



International **PSEUDOLAW** Research Network



London (and Online) 18-19th June 2026

Hosted by the Criminal Justice Centre, Queen Mary University of London

Full Program



Queen Mary
University of London

Welcome!

This two-day conference is the culmination of many things, and, we hope, the beginning of many more. One could reasonably trace the origins of contemporary pseudolegal practices to the rise of the tax protest movement and the Posse Comitatus in the United States in the 1960s; by contrast, the field of pseudolaw studies emerged much more recently and in a seemingly more global fashion, approximately a decade ago and roughly contemporaneously in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. So far as we are aware, the first special issue of a journal dedicated to the discussion of pseudolaw was volume 6 of the *International Journal of Coercion, Abuse, and Manipulation* in 2023, and the first edited scholarly collection on the topic was Hobbs, Young, and McIntyre's *Pseudolaw and Sovereign Citizens* in 2025. Pseudolegal practices have exploded in popularity in recent years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, as shown by the incredible diversity of topics and presenters at this event, so too has the number of researchers paying attention to this serious subject matter.

It is with these developments in mind that we decided not just to organize this conference but also to launch the International Pseudolaw Research Network, which we hope will serve as a valuable resource for anyone interested in pseudolaw, legal conspiracy theories, and related topics. To find out more about the IPRN and become a member, you can visit our website at www.pseudolaw.org.

We would like to sincerely thank the Criminal Justice Centre at Queen Mary University of London for supporting this event, as well as Adelaide University for their support of the launch of the IPRN.

David Griffin, Kate Leader, and Joe McIntyre
June 2026

Register:

Please register to attend (registration is free) for either day:

Day 1: Online Forum [Registration for 18 June, 12:15 to 17:00 BST \(online only\)](#)

Day 2: London Conference [Registration for 19 June, 9:00 to 18:30 BST \(online attendance\)](#)
 [Registration for 19 June, 9:00 to 18:30 BST \(in-person attendance\)](#)

Day One: Online Forum

18 June 2026 – Online Only

This first day of the conference recognises that pseudolaw is a global phenomenon and is being researched by scholars all around the world. To facilitate an inclusive and diverse discussion, the first day of the conference is being held as an online-only forum.

All times are in BST (GMT +1)

12:15	Welcome	
	Panel 1	
12:30	Young, Steve & Hobbs, Harry	No Contract: Sovereign Citizen Pseudolaw and the Social Contract
12:45	Baer Arnold, Bruce	Sovereign Citizens in a dark mirror: Presidential Pseudolaw
13:00	Heilpern, David	Profiteers and Pseudolaw – Making money out of ignorance and misery in Australia
13:15	Panel Q&A	
	Panel 2	
13:30	Perumal, Ramdhass & Mehta, Chelsy	The Architecture of Distrust: Pseudolaw, Pandemic Governance and the Weaponisation of Anti-Statist Narratives
13:45	Demian, Melissa	Uncanny Law
14:00	Osbourne, Zareena	Informed Consent in the Age of Vaccine Misinformation: Conspiracy Theories and Medical Law in the UK
14:15	Panel Q&A	
14:30	Break	
	Panel 3	
15:00	Petroski, Karen	Pseudolaw in Power
15:15	Delmonico, Edward	Corpus-Based Multidimensional Analysis of Quantum Grammar Discourse: A Case Study of Sovereign Citizen Speech
15:30	Jervis, Robin	Capitalism, Conspiracy Theories and the Frankfurt School
15:45	Panel Q&A	
	Panel 4	
16:00	Siegel, Itai	“Are You Even Authorized to Be a Judge?”: How Dutch judges deal with pseudolegal argumentation in court
16:15	Habick, Timothy	Pseudolaw as Adversarial Pragmatic Misalignment: How Misinformative Texts Survive Good-Faith Professional Review
16:30	Sarteschi, Christine	Sovereign Citizen Ideology: Spotlight on the January 6 th Attack on the United States Capitol.
16:45	Panel Q&A	
17:00	Closing	

Day Two: London Conference

19 June 2026 - In Person event
Room 3.1 QM, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.

The second day of the conference will be held in London, with all presenters in person. The event will be streamed for those who wish to follow what is occurring on the day but are unable to attend.

All times are in BST (GMT +1)

9-9.30	Registration - Tea and Coffee	
9:30	Introducing the International Pseudolaw Research Network Joe McIntyre, Kate Leader and David Griffin	
10-11.30	Panel 1	
	Jervis, Robin & O'Mant, George	Freemen on the Land in the UK: Pseudolaw in Comparative Perspective
	Thomson, Campbell	"A Common Law Coup in WEFminster": Pseudolaw activism in the UK's Freedom Movement
	Önnerfors, Andreas	Gudalandet – Swedish Pseudolaw in Court
1130-11.45	Morning Tea	
11.45-1.15	Panel 2	
	Griffin, David	Parasitic Genre and "Lexomancy": A Linguistic Approach to the Analysis of Pseudolegal Discourse
	McAulay, Joe	"When has this argument ever worked?" Contestation over Pseudo-Law Narratives in Britain's online Occultic Milieu
	Rooney, Tess	From Fraudster to Folk Hero: Pseudolegal Narratives and Social Media Litigation
1.15-2.	Lunch	
2-3.30	Panel 3	
	Mahajnah, Taysier Roberto	The Institutional Mainstreaming of Post-Covid Legal Conspiracy Narratives in the United States and Italy
	Samet, Robert	The Politics of Pseudolaw
	Löbber, Anna	Narratives of Awakening
3.30-3.45	Afternoon Tea	
3.45-5.15	Panel 4	
	Dew, Spencer	"The Natural Order Coded Within Our Skin"
	Kochi, Tarik	Rethinking 'sovereign citizens' in relation to deception, settler colonialism and neoliberalism.
	Szczyrbak, Magda	Agency and (de)legitimation in the discourse of self-represented sovereign citizens
	Uberti, Francesca	Invocations of Natural Law and Transcendent Legality in UK Fringe Legal Thought
5.15 - 6.30	Reception Drinks	

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Baer Arnold, Bruce

University of Canberra (Australia)

Sovereign Citizens in a dark mirror: Presidential Pseudolaw

Sovereign citizens – exemplars of pseudolaw – are typically understood as susceptible to conspiracy theories in justifying both a fundamental misunderstanding of conventional law (ie legal roles, procedures and concepts that are ‘givens’ in liberal democratic justice systems) and as being politically marginal. That marginality reflects their incapacity in dealing with systems that both deny the reality of their claims and disregard what exponents regard as valid procedures. Marginality also reflects their extreme but incoherent possessive individualism, a matter of a legal smorgasbord that each sovereign grazes in choosing rights, responsibilities and a legitimacy unrecognised by most peers. This paper offers a novel lens on pseudolaw, disinformation, nostalgia, authority and legal deliberation by considering an extreme sovereign.

That sovereign is fundamentally empowered rather than administratively marginal, embraces myths about past law and the decisionism valorised by theorists such as Carl Schmitt, disregards legal and social expectations regarding responsibility, fosters a post-truth political discourse and reifies conspiracy theories that are the descendants of historic ethno-religious anxieties. The individual in question – possessed of increasing personal wealth and the power (both hard and soft, resulting for example in media subservience) of one of the world’s hegemonic powers – is of course the current United States President.

