

In the Shadow of Corona Conspiracies - Investigating Polarization and Differences of Opinion in Norway's Anthroposophical Movement

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the conspiracy narratives based in anthroposophy that emerged during the coronavirus pandemic. These are viewed against the background of the general coronavirus conspiracies that were generated during the crisis and circulated globally, including in Norway. The article discusses the concept of conspiracy theories and references recent research in the field, particularly conspiracy thinking related to the coronavirus pandemic. It also provides examples of corona conspiracies that were disseminated by individuals associated with the anthroposophical movement. The article then considers the recent division and polarization in the anthroposophical movement, as well as the friction between anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy. It concludes with a reflection on the findings and the question of anthroposophy as a subculture versus counterculture.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, anthroposophical corona conspiracies, polarization in the anthroposophical movement, friction between pedagogy and anthroposophy, subculture, counterculture.

Introduction

According to the philosopher of religion Ansgar Martins, the coronavirus pandemic gave rise to “a new anthroposophical subculture” that partly “merged with contemporary conspiracy esotericism” (Martins, 2023, p. 73). It is well documented that corona conspiracies can be directly associated with neo-religious, esoteric and anthroposophical groups (Dyrendal & Hestad, 2021, Dyrendal & Tølleson, 2023, Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2022). The anthroposophically influenced conspiracy narratives largely coincide with other circulating corona conspiracies, where the former often incorporates additional dimensions of esoteric ideas from Rudolf Steiner. Consequently, the supposed forces behind these conspiracies include both earthly “underlying secret powers that control the world” and supersensual “cosmic energies and other spiritual phenomena [...]” that control world events (Schäfer & Frei, 2021, p. 403).¹ In the swarm of corona conspiracies, the super-conspiracy² that a malicious, powerful elite is behind the corona pandemic with a hidden plan to introduce a new world order and reduce the world population, is particularly extreme. Understandably, conspiracy narratives with such aggressive elements of anti-authoritarian extremism have raised alarm bells within the Norwegian Police Security Service (Bjørge & Braddock, 2022).

1. In this article I do not deal with the parts of Steiner's esotericism that were used in the corona conspiracies. Those interested are referred to my article “Anthroposophy and conspiracy thinking” in the journal *Samtiden* (August, 2023).

2. The term originates from the political scientist Michael Barkun.

Understanding the term *conspiracy theory* merits a chapter of its own. If used too liberally and frequently, it can easily become a synonym for any criticism of power that one dislikes. Labelling an opponent as a conspiracy theorist corrupts the term into “a general insult” and “a rhetorical tool that can be used in almost any context” (Dyrendal, 2003). However, the term *conspiracy theory* is distinct from *theory* as such. The latter refers to a system of scientifically based statements that, often after years of study, seek to explain certain facts or phenomena and their underlying laws. These theories can subsequently be corrected, falsified and further developed by others. A conspiracy theory, on the other hand, is characterized by the opposite: Its adherents maintain their beliefs even in the face of counter-evidence that should prompt reconsideration (Lamberty, 2020). Transitioning from situational critiques of power to using conspiracy theories as fundamental and recurring explanations is referred to in research as *conspiracy mentality*. Individuals tend to believe in several conspiracy theories, *even* when these are mutually contradictory (Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019, p. 216 and Dyrendal & Hestad, 2021, p. 102,103). Maintaining such an underlying worldview often leads to an “us and them” attitude where “the course of history and society is [...] full of hidden signs, patterns and connections” and this mindset is then combined with a “state of semiotic arousal, that is a hyperactive search for such confirming signs and patterns” (Døving & Emberland, 2018, p. 83). When I use the term corona conspiracies below, it is in the aforementioned sense, i.e., conspiracy theories or stories related to the corona pandemic. The academic studies of conspiracy theories mentioned above effectively describe *corona conspiracies* in the anthroposophical movement. In this article, I delve into this phenomenon in more detail, examining both external and internal debates and the resulting polarization. The exchange of opinions is well documented, and I will demonstrate that the conspiracy narratives observed in Norway align with internationally established findings. I conclude the article with a discussion and reflection on my findings.

Anthroposophical corona conspiracies

Vaccination as an attack on human spirituality

Many of the anthroposophical corona conspiracies stem from statements made by Rudolf Steiner over a century ago. While Steiner cautioned against “fanatical vaccine resistance” and took a pragmatic attitude toward vaccines (Meyer & Stauffer, 2022), he also made strongly vaccine-critical and dystopian statements. Among other things, he claims that in the future, seeking the spiritual will be pathologized and that certain vaccines will prevent the development of spirituality. He stated that “children will be inoculated with a substance that makes them immune to the spiritual [...]” (Steiner, 1999, p. 237). On the website of the anthroposophically oriented *Paradigmeskifte Forlag* (Paradigm shift Publishing house)³ there is an article translated from German and signed by the anthroposophical writer Kirsten Juel. She references Steiner’s quote and concludes that this “brutal statement from Rudolf Steiner has now become reality” (Juel, 12.9. 2021). The quote is then associated with the conspiracy narrative that 24,000 children in Australia were gathered in large sports facilities for forced vaccination. In reality, Australian health authorities had simply encouraged high school students to get vaccinated ahead of an exam, but the false narrative went viral and was disseminated to millions of people. Health authorities had to intervene to clarify that children were not required to be vaccinated for COVID-19 in Australia (Swenson & Fraser, 2021).

The next corona conspiracy communicated in the article was that the Pfizer vaccine contained graphene oxide, which “can cause blood clots and death”. Juel cited the Swiss online portal *Uncut-News* as a source, which is known for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories (Volger, et al. 2021). Another source she cited was a study from the University of Almeria, Spain, without mentioning that it was not peer-reviewed and that the University of Almeria distanced itself from it (Swenson, 2021). The existence of graphene oxide in vaccines has been thoroughly refuted by researchers (Schwarcz, 2021) and by several independent organizations affiliated with the international fact-checking network IFCN.⁴ In the article, Juel

3. Paradigmeskifte Forlag has been listed on Wikipedia’s so-called **Spam blacklist** since 2015. “Reason: Conspiracy theories and pseudoscience” (MediaWiki: Spam-blacklist, last edited, 2021).

