

QAnon: Nothing New?



Francisco de Goya, *Que viene el Coco* (from *Caprichos*, pl. 3). Aquatint print, 21.6 X 15 cm., 1799.

On December 4, 2016, an armed Edgar M. Welch drove six hours from his North Carolina home to Comet Ping Pong, a Washington DC pizzeria that Welch believed was harboring child sex slaves who were part of a child-abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton; after firing his AR-15 assault rifle in the restaurant, Welch was arrested. Needless to say, no children sex slaves were found in the pizzeria.

If “Pizzagate” seemed at the time like an aberrant, one-off, conspiracy theory spread by the alt-right during the contentious, disinformation-filled 2016 US presidential elections, it was soon eclipsed by QAnon. Beginning in October, 2017, a person—or more likely persons—using the pseudonym “Q” began posting on the

anonymous image board 4chan, claiming to be a high-ranking US government official with Q-level security clearance. According to these QAnon posts, a secret, Satan-worshipping cabal of cannibalistic pedophiles are running the American “Deep State,” and that Donald Trump would bring these Democrats, Hollywood celebrities, and Jewish entrepreneurs to justice in a day of reckoning called the “Storm.”

Like all conspiracy theories that require the collusion of a large number of people, QAnon fails the test of Mark Twain’s quip “Two people can keep a secret, as long as one of them is dead.” Sure, “Q” claims to be a government insider whistle-blower, but it strains credulity to think, of the many thousands of people who would have to be “in” on the cannibalistic, pedophilic cabal—from those who procured and transported the children, to those in charge of their housing and feeding, to those who would dispose of their little bodies after the elite were finished with their perverse acts and were done drinking their blood—that only “Q” would have spilled the beans, and that he/they would provide not a scintilla of proof.

Part of QAnon’s appeal to the white-supremacist followers of Donald Trump is that it harkens back to a long tradition of 19th- and 20th-century anti-Semitic tropes, such as the fabricated Protocols of the Elders of Zion that purported to reveal a secret Jewish plan for world domination. Another part of QAnon’s appeal is that it incorporates an apocalyptic final battle between good and evil—a vision that Travis View (Rozsa 2019) sees as following the pattern of what Richard Hofstadter described in 1964 as the paranoid personality of political conspiracy theorists:

The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point. Like religious millennialists he expresses the anxiety of those who are living through the last days and he is sometimes disposed to set a date for the apocalypse . . .

And, of course, the QAnon apocalyptic “Storm” resonated with the Christian evangelists among Trump’s supporters.

The appeal of QAnon, however, also draws on a deeper, more atavistic, archetypal fears we have about evil forces threatening our children. As Philip Matyszak documents in his 2019 book *Ancient Magic*, the belief that there were blood-sucking magical vampire creatures can be documented in an early 1st-millennium-BCE text from Sumeria. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, the *Lamia* (*Lemures* in Latin) were

bloodsucking vengeful spirits on the lookout for unguarded children they could eat. Ancient Greek mothers used to warn their children that if they misbehaved a Lamia named Mormo would come into their cribs at night and bite them. This tradition of mothers evoking a Lamia bogeyman (or bogeywoman) has endured in the Coco (also known as the Cucuy, Cuco, Coca, Cuca, Cucu or Cucuí), a ghost monster that originated in Galician folk tradition and has spread throughout the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world. [See the Goya print at top.]

In an age of high infant mortality, it would be natural to attribute the unexplained death of a child to outside evil forces like a Lamia. Indeed, this explanation has continued in modern Greek folklore, with the expression "τό παιδί τό 'πνιξε η Λάμια" ("the Lamia has strangled the child") being used to explain the sudden death of a young child. [Lest we scoff at this folk tradition, is using the term SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) a better way to explain the unaccountable death of an infant?]



A Lamia. Woodcut illustration from Topsell, 1658, p. 353.

There was also an erotic element to *Lamia*, who, in Greek mythology, could take the form of an *Empousa*, a sub-species of Lamia who would seduce young men and, *post coitus*, eat them. There is nothing new about a QAnon conspiracy theory that combines bloodsucking and sex.

On February 4, 2021, the Georgian Republican Representative Majorie Taylor Greene declared on the House floor that she regretted that she was “allowed to believe” in QAnon. While this lame defense was ineffectual in her attempt to retain her committee assignments, it does speak volumes about the enduring power of magical thinking, of our archetypal fears of bloodsucking monsters who eat children and of the dangers of sexual predators. As much as we would hubristically like to think that we have evolved beyond our “primitive” ancestors who invented gods to explain a natural world whose functioning they did not have the scientific tools to understand, we, like Greene, seem to be passive actors, easily swept up by our archetypal fears. The QAnon craziness will surely pass. But, just as sure, it will not be the last conspiracy theory rooted in our deep cultural archetypes.

References:

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