

Article

The “Global” Deception: Flat-Earth Conspiracy Theory between Science and Religion

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Abstract: The article focuses on flat earthism, one of the most well-known contemporary conspiracy theories in popular culture. According to proponents of this theory, which has found a growing international following in recent years, political institutions such as the U.S. government and scientific institutions such as NASA would operate to deceive humanity about the real shape of our planet and the universe in which we live. In countering the data acquired by modern science and common sense knowledge, flat earthism stands as a heterodox theory and a radical critique of the authority of socially legitimized epistemic institutions. This article consists of two parts. The first part will offer a genealogical reconstruction of the flat-earth conspiracy, tracing its history from the 19th century to the exponents of the current movement. The second part will delve into the discourse of the proponents of flat earthism with specific reference to the Italian context, through documentary analysis of recent publications and online material available on YouTube and Telegram, which constitute some of the main channels for the discussion and dissemination of flat earthism in Italy today. On the basis of the data collected and analyzed, it will be shown how flat earthism represents a paradigmatic case of superconspiracy, that is, of a far-reaching theory capable of linking and including within itself a set of other, more circumscribed theories. To this end, flat earthism elaborates on a discourse that ambivalently combines two registers, scientific and religious language, proposing itself as a dissident narrative that if on the one hand rejects the knowledge of institutionalized and organized science and religion, on the other hand accredits an alternative and anti-intellectualist path of knowledge, accessible to the “common man” that aims to create a space of autonomy and opposition to the processes of secularization and globalization in which the flat earthers see the project of building a dystopian New World Order.



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1. Introduction

In recent years, conspiracy narratives have gained unprecedented visibility in public debate and the media, abandoning the position of cultural marginality that has traditionally marked them (Reyes and Smith 2014). This trend has intensified especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has internationally fomented a climate of suspicion and criticism of scientific and political institutions (Butter and Knight 2023). Among these narratives, the flat-earth theory constitutes one of the best known and, at the same time, most exposed to the social stigma that invests many expressions of conspiracy thinking (Barkun 2015; Lantian et al. 2018). Indicative in this regard is the discussion initiated on Quora.com starting with the question: “Are flat-earth people mentally ill?”¹, a question that reflects how conspiratorial cognitive style is associated with a pathologizing interpretation (Boullier et al. 2021) found not only in current language but also in the academic field from the classic *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Hofstadter 1967) to more recent literature (Greenburgh and Raihani 2022). These studies tend to overlook the reasoning patterns by which the arguments of conspiracy theory proponents are constructed and defended (Oswald 2016), and the function played by the “knowledge community” in which group

norms preside over the elaboration of shared beliefs, as is the case with flat earthism during public conferences (Fernbach and Bogard 2023) or on social media in which the exchange of information is oriented by a participatory culture (Gajewski 2018). Flat earthers do not just advance a heterodox astronomical hypothesis concerning the flat shape of our planet, but set out, as is typically the case in conspiracy imaginary (Keeley 1999), to expose the deception perpetrated by a power elite that covertly directs historical events for evil ends, claiming that political institutions, such as the U.S. government, and educational or scientific institutions, such as NASA, would willfully keep humanity in a state of ignorance about the real nature of the world (Hendricks and Vestergaard 2019). Flat earthism is a widespread movement internationally. The Facebook page of one of its main associations, the American Flat Earth Society, has more than 225,000 followers, and in the United States, the country where it has taken root the most, this theory meets with favor among about 5% of the population, finding acceptance especially among millennials, generation Z, and those who claim to be religious or spiritual².

This article focuses on the flat-earth conspiracy theory and is divided into two parts. The first part will offer a reconstruction of the assumptions that characterize the theory of the flat-earth conspiracy, tracing its genealogical history from the 19th century to the exponents of the current movement. The second part will delve into the discourse of the proponents and opponents of flat earthism with specific reference to the Italian context, through documentary analysis of recent publications and online material available on YouTube and Telegram, which constitute some of the main channels for the discussion and dissemination of flat earthism in Italy today. On the basis of the data collected and analyzed, the article frames flat earthism as a paradigmatic case of superconspiracy, that is, of a far-reaching theory capable of linking and including within itself a hierarchy of other, more circumscribed theories (Barkun 2003). To this end, flat earthism combines a heterogeneous network of discursive sources (Soares de Melo et al. 2020), formulating an ambivalent narrative that on the one hand borrows the register of science (Arroyo-Barrigüete et al. 2023; Mattos et al. 2022) but rejects academic science, and on the other hand, borrows the language of religion, but draws on heterodox knowledge and spiritual currents proper to the cultic milieu (*sensu* Campbell 1972) that are proposed as alternatives to traditional and organized religions. In composing these sources of knowledge, the discourse of Italian flat earthism turns out to be marked by an anti-globalist rhetoric, in a twofold sense: first, because it argues against the acquisitions of science regarding the spherical shape of the planet, by supporting the thesis expressed by the formula “Earth is not a globe”; second, because it accredits an anti-intellectualist path of knowledge, accessible to the “common man” that aims to create a space of autonomy to oppose the processes of secularization and globalization in which the flat earthers see the implementation of the political, economic, and cultural project of building a future dystopian society, referred to as the New World Order. Flat earthism, not unlike other conspiracy theories (Hernáiz 2011), aspires to provide a response that makes sense of such a threat perceived as a global evil.

