

EDITED BY MICHAEL BUTTER
AND PETER KNIGHT

COVID CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Conspiracy Theories



COVID CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective examines how conspiracy theories and related forms of misinformation and disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic have circulated widely around the world.

Covid conspiracy theories have attracted considerable attention from researchers, journalists, and politicians, not least because conspiracy beliefs have the potential to negatively affect adherence to public health measures. While most of this focus has been on the United States and Western Europe, this collection provides a unique global perspective on the emergence and development of conspiracy theories through a series of case studies. The chapters have been commissioned by recognized experts on area studies and conspiracy theories.

The chapters present case studies on how Covid conspiracism has played out (some focused on a single country, others on regions), using a range of methods from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including history, politics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Collectively, the authors reveal that, although there are many narratives that have spread virally, they have been adapted for different uses and take on different meanings in local contexts.

This volume makes an important contribution to the rapidly expanding field of academic conspiracy theory studies, as well as being of interest to those working in the media, regulatory agencies, and civil society organizations, who seek to better understand the problem of how and why conspiracy theories spread.

Michael Butter is Professor of American Studies at the University of Tübingen, Germany. He also directs the ERC-funded project “Populism and Conspiracy Theory.” He is the author of *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* (2020) and coeditor of the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (2020).

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Conspiracy Theories

Series Editors: Peter Knight, *University of Manchester*, and Michael Butter, *University of Tübingen*.

Conspiracy theories have a long history and exist in all modern societies. However, their visibility and significance are increasing today. Conspiracy theories can no longer be simply dismissed as the product of a pathological mind-set located on the political margins.

This series provides a nuanced and scholarly approach to this most contentious of subjects. It draws on a range of disciplinary perspectives including political science, sociology, history, media and cultural studies, area studies and behavioural sciences. Issues covered include the psychology of conspiracy theories, changes in conspiratorial thinking over time, the role of the Internet, regional and political variations and the social and political impact of conspiracy theories.

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Introduction



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INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective

Michael Butter and Peter Knight

In January 2020, reports of a novel and concerning coronavirus began to emerge from Wuhan in China. By February, it became clear that the outbreak was serious and was spreading around the world. From the outset, even before Covid-19 was designated as a pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that the world faced an “infodemic” – an epidemic of fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories that was potentially as damaging as the SARS-CoV-2 virus itself (Ghebreyesus 2020). During the course of the pandemic, conspiracy theories had become a prominent feature of public discourse in many countries around the world. The virus has caused great alarm, but so too has the viral spread of conspiracy theories. Many of same conspiracy narratives were shared around the world, often spread via social media that has an increasingly global reach. However, just as the consequences of the pandemic were felt unevenly around the world, so too have conspiracy theories about the global health crisis functioned differently in each country and region. There is often a depressing similarity in the content of the conspiracy theories in these different locations. Yet, who spreads these conspiracy theories varies considerably around the world. In many Western countries where conspiracy theories are stigmatized, they are articulated by alternative media outlets and populist voices from the fringes; by contrast, in other countries where conspiracy theories are still considered a legitimate form of knowledge, for example, in Eastern Europe or in the Arab world, it is often government officials and established news channels that voice them. Accordingly, the nature, meaning and political uses to which conspiracy theories have been put also do not follow the same pattern everywhere. This volume of essays provides an overview of how these narratives played out in a range of case studies from around the world.

A Perfect Storm?

There has been a great deal of media attention on the spread of conspiracy theories during the pandemic. Often the claim is that the conspiracy theories have mushroomed in an unprecedented fashion, with Covid-19 being the first global epidemic in the age of full-blown social media, not helped by the rise of populist politics in many locations. A common assumption is that these media and political factors have created the conditions for a “perfect storm” of popular conspiracism (see Birchall and Knight 2022). This claim is usually accompanied by anecdotal evidence about conspiracy narratives and related forms of mis- and disinformation cropping up in family and friend groups on social media. While it is clear that conspiracy theories in many locations around the world have come to public prominence in a striking way, it is less clear whether there genuinely has been an unprecedented explosion of popular conspiracism. As the chapters in this volume attest, there is considerable variety in the volume of conspiracy narratives about the pandemic in circulation and the level of belief in particular theories. Surveys show, for example, that 30 percent of Americans and more than 50 percent of Nigerians think that the virus was deliberately created and spread (Henley and McIntyre 2020). In the Netherlands, by contrast, as Jaron Harambam’s chapter (Chapter 18) shows, only 15 percent of the population thinks that the virus is a bioweapon, and only 5 percent blames Bill Gates for its development.

While the levels of belief thus vary from country to country, the fact that everywhere at least some people – and sometimes a lot of them – believe in Covid conspiracy theories is a cause for concern – because belief can affect health behaviors such as compliance with quarantine requirements, mask mandates, or vaccine take-up. However, in many countries, the level of belief in Covid conspiracy theories is not higher than that for other pre-pandemic conspiracy theories, and there is even some evidence that it has actually fallen during the course of the pandemic (Uscinski et al. 2022). In Germany, as discussed in Michael Butter’s chapter, this even appears to be the case for belief in conspiracy theories in general. While some people have clearly intensified their conspiracy beliefs and become more vocal, others have taken a different path. The scale of an alleged global cabal orchestrated by China, the United States and other powerful countries together has made some conspiracy theorists rethink the suspicions they harbored before the pandemic. Thus, research has also shown an increase in trust not only in science but also in institutionalized sciences – that is, in those experts who appear in the media to corroborate the “official” version of events (Mede and Schäfer 2020).

Although there are understandable concerns that Covid conspiracy theories have functioned as a gateway to other, more extreme conspiracy theories, the evidence of radicalization is mixed. Surveys in many countries repeatedly found high levels of reported determination to avoid Covid vaccines, but in practice – in many countries in the Global North, but less so in the Global South – the actual take-up of vaccination has been far more widespread than the alarming opinion polls and

media discussion of popular conspiracism suggested in advance. We can instead conclude that the pandemic has made it more likely that people who used to keep their beliefs to themselves now feel more empowered to express them in public (Butter 2020). There is also evidence that conspiracy beliefs are now translating more readily into action, from refusal to comply with public health measures to actual violence, with an increasing number of intimidating or violent attacks on vaccination centers, politicians, and journalists. Conspiracy theories have potentially serious consequences in a pandemic, and they need to be taken seriously – even in (as M R. X. Dentith’s chapter shows) a country such as New Zealand that is widely regarded as having coped well with Covid.

Another common claim in media warnings about the rise of popular conspiracism during the pandemic is that the theories being circulated are bizarre and surprising. Yet, to historians of conspiracy theories, many of the narratives in circulation are quite familiar. The underlying conspiracy narratives were often already in place, and merely adapted to fit the pandemic, which in turn provided confirming “evidence” for true believers of what they had suspected all along. As Julien Giry shows in the chapter on France, for example, the initial conspiracist urge to label the new coronavirus as a foreign threat copied the structure and rhetoric of earlier conspiracy theories that emerged in the wake of the “Spanish” Flu in 1918 or the “Mexican” one in 2006. Even more specifically, in France just as in other countries, the villains of already widely spread conspiracy theories – George Soros, Israel, or United States – were blamed for orchestrating the pandemic to achieve their sinister goals. By the same token, Polish conspiracy theories grafted the pandemic often onto much older narratives, thus targeting “the usual suspects,” as Olivia Rachwol explains in the chapter on the country.

Although the individual components of these conspiracy narratives often have a long historical pedigree, during the pandemic they were sometimes combined in novel and at times unexpected ways. For instance, Brazilian conspiracy theories about the virus drew on long-standing fears of communist subversion but replaced the Soviet Union – traditionally the mastermind in such narratives – with China, as Katerina Hatzikidi shows in her chapter on the country. In Spain, right-wing conspiracy theorists also detected a communist plot behind the pandemic, according to Alejandro Romero-Reche’s chapter, but focused on the left-wing government and not on foreign powers. In other countries, even older conspiracist tropes about Jewish plots were actualized during the pandemic, as several of the contributions highlight. However, the chapters also make quite clear that it would be wrong to reduce the profusion of conspiracy theories about the pandemic simply to antisemitism. While many Covid conspiracy theories rely on antisemitic tropes, it needs to be stressed that contemporary conspiracy theories are often “multiversal” (Gess 2022). In many cases, explicitly or implicitly antisemitic versions exist alongside variations devoid of antisemitism.

In fact, even within specific countries and regions, there is often little or no agreement among conspiracy theorists about who or what is to blame for the pandemic or the ultimate purpose of the imagined grand conspiracy. Conspiracy

theorists around the globe have linked the virus to 5G technology, cast it as a bioweapon, or claimed that it does not exist and that the public is intentionally deceived to be chipped, made sick, or even killed off or, at the very least, robbed of their civil rights. Covid conspiracy narratives blame the military; national governments; transnational organizations such as NATO, WHO, or the EU; or powerful individuals like Bill Gates for either intentionally releasing a dangerous virus or stirring up panic over a virus that, if it exists, is completely harmless. Yet, while there is a great variety in the specific strains of conspiracy narratives that emerged and mutated since the initial outbreak, they often express a core belief that “they” (the government, the health authorities, the mainstream media, the global elite, the leaders of powerful nations like China or the United States, etc.) are lying to “us” (the ordinary people, the members of a specific nation, ethnicity, culture, or religion etc.).¹ Nevertheless, as many of the case studies in this volume demonstrate, conspiracy theories have also served to bring together in common cause otherwise unlikely or even opposing groups – especially in countries where such theories function as counter-narratives to an “official” version of events and where, thus, the shared conviction that the official version was a lie was more important than agreement on what was allegedly really going on.

One Size Fits All?

As soon as reports about the novel coronavirus made the news, conspiracy theorists around the globe began to engage with the issue as well. Many of today’s conspiracy believers are part of transnational networks and communities, and in their newsfeed they see posts from all over the world. It is therefore in most cases impossible to locate the national origins of many Covid conspiracy theories. But given the outsized reach of American media and political influence, and the increasing ubiquity of English as the global language, many of the narratives have been significantly shaped and popularized by US or English-language social media and conspiracy theorists from that region, as Clare Birchall and Peter Knight show in their chapter. The conspiracist documentary *Plandemic*, for example, whose title already suggests that the crisis has been carefully orchestrated, was rapidly disseminated all around the world. Türkay Salim Nefes shows how it impacted Covid conspiracy theories in Turkey, and Luis Roniger and Leonardo Senkman observe the same impact in Latin America. However, as Asbjørn Dyrendal points out in the chapter on the Nordic countries, it is not only American conspiracy theories that influence conspiracist narratives around the globe but often also simply events that occur in the United States. The Black Lives Matter protests, for example, that followed the death of George Floyd in May 2020 quickly became a topic for Scandinavian Covid conspiracy theorists who found it unfair that their smaller protests were criticized by politicians and the media whereas the anti-racism rallies were widely applauded.

However, in each location, different narratives have taken prominence (and in some cases have changed over the course of the pandemic): in Germany, for

example, the most prominent conspiracy theory is the idea that the pandemic is in essence a hoax perpetrated by the political elites to undermine democracy, whereas in Russia, as Boris Noordenbos's chapter demonstrates, officially articulated conspiracy theories about the pandemic claim that Western criticisms of the Sputnik vaccine are entirely unfounded and part of a concerted plot to deny Russia's superior scientific achievement. Moreover, as the chapters in the present volume show, US-origin conspiracy narratives are often adapted for local contexts, in some cases now becoming part of a wider anti-American or anti-Western position. For example, Chinese conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus, discussed by Carwyn Morris, Andy Hunlan Li, and Lotus Ruan, often claim that the virus was produced by the US army in Fort Detrick, thus picking up on a conspiracy theory first proposed by American conspiracy theorists. In a related fashion, as several of the chapters show – for example, Nicole Simek for Guadeloupe and Laura A. Meek for Tanzania – Covid conspiracy theories became entangled with anti-colonial resistance movements more generally. By contrast, as Martina Drescher shows in her chapter on Cameroon, Covid conspiracy theories circulating in that country also detect China's attempt to destroy Africa behind the pandemic. In short, like virtually all conspiracy theories that spread globally, the Covid narratives are phenomena of glocalization (Robertson 1992).

In addition to the regional translation of global narratives, there are also many examples of home-grown conspiracy theories emerging in many locations that nevertheless often merge with or copy the structure of globally circulating ones. Conspiracy theorists in the Baltics, for example, ascribed specific foreknowledge to Estonian virologists and public health officers, suggesting that they were somehow complicit in the manufacturing of the virus, as Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel show in their chapter on the region. In Guinea, to mention a very different example, the Covid pandemic was made sense of against the background of class conflict. Joschka Philipps and Saïkou Oumar Sagnane show in their chapter that members of the lower classes interpreted the pandemic as a divine punishment for the rich, whom they accused of having conspired to enrich themselves during the Ebola pandemic a few years earlier. While some of these flow back to the Global North, in many cases they do not and thus tend to go under the radar of much media and scholarly discussion in the Global North – not least because the data methods used to collect and analyze social media content, in addition to the efforts of fact-checking organizations, are rarely able to accommodate non-Western languages and contexts.

Conspiracy theories involve a claim that prominent events such as pandemics are not an unfortunate accident but are the result of the secret plotting by nefarious groups to deliberately bring about this state for affairs for their own ulterior motives. They form a distinctive mode of reasoning that usually starts from the assumption that nothing is as it seems; that nothing happens by accident; and that everything is connected (Barkun 2003). They often work through deflection (identifying genuine issues, but blaming the wrong people) and distortion (identifying valid groups to blame, but distorting the reason) (Butter 2014). They also

tend to divide the world into good and evil and seek to scapegoat external enemies or internal infiltrators. Although conspiracy theories were once far more orthodox and legitimate forms of historical knowledge (Butter 2014), they now tend to be stigmatized throughout the Western world (Thalmann 2019). In North America and most of Europe, conspiracy theorists now usually see themselves as challenging received wisdom (“everything you are told is a lie!”).

However, outside the Western world, the knowledge status of conspiracy theories has remained largely unchanged. Accordingly, they often *are* the received wisdom of the governing elite and are thus easily instrumentalized as part of the mechanism of propaganda and deception used to maintain power, as, for example, the case of the Egyptian military dictatorship shows, which Johannes Sauerland discusses in his chapter on the Arab world. This does not mean, though, that those positioning themselves in opposition to the government cannot also rely on conspiracy theories or that the official version is always a conspiracy theory, too. For example, the *Fidesz* government in Hungary for a long time relied on antisemitic and anti-immigrant conspiracy theories to cement its power. It did not spread conspiracy theories about the pandemic, though. But as Lili Turza shows in her chapter, it had a hard time countering the Covid conspiracy theories emerging from the fringes of society because it could not – as governments did in countries where conspiracy theories are stigmatized and not employed by those in power – attack the logic of conspiracism as such.

In yet another set of cases, conspiracy theories are not in opposition to received wisdom because there is a conspicuous lack of epistemic authority and agreement. As Oumarou Boukari and Joschka Philipps’ chapter on Côte d’Ivoire shows, the meaning and function of conspiracy theories during the pandemic are very different if there is no stable notion of shared truth and a tradition of stigmatizing conspiracy theories. In a similar vein, Nils Bubandt’s chapter on Indonesia offers a case study of a country that has a long tradition of suspicion as a mode of everyday political reasoning, with all politics routinely viewed as a story of corruption and conspiracy.

In the last two decades, research in the field of psychology has endeavored to identify the universal psychological drivers of conspiracy belief. There is now a very substantial body of research in this domain, but its core finding is that conspiracy theories aim (but often fail) to satisfy epistemic needs (such as coping with uncertainty or avoiding a sense of randomness); existential needs (e.g., reclaiming a sense of individual agency); and social needs (which include promotion of an in-group and self-positioning as unique and/or victimized) (Douglas et al. 2019). Research into the personality characteristics and the cognitive biases underpinning belief in conspiracy theories has provided important insights at the level of individual psychology, but it has been less successful at addressing how these mechanisms play out at the social level, especially in non-Western case studies. As the chapters gathered here make apparent, the meaning and function of conspiracy rhetoric vary considerably in local contexts. In Indonesia, for example, conspiracy talk sometimes blends into “collusion theory” and at other times forms part of a distinctive punk aesthetic, with reasonable suspicions constituting a form of “paranoia-within-reason” (Marcus

1999). Similarly in Zambia, as Justin Lee Haruyama explains in his chapter, conspiracy theories constitute an alternative but not necessarily irrational, let alone pathological, form of epistemological justification. Accordingly, in non-Western contexts where conspiracy theories function quite differently, it makes little sense to characterize belief in them as merely a form of “crippled epistemology” (Vermeule and Sunstein 2009) or even delusional paranoia.

Although there is often a complex matrix of psychological reasons why individuals turn to conspiracy theories, in the case of the Covid pandemic, it is important to recognize that there are significant social and political factors at play and that these can change drastically depending on the local context. Conspiracy theories about Covid-19 are rarely just about the virus or the health measures imposed. Instead, they emerge out of and feed back into a highly politicized landscape. In South Africa, for example, as Nicholas Abrams and Mongezi Bolofo highlight in their chapter, Covid conspiracy theories and the protests against restriction that they sparked became inextricably tied up with allegations against corruption against former president Jacob Zuma rejected by his supporters. In Germany, by contrast, Corona protests involve a motley group of people who have lost faith in democracy, or who fear that those in power are turning to repressive forms of control that will undermine freedom. In other cases, right-wing extremists have opportunistically used the pandemic and the confusion it has sown to drive support for their usually marginal politics – not always successfully. Examples include the Nordic countries, which Dyrendal discusses, or France where far-right politicians pushed online conspiracy theories in the public sphere for strategic reasons, as Giry explains in his chapter. However, it is vital to examine the use of conspiracy theories with a nuanced understanding of the local histories and tensions, because the political position of conspiracy theorists is not always what is imagined by media: As Butter’s chapter explains, the “querdenken” Corona protests in German-speaking countries are not simply a disguised form of right-wing extremism.

In addition to the focus of psychology on the universal drivers of individual conspiracy belief, research on conspiracy theories from a sociological, historical, and cultural perspective has tended to highlight subcultural forms, from those at the margins fearful of shadowy elites. However, this emphasis on countercultural conspiracism is in danger of missing important elements of the story for two reasons. First, most noticeably not only in the United States but also visible elsewhere, right-wing populists give voice to a white, masculine paranoia and increasingly position themselves as the victims of vast plot by the “ruling elite” to deprive them of their liberty. Second, and more important in the global context, conspiracy theories often operate from above as well as from below. In the United States, Trump was the most significant “super-spreader” of misinformation and conspiracy rumors relating to Covid. But authoritarians and populists in power around the globe – for example, in Brazil, Hungary, Russia, China, and much of the Arab world – instrumentalize the rhetoric of conspiracy as forms of propaganda in state-controlled media, both for the purposes of domestic repression and for foreign policy maneuvering.

Conspiracy theories are also usually assumed to lead inevitably to bad consequences, not least because they blame already victimized minorities for major events like the Covid pandemic, as is most obvious in the antisemitic versions of these narratives. However, we need to recognize that conspiracy theories can also give voice to legitimate grievances. In some cases, conspiracy theories emerge out of a genuine if ultimately misguided desire to explore alternative explanations and voices, as the chapters by Jaron Harambam on the Netherlands and Cecilia Vergnano on Italy show. The latter also provides a strong reminder that not everything that gets dismissed as conspiracy theory by the public deserves this label. Often, politicians, journalists, and scientists understandably concerned about conspiracism are too quick to cast legitimate, albeit usually misguided, dissent that does *not* assume that powerful forces are plotting in secret as conspiracy theory. This is also the frustration of conspiracy theories. For example, potentially deserved criticism of the medical industries for pursuing profit rather than the common good or criticism of the world's reliance for vaccination on the charitable impulses of Silicon Valley billionaires can easily be dismissed as crazed conspiracy theories about Big Pharma or Big Tech.

Comparative Approaches to Conspiracy Theories

Since (at the time of writing in July 2022) the pandemic is far from being over, this book provides a provisional snapshot of Covid conspiracy theories in global perspective. The volume is not comprehensive but includes a broad range of case studies from different regions and political regimes. While there are many similarities in the form and function of the conspiracy theories that have emerged in these varied locations, there are also considerable differences, which should give us reasons to rethink the notion of conspiracism as a universal phenomenon.

The twenty-eight chapters also employ a range of disciplinary perspectives, theories, and methods, which makes sense given that conspiracy theories are a complex phenomenon. Some chapters emphasize the psychological dimensions, while others focus on the political or subcultural contexts. Some chapters employ ethnographic methods and include original interviews, while others use digital methods, linguistics, and discourse analysis to make sense of the profusion of conspiracy theories on social media and legacy media. However, all the chapters draw on a deep understanding of the specific national and regional contexts. Some chapters focus on single-country case studies, while other provide an overview of an entire region. Not every region is covered equally, which speaks to the fact that research on conspiracy theories has to date primarily focused on Western Europe and the United States. The volume begins with two more general essays: Roland Imhoff discusses the psychology of conspiracy beliefs in the pandemic, and Stephan Lewandowsky, Peter H. Jacobs, and Stuart Neil review what is known about the origin of the virus – a topic that figures prominently in many conspiracy theories. The subsequent sections of the volume are organized

for practical purposes by continent. Yet, what becomes clear from the research as a whole is that conspiracy theories – in the age of digital media and global pandemics – circulate in complex and sometimes surprising ways between and within regions. In addition, many conspiracy theories today articulate mutual distrust of imagined enemies, from both without and within, and they have often emerged out of and respond to the global flows of people and ideas through colonialism, imperialism, and globalization. The aim of this volume is thus to investigate the role that conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic play in this global imaginary.

Note

- 1 While it is very tempting to borrow the language of epidemiology to describe the creation and transmission of conspiracy theories during the pandemic (as in the WHO's use of the term "infodemic"), it is important to remember that these are only metaphors that at times are misleading (Simon and Camargo 2021; Birchall and Knight 2022).

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PART 1

General Perspectives



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1

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PANDEMIC CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Roland Imhoff

The Covid-19 pandemic provided center stage attention to the almost universal existence of conspiracy beliefs and their potentially disruptive effect. Virtually all cross the globe, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus was accompanied by allegations in diverse shapes and colors. This begged the question why is it that people believe in such ideas and might global health pandemics provide an ideal breeding ground that can explain the seeming uproar in conspiracy beliefs?

Most psychological research would suggest that conspiracy beliefs do not develop in a bottom-up fashion whereby people come to the belief by combining available pieces of evidence that happen to speak for the existence of a conspiracy behind an event. Instead, a vague notion of a sinister plot comes first (either habitually or because it serves acute needs), and the available information is then assimilated by “connecting the dots.” People differ reliably in the extent to which they either endorse or reject virtually any conspiracy theory (Frenken and Imhoff 2021; Imhoff and Bruder 2014). This has led many scholars to assume a unifying mindset behind these individual beliefs, a conspiracy mentality (Imhoff and Bruder 2014). People scoring high on conspiracy mentality exhibit a generalized suspicion that a few evil people are out there to harm the whole world (which is different from paranoia where the whole world is suspected to be after the self; Imhoff and Lamberty 2018), and that neither powerful elites (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020a) nor regular others should be trusted (Frenken and Imhoff 2022), leading them to show less actual trust behavior (Meuer and Imhoff 2021). But what makes conspiracy theories so appealing to some?

As one of the currently dominant perspectives in psychology, conspiracy beliefs have also been theorized to address certain needs (Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017). They explicitly deny randomness but claim planning and intentionality, satisfying an epistemic need for certainty. They provide a clearly identifiable culprit

that can in principle be defeated, which might quench the desire for control. And they can potently deflect blame from one's own authorities (or human's invasion and exploitation of former wildlife territories), which helps accommodate social needs. These can now be easily spelled out for a global pandemic.

The proportionality bias describes the tendency to seek proportionality in explanandum and explanans: big event requires big explanations (Leman and Cinnirella 2007). To explain the global standstill of several weeks with a tiny invisible virus and its random mutation seems disproportional to many. A global conspiracy, implying the WHO and Bill Gates in cahoots with world government on the contrary, seems more adequate in terms of explanatory weight. In addition, in times of uncertainty, humans tend to desire definite answers (to differing degrees of course). Conspiracy narratives have an asymmetric advantage here in that they claim full certainty about what brought about the event or the pandemic, and they have very little trouble with conflicting evidence. First of all, the lack of evidence for the existence of a conspiracy can be easily explained by the fact that such conspiracies happen in secret and are well-guarded. Second, counter-evidence can easily be dismissed as being part of a distraction maneuver, a smokescreen to hide the incredible truth.

Conflicting evidence and the constant need for updating, however, are part and parcel of scientific discussions around the virus and the pandemic. In fact, it is what science is all about: updating knowledge in light of better evidence (plus of course, a systematic approach to knowledge generation). In the early days of the pandemic, national governments and even the WHO spread the false information that Ibuprofen deteriorated the condition in case of an infection. For several weeks, it was heatedly debated whether face masks have any benefit (mostly because the discussion was narrowly focused on benefits for the person who wears it rather than benefit in overall transmissions). As arguably one of the most problematic misunderstandings (in hindsight), both the CDC and the WHO focused many of their recommendations on the assumptions that the transmission of Covid-19 is primarily droplet-based, although the available information already hinted early at a greater likelihood of airborne transmissions. All the misconceptions were honest mistakes that had to be corrected, recommendations had to be updated, and knowledge adapted. Although such updating of knowledge and continuous correction of recommendations is a necessary ingredient of progress, it violated an all-too-human need to have a clear (and lasting) answer to achieve cognitive closure. Conspiracy theories provide exactly this – a clear and definite answer about the dynamics behind an event, which rarely requires updating in face of better evidence. Once the pandemic is attributed to the secret plan of a malevolent elite, each and every new bit of information is commonly assimilated to this interpretation, even if it directly violates this theory (e.g., downplayed as a clever maneuver to distract from the real forces behind the event, part of a smokescreen to keep the conspiracy hidden). This definite nature of conspiracy theories may clash with reality but provides (at least a feeling of) certainty and reduces the lingering threat of ambiguity.

An arguably even more pressing point could be made for the relevance of the need for control in pandemic times. Already the existence of a virus that cannot be contained frustrates the central need. This has become even more concrete in the face of governmental reactions to the virus in the form of restrictions and lockdowns. From one day to another, people were deprived of doing things the usual way. Their children could not attend school (which effectively meant, they had to take care of them), their leisure activities were closed, and, all too often, their jobs were canceled or restricted. One of the most potent tools in the quest to feel in control – planning – became a futile exercise. It was in this climate that conspiracy narratives offered a very tempting promise: if we can just unmask the hoax and defeat the villains, we can have our life back by tomorrow. Several prominent conspiracy theorists promised exactly that: Stop Bill Gates and get your life back (for the case of Germany particularly, prominently phrased by conspiracy theorist Ken Jebsen in a viral YouTube video that quickly reached over a million viewers in May 2020). Or in psychological terms: regain control.

Finally, the social needs are admittedly a bit of a mixed bag. Feeling good about one's national group can be achieved by deflecting blame from your national group. The insinuations made by Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and other US officials that the novel coronavirus escaped from a Chinese lab were met by the contrary claim that the virus originated in the United States by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian. Empirical research into the connection between Covid conspiracy beliefs and collective narcissism corroborates this anecdotal evidence. Collective narcissism has been described as the defensive belief in the greatness of one's ingroup that requires external recognition (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009). Collective narcissists are convinced that their group (most often country) does not receive the recognition that it deserves and are hence particularly sensitive to any information that might portray their nation in a negative light. In light of their tendency to blame others for national misfortunes (Cichocka et al. 2016), conspiracy theories might be a welcome strategy to explain away most national governments' failure to contain the virus effectively. In line with this reasoning, collective narcissism was a strong correlate of Covid conspiracy beliefs virtually in each of more than 50 included countries in a recent study (Sternisko et al. 2021).

Other social needs are more centered on the individual. Endorsing and disseminating conspiracy theories can be instrumental in displaying exclusive knowledge about the world, highlighting one's own unique superiority. Previous research has established a small but reliable link between the need for uniqueness and conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff and Lamberty 2017; Lantian et al. 2017), and we can observe this motive in the current pandemic as well. Conspiracy believers go against the grain and celebrate themselves as fierce resisters (in contrast to the dull masses of sheeple). In fact, an argument could be made that some preventive measures like social distancing or getting vaccinated are refused not despite but because of a majority endorsing and implementing them. Different from the other motives, however, it is difficult to identify a clear pandemic-related frustration for the need for uniqueness. It may thus only serve as the context in which this need and its association with

conspiracy beliefs are played out rather than a specific reason of why an increase in conspiracy beliefs is expected.

In summary, thus, a large body of psychological theorizing would suggest that the pandemic might be particularly fertile ground for conspiracy theories to flourish. People lack certainty and they are deprived of control and need a rhetorical device to deflect blame from their own authorities. And in fact, looking at journalistic attention to conspiracy beliefs surely confirms this prediction: conspiracy beliefs and their detrimental effects on curbing the infection rates are center stage news. Is this impression backed up by social science research?

Did the pandemic indeed increase the number of those who endorse a conspiracy worldview?

Did Conspiracy Beliefs Increase in the Pandemic?

Even if only focusing on Western countries for which more data is available, providing a definite answer is not a trivial task here. Most obviously, conspiracy theories surrounding the novel coronavirus did not exist before the respective pandemic and thus make it impossible to provide a temporal comparison. So, one would need to rely on different conspiracy theories (as a proxy to the general extent in conspiracy beliefs) or, ideally, estimates of the general underlying worldview of conspiracy mentality. Ideally, these data would allow longitudinal analyses of the same persons before and after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such data, however, do not seem to exist (perhaps unsurprisingly, few people expected the advent of such a massive pandemic). What does exist is cross-sectional data from before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. Such data do exist, but are relatively scarce.

One study asked a representative sample of 3,250 Germans between October 2019 and February 2020 to what extent they agreed with the claim that secret forces determine the fate of the world and repeated this question in a post-outbreak survey conducted between May 2020 and July 2020 ($N = 1,521$). Different from what would be expected from the psychological theories cited before, the percentage of respondents stating the statement to be likely or certainly true decreased compared to that before the pandemic, whereas the proportion of respondents asserting that it was certainly false that secret forces ruled the world increased by 9 percent (Roose 2020). This may seem like an idiosyncratic single case that could be attributed to above-average transparency in political and scientific communication in the early days of the pandemic in Germany. Curiously, however, a similar pattern emerges in the “Mitte”-studies, a biannual representative survey of the German adult population. Although this is not thoroughly discussed in the respective reports (Lamberty and Rees 2021; Rees and Lamberty 2019), the available information of response frequencies allows calculating average agreement per item. Average agreement with the statement that there are secret organizations with strong influence on political decisions went down from 3.14 (on a five-point scale) in 2019 to 2.53 in 2021 (an effect size Hedge’s $g = 0.65$; the proportion of respondents fully agreeing shrunk from 23.6 percent to 8.9 percent). Endorsement of the

statement that politicians and other leaders are just string puppets of hidden powers in the background went down from 2.84 (2019) to 2.44 (2021) with the proportion of people fully agreeing being cut in half from 16.1 percent to 7.8 percent. In light of this dramatic decrease, some scholars have speculated about a systematic bias due to coordinated efforts of conspiracy theorists to boycott participation in such studies (Lamberty and Rees 2021). Even if these results were valid, despite spanning a wider time window, they originate from the same national context with the same political dynamics in the pandemic – Germany.

It thus seems advisable to explore longer trends in another context with arguably less effective political rhetoric in the pandemic: the United States under Donald Trump. Comparing the average agreement with items of the American Conspiracy Thinking Scale (ACTS) (Uscinski and Parent 2014; e.g., “Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places”) from 2012, 2016, 2019 and three measurements in 2020 and one in 2021 reveals virtually no changes (Uscinski et al. 2022). If anything, levels of agreement were lower in 2012 than for some pandemic measurement times. There is thus no reliable evidence for the idea that the extent of conspiracy belief has increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

More data exist on the development of conspiracy beliefs during the pandemic (as these do not require pre-pandemic baseline measures). In one of the most comprehensive openly accessible datasets, the German Covid-19 Snapshot Monitor (COSMO n.d.), there is very little change in either conspiracy mentality or endorsement of specific Covid conspiracy theories (based on Imhoff and Lamberty 2020b) over time (Figure 1.1). Even clearer, there is no correspondence between the prevalence of such beliefs and the infection numbers (as a threat indicator).

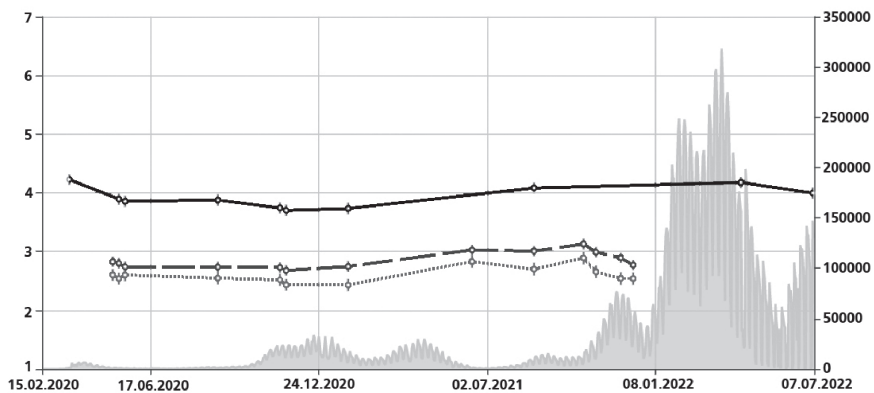


FIGURE 1.1 Conspiracy Mentality

Source: COVID-19 Snapshot Monitoring (COSMO) – www.corona-monitor.de (CC BY-SA 3.0 DE)

Note: The figure shows conspiracy mentality (upper solid black line), bioweapon conspiracy theory (middle dashed grey line), and hoax conspiracy theory (lower dotted grey line) across the pandemic (± 95 percent confidence interval) based on nationally representative samples ($\sim N = 1,000$ per data point) in Germany, in conjunction with the number of new infections in Germany.

Descriptively, the lowest mean score in conspiracy mentality and concrete beliefs coincided with the dramatic second wave in winter 2020/21 that witnessed not only a record number of deaths but also a hard lockdown. These data thus do not provide any support for the plausible assumption that conspiracy beliefs increase in response to threat or severe restrictions of individual freedom (and hence control over one's life).

One of the few large and representative longitudinal studies converges with these results. Over the course of the pandemic, the percentage of respondents in Germany agreeing with the notion that Covid is a hoax decreased from 14 percent in April/May 2020 to 9 percent in February/March 2021 (Spöri and Eichhorn 2021; note, though, that the survey question confounds the hoax belief with an estimation that the measures against the pandemic are overblown). As these data are longitudinal panel data, they also allow an estimation of the frequency of individual trajectories. In this sample, only 6 percent of respondents consistently endorse this statement and only 3 percent increased their agreement with it, as compared to 2020. In contrast, 8 percent lost faith in this particular conspiracy belief. Again, thus, these data provide little evidence for the notion that the pandemic exacerbates the issue of conspiracy beliefs in the sense of prevalence (although selectively drop-out is conceivable here).

These data seem to stand in direct opposition to what many perceive to be an increasing problem of conspiracy beliefs. There are several ways to make sense of this apparent contradiction. First, the pandemic may have brought the existing shades of conspiracy worldviews into the light. Previously, entertaining a conspiracy belief (e.g., that John F. Kennedy was not killed by lone gunman Lee Harvey Oswald) may have seemed too inconsequential to bug other people with it. There is no point in bringing up the issue over family dinners, reunions, or other social events. Because the pandemic affects everybody's personal life, this is drastically different for conspiracy beliefs about Covid. Complying with physical distancing recommendations or not, wearing masks in public or not, getting vaccinated or not, testing frequently or not are choices that every single individual has to make. As such, one's stand on these issues is communicated in one's social surrounding much more frequently, and – if conspiracy theories are endorsed – there is an enhanced sense of urgency. After all, discussing the exact surroundings of JFK's death is a timeless matter. If the issue at stake is protecting the population from a dangerous vaccination, however, now is the time to speak up. As a consequence, many people now learn from others they know that they believe in such theories (whereas they may have never found out under different circumstances). Second, part of the perception of the spread and relevance of conspiracy beliefs rests on media reporting. While such information on societally relevant topics of course fulfills an important function in a democracy, the amount of attention received by public protests is not necessarily proportional to the number of supporters of such protests. Third, while we see no dramatic increase in conspiracy worldviews, other indicators of the spread of conspiracy beliefs are more alarming. Again, primarily focusing on Germany (although similar arguments could be made for many European countries), subscription rates to clear conspiracy channels or numbers of demonstrators

with an undoubtedly conspiracy agenda marked increases in the years 2020 and 2021 (compared to pre-pandemic times). Combined with the lack of increase in conspiracy beliefs in public opinion data, this might suggest that the numbers do not increase, but the cohesion of conspiracy networks and their degree of organizational networking do. A less alarmist interpretation could attribute the increasing numbers of channel subscribers not to “true believers,” but to a mixture of curious individuals, journalists hopping on the topic, and personnel of security authorities trying to keep an eye on the scene. In a nutshell, although certainly a possibility, we lack robust evidence that justifies claiming that the pandemic increased the number of conspiracy believers.

The Societal Costs of Conspiracy Beliefs

Very early on, it became clear that the collective efforts to curb the spread of the virus might be sabotaged by people unwilling to follow the recommendations to increase hygiene standards, keep physical distance, or wear facemasks. Almost trivially true, people who believed that the disease was a hoax or no worse than the flu reported engaging in less infection- and transmission-reducing behavior (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020b), also longitudinally (Bierwiazzonek, Kunst, and Pich 2020; Pummerer et al. 2022). A recent meta-analysis across 53 studies from various national contexts provided overall consistent support that conspiracy beliefs were associated with reluctance toward prevention measures both cross-sectionally and over time (Bierwiazzonek, Kunst, and Gundersen 2022). It is thus plausible to assume that many infections (and ultimately deaths) could have been avoided without such conspiracy theories.