4. See, for example, the website of the European Parliament, 8.3. 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-9-2022-000303-ASW_EN.html and AP, 8.7. 2021.

attempted to reinforce the conspiracy theory about graphene oxide in the vaccines by referring to “a number of private videos shared on social media” and a study that purportedly showed that “vaccinated people had become magnetic”. She linked this to the well-known conspiracy trope that Bill Gates wants “to create a connection between humans and the internet”. This conspiracy myth has also been debunked (Goodman & Carmichael, 2020). The article on Paradigmeskifte Forlag’s website concluded with Juel urging “the so-called anthroposophical doctors [who] recommend the Corona vaccines as an important contribution to fighting the pandemic [to] wake up from their deep sleep” (Juel, 2021). It is worth noting the metaphor “wake up from their deep sleep”, which is a recurring expression among those prone to conspiracy thinking: You are part of a small minority that has awakened while the majority remains asleep. In Juel’s worldview, the anthroposophical doctors who recommend vaccines are asleep and are thus only *so-called* anthroposophical doctors.

The Swiss anthroposophical journal *Der Europäer* also echoed the above claiming that “vaccines have now been developed to split [humans] from the divine spirit [...] And one cannot start early enough. Therefore, vaccination of children and infants is a crime” (Fitts & Meyer, 2020, pp. 7,11).

The corona crisis as a flop

Steiner’s anthroposophy presents a demanding and complex interpretation of the apocalypse, hinting at clear millenarianism, which some anthroposophically oriented conspiracy propagators have drawn upon (Martins, 2023). There is no room in this article for an elaboration that would do justice to Steiner’s extensive and complex apocalypticism, but highly simplified one could put it like this: Steiner’s apocalypticism describes a web of constructive and destructive spiritual beings who are actors in a cosmic battle drama affecting world history. According to Steiner, In the 20th and early 21st centuries, the struggle will intensify and anti-Christian, demonic forces will gain strength, acting as opponents to the *Christ impulse*. The so-called “opposing” or “resistance being” will manifest themselves in the aforementioned attack on human spirituality (on the human self), and in new forms of technology that will lead to a merging of the machine and the human (Barkved, 2023). Steiner argued that a “fusion of the human with the mechanical being lay in the meaning of the earth revolution”. However, he cautioned that this fusion should not be “staged by groups that exploit things only in a group-egotistical manner” (Steiner, 1992, p. 21). The latter statement (and others in the same vein) have been incorporated into corona conspiracies. For example, the anthroposophical journal *Der Europäer* states that “vaccination in combination with electro smog and 5G [is the] ultimate goal of the dark, global powers” (Fitts & Meyer, 2020, pp. 4, 6). In an article from the Norwegian anthroposophical journal *Libra*, the ‘dark powers’ are linked to very specific organizations and names:

Once the [corona] crisis is over, perhaps a year and a half after the measures were implemented, we will have gradually gotten used to the dictatorship, we will have been vaccinated, stopped paying with cash so that all purchases are registered, and Bill Gates may have succeeded in his intention to implant a microscopic surveillance chip incorporated into the vaccine (Thomassen, 2020, p. 57).

In another context, the same article’s author, Trude Malthe Thomassen, questions how the Norwegian Directorate of Health’s Bjørn Guldvog could predict in February 2020 that the virus could mutate and become dangerous and assume at such an early stage that “the risk of more coronavirus-type events will force a far better health preparedness in the coming decade than is the case today” (Guldvog, in Thomassen, 2020, p. 77). Thomassen contends that Covid-19 was merely a “harmless cold virus” and cannot be described as “a crisis”. She suggests that there must be something else behind it; namely “a self-appointed power elite” consisting of, among others, “the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation”. According to Thomassen, “the global power elite” including “the UN, the pharmaceutical industry [...], the World Bank, the Director General of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (sic!), the CIA [...], WHO, OECD [...]” had already “arranged an exercise around two imaginary pandemics” prior to “the various epidemics”. She also notes “activity in Davos/WEF [World Economic Forum]” (Thomassen, 2020, pp. 51-66). According to the article’s author, “the corona virus is just a flop [...] put in place to bring about an economic collapse”. Through the pandemic restrictions, “a small minority will gain an economic advantage

that will enslave the rest of the world's population". The future holds "the new world order" governed by a "global leadership" that "is invisible as a virus" (Thomassen, 2020, pp. 57, 58, 61).

The corona crisis as a costume for demons

Thomassen did not explicitly reference Steiner's apocalyptic interpretations. However, Gottfried Straube Fjeldså, then editor of the *Paradigmeskifte Forlags* website and former Waldorf school teacher, did. According to him, there are demonic forces behind the desire to organize society as a "concentration of power in a few and private hands". Fjeldså claims that the head of the WEF, Klaus Schwab, is a tool of the demon Sorat⁵ and promotes a "centralization fantasy" worse than that of Adolf Hitler. Schwab uses "the pandemic as a golden opportunity to realize this" (Fjeldså, 202, pp. 51, 52). Schwab's vision of "transferring all power to international corporations, billionaires [and] technocrats" makes "Hitler's leadership ambitions seem like child's play". Fjeldså suggests that while this comparison may seem unreasonable and grotesque, "Sorat chooses the camouflage available in the era in question" (Fjeldså, 2021, p. 52).

