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Reclaiming agency against the new world order: Beyond the coping mechanism frame in conspiracy theory studies

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ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theories about evil globalist elites and their totalitarian agenda are widespread in Western societies. Some scholars attribute their popularity to the complexities of modernity: conspiracy narratives offer frightening yet reassuringly simplistic explanations of world events. This approach, that we call the coping mechanism frame, regards conspiracy believers are insecure, fearful, comfort-seeking individuals. This study examines whether this frame does justice to reality. Using an ethnographic approach, we centralise the emic perspectives of a Dutch conspiracy movement. Our analysis shows that its members are *critical* of certain societal developments, *intentional* in turning critique into action and *social* in organising themselves accordingly. We conclude that a look beyond the coping mechanism frame reveals that conspiracy theories can be an active *response to*, rather than a way to *cope with* globalisation. Studying conspiracy theorists as a social movement is essential to recognising the often-overlooked social and collective dimension of conspiracy culture.

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Introduction

> What binds us is the question: 'can't we do this ourselves?'. We have relinquished so many things. We have outsourced our media, a bureaucracy has absorbed our health care. We have become consumers of everything. We spend money, we consume and we withdraw; we are no longer truly involved in anything. So that is our common denominator: the realization that we have to take a few steps back, find each other, and start arranging things for ourselves again.

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This is how P (Male, 66) describes the members of a social movement that has emerged in the Netherlands over the past few years: a movement that aims to do things by itself again, together. Its members are critical of certain current societal developments, such as the opaqueness of political decision-making, growing social and economic inequalities, and big corporations' power. To counter these developments, they urge people to be more conscious and intentional, instead of simply following the crowd. They actively translate their critiques into practice too: from adopting self-sufficient lifestyles to reading alternative journalism, and from organising protests to founding new communities. Through these practices, members of the movement strive to uphold the values that they miss in today's society: compassion and care for each other. Moreover, they share knowledge, support each other and seek connection.

This side of the movement is, however, more often than not overlooked because of its other and better known face: the conspiratorial worldview it entertains. Most individuals who are involved in it engage at least to some degree with conspiracy theories[1] concerning an alleged societal take-over by an evil global elite. While much diversity exists in individual interpretations of this worldview, most members of the movement agree that a small group of very powerful and rich members of a global elite are in the process of implementing an agenda (often referred to as *Agenda 2030* or *The Great Reset*) to introduce a dystopian totalitarian surveillance state world-wide. Virtually all contemporary societal events and political developments are viewed, by those associated with this movement, from this conspiratorial perspective. This interpretative narrative can be characterised as a *superconspiracy theory* (Barkun, 2003) which connects a wide range of systems, events and theories in one overarching narrative. From climate change to the war in Ukraine, from the Black Lives Matter movement to inflation and from non-traditional ideas on gender to the Dutch farmer protests (or nitrogen crisis[2]): in this worldview, everything is connected and can be traced back to the same agenda.

Though many elements of this worldview can be found in previously existing conspiracy narratives (e.g. Butter & Knight, 2020; Harambam, 2020a), it gained prominence and an increasing and novel base of followers since the start of the corona pandemic. During that period, various initiatives and protests organised by the movement were usually directed against COVID-19 policy and joined not only by individuals who adhered to the previously described worldview, but also by

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other critics, like small business owners who felt disproportionately affected by the government's approach. What is remarkable about these developments, is that conspiratorial distrusts of the pandemic created new constituencies, ones that cross political boundaries, and bring together a wide variety of people, from the extreme left to the extreme right (cf. Harambam, 2023; Voss, 2023; Sturm & Albrecht, 2020). While only few scholars on conspiracy believers approach them as a social movement (cf. Drazkiewicz, 2023a, 2023b; Harambam, 2020b, 2023; Morsello & Giardullo, 2023; Sternisko et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2024), and social movement scholars similarly have a blind spot for conspiratorially minded people (Bertuzzi, 2021), we argue that this collective aspect is important to understand the appeal and effects of conspiracy theories. After all, these beliefs bring people together, foster a shared identity, and shape their future actions. In this study, we therefore approach this loosely bound network of people as a social movement.

Ever since the movement's emergence in the early months of COVID-19, the 'conspiracy dimension' of its beliefs has been the core focus of public discussions about it. Scholars were quick to diagnose them as a coping strategy to explain and deal with the anxieties and insecurities engendered by the pandemic (e.g. Douglas, 2021; Enders et al., 2020). Others pointed to dangerous consequences of these beliefs, such as antisemitism, public health risks, climate change denial, anti-democratic tendencies, oppressive attitudes towards other communities and sometimes even violence (Jolley et al., 2022). Subsequently, public debate tends to stigmatise its individual members as ignorant, mad or dangerous. Some scholarship on conspiracy belief has attempted to counter this stigmatisation, by arguing that the popularity of conspiracy theories should not be ascribed to their believers, but to the circumstances in which they live: an ever-increasingly complex, globalising world that is simply difficult to grapple with (Birchall & Knight, 2022). Conspiracy belief, these scholars state, offers the comfort of oversimplification and clarity and thus serves as a personal or cultural mechanism to cope with this world. This 'coping mechanism frame' suggests the image of helpless and fearful individuals, not willing or able to face reality, passively adrift on the waves of modernity.

While it is a common scholarly explanation for the existence of conspiracy theories, the coping mechanism frame fails to explain the manifestation of the movement that P describes. If conspiracy believers are passive individuals at the mercy of incomprehensible forces, what explains their formation as a critical collective striving to change the

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world? In this article, we interrogate the coping mechanism frame to answer the question: what are the societal critiques and everyday practices of these people? And how do these challenge the widespread academic assumption of conspiracy believers as complexity-averse, passive individuals anxious of globalisation and modernisation? We draw on ethnographic research on this social movement in the Netherlands conducted towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic to argue that while the coping mechanism frame may rightfully connect conspiracy beliefs to broader societal contexts, it wrongfully discards conspiracy believers as passive victims of modernity.

In the following section we elaborate first on the coping mechanism frame, and on why we regard these people as a social movement. We then introduce our ethnographic research and outline our empirical findings to illustrate that, contrary to what the coping mechanism frame suggests, people in this movement are critical, intentional and social. We conclude by discussing the implications of our study.