This paper considers Trump as a dark mirror of the sovereign citizens who peddle DIY litigation kits, articulate myths about Magna Carta, deny the authority of law when contrary to their personal interests, claim billions in gold in litigation and engage in lawfare. The paper asks what happens when a sovereign gets the keys to the kingdom. It considers emotion (particularly resentment, fear and anger) in the sovereign citizen mindset. It discusses disinformation by and for the extreme sovereign as both a driver of a postTruth society, deliberately exacerbated by coercion of traditional media, and something that reinforces disengagement by potential pseudolaw audiences from shared community legal values.

Associate Professor Dr. Bruce Baer Arnold teaches law at the University of Canberra, where he directs the undergraduate (LLB) law program. He has published widely on data protection, disinformation in digital and traditional environments, pseudolaw and corporate psychopathy. His conference presentation brings together several of those fields. Indicative publications are chapters in Sheehy, Boddy & Arnold (eds), *Research Handbook on Corporate Psychopaths* (Elgar, 2026) and ‘Pseudolaw as Utopia and Legal Smorgasbord’ in Young, Hobbs & McIntyre (eds), *Pseudolaw and Sovereign Citizens* (Hart, 2025). Monographs on legal personhood, identity crime, immortalisation and cognition technologies are scheduled for publication in 2026/7.

Delmonico, Edward

University of Helsinki (Finland)

**Corpus-Based Multidimensional Analysis of Quantum Grammar Discourse:
A Case Study of Sovereign Citizen Speech**

Sovereign Citizens, brandishing their homemade documents and bandying their tortured legal definitions, have long been a source of morbid fascination by legal scholars. Crucially, however, no linguistic research exists on how Sovereign Citizens communicate and recruit new members outside the courtroom. Consequently, a simple question cries out to be answered: how can a movement based on legal techniques which never work keep growing?

This case study investigates the linguistic practices of Sovereign Citizens using an original corpus of speeches and seminars given by leaders of the Quantum Grammar subgroup: the QG Corpus. Register features are measured quantitatively using Biber (1988)'s multidimensional analysis and compared to analysis of other legal texts (i.e. Goźdz-Roszkowski 2011). By examining the dimensional signature of the corpus, it is possible to gain insight into distinctive and codifying features of Sovereign Citizen speech. Next, the study undertakes a more qualitative analysis of legal terminology in the corpus. A general taxonomy of legal vocabulary is compiled (Tiersma 1999, Glogar 2023, Goźdz-Roszkowski 2011) and patterns of usage are identified.

Preliminary results from the multidimensional analysis are surprising. Contrary to intuition, the QG Corpus conspicuously lacks overtly persuasive features—its dimensional signature is highly dissimilar to that of, say, a sales pitch. Some of its dimensions are similar to those of conversations, some to prepared speeches, and some to broadcasts. The QG Corpus defies simple categorization as a register.

In summary, this case study undertakes some of the first linguistic investigation into the internal workings of a Sovereign Citizen group. It sheds light both on the covert nature of Sovereign Citizen persuasive rhetoric and the ways they perform legal authority. Sovereign Citizens, like many fringe groups, have come to exert ever-greater influence on politics and daily life.

Consequently, this research becomes ever more critical in order to understand what draws people into their orbit.

Edward Delmonico is a master's student at the University of Helsinki. His research interests include forensic linguistics, conspiracy theories, and computational linguistics. He follows fringe online subcultures the way most people follow reality television.

Demian, Melissa

St. Andrews University (UK)

Uncanny Law

Pseudolaw is now canonically described as reproducing the form of legal processes, documents, and utterances – but not their content. This feature of pseudolaw is commonly understood as part of what makes it appealing to those who try to use it, whether because they genuinely mistake it for real law, or because they regard it as superior to the law emanating from fraudulent states. For legal practitioners, this imitative relationship to actual law produces instead a disquieting sense of looking into a parallel universe.

In his 1919 essay on “The Uncanny,” Freud set out a set of parameters for uncanny experiences by noting the closeness of the uncanny in German (*unheimlich*) to its antonym, the homely or familiar (*heimlich*) which can also be used in the sense of being secretive or deceptive. Freud noted that *heimlich* carried dual connotations: “on the one hand...that which is familiar and pleasant, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight.” From this slippage between the intimately known and the secretive he developed his concept of the uncanny, an experience with something that initially looks familiar and even attractive, but then turns out not to be what it seems.

This uncanny nature of pseudolaw provides its link to conspiracy theorising on the part of many pseudolaw adherents. While pseudolaw itself may look uncanny to legal professionals, it is arguably a response to the “canny” or *heimlich* nature of law to people who are not legal professionals: both its familiarity, and its capacity to conceal hidden intentions, relationships, and meanings. These may include the secret histories of states and their governments that pseudolaw activists say they have uncovered. The uncanny in law appears to throw up resemblances between law and pseudolaw for legal actors; at the same time it shows how pseudolegal actors reach for those resemblances to the activities of states that are at the same time accused of concealing their true nature and purpose.

Melissa Demian is a Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews and, for the 2025/26 academic year, Core Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. She is a legal anthropologist whose research interests for the last 30 years have included local courts, legal pluralism, customary law, colonial legal history, and the “cultural defense,” with a primary focus on the western Pacific. Her approach to “pseudolaw” as a conceptual problem stems directly from these interests as they now pertain to the legal consciousness of people in the trans-Atlantic Anglophone sphere who reject the legitimacy of the states and legal regimes they inhabit.

Dew, Spencer

The Ohio State University (USA)

“The Natural Order Coded Within Our Skin”

My paper examines conceptions of “natural law” voiced by African American vernacular legal theorists and practitioners, who articulate a worldview in which moral law is linked with biological and bio-chemical law through “melanin theory.”

These thinkers engage in both “conspiracy theory” and “pseudolaw.” For them, melanin is not merely the source of skin pigment but, literally, “bio-intelligence,” a “technology coded within our skin.” Melanin offers a map of the “cosmic design,” the “natural order” of the universe, linking the divinely-ordained conception of ideal law (as synonymous with justice) and the divinely-designed human (as melanated and, thus, capable of potential divine status). Melanin functions as an inherent capacity for knowing the law and an ingrained desire for aligning society, despite and through its corrupt and unjust legal systems, with divine law.

I argue here that these fringe thinkers offer valuable insight into and examples of broader issues in relation to law and society. First, such thinking offers a critique of the existing legal system, with a particular eye toward anti-black (and anti-indigenous) bias. Second, this vision of natural law as both a divinely ordained moral order *and* a divinely patterned creation facilitates a wide variety of other conspiracy beliefs—of diet and public health practices (from fluoride to vaccines) as designed to interrupt the “sacred technology” embedded in melanin, for instance, or of police surveillance and incarceration of black citizens as linked to conspiracies involving the harvest of melanin. Third, such thinkers represent a case study in the way “conspiracy” logic can both reverberate with and distract from more practical and actionable political critique, while, fourth, these thinkers highlight and explicitly discuss a metaphysical understanding of law, which I take to be reflective of more mainstream beliefs held by the populace at large.

Spencer Dew is Associate Teaching Professor in the departments of Comparative Studies and African American and African Studies at the Ohio State University. He is the author of *The Aliites: Race and Law in the Religions of Noble Drew Ali* (University of Chicago Press, 2019) and is short review editor for *Religious Studies Review*. He writes widely on religiously-informed legal consciousness and vernacular media use within contemporary religious movements.