In another context, Fjeldså draws parallels between "the same euphoria" created by Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels when he mobilized the country's people for "total war" in 1943 and "the blind euphoria we can sense today in the break rooms at work [...]". Just as the people's acceptance of Goebbels' vision led to a popular uprising "that made the masses willingly live more frugally [and] close 100,000 restaurants and clubs", so "[today] the overwhelming majority of the population momentarily accepts experimental genetic engineering [and] puts their lives in the hands of technocrats in white coats". It is clear from the text that Fjeldså identifies with a "we" that lives "surrounded by people who are paralyzed by fear". It is this anxiety that causes them to grasp at "any straw" and thus expose themselves to "genetic engineering experiments" (Fjeldså, in Skaftnesmo, 2022, pp. 253, 260). Fjeldså lets the reader understand that - like those who fought against Nazism and Hitler - being part of a smaller "we" comes at a price. According to Fjeldså, when the majority are paralyzed by fear and willingly allow themselves to be used as guinea pigs in the service of a demonic medicine, someone has to speak out, even if the prize they have to pay is "condescending comments and people avoiding you". And if speaking up means posting things on social media - which the authorities call conspiracy theories and "fake news", but which are actually "critical science" - can I endure "still meeting my snoring colleagues at recess at work the next morning? [...] Can I really bear to put myself through this?". So those who see through the evil feel bad, just as those who stood up to the Nazi Hitler once did. Back then it was "book fire", now it's censorship in the form of "media power". According to Fjeldså, it is painful and demanding to belong to a small minority that stands outside the seduced, sleeping mass. It is a high price to pay to stand up to a collective euphoria where "the masses [through fear] are to be controlled and made docile" to demonic forces and their henchmen (Fjeldså, 2022, p. 255).

The 1938 situation

Fjeldså published the above claims as a guest writer in the book *Dragestrid - Kampen om mennesket*, (Dragon fight - The battle for man) by author and Waldorf school teacher Trond Skaftnesmo (Skaftnesmo, 2022). According to Skaftnesmo, Fjeldså's comparisons between the present and "Germany's dark past" may be perceived by many as "a breach of taboo". However, Skaftnesmo sees it differently: "If it happened once, it can happen again, albeit with different sets and costumes". He poses the question, "will we recognize the symptoms this time? Will we recognize the smell of Sorat before it hits us from the gas chambers?" (Skaftnesmo, 2022, p. 262).

5. Sorat (from Hebrew: Sun-demon), a name Steiner uses for what in Revelation is referred to as the Antichrist or also the *Beast with two horns*, linked to the number 666.

With reference to a blog post from the controversial politician Wayne Allen Root⁶, Skaftnesmo aims to illustrate that today we find ourselves in a situation akin to 1938:

The lockdowns [during the corona pandemic] correspond to the Warsaw Ghetto. Jews could not work. Jews could not travel. Jewish businesses were labeled as 'non-essential' [...] Stars on their clothes [...] The vaccinated enter restaurants, bars, concerts, supermarkets, planes and trains. They keep their jobs. The rest of us are labeled as 'subhuman' for life. That's the star. It's 1938" (Root, in Skaftnesmo, 2022, p. 264).

Skaftnesmo acknowledges that "the costumes, flags and facts" are not identical now as they were in 1938. Yet, "it can happen again. The only question is whether enough people will be able to recognize 1938 when we are there". That Skaftnesmo himself has recognized the 1938 situation is evident in the article series "The face of evil" published in *Libra*. Here, he claims that the bestial medical experiments carried out by Nazi doctors on humans, a central issue in the Nuremberg Trial, are still going on today, albeit in a different guise. "Medicine" is the demonic power that Sorat wields as a "weapon to break down the legal protection of the individual's integrity of his or her own body" (Skaftnesmo, 2021, p. 42). He adds:

At the end of this slippery slope, it may be as said in the revelation of John, that 'no one can buy or sell anything without having this mark, the name of the beast or the number corresponding to the name'. By then, the money-free society will have been introduced, and we will have reached the World Economic Forum's goal for 2030: You'll own nothing and you'll be happy! (Skaftnesmo, 2021, p. 42).

The final sentence from the above quote does not originate from the corona era, but from a WEF-meeting in 2016. According to Reuters (4.5. 2021), Denmark's former minister of Environment Ida Auken, the author of this statement, clarified that it is far from an expression of the WEF's goals, as Skaftnesmo claims. On the contrary, it is "not [an] expression of a utopia or a dream of the future, but [a] scenario that shows where we may be heading, for better or worse". Nevertheless, despite the claims of clarification, the seven-year-old statement, "You'll own nothing and you'll be happy!", has become a trope deeply embedded in corona conspiracies (Reuters Fact Check, 2021).

"Most of us have no sense of real knowledge."

A final example of anthroposophically inspired corona conspiracies comes from Sven-Inge Johansen, a former Waldorf teacher, writer and politician for the far right-party, *The Alliance*. In his blog, he writes that the corona pandemic was orchestrated by the WHO "and the environment behind it" to "create fear and use the various nations' health authorities as speaking tube". This also includes "key players" such as "Bill Gates [and] Erna Solberg". They all have in common that "they had invested in vaccines [...] All over the world, we see the ugliest abuse of state power [...] and brutality". According to Johansen, the corona pandemic "had nothing to do with disease, but was a directed performance where the authorities did not shy away from killing their citizens" (Johansen, 2023). He further states that he "has been inspired by Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy", which represents "real knowledge":

There is something secretive about real knowledge. Most of us float through life on a raft of propaganda and have no sense of real knowledge, but must acquire it perhaps through many painful conflicts, unfathomable resistance or even serious illness; the anthroposophical movement attracts many who begin their quest for knowledge as believers. But that is also perfectly normal and fine. Faith is trust and can be the most important building blocks (Johansen, 2023).

The aforementioned conspiracy narratives and the alternative view of knowledge described in the last quote can also be encountered in Central Europe, particularly in esoteric/anthroposophical contexts. One study explores the link between esotericism/anthroposophy and the Querdenker movement.⁷ A significant

6. Wayne Allen Root has "a history of promoting conspiracy theories and circulating false information" (Vazquez, 2019). The New York State Attorney General, Letitia James, writes that through "spreading misleading claims about effectiveness of products in treating coronavirus" Roots shows an "exploitative behavior that not only misleads the public, but actually compromises our health and safety" (James, 2020).