Conspiracy belief as a cultural coping mechanism

In the last decades, research into conspiracy theories has proliferated (Uscinski, 2018; Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). A comprehensive review of the state of the art of research through the lens of a wide range of disciplines and perspectives can be found in Butter and Knight (2020). Among other questions, scholars have asked in which forms conspiracy theories have appeared across time and regions (e.g. Pelkmans & Machold, 2011; Yablokov et al., 2020), how technological developments and (social) media feed into and facilitate conspiracy belief (e.g. Aupers et al., 2020), which consequences are associated with believing in conspiracy theories (e.g. Douglas, 2021) and how such belief can be countered (e.g. Krekó, 2020). But perhaps the most popular question among scholars is understanding *why* people come to believe in these conspiracy theories in the first place (Douglas et al., 2019; Uscinski, 2018).

The discipline of social psychology dominates the field of conspiracy theory studies (Butter & Knight, 2020), and attempts to answer this question by researching the characteristics, personality traits and circumstances that might leave individuals prone to conspiracy belief (e.g. Douglas et al., 2017). It tends to portray conspiracy believers as (politically) cynical or apathetic (Douglas, 2021), passive individuals with lacking social networks (Freeman & Bentall, 2017). Douglas et al. (2019) outline three sets of motives that drive conspiracy belief, which

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fullfills *epistemic*, *existential* or *social* needs: when individuals face circumstances that threaten their understanding of their environment, their feeling of being secure and in control, and their positive image of themselves or the group they belong to, they may turn to conspiracy theories to relieve these threats. In line, social psychologists have associated conspiracy belief with feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness and (existential) anxiety (Douglas et al., 2017). In uncertain times, conspiracy theories function to reproduce the status quo, rather than protest or change it (Jolley et al., 2018; Nera et al., 2021). This lens is also used to explain the perceived surge of conspiracy belief related to COVID-19: if anything, the pandemic was the cause of many anxieties and insecurities, to which conspiracy theories served as a coping strategy (e.g. Douglas, 2021; Enders et al., 2020).

Other scholars find these psychological approaches too narrow because they focus on individual characteristics, conceiving of them as individual pathologies, while excluding broader cultural and societal developments from their analyses (e.g. Aupers, 2012; Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000). Yes, some of these social psychologists do regard conspiracy belief as a collective attempt to deal with trauma or (perceived) victimisation (e.g. Biddlestone et al., 2021; Bilewicz, 2022), but their level of analysis remains at the individual level. These scholars, instead, see conspiracy theories as the expression of a *cultural*[3] attempt to grapple with the complexities of contemporary societies, pointing to various processes of modernisation: rationalisation, secularisation, bureaucratisation, globalisation, mediatisation, technocratisation, and corporatisation (e.g. Butter & Knight, 2020; Harambam, 2020a). According to Aupers (2012), these developments produce three types of insecurities: epistemological insecurity (fuelled by postmodernist thought and mass media), existential insecurity (when no grand narratives can meaningfully explain life on earth) and ontological insecurity (as human-made systems grow to function autonomously). Conspiracy theories are 'logical responses to technological and social change', and appeal to many by 'accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening, way' (Melley, 2000, pp. 8–14). They offer 'an odd sort of comfort' (Melley, 2000, p. 8) by providing an 'everyday epistemological quick-fix' to complex events and opaque structures (Knight, 2000, p.8). For these scholars, then, conspiracy theories emerge as a cultural coping mechanism to deal with this complex world.

While their efforts to depathologize conspiracy belief by contextualising it socially and culturally are important, they have their own pitfalls.

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Butter and Knight argue that these theories lack specificity in ascribing conspiracy culture to these broad sociological developments, putting them at risk of becoming pathological 'in the insistence that ultimately everything is always about the impossibly vast and shadowy forces of capitalism' (2020, pp. 34–35). Moreover, their approach does not break with the tradition of generalising the causes of conspiracy belief so that little room is left for people's own agency and meaning-making, and for the fact that different people may believe in conspiracy theories for different reasons (Harambam, 2020a). But perhaps even more importantly, seeing conspiracy culture as a coping mechanism – whether individual or cultural – does not put an end to the pathologizing tendencies in the study of conspiracy theories. Both approaches conceptualise conspiracy theorists as individuals who have little agency, are distressed or anxious, and struggle to understand the complexity of contemporary societies. They sketch the image of passive subjects seeking comfort in the shelter of conspiracy theories, rather than people who are critical of these societal developments, and intentional in their behaviour and decisions to deal with those.

Conspiracy theorists as a social movement?

The coping mechanism frame runs contrary to the observations and interpretations we made during our research in these communities which highlighted not just internal diversity, but also clear purposeful collective action. In this paper we therefore interrogate this collective aspect, showing how Dutch conspiracy believers have organised themselves in an active social movement with clear political and social objectives. Our approach follows Bertuzzi's call to study conspiracy believers not as atomised individuals, but (also) as a social movement since they 'engage in collective action in the streets to give voice to their issues, protest against authority, propose alternative lifestyles and often claim to be looking for a better / different future, all of which are elements that typically characterise collective mobilizations and social movements' (Bertuzzi, 2021, p. 3). Arguing against the coping mechanism frame we illustrate that these Dutch conspiracy believers can indeed be seen as a social movement in line with the definition of Della Porta and Diani (2006), as they are engaged in political or cultural conflicts with the goal of achieving change, they are connected by pluriform informal networks and their shared conspiratorial worldview fosters a degree of collective identity.

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As this movement was initially characterised by its protests against COVID-19 measures, the sense of urgency to attend events of this movement has disappeared for many protesters since these measures were lifted. Demonstrations now attract a smaller audience, consisting more exclusively of the people who were not only critical of COVID policies, but who consider the pandemic to be but one manifestation of larger underlying forces. They form what can be seen as a conspiracy movement, a mobilisation of people who unite 'on the basis of a mutual belief in a conspiracy theory […] and the shared desire to expose and subvert the alleged conspirators', that uses different strategies to protest epistemic authorities (Halford, 2023, p. 188). It could therefore be argued that while this movement emerged during the pandemic, it has only further solidified afterwards in the sense that it is now arguably more homogenous in its aims and worldviews than it was during the pandemic (Harambam, 2023). Still, the movement is highly pluriform in terms of the degree to which (and the sub-movements in which) members are involved and the specific topics or (sub)narratives that they focus on. The fact that no central name exists that refers to this movement exemplifies this pluriformity, and is also the reason why in this paper we refer to this conspiracy movement without assigning it any more specific name. Similarly, not everyone who engages with the movement's worldview will identify as an activist themselves. We therefore refer to 'members' when we discuss the people that are (to different degrees) associated with this movement.