Griffin, David

University of Leeds (UK)

**Parasitic Genre and “Lexomancy”:
A Linguistic Approach to the Analysis of Pseudolegal Discourse**

It is important but relatively straightforward to explain *why* pseudolegal arguments are wrong; invariably, as pseudolaw is definitionally not grounded in legitimate law, there will be a statute, piece of caselaw, or other similarly authoritative source which lays out a rule contrary to the argument being made. It is generally less straightforward, but ultimately more interesting from a discourse analytical perspective, to consider *how* pseudolegal arguments are wrong – in other words, to determine the linguistic and pragmatic features that characterize pseudolegal argumentation. By identifying such trends at scale, it is possible not only to more effectively analyze individual pseudolegal texts (broadly defined) but also to meaningfully compare texts produced by members of pseudolegal groups that may otherwise have seemingly little in common.

Drawing on theories of register and genre analysis (e.g. Swales 1990; Stein 2015) as well as prior linguistic analysis of pseudolaw (e.g. Griffin and Roemling 2024), this paper proposes that pseudolegal texts are best understood as belonging to “parasitic genres” – genres whose functioning depends upon a reader’s pre-existing familiarity with a specific non-pseudolegal genre. Sovereign Citizen-authored courtroom filings, for example, are decidedly distinct from courtroom filings written by actual attorneys, and yet the former could not exist without the latter. Determining which features a parasitic genre and its “host” share and which features distinguish the two allows for the identification of the most distinctive elements of pseudolegal texts, thereby enabling the more effective analysis of pseudolegal discourse writ large.

David Griffin is a linguist and American attorney based at the University of Leeds. His research interests include the use of language in legal contexts, the nature of pseudolaw, and the semiotics of authority more broadly. David’s PhD thesis, *Lexomancy: Law and Magic in the Pseudolegal Writings of the Sovereign Citizen Movement*, was the first substantial linguistic consideration of pseudolegal discourse and this has remained a central theme of his subsequent work. In addition to serving as the current treasurer for the International Association for Forensic and Legal Linguistics, David is one of the founders and co-convenors of the International Pseudolaw Research Network.

Habick, Timothy

Reasoning, Inc. (USA)

**Pseudolaw as Adversarial Pragmatic Misalignment:
How Misinformative Texts Survive Good-Faith Professional Review**

This paper proposes a linguistic account of pseudolaw grounded in ordinary mechanisms of pragmatic interpretation. Drawing on prior work on what I've termed pragmatic typos—small but consequential misalignments between intended meaning, linguistic form, and reader repair—I argue that pseudolaw represents a scaled and adversarial version of familiar communicative phenomena.

Pseudolegal texts typically exhibit grammatical well-formedness, legal register, and procedural mimicry, while lacking lawful interpretive anchoring. Their effectiveness does not depend on overt falsehood, but on the cooperative tendencies that readers of legally relevant materials use to repair ambiguity, infer purpose, and supply missing justificatory links. This produces artifacts that appear interpretable, reasoned, and institutionally aligned, despite being jurisdictionally empty. By analyzing pseudolaw through the lens of pragmatic governance and interpretive stability, the paper reframes conspiratorial legal discourse not as irrational belief, but as linguistically successful misalignment. This framework helps explain why pseudolaw is resilient under scrutiny, why it feels difficult to refute succinctly, and why judicial responses often rely on authority rather than explanation.

The analysis has implications for legal pedagogy, forensic linguistics, and judicial communication, suggesting that pseudolaw is best countered not by ridicule or repetition of authority, but by explicit diagnosis of its linguistic failure modes.

Timothy Habick is a linguist specializing in high-stakes language in education, law, and professional certification. As founder of Reasoning, Inc., he has advised ETS, LSAC, and AICPA on communicative clarity, fairness, and interpretive integrity. A former member of the ETS Reasoning Group, he has led World Bank assessment reform projects in Djibouti and Moldova. He holds a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and has produced forensic linguistic reports in matters involving authorship, defamation, and trademarks. His chapter “Disinformative Linguistics: Using Linguistic Science for Unethical Purposes” appears in the Routledge Handbook of Ethics in Forensic Linguistics (2026).

Heilpern, David

Southern Cross University (Australia)

**Profiteers and Pseudolaw –
Making money out of ignorance and misery in Australia**

Over the past two years my focus has shifted from legalistic refutation to investigating the profiteering sites – individuals and organisations which promote pseudo law and who charge PLA's by holding conferences and workshops, selling subscriptions and publications, providing individual advice and attending festivals and exhibitions - all for a fee.

In recent years I have gone undercover to attend four such events and this proposed paper considers the following questions:

- Who is making money out of the pseudo law phenomena?
- What is their level of popularity?
- How does their pitch work?
- What about all these cases they claim as 'evidence'?
- Who are their audience?
- What is the regulatory environment?
- Why are governments in Australia and world-wide not prosecuting these profiteers?
- What are the consequences of regulatory inaction?
- How can these profiteers be shut down – and should they be?

The proposed paper will focus on Australia, but also consider the profiteering entities in the United States, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

The above questions in turn give rise to a discussion of the proliferation and popularity of the PLA movement, highlighting the lack of anything beyond anecdotal evidence of exponential growth. Finally, the proposed paper will draw on my experience as a judicial officer to suggest that therapeutic justice models may well provide a non-punitive alternative to the current justice-system approaches to PLA's.

Perhaps we can beat these profiteers at their own game?

Professor David Heilpern was appointed as a Magistrate in 1998, and was at the time the youngest magistrate in Australia. He 'retired' in May 2020. He sat in the criminal, mining, family, industrial, coronial and children's jurisdictions of the Local Court, and was the Senior Civil Magistrate for five years. During his time on the bench, David was the principal educator for new magistrates throughout Australia and the Pacific and made several important reported decisions on criminal, environmental and evidence law.

Prior to his appointment, David was a litigation lawyer on the North Coast where he co-founded the law school at Southern Cross University in 1992, subsequently teaching in a range of subjects including constitutional law, criminal law and procedure and contracts. At the time, it was the first non-metropolitan law school in Australia. David maintained a litigation practice throughout this time, representing a wide range of defendants including high profile clients North East Forrest Alliance and Nimbin Hemp. During

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Conspiracy Theories and Pseudolaw

this time David graduated with a Masters in Law from SCU and was pronounced the Alumni of the Decade for the University in 2005.

David has authored or co-authored four published books, refereed journal articles on a range of legal and judicial topics, and is a prize-winning short story writer and poet. He regularly speaks at practical law conferences in Australia and internationally on advocacy, sovereign citizens, criminal law judicial trauma and courtcraft.

In August 2022, David was appointed as Dean of Law at SCU and his writing and research is now focussed on victim's rights, drug law reform, aboriginal overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, sovereign citizens and environmental activism.

Jervis, Robin

University of Brighton (UK)

Capitalism, Conspiracy Theories and the Frankfurt School

Conspiracy theories have become a mainstream phenomena in contemporary politics, representing an altered form of rationality and political action, with significant implications for democratic discourse. This paper seeks to examine this mode of thinking and its relationship with the themes and content of conspiracy theories using the analytical tools of the early Frankfurt School, with a specific focus on the conception of alternative rationalities explored in Adorno's *The Stars Down to Earth*. In so doing it demonstrates the continued relevance of Frankfurt School theory and seeks to shift the critical debate in conspiracy theory beyond established accounts of disempowerment and desperation in the wake of decades of neoliberalism. In particular, the paper examines how political polarisation transcends ideological schisms and represents fundamental differences in rationality inherent to conspiracy theory which help to define this slippery and loose category of events, ideas and movements. These rationalities are ultimately located as epiphenomena of capitalist mass culture.