This issue has become even more apparent with the advent of vaccinations against Covid-19. It is a long-standing and robust finding that conspiracy mentality in general is associated with great vaccine hesitancy (Lamberty and Imhoff 2018), but this had dramatically more severe consequences in the mid of a raging pandemic where herd immunity via vaccination seems to be the only feasible way out (without mass casualties). Conspiracy beliefs of various kinds were robustly negatively related with vaccination intentions (Allington et al. 2021; Freeman et al. 2020; Ruiz and Bell 2021), also longitudinally (Hartman et al. 2021), as well as with self-reported vaccination behavior (Čavojsková, Šrol, and Mikušková 2020). Meta-analytically, vaccination-related variables showed the strongest negative associations with conspiracy beliefs (Bierwiazzonek, Kunst, and Gundersen 2022). As vaccinations are among the most powerful tools to curb infection rates, conspiracy beliefs here also create societal costs discouraging getting vaccinated. Not being vaccinated, however, also comes with personal costs in the sense of a greater danger of contracting the disease. In fact, conspiracy beliefs longitudinally predicted the likelihood of testing positively for Covid-19, eight months later (van Prooijen et al. 2021).

The rejection of an effective protection against the virus however is not the only self-defeating correlate of conspiracy beliefs. Apart from a greater likelihood of job loss and income reduction (van Prooijen et al. 2021), which might be attributed to others, conspiracy believers also directly harm themselves by turning to so-called

alternative treatments against the disease. Conspiracy beliefs have been reported to be associated with the intention to treat Covid symptoms with homeopathy or essential oils (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020b), the intake of hydroxychloroquine (Bertin, Nera, and Delouée 2020), or the anti-parasitic ivermectin. Whereas swallowing sugary globule or vitamin C (Hartman et al. 2021) is mostly just ineffective and can hence delay treatment with actual (evidence-informed) medicine, chloroquine or ivermectin has severe side effects that can pose a direct health threat. In countries with public health systems, poisonings with such self-treatments ultimately then require interventions at the cost of the public health system.

Arguably, an even greater toll on the common good happens in the way in which conspiracy narratives have undermined social cohesion and trust in important institutions and at times instigated direct violence. Across several nations, protests against containment measures or vaccinations have led to outbursts of violence. In November 2021, such riots were reported from Brussels, several Dutch and Austrian cities, as well as Berlin and several Eastern German small towns. Similarly, violent protests had erupted over the summer 2021 in France, Italy, and other countries to protest against the introduction of so-called green passes (required proof of infection status). Not all of these are clearly attributable to conspiracy beliefs among the protestors, and the radical right may just have exploited some (for the affinity of extreme right-wing political orientation and conspiracy mentality, see Imhoff et al. 2022). Nevertheless, such violent, non-normative means of political articulation are the only viable option for someone who endorses a conspiracy worldview (Imhoff, Dieterle, and Lamberty 2021). If secret elites behind closed curtains make major political decisions, normative means of political engagement (appealing to elected representatives, running for office, signing a petition) are futile, as the official decision-making process is just a charade of string puppets. On the flipside, non-normative, illegal actions might gain legitimacy if they are construed as a means to overthrow a tyrannous regime (whose representative does not follow the rule of law, either). In line with this, people who had the task to make hypothetical judgments about their likelihood to engage in several political actions under the assigned perspective of a conspiracy worldview saw participation in normative legal action as less and non-normative violent actions as more likely (Imhoff, Dieterle, and Lamberty 2021). Directly related to the pandemic, UK-based respondents who endorsed Covid conspiracy theories expressed more support for and more willingness to engage in vandalism against 5G towers (the alleged culprit behind symptoms misleadingly attributed to Covid infections; Jolley and Paterson 2020).

The undermining effect of conspiracy worldview goes even further, however. It touches the very core of a pluralist society, something we have labelled an epistemic social contract (Imhoff, Lamberty, and Klein 2018). This contract entails an implicit consensus on which information to trust and which not. Necessarily, we cannot process all information first hand. We cannot be present across the globe to serve as an eyewitness to all major events. Neither can we recalculate all equations that lead the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to the conclusion that human action causes global warming. We can also not do experiments and case control studies on side effects of medicine or vaccinations. We thus simply

have to take many things for granted or at least trust the transmitted information. At the same time, not any transmitted information is likewise trustworthy, and with the democratization of information distribution via the Internet, selecting the informative wheat from the chaff is an ever-present challenge. One mental shortcut to achieve this is source-based trust. Some information is judged more credible than others because it comes from a respected and credible source. In a complex information society, there is no viable alternative. As a side note, this is all too often ignored in public discourse around fact checking. There is nothing in an information per se that turns it into a fact. It is its relation to reality, and this relation is not experienced firsthand for most information. People thus have to rely on epistemic crutches like trust in some sources or trust in a process (e.g., the scientific model of checks and balances or the model of independent media) or trust some abstract attributes (e.g., expertise). Across several studies, participants saw the exact same information as more credible when it allegedly came from an expert (than an educated layperson). People scoring high on conspiracy mentality, however, did not. For them, it played no role whether an expert or a lay took this position (Imhoff, Lamberty, and Klein 2018). At first sight, this seems like a more rational option, as the validity of information is logically independent from the source that endorses it. Upon closer inspection, however, we soon realize that a society where an insight from journalistic investigation is worth as much as a random video on YouTube and where doing one's own research is as good as a peer-reviewed article will lose its base to agree on anything. Conspiracy narratives have created such parallel universes in many Western societies and hence increased political tensions.

Conclusion

In summary, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the public attention for conspiracy beliefs and their potentially negative impact on society. This increase in attention, however, is not necessarily paralleled with an accompanying increase in the number of individuals who endorse such conspiracy beliefs. In contrast, despite well-elaborated theoretical reasons why one would expect pandemics to increase conspiracy beliefs, reality is more complex. Conspiracy theories are potent in addressing very human needs that were deprived due to the pandemic itself or restriction in response to it, but ultimately, it seems that Covid conspiracy theories were mostly adopted by those who already had an inclination toward a worldview in which a few evil agents determine the fate of the rest of the world. Pandemics thus merely offer a foil to roll out an already-established way to look at the world.

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2

LEAK OR LEAP? EVIDENCE AND COGNITION SURROUNDING THE ORIGINS OF THE SARS-COV-2 VIRUS

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Conspiracy theories thrive whenever people feel that they have lost control over their lives (Van Prooijen and Acker 2015). And what better way to lose control on a massive scale than a pandemic that upends our lives? That is why outbreaks of novel infectious diseases have always given rise to a kaleidoscopic array of conspiracy theories, usually including theories about the origin of the virus. For example, during the Zika virus outbreak in 2015–2016, allegations circulated on social media that the virus was a bioweapon (Wood 2018). Similarly, the “swine flu” (A-H1N1) outbreak in 2009 engendered theories about the virus being the result of the US biodefense agency’s efforts to “weaponize” influenza (Smallman 2015). Exploiting the readiness to accept conspiracy theories in times of crisis, when HIV emerged in the 1980s, the Soviet KGB mounted a massive disinformation campaign about AIDS, claiming that the United States had created HIV as part of a biological weapons research program (Selvage 2019, 2021). This conspiracy theory, or variants of it, ultimately became deeply entrenched in segments of the American public (Bogart et al. 2011; Kalichman 2009; Klonoff and Landrine 1999). In Africa, various variants of the theory became particularly widely accepted (Selvage 2021) and may have at least indirectly contributed to the fateful decision of the South African government to withhold antiretroviral treatment from its citizens, at an estimated cost of 300,000 lives (Chigwedere et al. 2008).

The prompt emergence of conspiracy theories concerning the origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is therefore not unexpected. These theories were fueled by the physical proximity of the Huanan wet market in Wuhan, where many of the earliest cases of Covid-19 were detected, to the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) right across the Yangtze River. If a new virus emerges near a virology laboratory, then it takes little imagination to invoke an accidental or intentional laboratory leak to explain the virus’s origin. Indeed, it is in principle possible that a new virus may leak from a laboratory, although, as we show in this chapter, the available evidence

points away from a leak and toward a leap from another species into humans. We also show that much of the argumentation by proponents of the lab leak hypothesis is not normatively optimal and instead exhibits hallmarks of conspiratorial cognition (Lewandowsky et al. 2015; Lewandowsky, Lloyd, and Brophy, 2018). We conclude that although the origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not fully settled, at present the evidence for a lab leak does not withstand scrutiny.

Leap Across Species: Zoonotic Origin Hypothesis

Most virologists have favored a zoonotic origin of SARS-CoV-2, involving a jump of the virus from another species to humans. Support for the zoonotic hypothesis derives from a number of sources, foremost among them being genomic sequencing which can potentially sketch an evolutionary path from ancestors circulating in other species to SARS-CoV-2. The zoonotic hypothesis is strengthened by evidence for a clear evolutionary path, and, conversely, it is weakened if inexplicable gaps in that path remain.

SARS-CoV-2 is a member of a wider family of beta-coronaviruses called the sarbecoviruses, named after its prototype member, the original SARS-CoV-1 that caused the SARS epidemic in 2002–2003. The zoonotic origin of SARS-CoV-1, involving a leap from bats to both farmed palm civets and humans involved in live animal trading at Guangdong markets, has now been firmly established (Cui, Li, and Shi 2018; Ge et al. 2013), and with it the realization that the bat sarbecovirus family poses a clear and ongoing danger of further zoonotic transmission to humans (Ruiz-Aravena et al. 2021). Chinese “wet markets” have been identified as potential hot spots for zoonotic transmission (He et al. 2022; Woo, Lau, and Yuen 2006). Across China and Indochina, there may be tens-of-thousands to hundreds-of-thousands of human exposures to coronaviruses from bats alone every year, each offering a potential opportunity for a new and dangerous mutation to jump to humans (Sánchez et al. 2021).

One key feature of sarbecoviruses is that they show extensive amounts of recombination – that is, when the viral genome sequences are compared by their relatedness, it looks like parts of the genomes are being regularly swapped (MacLean et al. 2021). Swaps occur when an animal is infected with more than one sarbecovirus at the same time. The observed level of recombination implies that a vast ecosystem of these viruses is circulating in non-human species, most of which have not been discovered. The area of the genome that is most likely to recombine is also the area that encodes the “spike proteins” – the very proteins that play a crucial role in penetrating host cells and initiating an infection. Many sarbecoviruses encode spike proteins that can penetrate a wide range of mammalian cells, implying that these viruses can easily transmit to, and even spill back and forth between, other mammals including humans.

SARS-CoV-2 is not as virulent as SARS-CoV-1, which had a case fatality rate of 15 percent according to the WHO (2003), compared to lower-bound estimates for Covid-19 of just under 1 percent (Modi et al. 2021). However, SARS-CoV-2

transmits far better between people. At the time of this writing, estimates for the latest variant, known as Omicron, consider its infectiousness to be second only to measles, mumps, pertussis, and varicella (Warner and Mishra 2022). Two of the most prominent features of the SARS-CoV-2 spike are its receptor binding domain (RBD) that binds very tightly to human ACE2, the protein that allows entry into lung cells, and the so-called Furin Cleavage Site (FCS). The FCS is a cleavage in the spike proteins (dividing them into so-called S1 and S2 subunits) which, to date, appears unique to the sarbecovirus family, although they are commonly found in other coronavirus lineages including beta-CoVs.

The RBD and FCS have become the focus of virological examinations to adjudicate between the competing origin hypotheses, based on the supposition by proponents of a lab leak that neither the RBD nor the FCS “appears natural” and therefore can only be the product of lab-based engineering or selection (Wade 2021). Contrary to that supposition, recent research has sketched a clear zoonotic path to the emergence of the RBD and FCS. Although some evolutionary gaps along this path persist, the number and size of those gaps have been dwindling. For example, sarbecoviruses in bat colonies on the border between Laos and China have recently been found to have RBDs almost identical to SARS-CoV-2 in both sequence and ability to enter human cells (Temmam et al. 2021). More distantly related sarbecoviruses have been found in Eastern European bats that are only one mutation away from acquiring a proto-FCS (Sander et al. 2022).

Additional evidence for a zoonotic origin emerged from a recent detailed analysis of the locations of the very first infections in Wuhan in December 2019 (Worobey 2021). Consistent with the role of the Huanan markets as the point of origin of the virus, the very first cases – either involving direct links to the market or the initial community transmission among neighbors – clustered near the Huanan markets rather than the WIV. Analysis of the spatial clustering of environmental samples in the market shows a clear association with areas selling animals, including at least one species (raccoon dog) previously identified as a likely intermediate host of SARS-CoV-2 between its original bat and ultimate human reservoirs (Worobey et al. 2022). Additionally, a lack of intermediate lineages between the two earliest strains of the virus indicates that the pandemic likely began with at least two separate spillovers – an incredibly improbable scenario if the virus was the product of a lab escape (Pekar et al. 2022). Taken together, the steadily growing body of evidence for a zoonotic origin creates increasing difficulties for the lab leak hypothesis.

Leak from a Lab in Wuhan: The Human Origin Hypotheses

Evaluation of the notion that SARS-CoV-2 emerged from a laboratory at the WIV poses considerable conceptual and scientific challenges. First, the lab leak hypothesis is not a single identifiable hypothesis but a loose bundle of diverse possibilities held together by the common theme that Chinese science or government – be it the WIV or some other arm of the Chinese government – is to blame for the pandemic.

At one end of this bundle is the straightforward possibility of WIV lab personnel being infected during fieldwork or while culturing naturally occurring animal viruses in the lab. At a genomic level, this possibility is challenging to disentangle from a zoonotic origin that followed other evolutionary pathways and is therefore difficult to rule out conclusively. However, recent epidemiological evidence that strongly implicates the Huanan markets as the focus of the original outbreak (Worobey 2021) weakens the cause for a lab-related accidental leak.

At the other extreme of the bundle of lab leak hypotheses are the explicitly conspiratorial assertions that SARS-CoV-2 was designed and engineered by the WIV, perhaps as a bioweapon, and was released either accidentally or even as a biological attack (presumably by the Chinese government against its own citizens in Wuhan). The Chinese government has a known track record of cover-ups, including during the first SARS epidemic in 2003. The government's censorship of news about SARS in Guangdong accelerated the spread of the disease (Ruger 2005). Initial cover-ups and denial are a consistent aspect of the Chinese government's approach to crisis management (Ye and Pang 2011). During the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, ten days after the first case was discovered, a group of health care professionals from Wuhan tried to issue a warning about the new virus. They were forced by police to apologize for "spreading rumours" (Ang 2020). In light of this track record, one should not dismiss outright the possibility that the Chinese government or officials at the WIV may have been trying to obscure their role in the emergence of SARS-CoV-2. However, a troubling past record alone is insufficient to buttress the assertion that SARS-CoV-2 was engineered in a laboratory.

The engineering assertion is in principle open to scientific test, using a mirror image of the evidence for or against a zoonotic origin: Any evidence for an evolutionary path weakens the lab-engineering assertion, and conversely, any challenges to an evolutionary path strengthen that assertion. Although a scientific adjudication is thus possible in principle, it does not follow that the lab-engineering account can ever be falsified to the satisfaction of its proponents. As we show next, much of the argumentation that has been put forward in support of the lab leak hypotheses conforms to the hallmarks of pseudoscience and conspiratorial cognition. Any assertion that is based on that type of argumentation tends to persist even after it has been falsified by conventional criteria.

Hallmarks of Conspiratorial Cognition

Conspiracy theories present philosophers and scientists with a deep dilemma because real conspiracies are sometimes uncovered. Volkswagen did conspire to cheat on emissions tests, Richard Nixon's White House was involved in the Watergate break-in, and so on. So to what extent can we be sure that conspiracy "theories" – defined as theories about events that are not conventionally taken to be supported by evidence – are epistemically warranted or not (Keeley 1999)? How can we tell real conspiracies from baseless conspiracy theories? And given that variants of the lab leak hypothesis explicitly invoke a conspiracy, how can we be sure that this conspiracy does or does not exist?

The approach we take here relies on the analysis of the reasoning and argumentation exhibited by supporters of pseudoscience and conspiracy theories, and how that differs from conventional evidence-seeking cognition (e.g., Lewandowsky et al. 2015; Lewandowsky, Cook, and Lloyd 2016; Lewandowsky, Lloyd, and Brophy 2018). Here we highlight several aspects of conspiratorial argumentation, which are prominent in the rhetoric by supporters of a lab leak.

Burden of Evidence

In normal scientific inquiry, as evidence emerges, the remaining plausible hypothesis space narrows. Some facets continue to be supported by available evidence whereas others are contradicted and eventually precluded altogether. Not so with pseudoscience which, by definition, is impervious to contrary evidence (Ladyman 2013). One way in which pseudoscientific theories insulate themselves from the contrary evidence is by reversing the burden of proof. This can be illustrated with particular clarity in Creationism. Proponents of “Intelligent Design” claim that humans must have been “intelligently designed” because we are seemingly too complex to have evolved by natural selection alone (Barnes, Church, and Draznin-Nagy 2017). This argument is inherently problematic because it seeks to reverse the burden of proof – instead of requiring evidence for “intelligent design,” this claim is taken for granted by assumption (“humans are too complex to have evolved”), and the overwhelming evidence for natural selection can be evaded by pointing to residual gaps in the fossil record for transitional or intermediate forms. This renders “intelligent design,” like all other pseudosciences, impervious to falsification (Boudry, Blancke, and Braeckman 2010; Boudry and Braeckman 2011).

Similarly, a core element of the assertion that SARS-CoV-2 must have been engineered in the laboratory is the supposition that neither the RBD nor the FCS “appear natural” (Segreto and Deigin 2021). Support for the “non-naturalness” of the RBD was adduced from a computer model that showed that SC2 had a higher affinity for human ACE2 than any other mammalian ACE2 (Piplani et al. 2021). Because there are no firm a priori criteria for what it means for a virus to appear “natural” (or not), the assertion is problematic to begin with, and it becomes even more problematic when it is combined with conspiratorial cognition.

This reversal of the normal burden of evidence manifests in other ways, such as the preference for exotic explanations connecting back to the purported conspiracy theory above banal explanations like simple coincidence, human error, or even malfeasance in service of a more mundane, genuine conspiracy. The Chinese government denied the existence of wet markets in China,² contrary to all available evidence (Xiao et al. 2021), but this clear attempt at misdirection has attracted considerably less attention than more exotic theories involving malfeasance in the laboratory.

The discovery of a novel virus in the same city as a research institute specializing in the study of similar viruses is, in the absence of evidence of causality, literally a coincidence. Although a causal link might exist, it is logically flawed to assume

that link and insist, in a reversal of the normal burden of evidence, on proof of its absence. This insistence is consonant with the observation that susceptibility to the conjunction fallacy is a characteristic of belief in conspiracy theories (Brotherton and French 2014). The persistent reliance on physical co-location as “evidence” for the lab leak hypothesis is particularly ironic because the physical co-location of the Huanan markets is ignored by proponents of the lab leak hypothesis, despite the fact that the markets were identified to be potential sources of zoonotic outbreaks years before the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (Newey 2021).

When an underlying conspiracy theory is assumed to be true as a starting position, it is difficult for supporters of that theory to accept the sort of routine error that necessarily accompanies any sufficiently large or complex human situation. Rather, these errors become evidence for the conspiracy or else evidence of its cover-up. For example, in 2007, a data error was discovered in the US temperature record that changed the relative ranking of the warmest years on record for the continental United States, without having an effect on global temperature rankings or records (Schmidt 2007). Because conspiracy theorists start from the assumption that human-driven climate change does not exist and that climate scientists are lying, to them this incident was not explicable as the sort of routine but inconsequential miscalculation one might expect when dealing with many data sources over a long period of time. Rather, it became proof to conspiracists of deliberate fraud being perpetrated upon the world – a “scientific hoax” (e.g., Limbaugh 2007).

Disregard for Coherence

Science strives for coherence; that is, propositions within a theory must not be contradicting each other – the solar system cannot be both geocentric and heliocentric at the same time. The coherence of explanations or theories is therefore often considered a necessary or at least “conductive” criterion for truth by philosophers of science (e.g., Douglas 2013; Laudan 1984; Roche 2014; Thagard 2012). By contrast, conspiracist cognition frequently appears incoherent by conventional evidentiary criteria. For example, people have been shown to believe simultaneously that Princess Diana was murdered but faked her own death (Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012), and climate deniers may simultaneously believe that CO₂ keeps our planet warm and that temperature and CO₂ are not connected (Lewandowsky, Cook, and Lloyd 2016). To the beholder of a conspiracy theory, the incoherence does not matter because it is resolved at a higher level of abstraction, namely, by the unshakable belief that the official account must be wrong (Lewandowsky, Cook, and Lloyd 2016; Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012).

The rhetoric of proponents of the lab leak hypothesis is rife with incoherence. One example involves the analysis of emails among virologists that were obtained via freedom-of-information (FOI) requests and which showed that several scientists initially raised the concern that the virus might have come from a lab, but then changed their minds when research pointing to a natural origin became available in

April 2020 (Andersen et al. 2020). Despite those emails clearly demonstrating that virologists considered, but ultimately rejected, various claims about SARS-CoV-2 being engineered, lab leak proponents tend to selectively quote messages to cast virologists as either never having given lab scenarios fair consideration, or – in total opposition – believing a lab origin all along but deliberately lying about it. These two opposing claims are deployed as the rhetorical need arises, without concern about their incoherence.

Fake Expertise

Normal empirical inquiry tends toward and is sustained by the development of expert consensus. Without the emergence of an epistemically justified consensus (Miller 2013), a field or topic would endlessly debate and contest first principles. The important role of coherence in traditional empirical inquiry results over time in the alignment of expert views, as questions that are no longer considered unresolved are left behind, and new avenues of research are explored.

Conspiracy theories, by contrast, not only exhibit incoherence but often directly challenge a genuine expert consensus as well. Indeed, the tenets of pseudoscience necessarily stand in conflict to actual science, and, therefore, almost invariably contradict a scientific consensus. This presents a problem for people who support a conspiracy theory or pseudoscience, because they must provide some reason to discount the position of domain experts. Experts are thus often assumed to be corrupted by financial or professional self-interest, such as “being on the take” from Big Pharma (Blaskiewicz 2013). By the same token, conspiratorial rhetoric frequently celebrates dissent from an expert consensus as heroic, even if the dissenters have little or no scientific training. The rhetoric may invoke figures such as Galileo as being heroic defenders of truth who were persecuted for their opposition to an official “dogma.” This duality of not only being a hero but also a persecuted victim permeates much conspiratorial rhetoric and most science denial (Kalichman 2009; Lewandowsky, Cook, and Oberauer 2015; Wagner-Egger et al. 2011).

The duality can also be observed among proponents of the lab leak hypothesis, who routinely consider themselves to be muzzled or censored but who nonetheless managed to retain sufficient rhetorical and political force for President Biden to instruct the intelligence services to investigate the possible laboratory origin of SARS-CoV-2 in May 2021. To illustrate, the author of a popular book on the lab leak hypothesis, who enjoys considerable media presence, complained about one of her unpublished manuscripts being “censored” (Regalado 2021). The charge of censorship seems difficult to reconcile with book deals and widespread media presence.

Because there is a dearth of credible experts who support conspiratorial rhetoric, those genuine experts are often denigrated as being corrupt or being supported by shadowy (often Jewish) financiers such as George Soros (Hapke 2011). From climate change to vaccination and tobacco control research (Landman and Glantz 2009), proponents of conspiracy theories almost invariably accompany cries of censorship with denigration of genuine experts.

Resistance to Falsification

Like most pseudosciences, conspiracy theories are immune to contrary evidence. What sets conspiracy theories apart from pseudoscience is that they take immunity to a higher level by being actively “self-sealing.” As more evidence against the conspiracy emerges, the theory is kept alive by reinterpreting that contrary evidence as further proof of the conspiracy, creating an ever more elaborate and complicated theory.

Strands of the lab leak hypothesis exhibit these elaborate self-sealing epicycles. For much of 2021, the closest known relative of SARS-CoV-2 was a virus known as RaTG13, which is known to have been held by WIV in a collection of bat swab samples (Zhou et al. 2020). RaTG13 is more than 96 percent identical to SARS-CoV-2. It is likely that this virus genome was sequenced from a swab taken in 2013 from bats in an abandoned mineshaft in Mojiang, Togguan County, in Yunnan province (Ge, Wang, and Zhang 2016). RaTG13’s centrality to many original lab-leak claims stemmed from its putative role as the “backbone” from which SARS-CoV-2 was allegedly engineered (e.g., Deigin 2020). Being closely related to SARS-CoV-2 and being present in the lab at WIV made RaTG13 a perfect candidate for a precursor that was engineered into SARS-CoV-2.

However, despite being related to SARS-CoV-2, RaTG13 has been found to occupy a separate phylogenetic branch. SARS-CoV-2 is not descended from RaTG13, but rather they share a common ancestor from which they diverged an estimated 40 to 70 years ago (Boni et al. 2020). This implies that RaTG13 could not have served as a backbone from which SARS-CoV-2 was directly engineered. Moreover, in the meantime, several related viruses have been discovered that are closer in sequence to SARS-CoV-2 for much of the genome, such as the virus from Laos showing that SARS-CoV-2’s RBD and binding efficiency to human receptors are not unique (Temmam et al. 2021). Rather than accept this contrary evidence, some lab-leak advocates pivoted to argue that RaTG13 itself was not a natural virus but rather had been edited or in some way fabricated in an effort to hide the “true” backbone of SARS-CoV-2 and thus its engineered nature. The strong support for a zoonotic origin provided by the Laotian viruses is thus reinterpreted to mean that WIV obtained and used a similar but so-far secret virus from Laos to design SARS-CoV-2. There is no evidence that this has happened.

It is likely that more and more relatives and antecedents of SARS-CoV-2 will be discovered during the scientific hunt for the zoonotic origin of SARS-CoV-2. Adherents of the lab leak hypothesis will therefore face a stark choice. They can abandon or at least qualify their belief in genetic engineering, or they must generate an ever-increasing number of claims that these newly discovered relatives and antecedents, too, have been fabricated or engineered. It is likely that at least some people will follow the latter path of motivated reasoning; some have already alleged that the recent Omicron variant could be the product of lab-based antibody escape from the Sigal Lab in Durban, South Africa (McBreen 2021). The lab-leak hypotheses may have embarked on a prolonged journey indeed.

Samples from a Torrent

The search string “lab leak COVID” returns 764 million hits on Google. It is impossible to analyze this torrent of activity in a single chapter, particularly when there are considerably more variants of the lab leak hypothesis than of the virus itself.

It is therefore entirely possible that a scientifically valid and coherent account of the lab leak hypothesis exists within this enormous sample and that we are unaware of it (although to the best of our knowledge it would not be in the scientific literature). The fact that some members of the US intelligence community assigned plausibility to a lab leak without, however, being highly specific supports this possibility.

Bearing in mind that caveat, however, our analysis clearly shows that numerous arguments (we estimate it to be the lion’s share) for the lab leak hypothesis are pseudoscientific and suffused with conspiratorial rhetoric. Our analysis provides a toolbox to help identify argumentation that is unlikely to be conducive to truth-finding (Lewandowsky, Lloyd, and Brophy 2018).

Science, Politics, and the Power of Conspiracy Theories

During the last 50 years, the world has been confronted with a series of new infectious diseases, from AIDS to the swine flu and Zika. In all cases, a zoonotic origin of the virus was ultimately confirmed, although in some cases the research required decades (Fong 2017). The Ebola virus has never been unequivocally attributed to bats, despite strong serological evidence that they are the likely reservoir (Hayman et al. 2012; Pourrut et al. 2007). At the time of this writing, various possibilities about the origin of SARS-CoV-2, which involve the lab at the WIV in Wuhan remain open. For example, it is possible (though unlikely based on the geographical clustering of the earliest cases) that the WIV was a relay point in a zoonotic chain through infection of a worker.

Evidence for these lab leak possibilities may yet emerge. However, it is unlikely to emerge from the pseudoscientific argumentation and conspiratorial rhetoric employed by supporters of this hypothesis. On the contrary, flawed argumentation and conspiratorial rhetoric are the hallmarks of political operations that masquerade as a scientific endeavor. Whether it is opposition to mainstream climate science (Hornsey, Harris, and Fielding 2018b; Lewandowsky, Gignac, and Oberauer 2013a, 2013b; Smith and Leiserowitz 2012; Uscinski, Douglas, and Lewandowsky 2017) or rejection of vaccinations (Goldberg and Richey 2020; Hornsey, Harris, and Fielding 2018a; Lewandowsky, Gignac, and Oberauer 2013a), endorsement of conspiracies, or use of conspiratorial rhetoric, are a seemingly inevitable component of the rejection of well-established scientific conclusions. In all cases, the same markers of conspiratorial cognition and pseudoscience are present. It is therefore critical to help the media and public identify those markers to avoid them being misled by flawed argumentation. When open scientific questions remain,

with limited time and resources, it is essential that these are spent with care on normal inquiry rather than being diverted into often futile arguments with believers in conspiracy theorists and pseudoscientists. That normal enquiry may yet yield evidence for a variant of the lab leak hypothesis.

Enabling people to resist conspiracy theories that masquerade as scientific endeavors is particularly important when powerful political agents become involved. The Soviet Union was furtively pushing a conspiracy theory about the origin of HIV decades ago. Today, blaming China for the pandemic has become a routine component of political rhetoric, most notably by Donald Trump and his allies. Trump's blaming of China has had two opposing, unfortunate consequences: On the one hand, the xenophobic rhetoric has been linked to increased anti-Asian sentiment (Hswen et al. 2021). On the other hand, the xenophobic rhetoric may have ironically made it more difficult for reasonable scientific voices that support a lab-based origin of SARS-CoV-2 to be heard.

Notes

- 1 The views of Peter H. Jacobs are his own and do not necessarily represent those of NASA (his employer at the time of writing) or the United States.
- 2 Originally published here: www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/23/c_139002600.htm until deleted. Parts of the original source have been reuploaded here: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of India, "COVID-19, 15 Truth You Need to Know," *Mfa.gov*, May 16, 2020, www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cein//eng/xwfw/xxfb/t1779506.htm.

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PART 2

Asia



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3

COVID ORIGINS, NATIONALISM, AND DIASPORIC HETEROGENEITY

China, Chineseness, and Covid-19

Carwyn Morris, Andy Hanlun Li, and Lotus Ruan

Introduction

What is the “Chinese” experience of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation? And how does an analysis of this subject complex the idea of “Chineseness” and “China” as used to describe events occurring both inside and outside of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and within Chinese diasporas? This is a particularly important question to ask in a period of time characterized by US–PRC geopolitical rivalry during which China or Chinese is often used as a flattened, blanket term in anglophone media, politics, and academia to describe everything from the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Sinophone languages, and Chinese diasporas. To contribute some answers to these big questions, in this chapter, we examine Covid-19 conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation related to China and Chineseness through an exploration of information that is predominantly written in Simplified Chinese and spoken in Mandarin Chinese (Sinophone language) circulating in the PRC’s physical and digital territories; information produced by PRC state representatives and state-affiliates circulating outside of PRC territories; and information predominantly circulating outside of PRC territories, particularly the United States, that is produced by explicitly anti-PRC and anti-CCP actors and institutions that either are ethnically Chinese or have very close ties to ethnically Chinese institutions and actors (Li 2022). In discussing the circulation of information around digital territory, we understand digital territory as an aspect of volumetric territory, with the development of territory – itself “a political technology” (Elden 2017, 8) – over “digital space,” a practice that “in many cases, [extends] the reach of the state” (Morris 2022a, 23) and aids the development of state sovereignty over digital relations.

While we feel that the complexity of Chinese narratives around Covid-19 should not be surprising and that such a point should ideally need not be

made, we are pushing back against a tendency for China, Chinese peoples, Chinese languages, and Chineseness to be flattened and homogenized into a singular identity/person/nation/experience. In doing this, we are highlighting that there is no singular narrative related to China, Chineseness, Sinophone languages, and Covid-19. Rather, the complexity of these narratives and the contradictions between them highlight the necessity to clearly identify what aspect of contemporary China or Chineseness is being analyzed, discussed, and described at any particular moment. In this chapter, Chineseness is ascribed to two things: the artefacts (conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation) themselves and the actors producing, propagating, and consuming the information. Allen Chun's (Chun 1996, 2009, 2017) critique of Chineseness shows that the descriptor's shifting meaning depends on the historical and geographical contexts within which the term is deployed. Chineseness can capture how these artefacts travel across contexts though shared language, ethnicity, identity, and platforms across the globe, but it obscures how these artefacts mutate and are deployed differently. This is why Chineseness itself must be unpacked if we are to understand conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation, rather than inadvertently contributing to misinformation through analytical slippage.

In the seminal article, *Fuck Chineseness*, Chun asks readers in the opening paragraphs:

What is the nature of Chineseness, and who are the Chinese? Finally, who is really speaking here? Something called “China” unquestionably exists, but, more importantly, there is a multitude of expressions to denote different aspects of China and Chineseness.

(1996, 111)

Chun goes on to show how China and Chinese mean different things to two different people, arguing that how words are used, what words mean, and how meaning change is important to people around the world, particularly if it is a term used to describe an individual's past, present, and future. Chun continues to unpack the complexities of Chineseness, noting that “ethnicity, culture and identity are analytically distinct notions whose meaning, and usage have been muddled in disciplinary practice” (2009, 331). More recently, Chun has pushed for readers to *Forget Chineseness* (2017), highlighting how the rise of the PRC has resulted in a move from the transnational idea of “Greater China” toward “New Greater China” that is defined by ongoing relations between the idea of Chineseness and the PRC, with the actions of the PRC influencing how Chineseness is understood around the world. Chun shows that these terms continue to have power and influence, something evident in the racism of the Covid-19 period and the use of China threat discourses in a variety of political projects. Following in the footsteps of Chun, this chapter will highlight how questions around China, Chineseness, and Chinese identity influence the everyday geopolitics of the ongoing US–PRC rivalry, a rivalry in which both US and PRC governments

have tended to flatten the meanings of China and Chineseness by creating “us” versus “them” binaries.

Following this introduction, we first examine Covid-19 disinformation and misinformation by focusing on information related to Covid-19 circulating primarily within the PRC. In the first empirical section, we focus on two key conspiracy theories: that Covid-19 was brought to Wuhan by US soldiers during the 2019 Military World Games, and that Covid-19 was produced in the US Army Base, Fort Detrick (Detrick). The section ends with extracts from interviews that were conducted as part of a research project by one of the coauthors. During this project, 15 interviews were conducted (online and offline), and the project was designed to understand how surveillance is imagined in the PRC and the UK during Covid-19. In the second empirical section, we move our analytical enquiry outside of the physical territory of the PRC, instead looking at how institutions and actors with strong links to the idea of China, the PRC, its state representatives and affiliated media; *The Epoch Times*, a Falun Gong-supported media organization, as well as Guo Wengui and the associated media network built up around him. Through these cases, we show how the Chinese and China in disinformation and misinformation engage a variety of audiences and are involved in a variety of political projects, and that through an examination of this we are able to have a better understanding of a multitude of political imaginaries as well as the contours of an emerging geopolitical rivalry between the PRC and the United States. In doing this, we are particularly interested in highlighting how CCP and PRC disinformation and misinformation target diaspora and anglophone non-PRC citizens by leveraging existing conspiracy theories; how conservative, anti-CCP diasporic discourse strategically tap into potentially racist discourse to discredit CCP and find potential allies; and how multiple political agendas are entangled yet easily lost through the label China because it is simultaneously a race, a state, a culture, a language, and an imaginary.

The Military World Games and Fort Detrick

On March 12, 2020, Lijian Zhao (2020a), Deputy Director of Foreign Ministry Information Department of the People’s Republic of China, tweeted: “How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!” This comment by Zhao was shared alongside a video, edited by the Chinese state media outlet Global Times including Chinese subtitles and a sinister background music, of the director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert R. Redfield, stating that some people who died of influenza were later diagnosed as having Covid-19. Earlier in the day, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chunying Hua (2020), had already jumped on Redfield’s comments, tweeting that “Some cases that were previously diagnosed as Flu in the US were actually #COVID19. It is absolutely WRONG and INAPPROPRIATE to call this the Chinese coronavirus,” while sharing the

C-Span version of the same discussion. As Hua's comment implies, all of this followed hostile comments from the Trump administration, and Donald Trump himself on Twitter, regarding China's response and relationship to Covid-19 or the "China virus" (Marlow 2020).

Setting aside the broader geopolitics of this interaction – this happened during escalating US–PRC tensions, including trade tariffs, the Huawei ban, and the TAIPEI Act – for now, within Zhao's tweet is a reference to the conspiracy theory that the US army brought Covid-19 to Wuhan. This popular Covid-19 origin theory was widely discussed on social media and focused on the idea that during the 7th International Military Sports Council Military World Games, US soldiers brought Covid-19 to Wuhan. Following Zhao's tweets on the subject, state-affiliated media outlet, *The People's Daily* (2021), shared a video of Zhao on Weibo, the Sina-operated microblog site that is hugely popular in the PRC, under the hashtag “#U.S., release health and infection information of the US military delegation which came to Wuhan#.” According to interviewees for this chapter, the Military Games theory rapidly became one of the most widely discussed conspiracy theories on the original transmission of Covid-19, with the support of this transmission theory by state representatives giving the theory a greater visibility.

While the Military Games transmission theory became a large talking point on and off the Chinese Internet as well as the cornerstone of what would become a disinformation campaign supported by Chinese state representatives and state-affiliated institutions, transmission requires a starting point. The lodestone of this disinformation campaign was the idea that Covid-19 was created in US military base, Detrick. That Detrick, located in Maryland, became embroiled in a Covid-19 conspiracy theory is not completely surprising, as there is a long history of Detrick-centered conspiracy theories. Detrick, home to the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, was a part of early HIV conspiracy theories, such as the “HIV-from-Fort-Detrick” conspiracy supported by the East German secret police, where it was theorized that AIDS was “genetically engineered” from two separate viruses in Detrick (Geissler and Sprinkle 2013; Knight 2003, 42). Detrick has numerous popular media appearances, including references in the feature films, *Outbreak* and *The Bourne Legacy*; the influential conspiracy television show *The X-Files*; and spy show *The Americans*. From this, Detrick slotted smoothly into a narrative built around US military transmission of Covid-19 to Wuhan.