Now what is the central ideology of this conspiracy movement? While clear social and political differences exist among members, they share the conviction that certain global elites are behind various societal developments leading towards a totalitarian world government. The cabal is a covert group of elites that publicly exerts power through international institutions like the World Economic Forum, United Nations, World Health Organization (WHO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). These 'globalist' institutions have obtained an unmatched degree of power leaving national governments without any real influence. Key plans of these institutions are to abolish private property and turn the masses into a cheap and willing labour force to serve those in power. Deprived of their freedoms, people are constantly monitored and controlled with high-tech surveillance systems, and all expressions of personal individuality are repressed to ensure an obedient and uniform population. The mainstream media, research and education systems and government communication play an essential role in this process.

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Together, they fabricate and refine the big lie that is to indoctrinate and blind us from reality. Not only the pandemic, but also progressive political projects and policies regarding sustainability and social justice (e.g. UN's Social Development Goals) are framed in this conspiratorial logic as having the function of making citizens believe they are 'doing the right thing', while in reality they are consenting to their own confinement.

This broad narrative shows similarity to worldviews displayed by COVID-19 protests or anti-institutional movements in other Western democracies (e.g. Birchall & Knight, 2022; Morsello & Giardullo, 2023; Sturm & Albrecht, 2020; Travica, 2022; Voss, 2023). At the same time, this 'global' narrative is adapted to the Netherlands, incorporating issues, ideas and symbols that are relevant in the Dutch context: members of this movement re-interpret local issues like the nitrogen crisis, the childcare benefits scandal (*Toeslagenaffaire*)[4] and the consequences of gas extraction in Groningen.[5] Similarly, they adopt Dutch cultural symbols like farmer's handkerchiefs and inverted Dutch flags in their protests (Harambam, 2023).

With the movement's collective action against progressive narratives on sustainability and social justice, it could be characterised as a reactionary or counter-movement (Becker, 2020; Selvanathan et al., 2021; Thomas & Osborne, 2022). At the same time, however, unlike most reactionary movements this collective does not strive to uphold the status quo. On the contrary, the movement is situated within a broader context of increasing anti-government protest in the Netherlands, challenging the establishment and institutions (Frens et al., 2023). While the movement clearly acts against many societal developments, its members are not just 'anti-everything': as we will illustrate in the following chapters, they formulate an alternative set of values and seek ways to live in accordance with these.

Methodology

To study conspiracy theorists as a social movement we chose multiple ethnographic research methods, because this approach centralises the daily lived experiences of people and their *emic* perspectives (Beuving & De Vries, 2015). Much academic scholarship and journalistic reports tend to talk *about* members of these movements, rather than *with* them – which is problematic given the striking differences between outsiders' overly negative views on the movement and its members' self-understandings (Harambam, 2023). Anyone wishing to truly learn

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about their motivations, concerns, experiences and practices needs to enter their world, incomprehensible as it may initially seem.

After over two years of informal exploratory research, the first author immersed herself in the on – and offline world of members of the movement between September and December 2022. She attended small-scale demonstrations and one larger protest, and conducted digital ethnographic fieldwork exploring the online content on 29 websites of some key organisations and initiatives. The third significant source informing our analysis is a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews (in Dutch) with eight members of the movement. Participants were found through mutual connections, and invitations were sent out with the intention of gathering a group of interlocutors that represents some of the diversity within the movement: five men and three women participated, aged ranging from 24 to 77, from six different towns in both rural and urban provinces, and with backgrounds from practical to university education. Some participants are professionally involved in the movement (e.g. Willem Engel, founder and frontman of organisation Virus Truth (*Viruswaarheid*)), whereas others' involvement with the movement is mostly situated in their private and social life. To some, affiliation to the movement and its worldview constitutes a core aspect of their daily life and identity, to others it is one interest among plenty, and for some it was only a significant factor in the past. One interview was conducted digitally, and all other conversations took place in participants' homes.

Without exception, participants were incredibly welcoming and open to sharing their experiences. Perhaps this may be due to the clear positioning of the first author, who brought in a willingness to understand as well as a personal background of years of familiarity with the movement through close relatives. Fieldwork notes, pictures, website quotes and interview transcripts were stored digitally during the course of the fieldwork period. Loosely following the Grounded Theory method (Charmaz, 2006), the collected materials were inductively organised by a few key pillars, such as 'practices', 'critiques', 'personal change', 'values', 'ideal society' and 'view of in-group'. The themes of these categories are at the basis of the analysis that follows.

Results: Enter the conspiracy movement

The first observation to make is that members of this movement do not constitute a monolithic whole. The diversity of backgrounds, degrees of involvement with the movement and interpretations of its worldview

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among participants made for a wide range of conversations. But that does not mean that no common denominators were found among members of the movement. On the contrary: what our research demonstrates is that they are *critical* of society's status quo, *intentional* in their actions to reflect this criticism and *social* in organising themselves accordingly. In the following sections, we will elaborate on this.

Conspiracy belief as critical

The movement's worldview encompasses a set of widely shared critiques of and discontents with certain developments in current society. Members of the movement describe a society in which those who hold power are distant from those subject to it, in which those who have money call the shots, and in which local or individual authenticities are at stake. Through this lens, the movement's manifestations appear not just as a form of conspiracy culture, but as an explicit pushback against these perceived developments.