Dr Robin Jervis is a Principal Lecturer in Politics in the School of Humanities and Social Science, University of Brighton, UK, and a member of the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics (CAPPE). His research in the study of pseudolaw and conspiracy theories represents the beginning of a new project which draws discourses on stigmatised knowledge into dialogue with critical social theory. Seeing conspiratorial beliefs as both resistance and subjection to capitalism draws a link with his previous work on transitions beyond capitalism, worker co-operatives and critical theory, most recently in a series of articles, some co-authored with Neal Harris and published in *European Journal of Social Theory* (2024), *Economic and Industrial Democracy* (2025), *Democratic Theory* (2024), *Capital and Class* (2025), and *Review of Radical Political Economy* (forthcoming). He teaches on a range of programmes in political theory, comparative politics, political economy and research methods. He holds a PhD in PPE from the University of York.

Jervis, Robin & O'Mant, George

University of Brighton (UK)

**Freemen on the Land in the UK:
Pseudolaw in Comparative Perspective**

The concept of pseudolaw describes conspiratorial systems of thought proposing a hidden legal system of “common law” in which law takes on almost magical properties. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit, cost of living crisis, and the rise of radical right populism, the potential of such movements to enter public discourse and have real-world political and social effects is increased. This paper compares two variants of pseudolaw - the “Sovereign Citizen” movement in the US and the “Freemen on the Land” in the UK, noting the growth of this movement in Canada and Australia. In so doing it seeks to clarify the lineage and trajectory of pseudolaw movements and understand how the context of US Sovereign Citizen theories, rooted in Christian Identity, antisemitism, reconstruction and the 14th Amendment, is discarded and mutated to allow pseudolaw’s translation to other jurisdictions. In so doing it adds to the scant literature on the movement in the UK. It contextualises these similar theories historically, highlighting their points of departure, and identifies a series of tropes that unite them, drawing on the “pseudolaw memplex” proposed by Netolitzky. These include a belief in the gold standard, the pseudolegal construct of ‘Admiralty Law’, and the fetishisation of foundational legal documents such as Magna Carta. It seeks to highlight how these similarities develop in different legal contexts and locate the value of these tropes in legalistic conspiracy thinking.

Dr. Robin Jervis is a Principal Lecturer in Politics in the School of Humanities and Social Science, University of Brighton, UK, and a member of the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics (CAPPE). His research in the study of pseudolaw and conspiracy theories represents the beginning of a new project which draws discourses on stigmatised knowledge into dialogue with critical social theory. Seeing conspiratorial beliefs as both resistance and subjection to capitalism draws a link with his previous work on transitions beyond capitalism, worker co-operatives and critical theory, most recently in a series of articles, some co-authored with Neal Harris and published in *European Journal of Social Theory* (2024), *Economic and Industrial Democracy* (2025), *Democratic Theory* (2024), *Capital and Class* (2025), and *Review of Radical Political Economy* (forthcoming). He teaches on a range of programmes in political theory, comparative politics, political economy and research methods. He holds a PhD in PPE from the University of York.

Kochi, Tarik

University of Sussex (UK)

**Rethinking 'sovereign citizens' in relation to deception,
settler colonialism and neoliberalism**

'Sovereign citizen', 'freeman on the land', 'conspiratorial sovereigntist' and 'pseudolaw' type beliefs cover a broad range of often contradictory standpoints and are often put to quite different uses. Most visibly there is a split between the 'public' and 'private' use of sovereign citizen beliefs. The 'private' use often entails individuals drawing upon pseudolegal arguments and strategies to contest legal obligations arising out of debts, mortgages, taxes, child custody decisions and forms of state regulation such as that arose in relation to 'lockdowns' during the covid pandemic of the early 2020s. The 'public' use sees often fragmented communities and movements of sovereign citizen believers contesting the legitimacy of the state through protest, the targeting of officials and sometimes through acts of violence – a tradition that goes back historically to the Posse Comitatus and militia movements in the later part of the 20th century in the USA. This paper looks towards developing an understanding which helps reconcile these different public and private uses and does so by situating sovereign citizen type beliefs within a broader historical framework of radical right-wing ideology, one which is hostile to the regulatory and social democratic welfare state, and which draws heavily upon the intellectual resources of conspiracy theory. Within this the paper considers a broader understanding of conspiratorial sovereigntist beliefs in relation to 'deception', 'settler colonialism', and 'neoliberalism' and shows how this helps to better understand the libertarian deployment of private law contract as both an analytical, argumentative and emancipatory tool.

Tarik Kochi is Professor of Legal and Political Theory at the University of Sussex. He is currently working on a book provisionally titled, *Against Deception: The Radical Right, Populism and the Law*. His previous books include: *Global Justice and Social Conflict: The Foundations of Liberal Order and International Law* (Routledge, 2019) and *The Other's War: Recognition and the Violence of Ethics* (Birkbeck Law Press/Routledge, 2009)

Löbbert, Anna

Berlin Social Science Centre (Germany)

This paper foregrounds research design to examine how pseudolegal arguments emerge, circulate, and gain plausibility across different socio-political contexts. Much existing research draws a parallel between pseudolaw and experiences of legal alienation. However, with some notable exceptions, there remains little empirical work examining the lived circumstances of adherents or their own accounts of why such views become compelling.

My prior empirical research, including unstructured interviews with pseudolaw adherents in Germany, supports the claim that conspiratorial legal reasoning is often rooted in experiences of alienation from law and legal authority. At the same time, it suggests that legal disaffection is interwoven and sometimes overshadowed by factors relating to personal circumstances, political orientations, and questions of identity.

Across the globe, pseudolaw appears to resonate with individuals across very different political positions, social contexts, and self-perceptions. To understand what drives the global growth of pseudolaw, we need a better understanding of how these factors interact. Comparative research seems uniquely suitable to disentangle more localized drivers from broader trends.

Starting from this, I develop a comparative research design, which systematically analyses the “narratives of awakening” shared by adherents on social media platforms. This can generate empirical insight into how belief in pseudolaw is shaped by both transnational repertoires and context-specific legal cultures, political histories, and individual experiences of legal authority.

Mahajnah, Taysier Roberto

Bocconi University (Italy)

The Institutional Mainstreaming of Post-Covid Legal Conspiracy Narratives in the United States and Italy

Conspiracy-driven legal claims are usually analysed as bottom-up phenomena. Scholarship on pseudolaw has focused on litigants, social movements, and fringe actors who mobilise legal language to challenge state authority from below. In the aftermath of Covid-19, however, a different dynamic has emerged. In both the United States and Italy, congressional and parliamentary inquiries into pandemic governance have brought into formal institutional settings arguments that previously circulated in marginal or pseudolegal environments.