2. Genealogy of a Controversial Idea

Flat earthism has a long historical tradition whose genealogy I aim to reconstruct in this section. For this purpose, I will adopt the genealogical method developed by Foucault (1975, 1976), with particular reference to the concept of “discontinuities”, for which the constitution and emergence of a given epistemological model cannot be described as a linear historical development of ideas from a precisely definable original moment, but as the outcome of unpredictable and multiple ruptures produced by the relationship between forms of knowledge and social relations of power that change over time. The Foucauldian approach is particularly pertinent in the present case because it allows for the interpretation of flat earthism as a discursive field in which the clash between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic scientific visions takes place in the modern age. Three main discontinuities can be identified in the genealogy of flat earthism that will lead from the 19th century to the contemporary conspiracy narrative.

The belief of living on a planet with a flat or discoidal shape is attested as early as ancient Greece and can be found in multiple religious cosmologies in both the West and the East (Schadewald 2000). Even up to the Middle Ages and the time of maritime geographic exploration, this belief, though a minority one, coexists with the belief regarding the sphericity of the Earth, which is increasingly accredited by science (Allegro 2017). Therefore, throughout this early phase, the flat-earth conception is presented as an astronomical model, an alternative to the prevailing one. It is only during the 19th century that a first discontinuity in the genealogical sense occurs for which flat earthism takes on a new meaning that transcends the strictly scientific domain and becomes the controversial object of a power struggle between epistemic authorities in opposition to each other. Contributing to this change is Washington Irving's novel *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* published in 1828, in which the author imagines the Church intent on dissuading the Genoese navigator from his expedition to the Americas because of the risk of plummeting from the edges of the Earth. Irving's literary work has a very wide resonance and is taken up by French and English intellectuals who, moved by an anticlerical polemic, bend flat earthism into an ideological tool to elaborate on a modernist narrative that opposes the religious superstition of a Middle Ages portrayed as an obscurantist age with enlightenment confidence in the progress of scientific knowledge (Cormack 1994). The outcome of this operation is a historiographical myth—still persistent in the popular imaginary today—according to which the belief in the flat Earth was commonly held in medieval culture, eradicated only by the development of science as secular knowledge capable of showing the groundlessness of the teaching of the Catholic Church (Giacomotto-Charra and Nony 2021). The history of flat earthism hinges, from here on, on the clash between faith and reason, as suggested by philosopher and physicist John William Draper's 1874 essay, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, which from its title, eloquently reflects the cultural climate of a period in which religion is measured against new scientific discoveries that threaten its dogmas, while science aims to carve out an autonomous disciplinary space free of metaphysical references.

The question of the shape of the Earth is inscribed in this conflict and enters the broader cultural debate. From this historical moment, the flat-earth belief will be branded as a stigma of ignorance, aimed at ensuring the superiority of modern thinkers over the past (Garwood 2008). The success achieved by the spherical Earth model marginalizes but does not entirely suppress the circulation of theses at odds with the view supported by science. An elective affinity links the supporters of flat earthism to the heterogeneous doctrines that, in that same second half of the 19th century, were being cultivated among esoteric, occultist, and theosophical groups, united by the search for a spiritual *renovatio* and the aspiration to found a new society based on alternative values to the dominant ones (Eliade 1978). In these groups, beliefs traceable to the *topos* of hidden or lost worlds are taken up and elaborated on, such as that of the "hollow Earth" that would influence the research of the Nazi Ahnenerbe Society (Strube 2015) or those narrated in the literary works of Jules Verne that inspired Cyrus Teed, founder of Koreshan Unity in Florida, a religious community that promotes the "concave Earth" theory (Tarlow 2006). This intersection with the esoteric milieu marks the second discontinuity in the genealogical path. Flat earthism no longer presents itself only as an astronomical model, nor as a stigma attributed to a superstitious mentality of Catholic origin by lay exponents of science and mainstream culture, but becomes a "subjugated knowledge", excluded from the dominant discourse (*sensu* Foucault 1995), a real counter knowledge promoted by minority groups, in which heterodox beliefs come together that oppose both academic science and institutional religion itself. It was in this cultural climate that the forerunner of the present day flat-earth movement, Samuel Birley Rowbotham, a fundamentalist Christian and follower of Robert Owen's socialist utopias, authored *Zetetic Astronomy. Earth not a Globe* (Rowbotham 1865), a text in which he advances the theory, based on the "zetetic" (skeptical) method of research, that the Earth would be a flat, stationary body within a geocentric-type planetary system. Rowbotham's disciples organized the Universal Zetetic Society in London in 1892, whose members included

Elizabeth Blount, a social activist who was convinced that modern science, astronomy first and foremost, contradicted the Bible's teaching on the flat Earth (Garwood 2008), on whose scriptural basis rests the journal she published, *The Earth. A Monthly Magazine of Sense and Science*. The attitude of these flat earthers denotes a pronounced anti-intellectualism, that is, the distrust, which will be the hallmark of the current flat-earth movement, of the authority of scientific institutions in favor of an egalitarianism that wants knowledge accessible to anyone through the exercise of rationality, a faculty available to all human beings, regardless of their formal education and social status (York 2017).

