

Conspirituality, Andrew Tate, and the Manosphere

Self-Help and Conspiracy Theories as Anti-institutional and Unofficial Knowledge

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Introduction

“How old were you when you first realized that others couldn’t see the matrix?” asked Elon Musk on X in November 2024. “Been fighting to break it for years”, replied the prominent male influencer Andrew Tate. The posts were liked over 229,000 and 9,300 times respectively, garnering close to 40,000 comments and 23,000 reposts. Those commenting on the posts shared a range of responses predicated on personal beliefs and lived experiences that coalesced around a common conspiratorial narrative: “I was 26 when I realized we were all basically slaves to the State, and really the corporate bureaucratic regime that runs the state”, replied one follower. Many reflected on specific events (e.g. JFK’s assassination, 9/11, the Covid-19 pandemic) and public figures (e.g. Donald Trump, Alex Jones, Q) as their source of awakening. Other users on X spoke of spirituality and Christianity being their source of salvation: “I believe this is the year that humanity will go ‘down the rabbit hole’ into realizing their ‘true destiny’ to unite the ‘global consciousness’ into usurping this current age, into the new one.”

This confluence of conspiracy theories and spirituality has been conceptualised by the notion of conspirituality. The term was coined by Charlotte Ward and David Voas to describe, “a rapidly growing web movement expressing an ideology fuelled by political disillusionment and alternative spiritual world-views” (Ward/Voas 2011: 103). Ward and Voas traced the “emergence” of conspirituality in the early twenty-first century through public figures such as the

British conspiracy theorist, David Icke. The pandemic saw a revival of the concept by journalists, podcasters, and academics, who used the term to make sense of the fusion of conspiratorial and New Age explanations for the Covid-19 pandemic and government responses to curtail the spread of the virus (Evans 2020; Giera et al. 2022; Schäfer/Frei 2021). From the outset, some questioned the novelty of the convergence of conspiracy theories and alternative spirituality, suggesting that conspiritoriality has an established history rooted in Western esotericism (Asprem/Dyrendal 2015). More recently, a series of articles have questioned the coherence of the term as a movement by drawing attention to the conflicts and tensions between conspiracy theorists and spiritual groups, particularly in terms of how truth claims are formed and defended (Ballinger/Hardy 2022; Harambam 2024; Tuters 2023). For example, Ballinger and Hardy (2022) interrogate the assumption that conspiritoriality is primarily web-based through an examination of the media practices of the prominent conspiracy theorist David Icke. Jaron Harambam (2024) similarly notes that despite the affinities between spirituality and conspiracy theories (e.g. distrust of societal institutions, disavowing the mainstream, an epistemology centred on the individual), conspiritoriality is not a unified movement that combines the pessimistic aspect of conspiracy theorising with the positive New Age vision of salvation and collective awakening, but rather reflects a confluence between the conspiratorial and the spiritual (Harambam 2024: 292).

One area that has received less scholarly attention is the gendered dimension of the term and the assumption that the positive focus on self, which Ward and Voas (2011) associate with the New Age, is antithetical to the male-dominated realm of conspiracy theories. There are several studies that explore the proliferation of conspiritoriality as an online movement on Instagram through feminised gendered aesthetics (Heřmanová 2022; Murphey 2023). Less scholarly research has questioned the gender essentialism assumed by Ward and Voas' (2011: 103) term, which assumes that the New Age with its "positive focus on self" is female dominated. Self-help offers an interesting point of comparison because the movement was originally intended for men and the genre's contemporary forms share much in common with conspiritoriality by interspersing spirituality and conspiracy theories (see Baker et al. 2023). In what follows, I explore how self-help has become a fertile space for conspiracy theories to flourish among young men. Drawing on the case study of Andrew Tate, I demonstrate how the self-help influencer is part of a broader subset of male influencers, who have built loyal online followings through fusing conspiracy theories with a positive focus on self-development. By providing a

historical overview of the history of self-help as a modern genre, I show how self-help and conspiracy theories dovetail around common orientations of learning experienced outside of an institutional context.