7. The name of the corona protest movement in German-speaking countries

recurring theme is the conviction that “a secret group controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order” combined with the belief that those who have “woken up” will “uncover the truth”, expose and ideally overthrow the hidden power groups, often called the *deep state* or *shadow government* (Liekfett, et. al, 2023, p. 124). The study notes that esotericism, including anthroposophy, fuels the conspiracy narrative that the COVID vaccine was developed to implant microchips with the aim of controlling the population. Not only does anthroposophical conspiracism espouse anti-government extremism, but it also promotes an anti-scientific attitude:

Proponents [of esotericism and anthroposophy] ignore the majority of scientific evidence in favor of claims for the existence of powerful, invisible forces that cannot be detected by current scientific methods [...] Esotericism and anthroposophy [...] are related to conspiracy beliefs through science denial and belief in supernatural, hidden forces (Liekfett, et. Al, 2023, p. 124).

According to the study, this segment of corona conspiracy typically rejects established science, claiming instead “to possess a secret, higher [alternative] knowledge or enlightenment” (Liekfett, et. Al, 2023, p. 132).

Debate and polarization

Call for distancing

The examples provided of corona conspiracies do not represent the anthroposophical movement as a whole. Several individuals have distanced themselves from these notions, and anthroposophical medical associations and Waldorf school associations in various countries have issued statements supporting the corona vaccine and the measures implemented by the authorities.⁸ In Norway, a heated debate was sparked by several reader posts from the brothers economist Bjart Holtsmark and historian Sven Holtsmark, both former Waldorf school students.⁹ In *Haugesund Avis* (Haugesund Newspaper) the brothers claimed that Fjeldså, then co-owner of Paradigmeskifte Forlag (which publishes Skaftnesmo’s books), “produces and disseminates misinformation such as the claim that between 400,000 and 4 million died from the Covid-19 vaccines in the Western world” (Holtsmark & Holtsmark, 25.1.2022). In the newspaper *Klassekampen*, they also sharply criticized articles Trude Malte Thomassen had published in *Libra*, particularly highlighting the conspiracy stories alleging that Gates wants to “implant a microscopic surveillance chip incorporated into the vaccine”, that the corona measures have led to us no longer having a democracy in Norway, and that “the coronavirus is a flop [...] implemented to bring about an economic collapse” (Holtsmark & Holtsmark, 14.3. 2022). However, it was Skaftnesmo who faced the brunt of the brothers’ criticism. They accused him of contributing to the spread of “the most outrageous conspiracy theories, [...] including that the vaccines against COVID-19 lead to mass death, and [...] that the Norwegian authorities have known this all along” (Holtsmark & Holtsmark, 2022, p. 29). According to them, the consequence of such conspiracy narratives will lead to Skaftnesmo “through his chains of fallacies and lies contributing [...] to the fact that today there are people who actually believe that the vaccines against COVID-19 cause mass death” (Holtsmark & Holtsmark, 21.2. 2022). The Holtsmark brothers’ criticism was sharp, especially in their claim that Skaftnesmo spreads lies and in their concern that his “extensive spread of misinformation” would “flow into the classroom” (Holtsmark & Holtsmark, 19.1. 2022). However, they were in my understanding able to attack the content of Skaftnesmo’s writings without resorting to ad hominem attacks on his person.

8. This did not mean that one necessarily uncritically supported everything that came from the authorities, only that the criticism related to the matter itself without being inserted into total explanatory conspiracy narratives. For examples of announcements from anthroposophical institutions, see <https://www.damid.de/presse/pressmitteilungen/1011-impfen-solidarisch-entscheiden.html> and <https://www.waldorfschule.de/artikel/bund-der-freien-waldorfschulen-bekraeftigt-seinen-standpunkt-in-der-pandemie>

9. I did not take direct part in the debate initiated by the Holtsmark brothers, but wrote a longer article in *Samtiden* (August 2023). The article was generally perceived as an adequate and objective contribution to an important topic, also from many people in the anthroposophical movement. Nevertheless, there were a few verbal personal attacks and highly polemic reactions to the article. For obvious reasons, I will not deal with this in this article.

The brothers also criticized the anthroposophical journal *Libra*, for containing “increasingly frequent and more extreme elements of conspiratorial articles”. Finally, they urged the Waldorf School Association and the Anthroposophical Society in Norway to “publicly and unequivocally distance themselves from the ideas of the movement’s extreme vaccine opponents” (Holtmark & Holtmark, 21.2. 2022).

In response, the Anthroposophical Society stated that they “neither support nor promote conspiracy theories”, but “the individual must take responsibility for their own opinions”. It was emphasized that the consideration of “freedom of expression is strong. The Anthroposophical Society does not have and will not have a superior authority over our members” (Wirsching, 2022, p. 20). However, they did not issue the “public, unequivocal distance” demanded by the Holtmark brothers. Similarly, the Waldorf Association did not issue such a statement of distance. Instead, they stated that the Waldorf schools “have followed national and local guidelines during the pandemic” and the Waldorf School Association has “supported the schools in following up the authorities’ orders and recommendations”. Regarding the Holtmark brothers’ criticism of *Libra*, they clarified that the “anthroposophical journal *Libra* has nothing to do with Waldorf education” and regretted “that the opinions of individuals are once again being used as evidence for the opinions of a large group of people. This is unfortunately a trend that the Waldorf School Association has witnessed for many years [...]”. The Waldorf School Association assured that “there is no room to advocate radical and private views in one’s teaching work”, but:

The private opinions of individuals are not the school’s business. If such opinions become a nuisance to the school, it becomes a personnel matter. The Waldorf School Association is a cooperative body and has no authority over the school’s employees. [...]The Waldorf School Association naturally distances itself from all conspiracy theories and extreme ideas. Such attitudes do not enter the classroom (Alsos, 22.2. 2022).

