

FEAR AND “THE GREAT RESET”:

**ANALYSIS OF THE WORLD
ECONOMIC FORUM’S POST-
COVID AGENDA VIDEOS AND THE
ADVERSE REACTIONS TO THEM**

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Abstract

This article compares the ideological positions found in the visions of the future proposed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in "The Great Reset" campaign and in the internet users' reaction to it. In this YouTube campaign, the WEF presents what it understands the "new normal" should be –understood as the new social, economic, and political relations after the COVID-19 pandemic. The YouTube users' comments reject the agenda and express different grounds for such an attitude. This study identifies the main ideas and ideologies within the comments and in the presentation of the WEF's campaign using the psychoanalytical political theory. The results reveal that the agenda and reactions to it are motivated by the exacerbated state of inequality and suffering caused by the current pandemic. While "The Great Reset" attempts to save capitalism by integrating human values, the comments contain populist and conspiratorial ideas. Although they rely on different epistemological grounds, the analysis reveals that both share a common understanding of a society that separates the populace against the ruling elites, who have become wealthier during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, The Great Reset, ideology, WEF, YouTube.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis with profound social, economic, and political consequences. The crisis weakened the already fragile legitimization of the current political system that relies on market-oriented policies, loans, and grants with attached reform conditions, which might cause the proliferation of political options that will channel existing frustrations (Condon, 2021). Some studies reveal that pandemics cause social insecurity and economic inequality, leading to social unrest and violence several years after the disease's mitigation (e.g., Barrett & Chen, 2021; Sedik & Xu, 2020). In the case of COVID-19, recent reports point to a possible upsurge of global unrest (Hribernik & Campbell, 2020; McVeigh, 2020). Moreover, pandemics can cost about \$11 trillion in response and \$10 trillion in lost earnings (Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, 2019). To prepare for the shock, the World Economic Forum (WEF) launched the initiative "The Great Reset" in May 2020, a campaign in which the organization conveys its visions of a rebuilt economy and society after the COVID-19 pandemic (World Economic Forum, 2020a). A new form of capitalism with human values that benefits shareholders and stakeholders –that is, all social groups and political actors (Schwab & Vanham, 2021) - should emerge from this crisis, they say (World Economic Forum, 2020a). This study compares WEF's ideas with YouTube users' negative reactions to them. Ultimately, it shows commonalities in these seemingly clashing groups and illuminates how platforms disseminate populist and conspiratorial messages without a coherent narrative connecting them.

The WEF is a for-profit foundation (Sharma & Soederberg, 2020, p. 835) that organizes an annual invitation-only conference in Davos, Switzerland. The conference features high-profile figures from business, with the participation of political figures and activists. The WEF is considered one of the world's most powerful agenda-setters (Schiølin, 2020, p. 544), whose global governance project has been denominated as *multistakeholderism*. The concept builds upon

multilateralism, a form of global governance that followed the end of the Second World War and that includes representatives of all governments who take decisions together within international organizations with global impact (Buxton, 2019, pp. 2–3; Gleckman, 2018). The multistakeholder governance model emerged after becoming apparent that multilateral bodies cannot address significant global issues or integrate all perspectives and interests (Buxton, 2019, p. 5). The gradual transition from multilateralism to multistakeholderism meant that the democratic mandate disappears from global governance as businesses intensify their influence in decision-making processes and replace democratically elected representatives (Buxton, 2019, p. 5).

The WEF activities have been the most prominent in moments when globalization and international capitalism lose legitimacy, as in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 (Kanchan, 2021). The pandemic is another such instance since it exposes the current economic model's inability to take care of all citizens' wellbeing. In that context appears "The Great Reset," an initiative that promises to reinvigorate trust in globalized capitalism by transforming it. However, there is skepticism about the WEF's intentions to create a radical change since it frames the crisis as a business opportunity that can be resolved in market terms (Kanchan, 2021). Besides, nothing significant changed in the current capitalist system after it failed during the financial crisis of 2008 (Davies, 2020). As the WEF explains, under the conditions of prolonged social distancing, the digital revolution will accelerate, and society will face a series of risks that go beyond health threats (Schwab & Malleret, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020b, 2020c). The WEF places its predictions in the context of increasing inequalities that can potentially endanger the functioning of global commercial and political relations (Schwab & Malleret, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020b, 2020c).

The initiative has received significant public attention, and the WEF promoted it on their YouTube channel. Two videos that discuss the agenda in broad terms have generated 151.057



Fig. 1 Film Still *The Great Reset*, World Economic Forum, 2020. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfVdMWzKwjc>

and 851.139 views by YouTube users and have a significant negative ratio of votes (1.099 "thumbs up" to 4.896 "thumbs down" in the case of the first video, and 4.247 upvotes to 24.793 downvotes in the second video).

The strong popular reaction is also evident in the number of generated comments below the YouTube video, totaling 5.300. Most comments reject the idea of "The Great Reset," and some of them express the fear of a grand New World Order conspiracy. This study aims to interpret the ideological positions of these narratives, including the official ones presented by the WEF and those present in the YouTube comments. The assumption is that adverse reactions to the WEF's agenda reflect different ideological backgrounds. Therefore, the goal is not to *a priori* treat the critique as irrational paranoia but to understand nuances between genuine concerns triggered by the new form of global governance advocated by the WEF and conspiracy beliefs.

There is a difference between critiquing something and coining a conspiracy. The activities and agendas of the Davos foundation have been previously problematized by many

academics (e.g., Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Gleckman, 2018; Morgan, 2019; Roth, 2020; Schiølin, 2020; Sharma & Soederberg, 2020; Trauth-Goik, 2021; Žižek, 2020), journalists, activists, and other public figures (e.g., Buxton, 2019; Sogge, 2014; George, 2015, Chapter 5, 2012). For instance, author Naomi Klein, while rejecting "The Great Reset conspiracy smoothie," explains that the Davos agenda is a "technofix" that "encompasses some good stuff that won't happen and some bad stuff that certainly will," already present in the discourses of billionaire philanthropists (Klein, 2020).