Those in power are detached

A widely shared grievance among members of the movement is the feeling that those in power are detached from their citizens and disconnected from local realities, resulting in policy that is not in line with the lived experience and needs of 'the people'. As written by organisation The Parallel Society (*De Parallelle Samenleving*) on the social media platform Gab:

> When will they notice that a great part of society has been crushed by a government who should protect her? A wholesale process of alienation is taking place between government and citizens, which does not bode well.[6]

Members of the movement witness a national government failing to adequately listen to the concerns, questions, and problems of its citizens. They assign this failure in part to the incompetence of political leaders or to bureaucratic systems that seem to be clogged. Often, too, they ascribe it to an alleged lack of integrity, an image which is only further confirmed by several recent incidents in which Dutch politicians were caught lying or withholding crucial information. Regardless of the reason, what sticks is the feeling that citizens cannot trust the government to take care of them and the issues they face:

> My trust in the government has decreased immensely. I still believe that we live in a beautiful country with good facilities. But I do think that our money is not spent in the right way. If you simply look at the profits made by large

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> corporations and the pharmaceutical industry, and at the funds invested in healthcare – then I just think, how did we get here in the first place? And what is done to solve that now? (E, Female, 45)

> They promise to do this and that. Then they huddle together in a room, and out of it comes a kind of mashed custard which yields a fully different outcome than the one you voted for. For God's sake, what did I vote for then? […] By now, I have the feeling – pardon my language – whether you get screwed by the cat or the dog … it really doesn't make a difference (R, Male, 77).

This experienced distantness and disconnection of those in power is not limited to the Dutch government, but extends to international arenas, where policies and legislation are often made without the inclusion of Dutch politicians. P (Male, 66) refers to Ursula von der Leyen as the '… President of the European Commission: the uncrowned queen of Europe – Why, who are you? Did we elect you?' The idea that Dutch

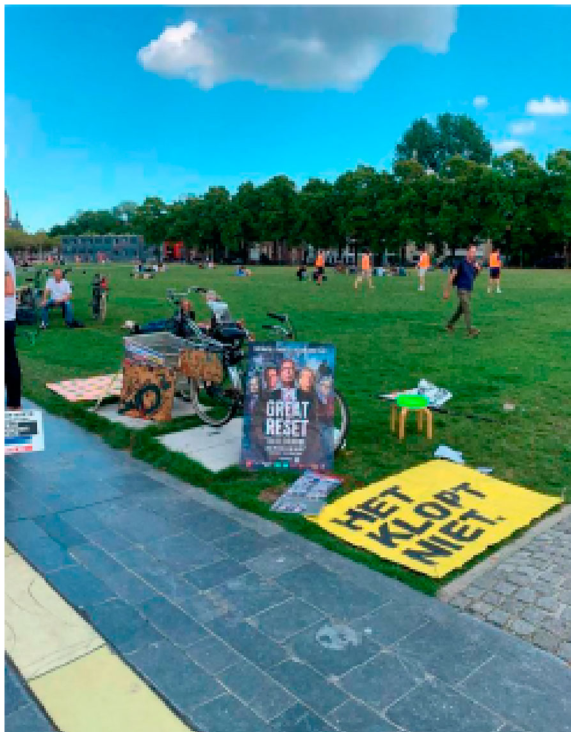

Figure 1. The attributes of a small gathering at the Museum square in Amsterdam, including a banner with the text 'this isn't right' and a 'movie poster' featuring George Soros, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, Klaus Schwab, Dutch Minister of Finance Sigrid Kaag and Bill Gates under the title: *The Great Reset*. Photographed by first author on 11 September 2022.

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citizens are deprived of any say in who gets to make the rules is also reflected in the movements' skepticism of international organisations like the World Economic Forum, WHO, UN and IMF. All in all, whether it concerns national governments or international organisations, the dominant sentiment among members of the movement is that agreements about their lives are made by individuals who have no insight nor interest in their lives at all (Figure 1).

To some, this experience is aggravated by a concern that local, regional and national identities and cultures are at stake because of processes of globalisation. They fear that the increasing global intertwinement and top-down influences on Dutch society will result in a uniformization of expression and thought, and leave no room for personal or local authenticity.

> Most of us at the Museumplein[7], who are fighting for this, are indeed trying to keep the Netherlands the Netherlands: 'doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg'[8], solving your own problems, entrepreneurship, doing things at small scale, I also find local food supply important – they are also messing around with that. We are not a particle of Europe, but that headstrong, stubborn little country of water at the coast. (N, Female, 44)

Everything is about money

Not only does the movement criticise the ways in which political power is structured and exerted, it is dissatisfied with large concentrations of power among actors that should not have a political say at all. Members of the movement speak about the unduly political powers that multinationals and the highly rich enjoy.

> Fundamental research has turned into applied research that only asks: how can we eventually earn money with this? […] Not only in science, but in society as a whole. Multinationals determine policy – Mark Rutte[9] is a good example of that: the man from Unilever who came to run the Netherlands like a business. (W, Male, 45)

The victims of this system are those without (exorbitant amounts of) money, the majority of citizens, who have little influence on the course of world events. As a result, members of the movement witness little empathy for the concerns and suffering of the less fortunate. That which does not generate profit is irrelevant, meaning that the fate of the average citizen is of no concern to big corporations, multibillionaires, and by extension to the governments that foster close ties with them.

> [In an ideal society, people would no longer] enjoy a yacht worth half a million euros while knowing that four countries away, people are starving. You

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> [would] no longer sit on a terrace comfortably when you know that three streets away, a mother falls victim to the Toeslagenaffaire. (G, Male, 66)

To some members of the movement, this focus on money – along with other developments in modern society, such as the increasing use of technology – has another unwanted side effect. In contemporary humans, they perceive a general sense of disconnection to oneself, to others and to the natural environment. As alternative news website Awakehuman (*Wakkermens*) writes in its motivation statement:

> Caught off guard by the increasing acceleration of new developments in the world and politicians who propagate untruths as normalities, the despondency and indifference in society is growing. […] Making use of this confusion and lethargy, and without any form of humanity, the economy is by now increasingly determining major parts of our society, yes, even of everyone's personal life.[10]

A shared image is that people are lived and numbed by 'the system', often without even realising it. Some interlocutors expressed feeling alienated and disconnected from society.