The military games theory gained prominence very early in the pandemic, but it took longer for the Detrick origin theory to gain the same level of mainstream recognition. On January 18, 2021, following accusations from the United States of a Wuhan lab leak, Hua referenced Detrick during a press conference:

I'd like to stress that if the United States truly respects facts, it should open the biological lab at Fort Detrick, give more transparency to issues like its 200-plus overseas bio-labs, invite WHO [the World Health Organization] experts to conduct origin-tracing in the United States, and respond to the concerns from the international community with real actions.

(Li 2021)

With Zhao continuing to reference Detrick in 2022:

[B]iological military activities of the US in Ukraine are merely the tip of the iceberg. Using such pretexts as cooperating to reduce biological safety risks and strengthening global public health, the US has 336 biological labs in 30 countries under its control. 336, you heard me right. It also conducted many biological military activities at the Fort Detrick base at home.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022)

Detrick, as a space of viral-potential, began to be discussed in 2020, particularly in the Weibo hashtag and “Super Topic,” “#AmericanFortDetrickBioLab#” (Sina Weibo n.d.). To give an idea of this theories circulation, as of writing, this topic has been read 1.51 billion times, discussed 250,000 times, and had 27,000 people create posts using it (Yin 2020). This Super Topic became a space where ideas around the relationship between Covid-19 and Detrick were widely shared, but it was a topic managed by the Communist Youth League, meaning they either founded the hashtag or applied (and were granted) control of the topic. Being the host, they had the power to influence the way the topic grew and what the topic displayed as “Hot” posted on the main topic page. They also controlled the description of the topic, which reads: “In April 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic swept through the United States, and New York quickly became the ‘epicenter.’ Meanwhile, in Fort Detrick, some 240 miles away, the US government was conducting experiments with dangerous pathogens!” Numerous groups created content related to Detrick, including Shanghai-based state-controlled media outlet, *The Paper* (*Peng-pai*), one of China’s most innovative media outlets, an outlet that had in the past pushed the boundaries of what content is acceptable in China’s pro-state media environment (Repnikova and Fang 2019). One particular video *The Paper* created and shared in July 2020 was viewed by millions and, by creating links to Imperial Japan, suggested that Detrick was a sinister place where death could emerge (*The Paper* 2020). The video highlighted Detrick’s “dark” history, saying that Detrick inherited the technological legacy of the Imperial Japanese biological and chemical warfare research unit that carried out war crimes in North East China. The video ends by saying “there are big questions to be asked” about whether the research carried out in Detrick has applications outside scientific research and if the diseases researched at Detrick were appropriately managed. While not explicitly stating that Covid-19 leaked from Detrick, the video did suggest that nothing good could emerge from Detrick and that the management of Detrick could not be trusted. With affectively powerful disinformation and misinformation like this spread by state-affiliated organizations and news sources during 2020, Detrick became a useful concept for state officials to draw on as they engaged in a geopolitical game of conspiratorial one-upmanship with the Trump administration.

The support of the transmission and origin theories by state representatives and state-affiliated media aided the circulation of these theories and gave a veneer of acceptability to them, according to interviewees. One interviewee noted that endorsement from state representatives “made a really big impact in China as a lot

of people saw it as an official government endorsement of this conspiracy theory.” Another interviewee highlighted that Zhao’s English language comments were shared through screenshots, translated into Chinese, and shared on Weibo, resulting in people speculating where Covid-19 emerged. When the comments of state representatives are shared on social media, it becomes an invitation for others to speculate on numerous non-Chinese origins for Covid-19, both publicly on social media and privately online and offline. As one interviewee noted:

Although most of my friends don’t think it’s important to discuss the origins of the virus, as the pandemic is already ongoing, this [subject] is discussed by major Chinese media. They don’t put it as a concrete fact, they just bring [conspiracy theories] out as discussion topics: a possibility.

Recent scholarship by Guobin Yang (2022) finds a similar relationship between state endorsement and disinformation. By citing diarist, Melon Mass, who wrote on March 14, 2020, Yang highlights the effectiveness of official disinformation in China:

Zhao Lijian used his personal Twitter handle to question the US even if he did not have firm evidence [about the origin of the virus]. This seems somewhat inappropriate seen from the perspective of China’s traditional [diplomatic] style. But it had a critical role in reversing the overwhelming trend of the world blaming the virus on China and was a slap on the faces of the political leaders in the US and some other countries who kept talking about the “China virus” and “Wuhan virus,” despite the fact that WHO already named the novel coronavirus “COVID-19” on February 11.

(178)

From this, we begin to see a few trends in how conspiracy theories have been operationalized in the PRC during Covid-19. These theories center around transmission and spread of Covid-19, and while they may start off in the wild, they gain power through tacit state endorsement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2021), when discussed by state-affiliated media and organizations but most powerfully through the words, in Chinese and English, of state representatives (Zhao 2020b; Romanoff 2020). The timing of state representatives discussing these theories suggests that they were involved in a tit-for-tat engagement with the United States. But the ideas around Detrick were spreading months before they were operationalized by state representatives, including through videos produced by state-affiliated media. When the theories were supported by state representatives, they grew lives of their own, spreading wildly on Chinese social media, and, it seems, shoring up support for the Chinese state in what might be perceived as a zero-sum ideological battle with the US. These are examples of what Yang (2022) describes as Covid Nationalism, and through the political technologies of conspiracy theory, disinformation, and misinformation, domestic support seemed to become solidified

as conspiratorial imaginaries around the major geopolitical rival were stoked. The ongoing visibility of this disinformation and misinformation must also be understood as an intentional and political choice, as, in the tightly governed PRC digital territory, many undesired large-scale public spectacles are quickly halted, bringing an end to protest cycles (Ruan et al. 2020; Morris 2022a, 2022b). This suggests that the circulation of this information is one part of a broader information strategy put in operation by PRC state representatives and affiliated media.

Complexing Chineseness Through Disinformation

The discussion of Chinese conspiracy theories has so far focused on conspiracies produced by PRC citizens for consumption by PRC citizens, although the content has sometimes not been in Sinophone languages. As PRC citizens are not confined within the physical territorial boundaries of the PRC, and even remain in the digital territorial boundaries of the PRC when outside of the physical borders of the PRC, these ideas rapidly moved around the world, being consumed by PRC citizens studying and working abroad as well as the Chinese diaspora more broadly. But moving outside of the PRC further complexes both the idea of a Chinese conspiracy theory and the binary geopolitical tensions – the US versus China – discussed earlier. In this section, we explore this by examining the English language material used in Covid-19 disinformation shared on social media outside of China’s digital territory, notably on Twitter and Facebook.

As noted earlier, the PRC and its state representatives produced content in both Chinese and English. The Chinese content was shared within China’s digital territory and on traditional media, but the English content was often shared outside of China’s digital territory, on Twitter, a digital space generally inaccessible within the PRC. While the English language content did reach PRC and Chinese-speaking audiences through translation and sharing, as Sinophone language content was actively produced for those within the PRC and the English content was shared outside of China’s digital territory, English language content was likely produced for non-PRC audiences. Importantly, while powerful rhetorical displays by Chinese state representatives in English can garner praise within China, a more combative approach to diplomacy described as “wolf warrior” (Yang 2022; Martin 2021), the accounts we share below move beyond the spectacular displays associated with wolf warrior politics and highlight a far more nuanced mode of misinforming and sharing disinformation. Therefore, it can be assumed that this content was produced and shared by state representatives and state-affiliated institutions in an effort to target English speakers with disinformation, particularly English speakers who were skeptical of the United States, the so-called “tankies” (Lanza 2021), and those who were skeptical of Covid-19 and vaccines in general, the so-called anti-vaxers and Covid-sceptics.

One particularly clear example of this is the case of Sichuanese rap group, CD Rev. In August 2021, the official PRC news agency, *Xinhua News* (2021), began sharing rap group CD Rev’s song, “Open the door to Fort Detrick,” and the

accompanying video on Twitter and Facebook. In this English language song and video, numerous ideas related to Detrick and US policy are touched on. The disinformation begins within the first seconds of the video, and the video opens with footage from an exchange between Senator Rand Paul and Dr. Anthony Fauci at a US Senate hearing. Paul says, “all the evidence is pointing that it came from the lab, and there will be responsibility for those who funded the lab, including yourself” before the video cuts to Fauci pointing to Paul saying, “I totally resent that, and if anybody is lying here, senator it is you.” But the two exchanges at the beginning of this video are in fact edited together from different parts of the hearing, with Paul’s footage – which was also shared in another edited form on Paul’s own YouTube channel (SenatorRandPaul 2021) – coming 90 seconds before the footage of Fauci. As this ambiguous beginning about an unnamed lab ends, a member of CD Rev says, subtitled onscreen in English and Chinese: “Typical political manipulation: Again and again; I’m so sick of these shows,” before showing the footage of a White House Press Briefing. Following this, the video enters into an English language rap asking “Fort Detrick; Why is it off limits; Nazi doctors were hired; War criminals from unit 731; Human experiments had been done; What kind of devil’s deal had been signed?” before eventually reaching the chorus: “Open the door to Fort Detrick; Because transparency is your favourite; Then great; America first; We want the, we want the truth.” On August 11, state representative Zhao (2021) also shared the video on Twitter, copying two lines from the song and saying “‘Open the door to Fort Detrick; Shed light on tightly held secre . . .’; This RAP song speaks our minds.” This sort of English language content is indicative of a broader attempt by PRC state representatives and affiliated media to spread disinformation and misinformation through English language resources to influence those outside of the PRC, something which is also achieved by journalistic writing and non-PRC, mainly white, YouTubers and social media personalities (Mozur et al. 2021).

But disinformation from Chinese sources is not limited to PRC state-affiliated actors, and two key actors involved in China related to disinformation and misinformation, who looked to influence people outside of the PRC were explicitly anti-CCP and anti-PRC forces: *The Epoch Times (TET)* and Guo. *TET* was founded by the Falun Gong, a religious/spiritual group exiled from and outlawed by the PRC in the 1990s. Founded in 2000, it was an obscure publication focused on publishing anti-CCP content until the mid-2010s, when it supported Donald Trump for Presidency and made use of new Facebook advertising tactics to grow its fanbase, eventually making *TET* a darling of the American alt-right (Roose 2021). With a strong anti-CCP agenda, it is unsurprising that *TET* ran an editorial line centered on the failings of the CCP, but this often blurs into the boundaries of disinformation. For instance, the publication regularly calls Covid-19 the “CCP Virus,” with the section, “CCP Virus,” one of the three (almost) always visible sections of the website when viewed on desktop (The Epoch Times n.d.). The articles highlighted by the editor of the CCP Virus section include stories of Covid-19 cover-ups in Northern China, studies on the damaging social and economic effects

of the Covid-19 vaccine mandates, and the information that vitamin D treats and prevents Covid-19 (Hao 2020; Anthrappully 2022; Lee and Jekielek 2022). One regularly touted aspect of Covid-19 discussed on *TET* is the Chinese lab-leak theory (Fu 2021b, 2021a; Phillips 2021). On the pages of *TET*, evidence of this includes that the Chinese military has touted biological warfare as further evidence of a potential leak, and many of the theories espoused by *TET* on Covid-19's origins appear in an hour-long documentary in April 2020 on the lab-leak theory that has been viewed by millions of people, including tens of millions of views on Facebook (BBC News 2020; NTD 2020). The lab-leak theory here gained support from a Chinese publication with anti-CCP and anti-PRC sentiment, a Chinese publication that was one of the key purchasers of pro-Donald Trump adverts, and a Chinese publication that wrote content critical of “John Liu, a Taiwanese-American former New York City councilman whom the group viewed as soft on China and hostile to Falun Gong” (Roose 2021). With *TET*, the notion of what a Chinese media publication could be is complexed, particularly as many of the content writers featured on its front page are white.

While *TET* became a Chinese disinformation and misinformation source that influenced English and German language audiences (Perrone and Loucaides 2022), it is Guo, a former PRC-based real estate tycoon and a billionaire who fled the PRC to avoid prosecution, and the media and political networks built up around him that are key to spreading Covid-19 disinformation and misinformation among the Chinese diaspora, in both Sinophone languages and English. Guo has successfully gained influence in the North American Chinese diaspora through video and media content, while also aligning himself with former White House Chief Strategist and Breitbart co-founder, Steve Bannon. Bannon, who was arrested while on Guo's yacht, cofounded a number of institutions with Guo, including the anti-CCP institution and political movement, New Federal State of China (NFSC). Guo is closely associated with the *GTV Media Group*, which includes *GNews*, and a leading figure in the Himalaya Farm and Himalaya Coin movements, the latter being an Ethereum token described as the official currency of the NFSC. The media networks around Guo regularly share video content of Guo – Guo's preferred medium of information sharing – alongside bilingual commentary and textual pieces. Central to the aim of these media ventures is the hope that PRC-managed media and information-sharing organizations will be banned in the United States, leaving “*Gnews* and *GTV* [as] the only platform and app to use for tens of millions of overseas Chinese and those within the CCP Internet firewall, to find out the truth about the CCP and the world” (Jiang 2021).

Through this content, Guo and the media network built around him offer insights into high-level PRC and CCP politics, corruption, identity politics, North American elections, and other current events. Unsurprisingly, Covid-19 – “the CCP Virus” – and vaccines are regularly discussed by Guo and within the media network. This includes extolling the virtues of alternative remedies to Covid-19, such as hydroxychloroquine, which, Guo says, helps people completely

recover from the virus and completely wipe it out (GNews 2021a). On the *GNews* network, bilingual videos and articles including Guo soundbites have discussed the profitability of vaccines for China while also describing Covid-19 as “a bio-weapon virus created in a [CCP] military lab [that] ravaged the world,” noting that the “CCP quickly developed and exported another biocheichal [sic] virus in the form of a vaccines” (GNews 2021b). Among the Guo media network, including on social media associated with the network, vaccine disinformation and misinformation is rife, with content such as screenshots from *GTV* and *GNews* shared with the text “DON’T TRUST THE VACCINE the medical industry is completely controlled by a special-interest” (Xiaolin 2021).

A key aspect of the Guo- (and also Bannon-) backed Covid-19 disinformation is the idea that Covid-19 was manufactured in a scientific facility, an additional lab-leak. These views are supported by scientist, Dr. Li-Meng Yan, whose scholarship on the issue has been debunked (Rasmussen 2021), but who has been featured on *GNews*, *GTV*, and *TET*, as well as being interviewed by Steve Bannon (multiple times) and Tucker Carlson (Philipp 2021; Dorman 2020). In early 2020, Dr. Yan originally shared her theory that Covid-19 had been released by the CCP to anti-CCP, Sinophone language YouTuber, Wang Dingnan (Lu De), an affiliate of Guo (Qin, Wang, and Hakim 2020). While Yan no-longer has an academic affiliation, after previously being associated with the University of Hong Kong, she is associated with Rule of Law Society, a non-profit founded by Guo and associated with Steve Bannon (Timberg 2021), which paid for her relocation to the United States and introduced her to a broader network of media commentators. Her papers related to the bioweapon and manufactured status of Covid-19 have been viewed over two million times and make up a core part of the scientific information shared across Guo-related media, Steve Bannon’s media, and other alt-right media, with the second of three papers using a title that “covers top keyword search terms for disinformation about bioweapons” (Donovan and Nilsen 2021), increasing its visibility as a seemingly academic source on Covid-19.

Building on this foundation, across Guo-related media, a number of strands of disinformation, some related to Covid-19, but many related to the CCP, are shared in Chinese and English, an attempt to move beyond the Sinophone language sphere in order to speak to multilingual audiences. This work is supported by the close connection between Bannon and Guo, with members of the Guo network, such as Yan, regularly appearing on Bannon-associated media. But Guo-associated media still conduct their most powerful work in Chinese, sharing disinformation with the Chinese diaspora and those within the PRC about a range of topics, from CCP corruption to Covid-19 vaccine fears. After content is produced in Chinese on Guo-associated media, it gradually filters into media outlets focused on English-speaking audiences, including outlets within the Guo media network. Amidst the disinformation generated by Guo and his associated media, his status as a truth-speaking enemy of the CCP is in turn aided by the actions of the CCP, with reports highlighting how a “pro-Chinese political spam network” (Nimmo et al. 2020) across Twitter and Facebook targeted Guo, his associates – including

Li-Meng Yan – and associated media. These attacks support Guo’s rebel status and provide a sheen of validity to the information shared by the media network (Strick 2020).

Conclusion

In the realm of everyday geopolitics, the conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation discussed in this chapter offer a window into how two geopolitical rivals, the United States and the PRC, attempt to influence the imaginaries of one another, as well as the role that the Chinese diaspora plays in complexing this US–PRC geopolitical binary. The conspiracy theories discussed here are the most widely circulated Covid-19 conspiracy theories, disinformation, and misinformation in PRC territories, and through them we get an indication of how state representatives and state-affiliated institutions are attempting to portray the US. Through this contested imaginary, we also begin to see the ongoing geopolitical rivalry playing out domestically in the PRC, with state representatives circulating disinformation and misinformation about the US and PRC citizens reacting to this information in heterogeneous ways, providing insights into how the PRC wishes to portray the US to its own citizens. Through this disinformation, we see an increase in the combativeness of PRC propaganda and diplomatic efforts, the so-called wolf warrior strategy, both in public and behind closed doors. Yang (2022, 170) notes, referencing Zhao, that such comments were “less about facts and more a countersalvo to debunk unfounded claims coming from American media.” Through the use of Sinophone and English language disinformation, Chinese state officials, supported by state-affiliated media, were able to simultaneously project an image of the strong Chinese state, deflect criticism from Covid-19 mishaps within the PRC and by the CCP, while also attacking the country that many perceived of as being China’s main geopolitical rival, the US, leading people to reflect on the feasibility of not just the American Dream but also the US national project (Zhang 2019).

That combative, Sinophone media designed for PRC citizens was being actively produced and circulated around the PRC suggests that much of the anglophone information circulated by those affiliated with the PRC was for non-PRC audiences. With the PRC audience already well served, anglophone content is likely designed to both “tell China’s story well” (China Media Project 2021) and to offer alternative takes on current events. From this perspective, we capture a glimpse of how the PRC is attempting to actively influence the anglophone media sphere through disinformation that targets non-PRC citizens. While scholarship has shown active PRC influence operations in non-PRC territories (Bolsover and Howard 2019), the use of highly produced media content to engage in a war of imaginaries with a geopolitical rival indicates a new phase of the rivalry. Covid-19 information is currently central to this strategy, but this strategy has also been employed in relation to Xinjiang and the Uyghur population (Byler, Franceschini, and Loubere 2022; Mozur et al. 2021).

Finally, disinformation produced by the Chinese diaspora for both anglophone and Sinophone audiences suggest that Chineseness is not a static element in US–PRC relations. The diaspora actors and institutions producing and circulating Covid-19 disinformation and misinformation will continue to play a role in how the PRC, China, and Chineseness are defined and understood by those outside of the PRC. This is particularly true in the United States, with both *TET* and Guo aligned with alt-right actors. Both *TET* and the Guo-affiliated network are involved in a phenomenon where wider multi-language media networks of disinformation tap into a racist Chinese–virus discourse to discredit the CCP, with “CCP” operating as a code word in Sinophobic discourse. Through disinformation and misinformation, these right-wing authoritarian leaning anti-PRC and anti-CCP institutions are contributing to a flattening of Chineseness in ways that may harm individuals within the Chinese diaspora.

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4

DIS-SPIRACY THEORY

Why Corona Rhymes with Corruption in Indonesia

Nils Bubandt

In September 2020, the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail* in collaboration with the news organization Tortoise named the Indonesian musician Jerinx the world's fifth-largest "super-spreader" of online medical misinformation. With an online following of close to a million in mid-2020, the Instagram and Twitter posts by the drummer of the Balinese punk-rock band *Superman Is Dead* generated more than 80,000 interactions, an online impact that was surpassed only by that of the US environmental lawyer and anti-vaxxer Robert Kennedy Jr., the California-based Scientologist Rizza Islam, the Nigerian politician Femi-Fani-Kayode, and the Samoan-Australian natural health influencer Taylor Winterstein (Hollowood, Serato, and Newell 2020).

Jerinx (pronounced Jerink) appears to fit the standard figure of the Covid-19 conspiracy theorist. And yet, as this chapter will show, Jerinx's conspiratorial posts partake in a broader political discourse about the occult side of power that appeals to police commissioners as much as punks and to ministers as much as ex-magicians. Beginning with a short description of the conspiracy theories of Jerinx, the chapter moves on to dissolve these theories in a political aesthetic that takes the form of "collusion theory" and "punk-spiracy" and to trace the similarities to other theories promoted by influential figures such as police commissioner Dharma Pongrekun and former Minister of Health Siti Fadilah Supari. The chapter concludes by suggesting the need for a "dis-spiracy theory" analysis, an analytical attempt to focus on the disparate overlaps between conspiratorial discourses and general discourses of political reason in a given context.

Your Average Conspiracy Thinker?

Jerinx, whose given name is I Gede Ari Astina, is a seemingly self-evident instance of a "super-spreader" of viral misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic. On

his Twitter and Instagram accounts – @jrx-sid and @jrxsid, respectively (both since suspended by the providers) – Jerinx argued that the dangers of the SARS-CoV-2 virus were deliberately exaggerated by “mainstream media” in a campaign orchestrated by an Indonesian and global elite in order to promote a culture of fear and to profit off the vaccines.

When in June 2020, the Indonesian Minister of Finance, Sri Mulyani, announced that the Indonesian state-owned medical producer, Bio Farma, would join forces with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to produce vaccines against Covid-19 (Putri 2020), following a similar agreement the year before about the production of polio vaccines, Jerinx wrote an Instagram post on June 25, 2020, that included the following:

Is their plan clear to you now? The World Bank’s favorite Minister of the Economy hooks up with a former computer software salesman who is busy working on vaccines. . . . Combine the dots and you will arrive at the conclusion that Covid-19 is about business. It is NOT about health, let alone compassion.

(as cited in Nurullah 2020; my translation)

In another post, Jerinx refers to the Covid-19 pandemic as a “plandemic,” a reference to the video “Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19” produced by Mikki Willis and released in May 2020. The conspiracist video features a lengthy interview with the American anti-vaccination campaigner and discredited scientist Judy Mikovits, who claims that the Covid-19 virus was manipulated or manufactured in a lab and that “Bill Gates is somehow implicated in causing the pandemic to profit off the eventual vaccine” (Hatmaker 2020).

In an Instagram live discussion in April 2020 with medical doctor and online influencer Dr. Tirta, which was watched by over 150,000 people, Jerinx said he had recently begun following the Flat Earth Society on Facebook and believed 60 percent of what they wrote: that the Covid-19 virus was likely made by humans, that its manufacture was part of a plan (*skema*), and that it “perhaps had connections to a pedophilia ring within the US White House” (Detikhot 2020). The last claim was a reference to the viral conspiracy video “Out of the Shadows” that had been released that same month by the American former stuntman and born-again Christian Mike Smith. Described by the news website *The Daily Beast* as “a fact-free ‘documentary’ film . . . alleging Hollywood is run by Satanists and pedophiles” (Hitt 2020), the video became exceedingly popular in QAnon circles and was purportedly viewed over a million times within 24 hours of its online release.

In Indonesia, many followers of Jerinx felt that he was onto something. Others called him a dumbass (“On Social Media” 2020) or saw him as a dangerous deployer of Nazi propaganda tactics (R53 2020). Whichever way, Jerinx appeared to fit the bill of a run-of-the-mill conspiracy theorist. He even has the word “conspiracy” tattooed conspicuously on his chest.

Conspiracy Theory Beyond Consensus

However, many aspects of the conspiracism and biography of Jerinx poorly fit standard narratives about conspiracy theorists. Jerinx is not an ardent anti-vaxxer, for instance. Although he bragged, early on in the pandemic, that he was not afraid to meet hospitalized Covid-19 patients, Jerinx was nevertheless vaccinated in August 2021, saying his main reluctance against being vaccinated was his prior history of hepatitis. In spite of a long history of social activism and being a punk musician raging against the machine, Jerinx is also not virulently against the state. In November 2021, for example, he was named an official anti-narcotics ambassador for the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) in Bali. In a post on his new Instagram handle (@true_jrx), he said that he would use this position not only to discourage young people from the curse of drugs, but also as a platform for his continuing fight against corruption and collusion (*suap*) in Indonesia.

Jerinx's Covid-19 conspiracism is not merely riddled with contradiction, it also comes to life in a plastic social and public media landscape where a variety of Covid-19 conspiracy narratives are promoted by an unlikely assemblage of actors in Indonesia – former Health Minister Siti Fadilah Supari, ex-magician-turned-TV-host Deddy Corbuzier, three-star general and police commissioner Dharma Pongrekun, economist Ichasanuddin Noorsy, and dermatologist Samuel L. Simon. In order to understand this contradictory and plastic landscape where punks and generals, ministers, and magicians co-produce conspiracy theories, I argue that one needs to abandon a common tendency in the scholarship of conspiracy theory – which can be found in both political science/cognitive and “culturalist” approaches to conspiracy theory (Butter and Knight 2020) – namely the tendency to see consensus rather than dissensus in conspiracy theories.

If the analytical object is to identify what distinguishes conspiracy theories from “normal” theories about the world, it seems to make good sense to focus on the commonalities or consensus between conspiracy theories. Indeed, in the discussion of Covid-19 conspiracy theories, all the usual suspects of conspiracy theory indicators have been lined up: their alleged shared conspiratorial mentality (Gligorić et al. 2021); their suggested tendency to partisan-motivated reasoning that favors arguments which bolster existing worldviews over others (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016); their purported denialism of authoritative sources and aversion to trust (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2015; Wirawan et al. 2021); and their common culture, narrative style, and monological set of beliefs (Byford 2011; Miller 2020).

However, consensus thinking in the scholarship on conspiracy theory runs the risk of pathologizing conspiracy theories as being radically different from “normal” theories about the world. Consensus-oriented scholarship on conspiracy theories thereby runs the risk of essentializing them by focusing on what they share with each other over what they share with other ideas about the world. Indeed, there is a certain irony to a unilateral focus on the consensus in conspiracy theories since the scholarship of conspiracy theory thereby comes to replicate what it argues about conspiracy theory: namely to posit a united cabal of like-minded people who hide

and conspire in the shadows of reality as we know it. By focusing too much on the “con” in conspiracy theories, scholarship risks missing how they are often characterized by dissensus rather than consensus. It risks ignoring their plastic and changing nature, and it risks overlooking how conspiracy theories frequently have origins in the same trajectories of critical political reason, which seek to “other” them.

This chapter is not a political or moral defense of conspiracy theory as a genre in Indonesia but is motivated by an anthropological impulse to de-orientalize what appears strange at first. We need to understand the historical and contextual discourses of truth and power within which theories about the world – conspiratorial and otherwise – exist. We need analytical accounts of conspiracy theories that trace their shared history with other theories of the world in order to see what George Marcus calls “paranoia-within-reason” (1999), meaning the already existing forms of suspicion within political reason itself and its flow into conspiracy theory along circuitous and plastic pathways. This means tracing the contradictory and disparate links of conspiracy theory to political discourse. One might call this dis-spiracy theory analysis, an analytical attempt to focus on the disparate overlaps between conspiratorial discourses and general discourses of political reason in a given context (see Knight 2021). In Indonesia, conspiracy discourse overlaps a great deal with, and has the same aesthetic form as, corruption discourse and general discourses about the unseen dimensions of power.

Dissensus: Dubbing Conspiracy Theory in Indonesia

The ideas about Covid-19 promoted by Jerinx and others in Indonesia clearly participate in a global Covid-19 conspiracy discourse. Jerinx integrates snippets of global conspiracy theories about Pizzagate, the plandemic, and Bill Gates into his own theories. But these global discourses are also adapted or “dubbed” into Indonesian discourses of political suspicion. I borrow the notion of “dubbing” from Tom Boellstorff’s analysis of the way in which globally circulating discourses about gay and lesbian identities are “dubbed” into Indonesian discourse. Boellstorff shows how global discourses about gay and lesbian identity are adopted and reframed in “contingent, fractured, intermittent, yet powerfully influential” ways to generate distinctly Indonesian notions of being *lesbi* or *gay* (2003, 225). Discourses about LGBT+ identities, Boellstorff suggests, do not move “as one voice” across the globe. Rather, they are “dubbed” or dialogically reconstituted into vernacular discourses about politics and subjectivity (226). Globally circulating conspiracy theory discourses, I suggest, are similarly dubbed. Indeed, it is this dubbing – the reconstitution of conspiracy theory into locally sensible discourses – that accounts for a great deal of their appeal.

In Indonesia, conspiracy theories come to make sense because they are “dubbed” into discourses about power and corruption. They are “collusion theories” as much as they are conspiracy theories. I use the term “collusion theory” to refer to a dissenting aesthetics of politics that reaches far into the realm of the reasonable and therefore appeals to a broad cross section of Indonesians. This political aesthetics

holds that politics – like all dimensions of life – has both an apparent and a hidden scene. In Indonesia, politics is frequently described with metaphors and references from Javanese shadow play, where the performances of the shadow puppets (*wayang kulit*) are controlled by a puppet master (*dalang*) who is hidden from view (Anderson 1990; Keeler 1987). The same goes for the heterophonic gamelan music that accompanies shadow plays. Gamelan music is said to revolve around one central melodic basis, but this melody is inaudible and never actually played (Perlman 2004), and there is no consensus as to what it sounds like. In other words, dissent is the inherent characteristic of this unheard aesthetics. In the same way that gamelan music is played around a tune no one hears and shadow plays are orchestrated by a puppeteer no one sees, political power is widely believed to be organized by forces and actors hidden from public view.

Noting the similarities between aesthetics and politics, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière argues that both are characterized not by consensus but by dissensus: a dissenting demonstration of a gap in the sensible that “makes visible that which had no reason to be seen” (2010, 38). It is this notion of dissensus that very much operates in Indonesian discourses about politics. The distinction between the apparent world (*lahir*) and the hidden world (*batin*) is also the distinction between the reality of visible, audible, and touchable phenomena and another world or reality (*alam*). This hidden world contains a desired but implicit aesthetics as well as cosmic powers. It is also a world full of behind-the-scenes actors as well as deceased mythical kings, ancestors, and *djinn*s. This unseen and unheard world is the foundation of the world of seen things, but is by definition always in dispute. It is dissensual rather than consensual, but nevertheless provides the basis for interpretation not only of aesthetics, but also of politics and history (Florida 1995; Kartodirdjo 1973; Ricklefs 1998).

This political aesthetics is not a cultural “hand-me-down” or cognitive frame for understanding politics, but rather a complex reference to politics that is transmutable and open to constant reinterpretation. It is the sedimentation of a long historical process whereby the aesthetics of shadow plays have been adapted, reformed, domesticated, and simplified by political rulers since Dutch colonialism, even as they continue to be channels through which politics are discussed and contested (Day 2002; Pemberton 1994). The notion of the shadow play – a notion of performance shot through with ideas about mystical power as well as pragmatic deception, associated with both high court tradition and village resistance, and an expression of “traditional” culture that has been fundamentally transformed to fit new popular forms in a modern televised and online world (Mrázek 2019) – is a politically molded and remolded aesthetic discourse that can be called upon to express a variety of dissenting voices about politics (Hatley 2005).

What is hidden in the traditional Javanese notion of politics is not necessarily bad; it is merely powerful (Anderson 1990). The notion that political power is ultimately occult and hidden seems to clash with modern notions of transparency but cross-fertilizes easily with notions of corruption, collusion, and nepotism. Elsewhere, I have shown how the idea of the widespread use of sorcery in electoral

politics gels with popular assumptions about endemic corruption in these same politics (Bubandt 2006) and that sorcery therefore comes to be seen (and comes to function) as a continuation of politics by other means (Bubandt 2012, 2014).

Collusion Theory

In this light, any sharp distinction between conspiracy theory and what I call “collusion theory” begins to dissolve. Collusion refers, after all, to a “secret agreement or cooperation especially for an illegal or deceitful purpose” (“Collusion” n.d.). *Merriam-Webster* even lists “complicity, connivance, conspiracy” as synonyms of “collusion.” What, one might ask, does conspiracy come to mean in a context where collusion and corruption are expected if hidden dimensions of “normal” politics, and where the consistent uncovering of conspiracies of corruption lends legitimacy to a political aesthetics in which political power always operates in the realm of the unseen (Schrauwers 2003)? Furthermore, what if any revelation of corruption might itself be potentially fake – proof of some even deeper corruption?

Corruption narratives, Akhil Gupta (1995) argues, are discourses through which the state comes to be publicly imagined. They are ways through which the (un) trustworthiness of the state is constructed at the same time as they construct the national population as a group whose rights are infringed. Corruption theories, one might say, are historically situated political aesthetics that articulate dissent. The same can be said about conspiracy theories. I thus suggest that a fruitful way forward for a scholarly understanding of the patchy proliferation of conspiracy theories is not merely to attempt to distil the essence and defining characteristic of a purportedly global and “monological” form of conspiracy theory (Byford 2011; Miller 2020), but also to try to dissolve conspiracy theories – their global inspirations notwithstanding – in specific historical contexts, including in the political aesthetics – the specific ideas of politics – within which they come to be reasonable (Knight 2021).

Three decades of New Order rule from 1967 to 1998 cultivated in Indonesia, the world’s fourth-largest nation, a highly rationalist, but also oppressive, authoritarian mode of governance that relied heavily on political aesthetics in which the true workings of power (but also of popular resistance) were hidden and where constant vigilance was therefore required (Anderson 2001; Heryanto 2005; Siegel 1998, 2006). This produced a paradoxical kind of trust within inauthenticity: the trust people place in the state exists in ambivalent tension with a sense that the public pronouncements, procedures, and signs of the state are inherently inauthentic. People, in short, trust the workings of an inherently inauthentic state.

This double consciousness, sensibly cultivated for decades as a political aesthetics to life under authoritarian rule, continues, I suggest, to be evident in the general reaction to the Covid pandemic. Indonesians display a very high degree of trust in official sources of information about Covid-19 (Wirawan et al. 2021), and 93 percent of Indonesians report that they will accept an effective vaccine (Harapan et al. 2020), a rate that is higher than those of other low- and middle-income countries,

and that dwarfs the 64 percent acceptance rate in the United States, for instance (Arce et al. 2021). Still, 12 percent of Balinese respondents in one survey and 20 percent of Jakartans in another thought that Covid-19 was a conspiracy (“Survey” 2021; Wirawan et al. 2021). In the latter survey, 28 percent said they believed Covid-19 was somehow manipulated (*direkayasa*). Jerinx, a vaccinated collusion theorist and a punk rocker with an ambassadorship, is as good an illustration as any of a political aesthetics of dissensus where power is trusted but manipulation nevertheless expected.

Covid Mistrust 1: Punk-Spiracy

The punk rock band *Superman is Dead* or *SID*, in which Jerinx is the drummer, was formed in 1995 on the basis of a wave of interest in heavy metal and punk music among Indonesian teenagers (Baulch 2007; Wallach 2008a). *SID* was the first Balinese band to get a deal with an international label. Inspired by punk rock bands like *Green Day* and *Social Distortion*, the English and Indonesian lyrics in the songs of *SID* take up a number of social issues from social justice, corruption, and religious intolerance to environmental devastation and mix them with a strongly nationalist undertone and highly provocative phrases. In the 1990s, punk was simultaneously an expression of political critique of the authoritarian New Order regime and a means of expressing new forms of alternative consumer identities for teenagers from the emerging Indonesian urban middle-class (Wallach 2008b). Located in the raucous tourist district on Kuta Beach, *SID* became an inspiration for an entire generation of disenfranchised youths eager to become originals in a country full of fakes and duplicates (Luvaas 2012, 84). This was the same social group that filled the demonstrations in the late 1990s calling for Suharto, the authoritarian New Order president, to step down after three decades of uninterrupted rule. Jerinx was also an entrepreneur: he founded his own clothes company of DIY punk fashion called RMBL and became a social media celebrity far beyond the fan base of “OutSIDers,” as the fans of *SID* call themselves. He branded himself as a mix between a tattooed bad boy, a cosmopolitan fashion icon, a traditional Balinese knight, and a political rebel. Punk was the key to his political rebellion, and it was an anti-establishment punk attitude that motivated his concerns about how Covid-19 was handled in Indonesia.

Jerinx is not the only “punk-spiracist” in the global community of punk. A number of prominent punk and heavy metal musicians elsewhere, like Matt Johnson from the British post-punk band *The The* and John Dolmayan from the California-based heavy metal band *System of a Down*, are reported to have expressed conspiracy theories about Covid-19 and Bill Gates (Hartmann 2020; Murray 2020). Other punk rockers are said to have been swayed by QAnon conspiracy theories (Camus 2020). In the same way that anti-establishment sentiments by supporters of alternative healing fuel a global assemblage of “conspirituality” (Parmigiani 2021), it is easy to see how the anti-establishment sentiments of punk feed into what might be called “punk-spiracy.”

However, punk-spiracy, once dubbed into an Indonesian context, is also reconstituted. Jerinx is not alone in distrusting the seriousness of Covid-19. The Indonesian president Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi and an avid heavy metal fan himself, was roundly criticized for being slow to implement a nationwide lockdown and for claiming that *jamu*, traditional herbal remedies, could prevent illness. Jokowi also downplayed the number of Covid-19 infections and delegated much of the government's Covid-19 communication to his Minister of Health, who in turn claimed the infection rates in Indonesia were low because its citizens prayed so much (Mietzner 2020). Jokowi was also said to have used *pétungan*, a traditional Javanese numerology system, to decide on the most appropriate day on which to commence the Covid-19 vaccination program (Iskandar 2021). Dubbed into Indonesia, punk-spiracies can be found throughout the political hierarchy. Dharma Pongrekun, for instance, a three-star police general and former vice-chief of BSSN, the agency that handles online- and cyber intelligence, claims in a book from 2019 that a global elite attempts to control Indonesia and the world through political, economic, and technological means. Having already obtained control of political and economic life on the globe, this elite is now allegedly aiming to achieve technological control of life itself by implanting a chip into all human bodies. In a YouTube video from 2020, Pongrekun intimates that the delivery system for that chip might be vaccines.