The friction between Waldorf pedagogy and anthroposophy

Additionally, besides polarization, a division within the anthroposophical community became evident in a reader post by Steingrímur Njálsson, teacher at the Oslo City Waldorf School. He began by thanking the Holtmark brothers for drawing attention to conspiracy theories “that must be countered” and said that he “completely agreed” that it was necessary to “confront the extreme vaccine opponents in our own ranks, [but] unfortunately [it] is easier said than done”:

The question is [...] where in the movement ‘the smelly dog is buried’.¹⁰ In their article, Holtmark & Holtmark mix the Waldorf school movement and anthroposophical environments. For those of us who are part of the Waldorf movement, this does not necessarily make sense, but rather reminds us of one of the many myths that are still circulating about Waldorf schools - namely that everyone who works there stands by the metaphysical and partly occult worldview known as anthroposophy. The fact is that fewer and fewer Norwegian Waldorf school teachers are anthroposophists. I would say that genuine anthroposophists are in a dwindling minority in almost all Waldorf schools today, and in some schools, they are all retired (Njálsson, 2022, p. 22).

Markus Lindholm from the Rudolf Steiner University College argued that it is challenging to separate anthroposophy from Waldorf pedagogy. According to him, the response from the Norwegian Association of Waldorf Schools was an attempt “to erect a fence between anthroposophy and Waldorf education”. Lindholm claimed that such a fence cannot simply be erected, because “anthroposophical thought figures underlie much of everyday life in Waldorf schools [...] anthroposophical views are present in everything from history to biology”:

In the introduction [to the Waldorf School curriculum] it is made clear that anthroposophical ideas about children’s development in so-called seven-year periods, or the notion that the human being consists of a physical body, etheric body, astral body and self, are guiding pedagogy. Of course, this is not in itself disqualifying. Waldorf schools are excellent schools! But it is not easy to determine where anthroposophy ends and Waldorf pedagogy begins. Steiner’s anthroposophy can inspire - but it can also prepare the ground for conspiracy thinking (Lindholm, 1.3. 2022).

10. With the Norwegian expression “where is the dog buried”, one asks where the real cause lies.

In response to the Waldorf School Association's claim that the journal *Libra* has nothing to do with Waldorf pedagogy, Lindholm pointed out that the first thing "employees of the Waldorf School Association encounter in the morning when they arrive at their offices, which are located in the 'House of Anthroposophy'¹¹ in Oslo, is a large rack of the journal *Libra*". In conclusion, Lindholm pointed out that it was a "pity" that the Holtsmark brothers' criticism was met in such an "anxiety-ridden" manner, and that this can be explained by the fact that the Waldorf School Association's "network has no culture of critical analysis of its own standpoint and has generally regarded academic discourse with suspicion" (Lindholm, 1.3. 2022).

When it came to the criticism of *Libra*, the internal polarization in the anthroposophical movement came to light through two readers posts by anthroposophist and Supreme Court lawyer Cato Schiøtz. He marked a clear distance to Trond Skaftnesmo's articles in *Libra* and assured that he had written to both the Norwegian Association of Waldorf Schools and the Anthroposophical Society and "emphasized the need to [...] take distance from Skaftnesmo's views". Schiøtz had pointed out to the editors of *Libra* that "Skaftnesmo's articles were likely to damage *Libra*'s reputation and the position of anthroposophy in Norway". He had also raised the matter with the board of the publishing house Antropos, which publishes *Libra*, and pointed out that

they should consider expanding *Libra*'s editorial board with new members, so that individual members with strong controversial views do not have too much impact in promoting their personal views. I have tried to balance the consideration of Skaftnesmo's broad freedom of expression and the free editorial position of *Libra*'s editorial board with a clear distance to Skaftnesmo's views (Schiøtz, 6.3. 2022).¹²

Fathers and sons

One might expect that writers who produce highly derogatory characterizations of living persons, comparing them to Hitler and regarding them as tools of demonic forces, would tolerate criticism directed at themselves. However, in the responses to the Holtsmark brothers' criticism, self-criticism of one's own point of view, which is a minimum requirement in other contexts, such as academic discourse, seems to be lacking. Fjeldså defended Skaftnesmo by comparing the Holtsmark brothers with their late father, Torger Holtsmark. According to Fjeldså, the latter appeared "thoroughly cultured and wise" and was a "philosopher, physicist, mathematician and anthroposophist of an unusually educated caliber [with a] serious striving for truthfulness and veracity. He was known for high ethical standards and, in addition, a generous and caring disposition!".

On the basis of these personal experiences, the sons' inveterate bullying, repeated misquotations, dishonest domination techniques, attempts at character assassination, and unwillingness to accept basic historical and scientific facts, which are allowed to flow out into the public domain under the guise of professorships, seem like a shocking contrast to the personality I have been allowed to get to know in their father, Torger Holtsmark (Fjeldså, 2022).

Skaftnesmo also employs the method of exalting the father and surrounding him with a bright halo of positive qualities to create an even stronger shadow image of his sons. He writes that he did not know Bjart and Sven Holtsmark "before this war began. But I knew of their father, who for several years was a central figure in the Anthroposophical Society". Skaftnesmo says that he had Torger Holtsmark as an examiner for an oral exam in his Master of Philosophy and "it went very well". Skaftnesmo remembers that the two of them "hit it off and had a long and fine dialog about Aristotle's causal categories". However, the "respectful dialogue" Skaftnesmo experienced with his father is not found in his sons; on the contrary, they "scold and stamp" him (Skaftnesmo, 2022, pp. 207, 208).

In a reader post in *Klassekampen*, Skaftnesmo claimed that the motive behind the Holtsmark brothers' criticism was "to weed out people like me from the anthroposophical movement, the Waldorf School and

11. When Lindholm wrote his readers post, the Waldorf School Association had offices in the same building as the Anthropos bookshop and the Oslo branch of the Anthroposophical Society. Today, they have offices in the same building as the Rudolf Steiner University College.

12. It should be noted that Schiøtz's proposal was accepted and that *Libra*'s editorial board was expanded by three members (including Schiøtz himself and me) and that two of the existing members, Trude Malthe Thomassen and Trond Skaftnesmo, chose to leave the editorial board.

in general from the public sphere”. He added that the space he had been given was so small that there “can be no debate to speak of. But that suits the brother Holtsmark well, since they have encouraged personal attacks, condemnation and labeling rather than a factual dialogue”. He further emphasized that the articles in *Libra* (written by him and Thomassen), which the brothers had called conspiratorial, “in normal language means that we keep a watchful eye on disturbing totalitarian tendencies in our time [...]” (Skaftnesmo, 2022, p. 23).