Dedicated to the popularization of these doctrines in the United States since the 1910s is industrialist Wilbur Glenn Voliva, spiritual leader of the Zion Apostolic Catholic Christian Church in Illinois and owner of the first flat-earth radio station in history, WCBD (Kneitel 1986). With the decline of the Zion community in the 1950s, English astrophile Samuel Shenton founded the Flat Earth Society in Dover. This corresponds to the third discontinuity that marks the genealogical path of flat earthism, as Shenton gives it its peculiar and present day character as a conspiracy theory, asserting that the images of Earth from the first space missions, launched in those very years, are forgeries capable of "deceiving the untrained eye" (Schadewald 1982). Shenton's successor is Charles Kenneth Johnson, who moves the headquarters of the Flat Earth Society to Lancaster, California. Johnson recovers Shenton's thesis about the scientific conspiracy orchestrated by governments and NASA, claiming that the 1969 moon landing was a fake and the photographs sent back by space missions a Hollywood fabrication. His Christian faith prompted him to hold up the biblical figure of Moses as an example of an *ante litteram* flat earther and prophesied the imminent advent of an era of revelation to the masses of knowledge about the flat Earth, a prelude to a new society led by Roosevelt designated as the first "president of the world" (Schadewald 1980). Therefore, with Johnson, flat earthism takes on the structure of a real conspiracy narrative in which an enemy appears—the scientific and political institutions—which works secretly to deceive civil society. This turning point in the history of flat earthism reflects two concomitant changes, observed especially in America in the 1960s. On the one hand, conspiracism begins to be perceived as false and delegitimized discourse, thus denoting a widespread aversion towards it by many sectors of public opinion (Thalmann 2019). On the other hand, the revolution of the youth counterculture provides fertile ground for the development of anti-establishment theories, alternative spiritualities, and scientific research, laying the foundations for the formation of conspiracy thinking that will still have influence today (Ward and Voas 2011).

Johnson died in 2001, and since then, flat earthism has been spreading at an accelerated pace thanks to the Internet. Employing web platforms among the first is Daniel Shenton, who updates the Flat Earth Society site, containing the largest archive on flat-earth theory available online³. The new digital environment offers not only the possibility of archiving information, but constitutes the main channel for building knowledge through the hybridization of heterogeneous sources from which flat earthism, like other conspiracy narratives, can benefit (Hanley et al. 2023; Valaskivi 2022). In 2014, the forum of the International Flat Earth Research Society was opened under the direction of Eric Dubay, a conspiracy theorist who points to previous flat-earth organizations as a "controlled opposition" aimed at discrediting research on the topic of the flat Earth⁴. Among the leaders of today's movement should be mentioned Mark Sargent. In the description of his YouTube channel, which boasts over 90 thousand subscribers, Sargent asks: "Are we inside a Truman show enclosed world, thousands of miles wide? This is part of a series of videos that shows not only is it possible, but likely"⁵. Contributing to the recent popularity of flat earthism have been, in no small part, public statements by celebrities. These include rapper B.o.B, who in 2017 launched a fundraising campaign to send a satellite into space with the goal of ascertaining the planet's lack of curvature and thus conclusively proving its flat shape⁶.

3. Results

In this section, I will examine the discourse of flat earthism, analyzing, in particular, the following: (a) the exemplary case of the biographical path of adherence to this theory of one of the movement's leading figures in Italy; (b) the arguments that inform the debate for and against the flat-earth conspiracy theory found on the Italian YouTube and Telegram channels. In Italy, there has recently been a growing interest in the flat-earth theory, a trend that was observable even before the COVID-19 pandemic and documented by the increase in the occurrences of words like "flat earth" or "flat earthism" on Google searches (Di Carlo 2019). This phenomenon reflects the more general attention of the media towards conspiracy discourse in this country (Mancosu and Vassallo 2022). As I will show in the next pages, Italian flat earthism shares, with the international movement, beliefs and a critical attitude towards science and religion; it is supported by individuals and social groups linked to anti-establishment political positions and the *milieu* of alternative spiritualities and non-academic sciences. This counter-cultural character of contemporary flat earthism is the outcome of the genealogical path by which the original astronomical theory has become inscribed, through the three discontinuities highlighted in the previous section, in a complex set of power relations that sees the contrast between two forms of knowledge, one institutional and one independent, and socially delegitimized.