Besides differentiating between critique and unsubstantiated belief in YouTube comments, this article also offers an insight into people's imaginations of a future after COVID-19, as the WEF agenda will not be subjected to popular scrutiny or opened to participation.

"The Great Reset" and world domination conspiracies

Aside from being discussed on YouTube, the WEF's campaign took on a new life on sharing and networking platforms as a

conspiracy theory (Alba, 2020). The theory claimed that a cabal of world leaders orchestrated the pandemic to control the global economy (Goodman & Carmichael, 2020). "It started trending on Twitter, when a video of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a UN meeting, saying the pandemic provided an opportunity for a 'reset,' went viral" (Goodman & Carmichael, 2020). A petition in Canada to stop it gained thousands of signatures (Poilievre, 2020), and members of the Canadian right-wing opposition warned against the elitist power grab (Wherry, 2020). The phrase "The Great Reset" trended on Twitter and Google in November 2020, with most posts coming from well-known far-right accounts (Alba, 2020).

In the US, the reactions to "The Great Reset" were also largely one-sided, reflecting a highly polarized society along party lines (Newport, 2019). The WEF agenda was associated with Joe Biden's slogan, then the Democratic Party's candidate, "Build Back Better" (Anti-Defamation League, 2020). Meanwhile, former US President Donald Trump was seen as the only leader keeping the conspiracy under control (Alba, 2020). Several hosts on the right-wing news channel *Fox News* have reported critically on "The Great Reset," including Tucker Carlson (2020), Laura Ingraham (2020), and Lou Dobbs (2020). It was also discussed on alternative digital right-wing media by commentators such as Ben Shapiro (2020) and Glenn Beck (2020). The belief of a grand conspiracy in "The Great Reset" agenda also had an anti-Semitic version that frames the WEF's intentions within a Jewish domination plot (Anti-Defamation League, 2020).

The misinterpretations of "The Great Reset" could be placed in the tradition of earlier conspiracy theories, including the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," a fabricated antisemitic text claiming to reveal a Jewish plan for global supremacy. The hoax, which was shown to be plagiarized from previous sources, was first published in Russia in 1903, translated into other languages, and disseminated internationally in the 20th century (Bronner, 2000, p. 1).

Similarly, the New World Order (NWO) conspiracies conjecture a secretly totalitarian world government. Apart from the belief in Elders of Zion, there were fears regarding the Bavarian Freemasons and Illuminati (Barkun, 2013, Chapter 3), occupying a significant portion of conspiratorial beliefs in Western cultures. In those narratives, influential historical and contemporary figures have been alleged to be part of a cabal that operates through front entities to choreograph political, social, and financial events, ranging from causing systemic crises to pushing through controversial policies, at both national and international levels, as steps in an ongoing plot to achieve world domination.

During the 20th century, there was a change of focus. The threat was no longer coming from the outside but within the state itself (Byford, 2011, pp. 57-58; Harambam, 2020, p. 86). This tendency is most evident in the theories related to the CIA's activities in the US (Knight, 2000) and in popular beliefs that the state colluded with al-Qaeda and oil companies to orchestrate the September 11 terrorist attacks (Knight, 2008).

Some of the imaginaries of "The Great Reset" represent the agenda in a similar light. However, it is necessary to interpret those narratives in the context of the intensified digital communications, significant economic and social life disruptions caused by the pandemic, globalized economic relations, and increasing wealth inequality.

Defining conspiracy theories

What counts as a conspiratorial belief when analyzing reactions to "The Great Reset"? The conspiracy theory concept remains a heavily charged term that can be employed to exclude opposing opinions from the debate (Husting & Orr, 2007). A solution can be found in two definitions provided by David Coady. First, "an explanation is conspiratorial if it postulates a group of agents working together in secret, often, though perhaps not always, for a sinister purpose" (Coady, 2006, p.

3). The stress here is *secrecy*. However, WEF has been transparent about its economic and political transformation agenda. On top of that, multistakeholderism requires a group of agents working together; Davos's foundation openly calls for collaboration between billionaires, philanthropists, selected political leaders, academics, and civil sector representatives.

Second, conspiratorial explanations are contrary to declared authorities' epistemic, political, and journalistic statements (Coady, 2006, p. 3). Investigative journalists often contradict official versions of events, claiming opaque vested interests, even sinister plots, are behind them. Conspirations do exist. One example is "The Panama Papers" 2016 investigation, which revealed a vast network hidden by secretive offshore companies, enabling international crime, corruption, and wrongdoing (The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2016). In 2013, Edward Snowden revealed a secret public-private collaboration between the US government and Verizon, handing over telephone data from millions of US customers (Greenwald, 2013).

This second explanation –a conspiracy theory as a counter-narrative– is adequate to look at the YouTube comments triggered by "The Great Reset." YouTube counter-narratives are considered here conspiracy theories if they a) assign hidden intentions that the WEF has not explicitly or implicitly stated and b) suggest an invisible power structure behind the apparent one. Additionally, other conspiratorial theories attributed to the WEF include ideas that are not found in criticism published by journalists, scholars, civil sector representatives, or other authority figures on the issues of global governance, politics, and social justice.

Methodological note

This study employs content analysis as a primary method. That includes the systematic process of analyzing texts interpreted within their contexts (Bruhn Jensen, 2002, pp. 21-22). The content analysis identifies words, themes, and concepts within the text to examine their presence, meanings, and relationships. Researchers can then make inferences about the ideas within the texts, sources, publications, and even the text's culture and period.

The research question is: "What are the ideological differences between the post-pandemic future envisioned by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in their campaign "The Great Reset" and the negative reactions to it on YouTube?"