This paper examines the US House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic and the Italian Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the Management of the COVID-19 Emergency (*Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sulla gestione dell'emergenza COVID-19*) as comparative case studies. It argues that these inquiries mark a shift in the location and status of contestation. During the pandemic, claims of illegitimate emergency governance and pseudoscience were primarily advanced through litigation, where courts filtered, reframed, or dismissed them according to established standards of review. In the post-pandemic phase, similar claims have re-entered the constitutional order through mechanisms that possess formal democratic legitimacy but operate under different epistemic constraints.

The paper advances three claims. First, congressional and parliamentary inquiries provide an alternative forum for contestation once judicial avenues narrow, relocating debates from the courtroom to the political arena. Second, the formal status of these bodies confers institutional visibility and legitimacy on lines of argument that previously lacked legal traction. Even without endorsing them, the act of investigation can elevate them into recognised constitutional discourse. Third, this process has broader effects. It can influence public trust in courts and administrative agencies, reshape future understandings of emergency powers, and normalise a more sceptical stance toward expert authority within constitutional discourse.

Taysier Roberto Mahajnah is a first-year PhD student at Bocconi University. He studied Law at the University of Bologna and later earned an LL.M. in Legal Theory from the European Academy of Legal Theory at Goethe University Frankfurt, as well as an LL.M. in Comparative Constitutional Law from Central European University. He is currently an Affiliated Researcher at the Centre for Constitutional Studies and Democratic Development (CCSDD), a research partnership between Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe and the University of Bologna. His research examines the legal mobilisation of conservative actors and their relationship with pseudoscience, pseudo-law, and conspiracy theories, particularly in the context of contemporary “truth decay.”

McAulay, Joe

City St George's, University of London (UK)

“When has this argument ever worked?”

Contestation over Pseudo-Law Narratives in Britain’s online Occultic Milieu

Pseudo-Legal conspiracy theories are spreading across the world at an unprecedented rate, spurred by recent social, economic, and political crises, but also in part by the easy availability of social media platforms. In the online realm, pseudo-legal influencers have reached new and growing audiences looking for solutions to legal and financial woes, and who are primed to accept conspiracy laden alternatives to conventional legal processes. Much of the current scholarship which has examined pseudo-law and its online spread has focused on these communities in isolation, examining pseudo-law or pseudo-legal thinking as a particular and singular branch of conspiracism. However, conspiratorial social movements abound across social media, and pseudo-legal conspiracy theories are merely one part of a much wider body of stigmatised knowledge which runs through online conspiratorial spaces.

As of yet, existing scholarship has largely failed to interrogate how pseudo-legal theories interact with, and perhaps even conflict, with other strains of conspiratorial thought in the digital sphere. This paper will address this current gap, through a critical examination of the contestation over pseudo-legal conspiracy narratives within the British Freedom movement.

Drawing on data gathered from a three-year netnographic immersion within the movement’s digital communities I argue that pseudo-legal narratives were consistently present within the movements “common sense” alongside other forms of stigmatised knowledge; often able to co-exist with other even contradictory conspiracist narratives. However, I also observed frequent narratives conflicts in which pseudo-legal ideas were contested and attacked by other conspiracists, often alleging that these practices and discourses were ineffective at facilitating social change, or were a distraction from more pressing movement concerns. I conclude by examining the implications of these findings for generating a wider understanding of how social media platforms both facilitate and complicate the spread of Pseudo-Legal ideas.

Dr Joseph Patrick McAulay is a Lecturer in Criminology and Digital Crime at City St George's, University of London. Prior to this he was appointed as a research fellow at the University of Oxford's Centre for Socio-Legal Studies where he was awarded a 3-year competitive Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship which researched digital culture, narrative criminology, and conspiracy culture. His current project “Dangerous Spectacles” utilises an innovative multi-methods strategy to investigate the relationship between conspiracy theories, social media, and crime in the United Kingdom. His research has been published in journals such as the *International Review of Victimology*, *Deviant Behaviour*, and the *Journal of Law and Society*. Joseph holds a DPhil and MSc from the Centre for Criminology in Oxford, and an LLB from the University of Edinburgh where he received the McClintock Prize in Criminology.

Önnerfors, Andreas
Linneaus University (Sweden)

Gudalandet – Swedish Pseudolaw in Court

In 2024, two representatives of the so-called 'viking sect' *Gudalandet* were sentenced to prison for having threatened Swedish local politicians with capital punishment. During the trial of the pair, a complex image of their motives was revealed. Their actions were interpreted as the outcome of a toxic child custody case, at the height of the so-called LVU-campaign, where Swedish social services were accused of having abducted children from minority communities with nefarious ends. Yet *Gudalandet* expressed a conspiratorial world view in which the legitimacy of the court or in fact, the national state of Sweden and the entire world order was questioned.

Almost since a decade, *Gudalandet* had engaged in claims that they represented an indigenous jurisdiction, sovereign and separated from all others. What were the origins of these claims and how did they impact the activities of the group? How were the ideas of a sovereign jurisdiction constructed and performed? And how did the collision of two sets of jurisdictional cultures play out in court? Starting from an analysis of the court proceedings against *Gudalandet*, this paper investigates the prevalence and performance of pseudolaw in Sweden. Exacerbated by the pandemic, groups and individuals in Sweden picked up concepts circulating in the global sovereign citizen's movement. The legitimacy of public health policies was questioned. Pseudo-courts sentenced 'traitors of the people' for their role in orchestrating or handling the pandemic. This paper aims to shed light on the pull and push factors for the imagination of alternative jurisdiction in general and in particular what Griffin and Roemling (2024) have termed 'lexomancy' – the use of convoluted quasi-/pseudo-legal language to conjure up an aura of legitimacy. Is the Swedish case an expression of a new form of 'Anti System Anti Government Extremism' (ASAGE) that can be observed across Europe?

Andreas Önnerfors is Associate Professor in Intellectual history and currently leads the project Fojo Verify at Fojo Media Institute, Linnaeus university, Sweden. Fojo Verify is a project developing fact-checking and verification skills in Swedish and international journalism. Since a decade, his research focusses on radicalization and conspiracy theories. In 2024, he published the monograph *Konspirationsteorier - meningsskapande berättelser i historia och nutid*, "Conspiracy theories: meaning-making narratives across time". Önnerfors particular interest is how conspiracy theories are medialised in text, sound and image.

Osbourne, Zareena

**Informed Consent in the Age of Vaccine Misinformation:
Conspiracy Theories and Medical Law in the UK**

This paper examines how social media conspiracy theories about vaccination challenge the operation of informed consent within medical law in the UK. Anti-vaccine narratives circulating on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and X frequently portray routine immunisations as harmful, experimental, or part of wider governmental or pharmaceutical conspiracies. These claims have contributed to declining uptake of certain vaccines and renewed outbreaks of preventable diseases in the United Kingdom.

English medical law places strong emphasis on patient autonomy. Following *Montgomery v Lanarkshire Health Board*, clinicians must ensure patients are aware of material risks and reasonable alternatives. However, the doctrine presumes that patients are capable of engaging with medical information in a broadly rational and evidence-based way. This paper questions how that assumption operates in a digital environment saturated with algorithm-driven misinformation.

Rather than focusing on family disputes, the paper situates the issue within broader medical law and public health frameworks. It explores whether widespread exposure to demonstrably false medical claims complicates the meaning of “informed” decision-making, and whether existing legal doctrine adequately addresses refusals rooted in conspiratorial belief. It also considers the structural tension between respect for individual autonomy and the state’s interest in preventing harm to others through vaccination programmes.

