading government agent who will act to enforce it, in this instance libertarian republican politician and presidential candidate Ron Paul. Without side-tracking too much into a discussion of Ron Paul's ideologies, suffice to say that he maintains a relatively wide base of support among members of conspiracy theory forums, at least for those members from the US and particularly in relation to his promise to abolish the US Federal Reserve, viewed by many as one of the most important institutional forces of the NWO; more precisely, it is an

empirical symbol of the phenomena of fractional reserve lending, digital backed money creation and debt-generation which are viewed as illegitimate and a primary means of social domination by the elites on a global scale, as the following post from a different forum member in the thread clarifies:

The Federal Reserve is perhaps the biggest financier in existence...It's not Federal & it Reserves nothing for a gold-based economy; All of the money in use is *counterfeit*, if you use the Constitution's definition of the word; It's not under the control of Congress, as described in the Constitution; The Federal Reserve (& the international *private* banking concerns that *form* the Federal Reserve) has been degrading the *international* economy for decades. Where does all of that "money" go? NWO & their programs & projects. The Federal Reserve, I don't believe, is the top of the pyramid, but due to it's power & influence, it must be real close to the top.

Regardless, within the 'elect Ron Paul' quote, the primary positive role assumed to be taken on by Ron Paul is that of enforcer of the US constitution. While it is not made explicit within this post, it is worth reminding the reader that the dominant form that the conception of the NWO takes among US Patriots is one of supranational institutions and elites seeking to destroy the autonomy and sovereignty of nation-states towards the goal of a single global government, and the most prevalent imagined manifestation of it involves UN troops marching on American cities (typically following some kind of government coup, collapse or capitulation following a 'false flag' catastrophe). This is in contrast to the conception of the NWO as it is found in the David Icke forums, where although a single global government is still accepted as a core NWO objective, it is secondary to the subjugation and domination of humanity and the human spirit. Thus it makes sense, in the context of the above quote, for an appropriate means towards the goal of preventing the NWO takeover of US sovereignty being the national defence of that sovereignty against the supranational forces of the conspiracy.

Elsewhere in the thread one member recommends good old fashioned organisation and mobilisation, which is worth quoting at length:

the only way we can win against them(or at least put their plans off by a few more decades) is to fight them using the same tools they use against us. So first thing that needs to happen is that some type of organization has to be made with the public intentions and notions being that the org exists to defeat any secret society and new world order agendas

Once this public organization is put in place, it could be financed by those who stand for truth, justice, and freedom. Celebrity endorsements, involve scholars, lawyers, some politicians, and other organizations.

The org wouldn't have any centralized figure or president, but would be a loose republic type structure so if the NWO wants to take out the pres, it wouldn't matter because the org is supported by the whole, so in order to take the org out, the whole thing would have to be squashed, and if it becomes global, there really is no stopping it.

This anti-NWO community would produce flyers, videos, public speaking events, expose criminals like Bush and his lies, and just an overall publicity campaign on what's going on with the NWO... Future plans could include financing safe havens, organic farms, communities, a trade/barter system in case the chip becomes law, and so on. The possibilities are endless....

In the context of the previous threads under analysis, this post is quite remarkable in its relative practicality, its conventional social movement mobilisation approach, its assumption of collective agency as having the capacity to overcome that of the NWO elites, and above all its mundanity, certainly in comparison with what we have seen in earlier chapters! Crucially, while the NWO is presented as illegitimate and a problem that requires solving, its controlling agents are not presented as brutally evil. The following section explores this idea in more detail as it is extremely important in the context of my definition of resistance discourse as detailed in Chapter 1.

6.4 The impact of New World Order (im)morality on expressions of empowerment

The two subsets of agency relevant to my use of the concept of resistance discourse relate to power and morality, both for the adversary and for the forum members (and of course the public at large), and the relative magnitudes of these elements as they exist within the discourse interact with each other and can shape and constrain ideas about resistance. In particular, based on my findings there appears to exist something of a 'bell curve' shape to the perceived morality of the agents of the NWO and the discursive consequences on the relative optimism and pessimism expressed towards resisting them in the forums. That some form of moral grievance is a prerequisite for thinking about resistance in the first place is well established, not only in Melucci's work (see Chapter 3 and in particular my unpacking of Melucci's notion of ideology in relation to an adversary's requisite illegitimacy) but among scholars of social movements more generally; Castells for instance argues that the Occupy Wall Street movement "surged as a largely spontaneous expression of outrage"

(Castells 2012: 185), which if anything inflates the constitutive power of grievance in relation to movement mobilisation too much. What is fascinating however is that the more evil the NWO is assumed to be and thus the more intense the grievance expressed, the more we see optimism and empowerment degenerating into pessimism and disempowerment. This not only fits the (exaggerated) idealised claims of Fenster and Basham in the conspiracy theory literature, but also Melucci's suggestion that "the response of the adversary, the tolerance or repression of collective action ... constitutes the decisive factor in a movement's pursuit of its objectives" (Melucci 1996: 324). Furthermore, Castells notes that "overcoming fear is the fundamental threshold for individuals to cross in order to engage in a social movement, since they are well aware that in the last resort, they will have to confront violence if they trespass the boundaries set up by the dominant elites to preserve their domination" (Castells 2012: 10). There is a 'goldilocks zone' of moral illegitimacy at play here; while it is certainly not a deterministic relationship, there is a definite and noticeable trend that the more brutal the perception of the agents of the NWO, the less we see expressions of optimism towards resisting it, as illustrated by the following four quotes from the discussion thread:

It is important to realize that fighting the NWO is not at all like fighting an adversary who fights fair or follows rules

A body of people who place no value on human life, and are willing to almost completely destroy the worlds population

DON'T TURN TO THE GOVERNMENT FOR HELP ... you go to them , all they'll do is set surveillance on you and others like you ... when they feel that you are actually interfering they'll eliminate you

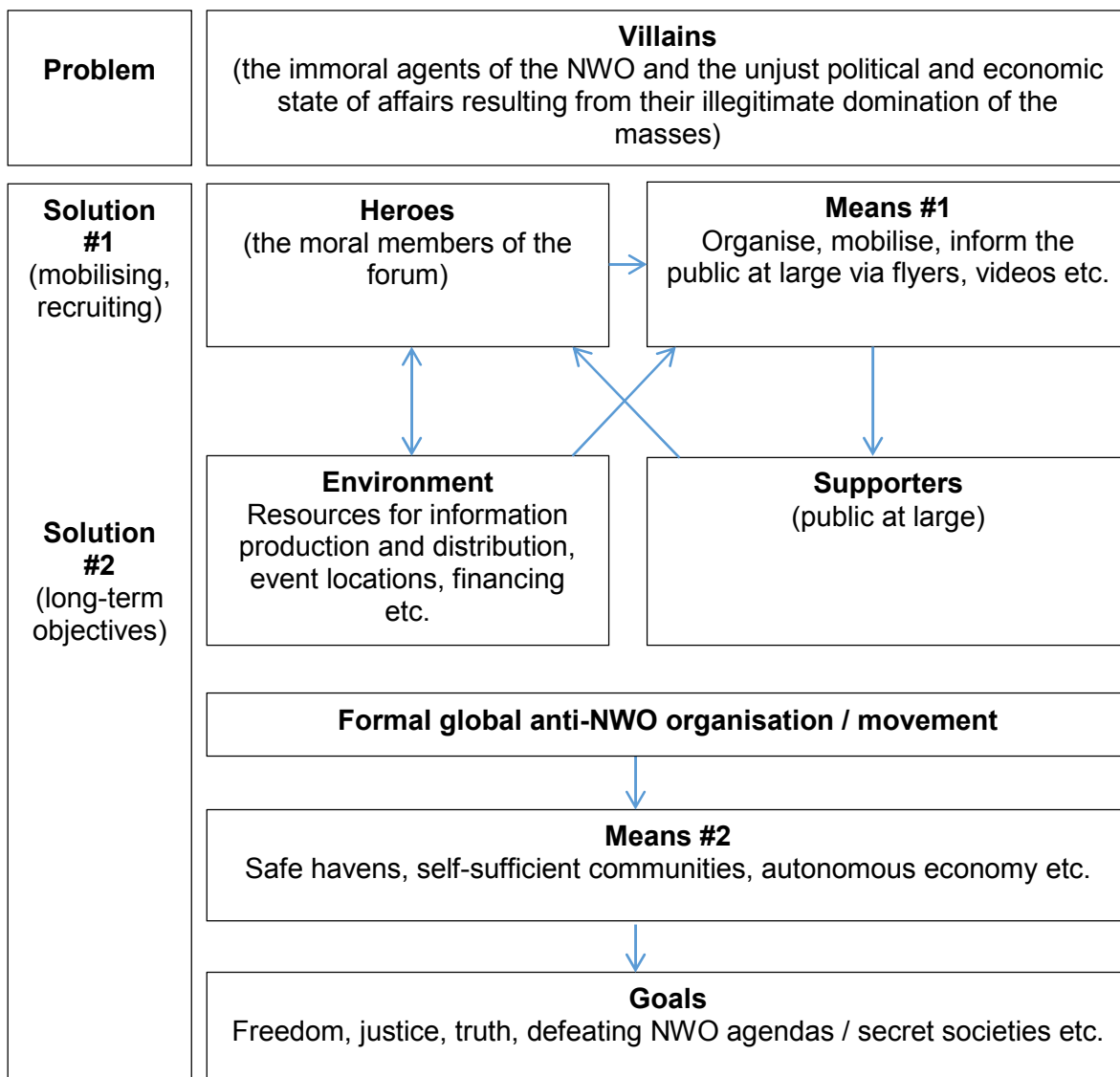
if anyone so much says the word revolution he'll be thrown into jail... revolutionaries have been murdered for this. Malcolm X, Black Panther Party, Che Guevera, etc

if u cause too much trouble, they may have something planned for u.

This is of course reminiscent of the survival strategies thread analysed in Chapter 4. Given the assumed malevolence of the NWO, the dominant resistance discourse was one of flight rather than fight, as directly confronting the elites would, it was suggested, result in certain death. However, reading the earlier long quote recommending traditional movement organisation and mobilisation, we do not see any reference to the NWO as evil. Illegitimate, yes. Requiring resistance and overpowering, yes, but there is nothing in that post that indicates fear of brutal retaliation by the elites. The NWO imagined in this post is one that is not only not as totalising in relation to the extent of the elites' power, but also in terms of their (im)morality. A reference is made towards the

NWO potentially murdering the US president (“take out the pres”) but there is none of the horror contained in so many posts within these forums that their forces would simply kill (or place into concentration camps) any collective movements seeking to protest or resist them directly. Indeed this member suggests that, once organised, such a movement would be immune to any individual assassination since “in order to take the org out, the whole thing would have to be squashed”. Furthermore, once the movement becomes large enough, “there really is no stopping it”. The optimism contained in this post is striking; not only are the elites not framed as all-powerful or evil, but we see a faith in collective agency, specifically the power of numbers, among the (organised) masses in order to resist. I explore this idea in more depth below, but for now the essential point is that a more moderate definition of the New World Order in terms of its (im)morality allows for an eminently practical ‘action system’ in Melucci’s terms for a traditional social movement mobilisation method of resistance via formal collective action and organisation. Indeed this single post, as admittedly conventional and even dull compared to most other suggestions in the conspiracy theory forums, encapsulates all the core elements of Melucci’s action system and ideology along with my agency-centred notion of ‘resistance discourse’:

Figure 6.1 ‘Action system’, ‘ideology’ and ‘resistance discourse’ played out in a single forum post



The application of these concepts and how they interact with each other in the context of this forum post is however less valuable for the purposes of this thesis than how they combine to contribute to the affective attitudes towards the potential efficacy of resistance. Is conspiracy disabling as Fenster (1999) suggests? Is there nothing that can be done about a malevolent global conspiracy, as Basham (2003) suggests? The answer of course is that it depends, and the key is in how the problem itself is defined. Most importantly, expressions of relative optimism or pessimism towards solving the problem of the NWO are shaped and constrained by the perceived power and morality of the adversaries. In Chapter 5 members of the David Icke forum suggested strategies of positive thinking, love and spiritual ascension which make sense as viable means and goals against an adversary defined as reptilian aliens who feed off negative human emotions. In Chapter 4, the

enemy was defined in such viciously evil terms that the discussion was overwhelmingly dominated by strategies of escape, hiding and survival. In addition to the constraining discursive impact of the perception of the adversary, a further crucial element (which is itself shaped by how the problem is defined) in shaping resistance strategy discussion is the perceived agency (in relation to power and morality) of the heroes and supporters.

6.5 Informing the masses

As I have mentioned earlier in the thesis, by far the most dominant means of resistance proposed within the online conspiracy theory discussion forums has been the dissemination of information to the masses in order to expose the conspiracy. As I have also mentioned, for the most part this strategy is presented in standalone terms, as an end in itself, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly operating under the assumption that if enough people find out the truth of the conspiracy, they will rise up and revolt. I have previously invoked the psychological concept of ‘deferred responsibility’ in this regard and I have no doubt that many social movement scholars would view such a strategy as a ‘cop out’, the consequence of an anodyne sentiment that allows one to vocalise one’s outrage towards the system without doing anything ‘concrete’ to resist it. This is certainly an unfair critique, grounded arguably in what Melucci derides as the dominant social movement research agenda which focuses attention only on their empirically identifiable, “visible aspects (personalities and events, public mobilizations, acts of violence” (Melucci 1989: 27). Similarly, Castells suggests that such a critique is based on the flawed assumption of a “productivist vision of social action. If nothing concrete is accomplished, there is failure” (Castells 2012: 143). Information dissemination is vital for any social movement for two reasons: firstly, as a recruitment tool, to convince potential supporters from the public to join the cause. As Melucci writes, for any social movement, “one of the fundamental tasks is that of making evident the illegitimacy of the adversary, and the negative nature of its position, in the eyes of both neutral observers and potential supporters” (Melucci 1996: 352). In figure 6.1 above I distinguish two ‘solution stages’, the latter comprising the eventual defeat of the adversary, but the former, building support and increasing numbers to form a mobilised collective, is a crucial precursor. In relation to Occupy Wall Street, Castells writes, echoing Melucci’s approach to what is important in movement research (See Chapter 3) that the communicative processes plays a fundamental role in building collective action: “As important as the material organization of the occupation was, it was the process of

communication that enabled the movement to find internal cohesion and external support” (2012: 171). Indeed for the Above Top Secret forum member who posted the formal organisation suggestion, sheer strength in numbers is presented as a protective shield against any individuals being assassinated by the NWO since “it wouldn’t matter because the org is supported by the whole, so in order to take the org out, the whole thing would have to be squashed”.

The second purported benefit is simple exposure with the goal of changing societal consciousness about a particular problem generally, under the assumption that this is a prerequisite for major social change. This idea is mirrored in Castells’ work on recent social movements, where he underscores the centrality of information dissemination towards the goal of public awareness and shifting public consciousness. With reference to the Spanish Indignadas, for example, he writes that “from the early stages of the movement it was clear that the main action concerned raising consciousness among its participants and in the population at large” (2012: 133). He goes even further to suggest that, firstly, a wider change in consciousness should be considered a necessary precursor to any form of social or political change (ibid.: 227) and secondly, that such a strategy is the most effective approach to bring about fundamental systemic change: “If a majority of people think in ways that are contradictory to the values and norms institutionalized in the laws and regulations enforced by the state, the system will change... This is why the fundamental power struggle is the battle for the construction of meaning in the minds of the people” (ibid.: 5). One issue I have with Castells’ discussion of this particular topic is that he attempts to ‘prove’ consciousness shifts and public support (as a consequence of Occupy Wall Street actions and online information dissemination employing forums, live streams, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Tumblr) via results of various national opinion poll surveys about Occupy Wall Street and the political and economic issues relevant to it (ibid.: 193), along with a longitudinal comparison of survey results over several years (ibid.: Appendix). As intuitively plausible as it might seem, it requires a significant epistemological leap of faith to prove specific societal consciousness shifts arising from the dissemination of information. Despite this, on a micro (individual) level it of course makes sense that becoming informed about a moral political problem (assuming the receiver of the information agrees that it is a problem) is a precursor to grievance, a change in individual consciousness and, potentially, social action in the form of resistance. Such an assumption certainly forms the basis of the ‘awakening’ strategies so prevalent in the conspiracy theory discussion forums.

The following succinct posts in the “Can We Stop The NWO?” thread encapsulate this idea, anchoring it in the basis of the NWO’s power over the consciousness of the masses:

the actual implementation of the NWO *relies* upon the ignorance of the masses before they can come to fruition...This indicates that they *can* be stopped simply by making the masses aware of what they are doing... The trick is to breed *awareness* in people that it doesn't have to go "their way". The first step to awareness of the NWO is to *expose* it to the People at a level that cannot be denied ... , if The People are *aware* of what's going on then The People can stand up as a group & *change* the government. This would effectively "disarm" the NWO of (at least one of) it's primary tool(s) & weapon(s)

Of course we can stop the NWO. Knowledge is all that humanity needs to win. Ignorance is all the enemy needs to win.

when you can make them question the world around them the NWO loses its power

The logic here certainly cannot be faulted: mass ignorance is represented as a necessary requirement for the NWO to achieve its global domination objectives; therefore mass awareness makes perfect sense as a direct and effective strategy of resistance. Again this highlights the importance of how the agency of the adversary is defined, in relation to how this shapes or constrains the perceived agency of those wanting to defeat the adversary. When the NWO’s power is framed in terms of government, military and police control (as in Chapter 4), strategies of direct confrontation seem foolhardy if not outright suicidal. When that power is framed in terms of secrecy and lies however, then straightforward solutions are more forthcoming. A more atypical illustration would be the discourse analysed in the David Icke discussion thread in Chapter 5, where the (extra-terrestrial) adversary’s core source of power over the masses was framed in terms of feeding off negative human emotional energy, resulting in suggested solutions that required nothing more onerous or risky than thinking positively. The above three quotes are also remarkable in their positivity resulting from their perceived capacity for action to overcome the NWO, but of course in this context positivity is an affective attitude resulting from the increased sense of power rather than an end in itself as with the David Icke forum discussion thread in Chapter 5.

Another member echoes this sentiment, though the post concludes that, rather than awareness constituting an effective strategy in itself, its proposed benefit is that once a critical mass is achieved it will incite the masses to resist (though no further elaboration is offered on what form such resistance would take):

The best thing you can do to fight the nwo is to try go educate others of their existence. Once a high enough %age of the world population are aware of its existence we wont have to fight it. They need our aprooval and exceptance of their nwo. Thats why they spend so much time and money mind washing ppl with their media, and psytracking ppl with entertainment. They need us to execpt it. So be exposing them and their plans ppl will resist.