We study a) "The Great Reset" YouTube videos, b) the short publication written by Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret (2020), and c) the 5.292 comments posted below the YouTube videos. The selected videos fulfill the following criteria: They a) are related to the COVID-19 pandemic and are part of "The Great Reset" campaign; b) were uploaded on the WEF YouTube channel after January 2020, when the pandemic started to spread globally; c) are longer than 10 minutes; d) gathered at least 10.000 views on YouTube; e) are in English, and f) have triggered more than 100 comments. Two videos were selected (see Figure 2).

Meanwhile, out of the 5.292 comments, those eligible for in-depth analysis fulfill the following criteria: a) they are in English, and b) contain at least one sentence. The content was analyzed by mixing top-down coding (using keywords to

Table 1 List of Selected Videos

Date	Title	URL
03/06/2020	The Great Reset Launch session	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfVdMWzKwjc
14/07/2020	COVID-19: The Great Reset	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHRkkeecg7c

preselect YouTube comments) with a bottom-up approach (the WEF content was analyzed without the predetermined coding). The following keywords were used to filter out the comments: "power," "money," "economy," "rich," "wealth," "poor," "evil," "elite," "global," "control," "freedom," "government," "politician," "politics," "humanity," "future," "social," and "change." There are 1.123 comments that fulfill the criteria and are eligible for the analysis.

After the first coding exercise, the comments and their respective codes were grouped into more significant interpretative categories by common themes. These themes are: "people vs. elites," "demands and ideologies," and "conspiracy theories." Finally, these interpretative categories were used to structure the results in three subgroups and connected to the theory in the discussion section.

To interpret the ideas in the videos and comments, we rely on the psychoanalytic theory of scholars known as the 'Lacanian Left,' who theorize social and political phenomena in the tradition of Jacques Lacan (Homer, 2020). Like the individual in Lacan's theory, society exhibits a divide at its core, an antagonism that cannot be bridged or overcome since it is inherent to the social structure (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 125). This antagonism prevents society from functioning as a total and unified entity. The cause of this is *the Real*, the traumatic kernel of our social existence that only appears in glimpses as a distortion of the accurate representation of reality and cannot be symbolized (Stavrakakis, 2002, p. 65; Žižek, 1994, p. 26). A large crisis caused by the reappearance of the Real increases doubts in the official symbolic authority (e.g., the market, God, the Communist Party), showing the deficiencies of the *reality principle*, which "constitutes the highest form of ideology" as it displays itself as an "empirical fact" to be perceived as non-ideological (Zupančič, 2003, p. 77).

People need fantasies in a narrative form to restore their belief in the symbolic authority and the reality itself, which has been upset by the systemic crisis (Stavrakakis, 2002, pp.

45-48; Žižek, 1997). Therefore, this research understands ideology as one such fantasy-construction representing reality as structured and coherent and provides an illusion that can obfuscate the Real, the traumatic kernel that appears in glimpses (Žižek, 2008, p. 45). Some of the discursive mechanisms that the ideology applies are disregarding historical causation, framing critical events as contingent occurrences, or insisting upon individual responsibility (Žižek, 1994). By establishing the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic (e.g., inequalities, fragile supply chains, inappropriate housing, the unpreparedness of health systems) as the collective trauma (the Real), we can understand all textual units chosen for the analysis as fantasmic constructions that intent to eliminate and hide the deficiencies of the current system and reinvigorate the belief in the symbolic authority.

The psychoanalytical political theory establishes a connection between the symbolic and imaginary order and the Real, allowing us to interpret the textual units by relating them to the material circumstances of our collective existence. Consequently, this approach allows us to use the health and economic crisis as the primary element in interpreting discourses related to our political futures.

Analysis

Analysis of "The Great Reset"

Humanity needs a "Great Reset" to reconstruct society after the pandemic, claims WEF. However, what does it entail? An analysis of the words included in the official WEF's document reveals that its promoters focus more on the economy and the private sector than on other parts of collective life. That is notable in some of the most dominant concepts in the WEF's official publication: "economy" (appearing 363 times in different variations of the word), "company" (113), "industry" (104), "technology" (100), "business" (86), "growth" (75), and the "digital" (58). Far lesser space was given to "poverty" (34), "education" (31), and "healthcare" (21). Noteworthy was the almost absence of concepts such as "equality" (6), "redistribution" (4),



Fig. 2 Word Cloud Showing the Main Topics in *The Great Reset*. Size indicates prominence. Elaborated by the authors.

and “justice” (3). The figures indicate the number of times a concept, which includes variations of a particular word (e.g., “economy” also includes “economic” and “economies”). Figure 2 contains the word cloud of most often repeated words in the WEF’s publication.

While the economic lens directs the ideas of the WEF, they see the government as an essential player in the future economy, regulating businesses but leaving space for innovation and development. Next, the main ideas are grouped from the point of view of the explanations provided and the future foretold.

Normative, depoliticized, and decontextualized explanations

The language used to present the agenda seems normative, often employing forthright prescriptions and predictions. At specific points, speakers go from using *might* and *should* to *will* and *would* to talk about the post-pandemic future. Some of the changes that “The Great Reset” suggests are imminent, and their rollout represents the natural process. In several

instances, the Davos representatives suggest that changes during the pandemic *will* remain after the danger is over, including the integration of the digital in areas such as social communication, education, and economy, what some authors call the datafication of life (van Dijck, 2014) and the platformization of content and services (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

The projections and explanations offered by the WEF are largely depoliticized. While the speakers in the videos explain that the governments *will* regulate business, strengthen or transition to public healthcare, and provide a stronger safety net to its citizens due to the pandemic, they do not elaborate on the political will needed to generate such outcomes. The following paragraph from the WEF’s publication on “The Great Reset” contains many of such predictions:

In general, there will be more regulation covering many different issues, such as workers’ safety or domestic sourcing for certain goods. Businesses will also

be held to account on social and environmental fractures for which they will be expected to be part of the solution. As an add-on, governments will strongly encourage public-private partnerships so that private companies get more involved in the mitigation of global risks (Schwab & Malleret, 2020, p. 94).