The paper argues that vaccine-related conspiracy theories expose a gap between the normative foundations of informed consent and contemporary information realities. Understanding this gap is essential for evaluating the resilience of vaccination efficiency in the face of pseudolegal and conspiratorial challenges to medical authority.

Perumal, Ramdhass and Mehta, Chelsy

National Law Institute University (India)

**The Architecture of Distrust: Pseudolaw,
Pandemic Governance and the Weaponisation of Anti-Statist Narratives**

The COVID-19 pandemic did not simply produce a public health crisis; it exposed and deepened a crisis of trust. In that atmosphere of uncertainty, a particular form of legal distortion often dismissed as fringe pseudo-law found renewed vitality. This paper argues that what emerged during the pandemic was not merely misinformation about law but a reimagined political narrative in which emergency governance itself became suspect. Lockdowns, vaccine mandates and regulatory controls were reinterpreted not as temporary responses to a global emergency but as evidence of a coordinated attempt by elites to entrench technocratic authority. Central to this development was a geopolitical imagination that oscillated between blame and suspicion. China was portrayed alternately as origin, adversary and strategic alibi within a larger story about global restructuring; frequently framed through the rhetoric of a “Great Reset”. These international anxieties fed domestic claims that constitutional democracies were quietly transitioning into systems of “medical martial law”. What appears outwardly as legal argumentation thus operates more as a narrative device; it translates, political frustration into a vocabulary of legal betrayal.

At the same time, the pandemic unfolded against a visibly unequal economic landscape. The “K-shaped recovery”, documented in the Economic Survey of India (2020-21), revealed starkly divergent post-pandemic trajectories. Yet sustained structural critiques of inequality struggled to achieve the same traction as conspiratorial claims. This paper suggests that digital platforms do not merely host such narratives but help shape their circulation, often privileging emotionally resonant explanations over institutional analysis. In this environment, pseudo-law becomes attractive because it offers clarity where complexity prevails. Finally, episodes surrounding elite impunity particularly the public fallout from the Epstein disclosures have functioned as symbolic confirmation for those already inclined to distrust formal institutions. For adherents, such moments are not isolated scandals but proof that visible governance structures conceal a deeper, unaccountable order.

Ultimately, the paper contends that contemporary pseudo-law should not be understood as simple legal ignorance. It represents a parallel mode of political reasoning one that converts anxiety about inequality, opacity and institutional fragility into a coherent, if legally distorted, worldview. The pandemic did not create this disposition but it undeniably accelerated and legitimised it.

Petroski, Karen

Saint Louis University (USA)

Pseudolaw in Power

We identify the legal-esque practices of “pseudolaw” as a discrete phenomenon because of the relative consistency of those practices over decades, despite the absence of any stabilized institutional system for reproduction of the practices. Due to this absence, however, the spread of pseudolaw practices among outsiders to the legal system is a puzzle. The recent migration of these practices into some established institutional settings is even more puzzling. This paper focuses on these puzzles and on exploring possible explanations for them.

The diffusion of pseudolaw practices in the twenty-first century has been well documented. Less has been said about governmental use of similar practices. The second Trump presidential administration in the United States has repeatedly taken legal positions that incorporate moves remarkably like those identified as part of the pseudolaw “memplex” by Donald Netolitzky, as well as deeper principles that I have identified in previous work as a grammar shared by pseudolaw and establishment law but treated differently by pseudolaw practitioners. To support this point, this paper explores the presence of pseudolaw-style principles and presuppositions in Trump administration products such as Executive Orders 14158 (establishing the Department of Government Efficiency) and 14160 (purporting to abolish birthright citizenship).

Why have pseudolaw practices spread so remarkably in recent decades and now, seemingly, migrated into actual state institutions? This paper also proposes some preliminary explanations for these puzzles, drawing on the history of late-twentieth-century right-wing U.S. legal activism as well as on broader sociocultural diagnoses of the late-capitalist information-revolution era by writers such as Bernard Stiegler, who has described post-90s culture as an “epoch of the absence of epoch,” and Hartmut Rosa, who stresses how now-infragenerational rates of technological and social change make certain kinds of activities that were once central to legal practice difficult, if not impossible.

Karen Petroski is a professor of law at Saint Louis University. She holds a Ph.D. in literature as well as a law degree, and she practiced law in San Francisco before becoming a law professor. Her writing draws on her humanities background as well as on her legal experience and addresses cultural aspects of legal practice and legal communications. Her recent work includes the books *Fiction and the Languages of Law* (2018) and Routledge’s *New Critical Idiom* volume on *Fictionality* (2023).

Rooney, Tess

University of Canberra (Australia)

From Fraudster to Folk Hero: Pseudolegal Narratives and Social Media Litigation

How does a unanimous jury verdict and settled criminal sentence come to be publicly relitigated as a conspiracy? This paper explores that question through a case study of the "Make America Healthy Again" (MAHA) movement's embrace of convicted Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes, examining a site where settled legal outcomes are systematically contested in online spaces and reframed as evidence of institutional corruption.

Although pseudolaw scholarship has traditionally focused on sovereign citizen movements and "freemen on the land," this paper identifies a parallel phenomenon: the emergence of "soft" pseudolaw within wellness and lifestyle influencer ecosystems. Unlike its "hard" counterpart, soft pseudolaw does not engage directly with courts through pseudo-judicial filings; rather, it appropriates forms of legal argumentation, such as due process claims, evidentiary critique, and appeals to regulatory capture, while detaching them from doctrinal substance, thereby delegitimising legal institutions in the online public square.

This paper argues that this influencer-led rehabilitation relies on modular narrative techniques: the recoding of due process as persecution, regulators as captured proxies, and fraud as suppressed innovation. These "narrative Lego blocks", including 'victim of Big Pharma', 'biohacker' and 'embattled mother', can be recombined to support different strands of conspiracist legal critique. Such narratives do not merely rewrite the Theranos litigation; they work prospectively to undermine confidence in courts and regulators, reshaping the legal environment in which future health technologies will be governed.

The paper considers implications for social media law and platform governance. How might content policies address "alternative investigations" that misrepresent legal findings without direct incitement or actionable falsehood? Drawing on Australian regulatory frameworks, it explores how legal doctrines governing misleading and deceptive conduct, therapeutic claims, and platform responsibilities might be adapted to address the recursive recycling of fraud narratives and their convergence with conspiracist pseudolegal discourse.

Samet, Robert

Union College (USA)

The Politics of Pseudolaw

The global spread of conspiratorial theories known as “pseudolaw” is garnering increased attention from legal scholars. Police and courts all over the world find themselves confronting citizens who not only reject their authority but espouse an alternate legal reality. Some pseudolaw activists make their own passports, birth certificates, and license plates. Others participate in fictional tribunals that claim universal jurisdiction and the ability to prosecute government officials. They are notorious for filing lawsuits without merit, refusing to pay taxes, reneging on mortgages, and claiming sovereign immunity to all forms of prosecution. These disparate practices are tied together by a shared rejection of the state and the claim that individual freedoms have been unjustly impaired. Pseudolaw activism has strong utopian overtones but not all utopias are the same. What kind of world does pseudolaw presage? What kind of utopia is it prefiguring?