Once such an awareness / ignorance dynamic (for the villains as well as the heroes and potential supporters) is established as the fundamental basis of agency for resistance, a number of strategic means can be proposed. Of particular interest is that the four quotes below propose means which utilise the 'offline' environment in order to disseminate information (rather than just, for instance, spamming blogs or forums or even just emailing others online), connecting the online strategic debates among themselves with direct actions in the 'real' world of other people in their local communities and beyond:

MONEY = write things like "GOOGLE NWO" or "MICROCHIPPING PEOPLE IS BAD" or "WHAT IS THE AMERO?" or "911 WAS AN INSIDE JOB" or "VOTE RON PAUL", on the edge of your paper notes

take a projector, connect a laptop - and for a few hrs, display a public sercice announcement warning of the NWO on a large building in a public area

my favourite thing to do in recent months has been to (secretly) spray-paint the word illuminati above or beside every gang-tag in my area, after a while i heard people asking people who is the illuminati

Putting signs up around your community, telling people to be aware of what might be comming in the future. Perhaps they will not believe you but at least they will be aware of it and suspicious and questioning

6.6 Agency, the offline world and empowerment

The objective of raising awareness, 'waking up the people' in society as a whole, is typically the first link between the ideas of the forums being self-contained by members of those forums, and reaching out to the outside world. I refer to this as the 'offline world' in order to provide a dichotomous analytical dimension with debate within the forums, and the distinction between online and offline in this regard offers some interesting insights into resistance discourse, particularly when it comes to affective statements of motivation towards fighting back against the NWO. I have found in general in the discussion forums that where the online / offline relationship is

invoked within strategies of resistance, the associated emotional attitudes are, more often than not, optimistic. There are a huge number of posts across the forums which express outrage not just at the NWO but at the (offline) inaction of other members or what they frequently refer to as the ‘conspiracy theory community’ more generally. Such expressions can be found in extreme form as in Chapter 4 where Above Top Secret members derided others as being ‘cowards’ for not doing anything to fight the NWO. Similarly in this thread, one member passionately underscores the importance of doing something rather than nothing:

You talk about what can we do but what the heck are you doing? You have a mouth and a voice? If people refuse to listen then start getting aggressive, dont let people make you believe your some wacko conspiracy theorist, give them everything youve got, hammer the crap into them 24/7

In fact the opening post of the thread states, “We could do SOMETHING”, emphasising via capitalisation that any form of action being better than doing nothing, in this case the suggested action being the production of physical “info packets” to pass on to the general public. Another post seeks to highlight the urgency of action in this regard while simultaneously underscoring the positively perceived capacity for collective action to defeat the NWO:

now is the time to expose the conspiracy against us for the evil force it is how these conspirators wish to rule us like cattle. to do this we must unite and organize against this threat to our freedom its the only way together we will be able to deal with the media controlling, power elite that plots against us. Those against the NWO must unite with one voice!

One particularly striking post, which from a purely strategic perspective would appear better suited to the ‘NWO Survival Planning’ discussion thread analysed in Chapter 4, further illustrates the sense of empowerment associated with the idea of doing something in the offline world:

Move out of the cities, establish a low key, minimalist lifestyle in rural and semi-rural areas of the country in which you live. Try your hand at planting seeds, hunting game, fishing and trapping. Experience what it is to be responsible for your own survival. It will either scare you or invigorate you. Then you have a choice. Do you want to accept whatever comes, or do you want to be the architect of your own destiny?

This post is positively brimming with affective, rhetorical expressions of empowerment, even though as a resistance strategy it falls into the ‘flight’ rather than ‘fight’ category. Thinking about and discussing doing something in the offline realm is more often than not coupled with positive

affective expressions in the forums. Here, other forum members are emotively and rhetorically challenged to accept the power of their own agency, to take responsibility for their own survival and to be “architects” of their own destinies. That such a prospect might scare them is highlighted but this possibility, presented as part of a dichotomy along with being “invigorated”, is clearly for rhetorical effect, the intention being for the audience to feel empowered by the prospect of taking control of their lives, even within the context of escaping the malevolent machinations of the NWO, which would arguably be more associated with the emotion of fear rather than empowerment.

Multiple similarly optimistic expressions towards the forum members’ perceived capacity to act can be found in this thread, grounded in the discursive task of rhetorically and metaphorically diminishing the power of the NWO while inflating their own potential power, for example:

dont roaches become very annoying to bigger animals? well there... i have seen ants destroy insects 30 times their size! if we all move together thats whats gonna happen

With all the bull# planning and strategizing that these fools have done they have ignored one key aspect of human nature - WHEN WE GET KICKED DOWN WE BOUNCE BACK 10x HARDER

They make up a tiny percentage of our population, just like a virus, there is some way to remove them, but it has to be soon. We don't need these "leaders" anymore, we can run our own societies better than they ever could, they have out lived their usefulness and are desperately grasping to power

Arent we the smartest, most intelligent, and ready for everything generation there is? we are thousands if no more... couldnt we get organized and go after this F..ers? public campaigns on the streets and everywhere.... hackers and crackers... into their databases and sites... follow this idiots everywhere, get to know everything they do and plan... after all we are all humans so are they and the ppl working for them...

The faith expressed in the power of humanity in these quotes is truly remarkable. Indeed the last quote simply writes that, “after all we are all humans”, elevating their capacity for action to be on a par with that of the NWO elites, thus establishing an equal playing field merely due to the simple fact of being human. Crucially, these quotes also rhetorically belittle the NWO elites as “animals”, “a virus”, “fools”, and “idiots”, framing them as weak, even subhuman and therefore ultimately, beatable. This is an absolutely vital discursive strategy in the context of positive affective attitudes towards resistance: diminishing the perceived agency of the adversary. The less power the elites are discursively constructed to have, and the more power the members themselves are presumed to

have, the more optimistic the resistance discourse tends to become. This is a key feature of resistance discourse which arises from the research of this thesis and which has not been examined in depth in the relevant literature, even when considering the importance of emotions in social movements. For instance, of relevance here is Castells' discussion of emotions as they pertain to social movements; two quotes in particular are worth quoting at length as they capture many of my findings in relation to affective expression of empowerment or disempowerment towards the prospect of resisting the NWO:

the emotions that are most relevant to social mobilization and political behavior are fear (a negative affect) and enthusiasm (a positive affect). Positive and negative affects are linked to two basic motivational systems that result from human evolution: approach and avoidance. The approach system is linked to goal-seeking behavior that directs the individual to rewarding experiences. Individuals are enthusiastic when they are mobilized towards a goal that they cherish. This is why enthusiasm is directly related to another positive emotion: hope. Hope projects behavior into the future. Since a distinctive feature of the human mind is the ability to imagine the future, *hope is a fundamental ingredient in supporting goal-seeking action*. However, for enthusiasm to emerge and for hope to rise, individuals have to overcome the negative emotion resulting from the avoidance motivational system: anxiety. Anxiety is a response to an external threat over which the threatened person has no control. Thus, anxiety leads to fear. (Castells 2012: 14,)

the theory of affective intelligence in political communication (Neuman et al. 2007) argues that the trigger is anger, and the repressor is fear. *Anger increases with the perception of an unjust action and with the identification of the agent responsible for the action*. Fear triggers anxiety, which is associated with avoidance of danger. Fear is overcome by sharing and identifying with others in a process of communicative action. Then anger takes over: it leads to risk-taking behavior. When the process of communicative action induces collective action and change is enacted, *the most potent positive emotion prevails: enthusiasm, which powers purposive social mobilization*. Enthusiastic networked individuals, having overcome fear, are transformed into a conscious, collective actor. Thus social change results from communicative action (Ibid.: 219, italics added)

The key difference between Castells' ideas about enthusiasm and resistance and mine, however, is that he emphasises the very process of togetherness and solidarity as constituting the source of enthusiasm and overcoming fear (ibid.: 2). While I would not dispute the idea that exaggerating the extent of an adversary's power as being a source of solidarity and a moral imperative to resist, such exaggeration can reach a critical point whereby the prospect of resistance is deemed futile. The idea of fearing an enemy is certainly not incompatible with feelings of solidarity, which can motivate people to want to resist; nonetheless such fear can in more extreme cases dampen enthusiasm to act. The research in this thesis foregrounds the perceived agency (and morality) of the adversary as the

fundamental discursive constraint on thinking about and discussing possible resistance in the first place. While there is no question that the very process of discussing the NWO with like-minded individuals from around the world (via the space of these conspiracy theory discussion forums) engenders a sense of solidarity and comfort, my findings suggest that this is far from sufficient to overcome fear and encourage enthusiasm for action, which are just as important, if not more so, than solidarity alone. While I have been highlighting in this thesis the point that conspiracy theorists can and do think positively about resisting the NWO, the fact is that fear, pessimism and apathy are rife in these discussions. Such affective sentiments do not necessarily preclude being able to discuss resistance strategies of course, but they can certainly restrict their scope. These forums contain millions of posts and although I do not use the term ‘community’ in reference to the members of these forums, they frequently label themselves as such and a large number of members contribute to the forums on a daily basis which, while undoubtedly resulting in a sense of solidarity, is simply not enough to counteract the perceived omnipotence and malevolence of the NWO elites when they are defined in such brutal and totalising terms. When the adversary is not defined in such extreme terms of both power and immorality, expressions of optimism and hope tend to emerge with far more frequency and vigour. Even in the quotes above relating to the importance of doing something in the offline world, this usually has to be combined with a less totalising perception of the NWO, such that the controlling agents are not perceived to be all-powerful. For instance, one member says of the elites that, “They aren’t god that I’m sure... so as humans they can be made to fall the same way they are making us fall”. When they are defined in totalising terms however, the claims of Fenster and Basham regarding the disabling and disempowering nature of conspiracy theory are supported by affective expressions of powerlessness in the forums.

6.7 Fear, pessimism and apathy

While I argue that the most important predictor of pessimism and disempowerment in these discussions is a discursive inflation of the perceived agency (in terms of power and (im)morality) of the adversary, a significant additional constraining factor is the perception of agency of the masses, or potential supporters, on whom members frequently (more often implicitly than explicitly) rely for anything resembling a future mass uprising. While the public at large are frequently labelled contemptuously as ‘sheeple’, one post in the thread displays an impressive sociological awareness of the critical role of consent in relation to domination and subjugation by elite powers:

Most people are lazy enough to hand over the responsibility for freedom to someone else, which is exactly the path into self-induced slavery. Ultimate freedom means ultimate responsibility for what you *do* with that freedom. Most people don't want that responsibility, so they trade their way into slavery. However, because of social manipulation implemented into peoples' lives over the course of many generations, such slavery is inadvertently ingrained into the mind of the children by their parents & peers...But by the time the child grows up enough to *realize* it, they're already trapped into that system of slavery to the point where they have no way out

While this post is certainly pessimistic, it indicates that some thought has gone into explaining the 'sheeple' phenomenon as a product of socialisation and social norm reproduction over multiple generations, rather than the more typical post which simply derides them, in moral and individually wholly autonomous terms, as unthinking and subservient. An extreme illustration of such a moral objection to the 'sheeple' can be found in another post within the thread:

I really dont care about humanity, the rest of the world has chosen the path of slavery, therefore they dont deserve to be free

This is certainly a contender for the most pessimistic comment I have encountered since starting my research, and it is definitely rare to see such severe misanthropy being expressed. Much of the basis of the moral outrage expressed towards the NWO is precisely its perceived illegitimate domination over humanity, and so more typically we see some level of desire to emancipate humanity even when labelling them as 'sheeple'. Nonetheless, the notion that the public at large cannot be relied upon due to their willing ignorance recurs persistently throughout these forums. One member argues that exposing the conspiracy is futile since "People have tried to expose the NWO to the public but the public is stupid". Another post however frames the futility of relying on the masses not on their perceived stupidity or willing subjugation but by reference to the extreme power of the NWO:

To stop the NWO you would have to have greater power than those who are instigating it. I somehow don't think that, even if all the Have-nots(which I am one of) pooled all of our resources together, would be able to put a dent in whats happening already

This brings us once again back to the core insight proposed by this thesis, that the perceived agency of the adversary shapes and constrains the perceived agency of those seeking to resist them. In fact the first sentence sums up this point in an incredibly succinct way: you need greater power than

them. While earlier quotes in this chapter discursively diminished the assumed power of the NWO while discursively inflating the assumed power of forum members and humanity in general, this post frames their power and resources as so overwhelming that even the entirety of the “have-nots” would barely be able to “dent” their plans.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which information dissemination and bridging the online ideas within the forums towards the offline realm can help to mitigate the perceived ‘power gap’ in the adversarial relationship between the NWO elites and the forum members themselves. The discourse contained in this Above Top Secret thread stands in marked contrast to the ‘NWO Survival Planning’ thread analysed in Chapter 4. In that thread the agency of the elites was constructed in totalising, extreme and brutal terms such that the entire point of the discussion was to discuss strategies of escape and survival when the vicious takeover finally comes into effect. Some posts rejected the notion of course and recommended resisting before the takeover, but due to the vivid imagined future scenario painted in the opening post of that thread, along with the associated perceived omnipotence and malevolence of the elite, the conversations were dominated by ‘flight’ strategies. By contrast, in this thread we have seen several discursive strategies being used in relation to the agency of both the adversary and the forum members themselves. By diminishing the adversary’s perceived power and immorality, expressions of fear are not as prevalent and instead we see a wide range of practical strategies being proposed along with exaggerated affective expressions of empowerment. It is still the same powerful, immoral NWO at its core, but it is one which is characterised as being run by fallible humans who constitute a minority and are not assumed to control everything in sight; in this context it becomes a lot easier to devise strategies of resistance and furthermore to be optimistic about their potential success.

Chapter 7: Peaceful non-compliance

Ghandi & MLK showed us how the right peaceful action can distill the hopes of millions, inspire others to stand up against the machine, & overcome this clearly overt move to world fascism

David Icke Thread, “A strategy of peaceful non-compliance?”

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I return to the David Icke discussion forum. Recall that in Chapter 5, the dominant resistance discourse entailed strategies of positive thinking, love and spiritual ascension, anchored as they were in the fundamental conception of the NWO as being controlled by extra-terrestrial reptilian aliens who feed off human negative emotional energy, their primary goal being not *merely* a tyrannical single global government, but ultimately the subjugation of humanity and in particular the suppression of the human spirit from reaching its potential. The thread analysed in this chapter, entitled, “A strategy of peaceful non-compliance?” has been selected for the striking discursive contrast, in relation to my central agency-related themes, with the “Tell me EXACTLY what we can do” discussion thread analysed in Chapter 5. While this thread does contain plenty of ‘new-age’ ideas, spiritual strategies and positive vibes as solutions to the problem of the NWO which are consistent with the ideas found in the David Icke forum as a whole, these are secondary to the dominant conversation which seeks debate on concrete, ‘five sense’, micro-level strategies of direct resistance to the NWO. There are two fundamental reasons for this shift in discourse: firstly, the thread began as a response to a newsletter produced by David Icke in relation to future enforced vaccinations where he recommended that people do not comply when the time comes (Icke has suggested that vaccinations are tools used by the elite either to suppress human consciousness and free will, or to implant microchips for tracking purposes and even for remote mind control). Secondly, mention of reptilians is, for the most part, absent in this thread. One post derisively refers to them as intellectually inferior and thus beatable when arguing that “we can out think these snakes”, while another frames the extra-terrestrials in more brutal and powerful terms resulting in a far more pessimistic attitude towards a strategy of non-compliance:

Depends what you're peacefully non complying against though... if it's reptile aliens from another planet that need to hunt humans for food (like we do to cows) then im not so sure if peaceful non compliance is gonna work

Nonetheless, as a consequence of not foregrounding the perceived power and morality of the adversary, which as I argue throughout this thesis is the most influential discursive constraining

factor on thinking about and discussing resistance, the discursively constraining role of the agency of NWO elites does not frame the debate as overwhelmingly to the extent that it did in the thread analysed in Chapter 5. As I argue in Chapter 6, the more flexible the definition of the NWO within the context of a particular discussion, and the more its agents' perceived power and pervasiveness is diminished, the more flexible, varied and (usually) enthusiastic we find the strategic debates on possible solutions to be.

The thread itself is a 'sticky' (an expression referring to important threads which are permanently pinned to the top of a forum sub-board so that they are always visible on the first page of the sub-forum, even if no new posts have been made in the thread for a long time) in the David Icke sub-forum entitled, "The Awakening / What we Can Do". It contains 267 posts in total, and has continued to have members contribute from July 2009 to September 2014. It is important to note that the thread's stated purpose at the start is to discuss non-compliance strategies *specifically for future government-enforced vaccinations*; however it quickly develops into an all-purpose NWO resistance (via non-compliance) thread which provides fascinating insight into the dichotomous problem/solution discourse within the David Icke forum when compared to the rather more 'esoteric' debates in the thread analysed in Chapter 5. This chapter therefore provides an important balance to the ideas contained within the David Icke forum; some of the forum's content can certainly be deemed outlandish, but it is clearly not just filled with supposed 'crazies' obsessed with spiritually destroying the lizard people through positive energy.

This chapter begins by summarising the range of strategies proposed within the thread, before expanding on the crucial discursive dichotomy of online versus offline resistance as examined in Chapter 6, and in particular how emotional expressions of empowerment tend to accompany discussion of offline resistance even when the strategies appear almost negligible in scale in the context of the overall global (and even beyond) conspiracy. I then explore the various justifications for non-compliance as a valid form of resistance against the power of the NWO, which then leads to an analysis of the role of morality in justifying (or refuting these strategies.) Finally, I examine the common debate surrounding the relative merits of individual and collective resistance, echoing that of the thread analysed in Chapter 4; in the case of this particular discussion thread, we see a strong appeal to recruit the public at large to join the cause, while others argue that real change can only come 'from within'.

7.2 Summary of strategies contained within the thread

A huge number of non-compliance strategies are proposed in this thread; as with Chapter 4 (the Above Top Secret thread entitled, “NWO Survival Planning”), my analysis is not intended to focus solely on the suggested means, but rather to unpack the discursive relationships which can be inferred from such means in relation to the perceived agency of the NWO elites, the forum members themselves and the public at large. Nonetheless, it is certainly interesting to see the range of specific means recommended in this thread in order to give the reader an overview of the thread:

Table 7.1 Summary of means proposed in the David Icke Thread, “A strategy of peaceful non-compliance?”