These explanations do not account for the current political struggle and complex relationship between states and corporations that enjoy the benefits of global capital flows and data gathering and analysis capacities. The speakers only suggest that "governments will most likely" decide to pursue these efforts without addressing ideological elements that underpin the struggle for universal healthcare, workers' rights, or mitigation of environmental risks. For them, the pandemic is a serious enough wake-up call that will motivate governments to curb the unrestrained power of transnational corporations and financial interests. However, this depoliticized approach has limitations. For instance, the pursuit of profit is already negatively affecting global vaccine distribution (Pieper, 2021). Meanwhile, there is still no political will within both largest political parties in the US to transition to a fully public healthcare system (Perez & Rock, 2021).

Similarly, the critical questions related to the structure of the political economy are designated as *global risks*. Pandemics and ecological disasters are presented as natural circumstances that affect population groups (i.e., in vulnerable countries) and need expert responses globally. They evolve and escalate very fast to reach a sudden tipping point and are difficult to measure. The concept of global risks does not consider the role of the political economy in creating both the health crisis (Wallace, 2016) and the ecological crisis (Foster et al., 2010; Heynen, 2007; Malm, 2015) when addressing both causes and responses. For example, the origin of the global pandemic has been connected to anthropogenic - thus, not *natural* - biodiversity loss caused by corporations and governments promoting environmental destruction (Ahmed, 2020).

Rather than a political project, the agenda suggests that the citizens' outrage over the consequences of the pandemic will move society to a more social model. The authors of the agenda explain that

It could be that enough people are sufficiently outraged by the glaring injustice of the preferential treatment enjoyed exclusively by the rich that it provokes a broad societal backlash. In the US, a majority or a very vocal minority may demand national or community control over healthcare, while, in Europe, underfunding of the health system will no longer be politically acceptable (Schwab & Malleret, 2020, pp. 82-83).

By imagining a large social change without political causation, WEF avoids attributing to citizens the power to reshape social life through a project of emancipation and instead frame citizens as "unsatisfied consumers," who can use their dissatisfaction to make demands from the state.

A Technically Determined Future

As seen earlier, the visions of the future in "The Great Reset" are dominated by the private sector. Besides, the agenda places various socio-technical imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015) at the forefront of the social, political, and cultural resets. Such imaginaries are "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology" (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4). Technological determinism in the agenda is present in the claims by various speakers that it is *natural* that Big Tech emerged as a winner from the pandemic and dominates the future economy. Rather than presenting such a turn as something that is the direct consequence of particular interests, socio-economic trends, and political decisions (e.g., Pfeiffer, 2017), the WEF agenda frames the technological turn as an independent development. Such a framing of both

the pandemic and the economic winners can be observed in the following statement:

During confinement, we depended entirely on the Net for most things: from work and education to socialization. It is the online services that allowed us to keep a semblance of normalcy, and it is only natural that "online" should be the largest beneficiary of the pandemic, giving a tremendous boost to technologies and processes that enable us to do things remotely: universal broadband internet, mobile and remote payments, and workable e-government services, among others. As a direct consequence, businesses that were already operating online are bound to benefit from a lasting competitive advantage. As more and diverse things and services are brought to us via our mobiles and computers, companies in sectors as disparate as e-commerce, contactless operations, digital content, robots, and drone deliveries (to name just a few) will thrive. It is not by accident that firms like Alibaba, Amazon, Netflix, or Zoom emerged as "winners" from the lockdowns (Schwab & Malleret, 2020, p. 176).

The agenda frames the increasing power and influence of the so-called Big Tech in the economy and social life as something that comes organically and will determine future socio-economic relations. The WEF's discourse about the future builds upon their previous statements regarding the 4th Industrial Revolution (Schjølin, 2020; Trauth-Goik, 2021), representing a fusion of technologies currently blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres (Trauth-Goik, 2021, p. 56). Furthermore, the authors of the agenda suggest that the recession induced by the pandemic will increase the replacement of human labor by robot labor, which will, in turn, provoke lasting and structural changes in the labor market.

As massive *dataveillance* (van Dijck, 2014) intensifies, people will be affected at a personal level. These authors say that "for better or worse," intense surveillance will become part of

workplaces by applying thermal cameras and digital bracelets to monitor activity. The pandemic's effects on our social, private, work, and economic activities will outlive the crisis; these speakers compare them with security measures that followed the attacks on September 11, which have not been revoked. For them, the accelerated developments in technology are both positive (an opportunity for advancement of efforts to overcome limits of human cognitive and physical agency) and negative (a challenge for whole economies that may lag behind).

WEF's discourse frames citizens as passive subjects that can either adjust to the new techno-economic conditions or suffer the consequences. Those warnings concern small businesses (e.g., restaurants that must compete with large chains that are better prepared for digital commerce), individuals who must now invest in resilience and update their skills for future jobs, and states that should facilitate this process. The authors warn that there is no turning back and that those who "adapt with agility and imagination will eventually turn the COVID-19 crisis to their advantage" (Schwab & Malleret, 2020, p. 210). This discourse has been identified as siding with "violent models of development," that is, models that allow people to either adapt or be crushed (Schjølin, 2020, p. 550). Consequently, the new Davos agenda undermines the collective potential to imagine, direct, and create alternative forms of social life or eventually decide on the desirability of such a digital future. The techno-social model they envision is deterministically framed as a historical fact beyond anyone's agency.

Analysis of the comments

The analysis is grouped by the three different interpretative categories based on recurring themes among comments and codes.

People vs. Elites

The most common theme in the comments is a discursively created divide between *us*, the multitudinous people, and the

elites. The *people*, in this case, is an interpretative category that encompasses several meanings. One meaning is the strength of volume (“we are *millions/billions*”); that is, the idea that the critics represent 99% of the world’s population (versus the 1%). Table 2 shows some of the users’ comments highlighting the power of the populace in front of the privileged few.