Countervalues to the system

These critiques – on the experienced distantness of (inter)national policymakers, money-driven society, and the loss of connection and authenticity – in turn translate into a set of alternative values that members of the movement see as more in line with what they consider authentically human. On its website, organisation The Parallel Society (*De Parallelle Samenleving*) describes itself as a 'loving community of free-thinking individuals who collectively safeguard our interests of liberty and humanity,' under the header of a 'New / Free / Conscious / Humane / Parallel Society.'[11] Upon being asked what an ideal society would look like, interlocutors describe a society that knows no force and fear, in which love rather than money is a core value and people live more conscious lives, in harmony with each other and with nature. P (Male, 66) advocated that 'people need to regain the feeling that they have some control over our democracy and their surroundings. We can only do so by adjusting the system.' Though opinions on what a new system should look like differ, many members agree that *locality* should be one of its central features:

> It appears that in practice, it is probably way better to achieve consensus about all kinds of matters in small communities, and that you need the government only for the big things, like building infrastructure. Together, you can often arrange all those other things on the provincial or municipal level as well. (R, Male, 77)

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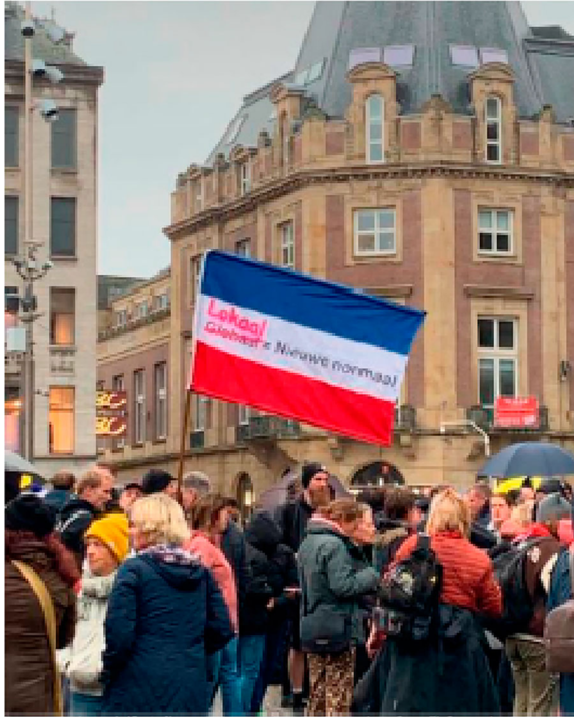

Figure 2. Protestors carry an inverted Dutch flag, symbolising the state of emergency that they consider the Netherlands to be in, that reads 'Global Local = The New Normal'. Photographed by first author at the Dam square in Amsterdam, 6 November 2022.

Local peculiarities should be preserved by 'looking at the specific functioning of society in a certain region, rather than applying one model to everything and everyone,' argued N (Female, 44). Members of the movement tend to envision a far more minimal role for (inter)national governments and big corporations when it comes to matters like healthcare, food supply and agriculture, journalism, education and the financial system (Figure 2).

As we have posed, the coping mechanism frame adequately addresses the fact that conspiracy belief cannot be seen as separate from the societal circumstances in which it appears. What may be clear, however, is that it does not emerge merely as a means of mitigating the insecurities posed by a complex, globalising world. Instead, it is a *critical reaction* to certain aspects or effects of modernisation and globalisation. Members of this movement question the desirability of these processes, and address the

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sense of disconnectedness or alienation that they worry these might produce. They share the sentiment that too many matters that impact their daily lives have been transferred to powerful and distant authorities. In response to this, they strive to regain ownership over various domains in their lives, and to obtain the freedom and autonomy to create communities and practices on a more local scale. In the following section, we will illustrate how they translate their critiques into practice in order to achieve this.

Conspiracy belief as intentional

The worldview of this movement does not only include the societal critiques which we have outlined thus far, but is often also paired with a critique of the 'masses' who are still 'sleeping': living their lives uncritically, and without questioning the systems that consume them. Juxtaposed to this is the attitude of many members of the movement who express favouring a turn towards more conscious lifestyles. Not seeing their values represented in today's society, they find and create other spaces to foster these values. In doing so they intentionally turn their critiques into practice, whether through protests, spreading and consuming information, altering their daily lives or founding new communities.

Protesting the establishment

Perhaps the movement's most explicit expression of its rejection of the system is its political mobilisation, reflected in many demonstrations against government policies and other societal developments. Organisation Virus Truth (*Viruswaarheid*) organised the first national anti-lockdown protest in the first months of the pandemic, and later focused on initiating legal procedures against the state. In 2021 Together for the Netherlands (*Samen voor Nederland*), a cooperation between multiple protest groups, started organising demonstrations, which it still does on a monthly basis – alternated by events like science summits and music festivals. To members of the movement, demonstrating is a way of showing discontent with the establishment, putting topics on the agenda nationally and eventually impacting national politics. As formulated by Together for the Netherlands (*Samen voor Nederland*) on its website:

> We highlight themes that are at play in society and make our voices heard, through a peaceful march, enriched by speakers and artists. It is our goal to create a societal debate on these themes, to generate media coverage and thereby influence politics.[12]

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The movement's critiques of the government are not only present on the street but also in parliament itself. Forum for Democracy (*Forum voor Democratie*), a party currently holding 5 seats in the Dutch Parliament, made a shift during the pandemic to politically representing the movement's worldview and anti-establishment attitudes for electoral gains. In the meantime, other parties emerged in anticipation of the parliamentary elections of November 2023, among them Together for the Netherlands (*Samen voor Nederland*).