Overall Strategy	Examples	Illustrative quote
Political	Electoral boycotts	“Do not vote. Do not vote. Do not VOTE.”
	Contacting MPs	“I have had a reply from my local MSP who has sent me a copy of the letter she has sent to Nicola Sturgeon(health minister for scotland) on my behalf insisting that she respond to the concerns I have raised”
Economic	Consumer boycotts	“Stop giving your money to the big corporations, divert your money back into the local community. Buy your weekly shop at the local fruit and veg shop, your local butcher”
	Bank disruption	“one technique that is very effective, and peaceful, is an organized bank run ... if this happens big enough, the banks and governments will crash”
	Remuneration	“Tell your employer that u want to be paid in Food, Gas etc”
Legal	Tax boycott	“Imagine 50,000/100,000/200,000 + people refusing to pay tax, or delay tax, or hold it in escrow... one of the most powerful acts of non compliance at our disposal”
	Individual legal rights against state	“Learn the difference between common law and statute law. Learn that in order for an agent of the state to act upon you, they have to have your consent, giving your name is giving your consent and you are entering into contract and giving them jurisdiction over you”
	Discarding legal identifying documents	“Revoke your Social (in)Security number, driver's license, etc”
Escape / survival	Self-sufficient rural community / living ‘off the grid’	“Our group consists of 3 ex military, 1 butcher, 1 shoe maker, 2 engineers, 1 doctor, 1 midwife, 3 farmers, 1 mill owner with a river, there is a good sized woodland, we are fully armed but not dangerous, legally of course and we are a rural community”
Spiritual / personal	Positive attitude	“The spiritual energy contained in one smile is enough to contact two people in a way which links them at a level of being that is stronger than steel and lighter than air. If I look into your eyes and what I see is love, I feel love reverberating through my entire being. Be the change!”

	Visualisation / spirit communication	"When you hear of a horrible act of the dark, like the manufactured earthquake in Haiti, visualize Light everywhere affected. By illuminating the plans of the dark, you make it so much easier for the unconscious to see. "I invoke the White Light of the Holy Spirit to fill up and surround every soldier in our Solar System." It's just that easy!"
Information dissemination	Websites / blogs / forums	"we could create a viral campaign on the Web"; "if someone here writes up an article about, and everyone else networks thru facebook, youtube, twitter etc. we can actually have an effect"
	Hard copy posters	"i was going just make a banner saying " say no to the vaccine " with some web-site contacts for information....and put it right outside my local health care centre"
	Contact officials	"Construct a chainletter that urges people to call their local policeofficers and explain to them that they will not accept being forcibly vaccinated ... urge the police to refuse to be used as tools to carry out these crimes"
Civil disobedience	Transport disruption	"we could all park our cars in the middle of main roads and block them"
	Urban parties	"Protest-parties with music and dancing in the street"
Withhold labour	Strikes	"On the 15th of every month we are running a 24hr INTERNATIONAL radio marathon and asking people not to go to work"
Technology	Reptilian-spotting device	"we could manufactuer some sort of device that allows us to see the chitahuri/lizards in their true form. Sort of dragging them into our 3rd dimension. I'm working on the tech. for that presently.

7.3 The affective power of small offline acts

What is striking about the strategies included in the above table is their relative mundanity (notwithstanding some, for example the patent-pending lizard-spotting technology) in comparison to the discussion in the David Icke analysed in Chapter 5. These are small-scale, concrete strategies directed primarily towards lower level institutional *elements* of the NWO, rather than against the controlling agents themselves. Recall the expressions of inflated agency and enthusiastic empowerment in Chapter 5, such that members argued that the NWO agents can be "vaporized with love" and furthermore that human beings are "consciousness beyond all form" such that there is nothing the adversary, even the malevolent reptilian aliens, can actually do to harm them. Even death is not to be feared. These represent a particularly unique and exaggerated perception of agency (as the perceived capacity to act in the face of the adversary) on behalf of the members, but it seems that even among the David Icke forum members, it is not necessary to aspire towards spiritual omnipotence to overcome fear and in order to express optimism and enthusiasm towards resistance. Remarkably, in this thread even when proposing resistance strategies that would, at best,

merely dent the day to day running of the overall system and NWO power structure, we can see extremely positive affective expressions relating to the members' perceived power and the efficacy of proposed strategies. The most interesting illustration for me in this context regards the suggestion to contact Members of Parliament urging them to reconsider vaccination laws. If there's one fundamental trait that is close to being universal among conspiracy theorists, it's the overwhelming lack of trust in government and state officials. Indeed this is one of the most common so-called disabling factors influencing the scope of resistance discourse among anti-NWO conspiracy theorists. As I detailed in Chapter 1 using the example of the Fathers for Justice movement, their legal and policy proposal campaigns would simply not be accepted as viable by someone like Henry Makow who believes: a) that all governments are controlled by NWO elites and b) that one of the fundamental NWO objectives is the very subjugation of males and the suppression of men's rights. Yet here in this thread we find recommendations to contact not just MPs but mainstream journalists, police and doctors. Every single one of these social groups, particularly for members of the David Icke forum, is assumed to be part of the NWO power pyramid (See fig. 5.2). One spectacular outlier quote in this context in the thread even suggests that members might be able to recruit the help of those at the *top* of the elite power structure: "There are people in Bilderberg, Skull and Bones, the Freemasons, etc. who are actually on our side and fighting for us". Given this, combined with the otherwise ubiquitous expressions of mistrust towards formal institutions, as well as agents representing or working within them (Noam Chomsky, for instance, is frequently labelled a NWO 'shill' in these forums since he works for MIT, an elite university!), in the conspiracy theory discussion forums, how can we reconcile such an apparent contradiction in proposed resistance strategies and their associated positive affective elements?

The key to understanding the ostensibly opposing (yet nonetheless just as empowering in their discursive expression) micro and macro strategies of resistance lies in the desire, frequently expressed in these forums, to *do something*, no matter how small. Of course, the type of strategy advocating transcending the entire physical universe to achieve a state of oneness with infinite love can certainly be classified as doing something, and moreover a legitimate act of resistance against a core problem which is defined precisely as the suppression of humanity in reaching that infinite oneness. But as is evident from the discussion in Chapter 5, many forum members criticise, indeed frequently not even attempting to disguise their contempt and anger, such an approach as a cowardly cop-out, suggesting that in actual fact it is doing *nothing at all*. Similarly for the Above Top Secret thread analysed in Chapter 6 I noted the tendency towards enthusiasm and optimism to be expressed whenever strategic resistance debates invoke the prospect of acting in the 'offline

world'. There are obviously multiple approaches to overcoming pessimism in the context of resistance discourse, and while intuitively this would appear difficult to achieve when framing the adversary as all-powerful, encompassing all institutions and especially as brutally malevolent, it is remarkable how frequently expressions of optimism accompany ideas about doing something, anything, in the offline world. Indeed this exact point is emphasised a number of times within this thread:

we definitely need to get things moving and actually DO something

we need to start coming together and actually do things

How much more death and destruction do you need to read about on this forum in-between work,tv and sleeping before you realise times up and your too old and weak to do anything?

we need to do it quickly and not rely so much on the Internet for our means of communication. We would need to create organizations, each with their own secret funding sources that is not seen by the government. We also need people in high places that is on our side (good side), lawyers, doctors, bankers, nurses, teachers, celebrities. We can't just rely on the Internet.

Although my focus in this chapter is on this single discussion thread, it is important at this stage to contextualise this idea within the broader context of the other David Icke threads in order for the reader to appreciate just how prevalent and emotive (both positively and negative) such expressions of a desire or need to act in the offline world are:

Table 7.2: Affective expressions towards micro-level ‘offline’ acts in other David Icke discussion threads

	Illustrative quotes
Positive	<p>“you are an inspiration. I’m from the London area, and would love to meet up with others to do our christmas card postings, setting up our wallpaper table in a busy shopping centre, high street, whatever, giving out leaflets, tying balloons on cameras, etc” (David Icke Thread, “<u>OK, Lets Go!</u>”)</p> <p>“get out there! ! ! ! We need STREET ACTION ! !” (David Icke Thread, “<u>What Have You Done Lately?</u>”)</p> <p>“imagine if we all put our head's together & created a leaflet, that we could all print copies of from here (say about 100 copies each) and put them up in telephone boxes, pub toilets, notice boards, shop windows etc ... Let's work together and make a difference and get the snowball effect moving” (David Icke Thread, “<u>Awakening Leaflets thread</u>”)</p> <p>“TO ME , THIS THREAD IS THE BEST SO FAR AS IT HAS SHOWN US ALL WE CAN DO SOMETHING , EVEN IF ITS SMALL !” (David Icke Thread, “<u>OK, Lets Go!</u>”)</p> <p>“I feel the need to get out and alert the public of what is going on, because there are many people out there who don't use the internet, or use it very little. We need to find as many people as we can who live within traveling distance from each other, to organize teams for the demos” (David Icke Thread, “<u>Setting up groups to do public demos</u>”)</p> <p>“maybe this is a microcosmic example of how to fight the power ,just do it, help your neighbors do it ,and get EVERY BODY to do it !” (Above Top Secret thread, “<u>What Will It Take to Defeat the NWO Thread</u>”)</p>
Negative	<p>“These conspiracy writers, either intentionally or not, are wasting our time and keeping us unproductive! Nothing is being done, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING.” (David Icke Thread, “<u>The Conspiracy Movement HAS to step it up NOW!</u>“</p> <p>“Somewhere along the line some of us are going to have to get our hands dirty and fight this shit... a lot of sat round doing fuck all about anything with the selfish outlook of " I'm so enlightened and awake " that everything is going to be just great” (David Icke Thread, “<u>Tell me EXACTLY what we can do</u>”)</p> <p>“We can either sit here day after day, night after night and "talk" about the NWO, Illuminati etc and do absolutely nothing until the day comes when we have a one world Government, by wich time it will be too late! Or we can actually get up off our arses and do something” (David Icke Thread, “<u>Awakening Leaflets thread</u>”)</p> <p>“how loooooooooonnnngggg is the talking, the watching, the debating, the questioning, the moaning, and the wondering going to last till the human species STOPS RIGHT NOW and FIGHTS for it's freedom to live uncontrolled and dictated to by any other” (David Icke Thread, “<u>When's it gonna happen sheeple?</u>”)</p> <p>“We have to shake people up and get them to realize there will likely be serious consequences for their inaction” (David Icke Thread, “<u>101+ Ways to Fight the NWO</u>”)</p>

I should re-emphasise at this juncture the fundamental methodological point I made in Chapter 3 that my research is not concerned with forum members' actual offline action (or even inaction) but rather how the relevant agency-centred ideas relating to resisting the NWO are constructed, negotiated and contested, and furthermore how they are shaped by the perceived agency of the adversary. The intensely (positive or negative) affective discourse present in the discussions on 'offline' activism are important for the insight they offer into the perceived agency, in terms of both power and morality, of the forum members themselves, not in terms of whether or not they actually do anything in the offline world. The totalising nature of the grand NWO conspiracy theory, particularly as constructed in the work of David Icke, certainly makes it difficult (as Fenster (1999) and Basham (2003) argue) to conceive of appropriate goals and means, often leading to expressions of apathy, disempowerment and pessimism. The David Icke forum threads are particularly fascinating in this regard in that expressions of empowerment can arise both from the (hyper)macro scale strategies (for example transcending the 'five sense' physical universe entirely) and from the micro scale of minor acts of information dissemination and non-compliance (for example putting a note about the NWO into Christmas cards). Of course, some people (including other members of the David Icke forum) might argue that those in the former 'spiritual ascension' camp are merely rationalising their inaction and powerlessness (or what Melley (2000) labels 'agency panic') via a post-hoc justification for doing nothing 'concrete' to resolve their grievance or bring about any kind of justice to such an unjust world. However, firstly, such an assumption ignores the fact that, within the ontological framework contained in the writing of David Icke (see Chapter 5), a strategy of love and spiritual ascension does actually make sense as an appropriate means and goal to overcome the adversary. The very problem itself is defined in terms of fourth-dimensional reptilians who not only feed off negative human energy but whose overriding goal is to lock humanity in the 'five sense' prison. Whatever the validity of such an ontological framework, the core discursive problem / solution dichotomy is relatively coherent. Secondly, from an epistemological standpoint I cannot know the actual beliefs (or repressed motivations in this case) of the forum members. To suggest that any particular forum member is rationalising or justifying his or her pre-existing sense of powerlessness when he or she argues that members should resist simply by being positive and happy would be to engage in pure speculation. I simply cannot infer anything about individuals' states of mind, which are in any case irrelevant to my thesis since I am focusing on the resistance discourses, the texts themselves.

7.4 The justification of non-compliance as a form of resistance

The aforementioned micro / macro strategy dynamic is summarised rather neatly by one post which writes, “I prefer to think that love will conquer all. But just in case it doesn't, its nice to have a backup plan”. This discussion thread contains not merely a multitude of practical strategy contributions as outlined in table 7.1, but the collective wrestling of debates surrounding the perceived efficacy of such a form of resistance. As Melucci notes, it is the communicative construction of ideas relating to resistance, formed “via interaction, negotiation and conflict” (1989: 26) that constitute the central meaning-making activity of any movement. The resistance strategies themselves are not as insightful in relation to my research aims as are the meta-level debates pertaining to the benefits and drawbacks of such strategies within the context of the NWO conspiracy theory which frames the discussion. What is really of interest is how the ‘why’ question is elaborated; what makes one strategy more or less effective than another? In this thread, justifications for the utility of non-compliance, sometimes on an individual scale but more often en masse, are expressed in affectively empowering terms such that they can overcome the problems brought about by the perceived power of the adversary:

The system relies on you using it to feed it

When the majority say "No" consistantly, quietly and without backing down, the minority can not hold them back

Mahatma Ghandi pulled it off flawlessly, why not look at his life, read the books or watch the movie? He brought the world's most destructive and evil empire on its knees, all by himself, through the power of peaceful noncompliance. He had no special powers of any kind

all we have to do is say 'NO' it is that simple. We just say 'NO' ... Again and again and again, to every one of their 'requests'. Because that is what they are, requests. They can not make us do anything

No malevolent rulers of any kind, have the power to overcome the concept of peaceful non compliance, it is the most powerful concept in the Universe when dealing with evil overlords. It has been used on countless planets throughout the Multiverse, to bring freedom and equality

Notwithstanding the disappointing absence of empirical evidence to support the latter claim regarding the proven and ‘multiversal’ efficacy of non-compliance, it is useful to see here just how such strategies are justified in relation to amplifying the perceived agency of the forum members and the public at large, while simultaneously downplaying the perceived power of the NWO. One post achieves such a discursive reconstruction of the hero / villain agency dynamic by presenting it as a numbers game, emphasising that the elites constitute the minority, and thus possess less power than the majority who need do nothing more arduous than say ‘no’. At the other end of the spectrum of the perceived power of the heroes, being part of a majority is deemed completely unnecessary, citing Gandhi as an example of a lone individual who single-handedly brought the malevolent British empire to its knees by merely engaging in peaceful non-compliance.

A crucial common rhetorical theme among the above five quotes is just how *easy* it would be to overcome the dominance of the NWO, thereby simultaneously magnifying the perceived agency of the forum members while diminishing that of the adversary. A man “with no special powers” can defeat the elites “flawlessly”; “saying no” - an act labelled “the most powerful concept in the Universe” - to the elite’s mere “requests”, is just “that simple”. The adversary is framed as frail, polite and desperate, reliant upon the public’s voluntary acquiescence for any power they have in the first place. By contrast, while the David Icke thread analysed in Chapter 5 included posts in which the power of the elites was also discursively diminished, this was on a hyper-macro scale, beyond the ‘five sense’ realm, such that the agents of the NWO can do nothing to you, not even kill you, when you realise “that you are consciousness beyond all form”. As I emphasise on numerous occasions, the specific practical elements of any proposed resistance strategies are less important, in terms of whether or not there is a sense of either empowerment or disempowerment, than the context of the perceived agency dynamic between the heroes and the villains in which those strategies are constructed and justified. Whether it is by becoming one with infinite consciousness (such expressions nonetheless can be found in this non-compliance thread; for instance one member writes, “as I know that I am conciseness and I am all knowing and I trust and believe this, and if I know how to access my full potential, I can go to it and ask it for help with this situation and know it will be done”) or by simply choosing to buy food from local suppliers rather than large corporations, the key is the collective, discursive reconstruction of perceived power relations by forum members.

The point, as I write in chapter 1, is that when the elites are discursively constructed in totalising, all-powerful and even evil terms, and ordinary people in terms of powerlessness, we see expressions

of pessimism and fear; when ordinary people are deemed to possess greater power than the adversary, we see enthusiasm and hope. The primary theoretical constraint with Fenster's (1999) and Basham's (2003) claims about the futility of resistance in conspiracy theory is that their conception of conspiracy theory is itself totalising and idealised. What I am seeking to demonstrate in this thesis is that there exist discursive cognitive and affective gradations in expressions of empowerment and disempowerment. The same basic global conspiracy framework of the NWO can be modified, reconstructed and contested in terms of elite agency in ways that shape and constrain the perceived capacity to resist it. How the problem is defined has significant consequences for how solutions can be conceived, and in particular the extent to which enthusiasm towards thinking about and discussing resistance, rather than fear, can emerge. As Castells argues, "overcoming fear is the fundamental threshold for individuals to cross in order to engage in a social movement" (2012: 10) and furthermore that "hope is a fundamental ingredient in supporting goal-seeking action" (ibid.: 14). When it comes to the NWO conspiracy theory, the extent of fear and hope can fluctuate wildly within the discussions depending on just how the conspiracy is defined in relation to the agency, in particular the perceived power and morality, of the adversary.