Furthermore, users see the YouTube comment section as a space where this force materializes, claiming that other comments sharing similar ideas give them hope. Along the same lines, comments often call for a violent uprising of the masses against the elites. Such sentiment is something that the authors of “The Great Reset” seem to acknowledge, as they pointed out in several instances that decreased material conditions exacerbated by the pandemic may cause uprisings.

The elites are framed in the comments as wealthy individuals who are power-hungry and have goals that exceed wealth accumulation. While some commentators fear that the elites

want to establish a particular form of social or personal control over citizens, the majority fails to establish a clear vision of what the elites want to do with this control. Although some of the comments assign hidden intentions to the elites in the form of a conspiracy, those comments are in the minority (out of 148 comments that present the elites as the enemy, only seven contain elements of conspiratorial belief). It is, therefore, not possible to draw a complete parallel between the populist construction of the people vs. elites divide and the conspiratorial visions of “The Great Reset.”

The comments repeatedly point out that the elites who have created social problems (e.g., wealth inequality, destruction of the environment) are now trying to fix them at the expense of the ordinary person, that they have no democratic mandate (“who elected these people?”), and that they are moving towards some form of economic enslavement of citizens, a sort of neo-feudalism. While these comments offer some political critique, they miss the opportunity to express any ideological

Table 2 *YouTube Comments that Point to the Greatness and Power of the People.*

<p>User: The Great Experiment</p> <p>Reading these comments gives me some hope that we may have a chance if we stop playing the game by the rules they create. Step 1 - we have a common goal, to prevent the transformation to global technocracy. They have power simply because we allow it by our ignorance and or indifference. At the moment we are being played off against each other e.g BLM and for as long as we allow this to continue they will retain power. When we aren't fighting/hating each other we are watching trash on TV. We are the population. We are the people and we have the overwhelming advantage that comes with being over 7bn strong.</p> <p>Our advantage and our power will activate and overwhelm anything in our way if and when we choose to unite as a collective mass of humanity and take action together.</p> <p>User: Killer Ice Lollies</p> <p>The 99% will hunt you down, that will be the great reset... Enjoy your money whilst you can</p> <p>User: Bart Weijs</p> <p>I vote we start building guillotines, and start using them on the central bankers. There was a time when the “elite” decided everything for the people, and that ended with the french revolution.</p> <p>User: Josette Degrotte</p> <p>We are at war, a 1% war against the people, the great reset. A war supported by all the elites and the governments and the media. This basically means that a very small elite thinks they are god decides what is good for the people or not, and imposes a green dictatorship on the people, poverty for the people, but they will keep all their privileges and will always be richer of course ... the corona is only a fabrication of 1%, a shock strategy, to impose freedom-killing measures and manage to impose this great reset of 1%.</p>
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understanding of power relations in today's globalized capitalism. Instead, they point to the moral corruption of wealthy individuals (who are "greedy," "evil," "arrogant," "power-hungry," "cynical," "hypocritical," and "sinister") or accuse them of having some medical condition ("psychopathology," "sociopathology," "narcissism," or "addiction"). Evil intentions are often assigned to Klaus Schwab, whose prominent German accent is associated with National-Socialism, and whose appearance (see Figure 3) is compared to a James Bond villain and Dr. Evil (a character from the Austin Powers movie series). Some examples of such a discursive construction of the "elites" can be seen in Table 3.

"The Great Reset" as a floating signifier of ideology

The YouTube commentators reject the WEF agenda on many different grounds that sometimes are mutually exclusive.

Different commentators interpret the idea of the reset as a potential turn to fascism, socialism/communism, feudalism, globalism, totalitarianism, rampant capitalism, and global technocracy. A large portion of the comments discursively displaces the central ideology of the WEF - they present the wealthy members of the Davos foundation as the enemies of the free-market capitalism or as its corrupted elements. For example, some commentators say the WEF wants to abolish private property, establish big governments, and give money away, avoiding the fact that they and the WEF may be defending the same system. The concentration of ownership inherent to the neoliberal economic order is thus discursively displaced and portrayed as an external factor or a remainder of left-wing totalitarian regimes.

Along the same lines, comments identify the globalization process as the enemy and see the return to the nation-state

Table 3 *YouTube Comments that Frame Elites as Adversaries of the People.*

<p>User: L O</p> <p>The Great Reset indeed. I've read that people can buy their way into this organisation (some 600K plus per year): The wealthiest among us dictating the future of humanity.</p> <p>User: spikeleo1</p> <p>All the phycopathic billionaires could end world hunger in a instant but choose not to they don't want to help they would rather talk about a great reset where no one owns anything but themselves which won't help humanity just hinder it instead and ultimately will enslave us in the end how unbelievably selfish of them they should be ashamed of themselves.</p> <p>User: Bruce Bassman</p> <p>Yes yeslets have the fukers who created this mess lead the way out? What the fuk do any of these globalist know about real life any-way</p> <p>User: jerry</p> <p>you are creating social unrest. You are pure EVIL. KLAUS is Doctor Evil Incarnate.</p> <p>User: Clary Jaxon</p> <p>The CEO of Mastercard, reaping profits from fees & interest rates by people deep in debt, is suggesting ways to create a sustainable economy?</p> <p>User: fly by</p> <p>You enslave the people! Just because you are so greedy and still want more! Billions are not enough for you - the suffering will only stop when YOU stop your GREED! It's probably similar to drug addiction, ONLY ALL people suffer from it - mostly the poor!!! An addict always harms others..."</p> <p>"No one is more hopelessly enslaved than those who mistakenly believe they are free." - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe</p>



Fig. 3 Film Still of Klaus Schwab Speaking in One of the Videos *The Great Reset*, World Economic Forum, 2020. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfVdMWzKwjc>

capitalism as the solution (e.g., moving production home and eliminating global financial transactions). This interpretative category sides with positive portrayals of former US President Donald Trump and negative accounts of current US president Joe Biden. Economic protectionism and nationalism were prevailing narratives in Trump’s discourse, especially during his first presidential campaign (Elliott, 2018).