Covid Mistrust 2: Paranoia Within Reason

Jerinx has served a 10-month jail sentence for defamation and hate speech related to the Covid-19 pandemic. In an Instagram post in June 2020, he had called the Indonesian Medical Association “pawns of the WHO” (*kacung WHO*) for requiring pregnant women to use a rapid swab test before being admitted to the hospital. He alleged that swab tests were not only unreliable, but that they also placed an undue burden on poor people. The Indonesian president Jokowi had ordered large-scale rapid testing in March 2020 but made it free only for those who had been in direct contact with Covid-positive people. Rapid tests became mandatory in a number of contexts as the Indonesian government reluctantly began to curb the spread of the virus, but prices varied widely among regions, and in some places tests costed as much as 400,000 rupiah (28 USD) in public hospitals or 770,000 rupiah (50 USD) in private hospitals – prices far outside the range of poor people already hit hard by the economic shut-down.

The procurement of rapid tests was part of a 75-trillion rupiah (five billion USD) government help package administered to the health sector, a sector notoriously prone to corruption and clientism. The Indonesian Corruption Watch had therefore already warned that poor implementation rules and economic oversight created ideal conditions for procurement corruption (Anggraeni et al. 2020). Indeed, the government economic package started a procurement run by both private- and state-owned enterprises, many of them having close ties with elite politicians who were eager to obtain tenders on the procurement and to resell them to government

and private hospitals at a premium (Mietzner 2020, 239). In August 2021, it caused general outcry when Peter Batubara, a member of the governing PDI-P party, was sentenced to 12 years in jail for accepting bribes from suppliers of food for the government's Covid-19 social aid program while he was the Minister of Social Affairs (Karmini 2021).

The legal premises for the conviction of Jerinx were article 28, paragraph two of the Indonesian Cyber Law (UU-ITE), which criminalizes online hate speech against ethnic, religious, racial, or social minorities (known under the acronym SARA in Indonesian) in conjunction with article 45, which criminalizes defamation. However, what seemed like a straightforward conviction of a conspiracist theorist was far from so. The Cyber Law had been implemented in 2008 to guard against online crime and incitement to violence, but human rights groups and activists alleged that the law was often used to suppress politically unwelcome dissent rather than dangerous online ideology (Anindyajati 2021). The network of digital rights defenders SafeNet reported that of the 59 criminal convictions under the Cyber Law between January and October 2020, almost a third had been under the hate speech article 28. They argued that the vagueness of the notion “social minority” (*antargolongan*) made the article open to political manipulation, and referring to the court case against Jerinx, the network pointed out that the Indonesian Medical Association was not a social group and that calling the association a “pawn” hardly constituted hate speech (“Hentikan Pelintiran” 2020). The NGO network was not alone in its critique. Some 180,000 people signed the online petition “Free Jerinx and Catch the Pawns and Defrauders of the People’s Money.” To many commentators, in Indonesia and abroad, a reasonable suspicion of hidden manipulation hung over the conviction of Jerinx. Conspiracy theory was beginning to sound like legitimate social criticism, unreasonably suppressed.

Indeed, during his trial, Jerinx and his supporters maintained that his accusation that the Indonesian Medical Association was the “pawn” of the WHO was not a conspiracy theory but rather a critique of the social hardship that Covid-19 restrictions placed on the poor, and of the opportunities for corruption that WHO-recommended government lockdowns and medical procurement deals posed. Even before the spike in infection rates, which between June and September 2021 made Indonesia a global hotspot for the pandemic, the country had been socially and economically devastated by the pandemic. As both the tourist industry and the Indonesian production sector ground to a halt in 2020, over 2.5 million Indonesians lost their jobs, and UNICEF feared that as much as 30 percent of the population had fallen below the poverty line (2021). In July 2021, the World Bank downgraded Indonesia to a “lower-middle income country,” dashing Indonesia’s hope to become a high-income country by 2030.

Covid Mistrust 3: People from “Certain Quarters”

In response to the social hardship following the abrupt halt to tourism, Jerinx had begun to distribute free rice packages in Denpasar in May 2020. In July 2020,

he joined in public demonstrations against what protesters called “the rapid test business.” Jerinx acquired the money for his food distribution by repurposing his clothing production line to make and sell T-shirts saying, “I believe in Siti Fadilah” (Nugroho 2020).

Siti Fadilah Supari is a cardiologist and a former Minister of Health who, according to an Indonesian misinformation analyst, was the country’s second-biggest source of Covid conspiracy (Guest, Firdaus, and Danan 2021). Interestingly, this was not so much because of what Supari was saying about Covid, but rather because of what she was saying about the role of the WHO and Bill Gates in relation to the avian flu epidemic (H5N1). Interviewed by former magician and TV host Deddy Corbuzier in May 2020, Supari recounted how she, as the Indonesian Minister of Health between 2004 and 2009, had maintained that Indonesia had the proprietary rights to the samples of the H5N1 virus found in the country and had refused to share them with the WHO under the then existing virus sample agreement. This refusal, which Supari referred to as “viral sovereignty,” was informed by what she regarded as the fundamentally unequal structures of global health (Lowe 2019). Supari maintained that the biological samples, such as those of the H5N1 virus, which Indonesia and other developing countries shared freely with the WHO, were being passed on to big pharmaceutical companies and turned into profitable vaccines to which the developing world had less access than richer countries (Elbe 2010). The avian flu pandemic, in other words, became a flashpoint for critique from the Global South of the hidden inequalities of global health.

Worried about the secretive nature of the world’s pandemic alert system, *The Economist* called Supari’s intervention “a shot of transparency” (“Science and Technology” 2006), and Supari managed to gather enough international support for her battle against the neo-colonial medical “conspiracy of developed countries against poor and developing countries” (Supari 2008, x) to cause the WHO to eventually alter its pandemic influenza plan (PIP) in 2011. The revised PIP required the pharmaceutical industry to grant licenses for vaccines to manufacturers in developing countries in return for their commitment to a global system of virus sample sharing (Smallman 2013). What some observers saw as a victory, Supari saw as a defeat because the power of the global pharmaceutical industry was not curbed after all. A conspiracy, she felt, still lurked in the incentive for the pharmaceutical industry and people from “certain quarters” (*pihak tertentu*) (“Siti Fadilah” 2012). Supari’s conspiracism was complicated by the fact that she was herself serving a four-year jail sentence for corruption in a medical procurement case. In 2017, Supari had been convicted of accepting bribes from manufacturers of medical equipment for an avian flu crisis center, causing the state losses of six billion rupiah (428,000 USD). Supari hinted that the conviction was in fact revenge for her outspokenness: “I was not wrong but I lost. My enemy was too big, so I lost” (“Siti Fadilah” 2020).

The notion of unknown people from “certain quarters” was a political key concept during New Order rule and was used by the regime to make unspecific accusations about subversive activities that legitimated political repression (Barker 2001). The concept did not die, however, with the fall of the New Order. Rather,

the notion that unknown people from “certain quarters” are the real behind-the-scenes actors of everyday politics entered into popular imagination in new and powerful ways and fueled rumors about health issues ranging from HIV-AIDS and organ theft to the avian flu (Bubandt 2016; Kroeger 2003; Lowe 2010). The result is a field of political verisimilitude in which conspiracy theory and political critique, fiction and fact, rumor and reality are fundamentally blurred. Supari’s conspiracism against the pharmaceutical industry, for instance, grew out of a reasonable critique of the neo-colonial structures of global health, the “vaccine business” of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the powerful role of the global pharmaceutical industry in the Global South that has also been voiced by level-headed academics (Farmer 2004; Levich 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that to understand conspiracy theory in Indonesia and elsewhere, it is not enough to understand its corrosive effects. One also needs to understand the corrosive conditions and historical pathologies of power out of which these theories grow. This entails dissolving conspiracy theories in the political context and aesthetics in which they occur in order to understand their ability to appeal to very different groups of people. To do so, I have suggested the relevance of the analytical terms “dubbing” and “dissensus” to conspiracy theory studies. Dubbed into an Indonesian context, conspiracy theory fuses with a widespread political aesthetics of power as dissensus in which what is not seen controls what appears on the surface. The result is an assortment of conspiracy-like theories characterized by dissensus rather than consensus: “dis-spiracies,” “punk-spiracies,” and “collusion theory,” all of which grow from a political aesthetics of power with a long legacy in the Indonesian political imagination. In an Indonesian context, conspiracy theory comes to constitute a “paranoia-within-reason” that makes unlikely allies out of punk musicians, police generals, and ministers.

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5

COVID-19, CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES, AND THE ARAB STATE

Johannes Sauerland

Introduction

In the Arab world, the first Covid-19 case was recorded in the United Arab Emirates in late January 2020. Subsequently, the virus spread to neighboring states, including Qatar and Saudi Arabia. By April 2020, all states in the Arab world had registered Covid-19 cases. In tandem with the virus, conspiracy narratives spread across the region. For example, Twitter users in Saudi Arabia alleged that the virus was designed by Bill Gates, and people in Egypt described the virus as an American bioweapon.

Conspiracy narratives in the Arab world carry similar themes as their global counterparts. Yet, they carry regional and country-specific characteristics, pointing toward different societal challenges. Furthermore, their content, the actors involved, and the mechanisms of diffusion differ. In some states, such as Saudi Arabia, conspiracy narratives opposing government policies are rooted in distrust toward the state. In other countries, such as Egypt, it was not only regular people but even government officials as well who promoted conspiracy narratives. This raises the question that why the state would promote conspiracy narratives that undermine its health policies.

This chapter will argue that two factors, regime legitimacy and regime capacity, can explain why Arab states resorted to conspiracy narratives or not during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. While autocratic regimes can rely on repression to ensure regime stability in the short term, in the long term all regimes require legitimacy. As a lack of legitimacy is a serious threat to regime survival, governments will attempt to rebuild lost legitimacy. Facing the Covid-19 pandemic, governments that command sufficient state capacities can build legitimacy by proving to be capable of handling the pandemic. However, states without sufficient capacities may be tempted to resort to conspiracy narratives, either to avoid blame for public

health failures or to gain legitimacy from defending the nation against constructed enemies. Legitimacy also influences how citizens experience the state. Citizens that see the state as illegitimate naturally distrust its rule and might engage with conspiracy narratives as an alternative source of information.

To show the difference in Covid-19 conspiracy narratives and the state's role in it, I will analyze the cases of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The cases constitute a stark contrast and represent the most populous nations in the Arab world. The chapter will proceed in three sections. The first section will set the analytical parameters. Specifically, I will define the term “conspiracy narrative” and lay out the framework of legitimacy and capacity. The second section will outline legitimacy and state capacity in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The third and main section will address Covid-19 conspiracy narratives in both cases, showing the link to governments' legitimacy and capacity.

Analytical Framework: Conspiracy Narratives, Legitimacy, and State Capacity

While the scientific community generally uses the term conspiracy theory, I prefer the term conspiracy narrative. Still, it is useful to first understand conspiracy theory as a concept.

In the most general terms, conspiracy theories explain events by citing the secret, malevolent plan of a small group as the main causal factor. They usually do not explain local affairs but instead address large-scale events with significant social or political repercussions. Thus, they explain political assassinations, the instigation of wars and revolutions, or, in this case, a global pandemic (Butter 2018, 21; Byford 2011, 21). Scholars usually limit the term further by highlighting three characteristics. First, conspiracy theories are deeply Manichean. They envision evil forces that aim to harm the own, upright community (van Prooijen 2018, 18). Second, they imagine those evil forces as a powerful, nearly omnipotent, and monolithic group (Bale 2007, 52; Fenster 2008, 1). Third, conspiracy theories describe the world as a place where “nothing happens by accident”, “nothing is as it seems”, and “everything is connected” (Barkun 2013, 3–4). The latter element, however, seems to be a defining feature of complete conspiracy worldviews rather than of specific conspiracy theories. Karl Popper (2019) called this “the conspiracy view of society.” Some scholars also refer to it as conspiracy ideology (Pfahl-Traughber 2002). This chapter, however, studies less coherent narratives and allegations of conspiracy.

Therefore, I prefer the term conspiracy narratives to study a wider range of “conspiracy talk” (Rabo 2014, 212). This is not a unique approach. For example, Peter Knight (2002, 3–4) speaks of narratives of conspiracy, and Turkey Nefes sees conspiracy theories as political narratives “par excellence” (2014, 139). Conspiracy narratives are political due to their inherent sociopolitical dimension. People do not fear conspiracies against themselves as individuals but against their group. Therefore, they are narratives about out- and ingroups and, thus, intimately connected to political rule, legitimizing political domination or resistance. It is mostly

assumed that conspiracy narratives challenge political rule (Sapountzis and Condor 2013; Anton, Schetsche, and Walter 2014). This is certainly true, also for the Middle East. However, they can also function as a tool of political hegemony, justifying suppression and, thus, legitimizing political rule (Gray 2010).

Legitimacy can be understood as a normative or descriptive concept (Fabienne 2017). This chapter follows the descriptive Weberian tradition. Hence, legitimacy denotes the public conviction that the regime's rule is rightful (Netelenbos 2016). According to Weber, "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (1947, 382). Legitimacy is crucial for a regime to survive, even though effective repression can go a long way to prevent uprisings (Bellin 2004). Still, a lack of legitimacy is a key threat to regime security, and intense repression often signals fragile legitimacy (Gerschewski 2013).

As has been developed in further detail since Weber, a belief in the rightfulness of a certain rule can be grounded in different sources. Oliver Schlumberger (2010) argues that in the Arab world, democratic sources of legitimacy, such as participation, are not given. Instead, legitimacy would rest on four pillars: religion, tradition, ideology, and the provision of welfare benefits. However, Schlumberger's last source of legitimacy, the provision of welfare benefits, seems to be quite narrow. I propose to widen it to include what Michael Zürn (2012) calls advancing the common good. Advancing the common good includes not only the provision of material benefits but also protection against internal or external threats. Indeed, political philosophers have often linked questions of security provision and legitimacy (Mabee 2009; Steinhoff 2007). This is highly relevant in the Middle East, as, in recent history, many countries experienced political instability and violence.

By drawing on Matthew Gray's work (2010), I suggest that a lack of legitimacy leads to conspiracy narratives on two levels. At the societal level, a lack of legitimacy will lead to mistrust among the population toward the state as citizens will be more inclined to believe conspiracy narratives that question the state's intentions, communication, and policies. At the state level, fighting an enemy, even if constructed, is a way for regimes to maintain or restore fragile legitimacy. The state can assume the role of the defender of society and, thus, gain some legitimacy. However, not every state will respond with conspiracy narratives when facing a legitimacy crisis. Looking at Covid-19, the difference lies in the state's capacity to respond to the pandemic.

State capacity can be an ambiguous term (Hanson and Sigman 2021). I will take it to denote the ability of the state to mitigate the pandemic's impact via adequate political, economic, and social measures. There are three key areas: health care capacities, economic resources, and administrative capacities. Health capacities entail the general strength of the system, access chances, and health care policies, for example, vaccination campaigns. Economic resources entail the ability to stimulate the economy and mitigate the impact for citizens. Administrative capacity means the ability to communicate and enforce policies effectively across society (Lynch 2020).

When a state's capacity is inadequate, the pandemic might seriously undermine a regime, potentially worsening the legitimacy crisis and resulting in further political opposition or even uprisings. Some analysts already have predicted that Arab regimes will struggle with the political fallout of the pandemic (O'Driscoll et al. 2020). Thus, a state that cannot control the pandemic can at least (attempt to) control the narrative around it. Conspiracy narratives are a convenient way for the regime to shift blame onto other actors while portraying itself as the defender of the nation. States that forcefully react to the pandemic because they command sufficient capacities can gain legitimacy by addressing the crisis, showing their citizens that they can deliver on the common good.

I have highlighted some aspects of the complex interplay between legitimacy and capacities, suggesting how capacity can influence legitimacy. Yet, legitimacy also impacts capacity, especially when it comes to efforts of communication and enforcement of policies. As stated earlier, a lack of legitimacy will negatively affect a government's credibility and, thus, hamper its efforts to communicate and implement policy.

Overall, a lack of legitimacy is a major issue for autocratic regimes, which tempts them to adopt conspiracy narratives. However, when it comes to Covid-19, capacity constitutes a dividing line between states with and without sufficient capacities. The former can capitalize on the pandemic by proving to its citizens that it serves a purpose. The latter resorts to conspiracy narratives to shift blame or to generate legitimacy by presenting itself as defending the community from evil conspirators.

Governance and the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Middle East

For decades, Arab authoritarianism seemed to be stable (Harik 2006; Jebnoun, Kia, and Kirk 2013). However, the Arab Spring in 2011 proved observers wrong. The wave of popular unrest exposed that many regimes had lost popular support and legitimacy. Even though regimes fought back and some survived the revolutions, many had to rely on increased repression (Schwarz and de Corral 2011). Yet, there are clear differences across the region. While Egypt saw a successful revolution, later reversed by a military coup, Saudi Arabia never saw large protests. At the same time, state capacity varies strongly across the region. The pandemic revealed those differences, showing which states were able to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and which were not (Lynch 2020). While the rich Gulf Countries were able to address the pandemic relatively efficiently, other countries such as Egypt were not.

Saudi Legitimacy

The modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded by Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud in 1932. Due to the vast oil income, the Monarchy established control and legitimacy with the various tribes of the peninsula (Jones 2010). Until today, the political legitimacy of Saudi Arabia remains closely tied to providing material benefits, as

the Monarchy uses its wealth to build deep patrimonial ties throughout the country (Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Farouk 2020).

The Saudi government derives legitimacy from two other sources: religion and tradition. Early on, the Monarchy forged close ties with the country's clergy, promoting a very specific interpretation of political Islam, Wahabism, that lends credibility to the ruling family. In times of crisis, the clergy has regularly and openly embraced the regime. The government portrays itself as the custodian of the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, adopting the historic Islamic title (Schlumberger 2010; Özev 2017). This indicates that the regime embraces tradition as a source of legitimacy as well. The House of Saud traces its history back to about the fifteenth century. Since the beginning of the modern state, the house rules the country in a dynastical manner.

However, some opposed Saudi rule. In the 1970s, the state was confronted with both an internal uprising of radical Sunni Islamists as well as with a Shia revolt in the Eastern provinces (Jones 2010). While the first problem was addressed by strengthening the Islamic profile of the country, the latter challenge is ongoing. However, the Shia are largely marginalized and are no serious threat to the regime.

Saudi State Capacity

In 2020, Saudi Arabia was hit early by the pandemic but has experienced only two relatively minor waves. With a total population of about 35 million people, the Kingdom saw a peak in cases during the first wave in summer 2020 with about 3,000 to 4,000 cases per day (Ritchie et al. 2020). From the start, Saudi Arabia was in a decent position to cope with the pandemic. The health care sector is relatively well-funded and equipped. For example, skilled medical staff exceeds the number advised by WHO guidelines of 45 per 10,000 population, and hospital bed density is decent (Gatti et al. 2021). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia distributed sufficient Covid-19 tests, meeting the WHO's 5 percent positivity threshold (Ritchie et al. 2020). Additionally, the health care system reaches almost all citizens because health care is mostly government-funded. For Covid-19, Saudi Arabia announced that it would cover all costs associated with treatments, testing, and vaccination. Over time, Saudi Arabia managed a quick vaccination campaign, with 70 percent of the population vaccinated by November 30, 2021 (Ritchie et al. 2020).

Saudi Arabia deployed its vast economic resources to address the pandemic's impact. Early on, the state adopted a massive stimulus package of 18.6 billion US dollars, amounting to roughly 7 percent of its GDP (UN 2020). The state restricted any export of medical goods, which helped in avoiding serious shortages of equipment. The economy still contracted by 4 percent, but the impact was mostly mitigated.

Over the last decade, the Saudi state significantly increased its governance capacities. Supported by considerable coercive apparatus, the state was able to rule deeply into society, making sure lockdown measures were enforced (Reuters 2021). However, Covid-19 measures were also used to justify crackdowns against

activists and government critics. Some people were wary of the restrictions, which somewhat undermined regime legitimacy. Yet, Saudis largely approved of measures taken and agreed with the handling of the pandemic (Diwan 2020).

All in all, the Saudi state enjoys – at least among its majority of Sunni citizens – sufficient legitimacy derived from religion, tradition, and material benefits. While the regime is not without a fear of losing power, as the continued crackdowns on dissidents show, it can feel relatively safe. Combined with strong state capacities, Covid-19 did not fundamentally threaten the regime. Therefore, one may expect that the regime would not engage in conspiracy narratives. Still, a part of the population distrusts the government, also due to the ongoing human rights abuses, which constitute an avenue for conspiracy narratives on the societal level.

Egyptian Legitimacy

The Egyptian Republic was established in 1952 when a group of army officers around Gamal Abdel Nasser toppled the Monarchy. Over the next years, the military established a firm military dictatorship (Al-Sayyid-Marsot 2007). Except for the short rule of the democratically elected Muslim brother Mohammed Mursi after the revolution of 2011, the country's president has been usually chosen from the military. Compared to the Saudi Monarchy, the Egyptian regime needs to draw on different sources of legitimacy.

All Arab republics promoted a blend of pan-Arab nationalism and Arab socialism, but it was Nasser who personified those ideologies (Schlumberger 2010). While Nasser's charisma contributed to his fame, it was his nationalist rhetoric and policies, opposing colonialism and imperialism, that generated widespread popular support (Woodward 1992). At the same time, legitimacy was bolstered by socialist ideals. With support from the Soviet Union, the regime modernized Egypt and generated wealth for many Egyptians (Gray 2010). However, with the fall of the Soviet Union, Egypt tumbled into a legitimacy crisis. Socialist policies were discredited, and without Russian support, the state was less able to provide material benefits. While Egypt secured some US support, its financial leeway shrunk. Egypt signed onto IMF loans that helped stabilize the regime's finances, but undercut social programs. This contributed to the Arab spring that rocked Egypt and brought down the regime, even if it was reversed with a military coup in 2013 (O'Driscoll et al. 2020).

Egyptian State Capacity

Egypt recorded relatively few Covid-19 cases. Despite its large population of 100 million, cases peaked with about 1,500 daily cases in the first wave in July 2020 (Ritchie et al. 2020). However, those numbers need to be approached cautiously. The reported caseload depends on testing and reporting capacity. Also, cases might be artificially underreported for political reasons. In 2020, Egypt had one of the highest excess mortalities worldwide, suggesting that the pandemic hit significantly

harder than numbers indicate, with potentially 86,000 additional deaths in 2020 compared to the reported 7,000 (Karlinsky and Kobak 2021). It seemed clear from the beginning that Egypt would have difficulties coping with the pandemic.

On paper, the Egyptian health care system compares well to economically similar countries. However, there are serious shortcomings. The health care system suffers from years of underfunding, leading to a low density of health care workers and hospital beds. During the pandemic, several hospitals reported overcrowding and a lack of equipment. Patients had to pay for most health care expenses themselves, and Covid-19 tests and vaccinations were too costly for many (Mandour 2021). As a result, Egypt had vaccinated only about 20 percent of the population by November 2021.

In economic terms, Egypt adopted a stimulus plan of about six billion USD, equal to 1.7 percent of its GDP, which included a wage subsidy for strongly affected workers (KPMG 2020). However, already in Spring 2020, the government announced that it would lift lockdown measures and aim to coexist with the virus (The New Arab 2020). Throughout the pandemic, the government donated and exported protective gear, for example, to the United States and China.

The government reacted slowly to the pandemic. When it acted, it imposed a decisive lockdown, shutting down most business activities and social gatherings. However, the Egyptian state is highly centralized. With weak authority beyond Cairo, enforcement was difficult. Instead, the government aimed to control public discourse. It amended the emergency law and cracked down on critics. Like in Saudi Arabia, those measures created further disillusion with the government (Ardovini 2020; Mandour 2020).

For a long time, the legitimacy of the Egyptian regime rested on two ideological sources, a mix of Arab nationalism and socialism and on improving the material life of its citizen. However, over the years those sources eroded, cumulating in the revolution of 2011. Even though the military ousted the democratically elected President Mohammed Mursi and took back control, it has since relied on severe repression, underlining its lack of legitimacy. Considering that Egypt was partially unable and partially unwilling to properly address the pandemic, it should be expected that the state would delve into conspiracy narration.

Conspiracy Narratives in the Arab World

Conspiracy narratives are not a new phenomenon in the region. According to some authors, conspiracy theories were imported from the West in the eighteenth century, as ideas about Jewish or Masonic plots gained popularity (De Poli 2014, 2018). Yet, considering the broader definition of conspiracy narratives, it is likely that they existed before, similar to European antiquity and Middle Ages (Groh 1987; Pagan 2012; Roisman 2006). Many authors have claimed repeatedly that conspiracy narratives are more prevalent in the Arab world than in other regions (Pipes 1998; Röhl 2010, 53). They often took a condescending perspective on the Middle East, characterizing the entire region as being obsessed with conspiracy

narratives (Zonis and Joseph 1994). As conspiracy narratives are widespread globally, this seems to be an inaccurate claim.

For the Arab world, Covid-19 misinformation circulated widely, mostly on social media, often originating from conspiracy-oriented pages and websites. O'Connor and Ayad (2021) found that 18 of the most popular Arabic-language Covid-19 conspiracy Facebook pages combined had about 2.5 million likes in March 2021. A key player is the Center for the Study of Reality and History (*Markaz darasāt al-wāqi' wa al-tārīkh*) managing a Facebook page and hosting a website. Like other sites, it publishes Western-made videos with Arab subtitles or voice-overs. Videos allege that the world is controlled by a small elite that purposely spread Covid-19 or that Covid-19 vaccines are used to inject a microchip into the human body (O'Connor and Ayad 2021).

Studies found that about 25 percent of the population of surveyed Middle Eastern countries, like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, suspect this (Sallam et al. 2021a). Even larger proportions of at least 30 percent believe that Covid-19 is human-made (Hammad et al. 2021; Sallam et al. 2021b, 2021c). However, not all theories gain traction in the Middle East. Those that do connect well with existing narratives and suspicion, such as ideas that see an American or a Jewish Elite at work. For instance, the idea that the virus is an American bioweapon deployed to harm China and Iran was circulating widely. In this sense, Arab countries are very similar to other regions. What sets them apart is that governments are often heavily involved in promoting conspiracy narratives. While potentially a general tendency of autocratic rule, it is less studied than conspiracy narratives at the societal level.

Conspiracy Narratives in Saudi Arabia

Considering Saudi Arabia's high legitimacy and state capacity, the regime and its affiliated media actors should not propagate conspiracy narratives. However, in some instances, the state spread conspiracy narratives. By contrast, the Egyptian regime undertook a systematic attempt to influence discourse.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Saudi Arabia generally disseminated geopolitically aligned propaganda, targeting states it is currently in conflict with, most notably Iran and Qatar. Saudi news outlets and officials frequently criticized Iran and Qatar for their handling of the pandemic. Coverage was highly politicized, highlighting how Iran purposely underreported cases, hid the true extent of the pandemic, and, thus, endangered neighboring countries (Grossman 2020). When some travelers fell sick after visiting Iran, Saudi officials complained that Iran, which since 2011 does not stamp passports of visitors, intentionally concealed the identity of visitors and, thus, obstructed international health efforts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Saudi Arabia 2020). When the Bahraini Ministry of the Interior took this further and accused Iran of "biological aggression" (Ministry of Interior; Bahrain 2020), Saudi media covered the remarks widely. Early in the pandemic, Twitter suspended numerous fake profiles that blamed Qatar for spreading the virus throughout the world. While it is unclear where the fake profiles came from, Gulf scholars suspect Saudi Arabia to be behind these attempts (Wazir 2020).

Such conspiracy narratives targeting political opponents, often with sectarian undertones, are common. When large protests broke out in 1979 in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province of Qatif, home to its small Shia minority, the clergy portrayed the protests as an Iranian conspiracy. Thus, whenever political tensions and conflict are high, Saudi officials push conspiracy narratives, bolstering their narrative against Iran, Qatar, or the Shia minority in the Eastern provinces of the Kingdom (Matthiesen 2012; Menshawy and Mabon 2021). But when the Saudi government became more preoccupied with Covid-19 inside the country, the media narrative shifted toward more positive coverage for the government's success in addressing the pandemic (Grossman 2020).

In Saudi Arabia, conspiracy narratives seem to exist mostly on the societal level. Several studies that investigated conspiracy narratives among the Saudi population found that some theories circulated widely on social media. Alasmari et al. (2021) gathered 3.8 million tweets from December 2019 to April 2020 of which more than 10,000 were analyzed, identifying seven misinformation themes. Saudi Twitter users spread various conspiracy narratives, especially that Covid-19 was developed by pharmaceutical companies for profit. However, most of the tweets were not conspiracy narratives, but rather misinformation, for example, that certain types of food would prevent infection. Still, a sizable minority of about 25 percent of the Saudi population believe Covid-19 is a conspiracy (Magadmi and Kamel 2021). While data is less comprehensive than desired, the outlined trends are supported by the difficulty of the state to reach a vaccination rate higher than 70 percent.

Overall, Saudi state media used the pandemic to disseminate propaganda against opponents. When those propaganda efforts suggested or at least implied a secret and intentional plot by enemies, the line toward conspiracy narratives was crossed. However, those incidents were not systematic. Still, conspiracy narratives exist in Saudi Arabia on the societal level, mostly in opposition to government policy, suggesting some mistrust toward the regime from some pockets of society.

Conspiracy Narratives in Egypt

In Egypt, the state took a more active role regarding conspiracy narratives. Early on, the regime downplayed the epidemic. Subsequently, it started blaming "evil people" for spreading false rumors about the extent of the crisis and finally started blaming certain groups for spreading the virus.

In early 2020, when no Covid-19 cases were yet recorded, the regime downplayed the virus' existence or watched false information spreading, even in state-owned programs. In a television interview on February 16, 2020, the Egyptian Health Minister, Hala Zayed, stated that the virus is not "contagious" (Abdelaziz 2020). Zayed (2021) also tweeted implying that the virus is not dangerous for the country, but that the decay of morals was. While those words are only a veiled hint at who is to blame for "false" talk about Covid-19, talk-show anchor Nashaat Eldeehy said on a state-controlled satellite channel that Covid-19 does not exist in Egypt and that the Muslim Brotherhood is spreading such rumors "happy to slander Egypt" (2020).

Several weeks later, when Covid-19 inevitably spread throughout the country and the government acted by imposing lockdown measures, it started targeting Covid-19 misinformation on social media. Egyptian authorities shut down websites and pages that contained false information. At the same time, however, they denied the extent of the crisis. When the *Guardian* journalist Ruth Michaelson wrote that the caseload was higher than reported, citing statistical models from Canadian researchers, Egyptian authorities expelled her from the country. The government then alleged that the *Guardian* and other news organizations deliberately conspired to spread false information. The Hashtag “Lies of the Guardian” (*Akāthib al-ghardīyān*) trended on Twitter. Government newspapers targeted the *Guardian* as well. For example, Muhammad Reda of *Youm7* (The Seventh Day), one of Egypt’s most popular news websites, claimed that the *Guardian* “fabricated news” to cause “controversy and confusion” among Egyptians (2020).

The clearer it became that Covid-19 was spreading rapidly throughout the country, government officials started blaming outside and inside groups for intentionally spreading the virus. The group that is regularly demonized by the Egyptian regime is the Muslim Brotherhood, which has clashed with the regime for decades. However, since Al-Sisi’s rise to power, repression has worsened again, with more than 60,000 Muslim Brothers imprisoned. President Al-Sisi regularly speaks of “the people of evil” (*Ahl al-shar*), generally referring to groups that oppose the regime (Abd Al-Aleem 2020). However, it has become a more specific reference to the Muslim Brotherhood. Several government figures have since then warned of plots by the Muslim Brotherhood with their backers from Qatar and Turkey. At times, the Islamic group has been described as hiding their secret Free Masonic or Jewish identity. Thus, the government fell back on accusations against the Muslim Brothers to explain why the pandemic was spreading, after all, going as far as accusing the group of purposely spreading the virus. For example, Muhammed Jumaa, Minister for Religious Endowment, alleged that the Muslim Brotherhood was spreading the virus among public employees (Hamdi 2020). State-owned media channels and websites spread similar accusations (Abd al-Hafiz 2020).

By no means are state-affiliated actors alone in pushing conspiracy narratives in Egypt. Some parts of the population embrace government conspiracy narratives and further spread them. Generic Covid-19 conspiracy narratives can also be found. Some individuals believed that the virus was human-made or even that Covid-19 cases in Egypt must be attributed to government gas attacks (Shehata and Eldakar 2021). However, solid numbers are not available. Last, the frequently targeted Muslim Brotherhood often responds with conspiracy narratives of their own, alleging state conspiracies against the group, Middle Eastern nations, or Islam.

Conclusion

Conspiracy narratives about Covid-19 exist widely in the Arab world. What seems most puzzling, however, is the role of the state. Instead of managing the impact of the pandemic, some governments spread conspiracy narratives that undermine

their health care policies. This chapter proposed a framework around regime legitimacy and capacity to address this puzzle. I defined legitimacy as the belief of the population in the rightfulness of the regime's rule and state capacities, as the ability to mitigate the pandemic's impact.

Legitimacy is a key resource for any government. While autocratic regimes can partially compensate a lack of legitimacy with coercion, it still constitutes – in the long run – a key threat to the regime's survival. Governments that lack legitimacy might generally be tempted to adopt conspiracy narratives to build legitimacy by rallying the country to fight a vague enemy. Yet, when facing Covid-19, regimes with adequate state capacity can build legitimacy by managing the pandemic in line with public expectations. This is what happened in the case of Saudi Arabia. The regime adopted an adequate response to the pandemic, ensuring that its health and economic impact were kept in check. Consequently, it had to not rely on conspiracy narratives to divert public blame.

However, for regimes with insufficient capacities, such as Egypt, the pandemic constitutes a serious political threat. As Egypt had little prospect of addressing the crisis, the regime reverted to conspiracy narratives that kept evolving as the crisis unfolded. In the beginning, the government denied the dangers of the virus, then claimed that evil forces would exaggerate case numbers, and finally went on to blame the Muslim Brotherhood for purposely spreading the virus. Against the expectations of the proposed framework, Saudi Arabia promoted some conspiracy narratives as well. However, the conspiracy narratives Saudi Arabia adopted did not undermine its Covid-19 response and instead seem to have been more an extension of the country's propaganda efforts in its conflicts with Iran and Qatar.

Legitimacy also decisively influences how conspiracy narratives resonate within populations. Citizens who distrust the state are more prone to conspiracy narratives. Some groups in each of the cases are suspicious of the state and thus resisted its Covid-19 policies, including by resorting to conspiracy narratives. State legitimacy and capacity seem to be a useful framework in explaining Covid-19 conspiracy narratives in the Arab world and the role of the state. Still, the complex interplay of legitimacy and capacity, state and population should be studied further.

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6

CONSPIRACY THEORIES ABOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN TURKEY

Türkey Salim Nefes

Introduction

Conspiracies and conspiracy theories have always been ubiquitous and influential in modern Turkish politics and society (Gürpınar 2020). Conspiracies even targeted non-humans. For example, the general public was shocked to learn that a popular dog, named Boji, was a victim of a human conspiracy. Boji, a street dog, had become a social media sensation after being fitted with a microchip by the Istanbul Municipality which allowed them to document that he had been using public transportation in at least 29 metro stations (BBC 2021a). Various images of Boji were circulated online, depicting a peaceful dog using public transportation. This, however, also earned Boji some enemies. One acted out to defame Boji. As the CCTV images showed, a human conspirator secretly planted a dog poo on a tram seat (Ertan 2021).

In this fertile context of conspiracies and conspiracy theories, the period of the Covid-19 pandemic is not an exception. This chapter discusses the communication of conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic in Turkey. It will begin with outlining the academic literature on conspiracy theories in the Turkish context. Subsequently, the chapter will delineate the timeline of the government's responses to the pandemic and explore some popular conspiracy theories about Covid-19 that circulated in the country. The chapter will end with a brief comment on the significance of the Covid-19-related conspiracy theories in Turkey.

The Academic Literature on Conspiracy Theories in Turkey Before the Pandemic

To understand the prevalence of conspiratorial thinking in modern Turkey, one needs to look at their historical background and contemporary political

polarization. To start with the former, a momentous historical trauma, called the Sèvres syndrome, seems to have inspired conspiracy theories (Çaylı 2018; Guida 2008; Gürpınar 2020; Nefes 2012, 2013). The syndrome centers on the belief that foreign powers and minorities in the country conspire together to carve up Turkey (Göçek 2011). The name comes from the Sèvres Treaty of 1920 that was signed between the Ottoman Empire and the allied countries at the end of the World War I. Its burdensome conditions led to the Turkish Independence War between 1919 and 1923, which created the contemporary borders of the Turkish Republic. Because of its foundational significance, the syndrome has both inspired and been used by various prevalent conspiracy theories in Turkey. For example, the Turkish government reacted to the Gezi Park Protests in 2013 by suggesting that a secret foreign power, the interest rate lobby (*faiz lobisi*), orchestrated the events (Nefes 2017). Another recently popular conspiracy theory, called *üst akıl* (an all-powerful and sinister agency), also accuses foreign powers and is a version of the Sèvres syndrome (Karaosmanoğlu 2021). An ethnographic study from a small town in the city of Trabzon in 2015 illustrated the continuing significance of the syndrome in conspiracy theory beliefs in Turkey:

Kemal, a 40-year-old worker I knew well, approached me with a serious face: ‘You know why this happens, no?’ . . . Breaking the silence, he eagerly offered his account and started on a tirade about ‘the Western powers trying to undermine the popular support that [then] Prime Minister Erdogan enjoys’.

(*Saglam 2020, 18*)

Political polarization and partisanship are also important factors in the dissemination of conspiracy theories in modern Turkey. A variety of actors from across the political spectrum proposed conspiracy accounts to explain social and political events (Gürpınar and Nefes 2020). De Medeiros (2018) argues that the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) government pragmatically propagated conspiracy theories against its opponents to justify its policies, which exacerbated the political fragmentation between pro- and anti-government sides. Another study on conspiracy theories about the alleged deep state in the Turkish parliament illustrates that this conspiracy account was instrumentalized by all political actors in different contexts between 1996 and 2010. These political parties ranged from the right-wing Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*) to the left-wing Kurdish political actors from the Peoples’ Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*) (Nefes 2018). Given that contemporary Turkey is empirically shown to be one of the most politically polarized countries (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, and Yıldırım 2017; Kemahlıoğlu 2015; Lupu 2015; Wagner 2021) and the general public is susceptible to political elites’ populist messages (Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, and Elçi 2021), the dissemination of conspiracy theories along with partisan channels will continue to be a significant factor.