“Those who want to condemn conspiracy thinking must first condemn Rudolf Steiner”

Skaftnesmo, given too little space to participate in what he called an open debate, compensated by texts published in the anthroposophical journal *Cogito* and a separate chapter in his book, *Dragestrid* (Dragon fight) (2022). Here he criticized the way the Holtsmark brothers used the concept of conspiracy theory and added that people “from official anthroposophical circles also accept this use of words and adopt it in their own readers posts”. According to Skaftnesmo, “factually speaking [...] a conspiracy theory is like any other theory: It can be right or wrong. And only the facts can determine the difference”. What the Holtsmark brothers do is to use “a rhetorical trick” by defining conspiracy theories as “a type of falsehood” (Skaftnesmo, 2022, p. 208). Moreover, he attributed a deliberate motive to the brothers for not mentioning his name in their initial critical articles in the *Haugesund newspaper*, as it deprived him of the opportunity to respond: “since my name is not mentioned, I have *no right of reply* in the newspaper.¹³ It was a smart move” (Skaftnesmo, 2022, pp. 208, 209). Addressing Njálsson, who in his post “joins the call from the Holtsmarks that the Waldorf movement has a special duty to take ‘a showdown with the extreme vaccine opponents’”, Skaftnesmo writes:

If the work of driving out anthroposophy and its smelly dogs has really been such a success as Njálsson describes (a success for which the Rudolf Steiner University College and the Oslo City Waldorf School should be given much of the credit) - why shouldn't the old anthroposophists, who are dwindling in number from year to year anyway, just be allowed to die in peace? Why must they be absolutely condemned and ostracized, as the Holtsmarks demand? And why does Njálsson's nose itch like a stinking dog's corpse? What is it about these anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists and genuine anthroposophists that makes it so important to ostracize them - when they are about to die out anyway? I think we must have done something right, after all, when we arouse such reactions (Skaftnesmo, 2022, p. 217).

Here it is worth noting how the impression of a split in the anthroposophical movement is reinforced by Skaftnesmo's use of the plural form: “...*we* must have done something right, after all, when *we* arouse such reactions”.

Skaftnesmo also responded to contributions from Schiøtz. Unlike the Association of Waldorf Schools and the Anthroposophical Society, who refrained from publicly distancing themselves from his ideas, Skaftnesmo pointed out that “Cato Schiøtz - anthroposophy's foremost defender in Norwegian public opinion - goes far in that direction”. He mentioned Schiøtz's efforts to persuade the Waldorf School Association and the Anthroposophical Society to distance themselves from his views, as well as warning *Libra's* editorial staff about the potential damage his articles could cause to the magazine's reputation and that of anthroposophy in Norway. According to Skaftnesmo, one does not get “much closer [...] to a condemnation without using that word” (Skaftnesmo, 2022, p. 84).

Skaftnesmo concluded by asserting that the Holtsmark brothers' misuse of the conspiracy theory concept makes both Rudolf Steiner, who claimed that “occult inspirations [...] work in history”, and the apostle Paul, who “knows that the rulers of the world are often inspired by the powers of darkness”, appear as conspiracy theorists:

13. The articles were originally written without any anonymization of the name. It was *Haugesund newspaper* that demanded that Skaftnesmo's name be anonymized and made it a condition of publication. As a result, the Holtsmark brothers used the pronoun *hen* in the two articles. Incidentally, this is why another of Skaftnesmo's “defenders”, Sven-Inge Johansen, in his article characterized the Holtsmark brothers' language as “Woke” and “Pride”.

The brother Holtsmark has created a significant problem for the defenders of anthroposophy's public reputation. By submitting to the brothers Holtsmark's rhetorical misuse of the c-word, they are in danger of turning Rudolf Steiner himself into a "conspiracy theorist" in this malignant sense. If they want to distance themselves from all "conspiracy theorists", Steiner joins in the same train of thought. And not only Steiner, but also Paul the apostle. The damned and stinking dog corpses are in good company. [...] Those who want to eradicate and condemn 'conspiracy thinking' among anthroposophists must first condemn Rudolf Steiner. Then they must come to terms with our Christian spiritual heritage all the way back to St. Paul. They have a big job ahead of them (Skaftnesmo, 2022, pp. 222, 224).

“The emissaries of totalitarian society”

Johansen's defense of Skaftnesmo was published on the website *Nyhetspeilet* (The News Mirror) with the subtitle "Fact Check since 2009 - A Magazine for Spiritual Science and Truth-Seeking," and partly on his own blog. On the latter, one can read that the Holtsmark brothers are characterized by "Woke and Pride ideals" and write in a "politically correct, foreign [gender-neutral] Woke language," laden with "political correctness." Since the historian Sven Holtsmark is also associated with the Institute for Defense Studies at the Norwegian Defense University College, the brothers' writings in the newspapers indicate that "the military was involved". The fact that Skaftnesmo had also published a book on forced vaccination (Skaftnesmo, 2020) 'probably struck a chord with the Norwegian Defense University College, because the authorities had just initiated [...] the major public vaccination campaign', and now Skaftnesmo had disrupted the 'state machinery' by 'warning against believing in vaccination'. In addition to insinuating that the Holtsmark brothers are attacking Skaftnesmo on behalf of the military and the state machinery, Johansen concludes the article with the following statement: The Holtsmark brothers and others who have been critical of Skaftnesmo's views¹⁴ "worked to remove the individual's personal freedom and also the individual's personal responsibility. They acted as the emissaries of totalitarian society" (Johansen, 3.8. 2023).