1. Self-help as anti-institutional

Self-help is a burgeoning genre that has developed into a lucrative industry. The genre is commonly attributed to Samuel Smiles, the Scottish author and government reformer, who wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1859, Smiles wrote what is commonly regarded as the first self-help book in English, *Self-Help with Illustrations of Character and Conduct* ([1859] 2021). The book extolled contemporary Victorian virtues including industry, perseverance, and thrift as prerequisites to achieve social and economic success. Inspiration to develop conduct and character was achieved through illustrative sketches of character documenting the lives of great men. For Smiles, cultivating one's character was the key to self-improvement. The book's opening maxim, "Heaven helps those who help themselves", foregrounds the text's emphasis on self-reliance. Smiles was influenced by the spirit of individualism that permeated Europe during the 1800s and inspired the transcendentalist movement of the mid-nineteenth century, a period during which figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasised the importance of spiritual intuition, self-reliance, and human striving (Baker 2022b). Smiles' promulgation of self-help was also shaped by what he conceived to be the limits of government. A former government reformer, Smiles was disillusioned with the capacity of bureaucracies and government legislation to improve people's conditions. He viewed a government's role as negative, restrictive, and protective (protecting life, liberty, and property) and institutional support as enfeebling, whereas self-help, in his view, had an invigorating impact on character: "Whatever is done for men or classes, to a certain extent takes away the stimulus and necessity of doing for themselves; and where men are subjected to over-guidance and over-government, the inevitable tendency is to render them comparatively helpless" (Smiles [1859] 2021: 1).

Smiles' emphasis on individual self-making was not a synonym for selfishness. The book *Self-Help* developed from mutual aid: a voluntary, cooperative system where groups provided one another with reciprocal support and communal care. Prior to writing *Self-Help*, Smiles delivered lectures to working-class youths in Scotland, who had taken it upon themselves to teach each other

reading, writing, mathematics, arithmetic, chemistry, and geography. A former biographer, Smiles cited examples of the character and conduct of other great men to highlight that the individual was responsible for their happiness and well-being, which could be inculcated to readers through the practice of diligent self-culture, self-discipline, self-duty, and self-control. Smiles' writings convey an anti-institutional tone that permeates much self-help literature today. As he notes,

Even the best institutions can give a man no active help. Perhaps the most they can do is, to leave him free to develop himself and improve his individual condition. But in all times men have been prone to believe that their happiness and well-being were to be secured by means of institutions rather than by their own conduct. (Smiles [1859] 2021: 1)

This emphasis on the individual as the key to self-improvement has continued throughout subsequent centuries as the genre flourished. The genre experienced several periods of growth. First in the 1930s when several popular texts provided readers with practical advice about how to achieve certain desirable outcomes across different domains (wealth, health, relationships) by influencing others and behaviour change. Notable examples included Wallace D. Wattles' *The Science of Getting Rich* ([1910] 2020), Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* ([1936] 2023), Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* ([1937] 2021), and Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* ([1952] 2004). The second period of growth was in the 1980s with the expansion of the genre for women. Although earlier manuals outlining how to manage an organised household could be categorised as self-help (Isabella Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1888), for example), during the 1980s the genre catered to women's mass entry into the workforce and the new challenges many women experienced when navigating multiple, novel roles as a partner, mother, and employee; an opportunity to "have it all" as exemplified by the series of self-help texts with the title, *Having It All* (Brown 1984; Gabriel/Baldwin 1979; see also McGee 2005). As self-help has transformed into a billion-dollar industry, it has catered to different audiences and challenges (e.g. the Great Depression, the cost-of-living crisis, the crisis of masculinity), yet at the heart of the genre remains a common concern with individual responsibility and self-improvement.

Self-help has flourished in the US because it resonates with the cultural ideal of the American dream, the idea that anyone can achieve success with

hard work and effort. Some popular self-help texts promote self-help as a spiritual endeavour wherein personal success is predicated on intuition, holism, and self-discovery. Popular self-help texts, including *A Course in Miracles* (Shucman [1976] 1997) and *The Secret* (Byrne 2006), share much in common with the quasi-religious New Thought Movement and Christian Science with their shared conviction about the power of the mind to shape reality. Premised on the idea of the law of attraction, whereby “like attracts like”, these texts propose that the energy you project into the world determines what you attract in all areas of life from health to wealth and relationships. Broadly categorised under the theme of manifestation, these texts resonate with the spiritual aspects of conspiratoriness by fusing together an anti-institutional and New Age outlook (for research on the nexus between conspiracy theories and anti-institutional discourse see Baker 2022a, 2022b; Christensen/Au 2023; Houtman/Aupers 2024). However, it is self-help’s meritocratic vision of success and individualist approach to knowledge that resists institutional learning (encouraging learning outside of an institutional context), which has provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish.