Aside from protesting and political action, members of the movement have found another way to signal their stances also when not actively demonstrating. Through the use of symbols, their protest continues long after they have left the streets. Among these are the inverted Dutch flag, symbolising the state of emergency that the movement beliefs the country to be in, farmers' handkerchiefs, symbolising

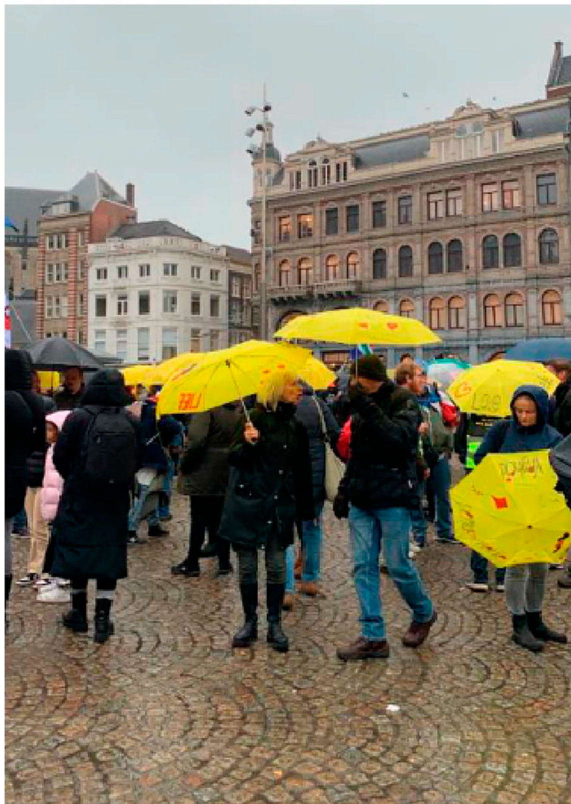

Figure 3. These yellow umbrellas, decorated with hearts and slogans like 'love', 'freedom', 'connection' and 'truth' have become a key symbol at protests. Photographed by first author at the Dam square in Amsterdam, 6 November 2022.

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solidarity with farmers in the Dutch nitrogen crisis, and yellow umbrellas decorated with slogans like 'truth', 'freedom', and 'love', which have become a key visual element of the movement's demonstrations. By displaying such symbols on their clothes, houses or cars, members of the movement reveal their involvement or solidarity with the movement, and express a form of micro-resistance against the system at all times (Figure 3).

Information networks

Another form of resistance can be found in the networks of consuming and sharing information. A key defining factor of the movement is its conspiratory worldview, which is sustained by a turn away from mainstream sources of information and media. P (Male, 66) explains his choice to found alternative news platform On the One Hand, on the Other Hand (*Enerzijds Anderzijds*) upon seeing a lack of diversity in thought among existing platforms:

> Most newspapers are in the hands of highly rich people, people who often operate in certain dubious groups, like The Open Society, and who also have big stakes in other industries and therefore have an interest in newspapers serving these interests. […] there are no newspapers left where I feel at home, no broadcasters, they have all become one big mush.

Distrusting the independence and integrity of mainstream reporting, many members of the movement choose to find their information elsewhere, among a flourishing network of alternative sources. Popular outlets are news- and interview website *Café Weltschmerz*, online TV and news platform *BLCKBX*, video podcast channel *The Trueman Show* and broadcaster Unheard Netherlands (*Ongehoord Nederland*), available on national television. Apart from the myriad of news websites, blogs and other online publications, the newspapers *The Other Newspaper* (*De Andere Krant*) and *Common Sense* (*Gezond Verstand*) can be read in print. Articles and insights from these alternative sources are shared widely on social media, both on mainstream and more alternative platforms. *Telegram* is a popular communication channel but entirely new social platforms have sprouted as well, of which The Parallel Society (*De Parallelle Samenleving*) might be best known. With the emergence of these *citizen journalism* platforms, P sees a return of diversity in the media landscape:

> These days, journalism is fortunately as diverse again as the national broadcasters once were. So if someone were to reproach 'citizen journalism' or 'free journalism' by saying 'all of it is different, this one party writes this but that

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> other party writes the opposite': that is what journalism is about. And that is freedom. If you want the uniform mush, you are free to look at that. But if you feel more at home looking at different views, you can do so now.

The choice to consult or even found alternative information networks is often an active choice based on the perceived uniformity of mainstream media reporting. Missing a degree of diversity of ideas and perspectives, members of the movement turn to spaces in which they do find the perspectives that resonate with their worldview.

Everyday changes

Next to protesting against the government and consuming alternative information, members of this movement put their ideas into practice in the more everyday facets of life as well, for example by trying to live 'more autonomously'. Not unlike the countercultural revolutionaries of the Sixties, they resist the encroaching powers of the capitalist system by making conscious decisions against the dependence on the government and big corporations, thoughtless consumerism and globalisation.

> I have come to look differently at my future. How am I going to shape it? Of course this changes when your vision of the world has changed. […] I myself would not want a mortgage anymore, for example. So I am thinking more about things like: where would I want to live in five or ten years? Can I find that in the Netherlands? Also when it comes to education. I would now do more research into a school for my kids than I would have before. Or the kind of food you eat. Where will you get your food from? Maybe you want to get it from a local farmer, to support that? (J, Male, 24)

> For example doing groceries: usually I would have thoughtlessly gone to Albert Heijn.[13] But then I thought: all the money is going to the big guys. You know what, I want to do things differently. […] I have the feeling that society is growing distant from itself, becoming more anonymous, you don't know anymore where your stuff and food comes from. It's not like I have become organic or vegan all of a sudden, but I have become more conscious. What am I actually doing? What kind of food do I eat? What kind of impact does that have on my body and mind? […] I ask myself what I am buying, not only thinking about what I eat but also about what that does for the person selling it. Because they have to live off of it too. How can I help them a bit? (N, Female, 44)

This consciousness does not only appear in consumption behaviour but in many areas of life (Figure 4). When it comes to health, members often advocate for the self-healing abilities of the human body or choose

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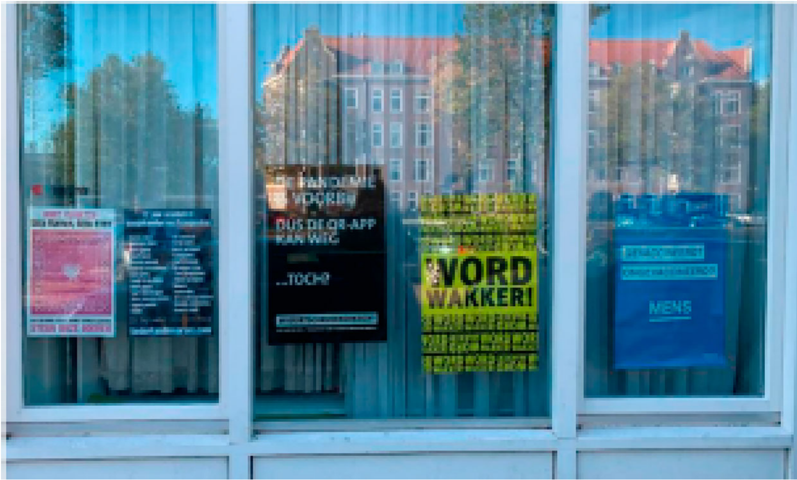