3.1. Conversion to Flat Earthism

The preceding genealogical reconstruction has highlighted the intertwining that links flat earthism not only to the scientific field but also to the religious field. Within this framework, the encounter with the flat-earth theory is equated, for many of its proponents, with true conversion, a biographical turning point that, analogous to paths of religious conversion, marks a "before" and an "after" capable of unveiling a new perspective on reality (Gooren 2007). The path is typically ushered in by a sense of disorientation, when the certainties on which the usual worldview rests are cracked by the discovery of inconsistencies in the version provided by official institutions (Miller 2002). In this gap opened by doubt, conspiracy theory makes available a peculiar argumentative vocabulary shared by the flat-earth community toward which the individual adherent develops a sense of belonging and identification (Olshansky et al. 2020). This is the path traced by Dino Tinelli, one of the leading exponents of the flat-earth movement in Italy and curator of the Pass channel on YouTube. In his autobiographical book, Tinelli (2019) recounts his first approach to flat earthism, which occurred in 2015 while watching a video on the Internet. The effect that video provokes in him is destabilizing:

Of course I had more than four big laughs at the mere thought that the Globe could be flat [. . .]. Full of doubts, despite the many arguments that can counter the supposed flat shape of the Earth, living just a few kilometers from the beautiful Lake Garda, I have the opportunity to go and do some hands-on surveying myself. (pp. 13–15)

Observation of the beach on the opposite shore, more than 14 km away, provides Tinelli with decisive proof that the surface of the water follows no curvature and that, therefore, the Earth's surface itself must be flat. It is the epiphany of a new look at reality:

Each new day of personal investigation led me to discover new things that only corroborated the discovery of deception on a global level [. . .]. It is a period where I am still in the stage of dismay and wish I wasn't really sure of what I am discovering, because as we get deeper into the research new elements continually surface that only reinforce the globe ball lie. (p. 16)

In recalling these experiences, the author employs metaphors that suggest the attainment of a new awareness, tracing the pattern of genealogical narratives (Todorov 1971), the stories that tell how the protagonist was able to gain an unexpected point of view that allowed the deconstruction of the lie and reveal the concealed truth about the Earth's authentic shape. This awareness corresponds, in the vision of conspiracy theorists, to the

fulfillment of a salvific knowledge, a gnosis, that guarantees a deeper understanding of the deception in which one is immersed, which is accompanied by the need to publicly communicate what has been discovered for the benefit of the community (Dyrendal 2013). This “awakening”, Tinelli continues, makes it possible to counter the system of indoctrination by which society implements a “mind control” that influences our perception:

Making us believe from an early age that we live on a ball of land and water hurtling through the universe before we even have the ability to ask questions. As soon as we are born they already give us little toys depicting the solar system, they give us cloth globes, globes, and we play without understanding what it is all about. In the first years of school, as early as 6, 7 years old, they explain to us how this globe is made and the whole thing is inculcated in us as a fact of scientific truth [. . .]. And that’s how it becomes the core of our deepest beliefs. Here is the mind control. Knowing where we are and who we really are is the key to freedom. The Earth is not a speck wandering randomly in an infinite universe born out of nothing. It was intelligently designed, and we are the center of this creation. (pp. 136–37)

The unveiling of truth can have radical outcomes that cause one to question the entire representation of the surrounding reality. Albino Galuppini, among the best-known names, along with Tinelli, of the Italian flat-earth community, expresses himself in these terms:

It is not only the impossibility of recording the Earth’s rotation or detecting its curvature. The discovery of the hoax of the heliocentric model has set in motion a process of full-scale revision of human knowledge [. . .]. It now seems clear to us that History, as it is told to us, is an allegorical narrative that can be approached as a true fantasy novel. Some places and historical facts or figures may have been real, however, the account of events and thoughts is altered or reinvented. (Galuppini 2019)

Galuppini’s words follow the rhetorical technique of dissociation of notions, an argumentative scheme by which “reality” is separated from mere “appearance” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958): what is known, and usually believed to be true, is reinterpreted as mere deception. From this reflection, Galuppini believes that a “revision” of all acquired knowledge is necessary. It is the application of a systematic *double entendre*, a rereading of every historical event as a sign that bears, behind its conventional meaning, a secret meaning to be deciphered that betrays the existence of an invisible plan. As in Tinelli’s case, for most flat earthers, their first contact with the flat-earth theory is through videos available online. Indeed, the web represents the main channel of dissemination of this and other contemporary conspiracy theories, prompting a process of democratization in the production of and access to knowledge. The Internet encourages the search for information that each user can eclectically assemble *ad hoc*: this accounts for the intertextuality of conspiracy discourse, its referencing of other discourses in a concatenation of quotations and reuses (Panchenko 2016). On YouTube, videos regarding the flat-earth theory tend to mention other videos, posted on the same platform or on other social media, as documentary sources to be substantiated or countered (Paolillo 2018). But if the web represents the ultimate vehicle for the construction and dissemination of contesting knowledge (Valaskivi 2022), it is also, at the same time, a potential threat. For conspiracy theorists, the pervasive power of control and manipulation by the elite lies in its power to interdict and censor. One example is Tinelli’s website, which offers a playlist containing “some videos that are not accepted by regime platforms”, including, in addition to those dealing with the subject of the flat Earth, those on the coronavirus, 9/11 attack, and vaccines⁷.