When anthroposophy is caricatured by anthroposophists

Another instance of division within the anthroposophical movement emerged in an article in *Libra* signed by the craftsman Tor Dancke. Here he claims that in the anthroposophical conspiracy segment there exists an "unhealthy and rigid culture of distrust [that] tends towards pure fanaticism [...]":

When you place everything you don't like - and everyone you don't like - as the very instruments and minions of the Devil [and when] opponents are singled out, identified and named, and then have 666 placed on their foreheads - then you are no longer polemicizing against them, but demonizing and degrading them in a vile way. Bill Gates is also a human being who breathes, feels and thinks like the rest of us. [...] When named persons and organizations, Soros, Gates, Schwab, Harari, Erna, Høie etc., as well as the UN, WHO, WEF [...] are more or less designated as the henchmen of the opposing powers, then one no longer talks *to them*, only *about them* (Dancke, 2023, p. 71).

In another context, Dancke considered resigning from the Anthroposophical Society due to the prevalence of conspiracy thinking within the Anthroposophical Society. Like the Holtsmark brothers, he urged the anthroposophical society to unequivocally distance itself from conspiracy thinking. This suggestion was dismissed by Fjeldså, who queried whether Dancke "imagines [...] a sect, a club with a pope or guru at the top, or some bitches who have the facts, a Dornach-approved parliament?"¹⁵

The polarization and division witnessed in Norway was also observed elsewhere, particularly in Germany. The prominent social philosopher and anthroposophist Karl-Martin Dietz actually did resign from the Anthroposophical Society in 2021. He did so because, in his view, the Anthroposophical Society in Germany did not clearly disassociate itself from statements of conspiracy theory within its own ranks (Dietz, 2021).

14. These include Cato Schiøtz and me.

15. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/tor.dancke> Dornach is the name of the village where the international anthroposophical center Goetheanum is located.

In a letter-form article, he wrote that “anthroposophy is being damaged by the fact that more and more anthroposophists are joining the Querdenker movement without clearly distancing themselves from the right-wing radical milieu, the Reichbürger movement, neo-Nazis and AfD”.

It is even the case that several anthroposophists appear as leading thinkers within the Querdenker movement and cite Steiner as the source of their ideas. [...] This time it is not opponents of anthroposophy, but supporters of anthroposophy who portray anthroposophy in a caricatured manner. Thus it [anthroposophy] has mutated into a package of rather dull notions that are “bought” by the public. And I understand anyone who perceives this anthroposophical caricature as dangerous nonsense. [...] Some try to appear as if they are waging a battle on behalf of the spiritual against the materialistic. But dogmatically distinguishing between “spiritual” and “materialistic” is irrelevant (and neither is Steiner’s position). To insinuatingly place people on one side or the other borders - in my view - on defamation (Dietz, 2021, pp. 72-75).

The existence of factions and divisions within the anthroposophical movement is not a new phenomenon. It dates back to Steiner’s time, persisted after his death, and continues to manifest in various forms today (Martins, 2023). The escalation of polarization, particularly fueled by corona conspiracies, warrants further discussion and reflection on its implications for the anthroposophical movement.

Reflections

To be stuck in the glue that was meant to connect us

Although this article discusses anthroposophical corona conspiracies in the light of academic research in the field, the following reflections will also be influenced by my long association with anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy since the 1980s. While I aim to allow reflections and discussions to arise organically from the case itself, without being guided solely by personal impressions and positions, I acknowledge that an internal perspective will naturally differ from an external view detached from the anthroposophical movement. Personal experience in the form of “lived” knowledge can be a strength. However, the challenge lies in recognizing that any community, regardless of its diversity, inherently fosters collegiality, unity and friendship. While these are positive elements necessary in any community, there is also a tendency for ideas to stagnate. Then “the glue that connects us becomes the glue we are stuck in”.¹⁶

The friction between anthroposophically inspired activities, particularly Waldorf schools, and the anthroposophy from which they originated, dates back to the founding of the Waldorf school over a hundred years ago. Steiner was clear that “Waldorf schools should not be a life stance- school where we cram as many anthroposophical dogmas as possible into the children. We shall not teach anthroposophical dogmatics, anthroposophy is not a doctrinal content, but we strive for a practical handling of anthroposophy” (Steiner, 2008, p. 19). He cautioned against anthroposophy as “sectarian fanaticism”, but emphasized that human understanding, the foundation of pedagogy, is rooted in anthroposophy. He further stated:

It is all the stranger that many people are constantly trying to suppress anthroposophy while at the same time being more than eager to propagate the pedagogy that has grown out of anthroposophy. There is a German proverb that says: Wash my coat clean, but make sure it doesn’t get wet! [...] It would be better if you decided to speak openly and truthfully. When people ask: how can I become a good teacher, one should answer: by starting from anthroposophy, for through it, it is possible to acquire the necessary basis of knowledge (Steiner, 1978, pp. 9, 10).

This inherent contradiction between practice and ideology was explicitly stated in Njálsson’s stance in the debate. Here, the notion that a Waldorf educator is also an anthroposophist was described as a myth. Njálsson’s reader post aimed to reassure the reader that there are few anthroposophists left in the Waldorf schools, most of whom are retired. The response from the Waldorf School Association also implied a distinction between anthroposophy and pedagogy, asserting that *Libra* has no connection with Waldorf pedagogy. However, over the years, numerous issues of *Libra* have featured articles on Waldorf education or have been themed around

16. Adapted from Anne-Mette Stabel (lecture during the doctoral dissertation on the history of the Waldorf Schools in Norway, 2013).

the subject. Several of the most active writers and editorial board members have been Waldorf teachers. Skaftnesmo exemplifies this; he is a Waldorf teacher and likely one of the most prolific contributors to *Libra*, alongside Cato Schiøtz. His reaction to Njálsson's reader post reveals that he sees himself as part of a collective "we", i.e., one of the "genuine anthroposophists" targeted for "ostracism".

Lindholm's commentary can be interpreted as an attempt to strike a balance between completely rejecting anthroposophy and uncritically embracing it. He highlighted the central anthroposophical concepts and ideas integrated into Waldorf pedagogy and the challenge of distinguishing where anthroposophy ends, and Waldorf pedagogy begins.