While the comments paint the WEF members as the incarnation of various ideologies, they have in common the idea that they are part of the problem. Only five out of all analyzed comments expressed a positive view of the agenda and the WEF. Some of them propose a proto-political solution. However, those proposals lack any articulation that could be interpreted as a coherent political project.

Table 4 YouTube Comments that Defend Capitalism from External Enemies.

<p>User: Veva de Southgate</p> <p>We don't want your new normal we want our normal human social contact we want sovereign countries and no your rotten globalists communist projects</p> <p>User: WillowTree 247</p> <p>Just remember the good guys always win. These people will be the 21st centuries Hitler. Stand united and they have no power of 7 billion people. Conform at all to their demands and they ruin the world.</p> <p>User: jadis40</p> <p>No one voted for you people to control the rest of us. You can take your Globalistic/NWO "Great Reset" and shove off.</p> <p>We know it's a disgusting attack on capitalism, basic freedoms, private property, and the middle class.</p> <p>User: alaa al ashoush</p> <p>What about free market as an alternative? It is not harmful to people when everybody produces for everybody's needs, ESG? It can be even easier! But of course No because it will not keep economies under elites' control!! Right?</p> <p>User: Klaus Froese</p> <p>Transform competitive capitalism into monopoly capitalism.</p> <p>Destroy millions to protect the climate (the end justifies the means).</p> <p>Create cheap jobs to numb humanity.</p> <p>Prohibit education, promote qualification - because education shows alternatives.</p> <p>Play God without referendum or democracy, because stupid people don't know what's good for them.</p> <p>The World Economic Forum is made up of stupid, sociopathic children of extreme power and delusions.</p>

Most of those comments suggest that WEF members should share their wealth. The idea behind this is that the reset would not be necessary should all the wealthy members donated their money to those who need it most. These claims are not made as a political demand for redistribution of wealth but as a rebuttal to the proposal regarding the post-pandemic future (see Table 5). Several comments call for abolishing ruthless competition, life following positive values (mentioning "love," "compassion," and "unity"), global justice, and lifestyles closer to nature. However, they do not appear to be strong compared to other themes.

The conspiracies

For the comments to be considered a conspiracy theory, besides assigning evil intentions to the WEF, they must ascribe secrecy to the conspirators and oppose official views. Comments representing conspiracy beliefs are abundant, but they lack coherence. In the comments, many conspiracies are not supported by arguments but offered as statements patched together. For instance, one comment explains that climate change and the pandemic are fake, warns about the dangers of 5G technology, and recommends the documentary *Planet*

Table 5 YouTube Comments that Propose a Certain Proto-Political Solution.

<p>User: Rurac Katrinel</p> <p>Are you wealthy people ready to give up your wealth, cause I think that's why we have so many poor people.. The reset starts with you if you want equality for everyone.</p> <p>User: shadowrunner101</p> <p>Let's start with the 1% giving up all their wealth and distribute it amongst the 99%, the we'll see how we want to go ahead. Oh??? The Great Reset isn't meant for the 1%??? What a surprise!!!!</p> <p>User: Amadeus Wolfe</p> <p>In searching for a common enemy against whom we can unite, we came up with the idea that pollution, the threat of global warming, water shortages, famine and the like, would fit the bill. In their totality and their interactions these phenomena do constitute a common threat which must be confronted by everyone together. But in designating these dangers as the enemy, we fall into the trap, which we have already warned readers about, namely mistaking symptoms for causes. All these dangers are caused by human intervention in natural processes, and it is only through changed attitudes and behaviour that they can be overcome. The real enemy then is humanity itself." Club of rome 1994</p> <p>User: Bruce Bassman</p> <p>Im just a small minded working class joe but I would like to suggest we just take all military budgets and convert that wealth and human power to serve humanity and Mother Nature instead of destroying her. First move should be to wrestle the mic away from evil globalist and social media companies</p> <p>User: Steve Blair</p> <p>How about these people start leading by example. Before you implement this nonsense, donate your wealth for the betterment of humanity and show us what you're own dollars have done. Release the free energy technology and all of the medical advancements to cure peoples ills instead of just treating them.. If any of this is sincere you wouldn't be putting in a meter for profit. I want to see you people live amongst the lowest of classes before you can even pretend to be authorities.</p> <p>User: Samsha 101</p> <p>Everyone- this is the Universe waking up the sleeping masses- this is about the surfacing of the illusion that we have been under that we are free. It is time for humanity to heal all of the differences that have been programmed into them and allow us a chance to unite, together, and abolish the systems and slavery once and for all. There is no savior, the savior is ourselves. If we take responsibility to end this once and for all we can build a better world with true freedom and harmony together. A beautiful world. You are powerful, remember who you are! Go within and find your purpose, because this matrix is crumbling.</p>
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Table 6 YouTube Comments that Understand the Pandemic as a Pretext to a Larger Plan.

User: angela oz
Now it proves even more why this coronavirus was invented to use it for their evil plans !!! The reset means depopulate the planet !!!
User: Bryan Youkhana
How did you manage to write a book (July) about a virus we knew for only 2-3 months and be so sure and precise how it ll change the world economically, socially, and all the implications that will ensue? Seems to me the knowledge was prepared long before
User: Pavel Scott
deception on people and covid only smoke screen ... invisible non-existent enemy to control people ... and so file only a huge scam on people.covid end when people wake up and get up
User: Psuedo Satori
So they did Event 201 dry run... then bam phony virus and lockdowns to weaken and destroy economies and stolen election to knock it out of the park. Who are these people? What are they really saying? Is this how they refer to us? Workers? Consumers? What do they mean social justice, pay gap, representation? Reset how? There was no economic collapse. It was intentional. Prove me wrong. Asshats!
User: mike last
im amazed at how cool and detail a scenario we have here with the planning of our future given that we are still under the terror of covid....this is serious and well thought out planning and certainly stuff that has been planned well before we knew anything about covid....

of the Humans (Gibbs, 2019) produced by Michael Moore. However, that comment does not bring all these elements together into a coherent whole. Furthermore, many comments do not explain WEF’s goals and leave that to the reader’s imagination.