3.2. Heterodox Discourses around the Globe

In the book *One Hundred Proofs that the Earth is not a Globe*, one of the classic texts of flat earthism, William Carpenter introduces the examination of the one hundred proofs supporting the thesis enunciated in the title, asserting that the privileged way to acquire

knowledge lies in the use of the senses that God has bestowed on mankind (Carpenter 1885). This premise encapsulates two fundamental, mutually complementary arguments of the current flat-earth rhetoric. The first is the appeal to the *auctoritas* of religious tradition. Nineteenth-century flat-earth theorists, as examined in the previous section, were animated by a fervor that led them to read the Bible as a flat-earth book, searching the Old Testament for confirmations of this conception. On the other hand, religious language alternates with pragmatic and rational arguments. Consistent with Rowbotham's zetetic method, inquiry must rest on direct observation, abandoning uncritical acceptance of notions taught in school (Scott 2018). A century and a half after Carpenter's book, Eric Dubay's *200 Proofs Earth is not a Spinning Ball* (Dubay 2018) is published. Although the evidence is doubled and updated in light of the latest scientific knowledge, the logic of contemporary flat-earth discourse retains the same structure as in Carpenter's time.

An example in the Italian context is offered by *Terra Piatta*, one of the most followed public channels on Telegram with about 2400 subscribers, opened in November 2016 and administered by user ArcoBaiter. In one of the messages posted on the channel, the *experimentum crucis* of the denial of the Earth's curvature is addressed:

If I were convinced that I was a spherical earth I would wonder at what altitude the curvature is seen. Here is a link that says so: 20 km. *Focus* [magazine], hit and miss from an amateur photo at 34 km, 14 km higher and no curvature! I if I were a spherical-earthier I would begin to have doubts. (post of 18 April 2018)

The ridiculous thing that spherical-earthers or blah blah-earth science can answer everything and see stars or planets thousands of light years away, but to the simple question: at what altitude we should perceive the curvature. . . There is no official site that can answer this simple question. (post of 9 August 2023)

Behind these miscalculations lies the deception operated by the powers that govern space research and media communication and which borrows the arguments already advanced by Johnson in the 1950s about the falsification of space images [. . .]. You know since I started writing on this channel and searching for the truth, I didn't think I would find so much evidence to sink the whole system that governs the world, first and foremost NASA that despite everything continues to maintain a FAKE line (post of 5 December 2020)—All photos of the entire globe at altitudes far above Earth's orbit are with cutouts. . . of the classic photomontage. (post of 25 January 2017)

Against the information deemed false that is disseminated by scientific institutions, the "common man" has the opportunity to verify the reality of the facts through independently conducted field research. Along the lines of Rowbotham's nineteenth-century experiments, a measurement is made concerning the surface level of the waters for the purpose of verifying the absence of Earth's curvature:

I finally did the test I had been waiting for. I placed my Nikon 1 m above sea level from a small beach on the coast of Muggia (Trieste) and zoomed all the way to Fincantieri in Monfalcone, all over a distance of 25.28 km. From the curvature calculations I should have had an elevation gain of 50!!! (post of 15 August 2017)

In a later message, ArcoBaiter makes explicit the meaning he ascribes to the conspiratorial view of flat earthism, pointing to the alleged motivation for the deception perpetrated against humanity:

They could not tell the world: we are on a flat earth enclosed by a dome of self-healing blue ice with a temperature hundreds of degrees below zero that does not melt like normal ice [. . .]. Why not say that? Well obvious, everyone would wonder who created the dome. Answer, an intelligence superior to man, therefore there would be no more leadership, consequently the masters of this world would lose control and authority. People would want to go and see the ends of the earth, touch the Dome, or at least, get clarification about it [. . .]. I do

not think that I have the truth in my pocket, however, these considerations of mine are the result of the many inconsistencies that I found after I decided to go deeper and walk through this topic. Today I can say that I came in as a ball land and I came out as a flat-earther. (post of 9 May 2020)

We are like “fish in an aquarium”, ArcoBaiter argues in a 27 April 2020 message, alluding to our position within a world enclosed under a dome, but also, metaphorically, in a society controlled by the “masters of the world”. Hence, the final exhortation, “wake up from the deception”. The explanation given calls into question technologically evolved alien civilizations responsible for locking us up on a flat Earth under an ice dome.

The power elite’s cover-up of the truth about the shape of the planet hints at an even larger conspiracy. Flat earthism represents an accomplished case of superconspiracy (Barkun 2003) that aspires to include numerous other conspiracy theories within its interpretive framework through a semiotic network of cross-references, from the Illuminati sect to chemical trails to control the climate, from the COVID-19 pandemic planned at the Event 201 summit to mental manipulation carried out by secret military programs. It is the expression of a complex conspiratorial mentality consisting of the propensity to read the world dramaturgically as a theater of the symbolic clash between light and darkness, where “every face is a mask” and where a malevolent group operates relentlessly as a *daemon ex machina* pulling the strings of history (Moscovici 1987). Conspiracism is composed of a repertoire of varied narratives that are mutually supportive and continuously revisited. One case that illustrates this process of reworking and expanding the flat-earth theory is that of the YouTube channel *Il punto di vista*, in which the discourse on flat earthism is inscribed within the more recent “big Earth” theory. Proponents of this theory agree that our planet has a flat shape and is surrounded by Antarctic ice, but they hypothesize that the edge of the Earth does not end at this ice, as usually imagined by flat earthers. Beyond it, the Earth would extend to include numerous other unknown and unexplored continents:

Yes, we are interested in the shape, but what we are more interested in in this case is to understand that we are probably on a portion of a much larger earth, so around it would open up a whole new scenario [. . .]. The point is that the moment I have a spherical Earth, a boundary is not contemplated. . . Instead, if there is a boundary, as there most likely is, it is the ice of Antarctica, there is someone behind that boundary. Since the nature of man is curiosity, imagine that tomorrow comes this information. Basically those who can afford it would leave to go and explore, thus uncovering this Pandora’s box that has been well guarded not for decades but probably for hundreds of years. . . We are in a kind of enclosure: this enclosure could be a school, it could be a rehabilitation, it could be an experiment⁸.

The “border” is militarily guarded, thus making it impossible to penetrate the space that extends beyond it. According to one of the hypotheses put forward by the flat earthers, some of these continents would be inhabited by human populations that took refuge there as a result of one of the great resets that occurred in the past. The phrase “great reset” recalls the international economic revitalization project that sees the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity for social transformation, as proposed by Klaus Schwab, president of the World Economic Forum, at the Davos meeting in 2020. Conspiracy theorists believe the pandemic is a tool planned by the power elite to achieve that agenda (Christensen and Au 2023; Roth 2021) and see the current one as only the latest, in order of time, in a series of other resets covered up for the purpose of concealing the existence of a civilization more technologically advanced than the one of today. The conspiracy about the shape of the Earth thus fits into a larger conspiracy concerning an alternative history that has been concealed for centuries by the “official narrative”.

4. Discussion

Flat earthism, like other conspiracy theories, is a dissident narrative that opposes mainstream discourse in order to refute it (Oswald 2016). The main polemical target of flat earthism is academic science that is embedded in socially legitimized institutions of knowledge (Mohammed 2019). Indeed, flat earthers accredit a countercultural cosmological view based on the geocentric model and rely on Rowbotham's zetetic method to recuse themselves from the conclusions of official science. With this in mind, they outline a counterhistory of scientific thought that targets its highest representatives, from Copernicus to Galileo, Newton to Einstein, redeeming historical figures affected by a cultural *damnatio memoriae*, protagonists of a mythical narrative such as the scientist Nikola Tesla, frequently evoked by conspiracy theorists for his free energy experiments. Implementing a rhetorical technique of dissociation of notions, flat earthism establishes an antithesis between official science, judged to be erroneous and especially corrupt, and alternative science, deposited in suppressed knowledge of the past and amateur research constructed from the "bottom up" in participatory form by independent scholars unaffiliated with university institutions (Gajewski 2018; Gomes 2020).

Against the theses advocated by flat earthism, science and the public respond with debunking strategies that focus on three levels of discourse: content, proponents, and method. At the first level, the content proposed by flat earthers is countered with the use of technical arguments. For example, on the blog *L'illusione della terra piatta*, which presents itself as a guide to avoiding "improbable theories", the manager explains the following:

I decided to start this blog with the aim of providing, to anyone interested, the tools to understand the reality around us in an understandable and, at the same time, mathematically rigorous way. To do this, I will present the proofs adduced by flat-earthers and refute them one by one⁹.

The blog examines the main themes of the flat earthers and responds to them, with the help of videos, graphic simulations, articles, and images, by means of reasoning that defends the validity of academic science. A second mode of countering flat earthism relies on *ad hominem* argument by which the rationality of their proponents is disqualified, even before the theses advocated. To this end, many videos found on YouTube adopt irony and ridicule with mocking intent, as reflected in titles such as "Terra piatta: la teoria della pazzia" (Flat Earth: the theory of madness) on the Neurodrome channel¹⁰ or "Terra piatta: il funerale dell'intelligenza umana" (Flat Earth: the funeral of human intelligence) on the Chronos channel¹¹. Another approach delegitimizes flat earthism by searching for its reasons for adherence in psychological deficits, logical fallacies, cultural conditioning, or social deprivation, as is the case in the video "Psicologia e Complotto: allunaggio, terra piatta, no-mask, 5G e bufale" on Sebastiano Dato's channel¹². But the reply to flat earthism can lead, at a third level, to methodological reflection:

In the scientific method, doubt is fundamental [...]. Doubt carried to excess, however, becomes alarming. In the face of solid and repeated evidence, it is reasonable to accept the results that are supported by competent experts in different fields. This is also part of the method of science. Otherwise, it becomes plausible to question anything. (Ranzini 2019)

The secondary target of flat earthism is institutional religion. As noted above, a religious afflatus propelled the pioneers of flat earthism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Already for Rowbotham, the quest for a flat Earth is symbolically described, in a biblical framework, as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil embodied in modern science. A struggle with millenarian overtones is destined to lead toward an age of final revelation about the shape of our planet. It is in this religious root that the rationale behind the alleged deception hypothesized by flat earthers finds explanation. The idea of a spherical Earth, in its leading us to believe that we occupy a peripheral position in the universe, is the main cause of relativism and atheism (Hendrie 2016). Its function is to enable the secularization project planned by economic and political power elites.