Figure 4. Another way of demonstrating affiliation with the movement is through posters: this window displays statements like 'Never forget: no farmers, no food!', 'Wake up!', 'Vaccinated? Unvaccinated? Human'. Photographed by first author on 19 October 2022.

alternative over regular healthcare. Others take being autonomous one step further and strive for a higher level of self-sufficiency, for example by keeping gardens to grow their own food. In the light of looming crises, some members invest in emergency facilities like generators and radio communication devices and stock up on non-perishables. Some strive for less dependency on debt-based currencies by investing in local currencies, like the *Florijn*. While these are all practices that can be part of a life embedded in society, some people choose to retreat from society altogether and form alternative communities. We will introduce some of these in the following section.

Through all these conscious acts, members of the movement simultaneously resist the system *and* turn towards alternative modes of giving meaning to their lives. Seen through this lens, the notion of conspiracy belief as a coping mechanism seems misguided. Members of this movement are not insecure, passive, and fearful subjects. Instead they know what they stand for and intentionally base their life decisions on those ideas.

Conspiracy belief as social

Both the psychologists who approach conspiracy belief as an *individual* coping mechanism and the cultural studies scholars who see it as a *cultural* coping mechanism fail to acknowledge that conspiracy belief is above all a

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social phenomenon – a dimension of conspiracy theories that has been discussed by various anthropologists (cf. Drazkiewicz, 2023b; Sobo, 2015; Stewart & Harding, 1999; Wepfer, 2021). Members' beliefs have consequences for the relations they uphold with others, both in the negative and positive way. In their activism, they sometimes estrange friends, family members and strangers who are not 'awakened' yet.

> I have opened a lot of people's eyes, I must say. [...] But I have also noticed that in some relationships – some were of course not too keen on this. I do have some friendships that have cooled down a bit now. (E, Female, 45)

Or they notice exclusion on a more general, societal level, due to the movement's conspiratorial worldview, and its concomitant stigmatisation.

> Groups are pushed together and then excluded from society. 'Ultra' and 'extreme', those are terms that clearly indicate that you are fringe, that you don't belong to the majority. Extremism, extreme right, terrorism, conspiracy thinkers; those are all lumped together, 'Putin lovers' belongs to the list as well these days. So then you are against the European Union, against health, against the climate, against good behavior. (W, Male, 45)

Regularly encountering misunderstanding and feeling ridiculed in interactions with others who do not share the same worldview, many members of the movement find comfort in interaction with those who can relate to it. And so new communities are formed. G (Male, 66) describes the contact he has with like-minded individuals at the Association of Free Journalists (*Vereniging van Vrije Journalisten)* of which he is a member:

> That [contact] is very warm. You come there and you feel safe, you feel seen, and people know what you are talking about. People know, for example, how sophisticated Hugo de Jonge[14] dealt with his vaccination story. They know all the ins and outs, no extra explanation is needed. [Usually] when you try to explain things, you are exhausted after the second sentence, 'do I really have to explain all of this? Why do you not believe me?' Well, all of that is not the case here, so you can start right ahead, you recognize each other. That is just very pleasant.

Meeting others, both online and physically at gatherings or protests, is a core element of the movement's activities. Members exchange experiences, find support, share information and create new ideas in spaces associated with the movement, which are built on this social dimension. Some of these spaces aim to establish new social systems separate from, and aiming to replace, the (social) functions of general Dutch society.

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An example of such a 'parallel society' is Free Friesland (*Frij Fryslân*), which describes its organisation as follows:

> In Frij Fryslân we know that a strong local economy is necessary for human beings and the environment. We do not transfer our sovereignty and decision-making power to governments or non-governmental institutions that have little connection to our country. Our residents take decisions jointly, transparently and honestly and hold those who execute the chosen direction accountable.[15]

Many such initiatives exist, usually on a local or regional scale. Organisations like the *Free Spirits Community* and *Society 4.0* support multiple initiatives by sharing practices and connecting members. The latter envisions regional or local autonomy in nine domains: democratic entrepreneurship, the economy, monetary policy, digital infrastructure, utilities, health care, living together, food production and education.[16] Though many such initiatives are still in their infancy, they demonstrate the intention to not only protest the establishment and resist the systems they criticise, but also actively translate these critiques into doing things differently *together* with likeminded people. The social role of these communities is also reflected in many of the values on which the movement places importance, which often include themes like 'love', 'connection' and 'harmony' and stress the importance of helping others. In an article in *The Other Newspaper* (*De Andere Krant*), the treasurer of the *Free Spirits Community* envisions the ideal community as follows:

> Like this, we can build a new planet earth together. A planet in which we base ourselves on love, harmony, freedom, nature, the talents and power in ourselves, in contact with each other. Where there is room to learn, to inspire each other and to create. A special place for everyone, young and old, where you can be yourself and you cooperate with attention from your head, heart and hands. Close and warm, and respecting freedom of choice.[17]

Not only is conspiracy belief created, navigated and reproduced through interactions between individual actors, but we have also seen its believers unite in a movement with social and political objectives. A set of shared critiques and values binds the members of this movement, who solidify this connection through many different organisations, associations, initiatives and communities. Stigmatisation from outside actors and a sense of like-mindedness within the movement further solidify the social ties within it. Whether in the digital or physical world and from the interpersonal to the local, national and transnational level, social interactions give shape to this movement. In its suggestion of conspiracy

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believers as a monolithic group of individuals, the coping mechanism frame fails to address the scope, complexity and significance of the social dimension of conspiracy belief.

Conclusion

In this paper we respond to the dominant frame in the social sciences that regards conspiracy beliefs as a coping mechanism to deal with the complex realities of today's globalising world. This frame suggests the image of insecure individuals unable to handle the fast-paced changes of modern societies who therefore passively succumb to the comfort provided by conspiracy narratives that simplify reality (Douglas et al., 2019). Approaching the Dutch manifestation of conspiracy belief since the pandemic as a social movement, we argue that the coping mechanism frame does not match the views, practices and communities that we encountered. To the contrary: our ethnographic research demonstrates that in this movement, conspiracy belief goes hand in hand with social critiques, intentional actions and dynamic communities.