The academic literature on conspiracy theories outside Turkey also confirms the significance of partisanship in conspiracy theory beliefs and endorsement (Enders

and Smallpage 2019; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016; Pasek et al. 2015; Saunders 2017; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016). Nevertheless, one should not forget that each conspiracy theory has its own specific sociopolitical causes and consequences. Therefore, partisanship might not be a significant predictor for all types of conspiracy theories. Health-related conspiracy accounts often have politically neutral content and therefore do not have to be disseminated along the lines of ideological beliefs and political party affiliations. Indeed, Eberl, Hubert, and Greussing (2021) show that Austrian citizens do not strictly follow party elites in their conspiracy beliefs about the Covid-19 pandemic and underline that populist attitudes are more reliable predictors of people's perceptions of the pandemic.

The Turkish Government's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

The official Turkish response to the pandemic began on January 10, 2020, when the Turkish Ministry of Health set up the Coronavirus Scientific Advisory Board. Subsequently, the ministry created medical stations to detect body temperature through cameras and placed hand sanitizers at airports and sent a plane to evacuate Turkish citizens in Wuhan, China, on January 30, 2020. The government began to impose travel restrictions in February 2020: All flights from China were cancelled on February 3, and the border with Iran was closed on February 23. Dr. Fahrettin Koca, the Turkish Minister of Health, declared the first detected case of Covid-19 on March 11 (BBC 2020a). According to the Turkish Ministry of Health, the first death due to the virus infection occurred on March 15, 2020. It should not go without mentioning that some scholars have expressed doubts about the official numbers. For example, Kisa and Kisa (2020) claim that the virus was probably already circulating in Turkey several weeks earlier, as the number of overall deaths in March 2020 in Istanbul was already higher than the historical averages.

The first Covid-19-related lockdown restrictions in Turkey were introduced on March 16 (BBC 2020b). The measures were gradually increased until June 2020 and comprised several curfews in cities with higher infection rates. In June 2020, the government relaxed some of the measures and allowed the re-opening of public spaces, such as restaurants, swimming pools, beaches, parks, libraries, and museums (BBC 2020b). Following the summer season, in which Turkey actively encouraged the arrival of international tourists, the government tightened the restrictions again to prevent the spread of Covid-19. In November 2020, the state imposed partial curfews during which individuals aged 65 and over were only allowed to leave their houses during the hours of 10 am to 1 pm, and individuals aged 20 and below were only allowed outside between the hours of 1 to 4 pm. Until April 2021, when the infection rate in Turkey became the highest in Europe, the government did not introduce any nationwide lockdowns. The lockdown included measures such as staying at home except for essential trips, limiting alcohol sales, and school closures (Hamsici 2021). In March 2022, Turkey eased the majority of the coronavirus-related restrictions. The Minister of Health stated that wearing masks would not be

mandatory outdoors or indoors when there was enough ventilation, and a contact tracing app code would not be required anymore when entering certain public places (Reuters 2022).

The Covid-19 vaccination campaign in Turkey started in January 2021 with vaccines developed by China's Sinovac company (Xinhua 2021). Subsequently, the campaign included Pfizer-BioNTech and Russia's Sputnik V vaccine in April 2021 (Aydogan 2021; Tasdemir 2021). On December 22, 2021, the locally produced vaccine, named TURKOVAC, obtained permission for emergency use (Aliyev and Duz 2021). Overall, as of March 27, 2022, 57,773,651 people have received their first dose (69 percent of the overall population), and 52,964,381 people have been fully vaccinated in Turkey (64 percent of the overall population) (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health 2022). By March 25, 2022, the total number of coronavirus cases in Turkey was 14,760,331, and the total number of deaths was 97,598 (World Health Organization 2022).

Conspiracy Theories About Covid-19 in the Turkish Context

This section delineates prevalent conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic and vaccination in Turkey. To start with the former, the globally known plandemic conspiracy theory was shared by Turkish users on social media (Özdemir 2021). The theory is based on a 26-minute documentary, titled *Plandemic*. It suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic is a hoax conspired by global elites to control populations. The plandemic conspiracy theory is not only replete with misinformation, but also misleadingly attacks leading official figures fighting the pandemic, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci (Kearney, Chiang, and Massey 2020). The documentary was released online on May 4, 2020, and spread widely through social media (Rotenberg and Perman 2020). Kearney, Chiang, and Massey demonstrate that right after its release, the documentary quickly gained attention on Twitter: “more than twice as many tweets were created in the 14 days following the documentary’s release compared to the previous 100 days” (2020, 5). Nazar and Pieters (2021) state that the plandemic conspiracy theory became widespread by requesting social media users to mass share the documentary, which undermined official gatekeeping efforts. They also note that the documentary fed suspicions and negative perceptions about vaccination campaigns and containment measures such as lockdowns.

Turkish online users also watched the documentary. Özdemir (2021) mentions that in May and June 2020, the *Plandemic* video became popular in Turkey: People shared the conspiracy content with Turkish subtitles. Nevertheless, it might be too early to infer to what extent the conspiracy theory prevailed in Turkey. Özdemir (2021) notes that the word “plandemic” was searched online only in three major cities: Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. This might be due to the comparatively higher levels of international connection of the residents of these cities. Regardless, there were similar conspiracy theories in Turkish. On Twitter, a hashtag (#VirüsMedyadanYayıldı #TheViruswasSpreadbyMedia) still allows online

users to express their belief that the Covid-19 pandemic is a hoax. For example, a Twitter user (@semasema69) who introduced herself as “just a Muslim” linked the pandemic theme to the Sèvres syndrome by claiming that foreign globalists fund 95 percent of the media income, which implies that foreign powers planned the pandemic. We do not yet have any empirical studies to quantify the significance of Turkish conspiracy theories that described the pandemic as a hoax.

Conspiracy theories about the vaccine also circulated in Turkey. Some significant conspiracy themes about the campaign were about Bill Gates. Hüseyin Vodinalı (2020), a Turkish columnist, claims that Bill Gates conspired to transplant microchips in people through Covid-19 vaccination in his opinion piece. This argument has spread online not only by the proponents of the conspiracy theory, but also through news media and humor. Popular journalist Cuneyt Özdemir mocked and debunked the argument in his television program, 5N1K (CNN Türk 2020). Another conspiracy theory about Bill Gates falsely claimed that Gates attempted to decrease the world population via vaccination. An Instagram page spread this false conspiracy theory with a photo of an English newspaper article from 2011, titled “Depopulation through Vaccination” and received more than 2,000 likes (Satıl 2021a). Other vaccine-related conspiracy theories do not talk about the grand schemes of elites. Rather, they speculate, exaggerate, or falsely report the side effects of the vaccines, such as them damaging people’s immune systems (Satıl 2021b).

The popularity of conspiracy theorists and their styles play an important role in convincing the general public (Butter 2020). While nearly all political elites as well as many popular singers and actors actively supported the official vaccination campaign (Kamacı 2021), a few opinion leaders disseminated conspiracy theories. The most vocal and one of the most well-known proponents of Covid-19 conspiracy theories in Turkey is Abdurrahman Dilipak. According to the fact-checking website Teyit (2021), Dilipak is the vaccination-conspiracy theorist with the highest number of followers on Twitter: 924,100 on March 30, 2022. Dilipak is an Islamic intellectual and a human rights activist who has been writing about Turkish society, politics, and other topics since the 1970s. In addition, he actively participated in Turkish politics and worked as an adviser to the political Islamist National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*) between 1978 and 1980. Dilipak both appeared in and hosted various television programs with political content on national channels. He currently writes for a national Islamist newspaper, *Yeni Akit*.

Dilipak wrote about health and well-being before the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, he is one of the most prominent supporters of the campaign to legalize cannabis in Turkey (McKernan 2021). Moreover, Dilipak is not a stranger to conspiracy theories. He was one of the contributors to the antisemitic conspiracy theory literature about a crypto-Judaic community, called *Dönme* (Converts) (Nefes 2015). Dilipak co-authored a book with İlğaz Zorlu, a self-proclaimed *Dönme*. The book argues that the *Dönme* community secretly influences Turkish politics via conspiracies (Zorlu and Dilipak 2001). Dilipak could be called a generic conspiracy theorist, as the foundation of his views relies on a conspiracy-ridden history.

Dilipak calls this “the deep reality.” This is an esoteric and clandestine system that includes secret elites such as the Knights Templar and the Rothschild family (Nefes 2015). According to Dilipak, the “deep reality” dates back to the construction of Solomon’s Temple and aims to trigger the end of the world (Nefes 2015, 581–82).

This conspiracy theory, the “deep reality,” seems to have shaped Dilipak’s views on the Covid-19 pandemic. In an interview on national television, *Haber Global*, he stated that Covid-19 was the product of a global conspiracy. It was prepared in the United Kingdom, developed by the United States, and planted in China (Haber Global 2021). In line with that, Dilipak campaigns against the Covid-19 vaccination in Turkey. He gave a speech at the biggest anti-vaccine gathering in Turkey, the “Great Awakening Rally” (BBC 2021b). In addition, Dilipak and Muammer Karabulut, the head of the Santa Claus Peace Council in Turkey, went to court to stop the official vaccination program (Birgun 2021). Overall, Dilipak has linked the Covid pandemic to the “deep reality.” In doing so, he brings together various actors around the globe, claiming that, for example, the European Union, the United Nations, and other international organizations are all part of a global plot. The conspiracy, he claims, controls not only TV channels like CNN but also social media platforms like Facebook. Moreover,

Various members of the Rothschild family also work for this system. Some major sponsors of the system are Barclays Bank, Bill & Melinda Gates Fund, Deutsche Bank, General Motors Company, The Goldman Sachs Group, Google, HSBC Holding, McKinsey & Company and UBS Group.

(Dilipak 2022, my translation)

Dilipak’s belief in a historical conspiracy of the “deep reality” seems to have shaped his perception of the Covid-19 pandemic. His conspiracy theories thus fit Richard Hofstadter’s definition of the paranoid style: “The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as the motive force in historical events” (1965, 29). In parallel, Goertzel argues that many conspiracy theories comprise part of a monological belief system in which “each of the beliefs serves as evidence for each of the other beliefs” (1994, 740). Accordingly, people believing in one conspiracy theory are more likely to believe in others (Goertzel 1994). This perspective could help fathoming Dilipak’s unique and far-fetched sounding *mélange* of conspiracy theories.

Conclusion

This chapter delineated the dissemination of conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic in Turkey. It touched upon historical and current factors of the prevalence of conspiracy theories, popular conspiracy theories about the pandemic, and the perspective of a prominent conspiracy theorist. I have shown that the historical trauma from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire by foreign powers and minority movements

has created a general mistrust of foreign actors, especially Western powers. This mistrust of foreign powers provides a fertile ground for conspiracy theories as mentioned in the debate about the Sèvres syndrome. Accordingly, it is not surprising that some people in Turkey interpreted the pandemic as a plot by major global powers and elites such as Bill Gates. This conspiracist reading of the Covid-19 pandemic was triggered and supported by the *Plandemic* documentary as well as the works of the well-known intellectual Abdurrahman Dilipak. Nevertheless, as nearly all political leaders and popular figures actively supported the vaccination campaign, the conspiracy theories about Covid-19 and the vaccination campaign in Turkey seem to have generated a very limited effect on the general public attitude. This observation seems to be well supported by the current official statistics: 85 percent of the adult population in Turkey has received two doses of vaccination as of March 29, 2022.

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PART 3

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7

COVID-19-RELATED RUMORS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

A Case Study from Cameroon¹

Martina Drescher

Rumors and conspiracy theories are at the crossroads of multiple disciplines. While research in the social sciences, in philosophy, or media- and cultural studies is quite abundant, linguists have not paid much attention to this phenomenon so far, and a systematic study of their textual and verbal properties still remains a desideratum (Caumanns and Niendorf 2001; Römer and Stumpf 2018; Stumpf and Römer 2018). However, as an unofficial, often contested, and stigmatized type of information, rumors and conspiracy theories are discursively constructed and disseminated in text form. Against this backdrop, the aim of the present chapter is twofold: First, to advocate a genuinely linguistic approach that concentrates on the linguistic and communicative facets of rumors and conspiracy theories by investigating communicative devices and practices like specific topoi, epistemic stance markers, and argumentative patterns; second, to illustrate such an approach by concentrating on Covid-19-related rumors and conspiracy theories circulating in Cameroon. Such an endeavor is *per se* timely because research has been dominated so far by Western scholarship and focused on a limited number of cultural areas while at the same time neglecting the African continent.² Yet, according to Pipes, the “most fertile ground for conspiracism since 1945 has been outside the West” (1997, 120). Therefore, a non-European perspective seems of fundamental epistemic value for elucidating the problem of conspiracism. This is all the more the case as rumors and conspiracy theories circulating among Africans seem to originate in the colonial past (Caumanns and Niendorf 2001, 199).

After a brief outline of the study’s theoretical framework (see Theoretical Framework: A Linguistic Approach to Rumors and Conspiracy Theories), I give some background information about Cameroon (see Cameroon: General Background Information). The presentation of the data (see Data and Method) is followed by the analysis of a series of excerpts (see Analysis) and a conclusion (see Rumors and Conspiracy Theories in Relation with the Origin of the Coronavirus).

Theoretical Framework: A Linguistic Approach to Rumors and Conspiracy Theories

A linguistic approach can draw on sociological work that conceives rumors and conspiracy theories as a specific form of social knowledge. As such, they are part of the struggle for the power to define social reality. According to Kapferer, “rumors are not necessarily ‘false’: they are, however, necessarily unofficial. Marginalized and at times in the opposition they challenge official reality by proposing other realities” (1990, 263). As a “spontaneous vie for the right to speak,” rumors attest “to a questioning of authorities, of ‘who has the right to speak about what’” (14). Since rumors and conspiracy theories are not acknowledged by the majority of the population, the mainstream media, or other socially legitimated instances of interpretation, they constitute a heterodox that is contested or even delegitimated knowledge. Thus, they contrast with the official or orthodox knowledge, even though the dividing line between those two types of knowledge is becoming increasingly blurred, not least because of the growing influence of social media (Anton, Schetsche, and Walter 2014, 18–19). The latter not only speeds up the spread of heterodox knowledge but also confers a higher credibility which leads to its “informationalization.” Rumors and conspiracy theories “thereby acquire the status of truth and definitively become a part of popular knowledge” (Kapferer 1990, 58). In any case, the distinction between information and rumor is subjective in the sense that it is the result of our own beliefs. People generally “take as ‘information’ what they believe to be true and as ‘rumors’ what they believe to be false or, in any case, unverified” (12). Or, in White’s words: “Hearsay is a kind of fact when people believe it” (White 2000, 34). This means that fundamentally, as Musila notes, “rumours tease out questions about the epistemological embeddedness of notions of truth and legitimacy of information” (2015, 99). And from this perspective, they also raise a general awareness of how uncertain our knowledge is. As Kapferer underlines, rumors confront us with the question why we believe what we believe and thus demonstrate once again, “that all certainty is social: what the group to which we belong considers to be true is true. Social knowledge is based on faith and not on proof” (1990, 264). Hence, the analysis of rumors and conspiracy theories requires a relational approach. It should focus primarily on the processes by which the relation between contested knowledge, on the one hand, and accepted knowledge on the other hand is discursively constituted (Anton, Schetsche, and Walter 2014, 14).

It is against this theoretical background, that I investigate the many rumors and conspiracy theories that have spread since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in central African Cameroon and, in particular, among its francophone population.

Cameroon: General Background Information

Situated in equatorial Africa with a surface of 475,440 km², Cameroon is often considered as a country of diversity par excellence and hence as a miniature Africa

(Drescher 2017). As a former German protectorate divided after World War I between France and Great Britain, Cameroon was under the influence of three colonial powers. Its population is estimated to be approximately 28.5 million (The World Fact Book n.d.), which form a religious patchwork of Christians, Muslims, and animists. Its extremely fragmented linguistic landscape counts about 250 indigenous languages – among them a dozen vehiculars – that are dominated by the two official languages (French and English), as well as two contact languages – Cameroonian pidgin-English and *camfranglais* – which both serve for interregional and interethnic communication. As a member of the Francophonie and the Commonwealth, the country at the same time belongs to the French- and the English-speaking world. Cameroon is divided into ten administrative regions. In eight of these regions, including the capital Yaoundé and the economic metropolis Douala, French is the official language while English is restricted to the two Western regions adjacent to the Nigerian border. Given that 75 to 80 percent of the population live in francophone regions and only 20 to 25 percent living in the anglophone zone, French is clearly dominant. Yet, it is generally not the first language, although it is present in all domains of public life (politics, administration, justice, education, media, etc.).

In contrast to apprehensions of World Health Organization (WHO) and Western governments, which anticipated at the pandemic's outbreak a dramatic situation on the African continent once the coronavirus began to spread, the disease had only a minor impact in most African countries, with the exception of South Africa. On March 18, 2020, the Cameroonian government took drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus by closing its borders, suspending the issuing of visas, closing all educational institutions, prohibiting gatherings of more than 50 people, and by enforcing the rules of social distancing recommended by the WHO (World Health Organization n.d.; République du Cameroun Services du Premier Ministre n.d.). In June 2020, Cameroon experienced its first peak. By the end of November 2021, the country counted 106,190 officially confirmed Covid-19 cases and 1,770 deaths. Not surprisingly, until that time, only 504,892 people had been fully vaccinated, which corresponds to a very low vaccination rate of 1.95 percent of the total population (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2022). This poor result is first and foremost due to a shortage of vaccines. However, a general mistrust against vaccination coupled with a high rate of denial of the coronavirus' existence, at least among our interviewees, also seem to play a role.

Data and Method

Guided by an interest in health discourse, and particularly by its moral facets (Drescher 2021; Drescher et al. 2022), we started in September 2020 to inquire about Cameroonians' ideas and experiences with the Covid-19 pandemic. To date, we have collected approximately 30 hours of audiotaped structured interviews with about 100 Cameroonians of different sex, age, status, etc.³ During a pilot study intended to test our questionnaire, we noticed that many Cameroonians hinted at

rumors and conspiracy theories about Covid-19. The latter are frequently invoked with certain topics such as a possible mandatory vaccination against the coronavirus, possible vaccine tests on the African continent, or specific measures taken by the Cameroonian government, for instance regarding the burial of Covid-19 victims. In addition, they often appear in argumentative contexts and serve to justify claims or allegations. We thus decided to address this issue in our questionnaire by adding a question about rumors or conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the virus which our interviewees might have heard of. The question thus presupposes that there are Covid-19-related rumors and conspiracy theories. It reads as follows: “There exist numerous rumors and conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus Covid-19. Which are the rumors and conspiracy theories you have heard of? What did they say?”

According to Coady, rumors and conspiracy theories both refer to heterodox knowledge. While rumors merely lack an official acknowledgment, conspiracy theories contradict the official representation of the events somehow or other (2014, 294). At the time of data collection, we did not discriminate between both terms. Rather, we used “rumor” and “conspiracy theory” as rough synonyms referring to information that is unconfirmed. While the expression *théorie de conspiration* (conspiracy theory) always appears in the interviewer’s question, in their answers the interviewees clearly prefer more common everyday terms, primarily *rumeur* (rumor) which is most frequent. Besides, related terms such as *on-dit* (rumor, hearsay) and *bruit* (rumor) are also documented in the data. Finally, there are a few occurrences of *théorie du complot/de la conspiration* (conspiracy theory), but the expression seems rather uncommon. This is confirmed by the fact that only the most recent edition of the general French dictionary *Le Petit Robert* (2019) has such an entry.

Analysis

The data show “many and varied ways in which official, institutional, and/or scientific facts and recommendations about Covid-19 are challenged, ignored, or subverted” (Lee, Meek, and Mwine-Kyarimpa 2021). However, rumors and conspiracy theories emerge mainly in two different contexts. On the one hand, they are brought up spontaneously by the interviewees and fulfill specific discursive, in particular argumentative, functions such as explaining, backing up claims and allegations, etc. On the other hand, they are reported in the interviewees’ answer to the question about rumors and conspiracy theories concerning Covid-19. Therefore, one can distinguish between *contextualized* versus *decontextualized* rumors and conspiracy theories.

Evidence from the data suggests that heterodox knowledge, whether only implicitly hinted at or explicitly spelled out, is keyed by linguistic devices, that is, epistemic markers, and communicative techniques, that is, reported speech, as in the following excerpt which is part of Fabrice’s answer to the interviewer’s question whether, in case a family member had been tested positively with regard to the coronavirus, he would prefer to consult a medical doctor or a traditional

healer. All quoted excerpts are translations from a colloquial, regional form of French. The respective expressions (i.e., we were made to believe etc.) are underlined. Phenomena which are typical of oral speech such as self-corrections, repetitions, and hesitation markers have been deleted in order to facilitate the excerpts' reading.

(1) because first, we were made to believe that the dad of one of our colleague's had died of Covid-19 at the hospital. This means that the hospital lies, the hospital has never said what is true. Well, personally, I don't even believe in this disease. If someone were to tell me that a gentleman who is afflicted with Covid-19, if this exists really, I would want him to turn to the traditional side because at first they made us believe that when certain persons arrive at the hospital, they are injected by certain things so that they die. It is said that it is Covid-19. We know many things, there are many things I have heard on the streets. I prefer that the one who is ill, if he finds a traditional healer who can give him a traditional drug, that he rather turns himself there than to go to get an injection and die.

The speaker doubts that the cause of death given by the hospital – namely Covid-19 – of the colleague's father is true. He claims instead that the hospital lies and intensifies this with a generalizing reformulation stating that the hospital never tells the truth. He then emphasizes that he does not believe in the existence of Covid-19, which implies that actually an answer to the interviewee's question about treatment options in the case of an infection with the coronavirus is superfluous. However, in the unlikely case that the disease should really exist, he would clearly prefer a traditional healer. He backs his position by referring to substantial knowledge gained on the street where one learns from hearsay that once people arrive at the hospital, they are injected so that they die. For the speaker, it is thus better to call on a traditional healer than to receive injections and to die. By using epistemic markers and references to alternative, allegedly more credible sources of knowledge, the speaker displays his mistrust in official information (about the existence of the disease, the treatment in hospital) and instead clearly gives preference to unofficial information. The excerpt illustrates how contextualized heterodox knowledge infiltrates Covid-19 discourse and serves for argumentative and communicative purposes such as justifying claims or incriminating institutions.

By contrast, explicitly asking for rumors means to invite the interviewees to merely list them. In this case, they do not emerge in specific communicative contexts where they fulfill determinate functions. Moreover, the interviewee's epistemic stance, that is, whether s/he buys into these rumors, doubts, or rejects them, often does not become clear either. Even though the decontextualized rumors and conspiracy theories elicited by our questionnaire are framed as such and elaborated with more or less detail, the interviewees do not necessarily reveal whether they are merely reporting what they have heard or whether they believe that this information is true. However, in both cases, one can observe traces of epistemic

negotiations and manifestations of *doing ethics* (see Rumors and Conspiracy Theories in Relation with the Origin of the Coronavirus).

Since one aim of this study is to present some of the Covid-19-related rumors and conspiracy theories circulating in Cameroon, the analysis focuses primarily on the decontextualized type and more precisely on specific motifs or *topoi* surfacing in the interviewees' answers to our explicit question. By doing so, it contributes also to an "*aesthetics* of conspiracy as a structured field of representation" (Carey 2017, 92, italics in the original). The goal is first to pin down the most common motifs in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and second to focus on one such motif in order to show its unfolding in different narratives. There is indeed evidence from the data that motifs form a thematic kernel or proto-narrative that can develop into different "grapevine narratives" (Musila 2015, 99). This means that a motif may generate a range of more or less elaborated variants which, while sometimes differing only in details, often also overlap with other motifs and produce complex narratives. In other words, a limited number of recurrent and rather pre-patterned, stereotypical motifs combine and entangle in multiple ways which explains the range of similar, yet never totally identical rumors and conspiracy theories. This concurs with White's observation about "vampire stories," that is, a specific type of transnational African rumor which originates in encounters with colonial medicine (2000). All in all, rumors and conspiracy theories are characterized by similarities of plot, a number of overlapping details, and formulaic elements. Because of their stability, they may be considered as an autonomous genre (White 2000, 6; Caumanns and Niendorf 2001, 206; Musila 2015, 93).

As already pointed out, the analysis must cope with some crucial methodological issues related to the epistemic status of a piece of information to be considered as rumor or conspiracy theory. Following Lee, Meek, and Mwine-Kyarimpa (2021) who "advocate for scholarly attention that goes beyond binaries of universal truths and falsities, but instead elaborates on the methods, commitments, and stakes of different epistemological practices," I first aim to reconstruct the interviewees' own perspective on what counts as a rumor by focusing on the communicative practices used to negotiate the status of an information as a credible, legitimate, or, by contrast, a contested truth. However, given that "rumours can be untrue, or contain a grain of truth, or the whole truth waiting to burst out" as Musila notes (2015, 5), the analyst's perspective also plays a decisive role since it allows to capture the communicative dynamics with regard to the epistemic quality of an information, that is, its presumed truth or falseness. Thus, the analyst, far from acting as an objective or neutral arbiter, brings in an additional point of view. This is also important in view of the epistemic "elasticity" or "porosity" of rumors and conspiracy theories (see Rumors and Conspiracy Theories in Relation with the Origin of the Coronavirus). For, as the data illustrate, the latter frequently consist of a mixture of true and false elements – at least seen from the analyst's standpoint. In addition, facts may be framed as rumors and vice versa. That is why the subsequent analysis oscillates between the interviewees' and the analyst's perspective and is informed by a productive tension between different epistemic stances.

Rumors and Conspiracy Theories in Relation with the Origin of the Coronavirus

First, a survey of the different explanations related to the origin of the coronavirus framed by the Cameroonian interviewees as rumor or conspiracy theory will be given. Thereafter, the focus shifts on one specific narrative, namely the (economic, political, scientific, etc.) competition for world leadership between different global powers, in particular China and the United States, and contrast its different ramifications.

1. As mentioned, the coronavirus is frequently seen in relation with the (economic, political, social) rivalry and competition between the global powers, in particular China and the United States, sometimes also Europe, in the context of world leadership. This motif is often combined with an explanation of the virus's origin as a (intended or unintended) laboratory failure or as a biological weapon.
2. The coronavirus is interpreted as an attempt of the West or globally acting organizations such as the WHO to harm or even to decimate Africans. This narrative also points to the scope of rumors and conspiracy theories which may occur on a local or a global level and also return periodically. A case in point is the HIV/AIDS pandemic. A similar rumor was spread with regard to this disease as our data from sensitization campaigns show (Drescher 2010).⁴ One can presume that the Covid-19 version is not restricted to Cameroon but has a much wider scope covering possibly the African continent. Closely related to this narrative is the conviction that all pandemics, including HIV/AIDS and Ebola, came into being in Western countries and were subsequently sent to Africa in order to destabilize the continent or to test vaccines by misusing Africans as laboratory rats. The interpretation of the virus as China's attempt to destroy Africa as well as the rumor, documented once in the data, that the virus was created by the Chinese in order to deal with their own overpopulation can be considered as variants. Globally, the coronavirus is associated with the West, with white people, and often labelled the "white man's disease" (*la maladie des Blancs*). However, "white" is used in a broad sense in contrast to "black" and refers also to people of Asian descent.
3. The origin of the coronavirus is seen as a biological weapon and related to a (intended or unintended) laboratory failure. Sometimes, research or vaccine trials which went wrong are seen as the cause. In this context, the interviewees often give lists of animals supposed to transmit the virus and thus to be avoided (not only bats, pangolin, monkeys, but also snakes, toads, poultry, etc.). One narrative based on this motif reports that the coronavirus was produced for China by the French *Institut Pasteur* which is why the infected American president – at the time of the interviews still Donald Trump – took France to court.
4. There are a lot of minor motifs or thematic elements in relation to China ranging from a Chinese creator of the virus to the nutritional habits of Chinese, for instance, their consumption of raw or not thoroughly boiled meat, especially game, which then backs the assumption that all animals are dangerous. Here,

one also encounters the idea of a deliberate enhancement of the virus to make it more lethal or its deliberate propagation through the air, in particular with airplanes. That China withheld for strategic reasons the information about the outbreak has also been framed as a rumor.

5. Many interviewees are persuaded that the coronavirus does not exist and thus report that the pandemic itself is a mere rumor. It is framed as the result of a conspiracy either of the West in order to destabilize Africa, or of the (corrupt) Cameroonian government itself in order to attract more funds from international donors. Some give more details by claiming that hospitalized Covid-19 patients were paid to pretend to be affected by the disease in order to raise the national infection rates and thus receive more money from the WHO etc., or to get better equipment. Against this backdrop, Covid-19 is often termed a “politicized disease” (*maladie politisée*). The narrative of the virus’s non-existence is of course not limited to Cameroon, but probably circulating worldwide.
6. Some report rumors about occult powers that want to increase their influence. This motif is often connected to the alleged trafficking of human organs. Preventive measures related to social distancing such as wearing a mask or greeting with the elbow are interpreted as secret codes or even rituals to make someone a sect member.
7. Further motifs concern the transmission and the treatment of Covid-19. The latter, and in particular a possible vaccine, is supposed not to cure, but to transmit the virus. With regard to transmission, it is rumored that the virus came into being because humans had intercourse with animals. Similar rumors circulated in the case of HIV/AIDS where condoms were alleged to transmit the disease, and supposed sex between humans and apes was the given explanation as to how the transmission of a virus originally hosted in animals was passed on to humans (Drescher 2010).
8. Finally, recommendations regarding the consumption of game (bush meat), disseminated notably to prevent the spread of Ebola some years ago, and allusions to potential dangers coming from specific animals are often framed as rumors in our data.

Rivalry Motif: China versus the United States

As this list illustrates, most narratives combine different motifs and thematic elements which are frequently intertwined. As already mentioned, the rivalry motif opposing China and the United States comes often together with the idea of the virus as a biological weapon or of its “escape” from a laboratory. Interestingly, the competition between the global powers displays two diametrically opposed basic configurations. While the idea of the virus as a means to destabilize a (politically, economically, scientifically) competing power remains stable, the conspiracy’s agents are inverted: in the first scenario, China is at the origin of the coronavirus, and in the second, however, it is the United States. In both scenarios, the basic motif overlaps with the perception of the coronavirus as a biological weapon, and it is enriched by further thematic elements which generate multiple developments

of the narrative plot and confirm the idea of rumors as both formulaic and fluid texts. The following section examines the first scenario.

Conspiracy of China in Order to Destabilize the United States, Europe, or Africa

Most of the complementary thematic elements occurring in this configuration revolve around economic rivalry, even though some specify that scientific and political leadership is also at stake. In general, the coronavirus is seen as the result of either a laboratory failure or a biological weapon deployed in the struggle (some interviewees even use the term *guerre* “war”) between China and the United States for predominance. According to some interviewees, the virus was created to force American owners of Chinese corporations to sell these at a lower price. Others explain that China wants to chase away Americans (and other nations) from their country because they dominate Chinese markets. In more developed narratives, the virus is also seen as a biological weapon in China’s war against the United States and Europe which to date dominate globally. According to one interviewee, the fact that these regions were most affected by the virus proves that the assumption is true. Surprisingly, the virus is also interpreted by some as China’s attempt to destroy Africa.

The following excerpts illustrate these complementary elements while also providing insights into epistemic framings of an information as unofficial, originating from an untrustworthy source, etc. The respective expressions (i.e., it was said, as one says, the rumor I have heard of) are underlined.

- (2) In the news and on the Internet, it has been reported that with the appearance of Covid-19 . . . the managers of American-owned Chinese companies were forced to sell their companies at a lower price. Thus, it has been reported that perhaps it (Covid-19) is a conspiracy by the Chinese in order to reobtain these companies.
- (3) Well, it is true, there have been several rumors. The first one that I heard of, it was the Chinese, since the virus comes from China. . . . It was said that China wanted to chase the Americans and other countries away from their soil, because they hold the markets in their country (China). Therefore, the Chinese let the virus loose as they wanted to remove the people from their country.
- (4) Well, the rumors here about the origins of the virus . . . I am going to say that it is a biological weapon, the first rumor I have heard of, . . . launched by China, as one says, it is about the phenomenon of leadership, in terms of science, in terms of politics and in terms of economics, and voilà. Well, I think that’s it, right?
- (5) What I can say is that among the weapons on Earth there are biological weapons, and what I have heard as a rumor is that the virus is a biological weapon launched by China against the main owners, as one would say, in quotation marks, owners of the world, who are North America and

Europe. The proof is that it is the latter who have been struck down by the virus – that is what I can say.

- (6) Others say it's done in a laboratory, so China and America where they wanted to test, right? and it escaped (laughter), and the virus came out like that, and it started to infect the whole world, thus that the Chinese wanted to destroy Africa, they want the world to be only for them, so, people said so many things.

Conspiracy of the United States in Order to Destabilize China

While some thematic elements added in this second configuration are similar to the first, there are also different constituents, notably the idea that the coronavirus was meant to slow down, to hinder, or even to stop further Chinese development. In the economic war between Americans and Chinese for world leadership, it is now the Americans who are seen as creators of the virus with the intention to destabilize China. For one interviewee, the United States “found” this disease in order to destabilize China which is on its way to become the world's leading economy. While China is busy fighting the disease, others continue to evolve. This argument occurs elsewhere with only slight modifications. One interviewee asserts that while China is busy finding the product (vaccine?), other powers continue working. Some specify that, in order to destabilize China, the United States produced Covid-19 on Chinese territory and that during the transport of Covid-19 vials, one broke, so that the situation spiraled out of control. Finally, the coronavirus is seen as a failed American attempt to destabilize the Chinese economy, since the Chinese put up a good fight and managed to contain the pandemic in their country.

The following pieces of data illustrate different concretizations of the rivalry motif.

- (7) Currently, when one speaks about the ranking of countries on an economic world level, China is rivalling the United States, and it seems, with regard to some points, China is allegedly taking first place over the United States, to be the number one worldwide in terms of economic power. The United States allegedly found something in order to be able to destabilize China, which wants to become the global economic power within the coming months, by putting the disease there so that China has to work on fixing the problem while the other countries continue their development. Voilà, that's my share of the rumors I've heard about this disease.
- (8) Personally, I learned that the rumors were rather the United States of America, in order to destabilize China, because *we all know* that China is the leading world power, well the Americans did it in order to destabilize China so that while China as it has been said, that well China, they simply just create products every day, well while China will try to get the product, other powers are busy working and then we have seen that it spread over the whole international territory.

- (9) Personally, the rumors I heard of, it has been said that Covid comes from China and that it is the United States being on Chinese land which have fabricated Covid and that during the transport of the Covid, it was with the purpose to destabilize China. And during the transport of the vials of this Covid, one vial broke. That is when it degenerated, that is what I know.
- (10) I understood, one made me believe that it comes from China. Yes, well it is a war between the United States and China. Well, the Americans did launch it in order to destabilize China. . . . Well, voilà, that is what caused it. I really think that if it is real, it is not good because the human being should not be like that and fabricate a disease (laughter).
- (11) The rumors I personally have heard of, it was really a shame that somebody breeds a virus and that he prefers killing a country. Without knowing that it may affect himself. Somebody has bred a virus. . . . One spoke of the Americans against the Chinese. Allegedly the virus was to spread in the air and cause damages in the world.
- (12) Currently there exist several rumors. . . . The first, it is to destabilize the Chinese economy by the Americans, but it didn't go as planned, because China did cope well since the first case was detected in Wuhan in China. But the Chinese fought as best they could, and they have stabilized the pandemic in their country.

As the previous excerpts show, Covid-19 narratives documented in the data mix different motifs while also integrating information with different credibility or legitimacy when seen from the analyst's point of view. Hence, the interviewees not only give examples of rumors and conspiracy theories circulating in Cameroon and probably beyond in francophone Africa, but they also provide valuable insights into the dynamics of their appropriation and transformation in everyday talk. On the one hand, the plausibility of what one could consider as a fact is put into question, and the information is framed as rumor. For instance, the virus's Chinese origin, recommended social distancing measures as well as certain scientific hypotheses are framed as being rumors by some interviewees. Conversely, what one would consider as rumor is labelled as "news" (*nouvelle*) or "information" which allows the interviewee to shift or even to reject a framing as rumor. A case in point is the claimed nonexistence of the coronavirus presented as "news" which points to its acceptance as a fact. Finally, a reported rumor may also be reframed to be true after further inquiry of the interviewer. However, all in all, the interviewees' attitudes toward the credibility of the information they give often remain ambiguous. This probably mirrors the epistemic status of rumors and conspiracy theories as uncertain, non-legitimized, or controversial knowledge. And it substantiates Musila's claim regarding "rumour's elasticity as a constantly morphing medium, which remains elusive and multivalent" (2015, 99).

Conclusion: Rumors and Conspiracy Theories Between “Epistemic Elasticity” and “Doing Ethics”

The data show convincingly that rumors and conspiracy theories indeed offer “rich glimpses into processes of negotiating knowledge production and the accompanying de/legitimization of truth(s)” (Musila 2015, 6). Besides informing about everyday epistemic practices, they also provide insights into the local construction of meaning and social truth in relation to the coronavirus. In particular, they shed light on Cameroonians’ interpretations of the Covid-19 outbreak and their ideas about the pandemic. If it is true that “the collapse of trust in institutions and the absence of an arbiter give free reign to the conspiratorial imagination” (Carey 2017, 91), then the data reveal that Cameroonians have a profound distrust of medical, governmental, and international institutions such as the WHO. In this respect, there are obvious parallels between rumors and conspiracy theories related to Covid-19 and those circulating about other infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS or Ebola. The idea that the virus has been created purposefully with the aim to decimate African populations or that preventive measures – be it condoms in the case of HIV/AIDS or a vaccine in the case of Covid-19 – are agents of infection recurs independent of the disease. These reoccurring motifs raise the question whether certain rumors and conspiracy theories are specific to Cameroonian and, more globally, African health discourse in general.