This “heliocentric mythology” would have diabolical origins and would be aimed at weakening the Christian faith. On the basis of a literalist interpretation of the Bible, which departs from that of institutional religion, flat earthism ideally relocates the Earth to the center of creation, offering an antidote to this secularizing drift to reconcile with a Christianity deemed more authentic (Roberts 2017). For flat earthers, academic science and traditional religion are two sides of the same coin, both tending to promote heliocentrism, a “religious dogma masquerading as science” (Hendrie 2019). Modern versions of geocentrism and creationism, strongly felt in the conservative milieu, especially American and Protestant (Schadewald 2015), thus resurface, “citizens of developed countries wrongly believe themselves to be free from the deception of religion. They do not know, in fact, that they are the followers of a new cult: the science religion” (Satya 2019). For the flat-earth channel *Costiera Amalfitana*, which has about 25 thousand members on Facebook, “Questioning, researching, performing tests and refuting scientific facts from all angles is science. Blindly believing what we have been told and taught is religion”¹³. In the heliocentric model, flat earthers see the triumph of academic scientism and positivism, which they label, reversing the charge they frequently fall victim to, as pseudoscience.

Ultimately flat earthism, as an astronomical theory, turns out to contradict science and common sense, and as a conspiracy theory, it formulates an anti-establishment discourse that dismisses the plausibility of socially and culturally accredited representations (Neville-Shepard 2018). Flat-earthism discourse combines a dual register, scientific and religious, namely, the critique aimed at academic science and organized religion is counterbalanced by the call for a deinstitutionalized science and religion, expressions of an alternative epistemology to the dominant one. Science-based arguments are the key persuasive resource and, at the same time, the aspect most criticized in the public debate by debunkers, although there are numerous references to the sphere of religion (Landrum et al. 2021). This counter-cultural character of contemporary flat earthism in Italy is the outcome of genealogical discontinuities that have occurred since the 19th century and which have placed the belief in the flat Earth in today’s configuration of power relations characterized by the epistemological conflict between an institutional form of knowledge and an alternative and independent form.

To better understand the cultural peculiarities of Italian flat earthism, a comparison with American flat earthism is useful. In the United States, where it is most widespread, the flat-earth narrative shows an accentuated religious character attributable to conservative Christianity. The argumentations of American flat earthers, in line with the tradition started by Rowbotham, are based on the authority of biblical text and consider the criticisms of their theory as an expression of secularist thought dominant in contemporary society, opposed to the Christian faith (Diaz Ruiz and Nilsson 2023). According to the POLES 2021 Survey, flat-earthism—and the related Moon landing conspiracy theory—is prevalent among millennials and generation Z, supporters of Donald Trump’s political positions (Hamilton 2022). These conspiracy theories, together with others that share with them a rejection of official science such as with COVID-19 or climate change, are also recurrent among conservatives, republicans, and evangelical Christians (Enders et al. 2022; Hamilton 2024). The American context is the one in which the correlation between adherence to conspiracism and religious identification is stronger than in other areas such as European countries, a correlation which is explained by the fact that in the United States, religiosity tends to be more politicized and to take on more right-wing orientations (Frenken et al. 2022). Italy is representative of the European situation, where the propensity to accept conspiracy theories is greater among the electorate of populist parties and these, in turn, draw on conspiracy rhetoric in their public discourse (Salvati et al. 2022), thus reflecting the critical attitude of conspiracy narratives. This orientation of populist parties was further accentuated with the coronavirus pandemic during which they manifested polemical instances towards the health prevention measures implemented by the Italian government (Giuliani and Presaghi 2023). Although the flat-earth doctrine in Italy is based on ideas and concepts similar to those found by conspiracy theorists in America and shows, as happens

in the United States, a similar connection with right-wing political ideologies, it is, however, less close on a religious level, to forms of traditionalist Christianity. In fact, Italian flat earthism is informed by a predominantly secular language and, even when it leverages religious themes, it signals a distancing from the organized religion of the church to become closer to the doctrines, knowledge, and symbolisms that typically circulate in the *milieu* of alternative spiritualities and non-academic science. A confirmation of this last point is given by the recent national gathering of Italian flat earthers, entitled *Revelatio orbis terrarum*, held in Rome in November 2023, at which Gabriele Ceracchini, leader of the group Popolo Vivente, announced the founding of ShinSekai-Neomondismo, a new and alternative cult that aims to give an expressly spiritual direction to the flat-earth movement¹⁴.

5. Materials and Methods

The present study, which focuses on the flat-earth conspiracy theory in the Italian context, was based on the analysis of two main types of material. The first consists of recent popular nonfiction works authored by a number of recognized exponents and opinion leaders of the Italian flat-earth movement and those who are actively engaged in promoting this theory through publications and participation in public events such as conferences. The second type consists of a *corpus* of online documents, specifically Facebook pages of flat-earth associations, Telegram groups, and YouTube channels for and against the conspiracy theory, selected according to their relevance given their specialization on the flat-earth topic and number of followers. Both types of material cover the period between 2016 and 2023.