2. Conspiracy theories as unofficial knowledge

Conspiracy theories are “a way of making sense of current events” (Butter/Knight 2020: 1). Essentialist definitions of the term cast the world in a Manichean struggle between good and evil (Baker et al. 2023), a dualistic worldview comprised of innocent victims and a small group of nefarious conspirators, who conspire against them (Butter/Knight 2015). Definitions of this kind resonate with Ward and Voas’ (2011) concept of conspiratoriness, which offers a broad politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theories, the second rooted in the New Age: (1) a secret group covertly controls – or is trying to control – the political and social order, and (2) humanity is undergoing a “paradigm shift” in consciousness. Conspiratoriness is presented as a unified movement that combines the traditionally male-dominated pessimistic beliefs of conspiracy theories with the feminine spiritual belief in salvation through human awakening. The assumption is that the movement brings together two antithetical affective and gendered domains: “the female-dominated New Age (with its positive focus on self)” and “the male-dominated realm of conspiracy theory (with its negative focus on politics)” (Ward/Voas 2011: 103). Michael Barkun (2013: 3f.)

identifies three core principles of a conspiracy theory: (1) nothing happens by accident, (2) nothing is as it seems, and (3) everything is connected. This definition distinguishes conspiracy theories from conspiracies (actual covert plots) on the basis that conspiracy theories seek to impose meaning on the world and “give the appearance of order to events” (Barkun 2015: 114).

Since the turn of the millennium, much scholarship has moved away from psychopathologising conspiracy theories to understand their cultural significance (Butter/Knight 2020: 31). In contrast to earlier scholarship, which depicted conspiracy theorists as irrational and paranoid (see Popper [1945] 2020; Hofstadter 1965, for example), and subsequent psychological studies that focus on the personality traits that render certain people susceptible to fallible world-views, in the late 1990s and early 2000s a number of scholars contextualised the cultural appeal of conspiracy theories in their capacity to offer comfort and order to those contending with the uncertainties, inequalities, and complexities of social life (Dean 1998; Fenster 1999; Knight 2000; Marcus 1999; Melley 2000). From this perspective, although conspiracy theories may be factually incorrect and provide a “quick-fix” solution to complex problems (Knight 2000: 8; Melley 2000: 8), they reflect meaningful responses to certain social, economic, political, and cultural conditions (Bjerg/Presskorn-Thygesen 2017: 140). Research of this kind moves away from reductionist portrayals of conspiracy theories as symptomatic of cognitively inferior and irrational belief systems and mental faculties, instead focusing on the cultural landscape in which they emerge and flourish. Consequently, conspiracy theories are contextualised in the cultural landscape of modernity, reflecting efforts to contend with the anxieties and inequalities that emanate from global, capitalist modern societies and the powerful social systems (the state, the media, multinational corporations) that comprise them (Aupers 2012). Many cultural approaches to conspiracy theories thus conceive of conspiracy theories as explanations of social events that seek to uncover the concealed, nefarious actions of powerful elites (Harambam 2024). Rather than examine the veracity of truth claims, cultural approaches focus on sense-making – understanding why conspiracy theories emerge, how these theories frame the world, what they offer those who believe them (Dean 1998; Fenster 1999; Knight 2000; Marcus 1999; Melley 2000).

Conspiracy theories are both a means of making sense of the world and a reasonable response to systematic inequalities and injustices (Harambam 2020a). Empirically grounded research has explored how distrust of the medical establishment and vaccines among marginalised groups emanate from institutional racism and medical experimentation on Black communities, as