Among the comments that present more elaborate ideas, the most common theme is the orchestration (“the virus was created”), the invention (“the virus does not exist”), or over-exaggeration (“the virus is harmless”) of the pandemic by the WEF and other elites. In this case, the conspiracy theory comes *post-factum* since it does not frame the disease as a tool for exerting bodily harm but as a method of imposing various forms of social and political control. In other words, the pandemic serves as a tool for population control and surveillance, the destruction of small businesses, economic losses, unemployment, or imposed limits to social life, which were planned long before. To a certain degree, comments mistakenly interpret anti-COVID-19 measures in western countries as an integral part of “The Great Reset.” The conspiracy theories appear to be motivated more by the political and state responses to

Table 7 The Most Occurring Themes within the Interpretative Category “Conspiracy Theory”.

The Themes	No. of comments
The pandemic serves for the evil plan	33
New form of oppressive social and personal control	15
The religious fight between good and evil	15
There is a hidden level of power	12
WEF is an entity of evil individuals	9
Fear of microchips and new technologies	8
Overpopulation control	7
Elites are morally corrupted	4

the pandemic than by the biological threat, long-term health impacts, or death. Some of the comments interpret the pandemic as a way for elites to halt overpopulation, but to a much smaller degree. Table 7 contains the overview of the most important themes in conspiratorial comments.

Another popular theme is the interpretation of the WEF in terms of a religious fight between good and evil. In that

Table 8 YouTube Comments that Interpret the WEF Conspiracy in Religious Terms.

<p>User: Lisa Hughes</p> <p>Our world has changed~because of you!! You're all evil Luciferians who created the problems (crisis) in our world for control! You caused the pandemic and the riots just so the majority of the people would be brainwashed by all of your LIES. We don't need or want your great reset. The distrust is with you and your satanic agenda! You did not ask US! # WE DO NOT CONSENT!!!</p> <p>User: MiaNaomi Post</p> <p>The Great Reset Initiative. This last hour-those left behind- Great global unity those are strong spiritual phrases from an economist Still believe there's no antiChrist and Jesus isn't coming? I beg you to listen! Christians are going to leave you here if you don't think you need The Savior! He's made a way of escape from these people who are in allegiance to globally uniting under a demonic system of world domination! Just ask Him to help you!</p> <p>User: Kimberly Eason-Sims</p> <p>Buying out 51% of all national and multinational corporations simply means that YOUR kind of government will be in CONTROL of everything! Businesses create money, governments create DEBT! So, ultimately, the ENTIRE WORLD will now be in DEBT to YOU, under the guise of EQUALITY! (What a bloody joke!) This is TOTALITARIANISM! This is the New World Order, being ruled by the Spirit of the AntiChrist, right up until the actual AntiChrist comes on the World stage. Dear God, do any of you people have ANY IDEA what you are bringing upon not only the world, but, the Judgement you bring upon yourselves?</p> <p>Time is short. Jesus came to tell EVERYONE the good news, that this world is not our real home. Be humble. ASK for forgiveness. LOVE your neighbors as you love yourselves. After Christ comes, you will not get a second chance.</p> <p>God bless you all.</p>

Table 9 Summary of the Findings.

Source	Dominant political discourses	Ideology
"The Great Reset"	Decontextualized and depoliticized explanations	Politics at the End of History and Techno-Solutionism
	Digitally defined future	
YouTube Comments	Morally corrupted elites	Populism motivated by the crisis and the ideological impasse
	Inconsistent visions of justice	
	Conspiracy theories	Displacement of the symbolic authority (capitalism and the pandemic)

context, the foundation members are either devil (e.g., "Lucifer" or an "Anti-Christ") or have made a deal with it. The WEF is accused of practicing satanic rituals (e.g., "eating babies"), tortures and murders, altering human DNA, and brainwashing people. However, those endeavors will fail because of Jesus Christ, who will destroy the evil cabal and save those who accept him as a savior. The satanic activities of the WEF are often related to the themes such as economic enslavement, social control, and totalitarianism. It also connects with

conspiratorial beliefs shared by QAnon (Associated Press, 2020), a user that posts conservative conspiracies on the imageboard 8Chan/8kun (Stonestreet & Morris, 2020).

Conclusions and discussion

While this analysis is limited since it only tackles a reduced number of texts and comments, it offers relevant insights into how a post-COVID future is envisioned. Here, we bridge the analysis by comparing main discourses that stem from the analyzed data and the ideology they represent, as seen in Table 9.

The WEF offers a nonideological solution to the health and economic crisis based on expert knowledge, treats citizens as consumers, and places the debate on the post-pandemic society outside of ideology by celebrating *real solutions* that rely on digital technologies. While it calls for the inclusion of everybody, their agenda forecasts great suffering for those who do not adapt to the world to come. Their discourse strongly relies on the principles of the post-political and technocratic

governmentality, which means that “the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists...) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests” (Žižek, 1999, p. 198). The ideas of post-politics originate from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the defeat of communism. The moment was interpreted as the End of History (Fukuyama, 1989) since it was seen as the end of ideological struggles and the beginning of technocratic leadership that frames efficiency and pragmatism as core values.