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the United Kingdom—which has witnessed a significant uptick in pseudolaw activity since the Covid-19 pandemic—this paper examines the ideological contours of the movement. Recent estimates suggest that there may be hundreds of thousands of pseudolaw activists currently operating in England, Scotland, and Wales. Although the movement appears to be politically heterogenous, the intellectual framework is explicitly libertarian. Pseudolaw is deeply solipsistic, explicitly hostile to collective action, and heavily reliant on metaphors about markets, contracts, and possessive individualism. Using a pair of case studies, I demonstrate how this radically libertarian worldview shapes the trajectory of UK-based activists who otherwise have little in common. What emerges, I argue, is a paradoxically antisocial utopia in which resistance becomes a mode of self-rule.

Robert Samet is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Union College in New York. A political and legal anthropologist, his research focuses on law, democracy, and populism, with special emphasis on the mobilization of grievances. His first book—*Deadline: Populism and the Press in Venezuela* (Chicago, 2019)—is based on fieldwork conducted alongside crime reporters in Caracas, Venezuela from 2007 to 2015. His articles have appeared in *American Ethnologist*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Current Anthropology*, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, and *Social Research*. Currently, he is carrying out fieldwork in the UK on the rise and spread of pseudolaw.

Sarteschi, Christine

Chatham University (USA)

**Sovereign Citizen Ideology:
Spotlight on the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol**

Sovereign citizens are an anti-government movement steadily expanding across the United States and many other parts of the world. A subculture of anti-government extremists, sovereign citizens falsely deny the legitimacy of government and law, believing their interpretation of society's laws supersede all others. A much-needed introduction to Sovereign Citizen ideology in book form, this study spotlights the prevalence and scope of sovereign citizen involvement in the January 6th Capitol insurrection.

The January 6th Congressional Committee reported that only two insurrectionists were sovereign citizens. Providing a more comprehensive review of their participation in the attack since that time, the work draws together hours of access to court records to unveil that the correct number was much higher. Highlighting the nature of their participation in the riot, this study also details the use of sovereign citizen tactics and their interactions with court officials during the adjudication process. Addressing a topic that is underexplored yet increasingly relevant as the growth in this movement continues unabated in the United States and abroad, the work extends our knowledge of known sovereign citizen cases and also provides a practical resource for identifying and countering sovereign citizen tactics.

Dr. Christine M. Sarteschi, LCSW, is a Full Professor of Social Work and Criminology at Chatham University. She is an internationally recognized authority on extremism, particularly sovereign citizen movements and their growing overlap with QAnon. Her work has been featured across major national and international media outlets and documentaries.

Siegel, Itai

University of Leiden (Netherlands)

**“Are You Even Authorized to Be a Judge?”:
How Dutch judges deal with pseudolegal argumentation in court**

If a party states during a hearing that he or she has no agreement with the judge, or that the Dutch state is an illegitimate corporation, how do judges respond? These are examples of conspiracy-infused pseudolegal arguments used consistently in Dutch courtrooms. This presentation examines the interactional approaches Dutch judges employ when presiding over cases in which pseudolegal argumentation is used. Drawing on a courtroom observation study, I show that pseudolegal argumentation appears in various uses, and that Dutch judges adopt differing interactional strategies in response. When the argumentation is posed merely declaratively, judges make use of an ‘ignoring’ approach, continuing the proceedings as if such argumentation was not posed. When the argumentation is used as legal argumentation, judges are able to integrate it smoothly within the legal proceedings. When the argumentation is used for disruptive purposes, judges either responded by ‘neutralizing’ the argumentation or by ‘adapting’ the proceedings. I highlight two such adapting approaches: circumvention and toleration. Notably, judges never directly debunked pseudolegal argumentation during the hearings.

The aim of this presentation is to nuance the prevailing image of the ‘sovereign citizen before the court’ as a figure judges deal with ‘with reluctance’, and to illustrate how pseudolegal arguments are accorded varying relevance within legal deliberation. The findings of this study suggest that interactional dynamics between Dutch judges and people adhering to pseudolegal argumentation are more complex and not necessarily conflictual. These insights are also relevant for judiciaries beyond the Netherlands. Moreover, this presentation seeks to open discussion on what constitutes a productive communicative attitude for judges when dealing with parties who contest judicial authority. What can procedural justice realistically mean when people adhere to pseudolegal argumentation and conspiratorial worldviews?

Itai Siegel is a PhD candidate in the department of Jurisprudence at the Leiden University. His research concerns the influence of conspiracy theories on (Dutch) liberal democracy, with a focus on sovereign citizens.

Szczyrbak, Magda

Jagiellonian University (Poland) & University of Pardubice (Czechia)

**Agency and (de)legitimation in the discourse of
self-represented sovereign citizens**

Courtroom interaction involving pro se litigants has been the focus of much scholarly attention, but some types of encounter still remain underexplored. One such example is the interaction between judges and self-represented sovereign citizens in the Anglo-American system of justice. Engaging in conspiratorial thinking, such litigants reject judicial authority, refuse to comply with court decisions and violate standards of courtroom behaviour. In doing so, they resort to epistemic legitimisation, i.e. claims to have “better knowledge” and recognition of the “real” facts, and deontic legitimisation, i.e. claims which have to do with being “morally right” (Chilton, 2004). In attempting to demarcate legitimate actions from non-legitimate ones, sovereign citizens discursively assert agency, i.e. the power to control their own actions (Duranti, 2004), and strive to have their pseudolegal beliefs – or narratives of “hyperindividualism” (Kochi, 2025, p. 37) – accepted as legitimate knowledge. With these considerations in mind, this study uses video material from five court hearings and identifies key strategies sovereign citizens use to achieve their communicative goals. Grounded in linguistics, the analysis focuses on the discursive means used to legitimise the pseudolegal belief system and delegitimise established legal frameworks, including: sovereign citizens’ assertion of the right to self-representation; refusal to accept the court’s jurisdiction; disruptive and delaying tactics; misappropriation of legal concepts and pseudolegal arguments; and using emotion as evaluation. The study argues that, as “a discursively created sense of acceptance” (Vaara et al., 2006, p. 793), legitimisation has to be communicated linguistically and that it is an interactional achievement. At the same time, it indicates, in line with earlier findings (Griffin, 2023), that through discursive (de)legitimation, sovereign citizens not only construct unique identity and establish individual authority, but also claim solidarity with other adherents of their belief system while disassociating themselves from the legitimate legal system and its representatives.

Magdalena Szczyrbak is Associate Professor at the Institute of English Studies at the Jagiellonian University (Poland) and at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Pardubice (Czechia). Her research interests include discourse analysis and pragmatics applied to legal communication, with a special focus on epistemic and evidential positioning in courtroom interaction and judicial writing. She is currently investigating the discursive shaping of expert evidence in Anglo-American jury trials and interactional strategies in proceedings involving sovereign citizens. Her recent work includes the edited volume *More than (just) words: Legal and non-legal narratives in the courtroom and beyond* (De Gruyter, 2025). Szczyrbak serves as Vice-President of the International Language and Law Association (ILLA).

Thomson, Campbell

King's College London (UK)

**“A Common Law Coup in WEFminster”:
Pseudolaw activism in the UK’s Freedom Movement**

Having emerged in response to COVID-19 lockdowns and the subsequent rollout of vaccines, the UK’s conspiracy-attuned Freedom Movement has adopted activist strategies rooted in pseudolaw. Reaching beyond the contestation of COVID-related issues, the Movement has adopted a multi-issue platform predicated on radical distrust and disavowal of the state. In seeking to contest state sovereignty, its activists localise an “international” framework of sovereign citizenry, via references to Magna Carta and seventeenth-century English maritime law. Freedom Movement activists have utilised pseudolaw arguments in (sometimes-successful) attempts to close vaccination centres, to contest fines and tax bills, or even to justify violent insurrection. In the Movement, these challenges to “real” law are (erroneously) called “Common Law.”