In my view, the question revolves less around whether anthroposophy is present and more about which understanding of anthroposophy serves as the foundation. To put it bluntly: If one immerses oneself in Rudolf Steiner's extensive texts believing they contain eternal truths, anthroposophy can manifest as what Steiner himself described as "sectarian fanaticism," resembling a 'total-ideology'. In this scenario, anthroposophy may appeal to marginalized groups seeking absolute explanations but may hold less appeal in contemporary discourse, where individual judgment and critical thinking are paramount.

"Steiner's successors - subculture or counterculture?"

The aforementioned quote originates from political scientist Helge Ole Bergesen. He delineates two inclinations within the anthroposophical movement: one tending towards introversion, solidifying into a sectarian *subculture*, and the other evolving into a *counterculture* open to societal change. An introverted subculture leads to the consolidation of anthroposophy as a result of "isolation" and "spiritual inbreeding". Conversely, if anthroposophy is actualized as a socially participatory counterculture, the intention to "carry a cultural impulse into the present" becomes clear. Thus "it communicates outwardly while renewing itself internally". If countercultures lose this aspect, they are "gradually reduced to sects for special interests" and lose the opportunity to be "leaven" for social change (Bergesen, 2000, pp. 51, 58).

In light of Bergesen's analysis, Lindholm's assertion regarding a general distrust of "academic discourse" in the Waldorf educational environment is noteworthy. Lindholm also contends that the same environment lacks a "culture of critical analysis of one's own standpoint". Although Lindholm's criticism in this particular area appears somewhat categorical, the point is essential. For any cultural movement striving to be an integral part of its time, interest and participation in academic discourse are indispensable. This becomes challenging, if not impossible, if one claims exclusive access to the truth or rests on old ideas and traditions. Autonomy, individualization and critical thinking, despite their potential challenges, is a signature of our time. A movement devoid of self-critical thinking is out of sync with the contemporary discourse.

In my opinion, the anthroposophical conspiracy mentality lacks the aforementioned signature. Rather, it manifests as tragic signs of a uniform and homogeneous, totalitarian and uncritical adoption of preconceived narratives. Furthermore, it embodies an extreme anti-authority ideology and culture of suspicion, which, as Dietz suggests, leads to anthroposophy being caricatured and mutating into a package of insipid notions. By portraying themselves as awake representatives of a deeper insight and alternative science inaccessible to the rest of humanity, proponents reinforce an "us and them" mentality that affects not only believers but anthroposophy and the anthroposophical movement as a whole.

Spreaders of conspiracy narratives often use the term *mainstream* to describe a uniform majority, contrasting it with their supposedly clearer insight into hidden forces at work. However, in my experience, the opposite is true; it is in the so-called mainstream that one finds diversity, a change of opinion, room for multiple perspectives, criticism and self-criticism, and a wide tolerance for different points of view. Within academic discourse, wonder and curiosity, critical engagement with one's own perspectives and openness to others are the basic forces that keep science moving forward and evolving. For those who were not 'hearing-damaged' by the noise of aggressive super-conspiracy theories during the corona crisis, there was plenty of objective and legitimate criticism and diversity of opinion to be found. Diversity of opinion is integral

to a democratic society. Even in the wake of the corona crisis, discussions about the justification of the lockdowns, for example, have been characterized by multiple perspectives and positions.

Believing that one, as opposed to the masses, have access to true, alternative knowledge is the opposite of diversity of opinion. Instead, it appears exceptionally uniform, with no room for correction or falsification, self-criticism or the development of ideas. Spreaders of conspiracy narratives believe they are more awake than the sleeping masses who allow themselves to be sedated by evil, demonic forces. In reality, they anesthetize themselves by escaping into constructed narratives offering simplified explanations. In this sense, conspiracy theories become a kind of “opium”, not for the majority, but for a small group convinced of their enlightenment. By juxtaposing the forces behind the “*plandemic*” and those behind the Holocaust, the so called ‘dragon fight’ gains legitimacy and morale is strengthened. Presumably, the sense of victimhood is also reinforced when, akin to Hitler’s opponents, one experiences pain and suffering: As Fjeldså’s victim rhetoric suggests, being frozen out at work, have to deal with snoring colleagues, receive unpleasant comments and are censored on Facebook when you post links from “critical science” further strengthen this feeling.

Aggressive counterattacks and victim rhetoric, in the form of claims of being bullied and persecuted, dominate the conspiracy segment. The criticism from the Holtmark brothers was sharp, however, instead of providing sharp and objective counter-criticism, they choose not only to attack the brothers personally, but portrayed their deceased father in panegyric terms to cast an even darker shadow over the sons’ perceived shortcomings. Surely such a response to criticism indicates a lack of substantial, factual arguments to counter the criticism. Believing that named individuals and organizations are executing a plan to exterminate large parts of the population surpassing the horrors of the Holocaust - driven by demonic inspiration - encapsulates one within a strange and sectarian world of imagination, perceived as outside of time and the world by others.

Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated, based on academic theory, that the broader conspiracy narratives during the corona pandemic were mirrored in anthroposophical corona conspiracies. Like other corona conspiracies, those found within the marginal anthroposophical environment was characterized by a chronic culture of suspicion. At the fringes of the anthroposophical dissemination of conspiracy narratives, one also encountered a clear anti-authority extremism with aggressive interpretations of individuals and organizations as instruments of demonically inspired plans to exterminate large parts of humanity. The anthroposophical corona conspiracies led to polarization and division within the anthroposophical movement and triggered discussions about the relationship between anthroposophy and Waldorf pedagogy.

One of Skaftnesmo’s points warrants extra attention: distancing oneself from conspiracy thinkers among anthroposophists necessitates distancing from Rudolf Steiner. For, “the ‘conspiratorial’ is a *logically necessary part* of any spiritual or religious worldview that assumes the existence of good and evil spiritual powers”. According to Skaftnesmo, not only Steiner’s anthroposophy, but “our Christian spiritual heritage rests on conspiratorial thought” (Skaftnesmo, 2022, pp. 222, 223). The idea Skaftnesmo launches here warrants further exploration - something I intend to pursue in a future article.

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