Obviously, rumors and conspiracy theories provide an occasion to comment on various sociopolitical concerns. This also means that they respond to a specific historical and cultural situation with its psychological uncertainties. Or, as Kapferer puts it, the information spread as rumor must “be expected, and answer to more or less conscious hopes, fears, and forebodings” (1990, 43). For, as Groh argues, conspiracy theories not only show a specific affinity with reality, but also they are quasi attracted by this reality (2001, 189). However, they have to fit into the dominant interpretation patterns of a group, a party, a nation, a culture, or a religion like the key in the lock, so that this mechanism works. Thus, “even though they do not depict actual events, conversations or things that really happened, they describe meanings and powers and ideas that informed how people thought and behaved” (White 2000, 89). If it is true that “the interpretation of rumors reveals the social climate, collective aspirations, and fears” (Kapferer 1990, 255), then it suggests itself that fears and fantasies, which have their roots in experiences with Western medicine in the colonial era, reverberate in current pandemic discourses. Some of the rumors surfacing in the data, in particular those related to vaccination and services in public hospitals, seem to date back to experiences with colonial medicine.

Furthermore, there is evidence from the data that rumors and conspiracy theories “incite moral commentary, personal opinions and emotional reactions” (Kapferer 1990, 50). They not only provide an occasion to intensify social relations and a sense of belonging to specific groups or communities, but they also have strong moral implications. Hence, spreading or simply referring to rumors and conspiracy theories may be seen as an invitation for *doing ethics* (Drescher 2020; Drescher 2021; Drescher, Boukari, and Ngawa 2022). As the previous excerpts illustrate, rumors are

often about negatively portrayed people who take negative action. Hence, they may feed, justify, and strengthen stereotypes and prejudices against foreigners or outsiders (Kapferer 1990, 134). A case in point is the constantly negative depiction of Europeans or Westerners in opposition to Africans or Black people that pervades the data. Here, the rumor about possible vaccine tests of Western laboratories on the continent, generally linked to the motif of an intended decimation of African populations imputed to Western and global health organizations, always triggers strong moral response. With regard to one basic form of rumors, namely exemplary stories, their “moral implications for the group constitute the mainspring of its repetition by readers and its regular and perennial resurgence in the form of rumors” (43). Rumors and conspiracy theories clearly give voice to moral concerns and generate more or less direct forms of doing ethics. An explicit moral evaluation is part of excerpt ten where the speaker reports the rumor about the coronavirus as a weapon in a war opposing China and the United States while at the same time harshly condemning the purposeful creation of a disease. While rumors and conspiracy theories point a finger at injustice, immoral behavior, corruption, racist attitudes, etc., they also contribute to reduce social complexity by conveying Manichean worldviews (Groh 2001, 190), that is by drastically simplifying a multi-faceted reality to an opposition between Good and Evil. Fundamentally, all rumors and conspiracy theories seem to connect to doing ethics so that it is up to further investigations to chart this moral territory. At last, Musila’s remark that rumors are “fluid texts that must be read using interpretative tools that transcend conventional notions of veracity” (2015, 93) points to the need for complementary theoretical and methodological tools in order to capture the specificity of these narratives. In particular, linguistically informed approaches may dig deeper into verbal devices and communicative techniques that indicate both epistemic uncertainty and concomitant moral stances.

Notes

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- 2 A case in point is *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited in 2020 by Michael Butter and Peter Knight where no African country is represented in the “Histories and regions” section.
- 3 My thanks go to Dr. Liliane Ngawa.
- 4 According to Pipes (1997, 2), who discusses conspiracy theories related to the origin of HIV/AIDS, the idea that the virus is man-made and created to eradicate either homosexuals or Blacks is also widespread in Western countries, especially in the United States. See also Geißler (2014).

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8

“COMPLÒÓÓT?”

Theorizing about Covid-19 Conspiracies in Côte d’Ivoire¹

Oumarou Boukari and Joschka Philipps

Introduction

In mid-2020, a team of linguists from the University of Bayreuth sought to study the ways in which people in Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon talk about the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing in particular on *moral* communication about the coronavirus. They wanted to know how moral concerns, claims, and value judgments about the pandemic emerged in concrete situations of communication. Conspiracy theories played an important role throughout the discussions, no matter whether the researchers explicitly asked for them or not and irrespectively of the interviewed groups, which consisted mostly of students, but also of teachers, pupils, retired persons, housewives, health professionals, and individuals working in the informal sector. In Bouaké, the second-largest city of Côte d’Ivoire, the questionnaire also included an explicit question about conspiracy theories about the coronavirus (“Est-ce que vous croyez en la théorie du complot?” i.e., “Do you believe in the conspiracy theory?” – notably without specifying *which* conspiracy theory).

This chapter focuses on the findings in the Ivoirian case (for the discussion on the Cameroonian case, see Chapter 7 by Drescher, this volume). Based on a total of 120 interviews with about 340 people,² it describes the suspicions and allegations that circulate in Bouaké, Côte d’Ivoire, and which scholars usually classify as *conspiracy theories*, that is, theories that “[blame] the current, undesirable state of affairs on a concerted conspiracy by a secret group” (Knight 2003, 16). Embedded in a notoriously under-researched world region compared to Western or northern settings, the data and discursive analyses from this case allow for new reflections on some of the field’s central methodological issues. This has less to do with the content of the conspiracy theories – many overlap indeed with those circulating in Europe and the United States – than with their form and their socio-contextual meaning. For instance, in contrast to most countries in the so-called Global North, conspiracy theorizing seems

to be neither necessarily stigmatized nor “heterodox” in the group discussions in Bouaké (cf. Anton, Schetsche, and Walter 2014, 13).³ For the most part, it is one way of making sense of reality among many.⁴ In our data, this is shown by the fact that there is no systematic ostracizing or reprimanding of individuals as “conspiracy theorists” in the recorded conversations. The interviewees did not seem to fear being put into a box. Whether a given statement represented a conspiracy theory or not hardly mattered for them, not least because they were rarely familiar with the concept.

“Complot” as a Synonym for Politics

Two aspects are intriguing in the Ivoirian discussions about the concept “conspiracy theory.” First, the interviewed groups and individuals, whether they were literate or not, did not seem to be very familiar with the French concept of “*théorie du complot*” or “*théorie de conspiration*.” After the notion was clarified by the interviewer, the participants usually adopted not the full term “*théorie du complot*” (conspiracy theory) but only the notion “complot” (conspiracy). And it remained ambiguous in their respective usage whether the term “complot” (conspiracy) referred to a dubious hypothesis or a factual truth.

A second interesting point is how the Ivoirian interviewees tended to explain the term “*théorie du complot*” to the interviewees, namely as a near-perfect synonym of politics.

- (1) Q: ok, so you believe in the conspiracy theory [*théorie du complot*] – why?
 A: *complòóót*?
 Q: like, if it’s politics.
 A: but it’s politics, the guys are looking for, the guys are looking for money, covid-19 it’s not true, it’s politics, the guys are looking for money ahiiiiii that’s not true orrrr, that’s not true.
- (2) A: *complot*? what *complot*? I don’t understand.
 Q: no: there are people who say that it’s political, that it’s not true.
- (3) Q: do you believe in the existence of covid-19?
 A: it’s all political, I don’t believe it
 Q: what do you mean? Can you explain?
 A: I mean it’s political machinations, it’s *coutcha* as they say.
 Q: so according to you all politicians are the same?
 A. *haji*? Who says politics says conspiracy, have you ever seen a politician who tells the truth?⁵

The interactions between the interviewees and the interviewees show how the unfamiliar term “conspiracy theories” is made familiar as a synonym of “politics,” which in turn boils down to the illicit art of siphoning off money from public

institutions for personal gains. This is made explicit in the semantics of the term “coutha” (in example 3), which can be translated as “trick”, “corruption,” or “embezzlement.” We find here a key trope of conspiracy thinking, according to which politics is fundamentally linked to intrigues and manipulations.

This Machiavellian image of politics, as a realm where even the most violent and morally questionable means are justified to strengthen or maintain one’s position of power, is of course not specific to Côte d’Ivoire, or West Africa.⁶ And yet, it makes particular sense in contexts in which political elites are known to be involved in various kinds of embezzlements of funds and secret machinations. It is therefore an image that also resonates to a certain degree with classic political science scholarship on statehood in Africa. “Social phenomena which Western common sense interprets as ‘corruption’ of the state or ‘political decay,’” as Jean-François Bayart argued, “lie right at the heart of our understanding of the state” (1993, 241).⁷ To be sure, Bayart and other scholars have highlighted that, in parallel to what they consider the corrupt “neo-patrimonial” state in Africa, there are alternative moral and ideological orders through which resources are distributed (e.g., Ekeh 1975). What we seek to highlight, however, is that the synonymous association of conspiracy with politics is not necessarily “paranoid” or unscientific in Hofstadter’s (1964) sense. Its accuracy depends on the ideal-type of politics one has in mind. In other words, a conception of politics as conspiracy is not necessarily more fictional than a conception of politics as the workings of the Westphalian state (cf. Niang 2018, 4).⁸

If our Ivoirian counterparts thus largely conceive of politics as being a set of strategic practices by which conspiring individuals and groups disseminate dubious information to gain or maintain powerful positions, how and where would one draw the line between conspiracy theorizing on the one hand and make sense of politics on the other? This conceptual question merits more critical attention than can be provided in this chapter, but we will touch upon it in the discussion. In the following sections, we are primarily concerned with a more descriptive purpose, that is, to delineate what kinds of conspiracy theories (in the conventional sense) circulated about the Covid-19 pandemic in the case of Côte d’Ivoire.

Scales of Conspiracies

Conspiracy theories are conventionally distinguished from theorizing about politics by highlighting the issue of scale (Briggs 2004, 175; Hofstadter 1964, 29; Keeley 1999, 125; Knight 2003, 16). To be considered a conspiracy theory, an alleged plot needs to be situated at such an implausibly high level of world-spanning political influence that it is unlikely to be true, or as Uscinski would say, that it cannot be given credence by the “appropriate epistemological institutions as having actually occurred” (2019, 48). This unlikelihood of global conspiracies was also mentioned by interviewees with regard to the coronavirus:

(4) Q: do you believe in conspiracy theories?

R: well, i would say no because there is no complicity between our different states because if it was a conspiracy to show that this pandemic exists, i

think that it is not credible from their side. so tchí i don't believe in this theory⁹

For this interlocutor, a global conspiracy in the case of Covid-19 is unlikely because it would necessitate too much coordination between different powerful states whose long-term strategic aims are incompatible, if not antagonistic. In this case, respondents usually refer to it simply as “rumors.”

Thus, certainly not all interviewees embraced a conspiracy theory in the conventional sense. To provide an overview of those conspiracy theories that did circulate among the interviewed groups, we categorized them with regard to scale on which the alleged conspirators were situated: (a) conspiracies by national political elites, (b) neocolonial, imperial, or geopolitical conspiracies, and (c) transnational conspiracies by non-state actors, including references to witchcraft and religious belief systems. Each of these types could be combined into multiple subtypes. Across this spectrum, we seek to demonstrate that conspiracist allegations carry different moral criticisms that tend to be much more complex than the labels they employ.

Conspiracies by National Political Elites

One set of theories asserts that Covid-19-related conspiracies were situated exclusively on the part of Ivoirian or African leaders. Whereas the virus was considered real elsewhere, the appearance of the virus in Côte d'Ivoire was deemed to be a hoax concocted by national politicians to benefit from financial aid.

- (5) Leave that alone, it's political, Covid is a government plot to get rich, Covid is a san movie! they are systematizing us . . .

well me for my part I remain sceptical eh, I don't agree with the existence of Covid-19 in Côte d'Ivoire because there is something very simple, the IMF [International Monetary Fund] has promised several millions to the countries that will be affected by Covid-19 to help them in this pandemic and one day later we learn that Côte d'Ivoire has had its first case. When they said that if we reach the thousand cases we will have several sums of money, Côte d'Ivoire also reached the thousand cases, so for my part, Covid-19 does not exist in Côte d'Ivoire, it is a political trick to make money easily.¹⁰

The suspicion of political elites concocting epidemics to attract international donor funding has been observed during previous pandemics, including during the 2013–2016 Ebola pandemic in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia (Bonnet et al. 2021; Gidda 2014) and during the 2018–20 Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Kasereka and Hawkes 2019; Muzembo et al. 2020). In the aforementioned citations, the main targets of moral criticism are Ivoirian government officials who are seen as having “plotted” the fake existence of the coronavirus to siphon off funding by international institutions. The conventional implicature of the verb *systemer* (to systematize) in Example 5 shows that local authorities are

explicitly accused of setting up or activating a sophisticated system of corruption that citizens are lured into. These suspicions resonate in particular with the experience of local populations who witness the substantial inflows of capital in times of crisis. The sudden emergence of new institutions and offices, the appearance of “convoys of 4 ×4s [four wheel drive vehicles], carrying the flags of NGOs” (Niang 2014, 102), and the unequal access to new resources that tend to benefit those already in power are frequently pointed to with a mixture of indignation and irony.

Neocolonial, Imperial, or Geopolitical Conspiracies

Distrust among the interviewees existed not only vis-à-vis their own national elites, of course, but also with regard to external conspirators involved in neocolonial, imperial, or geopolitical plots. They were identified in terms of different categories such as “les blancs” (whites), the “West,” or in terms of powerful countries (notably America and China) associated with an agenda of preserving or gaining world-spanning power.

- (7) with regard to corona, it exists, it's true but it's humans who made it. It's the Chinese who made it to become the most powerful in the world and then replace the United States, even the American president said that. Is the president of the most developed country in the world going to say something in front of everyone if it's not true?
- (8) I'm sorry, but they [the Westerners] should not be coming to test the vaccine in Africa here. If the vaccine is really real, let them first try the vaccine on Western patients before coming to test any vaccine here. You see that the whites still have a colonial ideology, they still want to dominate us.¹¹

The aforementioned citations exemplify not only a general concern with the geopolitical motives behind the coronavirus; they also showcase the ways in which interpretations of globally circulating news are enmeshed with suspicions about global power structures. Interview snippet 7 refers to Donald Trump's bashing of China¹² as the source of coronavirus, insinuating that, according to Trump, China had deliberately “fabricated” the virus to surpass the United States as the world's superpower. Trump's authority (“the president of the world's most developed country”) then is taken as the proof for the statement's truth.¹³ Snippet 8 relates to a televised debate between Jean-Paul Mira and Camille Loch, two French doctors and researchers whose comments caused a storm of indignation on the Internet. Mira raised the idea of testing vaccines against Covid-19 “in Africa” where “there are no masks, no treatment, no resuscitation” and Loch agreed. For various observers, including Didier Drogba, the former Ivorian soccer player and international superstar, these remarks were “deeply racist” and “absolutely disgusting.” Considering that the doctors had looked at Africans as “human guinea pigs,” Drogba called for African leaders to protect their populations “from those horrendous conspiracies” on Twitter.¹⁴

While theories about Chinese and American geopolitics are usually voiced from a relatively distant observer’s position, suspicions about outside medical interventions and the exploitation of Africa as a laboratory for medical experiments are intimately related to the colonial experience in Africa. The African continent, as Hellen Tilley (2016) writes,

[W]as the last massive region of the world that Europeans colonized (between 1880 and 1910). . . . This was a period when . . . pharmaceutical treatments and vaccination campaigns were on the rise. It was also a time when hygienic regimes in cities became more uniform.

The imperative of building scientific knowledge to eradicate diseases thus constituted a key justification for the colonial project, less for the sake of Africans than for the sake of medicine, since both colonialism and the scientific field were arguably interlaced with racism.¹⁵ As Olivier de Sardan (2021, para. 1) recently argued with regard to the anti-French sentiment in the Sahel zone, the suspicion and hostility vis-à-vis outside sanitary interventions are thus “rooted in indisputable facts” and “must be understood as the consequence of unfinished work on the memory of colonization, but also as the result of conspiracy theories that should not be underestimated.”¹⁶

Transnational Conspiracies by Non-state Actors

Finally, a more varied line of reasoning situates conspiracies on a transnational level. Here, political power was not associated with nation-states or specific imperial or colonial regimes, but with transnational actors and networks. Examples in Côte d’Ivoire included the well-known conspiracy theory about Bill Gates, for instance, as a representative of capitalist philanthropy who uses vaccines for planting microchips into people’s bodies to control them. Other references are made to the New World Order, Freemasons, Bilderberg, and the Illuminati. In the following example (9), the speaker’s mocking tone bespeaks a sense of superiority, the idea that this “higher” level of politics also requires a higher level of abstraction and information about the world, as well as the ability to question and reject the conception of the international community as being benevolent toward Ivoirians and Africans.

(9) Q: listening to you, it seems that you believe in the conspiracy theory, don’t you?

R: theory? You think it’s a theory (slight sarcastic laugh), people don’t know what’s going on, we have to wake up, especially us here (slight sarcastic laugh) we say for example that Bill Gates is the most generous man in the world, but it’s him and his investments that actually benefit from Covid? You think that how many people know what philanthro-capitalism is? Huh? But it’s him, you’ll see he’ll be even richer with Covid since it’s his money that finances it, not only will he have the benefits but he’ll take

advantage of it with his microchips to control us, thanks to the vaccine he financed, he'll have databases and sell them. wait and see, just sleep!

- (10) in any case it's the machinations of those people, the Illuminati and Freemasons consorts there . . . uh they want to impose their new world order there so they created disease to mix everything in the world and then try to come to arrange by imposing their policies. They will make believe that it is natural that it is the natural order, when it is programmed.¹⁷

This genre of transnational conspiracy theory appears familiar. But do references to Bill Gates or the Illuminati and Freemasons mean the same across different contexts? Based on the anthropological and discursive idea that all meaning is contextually embedded (e.g., Geertz 1973), there is reason to doubt such a “globalized” reading. In Côte d’Ivoire, as in Guinea, concepts like the “Illuminati” seem to be metonyms of larger and more complex realities (on the case of Guinea, see Philipps 2021).

The Illuminati are usually seen as a secret sect not only of all-powerful and transnationally connected people, but also with connections to satanic cults and to the magic and mysterious worlds of witchcraft. Their specific identity, their relationship with other groups such as the Freemasons, their level of implication in quotidian politics, and who actually belongs to the Illuminati remain much-debated subjects. A common interpretation, however, is that Illuminati membership comes at the price of sacrifice – typically a means to mobilize invisible and spiritual powers in one’s favor (as, for instance, described by Bâ 1973). The young Malian singer and kora player Sidiki Diabaté, son of Toumani Diabaté, for example, has routinely been questioned as to whether his missing finger was not a sacrifice to gain Illuminati membership. Mysterious deaths, including those during the pandemic, may equally be interpreted as a sacrifice of human lives. The logics of conspiracy theories and those of witchcraft (Geschiere 1997; Stewart and Strathern 2004) are thus intricately intertwined. As Dozon (2017) aptly argues in his book *La vérité est ailleurs. Complots et sorcellerie* (“The truth is elsewhere. Conspiracies and witchcraft”), their linkage relies on the fact that both conspiracy theories and witchcraft conceptualize a dualism between an apparent reality and an invisible (or secret, hidden) reality. Thus, the concept of the Illuminati (or the Freemasons, or Bilderberg, for that matter) is often a syncretic concept, which can also mean an association of all-powerful witches and spirits who manipulate the workings of the apparent world from within the invisible world.

Similar overlaps exist between transnational and religiously inspired conspiracy theories. Indeed, the conspirators mentioned are oftentimes identical, as the New World Order, the Illuminati, the Rosicrucians, or the Freemasons are also evoked as satanic networks and related to biblical prophecies.

- (11) I don’t know what you mean by conspiracy theory but we Christians have already been warned by the Bible, the Bible declares that the beast will come,

we know that the beast will come soon, it will seduce all those who don't have Jesus in their life and his followers, the followers of the antichrist, the false messiah and his allies the rosicrucians and the freemasons there are actively preparing the coming of the beast, so they will seek to impose a vaccine to the world to try to inject us with the sign of the beast.¹⁸

The key idea in this interview snippet is that, through the vaccine, humanity will be marked with “the mark of the beast” (the Antichrist among Christians; Dajjal among Muslims), referring to a biblical prophecy in the Book of Revelation (13: 14–17; New International Version). This prophecy holds that there will come a time when no one will be able to sell or buy unless he or she is branded with the “mark of the beast,” which today means acquiring the said mark via the barcodes of the microchips that would be contained in the vaccines. The mix of Freemasonry, the Antichrist, the false messiah, and the Rosicrucian Order is telling with regard to the conceptual multiplicity and diversity of forces invoked by the speaker. While most of these concepts can be used interchangeably, there are also attempts to rank their power hierarchically, as the following excerpt shows:

- (12) This Covid affair is not simple, if we see that places of worship are being closed, it's not for nothing, since I was born I have never seen that by the name [of Allah], people talk about it, they say it's Bill Gate, Bill Gate is too small in this business, even the illuminati, the freemasons they are all small in this business, they themselves are pawns ôôô, what do people play, this is a business of preparing the arrival of dajjal, it's the champions league huh. It's a matter of the bilderbergers, they are the real powerful ones in world government, they are the ones pulling the strings behind it.¹⁹

The speaker here invokes the closing of places of worship to highlight the unprecedented anti-religious character of the coronavirus, to then cite the forces that are deemed responsible for it. Bill Gates, the Illuminati, or the Freemasons, it is argued, are “too small in this affair,” they are just “pawns” in this game that ultimately “prepares the arrival of Dajjal,” the false Messiah in Islamic eschatology. Ultimately, the Bilderbergers are considered “the actual masters of world government who pull the strings” behind the coronavirus, in order to make the “pawns” around them work and behave in their favor. The playful likening of the current power struggles to a Champions League football match showcases the sometimes ironic and ludic modality of conspiracy theorizing in Côte d'Ivoire, which fits theoretical approaches by Birchall (2006) and Knight (2003), among others.

This breadth of the transnational conspiracy theories is noteworthy. While interviewees identified transnational conspirators by using often-similar concepts (Illuminati, Freemasons, Bilderberg, etc.), the latter referred to multiple contexts and motives behind the conspiracies, be they capitalist, satanic, or witchcraft-related. From the little material that was gathered, one can already get a glimpse of the manifold meanings

that can be attached to the same concepts, which renders an analysis of conspiracy theorizing in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Côte d'Ivoire highly complex.

Discussion

So far we have described how different groups of people in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire, debated about the coronavirus among themselves and what role conspiracy theories played in such discussions. Based on 120 interviews with a total of 340 people, we highlighted that the concept "conspiracy theories" was not widely known. To clarify what they were after, interviewers would explain the term as a synonym of "politics." In the following discussion, we take this conceptualization seriously and follow the synonymy.

In short, "conspiracy theory" in our data means a critical perspective on a Machiavellian game over power, money, and (spiritual) domination. Conversations that aim at detecting and explaining a conspiracy do not fall into a specific category of talk or reasoning. They are neither opposed to some kind of mainstream opinion, nor stigmatized for breaching discursive norms. People normally switch between conspiracist and non-conspiracist explanations of the coronavirus (see also Drescher, Boukari, and Ngawa forthcoming), and their concern in discussions is not to distinguish whether someone believes in a conspiracy theory or not, but which perspective is the most plausible under what assumptions. In these micro-sociological situations, where emotional energy is conjured around politics, social and conversational logics play a leading role (Collins 1998, 2005). Several snippets demonstrate how different critiques attract social recognition and attention, and how a speaker with controversial or particularly insightful knowledge captures and amplifies the group's emotional energy. Speakers potentially could conjure a shared sense of forming an informed and alert minority that knows about the secret conspiracies at stake, while the ignorant majority remained unaware of it.

In this conversational setting, the different scales of conspiracy theories (national, imperial, and transnational, including witchcraft and satanic types) are not hierarchical. Though some speakers would intimate proudly that their conception of conspiracies constituted a "higher" level of knowledge, the plausibility of their argument could also be challenged. Their challengers could suggest that a global conspiracy behind the coronavirus was unlikely, given the conflicts among the larger geopolitical players such as China and the Western powers and argue that politics behind the coronavirus play out on the national level, highlighting the plots by local and regional leaders over medical funds earmarked for the coronavirus emergency. Second, the different scales of conspiracies are by no means mutually exclusive. The same person may simultaneously situate conspiracies in the spiritual world citing the Bible, on a national level with reference to the latest corruption scandal, and on a transnational level by pointing out the mushrooming number of humanitarian offices, whose staff often make more money than a minister.

What unifies conspiracy theories and naturally embeds them in everyday talk is moral critique. As we have shown, such moral critique is often plausible in its

condemnation of existing power asymmetries and inherently social and situational, not least in the setting of our group interviews. Whether moral critique in a group interview ends up revolving around neocolonialism or national leaders or spiritual disorientation (or all of the aforementioned) depends fundamentally on the group, the knowledge of its respective members, and what they feel most comfortable debating, as well as the group’s micro-dynamics at that particular time, such as who leads a debate and who follows. Insofar, it would be fallacious to mistake the interviewees’ words for their general beliefs, let alone for their convictions that they are likely to act upon. As Collins (2005) shows, social situations are based on different interaction rituals, and what people express in a given ritual setting may not overlap with what they feel, say, think, and do in another.

Beliefs are not necessarily constant, but situationally fluctuate, as a number of theorists have argued and as researchers have demonstrated. . . . [W]hat people think they believe at a given moment is dependent upon the kind of interaction ritual taking place in that situation: people may genuinely and sincerely feel the beliefs they express at the moment they express them, especially when the conversational situation calls out a higher degree of emotional emphasis; but this does not mean that they act on these beliefs, or that they have a sincere feeling about them in other everyday interactions where the ritual focus is different.

(44)

If conspiracy theories are not easy to pin down in the case of Bouaké, there are two theoretical and methodological implications that can be drawn from their complexity. The first aspect here concerns the illegibility and scope of conspiracy theorizing. Since the term “conspiracy theory” is neither widely known nor used to distinguish a specific way of speaking in Côte d’Ivoire, the methodological question for analysts becomes whether we are to impose such a potentially normative distinction on our data (Boltanski 2014, 199) instead of reconstructing our interlocutors’ own ways of interpreting and naming their beliefs. Relatedly, while researchers often seem intent on identifying “the” conspiracy theorists, as if they were a group or specific kind of people, this is basically impossible in Bouaké. Though our sample could not cover all the different social spectrums, it is safe to say that conspiracy theorizing happens across all social milieus. Our findings, thus, not only run counter to the classic idea of conspiracism being prevalent predominantly among the fringes or margins of society but also contradict the assumption that conspiracist narratives are exchanged mostly *within* established groups and social circles. In Bouaké, they are just as easily shared and discussed across groups and between individuals who did not previously know each other.

The second aspect we would like to raise is the multiplicity of meanings that references to presumably specific conspirators bear. As we have shown, the meaning of the term “Illuminati,” for instance, differs from one comment to the next, certain similarities notwithstanding. Rather than constituting a lack of clarity, this

conceptual fuzziness has the capacity to absorb multiple moral criticisms, which render conspiracy theories attractive as a discursive form of interaction. Whether this is specific to the Ivorian and the Guinean case, which the authors are most familiar with, or whether the same could be said about cases in the northern hemisphere deserves to be further explored.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is the outcome of research conducted within the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2052/1–390713894.
- 2 The data in Ivorian French was transcribed in a basic manner according to the GAT 2 transcription convention (Selting et al. 2009).
- 3 Anton, Schetsche, and Walter (2014, 13) cite Schetsche in arguing that ultimately, “conspiracy theories are nothing more than heterodox bodies of knowledge that contradict the accepted (orthodox) bodies of knowledge of society” (Schetsche 2005, 118; my translation from German).
- 4 This mirrors similar findings by Butter and Reinkowski (2014, 17), who highlight that the reputation and acceptability of conspiracy theorizing vary considerably across space and time.
- 5 The original French: (1) Q: ok, vous croyez donc en la théorie du complot pourquoi ? – R: complodót ? – Q: genre si c'est politique. – R: mais c'est politique, les gars cherchent, les gars cherchent l'argent, covid-19-là c'est pas vrai, c'est politique, les gars cherchent l'argent ahiiii c'est pas vrai orrr, c'est pas vrai. (2) R: complot? quel complot? je ne comprends pas. – Q: no:: n y a des gens qui disent que c'est politique, que c'est pas vrai. (3) Q: croyez-vous en l'existence du covid-19? – R: tout ça-là c'est politique, moi je crois pas. – Q: comment ça? pouvez-vous vous expliquer? – R: je veux dire ce sont des machinations politique, c'est coutcha comme on dit. – Q: donc selon vous tous les politiciens sont pareils? – R: haji? qui dit politique dis complot, toi tu as déjà vu un politicien qui dit la vérité?
- 6 Indeed, it is no coincidence that of all political theory, the adjective “Machiavellian” (in French: “Machiavélique”) is probably the most popular term that intellectuals draw from to discuss politics in Côte d'Ivoire and across the West African region.
- 7 To be sure, Bayart's quote is not to be misunderstood as an embrace of Western common sense. See also Bayart (2000).
- 8 As Migdal has argued, as much as Weber's ideal-type of the state as “monopolizing legitimate force and ruling through rational law” has marked how people think and speak about politics (at least in the Western or northern parts of the globe), it is also a fiction insofar as it provides “precious few ways to talk about real-life states that do not meet this ideal” (2001, 14).
- 9 The original French: Q: croyez-vous à la théorie du complot? – R: bon je dirai non parce que là y a pas de complicité concernant nos différents états voilàà parce que êêêh êêh si c'était un complot pou::r montrer que ce::tte pandémie là existe, je pense bien que c'est pas crédible voilàà. c'est pas crédible de de de leur part. donc tchí je ne crois pas en cette théorie.
- 10 The original French: (5) faut laisser ça, c'est politique, covid c'est complot du gouvernement pour s'enrichir, covid c'est film san! ils sont en train de nous systémèr . . . – (6) bon moi pour ma part je reste sceptique hein, je ne suis pas d'accord avec l'existence du covid-19 en côte d'ivoire parce qu'il y a quelque chose de très simple, le FMI a promis plusieurs millions aux pays qui seront touchés par le covid-19 pour les aider dans cette pandémie et un jour après on apprend que la côte d'ivoire a eu son premier cas, lorsqu'ils ont dit si on atteint les milles cas on aura plusieurs sommes, la côte d'ivoire

- aussi a atteint les milles cas, donc pour ma part seulement la, le covid-19 n'existe pas en côte d'ivoire, c'est une politique pour se faire de l'argent facilement.
- 11 The original French: (7) corona là ça existe c'est vrai mais c'est l'homme qui a fabriqué ça. c'est les chinois qui ont fabriqué ça pour devenir les plus puissant au monde et puis remplacer les états unis, même président américain même a dit ça, est-ce que président du pays le plus développé du monde va dire quelque chose devant tout le monde si c'est pas vrai ? – (8) je suis désolé qu'ils [les occidentaux] ne viennent pas tester le vaccin en afrique ici. si le vaccin est vraiment réel qu'ils essaient d'abord le vaccin sur les malades occidentaux avant de venir tester un quelconque vaccin ici voilà. vous voyez que les blancs ont encore une idéologie de colons, ils veulent toujours nous dominer.
 - 12 See WION, “Trump Takes Aim at China over COVID-19 Pandemic,” *You Tube* video, 3:44. September 23, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXv6JM2zhH0.
 - 13 To reiterate, China is not the only power accused of being a conspirator. More often, in our data, the coronavirus is seen as a Western plot directed by the United States against China to preserve its hegemony.
 - 14 See Didier Drogba, “It Is Totally Inconceivable We Keep on Cautioning This,” *Twitter* post, April 2, 2020, <https://t.co/41GIpXaIYv>.
 - 15 It is important to note here that colonialism actually brought numerous diseases to Africa and caused a pathological “revolution” due to the radical reordering of habitat (Tilley 2011, 58).
 - 16 English translation from the French original.
 - 17 The original French: “(9) Q: à vous écouter on dirait que vous croyez en la théorie du complot hein? – R: théorie? vous pensez que c'est théorie (petit rire narquois), les gens ne savent pas ce qui se passe ce qui se passe, il faut se réveiller hein surtout nous ici (petit rire narquois) on dit par exemple que bill gates est l'homme le plus généreux du monde pourtant c'est à lui et ses placements que profite en réalité le covid? vous pensez que combien de personnes savent ce que c'est que là, le philantro-capitalisme? hein ? mais c'est que c'est lui, vous allez voir il sera encore plus riche avec le covid puisque c'est son argent qui finance, non seulement il va avoir le bénéfices mais ils va en profiter avec ses micros puces pour nous contrôler, grâce au vaccin qu'il a financé, il va avoir des bases de données et les vendre attends vous allez voir, dormez seulement dormez. – (10) En tout cas c'est les machinations des gens-là, les Illuminati et francs-maçons consorts là . . . euhh ils veulent imposer leur nouvel ordre mondial là donc ils ont créé maladie pour tout mélanger dans le monde et puis essayer de venir arranger en imposant leurs politiques. Ils vont faire croire que c'est naturel que c'est l'ordre naturel orrr c'est programmé.”
 - 18 The original French: (11) je ne sais pas ce que tu entends par théorie du complot mais nous autres chrétiens avons déjà été avertis par la bible, la bible déclare que la bête va venir, nous savons que la bête viendra bientôt il va séduire tous ceux qui n'ont pas jésus dans leur vie et ses adeptes, les adeptes de l'antéchrist, le faux messie et ces alliés les rosicruciens et les francs-maçons là préparent activement la venue de la bête, donc ils vont chercher à imposer un vaccin au monde pour essayer de nous injecter le signe de la bête . . .
 - 19 The original French: (12) cette affaire de covid là c'est pas simple hein, si on voit que on ferme les lieux de cultes c'est pas pour rien hein, moi depuis je suis né je n'ai jamais vu ça au nom, les gens parlent de de de on dit on dit c'est bill gate, bill gate est trop petit dans affaire ça, même les illuminatis, les francs-maçons eux tous ils sont petit dans cette affaire-là, eux-même c'est des pions ôôô les gens jouent quoi c'est une affaire de préparer l'arrivée de dajjal, c'est la ligue des champions hein. c'est une affaire des bilderbergs, c'est eux qui, c'est eux les vrais puissants du gouvernement mondial, c'est eux qui tirent les ficelles derrière.

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9

A DISEASE OF THE RICH AND A DISEASE OF THE POOR

Comparing Rumors about the Coronavirus and Ebola in Guinea

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Introduction

To analyze and contextualize social and political reactions to the coronavirus, this chapter compares rumors about the coronavirus to those about the Ebola epidemic in Guinea. Guinea, together with its neighboring countries Sierra Leone and Liberia, was hit by the Ebola virus between 2013 and 2016; another smaller Ebola outbreak was recorded in 2021. The coronavirus, which appeared in Guinea in March 2020, attracted rumors and conspiracy theories that differed in certain respects from those about Ebola. Broadly, while Ebola was widely considered a disease of the poor, the coronavirus was interpreted as a disease of the rich. This chapter seeks to make comparative sense of these differences (and some of the similarities and overlaps) and is based on extensive field research by both authors of this chapter. Besides in-depth qualitative research, Saïkou Oumar Sagnane contributed to a database on rumors about the coronavirus assembled by Guinea's National Agency of Sanitary Security (ANSS 2020); Joschka Philipps carried out a survey about conspiracy theories on Ebola in Guinea with over 600 respondents. Drawing on these data, the goal is to reflect on social controversies about the coronavirus not as an unprecedented singularity, but as something that has occurred in similar ways before – when it was also considered “unprecedented” (Stokes 2017, vii).

Our comparison bears an insightful irony. Back in 2014, when the World Health Organization (WHO) finally declared that the Ebola epidemic in West Africa was a “public health emergency of international concern” on August 8, media reactions and public opinion across the globe bordered on a moral panic. The risk of Ebola spreading to Europe and America was conjured in tandem not only with the notorious image of “Africa” as the “Heart of Darkness” (Owuor 2015). It also included a moralizing criticism of the local populations' incredulity vis-à-vis medical explanations of the virus, as well as their distrust and sometimes outward resistance against

medical interventions. Why would the victims and communities at risk not trust Western medical experts? Why would they resist and sometimes violently attack the medical teams that came to help them? Prominent answers alluded to the typical narrative of underdevelopment, poverty, and illiteracy (Absolu 2016, 53), while ignoring the legacies of colonial empires and their use of medicine (Hunt 2016; Tilley 2016) as well as the distrust in state-driven interventions in general (Barry and Amadou 2017; Niang 2014). Furthermore, observers focusing on the rumors and suspicions about Ebola left unmentioned that many local communities had learned how to deal with the virus and that this “people’s science,” as anthropologist Paul Richards (2016) calls it, has helped fundamentally to stop the epidemic by 2016. Fast forward to four years to the emergence of the coronavirus, and one gets an idea of the arrogance that had informed such a stance about people’s skeptical attitudes when faced with a deadly virus. Today, societies with hyper-equipped health systems and infrastructures are permeated by similar suspicions against the very global health and political apparatus that deals with the pandemic.

On a methodological level, our comparison is rough and approximate, since the authors gathered different data through different methods in relation to different concepts: Sagnane and the ANSS working on rumors and Philipps on conspiracy theories. A full-fledged conceptual discussion cannot be provided here (on rumors, see Kapferer 1990; Bordia and DiFonzo 2004; Stewart and Strathern 2004; on conspiracy theories, see Boltanski 2014; Brotherton 2015; Fassin 2021), but what needs to be highlighted is that there are important overlaps and family resemblances between a variety of concepts and their social function: rumors, hearsay, gossip, *souloumou souloumoui*, conspiracy theories, suspicions, *n’nâmè*, witchcraft accusations, and verbalized images are ingredients of social exchanges whereby participants test and tease out each other’s knowledge.² They are not indicators of stable individual beliefs, as is sometimes uncritically implied in statistical methods. Rather, they lie at the liminal space between certainty and uncertainty, as they connect collectively held certainties to an uncertain event or condition so that the uncertain can be talked about. In a nutshell, looking at rumors and conspiracy theories thus means looking at tentatively shared certainties that are mobilized in the face of uncertainty.

The chapter is organized as follows. In the first part, we outline the 2013–16 West African Ebola epidemic in Guinea and the respective rumors and conspiracy theories about it, based on hitherto unpublished survey findings. Second, and presenting findings derived from the ANSS’s database of rumors, we look at the coronavirus pandemic in Guinea since 2020. Throughout, we seek to describe the social conflicts and cleavages that emerged in the face of these viral threats and how they were inscribed in rumors and conspiracy theories. Based on our data, we highlight in particular how the two epidemics were interpreted in terms of class structures. While we discuss the implications at the end of the article, the key motive of this chapter is descriptive: to show what information, speculation, and suspicions circulated about Ebola and the coronavirus in Guinea.