7.5 Morality, fear and strategic efficacy

In relation to this latter point, while the perceived power of the NWO can either positively or negatively affect optimism within the forums, it is also vital to consider the moral dimension of agency. The perceived moral illegitimacy of the elite is, as Melucci argues (1996: 352), a fundamental prerequisite for the emergence of grievance in the first place as well as a crucial discursive tool for social movements to justify action and recruit potential supporters. If there is nothing morally objectionable about elite power, why even contemplate resisting it? There is moreover, as I argue in Chapter 1, an interactive relationship between the perceived morality of the adversary and that of the heroes. The relative immorality of the NWO informs and shapes the forum members' own morality in relation to resistance, which in turn has a constitutive role in devising practical resistance strategies along with their associated positive or negative emotional connotations. Peaceful non-compliance is associated with optimism and enthusiasm when the elites are not conceived as outright evil, but as agents who politely need to "request" the acquiescence of the masses. Despite this, numerous times in the thread we see posts condemning peaceful non-

compliance as both ineffective and immoral due to the perceived immorality of the NWO (along with their presumed consequent retaliation), for example:

they will not hesitate to kill peacefull noncompliers, the only way to survive is fight back

to be perfectly honest i dont think the new world order will back down to a punch of sign toting hippies

Hold on a minute... so they get to bomb our children, rape our people, turn entire civilisations against one another and we still choose to be peaceful

I'd rather try to escape using a small gun or die trying than being dragged to some concentration camp

there's nothing wrong with fighting, dieing for the right thing when faced with such evil

Don't get me wrong though I love peaceful, peaceful is awesome but it isn't going to work when some government agent comes for you it never has it never will

i dont think that skipping work would damage the new world order, after all they want to kill all but 500 million of us

Here we see a fascinating and, importantly as I elaborate in Chapter 1 in relation to my definition of resistance discourse, interactive discursive relationship between morality and power, not just on the part of the adversary but for the forum members themselves and in relationship to each other. It is important to note that it is relatively rare in the David Icke forums (certainly in comparison to Above Top Secret) to find such passionate calls for violent resistance on moral grounds. This is after all the ‘infinite love’ forum which contains an entire 44-post discussion thread dedicated to unpacking the physical and spiritual benefits of cuddling in order to overcome the dominance and spiritual subjugation of the NWO!¹⁷ Yet here the malevolence of the adversary is starkly presented, invoking images of bombing and raping innocent people, to demonstrate how morally objectionable choosing to be peaceful is at all. The particular post to which I’m referring does not imply that resistance is futile due to the evil nature of the NWO (as often occurs in other posts in these

¹⁷ “Cuddles can reduce the harm caused by chemtrails, oppressive World Orders, and trauma based mind control ... Cuddling raises the energetic level around you” (David Icke Thread, “Cuddles!!!!”)

forums), but rather advocates, in moral terms, a ‘fight fire with fire’ approach. Similarly another post argues that fighting, even to the death, is morally “the right thing” to do against such a ruthlessly immoral adversary. It is not just the interactive discursive battle between ‘their’ and ‘our’ morality that is noteworthy here however. The concrete, practical efficacy of minor acts of non-compliance is argued to be useless precisely because the controlling agents of the NWO are perceived to be so malevolent. “Sign toting hippies” are presented as powerless to the extent the elites would barely raise an eyebrow of concern when confronted with such a supposedly meaningless act of ‘resistance’. Furthermore, these elites “will not hesitate to kill” even those who are simply peacefully non-complying with the system! Finally, one member hammers the point home by reminding the others that one of the primary goals of the NWO is to murder “all but 500 million” of the global population. Faced with such genocidal ruthlessness, the notion that striking (here rhetorically constructed in sarcastic and belittling terminology as merely “skipping work” to exaggerate the point even further) can possess any strategic efficacy whatsoever is deemed an utter absurdity. The shaping and constraining capacity of framing the adversary as immoral is clearly not deterministic. In some cases the extreme evil of the enemy is viewed as a practical, sometimes even ethical reason not to resist (from an ideological standpoint of non-violence), while in others it constitutes the moral imperative to act at all.

7.6 Recruiting the masses

The latter example citing the NWO’s objective to kill 90% of the population emphasises the minority / majority structure of the adversarial nature of the conspiracy theory, much like any anti-elitist social movement, and in present times best encapsulated by the Occupy Wall Street movement’s slogan of “we are the 99%”. This brings us to the persistent recurring theme among the anti-NWO discussion forums being explored in this thesis and which was also key in the thread analysed in Chapter 6: the potential power of the public at large, the potential supporters in Melucci’s terms. Again and again in these strategic discussion threads there are posts expressing the fundamental need for awakening and recruiting the masses, even though they are frequently labelled as ‘sheeple’. This requires, as Melucci argues for all social movements, a discursive strategy of publicity that not only underscores the moral illegitimacy of the adversary to the masses, but the positive moral association between the goals of the movement with the goals of society at large (1996: 350). In relation to agency as it pertains to my notion of resistance discourse, there is a need

both in terms of morality and power (as the perceived capacity to act in order to overcome the adversary) to seek support from the masses. The moral element of this objective is achieved by making the public aware of how evil the adversary is, while the power element is achieved by emphasising that the agents of the NWO constitute a tiny minority and can thus be defeated. In addition, there are positive moral statements about recruiting outsiders in the first place; one post pre-empts potential negative attitudes towards ‘sheeple’ by arguing for members’ moral duty to empathise and attain solidarity with the masses, because “Your average Joe is a person, a human just like you and more importantly, has a consciousness. Don't give up on them”. The battle is thus framed in terms of the entirety of humanity against the – typically metaphorically but also literally in the case of the David Icke forum – inhuman adversaries. Even in the case of members of the police, almost universally viewed in these forums as the willing and day-to-day social ‘muscle’ of the NWO, one post emphasises their basic humanity and empathy in relation to the prospect of forced vaccinations, writing, “Do you really think that if the people working for the police knew that they we're carrying out massmurder when forcing people to take the vaccine, they would still do it?”. It is certainly remarkable in the conspiracy theory forums to find any such suggestion that such visible and coercive agents of the ruling elite would actually resist that elite when asked to perform a morally objectionable act. When sufficiently discursively humanised, it becomes possible for hope and faith in even these supposed bodyguards of the NWO to emerge. Another post expands this idea by proposing a wider range of ‘outsider’ social groups to be recruited for the cause, incorporating the assistance of “people in high places that is on our side (good side), lawyers, doctors, bankers, nurses, teachers, celebrities”.

From a perspective purely of strategic efficacy, perhaps the most important justification for informing and recruiting the public at large relates to the sheer power of numbers in order to overpower the minority NWO elites, as the following quotes illustrate:

We'll never do anything individually aware of the NWO, sure we can make a small imprint but in such small numbers as we are we will never do anything in time if we stay small

The more people we can reach with the correct information equates to more people with the desire to take positive action

There is far more strength in numbers than doing this alone

If we all do this in our daily life with friends, family, colleagues, just people we meet on a daily basis, then we are going to reach a lot of people

Standing alone is tough, standing with 10 behind you is much easier

we outnumber these liars

There does need to be a coalition against the NWO/CIA/Government or whatever you want to call them.....HOWEVER, it will do no good unless we can 'awaken' as many people as we can about the truth of our existence (the lies, government cover, etc.). The more people who are aware, the easier our 'fight' will be

Interestingly, the basic movement mobilisation (and related popular support acquisition) strategy contained in the latter quote strongly mirrors the one represented in Figure 6.1 for the Above Top Secret thread analysed in Chapter 6. However unconventional many of the resistance strategies in the conspiracy theory world are compared with what might be described as ‘traditional’ social or political movements, we nonetheless frequently find examples of orthodox movement mobilisation approaches to resistance. This can typically only be perceived as viable if there is an associated expression of belief in the power of the majority over the minority, despite the assumed environmental constraining resources in the elite’s possession. Importantly, the quote in question redefines the NWO interchangeably as either the “CIA” or simply “government”, which brings the perception of the adversary back ‘down to earth’ by equating the conspiracy with empirical and identifiable public institutions rather than a secret, shadowy ‘they’ operating behind the scenes. Negating the supposed hidden nature of the elites reduces their perceived power by anchoring them in visible real world organisations, rather than, in the most extreme manifestation, labelling the adversary as invisible fourth-dimensional extra-terrestrials. The primary take-home message from these quotes however is that, ultimately, defeating the NWO will require intellectual, moral and strategic support from the public at large. It is even categorically stated in one post, echoing Castells’ characterisation of the Occupy Wall Street movement as being a spontaneous uprising caused simply by mass outrage (2012: 185), that merely exposing the outrages of the conspiracy will engender in the masses “a desire to take action”. Some of these posts confer mobilising power on information itself, suggesting that simply knowing about the problem is a deterministic precursor to striving actively for a solution. In the context of the David Icke forum such an instrumental assessment of the role of information is interesting since more typically the very process of being aware of the conspiracy, referred to in this forum as ‘awakening’ is viewed as an end in itself. Indeed the title of the sub-forum is “the awakening / what we can do”, prioritising awareness above

action (becoming aware is of course still an act but the point is the foregrounding of intellectual and spiritual awareness above for example, direct confrontation). That said, as discussed in Chapter 6, and a theme which is prevalent across the forums as a whole, the role of awakening the masses to the cause is deemed to be vital for resistance; Castells in fact takes this idea to an extreme form when he suggests that “the fundamental power struggle is the battle for the construction of meaning in the minds of the people” (ibid.: 5).

7.7 Collective action and violence in a New World Order context

However, faith in recruiting the masses towards conventional, collective acts of resistance is not shared universally in the thread. The relative benefits and drawbacks of individual versus collective agency were important in the Above Top Secret thread analysed in Chapter 4, and while there certainly was something resembling a consensus on the benefits of being part of collective social actor, some dissenting voices rejected such a strategy on the grounds of distrust towards other people. Similarly in this thread, one post warns members of the dangers of collective demonstrations due to government ‘agent provocateurs’, although this fear is grounded in a mistrust of the state rather than people more generally:

i'm not sure whether getting together is a good idea, actually. If there are 100 people all together, it will cause a bit of a ruckas, perhaps even make the news, but there is the possability that such a crowd will draw shills etc who may cause trouble and get everyone arrested. In a police cell you will be on your own ... Protest marches don't work. They are easily disrupted by agent provocateurs so media & police can justify using violence on innocent people &/or discredit a movement

Here we see a fascinating example of how a conspiracy theory worldview can indeed be (discursively) disabling in relation to thinking about resistance strategies. Suspicion towards the morality, power and tactics of the elite are so strong here as to discourage even demonstrating since the state will employ agent provocateurs (and how can anybody identify these from the genuine demonstrators?) to cause trouble in order to give the police an excuse to crack down on the real protesters, who would then end up in jail. Another post similarly warns other members: “Be aware that the protestor standing next to you at the next town hall meeting may be a plant to watch what you, and your group, do and to sucker you into talking to them”. Such a ‘problem-reaction-solution’ or ‘false flag’ (an act caused by the elite but blamed on another party to gain public consent - see Chapter 4) explanatory approach is rife in the conspiracy theory discussion forums. There is seemingly no limit to interpreting any act or agent as being secretly controlled by the state, to the

extent that, during the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings for example, the David Icke forum was replete with detailed analysis of gory photographic images from the scene in order to prove that the injured parties were ‘crisis actors’ employed by the state, using make-up and props to present a convincing image to the public that an actual bomb had gone off (the assumed NWO goal underlying such an interpretation was to introduce new terror-based laws that impinge on citizens’ liberties). The reason I bring this example up is the enormous constraining influence such intense suspicion towards anybody as being a possible NWO ‘shill’ has on any potential enthusiasm that can be expressed towards recruiting members of the public to the cause. More typically expressions of mistrust in the public are symbolised by the ‘sheeple’ insult, but in this context the view of the public is not just that they are willingly subservient to the state but that you can never be sure if a new person supposedly ‘on your side’ is in fact a wolf in (NWO-manufactured) sheep’s clothing.

Similarly, fear of retaliation is expressed in the thread when discussing public collective acts of direct resistance. While typically in the David Icke forum (see also the ‘fight or flight’ discussion in Chapter 4 in the Above Top Secret discussion thread which contains many parallels) the principle of non-violence is championed ideologically due to the ontological basis of Icke’s ideas that all of humanity is part of the same infinite consciousness (one post for example advocates an individual approach and that “the best way towards non compliance, is to avoid confrontation altogether and do things for yourself” while another simply suggests, “Don't watch violent movies” as a legitimate strategy of withdrawing from the oppressive system), occasionally we see decidedly practical reasons to reject anything resembling collective direct confrontation, due to the perceived malevolence (and thus likely retaliation) of the all-watching and all – powerful adversary, as the following quotes illustrate:

Be aware that signing petitions, joining resistance groups and the like simply make you targets

violence will give them more excuses to implement a police state!

By contrast, one striking post in the thread expresses no fear whatsoever at the assumed violent retribution of the NWO and indeed anchors this in terms of a moral duty to employ violent tactics even with the risk of death for the sake of freedom, insinuating further that anybody disagreeing with this notion is a coward:

If they turn up on your doorstep, tell them to fuck off. If they become violent, stab them in the face. You have to ask yourself how far you are willing to go for your freedom. If you're not willing to kill and die for it, you might as well roll over and take it like a bitch right now

While this is the only instance in the thread advocating a concrete, direct strategy of physical violence against the NWO (even though it is primarily framed both in ideological terms and as self-defence against a violent attack by a NWO agent) the rhetoric contained in this post is very reminiscent of the cowardice-based insults in the “Tell me EXACTLY what we can do” David Icke forum discussion thread analysed in Chapter 5 as well as numerous insults in the Above Top Secret “NWO Survival Planning” thread in Chapter 4. It is an example of an ‘eye for an eye’ problem / solution resistance discourse that seeks, on both moral and practical grounds, to fight fire with fire against a ruthless and immoral adversary, the assumption being that not being willing to use violence will either leave you dead or eschewing personal freedom. However, numerous posts reject such an approach on ideological grounds, which brings us back to the spiritual resistance discourse that was so prominent in the thread analysed in Chapter 5.

7.8 Change comes from within

Given the ontological framework of Icke’s writings which inform the main basis of discussions within the online forum, violent confrontation can be rejected not just because of inefficacy or immorality, but because it misses the point of the entire problem to be solved in the first place, which is the suppression of human conscious ascension and spiritual enlightenment by the elites. One post makes this point very succinctly:

we got to understand that our main enemy is the MATRIX, not the reptilians/government. The government is in fact being manipulated by the matrix

What is fascinating here is that this comment diminishes moral accountability not just for state agents (who are themselves assumed to be “manipulated by the matrix”) but even for the reptilians themselves. The actual enemy is the illusory ‘matrix’ that keeps humanity in its ‘five sense prison’. Recall that in Chapter 5, negativity itself was defined as the true enemy. While this post represents a rather different and more subtle ontological definition of the problem to be overcome, it is similar in

that it reifies a non-agent as being that primary problem. While, according to this same member, the reptilians “have no logic, compassion, trust, love, etc”, this is irrelevant to the main point which is that they are not the agents to be defeated per se, but rather what is to be defeated is the oppressive five sense illusion, also labelled simply as ‘the matrix’, which they need in order to feed off negative human emotions. This completely shifts the problem / solution dynamic from one of adversarial confrontation to one of personal, spiritual development. Other posts emphasise that the only true change can come from within, or that the solution is simply a case of using one’s conscious mind to re-interpret (a decidedly subjective) reality in a positive light, which in turn is argued actually to change reality and have consequences on one’s own life and those nearby, for example:

The most important thing to remember is that this is a spiritual battle. These outside things will help, but you can't fix the world before you yourself are fixed

If we are the change we've been waiting for, then let's start being that change. Walk the walk

People, you can change your reality, you can find the answers, it is easy, you just have to change your perspective on the way you see reality ... with understanding and commitment to your own progress you can change everything, you just have to ‘want’ to.....There is no easy fix.....it takes a little time and commitment and also Love. But once you start, it gets easier and easier, and you will soon see how others notice the change you have become, and your reality becomes wonderful and productive!

Similarly, one post employs a light / dark metaphor in order to underscore the importance of positivity as a practical strategic solution to the conspiracy:

how do we fight the dark ones? By not fighting them at all! If your car is in a garage with no windows and it is so dark you can't see it, do you need to "fight" the darkness to get to your car? No! All you need to do is turn on the lights. it is that simple.

Such statements are certainly far more in-line with the general ‘new-age’, spiritualist discourse which is dominant within the David Icke forums, and despite the remarkable enthusiasm expressed towards minor acts of non-compliance against individual manifestations of the NWO examined earlier in this chapter, when it comes to affective expressions of empowerment they simply cannot compete with the hyperbolic empowering sense of agency contained in statements declaring that

humanity, being as it is a component of infinite love, is omnipotent and has nothing to fear from the NWO, as the following quote from the thread demonstrates:

We are the powerful ones! Make no mistake about that! Love is the strongest and most transforming power in the Universe ... The N.W.O has nothing! nothing! on us! We are beautiful and powerful and loving beings

Although there was no response to this statement from the earlier cited member who advocated a ‘face-stabbing strategy against NWO agents, it is certainly likely that this member would reject it as a cowardly and anodyne proposal to justify inaction. The point of course is that the perceived power and morality of the forum members is discursively shaped by the very definition of the problem to be overcome. If that problem is conceived as a (human) NWO agent being physically violent against you, then a physically violent self-defence resistance strategy is suggested. If however the problem is negativity and remaining in the ‘five sense prison’ as described in Icke’s work, then a positive, spiritual and love-based resistance strategy makes more sense.

7.9 Conclusion

This chapter has examined a remarkably different form of resistance discourse in the David Icke forum than was dominant in the thread analysed in Chapter 5. While in that thread strategies of resistance were as ‘macro’ as one can imagine (transcending ‘five sense’ reality entirely), in this chapter we have seen a wide range of extremely small scale strategies which are presented as effective solutions to the problem of the perceived power of the adversary. However, in relation to my research questions about constructions of agency and the discursive interrelations between the perceived agency of the villains and that of the heroes and the public at large, in this thread we can actually see a similar fundamental discursive reconstruction of this agency dynamic, in terms of reducing the perceived power gap. In Chapter 5 the elites were constructed in immensely totalising and powerful terms; empowering discourses emerged by constructing the members and humanity more generally in *even more totalising* terms such that nothing the elites can do (including murder) can exert any actual harm on you. By contrast, in this thread the elites’ power was constructed as being *dependent* upon the consent of ordinary people, thereby similarly inverting the perceived power gap without needing to inflate the heroes’ power, such that strategies can be proposed as effective and emotionally empowering.

Chapter 8: The resistance discourse of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement

We the people gained the courage to awake to reality as it really is. These statements in this letter to you that I have made are no longer "conspiracy theory." The ones conspiring are you and your wealthy friends

Occupy Wall Street Thread, “First OFFICIAL Release from OCCUPY WALL STREET”¹⁸

8.1 Introduction

In the introductory chapter of this thesis, and a number of times throughout, I have made comparisons with both the agency-related and resistance-related discourses of online anti-NWO conspiracy theory with those of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), a modern-day political movement. While I have rejected labelling the conspiracy theory discussion forum members as a movement (in order to avoid pedantic misinterpretation and diversion from the primary goal of my thesis – which is to unpack the discursive interactive relationship between problems and solutions within a political grievance based discourse as contained within the anti-NWO conspiracy theory), the overlaps are substantial and provide significant theoretical implications not just for the intellectual research agenda on conspiracy theory (which has tended to ignore the political content of conspiracy theory, see Chapter 2 as well as Birchall 2006: 66), but on what I define as the resistance discourse of movements more generally. Specifically, these overlaps can be conceptualised in two ways. Firstly, in contrast to the assumption in the majority of the literature on conspiracy theory that political objectives are *at best* tangential to the primary goal of uncovering secrets (Fenster 1999: 86), I argue that the fundamentally political nature of the NWO conspiracy theory (understood as an elite goal towards a single, totalitarian world government) makes it inevitable that thought and discussion about resistance will emerge. While I would not go as far as Castells who suggests that expressions of outrage are all it takes for a movement to mobilise and resist (2012: 185), it seems indefensible not to appreciate that intense political grievance will result at the very least in the contemplation of political resistance strategies. I would hope, that by this point in the thesis, such a suggestion is not controversial to the reader. Secondly, from the other direction, traditionally-conceived social and political movements, particularly populist ones, contain agency-based adversarial discourses that display striking similarities of form and content with those of conspiracy theories. Recall the notion of a movement’s ideology as proposed by Melucci (see Chapter 3) which incorporates three social groups (heroes, villains and potential supporters) along with associated

¹⁸ <http://occupywallst.org/forum/first-official-release-from-occupy-wall-street/>

discourses of moral legitimacy and illegitimacy among those groups. Now recall the generally accepted definition of conspiracy theory within the academic literature:

a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret (Keeley 1999: 116)

As I argued in Chapter 2, such a definition, while certainly appropriately formulated and applicable to the NWO conspiracy theory, is so general as to be easily applicable to virtually any anti-systemic or populist social movement one cares to think of. The most obvious comparison here would be the Marxist minority / minority dichotomous class representation of society, postulating a minority ruling elite exercising disproportionate power over the masses, a ruling elite which moreover exercises such power in secret since it needs to employ the symbolic power of a ‘dominant ideology’ in order to keep the masses from becoming conscious of their subjugation and solidarity, and thus to keep them from transforming into a ‘class-for-themselves’ capable of organised, collective political resistance. Certainly there are many people who would have no qualms whatsoever labelling Marxists as conspiracy theorists, and when characterised in this way, and when compared to Keeley’s definition above, it is difficult to disagree. Yet doubtless someone like Fenster would never even dream of suggesting that Marxists are at best only tangentially concerned with political objectives, and are primarily concerned with uncovering the secret and nefarious machinations of the malevolent global bourgeoisie!