This movement believes that our societies are driven by disastrous capitalist forces while being run by distant, immoral and corrupt elites. Some may say that although such beliefs may have kernels of truth, but that their conspiratorial conclusions are an oversimplification at best, and dangerous at worst (e.g. Birchall & Knight, 2022; Douglas, 2021; Sturm & Albrecht, 2020). However, the truth-value of their beliefs is not what is our point here. Instead, our argument highlights the generative potential of this movement instead. *Responding to* rather than *coping with* a globalising modern world, members of the movement strive for a higher degree of autonomy over their lives in a time in which impactful decisions are increasingly made on a supranational, if not global, stage. They unite in what Eriksen (2014) calls an *alterglobalization movement*, which strives to 'strengthen local autonomy and political accountability in the face of powerful governments or corporations' and critiques 'the greed and undeserved wealth of a few superrich persons' and 'deep global inequalities' (p. 176). Whereas such movements are not per se opposed to a degree of global interconnectedness, they advocate for a 'more equitable, democratic, and decentralized' form of globalisation (p. 173). Approaching the Dutch movement of conspiracy believers as an alterglobalization movement demonstrates the possibility of studying conspiracy belief as a response to globalisation *without* resorting to the coping mechanism frame.

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The movement does not stop at criticising societal developments, but translates its critiques into intentional action. Whether through protesting the authorities, reading different newspapers or shopping locally, members simultaneously resist the systems of which they are critical *and* ensure to create alternative systems of meaning that uphold their values. McGranahan (2016) characterises such practices as acts of *refusal*, which goes beyond mere resistance and carries a deeper and more positive meaning: it can be 'generative and strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another' (p. 319). Whereas the coping mechanism frame suggests that conspiracy belief helps individuals *navigate and survive* the system, we have shown that members of the movement actively and intentionally *resist and alter* it.

McGranahan characterises refusal as generative, critical, hopeful and *social*. The coping mechanism frame tends to focus on individuals or broad cultural developments, and therefore overlooks the dynamic social dimension of conspiracy belief. We have illustrated how social interactions are at the heart of the critiques and practices of this movement. Its members are united by a shared worldview and by the stigmatisation they often face in society, and their connection is solidified by a broad network of related organisations, associations, initiatives and communities with a social and political agenda. Our critique of the coping mechanism frame is first and foremost enabled by our recognition of the social nature of conspiracy belief. Studying this group of conspiracy believers as a social movement (cf. Bertuzzi, 2021) allows us to focus on their critiques and practices without getting too distracted by the conspiratorial dimension of the worldview to which they adhere. We have adopted an agnostic stance towards this worldview: we have not intended to make any claims with regards to its truth value and the desirability of its presence in society. This paper does not aim to deny nor confirm existing critiques of conspiracy worldviews, and their potentially detrimental societal and personal consequences, as have been elaborately discussed by scholars (Butter & Knight, 2020; Douglas et al., 2019; Jolley et al., 2022). Our focus in this paper, instead, merely lies with the self-perceptions and emic experiences of these people as members of a social movement.

This focus contributes to the study of conspiracy culture in several ways. First, it moves away from the prevalent pathology frame which focuses on the falsity and dangers of their convictions, while obscuring a broader understanding of their worldview and the concrete ideals and goals these people have. Second, it emphasises how conspiracy

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beliefs are not just a cognitive matter, but they are inherently social: formed and given shape in interactions with others. As such, we have aimed to highlight the social and collective aspects of conspiracy beliefs. With this paper, we do not intend to argue that conspiracy theories never serve as a coping mechanism, nor that *all* conspiracy belief is associated with critical, intentional and social behaviour. Rather, our argument here is that *any* frame that sees conspiracy believers as a monolithic flock can only fail to do justice to the complex realities of movements like the one we have discussed here. Whether such movements are a danger to democracies or not, we hope to have shown the need to study these people and their beliefs in their societal contexts.

Notes

1. Note that the term 'conspiracy theorist' is inherently problematic, due to its negative connotation and the power structures that are inevitably involved in the process of labeling some theories as conspiracy theories (e.g. Bratich, 2008; Harambam, 2020a; Pelkmans & Machold, 2011). We are aware of this, but have chosen to adopt this term nonetheless due to a lack of neutral alternatives.
2. Years of excessive nitrogen depositions in the Netherlands have produced a crisis in which the agricultural, industrial, transport or construction sectors will have to commit to measures in order to reduce nitrogen emissions. Especially the farming sector has protested loudly against government plans to reduce agricultural nitrogen pollution.
3. We refer to culture in a broad sense of the word that also encompasses social and political convictions.
4. A recent political scandal: between 2013 and 2019, an estimated 26,000 parents were falsely accused of making fraudulent claims to childcare benefits and subsequently forced to pay back all benefits they had received, which had and still has disastrous consequences for many families.
5. The people living in this northern province of the Netherlands have suffered earthquakes due to years of gas extractions in the area, for the inadequate handling of which the government has been widely criticised – both in mainstream and alternative scenes.
6. https://gab.com/deparallellesamenleving
7. A small group of protestors gathers at the Museum square in Amsterdam every Sunday for an informal session of 'drinking coffee' together, a tradition born during the pandemic when protesting was formally not allowed.
8. A Dutch saying that translates to 'just act normal, then you act strange enough already' and tends to be used to characterise a(n imagined) Dutch, sober identity.
9. Mark Rutte was Prime Minister of the Netherlands since 2010 and announced his departure in 2023.
10. https://wakkermens.info/onze-motivatie/

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11. https://www.deparallellesamenleving.nl/
12. https://samenvoornederland.nu/
13. One of the major Dutch supermarkets.
14. Hugo de Jonge was the Dutch Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport during the COVID pandemic.
15. https://frij.frl/nl/visie
16. https://society4th.org/
17. https://deanderekrant.nl/nieuws/met-free-spirits-community-bouwen-aan-een-nieuwe-aarde-2022-06-02

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