Part I: Ebola

Intimacy, Uncertainty, and Suspicions

Ebola is not a particularly contagious virus. It spreads by direct contact with the body fluids of an Ebola victim, and not through air. However, Ebola is extremely infectious: if one absorbs the tiniest amount of a sick person's body fluids (such as saliva, blood, or vomit), it is enough to be infected. As a virus of utmost intimacy, Richards thus calls Ebola a "perverse" virus insofar as it "punishes those who care for the sick" (2016, 2–3). Indeed, the highest risk was concentrated among the family and community members who cared for Ebola victims, those who were involved in funeral ceremonies of washing and burying the bodies, as well as members of medical teams. Given the dramatic contrast between, on the one hand, the social importance of family solidarity and closeness in Guinea and, on the other hand, the role of close contact in spreading an unknown disease, people were quick to adopt an attitude of denial. Rumors circulated that the disease did not exist or that it was divine or political, which in turn alarmed the authorities.

Given the highly infectious nature of the Ebola virus, the authorities' initial reaction to the virus was extreme. The first general awareness message was that "Ebola has no cure," which inadvertently caused many to keep away from treatment centers and added to the mistrust toward the health sector, which was already high in normal times. In the following weeks and months, the high mortality rate among Ebola patients further undermined people's willingness to look for treatment and visit health institutions when they encountered symptoms. Sakouba Keita, the national coordinator of the fight against Ebola, writes "It was suspicious because you send a patient to the hospital and it is his corpse you recover" (2021, 56). As Ebola became increasingly associated with death, so were the organizations and institutions linked to the Ebola emergency response, not least because the medical emergency response oftentimes appeared like a military attack. At one point, when the virus emerged in the prefecture of Forécariah, more than 140 vehicles arrived in the area in the name of the response. When the virus re-emerged in the sub-prefecture of Koropara (Nzérékoré prefecture), more than 40 response vehicles were counted; the epidemic coordinator flew in by helicopter. Such operational and logistical arrangements, which relied on the WHO's (World Health Organization) intervention frameworks and ignored local customs, generally reinforced Guineans' fears of the disease.

These fears translated into serious allegations. The treatment centers were considered "death houses" where doctors killed patients in order to traffic in human organs. The disinfectant sprayed against Ebola in villages and neighborhoods was said to be the virus, and organizations like the Red Cross or Médecins Sans Frontières had to be kept away because they were thought to spread the virus. The general image by Anne Marie Moulin of "the rescuer [who] turns out to be the assassin, the doctor in a white coat who will extract the heart, drain the blood, and remove the organs" (2020, 217) is an extreme but fitting description of how distrust

and denial characterized the Ebola emergency and made it an intertwined crisis that was both epidemiological and social in nature. These allegations also translated into concrete action. In many places, local populations banned medical teams and officials from accessing villages, various treatment centers were raided and destroyed, and in the notorious case of the village of Womé, five members of medical teams and three journalists were killed by local populations (Stillman 2014).

Rumors and conspiracy theories circulated widely on social media as in face to face conversations. On a micro level, rumors revolved, for instance, about those who had survived an Ebola infection. Since there was apparently no cure, surviving Ebola had become suspicious. Survivors were suspected of having “cheated death” and being the cause of misfortune that brought the death of other loved ones. Many were accused of having “paid” for their survival by sacrificing other deceased family members. Anthropologists Sylla and Taverne (2019) explain that such suspicions constituted an important difficulty in the social reintegration of survivors. On the macro level, an elaborate conspiracy theory concerned George Soros, the investor-philanthropist who founded the Open Society Foundation. Soros was considered a friend of Guinea’s then-president Alpha Condé and had provided expertise to the Condé government for developing the country’s new mining code.³ As to Ebola, Soros was suspected to own a laboratory in neighboring Sierra Leone, where the virus was produced. He and other powerful people were said to conspire with the Guinean President and the ruling elite to exterminate the different ethnic groups in the forest region. That genocidal suspicion, which was prevalent way beyond the uneducated poor, can be traced back to a long history of discrimination. Under colonial and postcolonial regimes, the “Forestier” ethnic group, a label which was invented by the French colonial power to denominate a variety of different groups with different languages, and which has become common sense in Guinea, had generally been considered the least “civilized” peoples of Guinea, both because of their mystic beliefs and capacities and because they were consuming bush meat – including monkeys and bats – which were now suddenly said to be the source of “Ebola.”⁴

The level of uncertainty among Guineans as to what Ebola really was is easily underestimated or attributed to ignorance and illiteracy. Yet, even staff members of the very organizations that sought to combat false rumors and who disseminated the message that “Ebola is real” were doubtful as to whether this message was true. One example is Search for Common Ground, an NGO that played a pivotal role in building linkages among international donors, national state representatives, local authorities, village chiefs, and traditional communicators. As one of their coordinators intimated, the staff members’ doubts were ubiquitous.⁵ He too did not know whether he should trust the international donors (who were ultimately also his employers and assured that he could bring food to the family table), or whether he should heed the many critical voices who called into question the official Ebola narrative. Jean-Marie Doré, for instance, a trusted intellectual who had served as Prime Minister only a few years before, actively opposed the building of an Ebola

Treatment Center near his home town. Other people took advantage of the confusion. A variety of traditional healers, for instance, found a niche to promote what they claimed to be effective treatments against Ebola.

Survey Findings

Suspicious regarding Ebola continued to circulate well after the epidemic had been successfully overcome and are still present today. In the following, we turn to Philipps's 2017 survey, carried out more than one year after the epidemic had officially ended. The survey focused generally on people's understandings of how power was organized in Guinea and worldwide, but it also included three questions on conspiracy theories about the Ebola virus: (1) Was Ebola a natural coincidence or was it a conspiracy planned by humans? (2) If Ebola was a conspiracy, who was behind it? (3) If Ebola was a conspiracy, what was the goal? The survey (n = 612) was carried out mainly by sociology students and student assistants in the country's two most populated cities: N'zérékoré in the country's forest region and the capital city Conakry in Maritime Guinea. The findings will be presented in terms of rounded numbers.

According to the survey, about 45 percent considered Ebola to have been a conspiracy, compared to roughly 37 percent who believed that it was a natural coincidence. The remaining respondents either said they did not know the answer (14 percent) or said they did not want to answer the question (3 percent). According to the survey, those who considered Ebola a conspiracy suspected primarily the government (7 percent), politicians (1 percent), or more precisely the president (19 percent). Foreign powers were also suspected, though under different labels, including "*les blancs*" (white people) (4 percent), the West (3 percent), humanitarian institutions (1 percent), or France (1 percent). They were sometimes mentioned in collusion with the President or the government. As to the motives behind the alleged Ebola conspiracy, the notion of "Ebola business" was the most frequent response. Over 15 percent of all respondents argued that Ebola was spread (or invented) to make money, be it by accessing international funds or by profiting from medical experiments and selling organs. Twelve percent considered a genocidal motive behind Ebola to reduce the African, Guinean, or more specifically the Forestier population, and 7 percent suspected the President to use Ebola as a strategy to win elections.

Importantly, these statistical snapshots hardly do justice to the dynamic ways in which conspiracy theories circulate and in which attitudes toward them change in social situations. According to the authors' qualitative investigations and experiences, rumors and conspiracy theories are exchanged, contested, agreed upon, or disregarded in highly situational ways, and peoples' answers in a survey do not reflect stable positions, but are contingent on the respective situation, the specific interviewer and the way she asks the question, and what the respective respondent associates with her.

Accordingly, the same methodological vigilance is needed when it comes to establishing a social profile of who believes that Ebola was a conspiracy. Women

TABLE 9.1 Beliefs about Ebola by Sex

<i>Sex</i>	<i>Natural Coincidence</i>	<i>Conspiracy</i>	<i>I Don't Know</i>	<i>I Don't Want to Respond</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>Total</i>
Female	40.1 (85)	40.1 (85)	17.0 (36)	2.8 (6)	0.0 (0)	100.0 (212)
Male	35.7 (142)	47.7 (190)	13.1 (52)	2.8 (11)	0.8 (3)	100.0 (398)
Total	37.2 (227)	45.1 (275)	14.4 (88)	2.8 (17)	0.5 (3)	100.0 (610)

Source: Survey on conspiracy theories about Ebola in Guinea (conducted by Philipps 2017)

TABLE 9.2 Beliefs about Ebola by Education Level

<i>Education Level</i>	<i>Natural Coincidence</i>	<i>Conspiracy</i>	<i>I Don't Know</i>	<i>I Don't Want To Respond</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>Total</i>
No formal education	40.6 (28)	34.8 (24)	23.2 (16)	1.4 (1)	0.0 (0)	100.0 (69)
Primary level	28.6 (20)	50.0 (35)	18.6 (13)	2.9 (2)	0.0 (0)	100.0 (70)
Collège (lower secondary level)	36.2 (42)	44.8 (52)	13.8 (16)	3.4 (4)	1.7 (2)	100.0 (116)
Lycée (upper secondary level)	39.2 (60)	46.4 (71)	12.4 (19)	1.3 (2)	0.7 (1)	100.0 (153)
University level and higher	38.5 (65)	46.2 (78)	11.2 (19)	4.1 (7)	0.0 (0)	100.0 (169)
n/a	37.1 (13)	42.9 (15)	17.1 (6)	2.9 (1)	0.0 (0)	100.0 (35)
Total	37.3 (228)	44.9 (275)	14.5 (89)	2.8 (17)	0.5 (3)	100.0 (612)

Source: Survey on conspiracy theories about Ebola in Guinea (conducted by Philipps 2017)

seem to be slightly less likely than men to believe in an Ebola-related conspiracy (40 percent vs. 48 percent, see Table 9.1).

Lower levels of belief in conspiracy theories are also associated with people who consider their standard of living high or average, and with young people below 20 or older people above 35. As to language and ethnic groups, those who spoke Maninka (the same mother tongue as the then-President Alpha Condé) and Koni-anké (their ethnic “cousins” in the forest region) were by far more likely to believe that Ebola was a natural coincidence (52 percent and 63 percent, respectively) compared to members of other language and ethnic groups who tended to trust conspiracist explanations. This mirrors the political character of conspiracy allegations, many of which were levelled against the then-President Condé.

Finally, perhaps the most interesting finding is the relationship with education. People with no formal education seem to be the least likely to believe that Ebola was a conspiracy (35 percent), whereas those who have been to university (46 percent) are above average. The difference is mainly due to the fact that those who had no formal schooling were the most likely to answer that they “do not know” (23 percent), whereas those who had been to university were the least likely to do so (see Table 9.2).

To summarize, and while keeping in mind that these statistics are approximate at best, the survey shows that conspiracy theories about the Ebola epidemic in Guinea are not to be reduced to high levels of illiteracy or a lack of education. They are sociopolitically complex and widespread across various social strata.

Ebola: “Disease of the Poor”

The 2013–16 Ebola epidemic in West Africa was largely considered a disease of the poor, both on a global and on a local level. Globally speaking, the Ebola epidemic was concentrated in countries that rank 178th (Guinea), 182nd (Sierra Leone), and 175th (Liberia) out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index. As various observers have noted, it was precisely because Ebola affected mainly poor Africans that pharmaceutical companies waited for so long until they made vaccines available. “Even though the threat of Ebola has been hanging over West Africa for 40 years,” as WHO Director General Dr. Margaret Chan argued, profit-driven enterprises saw no sufficient incentive to get existing vaccines licensed for the market, though they had been proven 100 percent effective against both the Ebola and the Marburg virus when they were tested among monkeys almost a decade before the Ebola epidemic hit West Africa (Woldemariam and Di Giacomo 2016, 63).

Moreover, since Ebola victims were concentrated in areas of poverty within their respective countries (Fallah et al. 2015), the virus was quickly interpreted as a disease of the poor. In Guinea, this interpretation grouped together images of rural poverty, of primitive housing and backward traditional lifestyles, images that were fully exploited in Western journalism (Foucher 2015) and often associated with the forest region and Forestier ethnic groups. Given the low contagiousness of the virus, urban elites largely considered themselves at a safe distance from the epidemic threat.

Thus, while overt violent conflicts during the epidemic played out between, on the one hand, local populations that were considered a(t) risk and, on the other hand, various national and international intervention teams, the general social perception focused on class as a marker of risk. In a context where bodily contact is ubiquitous under normal circumstances (squeezing into taxis and buses, giving handshakes, nudges and hugs, eating from the same plate), the fear of being infected attached a particular stigma to the poor. This, as we shall see in the following part, differed markedly from the situation during the coronavirus pandemic.

Part II: Coronavirus

Emergence and Spread of the Coronavirus in Guinea

The first case of the coronavirus pandemic was recorded in Guinea on March 13, when a Belgian EU official was hospitalized and tested positive in Conakry. The

Guinean government put in place containment measures, including the prohibition of gatherings of more than 100 people (and later of no more than 20 people), the closure of Conakry's International Airport (on March 23), and ultimately a state of emergency on March 26, officially closing all borders and blocking traffic between Conakry and the interior of the country. In contrast to the previous Ebola epidemic, the coronavirus was initially seen as a "rich people's" virus.⁶ Early victims of the virus in April 2020 included well-known political figures who were exposed to international travel and infected persons. Among them were Salifou Kébé, hitherto the president of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI); Sékou Kourouma, secretary-general of the government; Louncény Fofana, the second vice president of the Guinean National Assembly; and Victor Traoré, former director of Interpol Guinea (see Philipps 2022).

The international airport in Conakry remained open for ten days after the first case was recorded. During that time, various senior officials of the country's private sector and public administration flew home from abroad, some of whom later showed symptoms and then tested positive for the coronavirus, often after having already transmitted the virus within their social and professional circles, be it in the administration where they worked, within the media environment during press conferences, and in banks they had visited for financial transactions.

A socio-behavioral survey conducted in June 2020 (Sagnane, Dioubaté, and Sylla 2020) showed that the social categories most at risk of catching the virus were salaried workers (a minority in Guinea's job market, which is dominated by the so-called informal sector), traders and entrepreneurs, as well as married people. It was also through these rather well-off categories of people that the ANSS considered the first wave of the virus spread to other prefectures beyond the capital Conakry. Government employees and employees of international institutions regularly travel from Conakry to other prefectures, traders transport goods from Conakry to the interior of the country, and married people are obliged to maintain social relations through courtesy visits or participation in social events among their families. People from rural areas said that the coronavirus is a "big city disease." According to the ANSS situation report as of June 1, 2020, at least 90 percent of diagnosed cases were concentrated in the capital Conakry and the two surrounding towns Coyah and Dubréka. Finally, the coronavirus in Guinea was also considered a "disease of old people." The majority of victims who died of Covid-19 were over 60 years old. Young people thus considered that the virus would be of no risk to them and were careless about the disease and negligent with regard to preventive behaviors.

The coronavirus first spread to the five communes of Conakry. At least 30 percent of confirmed cases nationwide were found in the commune of Ratoma (ANSS 2020), the second most populated commune in Conakry and home to largely bourgeois neighborhoods such as Kipé, Nongo, and Lambanyi, where one can find the villas of government officials and wealthy businessmen. Subsequently, the virus spread to the neighboring prefectures of Coyah and Dubréka, which were initially separate from the capital but are nowadays

known as “Grand Conakry” due to sprawling urbanization. Indeed, many salaried workers work in Conakry but live in Coyah and Dubréka with their families, and urban mobility between Conakry and its wider environment is important for various businesses, especially for taxi services. Accordingly, when the government sought to contain the coronavirus by erecting roadblocks and restrictions for taxi drivers, this sparked violent anti-government protests, especially on May 12 in Coyah and Dubréka. Six deaths and numerous injuries were recorded during clashes with security forces; the central police station of Coyah and the neighboring police and gendarmerie stations of Manéah were vandalized (Philipps 2022).

Finally, the emergence of the coronavirus in Guinea coincided with the highly contested constitutional referendum, by which then-President Alpha Condé sought to change the constitution and allow himself to run for a third mandate. Rumors as to whether the coronavirus was part of a political plot accordingly circulated in Guinea even more prominently than elsewhere.

Covid-19: “Disease of the Rich”

The image of the coronavirus as a “disease of the rich” was not only due to the prominence of the first victims in Guinea. It was also related to the first patients’ encounter with the medical facilities at the care center of Conakry. The patients, “most of whom come from Guinean high society,” publicly criticized the “unsanitary and unhygienic conditions” in the Donka hospital, as well as the “contempt and arrogance of Dr. Sakoba Kéita, head of the National Health Security Agency (ANSS)” (Boundo 2020). Following this widely publicized incident and on the basis of WHO recommendations, the ANSS ultimately introduced the option of home care. Furthermore, when the epidemic hit the general population, there was a treatment center for prominent public figures and a treatment center for the general population, with very different sanitary conditions and different levels of comfort. This dichotomy was highly publicized, describing the inequalities in care for the same disease. Among the public, this fostered the idea that the rich avoid the very health care system that they themselves have refused to improve while many of them were in public office. Talk, gossip, and rumors about the coronavirus thus revolved significantly around the question of class.

In the following section, we will turn to a selection of rumors that were collected for the ANSS database, which Saïkou Sagnane worked for as a consultant from July to December 2021. The team of consultants working on rumors was led by a university-based institute, the Laboratoire d’Analyse Socio-Anthropologique de Guinée (LASAG), and funded by the German GIZ and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The mission was to monitor, collect, analyze, and deconstruct rumors, which were posted online through the KoBoCollect platform. The KoBoCollect link was widely distributed so that each citizen could contribute

to the collection of rumors. The team met every two weeks to analyze the rumors collected, propose ways to deconstruct them, and contribute to the ANSS' "Stop Infox" bulletin that was shared with various actors of the Covid-19 response and the media to counter falsehoods and react to misinformation on social media and in the public realm. The team only addressed rumors that had been gathered repeatedly and thus seemed to circulate widely. In one instance, the agency reports on a rumor found on Facebook that the rich are the ones who bring the disease to Africa. Though not entirely false in Guinea's case (where the first Covid-19 patient was a Belgian EU official), this information and its implications were to be confronted, according to the ANSS, with the fact that the coronavirus "affects all social categories" and informing the public about the necessary preventive measures. The key strategy to convince the public of this fact would be to use testimonies of convalescent coronavirus patients, privileging those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The perception of the coronavirus as a disease of the rich also implied a perspective on rich people as being "soft" and "vulnerable" to the virus because they had created artificial physical conditions (air conditioning against the heat) and a bland dietary regime (without chili) that subtract from their daily lives the very ingredients that made the normal population more resistant to the coronavirus, including heat, chili (piment), or palm wine.

A small anecdote may serve as an example here: a student in conversation with his classmates shares a bottle of water. One of them says, "there is the coronavirus again." Another responds by saying that "the virus doesn't survive at high temperatures. When you drink, the water goes into your stomach where it is very hot; the virus cannot survive there." Similar quotes from the ANSS database on rumors may further illustrate this point. "Consumption of a high dose of chili pepper kills the virus;" "White wine [artisanal palm wine] effectively fights against coronavirus. That's why the contamination rate is low in the forest region [where palm wine consumption is high]." Given that the general population felt relatively safeguarded against the coronavirus, they were skeptical with regard to the imposition of face masks by the government. People were fined 50,000 GNF (roughly five euro) if police caught them without a face mask, an enormous sum of money for many Guineans.⁷ Masks were called "*bavettes*," which means "bibs," as associated with babies and small children to keep their clothes clean while eating. Frequent comments were:

"They should leave us alone with this story of the bib. Look at Coyah. Who is wearing the bibs there? Do they have the disease? No!"

"Those who wear bibs look like monsters."

"The bibs are nothing more than dust covers."

"I have to leave for Conakry tomorrow. Give me a bib so that I don't have to pay 50 thousand Guinean francs to the police. Because we wear the bib to avoid paying money."

Certain conspiracy theories were more drastic, arguing that the coronavirus “will not end as long as people continue to wear masks,” because the virus was thought to be deliberately hidden in the masks to infect the population.

Religion and Politics

The idea of a “rich man’s disease” was intertwined with similar notions, including that of a “white man’s disease” or as a “disease of government people such as ministers and senior officials.” This stood in stark contrast to the Ebola virus, where victims had been concentrated among the poor. This difference between the coronavirus and Ebola was not lost on Guineans, who sometimes saw it as a godly intervention to restore justice.

“God does not sleep. There is sin on them. They lied to us here about Ebola. Now it’s their turn. All those who have plundered this country will pay. Even though we should wish our neighbor no evil.” Indeed, spiritual explanations and interrogations were widespread. Many believers were highly critical of the closure of mosques, especially during the holy month of Ramadan. “As long as the mosques are closed,” they argued, “the coronavirus will not end.” Behind this evocation stood the idea that the disease is a “divine sanction” against those who do not worship God. In similar ways, the closure of mosques was critically compared to the permission of political rallies: “We do not understand why mosques are not opened. However, we often see political rallies here and there. If political gatherings have not spread the virus, it is not the prayers in places of worship that will.” In addition to the speculation based on the profile of the coronavirus patients, information has been circulating about possible conspiracy theories orchestrated by the political authorities. Unlike the Ebola epidemic, where political authorities and health actors were accused by the population of economic enrichment (Ebola-business), the spread of the coronavirus was marked first and foremost by an electoral context of social contestation and political crisis. This context fueled the emergence of conspiracy theories that the government, the ruling RPG party, and President Alpha Condé were using the epidemic to stifle social demonstrations and political protests against the proposed constitutional referendum and the third term of office of the incumbent president. Some of the key rumors about the coronavirus thus refer to the virus as a political construct:

This disease has not yet returned to Guinea. All these deaths published by the ANSS are only community deaths. No one has died of Covid-19 here in Guinea. The last time at the People’s Palace, there were thousands of people gathered. If there was ever this disease in Guinea, everyone would have died.

Go and tell that [speaking of respect for preventive measures] to the RPG militants who organize propaganda movements here and there without any respect for your instructions, all filmed by your RTG television which is seen by the President of the Republic, who remains silent because it is in his interest.

The party in power arrests political opposition supporters for not wearing masks in order to dissuade political demonstrations.

Indeed, President Alpha Condé may have benefitted considerably from the coronavirus, not least insofar as the latter attracted sufficient international attention so that the Condé regime could organize and win the highly contested constitutional referendum in March 2020 and win the equally controversial presidential elections on October 18. He was, however, unseated by a military coup d'état on September 5, 2021. After the coup, the number of new recorded cases dropped considerably in Guinea to the point that Covid-19 was no longer talked about. This situation reinforced the opinion that Alpha Condé left with the coronavirus.

Conclusion

This chapter compared social interpretations and reactions to the Ebola virus and the coronavirus in the Republic of Guinea. One goal was to reflect on the coronavirus not as an unprecedented singularity, but as something that has occurred in similar ways before. Indeed, the Guinean case illustrates that, in countries that previously experienced an epidemic, the coronavirus is interpreted against the backdrop of such previous experiences. In Guinea, for instance, some people considered the coronavirus a divine “righting” of a previous wrong: those who had allegedly lied about the Ebola epidemic in 2013–16, that is, the rich elites who profited from “Ebola business,” were now being punished by the coronavirus.

The second goal was to describe social conflicts and cleavages that emerge in the face of viral threats and how they are inscribed in rumors and conspiracy theories. We showed that both Ebola and the coronavirus were frequently interpreted through the lens of social class, and more specifically in terms of class conflict. This evokes a bit of a puzzle because, compared to Western contexts, class is not a particularly strong social category in Guinea. Although inequality in Guinea is evidently rising (International Monetary Fund 2013, 15), the class divide is bridged frequently in everyday situations. Rich and poor people interact through family and kinship ties, as well as through religion, and the urban social habitat in the capital city Conakry, for instance, is interspersed with villas and corrugated iron huts standing side by side. If the Ebola virus and the coronavirus were strongly interpreted in terms of class structures, this is thus something to be explained.

On a rather self-evident level, the association with class was mainly due to the initial propagation dynamics: the Ebola virus was spread from rural areas among poorer communities in the country's forest region. In contrast, the coronavirus was brought to Guinea first by a Belgian EU official and upper-class citizens; early victims of the virus included well-known political figures. On a more profound level, however, the association of diseases with social classes highlights the competition of citizens for access to state and corporate resources. The majority of Guinean citizens unsuccessfully covet administrative positions and share a feeling of powerlessness, jealousy, and disadvantage vis-à-vis “white collar” officials and businessmen who enjoy financial wealth, its privileges, and prestige. Administrative officials are thus accused, rightly or wrongly, of being at the root of the population's “suffering” and of serving their own interests instead of serving the population. Taking the coronavirus for a divine punishment of the rich drew from this rationale: let

them suffer the righteous chastening of God, let them leave so that others can take their places. Inversely, the rich also feared the poor when faced with Ebola, a virus associated with rural “backward” Forestier populations consuming infected bushmeat and allegedly living in unhygienic and crowded spaces of contagion. Not unlike the figure of the zombie, the image of the sick Ebola patient was seen as the contagious “other” that risked dragging “us,” the urban elites, with him (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2002). The implicit “terror of alterity” thus also implied a class division whose porousness constituted a deadly risk (Webb and Byrnannd 2017, 111–12). These conflictual social class relations often go unnoticed in the daily life of Guinea. This may be due to the routine insouciance by which citizens cope with the hardships of everyday life, or because social relations and conflicts are frequently expressed in an ironic relational atmosphere where one may make fun of their interlocutor without offending him.

On a methodological level, finally, we need to evoke the problem of situating rumors and uncertainty exclusively among the affected populations during epidemics and pandemics. In short, while the local populations’ mistrust and rumors have received much scholarly attention, global health interventions are usually considered as being based on solid scientific facts. This binary perspective is both morally problematic and empirically false. As we have shown in the case of Ebola, public health interventions and medical expertise are and were equally shot through with uncertainties. For instance, the rumor that fruit bats were the main reservoir for Ebola – although this was not officially considered a rumor – remains unproven until today (Caron et al. 2018), and ongoing debates concerning the coronavirus and whether unvaccinated health personnel should lose their jobs are also a case in point. Sociologically speaking, it is crucial to precisely consider the nature of uncertainty and fears on both sides of public health interventions to illuminate the conflicts and tensions between those who act and those who react. Rumors and conspiracy theories are to be reconceptualized to match what was happening on both sides or else these concepts become tools to reify the very power dynamics that arguably lie at the heart of the conflicts that we elaborated on.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is the outcome of research conducted within the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany’s Excellence Strategy – EXC 2052/1-390713894.
- 2 “*Souloumou souloumou*” (“sounds that circulate,” in Sosso) and “*n’namè*” (“I have heard,” also in Sosso) are Guinean expressions that refer to, respectively, information that is given secretly and anonymously, usually in a low voice, and information that the informant can say out loud but cannot prove.
- 3 Guinea is the world’s second-biggest producer of the aluminum or bauxite and has important reserves of other raw materials.
- 4 The widely disseminated idea that bats were the main reservoir for the Ebola virus remains unproven until today, in spite of ongoing research since 2013 and continuing international public health campaigns such as “How to live safely with bats” (USAID 2020).

- 5 Interview with a staff member of Search for Common Ground Guinea, April 2017 (with Joschka Philipps).
- 6 Yet, the virus quickly affected poorer populations as well. One hotspot was the main prison in Conakry, the Maison Centrale. On May 12, authorities confirmed that out of 130 tests, 58 people were infected and reported three deaths linked to the virus. Conakry's Maison Centrale – with a capacity of 300 – is the most overcrowded prison in the country with 1,500 inmates.
- 7 In the previously mentioned survey on beliefs about Ebola from 2017, 36 percent of the 612 respondents reported having fewer than 10,000 GNF per day.

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10

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS AND THE CORONAVIRUS

Conspiracies and Deep Politics during South Africa's Pandemic

Nicholas Abrams and Mongezi Bolofo

In February of 2020, just ahead of South Africa's first Covid-19 lockdowns, Bill Gates landed in Cape Town to play a charity tennis match with Trevor Noah (host of the *Daily Show*) and Grand Slam tennis champions Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. His presence just prior to the first confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the country did not go unnoticed by those espousing vaccine-hesitant discourses that would emerge later that year. Conspiracy and anti-vaccine narratives surrounding the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's work in Africa had circulated long before the advent of the novel coronavirus, and the conspiracy discourses which emerged regarding the billionaire's new investments in the pharmaceutical industry and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's involvement in the development of Covid-19 vaccines built on that foundation.

One year later, in March of 2021, the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini died of Covid-19-related complications, and the state funeral was "disrupted" by a regiment of Amabutho (the "traditional" volunteer army of the Zulu King) who were not permitted to attend due to pandemic restrictions. Cyril Ramaphosa, the current South African President, was forced to evacuate the funeral as Amabutho overwhelmed the police and stormed the royal palace to mourn the death of their King. On live television, the leader of the Amabutho explained to a journalist that "we cannot be deterred by these government rules of COVID. If this COVID belongs to the government, [they] must take it [back] and get [out of] our way." The event prefigured a series of other spectacles of open defiance of Covid-19 restrictions within KwaZulu-Natal (the Zulu homeland, South Africa's easternmost province) by organizations and peoples associated with the politically activated elements of a "Zulu-traditionalist" political constituency – elements long associated with the support base of the previous President Jacob Zuma.

This chapter maps the emergence of the relationship between Covid-19 conspiracies and Zulu-nationalist politics in South Africa. We will explore how some of the

most salient Covid-19 conspiracy theories that emerged within South Africa were mapped upon a pre-existing, highly contentious, and conspiracist conflict within the political sphere. The narrative continuity that links preexisting political conspiracies to Covid-19 is not unique to South Africa, but it requires a review of the specific history of the politics of reparations and corruption that took center stage in the national public sphere prior to the pandemic. In this conspiracy universe, Bill Gates is a relatively minor character, and his relevance is germane to the ways that private wealth from the West is narrated as being significant to the “right-left” split in the African National Congress (or ANC, South Africa’s current ruling party) – a rift that lies at the heart of South Africa’s current political crisis. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to review the ways that systematic corruption is conceptualized by recent inroads made within South African political science and public policy research and its relationship to narratives of corruption produced by the South African news media and to explore the inner logic of what is known as the “White Monopoly Capital” (WMC) conspiracy theory by following its relationship to vaccine conspiracy narratives, particularly within isiZulu language digital counter-publics.

Many of South Africa’s Covid-19 conspiracy theories take up tropes familiar to a global audience: here, the vaccines might be understood as part of a Satanic plot to control or to “depopulate” the South African public. However, in South Africa, these conspiracies theories are most politically salient when combined with other prevailing conspiracy narratives: particularly, that the “puppeteers” who have engineered the both the coronavirus, as well as country’s political crisis, are the old masters of the apartheid state (the old Afrikaner bourgeoisie) and their allies in the West. The synchronism and combination of political along with Covid-19 conspiracy theories can be explained as a coincidence of timing and an anxious attempt on the part of both a Zulu-nationalist constituency and an emergent, aspirational Black business-owning class to explain why their political project had been seriously jeopardized or failed entirely. In other words, Covid-19 arrived in South Africa shortly after former president Jacob Zuma was ushered out from the halls of power in the state executive and into a courtroom for a corruption inquiry. Consequently, the political Covid-19 conspiracy narratives that have since emerged as a way of expressing discontent with the politics of the new president (Cyril Ramaphosa) are functionally useful to a particular kind of populist rhetoric: this is a political space that has been contested by both Jacob Zuma’s faction of the African National Congress as well as the smaller (in terms of the number of seats in parliament) Economic Freedom Fighters (a “left-populist” political party in South Africa).

A Note on Heuristics, Methods, and a Brief Recent History of the African National Congress

In the past few years, the term “state-capture” has been used by both South African academics and the mainstream press to describe a “real conspiracy” pertaining to endemic and thoroughgoing corruption within the highest echelons of the state, particularly within Jacob Zuma’s administration (Chipkin and Swilling 2018;

De Klerk and Solomon 2019). As the South African press has mediated this “real conspiracy” into a national public discourse, this “real conspiracy” has become a productive site for oppositional political “conspiracy theories” to circulate, particularly within user-generated social media (via Twitter or other media shared via WhatsApp, etc.). The heuristic dividing a “real conspiracy” and a (fake) “conspiracy theory” is an uneasy distinction for us to make; readers should take care to note how this distinction may speak more to the bifurcated nature of the public sphere in South Africa (where public debate has been siloed within separate camps) than it does to help us understand if all the details of a narrative are “true.”

This considered, methods employed to produce data for this study included a combination of collaborative and non-collaborative ethnographic methods as well as critical discourse and media analyses. Primarily, our approach to conspiracy theory draws from a decade-long genealogy of digital ethnography within anthropology (see Boellstorff et al. 2012; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Coleman 2014). These ethnographic studies have shifted from taking a “culturalist approach,” where the analysis constitutes an investigation of the “symbolic or ideological content of posts and [other user-generated media]” to an attention to effects of practices pursued by users in online and offline spaces (Devries 2021, 242). Our approach here is to conceive of these networks of conspiracy-related media discourses as a “counter-public,” a concept that Nancy Fraser describes as a “parallel discursive [arena] where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their interests, identities and needs” (1990, 67). The goal of this research is thus to pursue a hermeneutic understanding of that space and to assess its relationship to populist and electoral politics in contemporary South Africa.

To do so, we make a second heuristic distinction with regard to a “right-left” split within the African National Congress; conceiving of the party as fractured in this way helps describe the current political terrain within a country that has been dominated by a single party since the democratic transition occurred in 1994. The heuristic is an oversimplification, but is still useful to describe how the current and previous presidents (the leaders of the two factions) cultivate their public image. The former President Jacob Zuma (in office from 2009 to 2018) is a politician who postures as a populist that will lead the people in an antagonistic confrontation against the country’s large bourgeoisie; current President Cyril Ramaphosa (formerly Zuma’s deputy president and now President of the Republic since 2018), conversely, is a billionaire who, particularly within his election campaign, postured as a “neoliberal” and a competent manager and someone who can bring an end to endemic corruption in the public office.

In the conspiracy theory we explore later in the chapter, the two factions are understood to serve different and competing political interests. In the “White Monopoly Capital” conspiracy narratives, President Ramaphosa is the antagonist: a servant of White-owned capital who is intent on pursuing domestic developmental policies that favor the old White bourgeoisie’s business interests. (Likewise, “old Afrikaner bourgeoisie” is a cultural/narrative category, not an analytical category

belonging to the authors).¹ Abroad, Ramaphosa is understood to serve “White Monopoly Capital” working to maintain close relationships between South Africa and other Western states. Conversely, for Zuma’s supporters, his presidency was significant because it marked a geopolitical realignment away from the West and its associated financial institutions – it was under Zuma’s presidency that South Africa joined BRICS (the association of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and at the 2013 BRICS summit in Durban, a New Development Bank, a potential alternative to the IMF (International Monetary Fund), was proposed. According to narratives within this Covid-19 conspiracy universe, Zuma was removed from office, jailed, and subjected to a corruption inquiry by secretive forces within the state and business community primarily because of the threat he posed to “White Monopoly Capital” after his attempt to reorient South Africa away from the West and away from a dependency upon Western-dominated financial institutions.

White Monopoly Capital: Raymond Zondo Meets His Match

In popular discourse, “state capture” has come to refer to a common-sense narrative about the nature of contemporary politics in South Africa. This is a national conversation, circulating throughout both liberal academia and legacy news media, about the forms of systematic corruption that have set the policy agenda of the executive branch of the national government (and to a certain extent municipal and provincial levels) during former President Jacob Zuma’s nearly decade-long administration. In contradistinction to conceptualizing the issue as a series of simple and discrete instances of corruption, or even a “culture of corruption,” *state capture* is invoked to refer to a “real,” organized conspiracy to transform organs of the South African state into vehicles for generating rents for private wealth. State-owned enterprises (SOEs), including the electricity commission (ESKOM) and railroad company (TRANSNET), among others, were understood to be “captured” by a conspiracy-network of politicians, public servants, and business executives, and once captured, the purpose of the SOEs transforms from being a vehicle to provision the public good (e.g., a supply of electricity that can meet public demand) into a vehicle for generating incomes to individuals connected to the patronage/conspiracy network (e.g., paying well-connected subcontractors above the market rate for their services rendered or materials sold to the SOEs [Chipkin and Swilling 2018]).

The politics of state capture came to the fore of the South African public sphere in 2016, amid public pressure in the wake of the publication of a report by the South African Public Protector (a South African state institution, independent of government) which suggested an inquiry be commissioned to investigate the possibility of state capture by then President Jacob Zuma and the brothers Ajay, Atul, and Rajesh Gupta (a family of wealthy businessmen originating from India). In the wake of the scandal, Cyril Ramaphosa was chosen to eventually succeed Jacob Zuma at the 2017 annual conference of the African National Congress, and prior to his inauguration in the twilight of Zuma’s administration, the Judicial

Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture led by Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo was initiated (the commission is colloquially known, and hereafter referred to, as the Zondo Commission). Nearing the end of his term, Zuma resigned before a no-confidence vote could be held to preemptively remove him from office. Proceedings at the Zondo Commission have been vital to the constitution of a particular narrative about the nature of the post-apartheid state and its development over the last decade: that the newly emergent (Black) capitalist class in South Africa is not a dynamic and entrepreneurial class, but rather a parasitical class that is dependent on extralegal relationships with the state for its own development (Beresford 2015; Brunette et al. 2021; Sparks 2012).