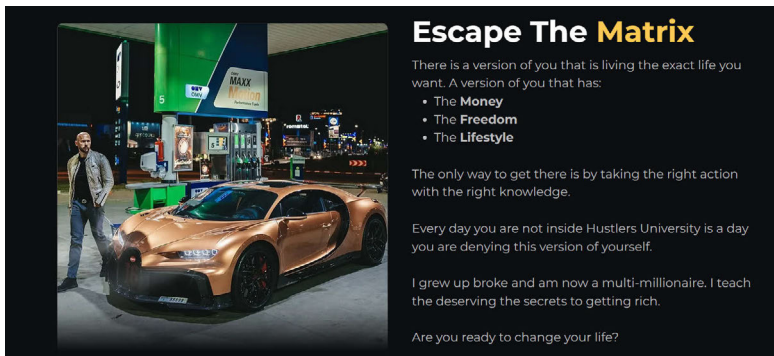
exemplified by the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments from 1932 to 1972 (Baker et al. 2023; Ball et al. 2013; Knight 2000). For example, Alondra Nelson's (2011) study of the Black Panther Party's medical authority over African American communities in the 1970s emanated from decades of medical discrimination of Black communities by experts which resulted in low institutional trust. Vaccine refusal can emanate from structural discrimination, conspiracy theories, and low trust. Covid-19 conspiracies proliferated in response to the unequal trade-offs people experienced as a result of government measures: mortality, morbidity, mental illness, unemployment, social isolation, and homeschooling (Baker et al. 2023). Covid denial emerged in a context of low institutional trust, where those experts and politicians "led by the science" made errors (e.g. the World Health Organization's initial advice on transmission and mask-wearing), concealed vital facts from the public (e.g. Dr Fauci's dismissal of the efficacy of mask-wearing in early 2020 to reserve masks for health workers due to supply issues), and were publicly exposed as corrupt (e.g. numerous cases of government officials breaking the very lockdown rules they established to contain the virus (Fancourt et al. 2020). Many Covid-19 conspiracies emanated from institutional distrust and provided a framework through which to understand a "wicked problem" (how to contain the virus) for which there was no tame solution (Baker et al. 2023). Other research has shown the importance of a context-situated approach to studying conspiracy theories with some narratives considered conspiracy theories understandable in certain societies marked by economic inequality and fuelled by corruption (Casara et al. 2022; Cordonier et al. 2021). Hence, while conspiracy theorists may subscribe to essentialist definitions of powerful elites conspiring to seek control of the population, conspiracy theories can be understood more broadly in relational terms as unofficial knowledge (Birchall 2006; Harambam 2020b). It is in this context that self-help gurus, such as Andrew Tate, present conspiracy theories as learning outside of an institutional context.

3. Andrew Tate: self-help guru and conspiracy entrepreneur

Andrew Tate represents the fusion of conspiracy theories and self-help. The former kickboxer, reality-television celebrity, and self-described digital pimp has built a lucrative empire as a self-help guru, particularly among young men. In 2021, Tate founded Hustlers University, an online training platform instructing subscribers about modern methods of wealth creation, recently

rebranded as The Real World. Tate's self-help advice about how to achieve wealth creation is firmly anti-institutional. He frequently alludes to the wealth he has accrued outside of an institutional context ("You can skip university, you can buy my programme and I guarantee you, you will know everything you need to know", "Have you ever seen a college professor with an S63, a McLaren and a Lambo and an Aston Martin standing next to a Porsche? No, you've never seen any of this. I know how to make cash" (Tate in Coffeozilla 2022)). Tate's online educational platform promises to provide students with "step-by-step" guidance to earn their first six to seven figures online with practical courses on "E-commerce, Dropshipping, Stocks/Options, Crypto/NFTs, Marketing, and Business". It also covers more generic self-help topics, such as fitness and nutrition. Tate's personal story of social mobility from a housing estate in Luton, England, to a self-described multi-millionaire legitimises his self-help protocols and educational platform. Hustlers University also promises to help subscribers "Escape The Matrix", a shorthand for the global systems that collude to enslave ordinary people through obedience, surveillance, inflation, and debt.

Figure 1: Image of Andrew Tate from his educational platform, The Real World.



Part of Tate's global success is the way he fuses together self-help advice ("I will teach you to be rich") with popular conspiracies. His prominence as a self-help influencer – allegedly the most googled man in the world in 2022 – coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic when he became an outspoken critic on a range of issues from lockdowns to mask-wearing and vaccines. More recently, he has become a vocal critic of Israel, promoting a series of anti-Semitic con-

spiracy theories on X and alternative platforms (Rumble, Telegram). These are not just “big tent” conspiracy theories, but employed by Tate to frame his arrest in Romania on 29 December 2022 and ongoing legal battle as a conspiracy, unjust, and orchestrated by elites who fear his authority and influence over young men. “This is a Matrix attack”, was his first public statement when he was arrested on suspicion of rape, human trafficking, and forming an organised crime group. Conspiracy theories thus play a dual role for Tate: depicting him as a persecuted hero while fuelling distrust of the authorities that seek to prosecute him.