This material was treated according to the qualitative approaches of critical thematic discourse analysis (Lawless and Chen 2019) and rhetorical analysis (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958). Critical thematic discourse analysis made it possible to highlight the recurrent and prevailing contents and ideologies, and social power relations implied in the texts; rhetorical analysis made it possible to identify the typical argumentative patterns and forms of reasoning that structure language for or against flat earthism.

6. Conclusions

This article focused on the flat-earth conspiracy theory. The genealogical reconstruction presented in the previous pages has shown how flat earthism, originally born as an alternative astronomical model, was subsequently inscribed, starting from the 19th century, within a network of power relations between different epistemic authorities, in opposition on the scientific, religious, and secular level. The conflict between these authorities has contributed, over the course of two centuries, to making flat earthism a conspiracy theory, a stigmatized discursive formation supported by dissident groups who contest the knowledge of socially legitimized institutions.

In the specific cultural context of Italy, the flat-earth conspiracy theory is proposed as a critical narrative. This narrative is critical insofar as it accomplishes a denunciation of two opposing forms of silence or tacit knowledge. The first is *doxa*, the common sense knowledge we all share, that goes unspoken because it is considered so obvious and taken for granted as to be beyond dispute, as in the case of the statement “the Earth is round”. The second is backstage (*sensu* Goffman 1959), the hidden space where, metaphorically, a knowledge shared only by a small occult circle of power would be concealed, that goes unspoken because it is kept secret. In contradicting the first kind of silence or tacit knowledge, flat earthism is a theory, in a strictly etymological sense, paradoxical; in pointing to the existence of the second kind of silence or tacit knowledge, it is proposed as revealing and unmasking.

The reasons for the attraction of these kinds of narratives are heterogeneous, including factors such as responding to the psychological need for security and control, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a group, giving expression to radical political ideologies, providing meaning to traumatic events (Douglas et al. 2019), attributing blame and responsibility to a potential enemy (Konkes and Lester 2017). The flat-earth narrative carries these demands

and implements a radical reinterpretation of the whole of human history as a global deception perpetrated by a power elite to which it responds with a counter knowledge deemed salvific and emancipatory for its supporters.

Both internationally and in Italy, the current surge and success of the flat-earth movement, favored by social media which constitute the main place of elaboration of this conspiracy theory, especially through videos on YouTube, lies in its ability to give meaning to a world perceived as new, transforming, and dangerous; this applies in today's post-pandemic society exactly as in that of Rowbotham's time, marked by social and cultural innovations introduced by the industrial revolution (Weill 2022). The Italian case, explored in depth in this article, offers a privileged point of view in the study of conspiracism on at least two aspects, since it allows the following to be shown: (a) flat earthism is part of a broader conspiracy discourse circulating via the web within a movement which, despite local specificities, has a transnational character and speaks a *lingua franca* composed of a repertoire of meanings, counter knowledge and dissident social and political values in which conspiracy theorists recognize themselves; (b) despite the fact that flat earthers in Italy form a minority on the margins of the mainstream culture and are denigrated by the media, public opinion, and institutions, the narrative and beliefs they propose are able to attract and coagulate heterogeneous forms of criticism and civil activism—think to the denialist front during the recent pandemic or the opposition to the war between Russia and Ukraine—which can have significant social repercussions and political uses in the national public debate.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.quora.com/Are-flat-earth-people-mentally-ill> (accessed on 16 November 2023).
- 2 <https://today.yougov.com/topics/philosophy/articles-reports/2018/-04/02/most-flat-earthers-consider-themselves-religious> (accessed on 30 November 2023).
- 3 <https://www.theflatearthsociety.org/home/index.php/library> (accessed on 27 November 2023).
- 4 <http://www.atlanteanconspiracy.com/2015/03/flat-earth-society-controlled-op.html> (accessed on 27 November 2023).
- 5 <https://www.youtube.com/c/markksargent> (accessed on 27 November 2023).
- 6 <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/25/us/b-o-b-flat-earth-gofundme-trnd/index.html> (accessed on 27 November 2023).
- 7 <https://www.tinelli.eu/indice.html> (accessed on 27 November 2023).
- 8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOIBq1d37DY> (accessed on 28 November 2023).
- 9 <https://flatearthdelusion.blogspot.com/p/home> (accessed on 22 November 2023).
- 10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hbPRi5GazE> (accessed on 22 November 2023).
- 11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FcPcaouv8I> (accessed on 22 November 2023).
- 12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PRjQIt4fXs> (accessed on 22 November 2023).
- 13 https://www.facebook.com/pg/CostieraAmalfitana.2/about/?ref--page_internal (accessed on 26 November 2023).
- 14 [https://www.facebook.com/events/1080309596312983/?acontext=%7B%22event_action_history%22%3A\[%7D&locale=it_IT](https://www.facebook.com/events/1080309596312983/?acontext=%7B%22event_action_history%22%3A[%7D&locale=it_IT) (accessed on 30 November 2023).

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