Additionally, the WEF proposes various forms of *techno-solutionism* (Morozov, 2013), which includes mitigating significant social issues by developing and applying new technologies and the relegation of democratic powers to the Big Tech companies. Recent political developments led to the merging of the technocratic habitus, progressive neoliberalism, and techno-solutionism, through the naturalization of “the class politics of tech capital while elevating professionals, thought leaders, entrepreneurs, and programmers, all armed with data and a transcendent power to solve social problems” (Jutel, 2020, p. 433). Similarly, the WEF forecloses the possibility for a radical social change, considering the significant political, social, and economic repercussions of large technological developments.

Finally, “The Great Reset” does not capture any of the challenges of the datafied society (Stefan Baack, 2015) and ensuing platform economy (Consultancy.org, 2018), where conspiracy theories –together with fake news and disinformation– are disseminated massively in real-time.

Several authors in psychoanalysis and political theory identify that kind of post-political language that forecloses the possibility for a systematic change and the traumatic opening caused by a systematic crisis as the generating forces behind the populist anger. The most dominant theme in the comments was precisely a populist vision of global economic

and political relations in which the great divide between classes takes the shape of discursive categories. The comments express the rejection of the morally corrupted, global power-hungry elites and call for the return to nation-state capitalism and the end to politics centered around global relations. Strong emotions against wealthy individuals in some instances lead to the calls for violence.

Meanwhile, the comments by YouTube users make many different (and often inconsistent) demands without an emancipatory or political project that would link all these struggles. These messages do not go further than expressing the elites and the populace as social groups with opposing interests in an escalating conflict. This clash fits into the concept of populism developed by Ernesto Laclau (2005). Laclau (2005) explains that populism functions as a “chain of equivalences,” a process in which numerous particular demands are bound together against the axis of power (i.e., the 99% against the 1% of privileged elites, globalists, and the WEF). The populist discourse is a way of symbolically articulating the traumatic event such as the crisis; through that performance of populism, we collectively create an understanding of the current suffering (Moffitt, 2015; Stavrakakis et al., 2018). Such populist sentiments were also present in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 (Stavrakakis, 2014). More importantly, the comments in the analysis seem to be directly motivated by the discourse of the WEF that does not only reinforces current power relations but envisions a future in which even more power is given to specific wealthy individuals (namely, CEO of technological companies). Populist leaders often articulate the popular frustrations against the dominant center of power that proclaims that there is no alternative to the neoliberal form of globalization (Mouffe, 2005, p. 70) and suggests strongly that any positive state or hope for a change “is a dangerous illusion” (Fisher, 2009, p. 5).

In the comments, the populist discourse is more dominant than conspiratorial beliefs. Although there is an overlap between the two, the basis of their assumptions is different.

The overwhelming majority of comments that see the elites as the enemy do not question the existence or seriousness of the pandemic and do not understand the WEF as a conspiratorial body but an economic forum. Moreover, their characterization of the events appears to be informed and motivated by the numerous reports in the Anglo-Saxon media about the increased wealth of billionaires when the pandemic left many without income or home (e.g., Beer, 2021; Neate, 2020; White, 2020). In the YouTube comments, populist discourses are somewhat scattered, incoherent, and even inconsistent, but they show potential for political mobilization as YouTube users demonstrate an eagerness to participate in the proto-political debate with their fellow commentators.

The comments exhibit some conspiracy beliefs, which establish various actors as the enemy. However, instead of turning to a concept that resembles political economy, the YouTube comments knit a narrative that traverses the empirical reality. The relations of material existence in neoliberal societies that, during the pandemic, left a traumatic opening in the personal experience of individuals are being obfuscated. For instance, in the accusations of the satanic agenda, the elites' economic and political interests are presented as motivated by the occult, satanic forces instead of the neoliberal ethics. At a moment when the *laissez-faire* principles of global capitalism that are taken for granted show inability to resolve the health emergency, "for many people there is no way of framing an analysis of what is happening or registering their dissatisfaction other than in the 'crackpot' rhetoric of the conspiracy theorist" (Knight, 2000, p. 37).

While in the populist messages, a stable binary opposition based on some political or economic categories is shown (e.g., "wealthy elites" vs. "99%"), in the conspiratorial comments that antagonism is displaced. The elites are not the issue, but their corrupted elements that their allegiance has compromised to dark forces or their unrestrained lust for control. Contrary to what it claims to do, such a narrative works in favor of the symbolic authority or the market since

it implies the existence of a secret level of authority, which, as Žižek says, "pulls the strings [...] behind the visible, public power" (1996, p. 96). By claiming to expose the Other of the big Other, it effectively strips the actual authority of any responsibility.

Finally, the observation of how populism is articulated in both discourses is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this analysis. At its core, populism includes the contradiction "between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy, that is, the difficulty the government of science has in adapting itself to manifestations of democracy," ultimately exposing the desire to govern without the popular mandate (Rancière, 2009, p. 80). The multistakeholder form of governance proposed by the WEF is repeatedly questioned in the YouTube comments, which challenge the Davos elites' lack of democratic mandate, accountability in creating "the mess," or perspective ("how can they understand our suffering?"). Both the intent of the WEF to resolve the crisis of capitalism within capitalism (by giving it human values, so it works for everybody) and YouTube users' inability to formulate a coherent political demand and tendency to believe in conspiracies reflect Gramsci's well-known quotation: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276). In an interpretation of Gramsci's words, Babic says that "the existing order suffers from existential problems that are unlikely to be solved within the limits of the old framework. At the same time, a new, hegemonically stable order does not seem to be on the rise, ready to supplant the old one" (Babic, 2020, p. 773). This ideological impasse characterizes dominant narratives in the texts examined here. These narratives indicate that there is something wrong with the *status quo* and that legitimation of the current system is shifting. However, neither group – WEF and YouTube users – can formulate a clear demand for a social order that transcends the limits of current socio-economic relations. Instead, both groups express an implicit or explicit desire to overcome the current predicament without fundamentally changing anything.

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