Tate’s fusion of self-help and conspiracism is not unique to the influencer. It has become so commonplace that journalists and scholars have spoken of an “alt-right pipeline” (Munn 2019), in which self-help becomes a gateway to conspiracism. Academic research has explored this trend with niche communities of men seeking self-help advice on 4chan susceptible to political radicalisation, conspiracy theories, and far-right ideology (Elley 2021). Researchers have also explored the cultural context in which male gurus have achieved cult-like followings by appealing to the aspirations and anxieties of young men (Baker et al. 2023). Shifting gender norms, high rates of drug use, incarceration, and suicide that disproportionately affect young men have contributed to the creation of the manosphere, a term used to describe a “loose confederacy of interest groups [that] has become the dominant arena for the communication of men’s rights in Western culture” (Ging 2017: 638). While there are many variants to the manosphere (e.g. pick-up artists, men’s rights activists, incels), what unites these groups is the idea that masculinity is in crisis and that feminism is to blame. Self-help has become a popular antidote to these ills, with the technological affordances of blogs, forums, and social media enabling the amplification of new articulations of aggrieved manhood. It is in this digital space that Tate has emerged as a self-help influencer as well as Sacha Stone, Stefan Molyneux, Aubrey Marcus, and Russell Brand, to name a few. Marcus and Brand align vividly with the spiritual doctrines of the New Age, but many other male influencers such as Tate, despite his recent conversion to Islam, present a more practical approach to self-development.

Tate’s religious sensibility is rooted in a series of convictions about a man’s “sacred duty” (“I believe that men have the divine imperative to become as capable, powerful and competent as possible in this life”, “I believe men have the sacred duty to protect and provide for the important people in their lives”, “I believe that men have the sacred duty to approach everything in life from a position strength” (Tate 2024, n.p.). Distinct from Samuel Smiles, whose self-

help manual sought to cultivate conduct and character, Tate's self-help advice is firmly aimed at winning in the game of life. Tate promotes the idea of life as a zero-sum game. According to this worldview, to succeed in the game of life people must fight the matrix and continuously work on themselves ("You are the only person who can make this work and you are the only person who can f*** this up" (Tate in Coffeewizilla 2022)). Hence, Tate promotes a worldview that could be considered conspiritorial in its anti-institutional tone and emphasis on self-development as the antidote to perceived tyranny and corruption. It is not, however, one that endorses New Age spirituality in the feminine sense, as described by Ward and Voas (2011). Rather it is what they describe as "a positive version of self", grounded in self-improvement and the masculine imperative to cultivate virile strength and masculine excellence outside of an institutional context.

4. Conclusion

Conspiritoriality has accelerated since the pandemic as both a concept and a practice, capturing the fusion of conspiracy theories with New Age spirituality. Gender is central to how the term has been conceptualised and analysed, with many contemporary exemplars embracing "highly gendered aesthetics" online (Murphey 2023). What has received less scholarly attention is the gender essentialism implied by the term. In particular, the claim that the female-dominated New Age (with its positive focus on self) and the male-dominated realm of conspiracy theory (with its negative focus on global politics) are antithetical (Ward/Voas 2011). Through an analysis of the emergence of modern self-help as a genre and an industry, this chapter has sought to show the synergies between self-help and conspiracy theories. Self-help emerged in the nineteenth century as a practice of individual self-improvement. Although self-help is not necessarily a private affair – emerging from the collaborative system of mutual aid – it is firmly anti-institutional, emphasising the individual as the locus of change and the importance of learning outside of an institutional context. Spirituality has much in common with this pursuit through its anti-institutional ethos (Houtman/Aupers 2024). Conspiracy theories maintain this opposition to institutionalised narratives and dominant orthodoxies. Rather than promoting irrationality and inferior thinking, conspiracy theories can be viewed as unofficial knowledge. At the same time, a cultural approach to understanding conspiracy theories should not preclude critical engagement with

claims and their intended or unintended effects. Conspiracy theories flourish during periods of low institutional trust. The pandemic became a turning point for many, a process of becoming “pilled” or “awakened”, with government officials and social institutions perceived by many as incompetent, compromised, and corrupt. The male self-help influencer, Andrew Tate, has become a public example of this fusion of conspiracy theories and positive self-development post-pandemic. He is one example of many male self-help gurus who have built a lucrative career from combining conspiracy theories with self-improvement advice. This analysis of male self-help gurus is not to suggest that women do not also inhabit these spaces. Rather it is a corrective to the tacit assumption that the “male dominated world of conspiracy theories” and the “female dominated New Age movement” are opposite realms.

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