On this note, it is worth noting Fenster’s updated theoretical claim regarding the political nature of conspiracy theory in the second (2008) edition of his 1999 work:

I propose that conspiracy theory operates broadly as a political and cultural practice that longs for a perfectly transparent, accessible democracy – an end that, even if it were possible, conspiracy theory can hardly imagine and cannot attain (Fenster 2008: ix)

As I suggested in Chapter 1, this characterisation of conspiracy theory in Fenster’s work constitutes a radical shift in incorporating political ideas into conspiracy theorising from the first edition of this text; presumably in the decade between the two editions of his book he realised that such a peremptory and dismissive representation of conspiracy theory was untenable. Despite this, he has still not come close to claiming what I suggest in this thesis - that political solutions can indeed be conceived and strategised for within a conspiracy theory framework - as he needs to underscore that

conspiracy theory can not only not attain but cannot even *imagine* any actual political solutions. What is even more remarkable in the context of this chapter is his suggestion that conspiracy theory seeks a transparent and accessible democracy, a goal that is fundamental to many modern anti-systemic social movements, from the global justice movement which began in the late 1990s, all the way to the 2011 OWS movement. In fact in one of the threads under analysis in this chapter, one Occupy Wall Street forum member writes that the main goal of OWS should be “DIRECT & TRANSPARENT DEMOCRACY “ (capitalised in original), which is almost a verbatim mirror of Fenster’s description of conspiracy theory.

This chapter has been included in the thesis for three reasons. Firstly, the discourse of an established, mobilised, traditionally-conceived mass social movement, which many social movement scholars have researched, can acceptably be characterised as conspiracy theory, given the conceptual definitions in the conspiracy theory literature. Secondly, because of this it becomes possible to establish that a conspiracy theory absolutely can result in the mobilisation of a traditionally-conceived mass social movement. These statements combined serve as important mitigating theoretical caveats to the assumptions about conspiracy theory being fundamentally non-political (see Chapter 2). I am sure some readers may be uncomfortable with my referring OWS members as conspiracy theorists based on their discourse, since the term itself (certainly in public cultural discourse as well as in some of the academic literature), connotes pejorative normative assumptions of irrationality. Ultimately however, I am making a point about the very concept of conspiracy theory and how it is defined, which bring us to the third reason for the inclusion of this chapter: as I outline in section 8.6 below, the definitional scope and lines of the concept of conspiracy theory are respectively too broad and too blurred, a consequence of which is the proliferation of all kinds of misguided theoretical and normative statements about conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists. The discourse of a nefarious, secretive and minority elite pursuing its goals against the interests of humanity as a whole is prevalent in almost any established anti-systemic social movement. I thus propose, echoing Birchall’s contention regarding the discourse of cultural studies and conspiracy theory (2006: 72), that at present there is no satisfactory resolution to being able to distinguish clearly between (legitimate) social movements and (illegitimate) conspiracy theorists. It is really only when conspiracy theory is defined in extreme forms (see the more in-depth unpacking of Basham’s malevolent global conspiracy conceptualisation in section 8.6 below) that we can be truly comfortable saying that X can definitely be characterised as conspiracy theory in comparison to Y (for example an established populist and anti-systemic social movement). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to propose a new definition of conspiracy theory,

but certainly one is needed which can at least somewhat specify the conceptual scale of extremities when it comes to power and morality (as well as secrecy).

With this in mind, this chapter examines two online discussion forum of the OWS movement which were first posted in September 2011, around the time of the movement's inception in terms of the occupation itself, entitled "First OFFICIAL Release from OCCUPY WALL STREET", and "DETAILED LIST OF DEMANDS & OVERVIEW OF TACTICS FOR DC PROTEST"¹⁹. The former opens with the "Declaration of the Occupation of New York City" released by the movement and contains hundreds of responses from other forum members which can be analysed, just as the discussion threads in Chapters 4-7 of this thesis, as a form of agency-based resistance discourse and incorporating Melucci's concepts of 'action system' and 'ideology'. It furthermore functions as a request for, in Melucci's terminology, communicative construction to negotiate collectively problems and solutions; the declaration asks members to "address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone". The second thread comprises a more focused, collaboratively-generated list of specific demands on behalf of the movement. This chapter examines the resistance discourse contained in these two threads, focusing – as with my analyses on the conspiracy theory discussion forums – on the power and morality elements of agency in relation to the three core social groups and how these shape and constrain the consequent 'action system' discourse via cognitively and affectively constructed solutions. Throughout the chapter I also highlight the significant overlaps in discourse with that contained in the conspiracy theory discussion forums, in order to re-emphasise the validity of my use of Melucci's movement concepts in relation to anti-NWO resistance discourses.

8.2 Heroes, Villains and Supporters

Although I have not focused on the notion of collective identity in this thesis (see Chapter 3 for my reasons for this), it is important to recall Melucci's suggestion that the first primary meaning-making activity for any movement to make sense of collective action is to construct a 'we' (1996: 40). Any interest I have with the notion of collective identity in relation to the conspiracy theory discussion forums has been in terms of the interactive construction of the perceived agency of forum members, juxtaposed firstly in opposition to the NWO adversary and secondly in the discursive love / hate / need relationship with the public at large, rather than any standalone

¹⁹ <http://occupywallst.org/forum/detailed-list-of-demands-overview-of-tactics-for-d/>

subjective identity construction for the members themselves. The starting point for the first OWS thread under analysis here is the posting of the movement's first official declaration, and the 'we' construction contained in the opening sentence is so striking as to appear almost excessive:

As we gather together in solidarity to express a feeling of mass injustice, we must not lose sight of what brought us together. We write so that all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know that we are your allies

As mentioned above, the point of interest is not so much any declaration of collective identity in itself (for example in this case a social collective group concerned with expressing grievance at a mass injustice) but on the interaction between the movement's identity and other social groups. In this statement the 'we' is constructed strategically and rhetorically in order to emphasise the populist solidarity and unity of (almost) all people against the injustice brought about by the elites, referred to ubiquitously in the OWS movement in quantitative terminology as "the 1%". Melucci argues that in any movement's ideology, the central discursive task is "that of making evident the illegitimacy of the adversary ... in the eyes of both neutral observers and potential supporters" (1996: 352) and furthermore to emphasise "a positive relationship between the actor and the general goals of society" (ibid.: 350). This is a perfectly succinct summary of the OWS declaration contained in the opening post of this discussion thread, as after this opening sentence and the subsequent introductory paragraph, the declaration lists 23 moral grievances against the elite, each sentence beginning with the word "They". Some particularly striking examples are as follows:

They have taken our houses through an illegal foreclosure process

They have sold our privacy as a commodity

They determine economic policy

They continue to block alternate forms of energy to keep us dependent on oil

They have purposely covered up oil spills, accidents, faulty bookkeeping, and inactive ingredients in pursuit of profit

They purposefully keep people misinformed and fearful through their control of the media

They have participated in the torture and murder of innocent civilians overseas

I will examine the spectacular parallels with conspiracy theory in more depth in section 8.4 below, but I need to mention this as an aside as it is simply impossible to read these and not be struck by the overlap. Of interest for now is the agency construction of this 1% elite, specifically their

perceived moral illegitimacy and their perceived excessive power which are framed as the source of the problem. The morally illegitimate “they” who are presented as the “significant causal agents” (to use Keeley’s (1999) terminology) of the injustices of the world, are discursively framed in direct, adversarial opposition to the ‘we’ (both the occupiers and the public at large) who seek to act towards the ultimate goal of saving “the future of the human race”. The discourse thus far, solely from the declaration contained in the opening post of the thread, neatly fits not only Melucci’s ‘ideology’ concepts in relation to the three social groups of relevance along with the necessary strategic legitimising discourse, but also my own notion of resistance discourse as defined in Chapter 1, in terms of what can and can’t be done, and what should and shouldn’t be done, by these three social groups, given the proposed political grievance to be resisted. The elite are deemed not only to be immoral in their actions, ranging from “illegal” repossession processes all the way to torturing and murdering “innocent civilians”, but also immensely powerful, capable of controlling both national economic policy and the mass media (and, by implication, the very minds of the masses which are kept “misinformed” and “fearful”).

Interestingly, the very first response in the thread asks, “Who is “they”? Could someone provide a list of names, or at least a list of the companies, charged with these grievances?”. In Chapter 7 I noted the practical discursive benefit of naming the adversary in terms of visible, identifiable public organisations or institutions (one post used ‘NOW’, ‘the government’ and ‘the CIA’ interchangeably in this regard) rather than an unnamed, invisible and shadowy elite. This first response in the OWS thread indicates an awareness of such discursive power, requesting clear and precise identification of the agents causing these injustices to be resisted. This is echoed in Melucci’s work as he argues that “(w)ithout the identification of an adversary, of another social actor in conflict with the group for control of certain resources or values, discontent and protest will not engender a movement (1996: 293). It is further echoed by posts made by members of the conspiracy forums, for instance:

You can't stop ANYTHING until you know what it is
(Above Top Secret thread, “Can We Stop The NWO?”)

You cannot kill an enemy you cannot see
(Above Top Secret Thread, “The myth of successful armed resistance in the US in case of martial law”)

You hate these people and you dont even have names on them? ... What I am asking is that you show that your research actually lead somewhere, because most the research does not really lead to any real names or companies. Without any names or companies,

then all the stuff you have been saying isnt worth anything, since fighting blindly against something unknown just is a fight already lost.

(David Icke Thread, “Tell me EXACTLY what we can do”)

In the OWS discussion, one member responds to the request for naming the enemy, which although still does not contain any actual names, is nonetheless an effective summary of the specific agents behind the grievance expressed by the declaration of the movement:

THEY = the criminal bureaucrats who continue to get paid by lobbyists to ignore corporate injustices and corporate agendas... THEY = the executives of corporations (like Enron) who continue to steal money from the public while distributing false income statements and P&L statements to their shareholders... THEY = the government bureaucrats in the SEC who continue to shirk their responsibility to investigate and prosecute corporate criminals while getting paid to look the other way

A somewhat less passionate and rhetorical, though perhaps more technically correct, response to the question simply clarifies that, ““They” refers to the noun “corporations” in the paragraph preceding the list”. However, in the overall context of the OWS discourse, while the central grievance is focused on the financial power of corporations, this does not faithfully represent the villain discourse since the 1% elite does indeed incorporate the political elites. The movement’s most frequently cited campaign objective has been, as one member of the forum writes, “CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM” (capitals in original), adding that “unless you get the big money out of politics, no change whatsoever will occur”. The adversary for the OWS movement is thus defined as the 1% of the political and economic elite, incorporating the Wall Street / Washington geographical relationship, who are perceived in morally illegitimate terms as acting against the interest of the public at large.

8.3 The OWS ‘action system’: goals, means and environment

Table 4.1 in Chapter 4 provided a summary of the resistance discourse in terms of Melucci’s notion of ‘action system’, incorporating ideas about goals, means and environment, for the “NWO Survival Planning” discussion thread on Above Top Secret. Table 8.1 below demonstrates that the exact same analytical approach can be applied to the OWS resistance discourse within the two threads examined in this chapter:

Goal	Environment (resources)	Means (illustrative quotes)
Political transparency	Campaign finance laws / Corporate & political lobbying relationships	<p>“kicking the lobbyists out of the Washington”</p> <p>“Politicians should get one salary, and campaign finance reform should make sure that that is the only thing they get”</p> <p>“No person, corporation or business entity of any type, domestic or foreign, should be allowed to contribute money directly or indirectly to any candidate for federal office, or to contribute money on behalf of, or oppose to, any type of campaign for federal office”</p> <p>“Just as we found there was no place for Government involvement with Religion and visa versa, we have the 1st Amendment "Separation of Church and State". Therefore we should move for another Amendment of "SEPARATION OF CORPORATIONS AND STATE"! There is no room for one meddling in the other.”</p>
Wealth redistribution	Government bailout funds / tax laws	<p>“The baks got their bailout- I think one of our demands should be the middle/lower class bailout. Many middle class people are suffering w/ student loan debt. Can we please make one of the demands relief from private (commercial) student loans (we should be allowed to ischarge them). Many of us are drowning in student loan debt”</p> <p>“proposed fair tax system ... that would slash middle class and working poor taxes, have the wealthy pay their fair share, fund education, healthcare, etc”</p> <p>“PUT BACK THE MONEY. Transfer back, with interest, all public-source money given to private financial organizations whose demise was caused by irresponsible management”</p>
Banking reform	Monetary and financial regulatory system	<p>“Re-introduce the Glass Steagall Act”</p> <p>“The key is the federal reserve and the fractional banking system. Dennis Kucinich has introduced the NEED act which would nationalize the fed and abolish privatized currency”</p>
Democracy	US Federal Government / US Congress	<p>“The solution is a form of direct democracy. This is where every citizen of a country votes on legislation, no representatives. This virtually removes the connection between money and politics, since every person has the power. In order to influence votes in a direct democracy, corporations would have to buy off a majority of the citizens, which becomes improbable”</p>
Economic and financial accountability	Corporate regulatory system	<p>“USE CONGRESSIONAL AUTHORITY AND OVERSIGHT TO ENSURE APPROPRIATE FEDERAL AGENCIES FULLY INVESTIGATE AND PROSECUTE THE WALL STREET CRIMINALS who clearly broke the law and helped cause the 2008 financial crisis</p> <p>“REVOKE CORPORATE PERSONHOOD ”</p> <p>“regulating derivatives markets”</p>

		“Demand the stop of stock short selling stocks”
Non-compliance / withdrawal from the economic system	Employment / consumer boycotts	<p>“Why don't "we the people" organize a national sick day...we all call in sick to work the same day and just spend the day at home...we dont go out and buy products...we just stay at home to show how "sick" we are of this and we want change”</p> <p>“it is every americans responsibility to stop buying convenient crap.... or we get what we pay for... the revolution is just as much in each world citizens mind as it is on the street... boycott walmart and”</p>
Raising awareness	Mass media / internet	“RE-ESTABLISH THE PUBLIC AIRWAVES IN THE U.S. SO THAT POLITICAL CANDIDATES ARE GIVEN EQUAL TIME FOR FREE AT REASONABLE INTERVALS IN DAILY PROGRAMMING DURING CAMPAIGN SEASON”

Table 8.1: Goals, means and environment in the Occupy Wall Street discussion threads

8.4 Comparison of representations of morality and power between OWS and conspiracy theory discussion threads

While there exists some overlap in relation to goals, means and environment as contained in table 8.1 and the discussions in the Above Top Secret and David Icke discussion forums (for example the non-compliance suggestions along with the recommendation to abolish the Federal Reserve), overall there is a significant contrast in relation to the scope and diversity of political, legal, institutional and regulatory environments via which the movement’s goals may be achieved through various means. This section endeavours to explain this disparity despite the significant agency-related overlaps between the resistance discourses of the OWS forum and the anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums. It is a reflection of the common theoretical claim I make throughout this thesis, that subtle changes in how the adversary is defined can have dramatic impacts on the possible solutions proposed.

Firstly, returning to the quotes from the opening post cited in section 8.2, the agency-based parallels with conspiracy theory are simply breath-taking. The OWS movement, which, I would imagine, no academic in the world would hesitate to label a social movement (due primarily to its visible, public

acts of occupation and protest rather than its discourse), postulates a morally illegitimate minority (comprising the political and economic 1% elite) which acts in secret (the absence of transparency in political finance along with regularly ‘covering up’ its crimes) to further its own economic and political interests at the expense of the well-being of humanity in general. In Chapter 4 I noted the tendency (using the example of the imagined future staged NWO nuclear attack) of rhetorical conceptions of NWO controlling agents to exaggerate their immorality to what Basham describes as “insanely evil” (2003: 91) levels, even though it is far beyond what might be deemed necessary in order to incite grievance or outrage. Amplifying the perceived immorality of the adversary is ubiquitous as a strategic rhetorical tool. In the context of OWS, as the quotes in table 8.1 would suggest, the moral illegitimacy of the elite can simply be framed in terms of excessive power and insufficient transparency and regulation in the political and financial system of the US. No further moral outrage is actually necessary in order for these goals and means to be collectively pursued. Despite this, the OWS declaration cites that this elite participates in the murder and torture of innocent people. In fact a couple of forum members pounce on this extreme (in the context of the overarching political / economic / legal discourse within the discussion) representation of the immorality of corporations:

what corporation killed innocent victims

HOLY WTF BATMAN? WALMART DID THAT?

In addition, the perceived suppression of information via the elite’s control of mass media would certainly not look out of place on any conspiracy theory forum. These elites are furthermore argued to be suppressing information “purposefully”, indicating again what Keeley stipulates as a requirement for a conspiracy theory, the “significant causal agency” of a small group of powerful people, in combination with Popper’s claim that conspiracy theorists attribute to events and institutions a “conscious design” (2006: 15) such that elites are thought to plan, actively, deliberately and consciously, these immoral acts. Moreover, while there are no OWS member posts using the term ‘sheeple’ (not least in the context of these threads which were aiming to unite the entirety of humanity at the movement’s inception), it is a slippery slope when suggesting that the masses are ‘kept misinformed’ by the media, discursively dismissing the masses’ own agency, or the subjective capacity of people to re-interpret mass media content themselves or even to access alternative media sources for information. That said, the ‘sheeple’ term is somewhat unique to

conspiracy theory in the sense that many conspiracy theorists do unabashedly express a sense of intellectual superiority over the very fact that they have purposefully opened their minds to discover hidden knowledge about how the world really works. For OWS however, the goals are framed in primarily economic and political terms.