Drawing on a year of online and in-person fieldwork conducted with Movement activists, I argue that participation in pseudolaw practices does not depend on activists’ full belief in their legal validity. Rather, I suggest that their appeal rests upon their capacity to contest state sovereignty, and its enactment through law and regulation, by *acting* to the terms of an “alternative” (pseudo)legal paradigm. Like a drag performance, they embody a form of “legality” that is self-conscious in its artifice, thus proclaiming the constructedness and contingency of the state’s “real” law.

I consider these performative and pragmatic aspects of pseudolaw activism via two ethnographic examples. Firstly, I describe the content and reception of the “tax protest” methods of the anti-war campaigner Chris Coverdale, as presented to a Freedom Movement meetup in London in June 2023. Secondly, I detail an unsuccessful attempt to dissolve Parliament made by activists in late August 2023, through a (mis)reading of Magna Carta. In doing so, I draw attention to the affective appeal, and occasional demonstrable *efficacy*, of pseudolaw methods for certain Freedom Movement activists

Dr. Campbell Thomson is a social anthropologist based at King’s College London, where he is a Postdoctoral Research Associate on the Wellcome Discovery-funded project Between Deception and Dissent. His research has explored the emergence and sustaining of conspiracy attuned social activism in response to COVID-19 lockdowns and vaccination policy. He is particularly interested in meetings of populist political narratives with “conspiracy theory” and “misinformation” (however defined), digital and media cultures, and the anthropology of Britain and Europe. His recent work has examined the (mis)appropriation of legal discourses within radical political movements.

Uberti, Francesca

Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, University of Oxford (UK)

Invocations of Natural Law and Transcendent Legality in UK Fringe Legal Thought

This paper explores the revival of ideas of a transcendent legal order among citizens subscribing to alternative political worldviews and fringe legal thought in contemporary Britain. It focuses on unorthodox framings of law associated with the UK 'Lawful Rebellion' and 'Freeman-on-the-Land' movements. The analysis draws on a qualitative study involving a thematic analysis of online activist texts, published judicial decisions involving Freeman-influenced litigants, and accounts of local authorities gathered through a qualitative survey and interviews with public officials. A distinctive feature of this movement milieu is the conjunction of frequent invocations of law and legality with a marked divergence from official legal discourses. This has led some commentators to dismiss these fringe legal arguments as 'nonsense', or the product of irrational or magical thinking.

In this contribution, I push back against this view. My main argument is that to best understand these movements, it is necessary to understand their arguments as part of broader cosmologies of legal order – which I frame as political and legal mythologies. A central element in these mythologies is the notion of 'natural law'- universal, immutable and beyond the realm of political decision-making and state power - as the only true law. Rather than an eccentric perspective arising in isolation, I suggest this framing of natural law directly follows a longer tradition of lay resistance to government authority. It departs, however, from historical precedents in which natural law and transcendent legality claims supported demands for broader political representation. Freeman activism is instead sceptical of, and often actively undermines, representative democracy itself. To interrogate the rhetorical detachment of legality from democratic institutions, I will draw on Colin Crouch's notion of post-democracy and Margaret Canovan's work on populism and 'redemptive' democracy, situating these lay mythologies within broader political developments linked to declining trust in liberal-democratic orders.

Francesca Uberti is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies and non-stipendiary Junior Research Fellow at Wolfson College, University of Oxford. She holds a PhD in Law (Socio-Legal Theory) from the London School of Economics, where she was the recipient of the ESRC – Rena Field Scholarship. Prior to her doctoral studies, she completed the MSc in Law, Anthropology and Society at the LSE. She also holds a Laurea Magistrale in Giurisprudenza (integrated LLB/MA Law degree) from Bocconi University, Milan.

Francesca's current research investigates the phenomenon of 'pseudolaw' in the UK, examining how different groups mobilise unorthodox interpretations of legal texts and narratives as a way of challenging state authority.

Her broader interests lie in legal authority, legitimacy, and contestation; the social life of legal ideas; and the interaction between law, regulation, and digital cultures. She is particularly interested in how people engage with law outside formal legal institutions, and the implications of different forms of engagement for regulation and the rule of law.

Young, Steve & Hobbs, Harry

University of Otago and University of New South Wales (Australia)

No Contract: Sovereign Citizen Pseudolaw and the Social Contract

This article examines how members of the sovereign citizen movement reimagine and enact the social contract. Sovereign citizens reject the conventional understanding that membership in a political community arises through implicit consent, constitutional inheritance, and institutional legitimacy. Instead, they embrace conspiracies that explain how the state has become corrupted and lost its legitimacy. This enables them to invoke prior or antecedent legal claims – ‘pseudolaw’ – and explicitly opt out of the state’s legal system. In effect, they construe the social contract as a real and revocable agreement between individuals and the state. These beliefs do not succeed within the state’s legal institutions; nonetheless, they illuminate important tensions in the justificatory functions of the social contract. Despite their reliance on conspiracies, sovereign citizen refusals highlight that modern legal systems depend on normative acceptance (and even coercion) rather than actual consent, thereby making visible the distance between the myth of the social contract and the realities of legal governance.

Through an investigation of sovereign citizen theory and socio-legal case studies, this article argues that sovereign citizens treat consent as literal, individual, and retractable. They reveal how much modern states rely on fictive or metaphorical consent narratives to justify expansive legal authority. Pseudolaw adherents reject driver’s licenses, deny the jurisdiction of courts, claim freedom from mortgages and other obligations as they establish their own legal systems. While doctrinally ineffective, these challenges show how legal obligation depends on shared acceptance of narrative, justificatory myths and the routinised institutional reproduction of state authority. Situating these practices within broader transnational dynamics, sovereign citizen ideologies have migrated from the United States and now appear in both common law and civil law jurisdictions and in the English and non-English speaking worlds. Despite fundamental differences in legal cultures and constitutional structure, the diffusion of these practices demonstrates that consent and non-consent widely operate as a performative framework to reimagine the social contract as a site of personal authority and power in an age of societal distrust, growing inequality, and digital alienation. As much as their conspiracy theories raise eyebrows, their focus of criticism may not be entirely misplaced.

Dr. Stephen Young is an Associate Professor at the University of Otago’s Faculty of Law (Te Kaupeka Tātai Ture, Otākou Whakaihu Waka), who brings together rigorous research and relatable public engagement. His 2020 book *Indigenous Peoples, Consent and Rights: Troubling Subjects* earned him the Law Society of Australia and New Zealand’s Early Career Research Award. In 2023, he was further honoured with the University of Otago Early Career Award for Distinction in Research.

Dr. Harry Hobbs is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Law and Justice at the University of New South Wales, and the Director of the Pseudolaw Project at the Gilbert + Tobin Centre of Public Law. The author of four books and more than 70 journal articles, Harry is a multiple award-winning scholar with broad and diverse research interests ranging from constitutional law and the rights of Indigenous peoples, to micronations and sovereign citizens.