Despite this, another prominent theme in the OWS discussion threads is the importance of information acquisition and dissemination, again strongly mirroring certain resistance discourses of the NWO conspiracy theory. Indeed the quote at the very beginning of this chapter sounds exactly like the kind of thing one would find in the conspiracy theory forums (actually this very post pre-empted such accusations by arguing that the core problem, with which OWS is concerned, is “no long conspiracy theory”), underscoring not only the metaphor of being ‘awake’ but of the positive moral character associated with actively uncovering this hidden information about ‘real’ reality: “We the people gained the courage to awake to reality as it really is”. In the ‘detailed demands’ OWS thread, one post echoes perfectly the expectation of the recruitment of the masses at large to resist purely upon becoming aware of the movement’s cause:

Education is the KEY, once the masses know we are going to break-up the banks and create the even playing field we had after the Great Depression until 1999--They will rise up with up!

This is almost a verbatim carbon copy, in terms of the conceptualisation of the power of information to mobilise action, of the quote from the DI “A strategy of peaceful non-compliance?” thread analysed in Chapter 7:

The more people we can reach with the correct information equates to more people with the desire to take positive action

However, faith in the masses’ morality and capacity to act is not universal in the OWS forums. One post does not even attempt disguise contempt for the public at large, yet again mirroring certain elements of conspiracy theory discourse analysed in this thesis, asking in the context of a proposal for direct democracy via legislative referenda: “do you really want to trust uneducated and uninformed citizens to rule on laws?”. Another quintessential phrase associated with conspiracy theory can be found in a post which thanks the forum for “helping people to *connect the dots* on corporate greed and corruption” (italics added). Further, another post simply demands “NO MEMBERS OF SECRET SOCIETIES IN POLITICS”, a clear example of a conspiracy theory

conception of political power. Finally, one OWS post postulates a very conspiratorial NWO-like global power structure, emphasising to other members that the present US two-party electoral system is merely a smokescreen as the true global controlling agents act behind the scenes:

It's the global corporate/financial/militarist EMPIRE behind the police, behind the two phony parties, behind the media, behind the wars, behind the vast economic inequality, behind the global environmental destruction, and most dangerously behind the TWO-Party modernized "Vichy" sham of faux-democratic government --- which is the causal cancer that keeps all the people fooled all the time and insures that the understanding of, recognition of, confrontation of, and even the slightest mention of EMPIRE is never, never, never whispered by the politicians, never mentioned by the corporatist media, never hinted at by most of the internet sites, and too-seldom even mentioned by progressive web sites and their posters.

As I have mentioned a number of times in this thesis, part of the problem in the peremptory statements in the conspiracy theory literature is forgetting the fact that conspiracy theorists are never just conspiracy theorists and nothing else. Some OWS members may well consider themselves conspiracy theorists, and it certainly would not surprise me in the least, given the classical conspiracy theory lexicon employed, as well as the core assumptions about exaggerated and hidden elite agency, if some of the latter OWS thread quotes were written by people who are also members of conspiracy theory discussion forums.

In addition, although certainly exceptional in the context of OWS, the thread also contains expressions of fear and futility towards the prospect of resisting, due to the perceived excessive power of the 1% elite. One post concedes apologetically, "Hate to admit I feel pretty beaten into submission to a point,, and fearful of standing up for my rights". A far more striking example within the OWS forum, on another thread entitled, "DETAILED LIST OF DEMANDS & OVERVIEW OF TACTICS FOR DC PROTEST", incorporates virtually every agency-based element of the NWO conspiracy theory, postulating an elite so morally illegitimate and so powerful that it is deemed futile to try to pursue the movement's demands as they currently stand:

In demanding that the current government create or change policies, you are trusting the foxes to guard the hen house. You are not dealing with an honest broker. Our corrupt government and its corporate puppet masters have been enacting legislation for decades that looks like it is going to be good for the people, while in actuality, it benefits only the 1%. You may get them to reinstate Glass-Steagall, for example, but I guarantee they will create new loopholes and/or other new legislation to ensure the status quo. There is a reason that legislation is so voluminous and complex you need a

law degree and a staff to understand it—this is how they hide the loopholes and they are very good at it. If the movement's demands end up being a list of policy changes, at some point they will agree to change policy, the movement will rejoice, disband and they will promptly fuck us over anew.

Here we see expressions of intense mistrust in government agents (“foxes”) such that proposed policy changes such as the reinstatement of the Glass-Steagall Act are deemed futile because the controlling agents are presumed to have sufficient power to re-legislate in order to maintain their dominance (“the status quo”) regardless. Such a characterisation of inflated elite power, in combination with a perception of futility towards specific, concrete policy changes, is highly typical of the discourses in the conspiracy theory realm. For instance, here’s a very similar characterisation of elite power and consequent futility in the context of voting from the Above Top Secret thread entitled, “is there anyway we can stop the new world order”:

Did you say vote?????? Sorry, but that's laughable, totally. How ya gonna vote out people who own and control the voting processes? They own the voting machines (diebold), and they pay off people every election cycle to cause big stirs at the voting polls and get new laws and ordinances passed all the time to disenfranchise voters.

By virtue of their perceived control over all crucial political, economic and legal environmental resources, the very notion of using mechanisms within that system in order to bring about change is deemed ludicrous, even “laughable”. While such an intense juxtaposition of moral grievance and futility is relatively commonplace in the conspiracy theory forums, it’s extremely rare to see within the Occupy Wall Street forums. The OWS quote above concludes with the spectacularly pessimistic suggestion that even once a particular policy goal has been achieved, not only will it make no difference but the cycle of domination will persist as before since the elites will “fuck us over anew”. Such a sentiment is taken to its extreme form in the Above Top Secret “NWO Survival Planning” thread, whereby even after the *imagined* catastrophic and brutal NWO takeover resulting in the deaths of billions of people, there is no hope since the people who do survive the fallout “will come back to take over the world again and screw it all up again for GREED”. This extends the mistrust of moral agency from elites to humanity in starkly deterministic terms, which is about as disempowering a worldview as it is possible to conceive – a worldview moreover expressed within the discourse of an established, mobilised and traditionally-conceived social movement.

8.5 Non-violence and the presumed retaliation of the elite

On this note, as I have argued throughout this thesis (and which supports Basham's (2003) claim that, in the face of a totalising malevolent global conspiracy, there is simply nothing that can be done about it), extreme representations of power and malevolence among the adversary are decisive constraining factors in both cognitive and affective expressions of resistance discourse. The above OWS quote relating to the futility of reinstating the Glass-Steagall act does present the elite as immoral, but in a rather tame manner when compared to how the NWO elites are conceptualised in the conspiracy theory discussion forums. The agency of the elites constructed in the OWS quote may suggest sneakiness and selfishness in relation to creating "new loopholes" to ensure continuation of their dominance, but they are certainly not represented as so evil that they are to be feared (the "NWO Survival Planning" discussion thread analysed in Chapter 4 is the starkest comparison in this regard). Nonetheless, we still see evidence of fear toward the potential retribution of the elite if OWS members engage in public demonstrations, echoing both Melucci's claim that "the response of the adversary, the tolerance or repression of collective action ... constitutes the decisive factor in a movement's pursuit of its objectives" (1996: 324) and Castell's claim that "overcoming fear is the fundamental threshold for individuals to cross in order to engage in a social movement, since they are well aware that in the last resort, they will have to confront violence if they trespass the boundaries set up by the dominant elites to preserve their domination" (2013: 10). For example, one OWS forum member questions the proposed efficacy of occupation given the assumption of violent retaliation by the police (here further dehumanised by the label "pigs"):

Not sure how this "entrance blocking" maneuver using "proven non-violent tactics" is going to work once the pigs arrive

Again this is of course a decidedly tame, indeed somewhat sarcastic and passive-aggressive, way of expressing fear of elite retribution. It certainly cannot compare to the more dramatic such expressions of fear in the conspiracy theory forums, an affective standpoint perhaps best exemplified by this quote from the David Icke forum thread entitled, "so we are awake that's the first step what do we do now?":

a march on the Pentagon, or for that matter any anti-establishment reaction is just feeding the maw of the beast. They just love that shit. Although it may appear to be a show of courage by confronting and challenging them, it incites them to bust heads in. You won't have them trembling in their hobnail boots, other than trembling with excitement over the ensuing bloodshed.

The perceived immorality of the elite is amplified to such extreme levels here that the fear is caused not just by the presumed capacity for the NWO to respond violently to resistance at all, but that the elites are framed as positively bloodthirsty, and indeed are imagined to become physically giddy with excitement at the prospect of shedding innocents' blood. Such a moral conceptualisation of elite agency should be contextualised within David Icke's overall framework, in which (reptilian-possessed) elites are routinely accused of indulging in Satanic blood-letting (and even blood-drinking) rituals or human sacrifices. Nonetheless, no matter how immoral the 1% are framed in the OWS movement's online discussions, they never reach the extreme levels found in the conspiracy theory forums. There is evil and then there is, to use Basham's terminology when he defines the malevolent global conspiracy, "insanely evil" (2003: 91).

8.6 Power and morality in OWS and conspiracy theory: a matter of extremes

It is worth recalling Basham's complete definition of the malevolent global conspiracy here as it provides a much more effective basis compared with Keeley's (1999) overly-general definition of conspiracy theory, on which to explain the 'action system' differences between the OWS forum and the conspiracy theory forums which I mentioned at the start of Section 8.4:

"the deceptions and manipulations implied by the term "conspiracy theory" are usually thought to express **nefarious, even insanely evil**, purposes. A total malevolent global conspiracy is the extreme example. Imagine that the "world" as we know it today is an elaborate hoax. A cabal of unaccountable, parasitic power elites virtually unknown to the public controls the economy, politics, popular ideology, and pop culture and so, by causal implication, the lives of the masses. These conspirators pursue a **wholly Machiavellian** program for the wealth, power, and challenge, perhaps even for the **twisted entertainment** and **maniacal ego amplification**, it provides them" (Basham 2003: 91-92, emphasis added).

From start to finish in this thesis I have emphasised the fundamental importance of both power and morality in relation to resistance discourse generally and to conspiracy theory in particular. What Keeley is missing in his generally-accepted definition is the (extremely negatively conceived) moral element of agency assumed to be possessed by the elite. Secrecy and power, while necessary for any proposed explanation to be able to be labelled 'conspiracy theory' are, I would argue, insufficient for anything resembling a faithful representation of the rich and fascinating discourse that can be found within conspiracy theory discussions. It is primarily due to the absence of

incorporating morality (beyond the assumed illegitimacy of acting in secret) into his definition that the OWS movement, Marxism and indeed any populist social or political movement one cares to think of, can be equally labelled as conspiracy theory under Keeley's 'standard' definition. However, it is clearly not as straightforward as simply including (as Basham) does, representations of (im)morality in the discursive construction of the adversary; after all Melucci makes clear that *all* social movements need to construct the agency of the enemy as morally illegitimate, not only to solidify their collective grievance, but to garner support (whether via recruitment or simple moral support) from the wider public. In fact Castells cites George Lakoff's suggestion that the idea of OWS representing a "moral movement aiming to impact the public discourse" as being "supported by observation") (2012: 193). Within the discourse of the OWS movement, the 1% elite are constructed as possessing too much power, with not enough transparency, and they exercise that power using illegitimate and even immoral means. Within the conspiracy theory discourse, the NWO is constructed as possessing too much power, with not enough transparency, and they exercise that power using illegitimate and even immoral means. What, then, is the difference between them?

As much as I would love to be able to draw a precise analytical distinction in order to explain the differences in resistance strategies between OWS and conspiracy theory, I have neither the intellectual confidence nor ambition to revolutionise the literature by proposing a succinct and acceptable definition of 'conspiracy theory' on the basis of my research, particularly since, as Knight notes, there is "no fixed set of inherent qualities that makes something a conspiracy theory" (2000: 11). What I can suggest is that a distinction can be made by referring to relative extremes of power, morality and secrecy. It would of course be impossible to demarcate empirically the exact line that has to be crossed for an enemy to be characterised as *too* powerful, immoral and hidden such that the conceptualisation can satisfactorily be labelled conspiracy theory. The lines are simply too blurred. Nonetheless, given the findings of my research, it is a reasonable distinction to be highlight given the otherwise striking discursive overlaps. Appreciating such conceptual extremes also explains why at certain times the discursive impact on expressions of efficacy and optimism in the OWS forum mirrors the apathy and futility that can frequently be found in the conspiracy theory forums. Generally speaking the tendency I have found is that no matter where the discourse is coming from, the more extreme a conspiratorial conception of elite power (the extremities being in relation to discourses of power, morality and secrecy), the more we tend to see disempowering discourses, and thus the more the claims of Fenster (1999) and Basham (2003) appear credible. I stress this is of course just a tendency and is far from deterministic; nonetheless, we see similar

expressions of futility in the OWS forum when the adversary is constructed in extreme terms in relation to power and morality (and to a lesser extent, secrecy). And it is also why, when the perceived power, immorality and secrecy of the NWO is discursively diminished, we can find detailed, practical strategies of resistance accompanied by enthusiasm and hope. In Chapter 2 I provided a ‘conspiratorial continuum’ diagram (Figure 2.3) indicating the various agency-based conceptual dimensions within definitions of the NWO that I have come across during this research. These five dimensions range from less conspiratorial to more conspiratorial; for example, definitions which foreground the political nature of the NWO conspiracy theory are less conspiratorial than those which foreground its extra-terrestrial nature because of the assumed extent of power, secrecy and immorality in the elite. Political definitions of the NWO (for example as contained in some US Patriot discourses) point to visible political institutions such as the United Nations as being the primary source of any future global NWO takeover. The UN may appear as a powerful entity to many people, but in the conspiracy theory world it is typically seen as far less powerful, far less immoral and far more visible than fourth-dimensional non-human reptilians who feed off human sadness. Strategies seeking to resist the UN are thus much more conventional, straightforward and forthcoming than strategies seeking to resist extra-terrestrial lizards. In the context of the OWS movement, the adversaries are certainly defined as excessively powerful as well as morally illegitimate (and acting without transparency), but these adversaries are not assumed (usually – there are exceptions) to have so much power that they are above the law itself. Government, laws and regulations are environmental resources which are assumed to possess greater power than these adversaries. This is why so many practical demands from OWS members can be collaboratively offered, associated with significant enthusiasm regarding their perceived efficacy, which specify individual policy amendments, tax laws or financial accountability laws. In the rare example cited earlier referring to the “foxes” in government such that the 1% elite were deemed to have so much power that they could simply re-write laws and eventually “fuck us over anew” even if they initially conceded to the movement’s demands, the attitude was decidedly pessimistic.

Table 8.2 further illustrates this agency-based discursive relationship by comparing cognitive and affective expressions in the OWS and conspiracy theory discussion forums in terms of how these are shaped by the conspiratorial dimensions of elite agency:

Table 8.2 Agency extremes and their impact on cognitive and affective resistance discourse expressions the Occupy Wall Street and conspiracy theory discussion forums

Dimension of conspiratorial elite agency	Exaggerated		Diminished	
	Cognitive (strategic efficacy)	Affective (empowerment / disempowerment)	Cognitive (strategic efficacy)	Affective (empowerment / disempowerment)
Power	<p>"I somehow don't think that, even if all the Have-nots(which I am one of) pooled all of our resources together, would be able to put a dent in whats happening already"</p> <p>(Above Top Secret Thread, "<u>Can We Stop The NWO?</u>")</p>	<p>"Hate to admit I feel pretty beaten into submission to a point ,, and fearful of standing up for my rights "</p> <p>(Occupy Wall Street Thread, "<u>First OFFICIAL Release from OCCUPY WALL STREET</u>")</p>	<p>"No trading will be permitted by our elected officials, and all private funds of elected officials must be placed in a blind fund to disallow trading based on inside information"</p> <p>(Occupy Wall Street Thread, "<u>DETAILED LIST OF DEMANDS & OVERVIEW OF TACTICS FOR DC PROTEST</u>")</p>	<p>"We are the powerful ones! Make no mistake about that! ... The N.W.O has nothing! nothing! on us! We are beautiful and powerful and loving beings"</p> <p>(David Icke Thread, "<u>A strategy of peaceful non-compliance?</u>")</p>
(Im)morality	<p>"Not sure how this "entrance blocking" maneuver using "proven non-violent tactics " is going to work once the pigs arrive"</p> <p>(Occupy Wall Street Thread, "<u>DETAILED LIST OF DEMANDS & OVERVIEW OF TACTICS FOR DC PROTEST</u>")</p>	<p>"trembling with excitement over the ensuing bloodshed"</p> <p>(David Icke Thread, "<u>so we are awake thats the first step what do we do now?</u>")</p>	<p>"There are people in Bilderberg, Skull and Bones, the Freemasons, etc. who are actually on our side"</p> <p>(David Icke Thread, "<u>A strategy of peaceful non-compliance?</u>")</p>	<p>"they fear us ... I can't blame them. If we were to unite ... we would give them a run for their money"</p> <p>(Above Top Secret Thread, "<u>NWO Survival Planning</u>")</p>
Invisibility	<p>"You cannot kill an enemy you cannot see "</p> <p>(Above Top Secret Thread, "<u>The myth of successful armed resistance in the US in case of martial law</u>")</p>	<p>"So if you've seen nothing, if the crimes of this government remain unknown to you, then I would suggest you allow the 11th of October to pass unmarked"</p> <p>(Occupy Wall Street Thread, "<u>First OFFICIAL Release from OCCUPY WALL STREET</u>")</p>	<p>"THEY= the 3 credit reporting agencies acting as governmental companies but are FOR PROFIT COMPANIES. in this recession how in the world can you get anything on credit if your credit score has been affected by the economy. But is anyone making them re-adjust their ranking policies. NO "</p> <p>(Occupy Wall Street Thread, "<u>First OFFICIAL Release from OCCUPY WALL STREET</u>")</p>	<p>"the 12 or so main illuminati families, i am not advocating violence if there are millions of people, marching and moving on them all directly to make citizens arrests, they do not stand a chance"</p> <p>(Above Top Secret Thread, "<u>Okay, we all know the New World Order is here, Whadda ya gonna do now?</u>")</p>

From the illustrative quotes in table 8.2 we can see that there is a tendency for negative cognitive and affective expressions in relation to resistance discourse when the adversary's power and morality (and, to a lesser extent, secrecy) are exaggerated. Conversely, when the adversary's power, morality and secrecy are diminished, associated cognitive and affective expressions tend to be positive. I would not suggest that this is a deterministic relationship (not least because there are some examples of posts which exaggerate the power and immorality of the NWO to extremes and yet are associated with extremely positive cognitive and affective expressions towards resistance, even when the strategy implies certain death!), but as a general tendency it is certainly supported by this research and moreover corroborates (when the conspiratorial elements of the adversary's agency are exaggerated) the claims of Fenster (1999) and Basham (2003) that conspiracy theory, at least in such an extreme form, can be viewed as disabling and that there is nothing that can be done in the face of a totalising malevolent conspiracy. The problem with these claims however is that they postulate a highly idealised and 'pure' conspiracy theorist when in fact there exists, as has hopefully been demonstrated in this thesis, a hugely diverse range of conceptions just of the NWO conspiracy theory. There are nuances and gradations in expressions of empowerment towards resistance that reflect gradations in expressions of elite agency in relation to power and morality. In some cases, such as with the discourse contained in the David Icke thread analysed in Chapter 5, while the adversary's power and immorality is presented in truly extreme terms, this is not necessarily a constraining factor as long as the perceived power of the members themselves is exaggerated even further (for example when humans are described as being "consciousness beyond all form" and thus invulnerable to physical harm by elites), and some of the most incredibly empowering expressions can therefore be found in a forum which postulates an invisible, extra-terrestrial elite which has controlled the planet for millennia and which *literally* thrives off human suffering. The point is that the perception of extreme power in the adversary is only a constraint in thinking about and discussing resistance if there is a concomitant perception that the members themselves (along with humanity more generally) possess less power. As argued in Chapters 6 and 7, the wider this perceived power gap, the more likely we are to find expressions of disempowerment or futility.

8.7 'Word cloud' comparison between the Above Top Secret, David Icke and Occupy Wall Street online forums

Although the research in thesis is entirely qualitative in nature, focusing on the meanings of and relationships between resistance discourses as they are constructed in the discussion forum texts, it

is nonetheless enlightening to provide a broad quantitative overview of the key words used in these forums. For the entirety of my discussion thread samples, I have uploaded the texts into a ‘word cloud’ generator²⁰. A word cloud diagrammatically represents a key word list from a text whereby the size of the font correlates with the frequency of the key word. Figures 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 below are the results for the three discussion forums:

Figure 8.1 Above Top Secret forum word cloud



²⁰ I have used Tagxedo for this purpose: www.tagxedo.com/

[illegible]

Figure 8.3 Occupy Wall Street forum word cloud



The key differences between the Above Top Secret and David Icke forum word clouds, despite the sample for all threads being selected for their relevance in relation to resisting the NWO, are fascinating. Above Top Secret discussions are more focused on practical, empirical manifestations of the NWO as well as proposed strategies. “Government”, the “state”, “America” / “American” and “law” in particular stand out as reflecting the US-based libertarian basis for the NWO conspiracy more commonly employed within the US-dominated Above Top Secret forums. In relation to resistance, the key words again reflect the more nationalistic and right-wing ideological basis of US Patriots or militia, particular in terms of direct, aggressive confrontation. Key words such as “armed”, “fight”, “war”, “guns”, “weapons” and “survival” are strikingly prominent. By contrast, the David Icke word cloud incorporates far less aggressive key words and incorporates many more non-empirical phenomena, reflecting the predominantly spiritualist and new-age

discourse in the forum informed by Icke's theories. "Love", "fear", "idea", "consciousness", "believe", "choose" and "mind" stand out as representing the central priorities in relation to resisting the adversary within the David Icke discussion forums. The OWS forum word cloud is almost dull in comparison with the other two. There is very little in relation to affective or moral expressions or the role of knowledge (the word "know" for instance is very prominent in both the Above Top Secret and David Icke word clouds) but it is absolutely flooded with practical, empirical phenomena relating to conventional activism and activist targets such as "corporations", "government", "states", "banks", "congress", "elections", "representatives" and so on. This difference in key word preponderance between OWS and the conspiracy theory forums is not circumstantial. It reflects the subtle differences in conceptions of elite agency in terms of power and morality, as well as the perceived power of the movement itself, within the OWS discourse. Yes there are expressions of grievance against the illegitimate concentration of power in the 1% elite in the OWS discourse, but these elites do not even come close to comparing to the perceived power of the elites in the typical NWO conspiracy theory framework. And furthermore they cannot compare to the perceived immorality of the elites in the such a framework. While there was mention of corporations being involved in torturing and killing innocent civilians in the OWS discussion, such a moral grievance does not pervade the discussion thereafter, and instead the debates focus on means and goals, on specific laws and regulations that would be able to overcome the problem of concentrated elite power. In the conspiracy theory forums by contrast, extreme grievances against the perceived evil of the NWO are rife.

8.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an agency-based analytical comparison between conspiracy theory resistance discourses and those contained in the OWS discussion forum. There exist striking similarities in both directions: firstly, there are multiple substantive overlaps in the OWS discourse in relation to conspiratorial conceptions of elite power. In both cases, the problem is defined as extreme concentrated power in the hands of a small elite, adversaries who are deemed morally illegitimate and who act against the interests of the majority of humanity and furthermore do so in the absence of transparency and accountability. Secondly, in the other direction conspiracy theory discussions resemble the discourse of a traditionally-conceived social or political movement. While I have not gone as far as to label the members of the conspiracy theory forums as a movement, the

fact that the discussions are preoccupied with political problems and political solutions means it is entirely possible to analyse their discourse in the same way as that of a social movement. We see strategies of consciousness raising, recruiting outsiders, demonstration planning, lobbying politicians and all manner of typical political activism strategies in order to overcome the illegitimate dominance of the adversary. We also of course see strategies of escaping to the wilderness, stocking up on ammunition to fight NWO forces even while accepting inevitable death, and even transcending the 'five sense' universe entirely. That such solutions are unconventional is of far less importance than the fact that the discourse forms resemble in so many important ways that of a social movement such as OWS. The key differences, I would reiterate, relate simply to the extent to which perceptions of power, immorality and secrecy are exaggerated in the adversary. Many people would have no problem whatsoever labelling the Occupy protesters as conspiracy theorists, blaming as they do a tiny wealthy elite for all the world's political and economic problems, and certainly under Keeley's (1999) definition they can absolutely be categorised as conspiracy theorists, as can Marxist or any other populist social movement in history. But they do not come close to inflating the perceived power and immorality in the way that anti-NWO conspiracy theorists do. While some rare instances do exist in the OWS forum, in general we do not see conceptions of the elite such that they are deemed to have extreme totalising power and malevolence of the sort that Basham (2003: 91-2) imagines (and which is a very faithful representation of the NWO conspiracy although he does not explicitly label it as such). It is certainly a somewhat fine analytical line when it comes to distinguishing a conspiracy theory resistance discourse from one employed by a more traditionally conceived social movement, but that line is likely to be crossed the more extreme the discursive construction of elite agency in terms of power, morality and secrecy.

Chapter 9: Theoretical reflections and discussion

We collectively and individually have all the power in the world. The journey of 1000 miles cannot begin until the first step is taken. So effectively we are giving all of our power away until we take the first step to reclaim it in responsible and moral action (David Icke Thread: [“What Will It Take to Defeat the NWO Thread”](#))

9.1 The discursive malleability of agency

The quote above from the David Icke forum provides a wonderfully succinct ‘from the horse’s mouth’ summary of the core theme of discursively constructed agency as used throughout this thesis. My starting point for this research, based on the academic literature on conspiracy theories, has been to examine the (un-researched) conjectures of Fenster (1999) and Basham (2003) that conspiracy theory by its very nature is disabling and that, when faced with the prospect of a totalising, global and malevolent conspiracy such as the NWO, there is simply nothing that can be done about it because those in power wield too much power. It is worth reminding the reader of my two analytical research questions (see Chapter 1):

- How are ideas about the perceived agency of the members of the online anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums, in terms of power and morality, shaped or constrained by the perceived agency of the NWO within the discourses of online anti-NWO conspiracy theory discussion forums?
- Given how these ideas are presented within the discourses, to what extent can it be argued that conspiracy theory itself is either empowering or disabling ?

The overarching theoretical framework underpinning this thesis has been via the notion of ‘resistance discourse’, which I define in Chapter 1 as ideas relating to two subsets of agency, power and morality (what can and cannot be done, and what should and should not be done), which furthermore discursively interact with each other among the three core social groups: heroes, villains and supporters. The above quote nicely illustrates the central constitutive roles of power and morality along with their interactive relationship in the context of such an adversarial dynamic. The post combines affective expressions of both empowerment and disempowerment; while resistance is symbolised as a disheartening “journey of 1000 miles”, the forum members, individually and

collectively are nonetheless said to have “all the power in the world”. Crucially, they are furthermore argued to be “giving away” their power to the adversary by not pursuing their “moral” duty to resist, emphasising in particular the importance of doing something, no matter how small it initially seems, in order for the vital “first step” to be taken towards the goal of resisting and eventually overcoming the enemy.

The perceived power and morality of forum members themselves, along with the public at large, are shaped and constrained by the perceived power and morality of the adversaries. The NWO is typically defined as an immoral elite group seeking to dominate humanity via its pursuit of a single, global totalitarian government. Basham (2003) argues that constructing such an adversary results in the realisation that nothing can be done; but as I have demonstrated in this thesis, such a construction of an adversary actually results in persistent and detailed discussions of the realisation that something must be done. Although Fenster argues that political objectives are largely absent for conspiracy theorists (1999: 86) and that even when thinking about potentially doing something, solutions can neither be attained nor even imagined by them (2008: ix), this is simply not true, and appears to apply only to a highly stylised ‘ideal type’ conspiracy theorist. A huge range of possible solutions are frequently constructed, negotiated and contested within the conspiracy theory forums, even when the elite is painted as omnipotent and, to use Basham’s terms, “insanely evil” (2003: 91). The actual fact that resistance goals and means can indeed be imagined is however less important for this thesis than the diverse ways in which proposed goals, along with the perceived agency of forum members and humanity more generally, are discursively shaped by the perceived power and morality of the adversary. I have not been able to cover the full range of resistance strategies discussed in the conspiracy theory forums, but I hope to have provided some substantial insights into just how varied such strategies can be given how the NWO conspiracy theory is defined in relation to agency. At times such strategies constitute textbook small-scale empirical acts of resistance which would look perfectly reasonable being undertaken by any traditionally-conceived social movement, while at others they have crossed into the realm of transcending the physical universe entirely. When the problem itself, in relation to the perceived agency of the villains, is defined in unconventional terms, appropriate solutions, in relation to the perceived agency of the heroes and potential supporters, have needed to be similarly unconventional.

This chapter begins by summarising the problem / solution dynamic of resistance discourse as it has been discursively negotiated within the conspiracy theory forums in the context of the NWO. Perceptions of power and morality are both fluid and interdependent among the three core social

groups. Sometimes the conspiracy theory can indeed reasonably be said to be disabling within the discourse, while other times affective expressions of empowerment are immense.

9.2 Problems and solutions: an interactive discursive relationship

Table 1.1 in Chapter 1 represents the conceptualisation of ‘resistance discourse’ as employed throughout this thesis. The concept is anchored in the notion of agency, specifically in relation to power and morality, such that ideas surrounding a perceived problem are associated with ideas surrounding possible solutions. The majority of the academic literature on conspiracy theories has tended to ignore or even outright reject the notion that conspiracy theorists might actually wish to think about solving problems. Instead the dominant academic research agenda on conspiracy theories has been focused on explaining why they exist at all, whether or not some of them are true and what kinds of epistemic or logical fallacies they contain. Where authors have incorporated ideas about resistance, for example Castells (2004: 87-100), they have relegated the relevance of conspiracy theory discourse which to negligible levels, instead foregrounding the ‘traditional’ political ideology (in the case of the US Patriots, these are characterised by Castells as right-wing libertarian nationalists) which allows for unquestioned acceptance that they are indeed capable of, and interested in, political resistance. Perhaps a factor in this reluctance to view conspiracy theory in political terms is due to the label itself: conspiracy theorists theorise. Perhaps if I proposed a new term like ‘conspiracy activists’ it would make people more comfortable appreciating that they are concerned with practical political solutions and not just intellectual problems, but I am not in the business of neologisms, nor would such a relabelling, I would argue, be even necessary or useful to make my point here. All it takes is an appreciation that there is no such thing as a truly idealised conspiracy theorist who theorises conspiracies but does nothing else. Libertarian nationalists can employ classical conspiratorial conceptions of elite power, as can anti-corporate humanitarians (such as OWS as I discuss in Chapter 8) or indeed any kind of social or political movement which postulates an illegitimate concentration of power within a minority elite. Conversely, there will be members of the David Icke forum, who agree with Icke’s suggestion that the NWO conspiracy is controlled by extra-terrestrial reptilians, who are active in OWS. In fact, as of August 2013 a search of the David Icke forums results in 103,000 references to “occupy wall street”, and while many of these include theories about OWS being part of the NWO conspiracy, many also include calls to

join the occupation²¹. The non-compliance strategies proposed in the David Icke thread analysed in Chapter 7 demonstrate that even traditional small scale acts of resistance can be proposed in the face of a global, extra-terrestrial and malevolent elite.

So, once one understands that conspiracy theory does not necessarily have to be solely confined to the process of theorising conspiracies (the problem), it becomes possible to examine proposed solutions to that problem, be they political, economic, social or even spiritual. In fact for almost any other field of human thought or action, political or otherwise, thinking about solutions automatically goes hand in hand with thinking about problems; to suggest that conspiracy theory constitutes the exception in this regard, that conspiracy theories are concerned only (or even primarily) with discovering or speculating on secret knowledge regarding an immoral elite, without thinking about or strategising for possible solutions is simply an indefensible peremptory proposition.

The central focus of analysis of this thesis however has not been on whether it is *possible* to think about solutions (it clearly is), but, as the research questions above illustrate, on what kinds of solutions and in particular how the perceived agency of the adversary discursively shapes and constrains the perceived agency of the members themselves, along with the range and form of possible solutions, and furthermore with whether or not the resulting discourse can be said to be empowering or disempowering. The crucial factor in whether or not forum members have expressed any affective sense of enthusiasm or hope has been, as I detail in Chapter 8 when comparing the discourse with the Occupy Wall Street movement, the perceived extent of power of the villains compared with that of the heroes and humanity in general, and the perceived extent of immorality conferred upon to the adversary. When the NWO is imagined in terms of extreme power and extreme immorality (as well as extreme secrecy), proposed solutions have tended to be of the form of moving away from the enemy (whether physically or spiritually) rather than direct physical confrontation (see Chapters 4 and 5). This is to be understood in both cognitive terms (the strategic efficacy of any direct resistance strategy against the overwhelming resources of the elite) and affective terms (for example references to the elite as being brutally, ruthlessly murderous such that they would have no qualms about killing anybody trying to resist them). I should stress that such a discursive relationship is observed only as a general tendency; I do not suggest any kind of deterministic logic at play here. To illustrate, many of the most passionate calls for direct

²¹ For example, David Icke Thread, "occupy wall street goes global !!!"
<http://www.davidicke.com/forum/showthread.php?t=182572>

confrontation have been framed precisely in (affective) terms of the extreme immorality of the NWO, even if it implies (in cognitive, practical terms) certain death, for example in the Above Top Secret 'NWO Survival Planning' thread:

just know one thing that youll never give in and that they had to pay a DEAR price for taking your life

when they come i will resist even if my campagian last 10 minutes they will not take me alive

there are many people on this site who would tell you that you can do absolutely nothing when the NWO takes over. These are the same people who will die in a fetal position or the same people that will let the NWO murder their families before their eyes. It is better to die fighting than on one's knees

Nonetheless, it is evident that when the agency of the enemy is constructed in less extreme expressions of power and morality, the range of possible solutions open up enormously, and affective expressions of empowerment, rather than futility, tend to emerge in the discourse. The David Icke thread analysed in Chapter 7 illustrates this point extremely well; it is from the discursive bridging of the gap between the perceived power of the adversary compared with that of the heroes that it becomes possible to propose and flesh out an extremely diverse range of micro-level resistance strategies. The elite's power in this context was constructed as being dependent on the consent of the masses, transferring the real power away from the NWO and back to the people; as one post put it, "The system relies on you using it to feed it". When the perceived agency of the enemy (in terms of their capacity to act) is discursively diminished, and that of the forum members inflated, hope and optimism often accompany extremely small-scale non-compliance strategies that, in the context of a typically defined NWO conspiracy, one might otherwise expect to be dismissed as futile since it cannot do any real damage to the supposedly totalising power of the elite. When the elite's agency is framed in precisely such totalising terms, more closely mirroring Basham's (2003: 91-2) idealised conceptualisation of a malevolent global conspiracy, expressions of pessimism and futility do tend to emerge more often, as encapsulated especially strikingly by the following quote from the Above Top Secret forum:

they have all the money, they have control of the armies, they make the rules, and they have control of the media. It's fool hardy to think that they can be opposed in any way" (Above Top Secret thread "We Need A Global Anti-New World Order Alliance!")

What is particularly interesting however is that in the context of the David Icke forum, where the conspiracy is indeed framed in starkly totalising terms and even – arguably – more frightening terms than the typical conception of the NWO since it postulates extra-terrestrials who not only feed off human misery but seek to impose the ‘illusion’ of ‘five sense reality’ in its entirety onto humanity, we nonetheless find expressions of enthusiasm and hope towards such prima facie micro-level individual strategies like straightforward positive thinking. These elites are constructed as so immensely powerful that they control not just empirical manifestations of the NWO such as governments or international institutions, but of reality itself. Icke’s most recent conspiracy theory in fact has been to suggest that the Earth’s moon is in reality an artificial satellite built by the alien reptilians as a device for remote mass human mind control, in order to keep the masses locked in the ‘five sense’ prison and preventing them from achieving their ultimate potential as multidimensional spiritual beings . I have been unable to uncover the precise mechanics of how such a moon based mind control system would function in practice based on Icke’s writings, but suffice to say that it is difficult to conceive of a more totalising perception of elite agency than an elite which deliberately acts to trick humanity as to the entire nature of reality (it is no coincidence that Icke frequently cites the movie The Matrix in his work and indeed he refers to this latest theory as ‘the Moon Matrix’). Despite this, in the ‘Tell me EXACTLY what we can do” thread in the David Icke forum analysed in Chapter 5, this ontological framework of ‘five sense reality’ being mere illusion is discursively used to members’ discursive advantage, transferring the power relationship such that the people are perceived as more powerful than the elite. Given how extreme and totalising the Icke framework is in relation to elite agency, in order to diminish or even obliterate the perceived ‘power gap’ between the heroes and villains, the heroes’ agency must be exaggerated to even more extreme levels, and this is precisely what occurs in that thread. Are the reptilians or other NWO agents capable of killing the members, and are they evil enough to want and be able to do so? Yes, of course. But it doesn’t matter, because, as one member puts it:

When you get the direct experience that you are consciousness beyond all form, either through meditative experience or through a teaching plant - you'll realize there is NOTHING THEY CAN DO TO YOU. What is the worst they can do to you? Kill you? No they can't. Your consciousness will merely shift to a different dimension. They can't do anything to you.
(David Icke Thread, “Tell me EXACTLY what we can do”)

This demonstrates that there exist multiple, creative ways of redefining agency in order to engender a sense of empowerment towards thinking about and discussing resistance. Some social movement scholars may dismiss many of the more unconventional resistance strategies proposed in the conspiracy theory forums as not constituting resistance at all. In relation to the “NWO Survival Planning” thread, can the notion of fleeing to the hills to live ‘off the grid’ really be categorised as a strategy of *resistance*? The very term ‘resistance’ after all invokes the idea of ‘motion towards’, rather than running away. It suggests an active, physical confrontation whether it be via policy demands or via a full-scale riot. Escaping certainly seems unsatisfactory at first glance in this regard, but I would suggest this is missing the point entirely. If the adversary is constructed in such powerful and evil terms that a ‘motion towards’ approach is assumed to result in certain death, what possible strategic efficacy is there in physically confronting the adversary head on? Some members of the forums dismiss a ‘flight’ based strategy entirely and suggest that fighting, even when assuming that being killed is a certainty, might not be effective for any strategic goal but it is the right thing to do from an ideological and moral perspective. Regardless, the point is that escape can absolutely be categorised as a resistance strategy when the problem itself is defined as an elite that will murder you on sight. The problem is that *you will be killed*, and so surely a forgivable proposed solution to this problem is to do anything you can not to be killed! Furthermore, Melucci himself suggests that strategies of escape can be perfectly valid for social movements, in certain contexts:

in a culture where communication becomes the means and content of domination, silence and retreat are forms of resistance (1996: 183)

If it’s good enough as a practical form of resistance in Melucci’s eyes in relation to social movements, why is it not good enough for conspiracy theorists merely discussing strategies in the context of an imagined future scenario? Indeed Melucci’s wording in the above quote hints at the central insight to be gained from this thesis, that the form the problem takes shapes and constrains the form that the solution takes. The same goes of course for the even more unconventional strategies proposed in the David Icke thread. A proposal for an increase in cuddling as a valid strategy of resistance against a malevolent and powerful elite sounds frivolous at first glance. I will admit I had difficulty containing a snigger myself when I first came across that thread, in fact I may even have let out an involuntary ‘awww’. But in the context of a problem which is defined as an adversary feeding off negative human energy, which in turn implies that they will be ‘starved’ if humans generate enough positive energy, cuddling does not sound nearly as ridiculous as one might initially think, because, as one post argues in that thread, “(c)uddling raises the energetic level

around you”. The resistance strategies contained in the conspiracy theory forums are never proposed in a vacuum. They are anchored in and shaped by specific discursive conceptions of elite agency (placed in an adversarial relationship with the perceived agency of the members and humanity in general) and so forum members propose and communicatively construct, via negotiation and contestation in the form of online conversations, appropriate solutions.

9.3 Reflections on the theoretical and methodological contribution of this research

I have throughout this thesis underscored the centrality of agency in relation to discourses of resistance. Such an approach not only offers a contribution to the conspiracy theory literature which has tended to focus on explaining the existence of conspiracy theories rather than on their consequences, but also to the literature on movements more generally, at least in terms of employing Melucci’s methodological framework. While there exists a relatively thriving academic literature on meaning making within social movements, particularly the work on collective action framing (see Benford and Snow 2000), this literature has tended to focus on the cohesion and coherence of ideas relating to resistance only to the extent that they promote visible, concrete and therefore ‘successful’ mobilisation and acts of resistance. The research informed by the framing approach invariably takes place, firstly after such acts take place and secondly, via access to ideas which have been ‘pre-packaged’ and communicated by movement leaders, which misses the (crucial, according to Melucci) processes which led to the ideas forming in the first place, and which furthermore present a misleading stability and coherence via a ‘top-down’ picture of a movement’s ideas. From a methodological standpoint I concur with Melucci’s proposal that observational research should “grasp action as it actually unfolds” (1996: 387). This ‘action’ – which for Melucci relates to the processes of constructing collective identity and resistance and which precedes visible empirical post-mobilisation acts – can rarely be accessed by researchers of social movements. This is because to access the collective ‘communicative construction’ from a bottom-up perspective necessitates a form of immersed participant observation when it comes to face-to-face research of social movements. Melucci recognises the practical limitations of such a methodological goal, namely that research requires a form of participant observation so that one can be present as the micro level discussions take place. He suggests that the only viable methodological approaches for his theoretical framework are those which he labels “action research and research intervention” (1995: 58) via direct participant observation, since such an approach

“directly address(es) the question of how action is constructed and attempt(s) to observe action as it takes place, as a process built by actors” (ibid.). However, Melucci also sees dangers in such a method which arise from the researcher’s participation, namely the researcher’s constitutive role in what he or she observes by being present in the first place. Such methods, he argues, tend to ignore the fact that “a researcher intervening in a field of action does not work under ‘natural’ conditions but modifies the field and may even manipulate it, beyond his or her intentions” (ibid.). The benefit of analysing online discussion forums has not only been the easy access to an immense quantity of bottom-up ‘communicative construction’ data, but the ability to access ‘uncontaminated’ (by the researcher) data in the form of perfect transcripts of discussions as they took place in real time. A face-to-face participant observer would be reliant on notes and memory which leads to inevitable data loss.

Given the crucial role of online spaces in modern social movements, at the very least in terms of the utility of it as a communicative tool as well as being able to bring together geographically disparate individuals in solidarity towards a shared goal, but even more importantly in terms of the discursive construction of ideas relating to strategies of resistance, further research employing Melucci’s epistemological and methodological approach should be taken advantage of, given the unprecedented access to perfectly transcribed, real-time data. Castells’ recent work on the various international social movements of 2011 (including the Occupy Wall Street movement and the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings) has underscored the centrality of online networks as a space for “autonomous communication” (2012: 9). He writes that, for the Occupy Wall Street movement, “(a)s important as the material organization of the occupation was, it was the process of communication that enabled the movement to find internal cohesion and external support” (Ibid.: 171) and that “(t)he rapid geographical spread of the movement reflected its viral diffusion on the Internet. The movement was born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet, and maintained its presence on the Internet, as most occupations set up their own websites, as well as their specific groups and other social networks” (ibid.: 168). He emphasises the point further in relation to the capacity of online spaces to bring people together to negotiate discussion towards a shared objective:

Social movements arise from the contradictions and conflicts of specific societies, and they express people’s revolts and projects resulting from their multidimensional experience. Yet, at the same time, it is essential to emphasize the critical role of communication in the formation and practice of social movements, now and in history. Because people can only challenge domination by connecting with each other, by sharing outrage, by feeling togetherness, and by constructing alternative projects for themselves and for society at large (ibid.: 236)

social networks on the Internet allowed the experience to be communicated and amplified, bringing the entire world into the movement, and creating a permanent forum of solidarity, debate and strategic planning (ibid.: 169)

Importantly, Castells also notes the importance for modern social movements of ‘consciousness raising’ as a goal in itself, to “change the values of society” (ibid.: 227), which strongly echoes what is perhaps the most prevalent strategy of resistance in the entirety of my conspiracy theory discussion forum sample. If information itself – in this context information exposing any perceived injustices which are presumed to have been brought about by the adversary – is valued as both means and goal, then given the proliferation and usage of online discussion forums as a space to express moral outrage towards political problems, this is an absolutely vital space for research. In fact Castells goes so far as to suggest that raising public awareness to a moral societal problem is often the most important task of a modern social movement, writing that “what is truly decisive in assessing the political effect of a social movement is its impact on people’s consciousness” (ibid.: 196), echoing the logic of the post in the David Icke non-compliance forum thread that “the more people we can reach with the correct information equates to more people with the desire to take positive action”. Castells elaborates this idea further by arguing that shifts in consciousness constitute the critical precursor to genuine, macro-level social change:

If a majority of people think in ways that are contradictory to the values and norms institutionalized in the laws and regulations enforced by the state, the system will change, although not necessarily to fulfill the hopes of the agents of social change. This is why the fundamental power struggle is the battle for the construction of meaning in the minds of the people. (ibid.: 5)

I have not characterised the discourse of online conspiracy theory discussion forums in such an instrumental way in this thesis. My concern has never been with whether or not any of the discourse will lead to any kind of social change in the offline world, firstly because my research questions have been limited to the discourse itself and how the various ideas surrounding perceptions of power and morality among the heroes, villains and potential supporters shape and constrain ideas about resistance. Secondly, from an epistemological standpoint I cannot pinpoint anything resembling a credible empirical link between anonymous online forum posts and societal consciousness or social change. Castells attempts to achieve this in his work by citing national opinion poll data relating to the discourse of the Occupy Wall Street movement (ibid.: 193), but as plausible and reasonable as it might appear at first glance to claim a form of mass consciousness causality emanating from a movement’s grievance discourse, the actual mechanism by which such a

phenomenon would be generated is to me so complex and intangible that it would be incredibly difficult to establish with any credibility. Firstly, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, the very notion of subjective belief, including at the individual but especially at the aggregate societal level, is not something that can be reified, to use Melucci's terms, as a stable or coherent "unified empirical datum" (1989: 18). Secondly, even if it were possible to reify aggregate belief in such a manner, what would such a causal mechanism even look like? One would need to establish evidence of multiple people accessing specific online spaces, reading specific forum posts, digest them and then internalise them in their own consciousness such that a particular former view of the world can be established to have been adjusted based on this new information, which furthermore motivates them to undertake resistance acts in the offline world. I am not being unnecessarily pedantic here; I have no doubt that such a process exists and that people in reality can and do adjust opinions on a particular subject after accessing new information about it, but the methodological implications are immense. This is why throughout this thesis I have always anchored my analysis in constant and close reference to the texts themselves and the ideas contained therein which (see Figure 3.2). Many of the ideas in these texts make references to offline acts, including ones that are claimed to have taken place (for instance one post writes that the forum member has sprayed the word 'Illuminati' on building walls) but I cannot establish the verity of such a claim and moreover it is completely unnecessary to do so given the nature of my research questions.

9.4 Suggestions for further research

Despite this, given the fundamental nature of the discourse under analysis in this thesis which is centred around ideas of actual offline resistance by conspiracy theory forum members, it is certainly the next logical step to extend the conclusions to research that involves offline resistance. A few evidently viable research agendas can be proposed in this regard, for example:

1. Participatory ethnographic research of an incipient social movement

Despite the aforementioned constraining issues in relation to the researcher's constitutive role and inevitable 'data loss' in comparison to researching the comprehensive transcripts of online forum discussions, as Melucci suggests his epistemological and methodological basis for researching the communicative construction of an action system as it actually takes place requires being able to be there at the time this collective meaning making process occurs.

How do discussions surrounding the perceived agency of the adversary shape and constrain the perceived agency of movement members? How do these members construct, negotiate and contest an action system such that resistance strategies that are both cognitively viable and affectively empowering can be proposed and, ultimately decided upon? Why are some strategies rejected? On practical or moral grounds? How do they then actually carry out these resistance strategies in practice? How do they recruit new members or disseminate information to the wider public about their grievances? What kinds of changes take place following these acts of resistance? Are they concrete policy changes in relation to government or other institutions or are they primarily changes in public awareness? Note also that I specify such research to be of an ‘incipient’ movement. As Melucci has underscored, a major issue with social movement research, given firstly its tendency to value visible, empirical acts of resistance over meaning construction and secondly because of the methodological difficulty in even finding out about a social movement’s ideas until it has already mobilized and undertaken a public act of resistance, is that research is often limited to ‘after the fact’ phenomena, which are, as Melucci argues simply “manifestations of deeper processes which in turn depend on the capacity of actors to negotiate the ends, means and environment of their action“ (ibid.: 27). The processes of collective meaning construction have long since taken place and at best can be inferred post hoc. Being able to discover and participate in an incipient social movement prior to its first public collective act is clearly extremely difficult, absent either pre-existing social associations with the people involved in setting up the movement or sheer luck. The online realm is again here a useful tool however, as any number of online political forums (or indeed cultural ones for that matter, if a researcher is more interested in cultural or identity politics than anti-systemic or populist social movements) will contain threads expressing outrage and a call for collective action. There are of course ethical issues relating to joining and participating in an incipient movement so the researcher would need to be very explicit about his or her intentions and role both to the other movement members and to the research community, so that permission is granted by members for the research to take place. But the ability to get one’s foot in the door, so to speak, of a movement in its initial formative stages would certainly be worth it in terms of being able to access the early processes of collective meaning construction and the development and impact of the movement thereafter.

2. In-depth interviews, and possibly thereafter participant ethnographic research, with self-identified conspiracy theorists in relation to ‘offline’ resistance

While the research in this thesis has been completely restricted to discursive, agency-centred relationships within a NWO conspiracy theory framework, it would be extremely enlightening to extend the ideas concluded from my research via interviews with people who identify themselves as anti-NWO conspiracy theorists. There are fundamental epistemological issues with such an approach in relation to this thesis which I have mentioned before, particularly the constitutive role of the researcher and the intangible and unfixed nature of subjective belief. The research in this thesis has left the processes of collective meaning construction in their ‘natural setting’ (by this I of course mean within the very context of online discussion forums, i.e. as a space for interactive and collective discussion), something which I consider to be a crucially important factor in relation to the credibility of my analysis. An interview is not a natural situation at all; particularly given the somewhat sensitive nature of conspiracy theory in the sense that it is frequently employed in the media as a derogatory term implying irrationality or even stupidity, it would be impossible to establish the extent to which the respondents would be going ‘all out’ with their beliefs and not holding back out of fear of embarrassment. Nonetheless, it would certainly be possible to guide interviews based on the theoretical concepts used in this thesis in order to unpack, on a personal, individual level, how agency-based ideas within a conspiracy theory framework inform concerns about power and morality when thinking about possible resistance strategies? Do they feel empowered? If so or if not, why? What kinds of moral imperatives do they cite for resisting? To what extent does the presumed retaliation of the elite concern them, and how does this affect what kinds of resistance would be most effective? To what extent do they express faith in being able to recruit the support of the masses? Are there other factors (i.e. not related to conspiracy theory) in their life experiences and political worldviews which influence their perception of their own agency and desire to act? However, these questions would in large part be replicating many of the ideas in this thesis. Any really fruitful findings would come from subsequent acts of resistance, no matter what form they take (including non-collective strategies as unconventional as those proposed within the forums, for example merely trying to be more positive within themselves and in their local communities; however it might be methodologically problematic to observe an individual transcending the physical universe to become one with infinite love). How did the act of resistance fit their discursively constructed action system within an overall conspiratorial conception of the elite? How did they strategise with others or recruit additional supporters? To what extent do they think their acts made a difference, if at all (in terms of either policy or consciousness changing)?

Did they feel empowered by the act? Do they intend to continue doing the same things or are they seeking to try new strategies? Do they feel the need to ‘find the others’ to make a further collective impact?

One tricky aspect of this is convincing self-identified anti-NWO conspiracy theorists to be interviewed, and subsequently observed, by me or anybody else for the purposes of academic research. While I have tried throughout this thesis not to make judgments about the phenomenon of mistrust and even paranoia among conspiracy theorists (see Chapter 2), it is a real concern. Recall the discussion in Chapter 7 about worries relating to state sponsored ‘agent provocateurs’ or ‘shills’ attending a public demonstration. It would take a real effort to establish the kind of trust necessary – even for those conspiracy theorists who don’t imagine NWO shills everywhere – to allow me, an outsider, to follow the course of action in terms of any actual resistance they undertake. A potentially useful networking outlet in this regard might be the large scale conspiracy theory conventions such as ‘Conspiracy Con’, whose very existence necessitates trust in outsiders to a sufficient extent as to attend such a conference and speak openly about conspiracy theory ideas. Below is the Conspiracy Con 2013 poster for the event which took place in June in San Francisco. Of immediate note in the program is the relative absence of anything resembling resistance; instead, echoing Fenster’s (1999: 89) characterisation of conspiracy theorists as eternal and insatiable intellectual puzzle solvers rather than being concerned with actual resistance. And I have not disputed this suggestion entirely since the overwhelming majority of discussion in the conspiracy theory forums is precisely *theorising* conspiracies and the most active threads are not the ones strategising resistance but those interpreting and analysing empirical events seeking to uncover an explanation. However, as I have also emphasised on numerous occasions, it is inevitable when discussing problems, especially ones of a moral nature, that discussion leads to ideas about solutions. The sentiment in such a context *that something needs to be done* is ever-present and there is no doubt that attendees of Conspiracy Con will have thought about resistance and will have ideas about what strategies might be effective given a particular conception of the conspiracy itself.

Figure 9.1 Conspiracy Con 2013 Poster



3. Further discourse analysis of conspiracy theory discussions that do not relate to resistance

The entire focus of this thesis has been on ideas and discussions about resistance in the face of a perceived global NWO conspiracy. It is not a subject that has been explored in any depth within the conspiracy theory literature (for various reasons; see Chapter 2) and the empirical contribution of this thesis in terms of bringing this discourse to light is, I would suggest, extremely important. However, resistance discourse makes up a tiny minority of discussion in the conspiracy theory forums. The ‘puzzle solving’ activity I have referred to previously makes up the vast majority of discussion and it is incredibly fascinating. As I also mentioned in Chapter 2, research on actual

conspiracy theories, how they have been constructed and what ideas they propose (and whether or not there is any merit to them) has of course been already undertaken; after all the theories themselves are central to the basic phenomenon. However, the range of discussions in these forums is so monumentally huge and provides a wonderful source of research on conspiracy theorising itself. I have frequently found myself losing hours in the conspiracy theory news sub-forums (when I should have been focusing on the NWO resistance threads!) because it's truly engrossing to witness the discursive evolution of conspiracy theories taking shape from the moment a newsworthy event takes place. For example, there is a gigantic thread on the Jimmy Savile scandal on the David Icke forum that contains over 40,000 discussion posts! Often such analysis threads involve speculation perhaps with reference to a pre-existing conspiracy theory, but at other times the lengths that forum members go to in order to provide evidence for a new conspiracy theory are remarkable. Research which analyses the processes by which members interpret and reconstruct reality on a daily basis towards news events would certainly be enlightening and insightful, and indeed this may be my first research project rather than continuing the resistance angle. And no matter how flawed I may think a particular explanatory argument may be in this context, as someone pursuing academic research myself I have nothing but admiration (occasionally even envy when I'm feeling less than productive in my own research) for the passion and enthusiasm evidenced by the voluminous research undertaken by many conspiracy theory forum members to uncover or expose 'hidden knowledge'.

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