The Covid-19 pandemic reached South Africa at a time when reparations for apartheid (“land expropriation without compensation” or “the land question”) and accountability for government corruption (the Zondo Commission) had center stage in the public sphere. After several extensions of the commission’s mandate, the Zondo Commission finally concluded its work in January of 2022 – this marked nearly two years after the first cases of Covid-19, when Zuma had yet to be charged for corruption pertaining to his actions as President. At that time, the public bore witness to the political elements associated with Zuma’s base and conspiracy theorists skeptical of official narratives surrounding Covid-19. Protests in support of the former president grew amid the proceedings of the corruption-related court cases outside of the Pietermaritzburg (the capital of KwaZulu-Natal) courthouse, and conspiracy discourses linking popular disdain for the West, Bill Gates, and vaccine skepticism began to emerge in digital counter-publics (Gagliardone et al. 2021).² A legal drama at the Zondo Commission further bifurcated the public arena, entrenching the distinct ways that Zuma’s supporters and detractors narrated the significance of the ongoing and unresolved inquiry: Zuma accused Raymond Zondo of being biased against him. Zuma sought a case by the Judicial Services Commission and the High Court to force Zondo to be recused from the commission; conversely, the commission (under Raymond Zondo) took to the apex court (the Constitutional Court) which ultimately ruled that Zuma must attend the state capture commission. Amid Zuma’s refusal to do so, the Constitutional Court found that Zuma was in contempt of its ruling and sentenced him to 15 months of incarceration.

For many of Zuma’s supporters, the Zondo Commission was always seen as illegitimate, and the Constitutional Court’s ruling was taken as further evidence that the country’s apex court was itself “captured” by large (White) business interests: that Zuma was being “railroaded” by the justice system (in both the Constitutional Court and the Zondo Commission), designed in a way by which the old Afrikaner bourgeoisie might enact revenge against him. Here, it is critical for readers to understand that this conspiracist conception of South African “deep politics” follows if one accepts the notion that there was never a resolution to the “war” and the “combat” that constituted the anti-apartheid struggle. In other words, the idea is that the covert and secretive war that had been conducted (particularly in the decade of the 1980s) between the apartheid security services and the armed wing

of the Congress movement never ended after the democratic transition but rather took on new forms and new terrains of struggle within the new post-apartheid state. During the anti-apartheid struggle, Jacob Zuma was the head of intelligence for Umkhonto we Sizwe (the armed wing of the Congress movement), a high-ranking position that allowed him to pursue politics post-1994. These narratives thus position Zuma as a “champion of the people” who had, over the course of his presidency, continued to fight the struggle amid new terrains of conflict within the state, between state and big-business relations, and within a broader global geopolitical contest. Zuma’s fall, from sitting in the office of the President to sitting for depositions, is logical if one accepts that Zuma’s successor (Cyril Ramaphosa) had always been an agent of “White Monopoly Capital.” That is, believing that Ramaphosa “sold out” to the old bourgeoisie and that the judicial commission is/was itself a conspiracy to oust Zuma from power because he represented the first real threat to the entrenched privileges of Afrikaner capital since the height of the violence and unrest associated with the late apartheid period.

Crisis Upon Crisis: Covid-19 and the Politics of State Capture

The rollout of vaccines in South Africa lagged behind much of the developed world. Mass vaccination campaigns began in May 2021, but supply shortages hampered the impact of vaccination campaigns. South Africa, like many other countries at this time, experienced strict and long lockdowns that wreaked havoc on an economy that had already endured chronically high unemployment rates (with some scholars estimating an average between 20 and 40 percent) over the two decades (Alenda-Demoutiez and Mügge 2020). Left-populist opposition politicians and political parties leveraged the popular resentment surrounding lockdowns and the inadequate support given to those rendered unemployed to their advantage: the Economic Freedom Fighters (the political party most closely associated with the project of land reform in South Africa) shifted positions on the lockdown, calling for restrictions to be rescinded and to allow for individuals to return to work.

In June of 2021, Julius Malema, leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters, took aim at President Ramaphosa for the slow pace of the vaccine rollout: his party demanded that vaccines from Russia, China, and Cuba be procured, suggesting that the vaccination campaign would be more successful if the government did not solely plan to procure vaccines produced in the West. Malema accused the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) of being “captured” by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and on June 22, Malema and his party staged a march in Johannesburg to the SAHPRA offices demanding that non-Western vaccines be made available to the public. Malema’s skepticism toward the current government’s strategy of employing only Western-made vaccines within South Africa found resonance in certain circles alongside “White Monopoly Capital” conspiracy narratives and “satanic Bill Gates” conspiracies which see the vaccines as a “mark of the beast” and an implant chip designed by Microsoft to control or

“depopulate” segments of the population in Africa (Gagliardone et al. 2021). And while the Ramaphosa administration’s decision to only procure Western-made vaccines came at the expense of a potentially more rapid rollout of vaccines, the decision was also received within conspiracy circles as evidence of the existence of more insidious alternative motives.

For example, on Twitter, a user expresses anger at the South African Broadcasting Corporation – the country’s public broadcaster – over the way it has represented Russian-made vaccines in its news coverage. The author positions a conflict between the financial interests of Western pharmaceutical companies and concerns for the general well-being of South Africans and the national biopolitical interests:

@SABCNews @SABCizindaba nidukiselani abantu ngamanga mayelana nevaccine yaseRussia @sputnikvaccine musani ukusetshenziswa onxiwa nkulu basetshonalanga ukucolisana iVaccine Sputnik yekani ipolitiki ngezompilo zabantu.³

@SABCNews @SABCizindaba why are you misleading people with lies about the Russian vaccine @sputnikvaccine desist from being used by western capitalist in tarnishing the image of the Sputnik Vaccines, refrain from politicking with peoples’ lives.

Conversely, in a video posted to TikTok, the social media app used for circulating short user-made video clips, a woman’s voice speaks in a distressed tone over the image of President Ramaphosa and the caption “South Africa is not for sale please.” In the clip, the woman links COVID-19 vaccines to a conspiracy by the “New World Government” and the G20 Compact with Africa:

South Africa, we are aware that the [South African] Health Minister [Mathume Joseph] Phaahla and Dr. Salime Abdool Karim are conveying the position of the World Health Organization and the COVID demands of the G20 compact with Africa known as G20 CwA; which wants to capture the Republic of South Africa as the province [sic] of the New World Government, spearheaded by G20 CwA which is co-chaired by the South African President Ramaphosa and the German Chancellor.⁴

The “G20 Compact with Africa” is in fact a 2017 initiative designed to promote private investment in Africa; but in the clip, the user links White-Monopoly-Capital conspiracy narratives with Covid-19 vaccine conspiracies in the way that it narrates President Ramaphosa as a nefarious agent of Western wealth.

These posts (and other like them) were circulated during the South African spring of 2021 (from September to November), just after the third wave of the pandemic and the return of severe Covid-19 restrictions during winter (June to September) of that year. The country’s political crisis also seemed to have reached a crescendo that winter when, in the time between the Constitutional Court’s ruling that Zuma was to be jailed for contempt of court and his actual arrest, regiments of Amabutho again gathered outside Zuma’s homestead complex (in Nkandla, rural

KwaZulu-Natal) in order to physically prevent his arrest by the police. Finally, Zuma turned himself in for arrest on July 8 for the contempt of court charge. The aftermath of Zuma's arrest played out in newsrooms across much of Africa and worldwide: trucks torched blocking national freeways, videos of lootings in shopping malls, grocery stores, pharmacies, and supply chain warehouses as well as clips of reactionary vigilante violence against looters gave many the impression that South Africa was in the midst of its own "Arab spring."

However, the riots subsided after July 17 and seem to be interpreted by many within the South African government as an attempted, and failed, *coup d'état*. In August 2021, President Ramaphosa commissioned an expert panel to study the causes of the riots and to understand why the police failed to prevent their spread. The expert panel's report, published in November 2021, describes the conspiracy against the state:

As the deadline approached for the former President [Zuma] to hand himself over to the authorities or face arrest, his supporters, who mobilised largely on social media, called upon people to, among others, make the country ungovernable; physically prevent his detention; and remove President Ramaphosa from office. According to many of the submissions we received, the incarceration of the former President [Zuma] at a correctional facility in Estcourt, was the spark that ignited the orgy of violence that followed. On the very next day after his incarceration, the night of July 9, a number of trucks and cars were torched on the National Route 3 at Mooi River Plaza. This action resulted in the closure of the N3, a major route which links the provinces of KZN and Gauteng. This route also serves as a key economic artery from the largest South African port to major inland cities, including those outside South African borders. Twenty-four hours later, the violence had spread to shopping centres and malls in various parts of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

Hardly a day after the violence first broke out in KZN, parts of Gauteng were also engulfed in violence. The submissions we received point to elements of organisation behind the looting of the malls, combined with opportunistic looting. We also received submissions that some of the attacks were planned in hostels. It is clear that the planners wanted the looting to look like they were spontaneous; a phenomenon that we have coined "organised spontaneity." Community members informed church leaders of impending attacks. Some in the media fraternity received tip-offs. Instigators were seen on security cameras moving around from mall to mall in vehicles. There were instances where high value goods such as solar panels were targeted. It took some skill to remove these because they were attached to buildings. In such cases criminal elements were involved.

(Africa, Sokupa, and Gumbi 2021, 38–39)

In the aftermath of the riots, various explanations were given for their scope and scale. The conspiracist account presented in the aforementioned report is largely

consistent with the South African news media, which at the time alleged that the unrest had been instigated by rogue elements of the South African State Security Agency, in other words, supposed factions of the intelligence apparatus that remained loyal to former president Jacob Zuma (Felix, Wicks, and Hunter 2021; Thamm 2021). Other elements of the national conversation lamented Zuma's imprisonment as the catalyst that inaugurated the violence amid enduring widespread frustrations about the social and economic inequalities of post-apartheid life (not to mention that the arrest coincided with the reimposition of pandemic lockdown restrictions that made it even more difficult for the chronically unemployed to find work).

Furthermore, only a few months prior, Zuma himself had written a letter to Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo where he explained his refusal to participate in the commission, alleging a conspiracy against him by another faction of government said to be controlled by private business interests. Specifically, Zuma alleged that his political program put him in the crosshairs of the large White bourgeoisie who felt his presidency threatened the "arrangements" and "assurances" that had been negotiated with leadership of the ANC prior to the democratic transition in 1994:

My position in respect of the contempt of court proceedings is a conscientious objection to what I consider to be an extraordinary abuse of judicial authority to advance politically charged narratives of a politically but very powerful commercial and political interests through the Zondo Commission. . . . The Constitutional Court would represent freedom for everyone, and with it, I believed that we would be safe from the unjust and oppressive political narratives that had routinely found credibility in [the apartheid legal system]. It is no secret that dominant narratives come from the dominant and moneyed classes in our society. Ideally, such narratives should not sway our apex court on how to deal with a particular litigant. . . . I have no doubt that the Zondo Commission has become a complex project controlled by my political foes. Even though I established the Commission, I was aware that it had been proposed as part of the campaigns to force me out of government. (2021, 4–12)

Again, the conspiracy narrative in Zuma's letter is consistent with his previous rhetoric: for example, in 2016, amid the early controversy surrounding the publication of the Public Protector's allegation of state capture (leading to the establishment of the Zondo Commission), Zuma gave a speech to supporters in KwaDukuza (municipality in KwaZulu-Natal) where he postulated that he spurned the ire of "the powers that be" because of the work he had done to align South Africa with BRICS and establish the BRICS bank (SABC News 2016). Moreover, the violence of the July 2021 riots was largely concentrated in (and according to the government's panel also originated from) KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa's easternmost province – the Zulu homeland and the place of birth and residence of Jacob Zuma.

Before Zuma became President, while being a member of the African National Congress (ANC), the province had been a known stronghold of Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which rivaled the ANC during the apartheid years. Scholars have since argued that a local Zulu-nationalist and traditionalist constituency (for which the IFP was a political vehicle) had historically been at odds with the ANC's liberal politics and that Zuma's initial presidential campaign was so successful because he had positioned himself as a Zulu-populist "man of the people," securing the support of much of the former IFP base (Hickel 2015; White 2012).

While it should go without saying that doubt surrounding vaccines and "official" narratives about the pandemic in South Africa are not limited to isiZulu speakers in KwaZulu-Natal, nor to the supporters of the former president Jacob Zuma, it is also certainly the case that Zuma had been for many years preparing his supporters to accept conspiracist and alternative accounts for received narratives about politics from the news. At the same time, this work of preparing audiences to accept an ongoing conspiracy as fact of modern South African governance is also the providence of the Zondo Commission and the media discourse surrounding state capture.

"White Monopoly Capital Has Been Having Christmas Since Before and After 1994": State Capture, State Theory, and the South African Petit Bourgeoisie

At the beginning of this chapter, we noted that Covid-19 political conspiracies in South Africa can be understood as an attempt to make sense of the seeming failure of a political project born from the perceived interests of both a Zulu-nationalist constituency and an emergent and aspirational Black business-owning class. To understand this argument, it is worth reviewing some of the history of how the pre-Zuma ANC pursued the goal of increasing Black involvement within the economy through what has been referred to as the first generation of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) programs. It was the perceived failure of these programs to generate substantive economic growth for the Black majority that produced the political terrain, leading to Zuma's rise to presidency.

Black Economic Empowerment was the hallmark project of Zuma's predecessor, Thabo Mbeki, whose program placed a "strong focus on 'deracializing' the economy through affirmative action policies aimed at fast-tracking the placement of Black people into management . . . positions" in government and private enterprises (Chipkin and Swilling 2018, 32). Mbeki sought the creation and advancement of a Black business class, a goal consistent with a long-standing consensus within the revolutionary theory of the African National Congress. Indeed, as Roger Southall explains, the ANC's theory of change is premised on the idea that building a Black capitalist class is of paramount importance to the post-apartheid state, insofar as that class' "historic function [would] be to not merely challenge white economic domination but to raise productive forces, thereby providing for redistribution of wealth to the black working class, and the urban and rural poor"⁵ (2004, 326). The project of advancing a Black business class was itself considered

germane to the “universal” or “national” interest of the post-apartheid state (Tangri and Southall 2008).

Over the course of the twentieth century, both the apartheid and post-apartheid governments have utilized the procurement budget of the South African state-owned enterprises (SOEs) as a vehicle for supporting and producing a capitalist class that was understood to be desirable for the national interests of either government. This was one of the methods by which Afrikaner capital built up after South Africa’s independence from Britain, and it was taken up as a model by which Black capital could likewise be produced. To achieve these aims, Mbeki mandated that subcontractors to SOEs and companies competing for government tenders fulfil certain diversity requirements. However, by the time he left office, Mbeki’s policies were not considered to be effective at transforming the racial composition of the capital owning classes – there was an increased recognition that White-owned businesses and legacy suppliers to the SOEs were capable of maneuvering “within the rules of the [BEE] policy while at the same time defeating its purpose” (Chipkin and Swilling 2018, 35). And after the first decade of BEE under the ANC’s governance, Black-owned companies comprised a miniscule share (around 2 percent) of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange’s market capitalization (Tangri and Southall 2008).

Zuma came to power on a mandate to not just redistribute wealth, but to fulfill Mbeki’s promise to create a “bourgeoisie” that was “patriotic” to the national democratic revolution. To this end, Zuma’s legacy will now be known for his illegal and “unethical” interventions into the domestic industrial markets that feed these state-owned enterprises – a process that has otherwise come to be known as state capture. The Zondo Commission has collected the witness testimonies that together recount the narrative that Jacob Zuma had spent his decade of presidency building a patronage network that allowed him to collude to appoint ministers (such as Malusi Gigaba, former minister of Public Enterprises) who would then appoint a Chair and board of directors of an SOE (such as Brian Molefe, former CEO of the SOEs Transnet and Eskom) who would then use illegal and unethical methods to replace subcontracts and tenders (from SOEs) from legacy establishment businesses with businesses associated with the Zuma patronage network (Chipkin and Swilling 2018). In other words, bribery, threats, and intimidation were tactics used as an overarching strategy to subvert standard procedures to replace the legacy (and largely White owned) businesses that fed the supply chains of the SOEs with the ones that are linked to Zuma’s networks both inside the state and within the business community.

For Zuma’s critics, his cynicism knows no bounds. Zuma’s presidency had already weathered a series of corruption scandals that broke onto the front page of South African newspapers prior to the publication of the public protector’s report in 2016. The final scandal that eventually led to the collapse of the administration positioned the narrative of “White Monopoly Capital” as both a “real conspiracy” and a “conspiracy theory” for the South African national public. In 2017, leaked emails revealed that the slogan “White Monopoly Capital” had been adopted and popularized by an “astroturf” campaign run by the spin doctors of Bell-Pottinger’s (a British public relations firm) South African branch. A relatively obscure slogan that had originally been drawn from a particular South African Marxist intellectual

tradition, “White Monopoly Capital,” suddenly became known to the public as a disinformation scheme, seemingly cynically employed by members of the Zuma and Gupta families to distract from the allegations of corruption that had been leveled against them (Aboobaker 2019; Cave 2017; Segal 2018).

For some of Zuma’s critics in South African academia, the illegal and unethical political appointments and business arrangements (not to mention the psychological operations conducted by Bell-Pottinger on the South African public) are only possible, given the creation of a “shadow state” within interior of the public state that could facilitate the capture of the SOEs for a “Zuma–Gupta power elite”⁶ (Chipkin and Swilling 2018). The “backroom deals,” secret collusions, bribery, threats, and organized conspiracies necessary to facilitate what is called state capture may be far afield from the kinds of rational, public debate that one would recognize as “democratic” forms of governance. At the same time, however, there is also a certain sense among some of the remaining Zuma supporters that these tactics were the costs of attempting to succeed – that these illicit exercises of executive power were simply the only options available to the Zuma administration. (Supporters of Jacob Zuma also offer many other reasons to explain why he should not be seen as being personally responsible for the corruption scandals that broke during his administration: e.g., one might rationalize that “Zuma did not know about the corrupt actors operating under him,” or that “there are corrupt actors operating under and without the consent of Ramaphosa as well.”)

But these illicit state–business arrangements, forms of capital accumulation that operate parallel and parasitical to the state, are understood in the popular imaginary to occur at almost all levels of politics and the economy: from the office of the national executive down to the municipal level, including within industrial labor markets where patronage networks largely structure access to employment for much of the South African working class. Alexander Beresford puts it succinctly when he identifies that a perception – throughout the media, academic literature, and in popular discourse – of politics in South Africa (and African politics more generally) as being structured by a condition in which political leaders are not

[H]eld accountable by the electorate based on their capacity to deliver on their promises of providing public goods such as health and education in an impersonal fashion through formal political domain, political leaders are said to derive support and legitimacy by distributing patronage through informal, deeply personalized patron–client networks build upon mutual expectations of reciprocity.

(2015, 227)

He continues, noting that it is prescient that we do not take these conditions as being essential to post–colonial Africa so much as we recognize that “patronage dependent accumulation . . . is a central feature of the development of capitalism, and is inexorably bound up with the process of class formation that accompany it” (229).

For the most part, the Covid–19 conspiracy narratives that position insidious or conspiratorial origins of the virus or Western vaccines have been functionally

useful for politics positioned as “anti-colonial” and “anti-Western.” However, this is not to say that contemporary “left-wing” politics in South Africa are for the most part conspiratorial (nor do we argue that there is an absolute absence of Covid-19-related conspiracy theories that may be functionally useful to “right-wing” politics in South Africa), but rather that what these conspiracy narratives reveal is that for some of those operating within these patronage networks, there is a certain Schmidtian orientation (conditioned by a “friend-enemy” distinction) toward the political sphere that informs their politics (Mouffe 2005; Schmitt, Schwab, and Strong 2007; Wilson 2012). In other words, an analysis of the endemic nature of corruption in South Africa will miss important insights about the motives of political actors if what is commonly read as corruption is only understood as having been born of pure cynicism. The “White Monopoly Capital” conspiracy theory, as it has been called in much of the mainstream news media, largely disavows the possibility of political interests for Zuma supporters. “White Monopoly Capital” is understood rather as the product of a psychological operation conducted by Bell-Pottinger and cynical elites as opposed to being a vocabulary for a political horizon or imaginary⁷ that might unite a diverse set of political interests (Laclau 2005).

This considered, it is prudent to recognize how the prevailing media narratives about Zuma supporters, as people associated with both Covid-19 conspiracies and the July 2021 civil unrest, function to build a consensus about the illegitimacy of political demands regarding enduring inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. Here, “white monopoly capital” has emerged as important vocabulary through which these demands about inequality are being addressed in the public sphere. However, as we have shown, the South African public sphere has also become increasingly bifurcated and paranoid; importantly, these two distinct conceptions about the nature of the post-apartheid state (“state capture” and “white monopoly capital”) effectively function as an anchor for these competing political projects by preparing their respective audiences to adopt conspiracist modes of “cognitive mapping” (Jameson 1990). Regardless of any reservations we may have about either of these political projects, it is important that we remain wary and skeptical of the news-media “signifying practices” that present the post-Zuma-Zulu-nationalist as a political subjectivity that is essentially predisposed to being hostile to liberal democratic norms, to the rule of law, and to the state’s capacity for a biopolitical management of the pandemic emergency (Hall 1997).

Notes

- 1 Specifically, “White Monopoly Capital” is often used to refer to people like Nicholas Oppenheimer (former chairman of *De Beers* and former deputy chairman of *Anglo American*), Johann Rupert (chairman of *Richemont*, a luxury goods holding company based in Switzerland), and Brian Menell (whose grandfather founded the *Anglovaal Group*, a holding company with interests in mining and finance).
- 2 Gagliardone et al. describe how Bill Gates was positioned in vaccine skeptical narratives on South African twitter accounts as an “empty signifier,” an attempt to represent a system that is larger than any individual (2021, 12).
- 3 As of July 4, 2022, this tweet has been removed from Twitter.

- 4 As of July 4, 2022, this TikTok account has been removed.
- 5 This “National Democratic Revolution” was historically conceived of as the first stage in the two-stage revolutionary process, prior to the transition to socialism (Southall 2004).
- 6 Chipkin and Swilling (2018) borrow the concept from C. W. Mills’s (1956) *The Power Elite*. Recall that Gupta here refers to a family of wealthy businessmen of Indian origin who became close to Jacob Zuma during his administration. In some of the testimonies before the Zondo Commission, they are alleged to have been financiers of some of the companies that benefited from Zuma’s interventions into the markets for SOE subcontractors as well as having offered bribes to various public officials, including, notably, the former Deputy of Finance Mcebisi Jonas.
- 7 In South Africa, the words “radical economic transformation” are often used by Zuma and his supporters to describe this political project of the aspirational Black business class.

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11

AFRICA OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Authoritarian Anti-Imperialism, Transnational Pentecostalism, and Covid-19 “Conspiracy Theories”

Laura A. Meek

In March 2021, Tanzanian President John Magufuli passed away from what many believe was the very disease he insisted did not exist in his country: Covid-19 (Busari and Princewill 2021; Dahir 2021b). Magufuli was infamous for claiming that Covid-19 is “satanic” and could be defeated through prayer. Although the official narrative is that the president died from heart complications, many within and beyond Tanzania doubt the veracity of this claim (Dahir 2021a). Meanwhile, other high-ranking government officials in Tanzania, such as Zanzibar’s Vice President, Maalim Seif Sharif Hamad, are confirmed to have died of Covid-19 while Magufuli was censoring any mention of the disease by national media outlets (Rajab 2021). Then, less than three months after President Magufuli’s death, the Nigerian prophet T. B. Joshua – arguably the continent’s most influential Charismatic Christian pastor and televangelist – died suddenly, prompting rumors that he was murdered to prevent a Black leader from acquiring too much power (BBC News 2021b; Emmanuel TV 2022; Orjinmo 2021). Both of these men were critical in shaping their followers’ responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, gaining notoriety and admiration in equal parts.

In this chapter, I consider a number of “conspiracy theories” by and about these leaders, examining what they reveal about the intersections of political power, religion, and public health in contemporary Africa. First, I describe President Magufuli’s (in)actions with regard to Covid-19 in Tanzania, the (racialized) international censure it prompted, and how the President’s response was read by many Tanzanians as defiance against the coloniality of global health. I next explore how Magufuli was influenced in his stance by Prophet T. B. Joshua, a Pentecostal preacher whose church he had visited in Nigeria and whom he invited to Tanzania in 2015 to negotiate a peaceful presidential transition. T. B. Joshua, in turn, claimed to have prophesized the Covid-19 pandemic and to be able to cure Covid-19 patients around the world through the (televised) power of the Holy Spirit.

I conclude by arguing that the populism of both these leaders stemmed, in part, from their ability to move Africa out of the “shadows” of global power (Ferguson 2006) and into the center of Pan-African and Pentecostal world-making. Both leaders galvanized widespread support by drawing upon “Black counterknowledge” (Fiske 2016) – layered with legacies of ongoing imperialism, racial capitalism, and global anti-Blackness – to articulate narratives that refused and unsettled such a world order. Harnessing what Nicole Charles calls the “usefulness of suspicion” (2022, 8), they repositioned Africa, not as a place of shadow, but as a bastion of light leading the struggle against shadows located elsewhere. It is from this perspective that we might grasp the persuasiveness of the so-called “conspiracy theories” they promoted, as well as the ones which followed in the wake of their deaths.

Secularizing Sensibilities against Covid-19 Denialism

In response to Covid-19, former Tanzanian President John Magufuli – elected in 2015 and re-elected in the midst of the pandemic in October 2020 – made the controversial decision not to impose widespread lockdown or even encourage mask-wearing or social distancing. Instead, in April 2020, he called for citizens to engage in three days of national prayer to defeat Covid-19 (VOA News 2020). Then, in May 2020, Tanzanian authorities stopped regularly releasing figures regarding rates of Covid-19 infection in the country, and what minimal figures they did provide appeared highly suspect (Mwai and Giles 2020). This situation prompted the US embassy in Tanzania to issue an alert – in explicit contradiction of the Tanzanian government’s position – warning that hospitals in Dar es Salaam were “overwhelmed,” that the risk of contracting Covid-19 was “extremely high,” and that “all evidence points to exponential growth of the epidemic in Dar and other locations in Tanzania” (U.S. Embassy in Tanzania 2020). This alert remained on the Embassy’s website for many months despite Magufuli’s declaration that Covid-19 had been “eliminated thanks to God” (BBC News 2020).

While President Magufuli was praised by some Tanzanians for his handling of the pandemic, the international response was less favorable. Western media in particular excoriated the president for his promotion of Christian and Islamic faiths as more efficacious than laboratory testing or biomedical treatment for Covid-19. In April 2020, the president was described by the Canadian national newspaper *The Globe and Mail* as one of the “notorious nine” worst leaders in the world for his pandemic response (York et al. 2020). The same month, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Tanzania was the only country in the world to “actively recommend its citizens attend religious services as a method to combat the virus” (Bariyo and Parkinson 2020). A Roman Catholic with Pentecostal and Charismatic ties, Magufuli was reported to have told a congregation in Dodoma that “You haven’t seen me fearing to take communion, because corona[virus] is satanic and can’t survive in Jesus’ body. It will be destroyed” (AllAfrica 2020).

However, the international criticism of Magufuli’s pandemic response extended beyond the president himself. International news stories reporting high rates of

church attendance in the country often employed not-so-subtle colonial and racist overtones in describing Tanzanians – evident, for instance, in the use of terms like “thongs” and “hordes” (Bariyo and Parkinson 2020; Roussi 2021). Such portrayals invoke an uncivilized, nonmodern mass driven by irrational beliefs not (yet) properly eradicated by the supposed gifts of European Enlightenment and reason (Chakrabarty 2008; Keane 2007). For example, a passage in a *Wall Street Journal* article asserted that: “Historians say the arguments advanced by Mr. Magufuli and some pastors in the U.S. and elsewhere that faith should be mobilized to defeat the virus shows the endurance of ideas that can be traced back to medieval Europe” (Bariyo and Parkinson 2020). Even among scholars of religion in Africa, our own “secularizing sensibilities” (Engelke 2014, 300) risk reducing religious and spiritual responses to the ontological plane of metaphor, psychological coping strategy, or misguided belief (Kirby, Taru, and Chimbizikai 2020; Moyet 2020; see also Roberts 2016). It is against this “denial of coevalness” – the tendency to render subjects outside a shared temporal frame (Fabian 1983) – and its imperialist overtones that President Magufuli aimed his later critiques of Covid-19 laboratory tests.

Authoritarian Anti-Imperialism

President Magufuli was himself a scientist – with a PhD in chemistry – making his promotion of the “true healing of God” (*uonyaji wa kweli wa Mungu*) and his refusal to advocate for biomedical treatments for Covid-19 all the more surprising. Even more scandalously, Magufuli called the epistemological authority of science into question by testing the Covid-19 diagnostic test itself. He submitted several non-human samples to the National Health Laboratory for Covid-19 testing, labelling them with human names to disguise the experiment. The laboratory returned positive results for samples from a goat, a quail, and a pawpaw fruit, seemingly proving the inefficacy of this diagnostic technology (AllAfrica 2020). On national television, Magufuli used this finding to insinuate that both laboratory staff and (opposition) politicians who were calling for Covid-19 lockdowns were secretly “on the payroll of imperialists” (Kolumbia 2020). These moves were consistent with Magufuli’s political stance toward the Global North more generally: he refused to attend the UN General Assembly and he revived the independence-era term *beberu* (literally, “male goat”) to refer to such groups as “Western imperialists” (Awami 2020).

Additionally, in a move that harkened back to an earlier era of socialist nonalignment in Tanzania (Langwick 2010), Magufuli made waves by announcing that he would import an artemisia herbal tonic from Madagascar, whose President Andry Rajoelina provoked international ire by claiming that the tonic cures Covid-19 (Baker 2020; Ioussouf 2020). The Presidents’ promotion of vernacular African healing practices rekindled independence-era narratives of African self-sufficiency, reminding many Tanzanians of their first president, “Mwalimu” (Teacher) Julius Nyerere, who frequently ignored “advice” from Western nations, fighting against the imposition of structural adjustment policies until the very end of his presidency (Thiong’o 2021). As Madagascar’s herbal therapy was exported to the Comoros,

Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Tanzania, and other nations, supporters saw this as a resurgence of Pan-African innovation (Aljazeera 2020; Shaban 2020). Mwalimu Nyerere was a frequent point of reference for Magufuli, who explained his refusal to issue lockdowns by saying that “Our founding father [Nyerere] was not someone to be directed to be told what to do . . . Those who devise these kinds of rules [lockdown] are used to making these directives that our founding father refused” (BBC News 2021a). Magufuli instead prioritized the need to keep the economy open, arguing that lockdowns, too, would cost lives.

Whether President Magufuli’s actions were driven more by faith or politics, his anti-imperialist and pro-religious stance contributed to his widespread popularity in Tanzania, despite the numerous authoritarian measures he implemented while in office (Human Rights Watch 2019; Khelef 2021). Tanzania’s political climate underwent a drastic repressive shift during Magufuli’s two presidencies, as he imposed media censorship, arrested activists, disqualified opposition party members from office, imprisoned LGBTQ individuals, and barred pregnant girls from attending school (Amnesty International 2019; Center for Reproductive Rights 2018; Steer 2018). It is possible that the October 2020 national elections played a significant role in Magufuli’s response to Covid-19 as he attempted to win popular support by augmenting his authoritarian and anti-imperialist persona with a demonstration of his ability for “religious mediation” (Haynes 2018).

Religious Mediation and/as Political Power

Much of Magufuli’s rhetoric referenced Pentecostal notions of spiritual warfare, suggesting that the Covid-19 pandemic was not merely a secular threat. This was evident, for instance, when the laboratory tests proved faulty and he commented: “So many times, I have insisted that not everything that you are given is good. There could be people being used, that equipment could be used . . . but it could also be sabotage because *this is warfare*” (Awami 2020, emphasis added). While Western media outlets like *BBC News* interpreted that statement as “lurching towards a conspiracy theory” (Awami 2020), I heard echoes of the pervasive Pentecostal discourses on religious “warfare” against satanic forces threatening the nation and its citizens. Indeed, political practices of religious mediation – via “efforts to keep God on the side of the nation” (Haynes 2018, 71) – are playing an increasingly central role in national leadership in and beyond Tanzania.

Magufuli had been demonstrating his ability for religious mediation since his first presidency. When he won the 2015 national election (with 58 percent of the vote), the presidential transition was palpably tense and fraught with accusations of vote rigging (Allison 2015; Nesoba 2015). To pacify political opposition, Prophet T. B. Joshua was invited to Tanzania as an honored guest of the state to facilitate reconciliatory talks between incoming President Magufuli and the defeated opposition leader, Edward Lowassa (who had received 40 percent of the vote) (Nesoba 2015; Wambura 2021). Years earlier, both men had made pilgrimages to T. B. Joshua’s church in Nigeria – Magufuli in 2011 and Lowassa in 2012 – and both

later referenced their relationship with the Prophet in order to gain political and social capital (Wambura 2021). Magufuli specifically claimed that T. B. Joshua had encouraged him to run for president. Later, after Magufuli's hospitalization in Germany in 2019, some even mused that the president was healed precisely because of this relationship with T. B. Joshua, noting that: "President Magufuli openly acknowledges Joshua's place in his life and leadership, even referring to him as a 'mentor'" (Mahlonga 2019).

Meanwhile, T. B. Joshua led similar "peace-brokering missions" from Liberia in 2000 to South Sudan in 2019, making him a prominent political (as well as religious) figure throughout much of the continent (Fatumole 2021; Njoku 2019). He, in turn, was particularly deft at folding everyday occurrences and world-historical events into his sermons, using his prophesizing to position himself as a key player in a global, Manichean battle between forces of good and evil. For instance, in 2014, when a guesthouse at his church collapsed, killing over 100 pilgrims who had come to attend his services, T. B. Joshua declared that this was caused by nefarious forces seeking to assassinate him (News24 2014). He pointed to recordings of a small plane flying over the guesthouse earlier that day, claiming that an "infrasonic weapon" had been used to intentionally blow up the building (BellaNaija 2014; News24 2015).

Transnational Prophecy and Deliverance

Temitope Balogun Joshua, or "T. B. Joshua," was a prominent and controversial Nigerian Charismatic pastor and televangelist who founded a Christian megachurch outside of Lagos (Emmanuel TV 2022; Nche 2021). This church – named The Synagogue, Church of All Nations (SCOAN) – is part of a global Pentecostal and Charismatic movement, which is the fastest growing form of Christianity in the world (Anderson et al. 2010; Robbins 2004). Pentecostalism took hold in Africa during the 1980s and has since become widespread across the continent (Marshall 2009; Meyer 2004; Tazanu 2016; Tokunbo 2019). For my interlocutors, T. B. Joshua is a household name. During the years I visited with local families in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania (2011–18), T. B. Joshua's television station, Emmanuel TV, was frequently playing in the background. This station is one of the world's largest Christian television networks with programming offered across Africa, North America, and Europe.

Also aired across the world via Emmanuel TV were T. B. Joshua's many prophecies about catastrophic events to come. He claimed to have predicted tragedies around the globe, ranging from the crash of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 to the Boston marathon bombings (Emmanuel TV 2014; TB Joshua Ministries 2013). On June 24, 2020, the TB Joshua Ministries Facebook page (which has over five million followers) shared a post describing how T. B. Joshua had foreseen the Covid-19 pandemic and had warned since 2008 that a crisis would "bring the world to its knees in humility" (TB Joshua Ministries 2020). In December 2019, T. B. Joshua predicted that this crisis would happen in 2020, which would be "a

year of humility.” The Facebook post goes on to note that the Director of the US CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Dr. Robert Redfield, “has just released a statement concurring with the prophecy of 2020 from Prophet T. B. Joshua concerning humility.” It explains that the statement was made in testimony before the US Senate Judiciary Committee, before going on to admonish readers not to forget that the Director General of the WHO and the Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court “also gave the same statement about humility.” It concludes that this is what T. B. Joshua “had warned the world about for over a decade” (TB Joshua Ministries 2020). Just 48 hours after this was posted, it had already generated 1,400 comments and 2,300 shares. As of November 2021, it had 112,000 views and 13,000 likes. There are similar Facebook pages for the T. B. Joshua Ministries in several other languages, including Arabic, Spanish, French, Russian, German, Portuguese, Korean, and Hebrew.

Meanwhile, the SCOAN website features a constantly updated list of testimonies from those who have been healed by pilgrimage to T. B. Joshua’s church (SCOAN International 2022; see also Joshua 2009). As one of my Tanzanian interlocutors explained to me after returning from such a trip to Nigeria: “Some people are physically sick, but when they go to a hospital, they are told there is nothing there, that they are not sick. They are sick in another means.” This “other means” refers to the power of darkness – including witchcraft and spirit possession – for which Pentecostals hold that only deliverance can provide a lasting cure (see Dilger 2007; Haynes 2017; Mohr 2012; Tokunbo 2019).

As I often witnessed during my fieldwork, Emmanuel TV viewers could also be delivered by touching the television screen at the Prophet’s request, transforming the television itself into “an object with curative power” (Tazanu 2016, 45; see also Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu 2012). Indeed, T. B. Joshua claimed to have cured people in Honduras of Covid-19 through such virtual prayer (Bhengu 2020). Emmanuel TV aired images of these patients vomiting, removing the noxious “toxins” from their bodies (Citizen Reporter 2020). One patient could be heard saying: “I passed out a lot of foul substance; that was the power of the prayer.” For believers, Emmanuel TV thus acts as the “technological realization” (Meyer 2011, 34) of the Holy Spirit, literally bringing God closer to patients, enabling an experience of healing by divine presence. It also seeks to demonstrate the power of T. B. Joshua – and of a claim to Afrocentric spiritual prowess more generally – to heal the sick as far away as Honduras.

Destabilizing Colonial Tropes of Africa

While one could dismiss President Magufuli and Prophet T. B. Joshua’s actions as “conspiracy theories” – that act as irresponsible public health interventions or self-serving political maneuverings – such censure will not get us very far in understanding their widespread popularity. Rather, I argue, these two leaders were able to galvanize a repositioning of Africa within global power relations that brought the continent out of the “shadows” of global power (Ferguson 2006) and into

the center of Pan-African and Pentecostal world-making. They contested Africa's marginalization by enacting the world otherwise, articulating Afrocentric forms of medical knowledge and spiritual prowess – from herbal remedies to deliverance – as critical life-saving technologies *from and for* the Global South.

In so doing, both President Magufuli and Prophet T. B. Joshua profoundly destabilized colonialist tropes portraying the continent as a space of lack, crisis, and victimhood. Such tropes have been reinvigorated by global health predictions that Africa would be devastated by the pandemic, “particularly susceptible” to the virus, inept in its response, and dependent upon philanthropy from the Global North for survival (Anna 2020; Bavier 2020; CNN 2020; OCHA 2020). These predictions perpetuate the “African tragedy” in global health – “the uncritical epistemic industry that has long produced knowledge of African development as a monolithic and primordial tragedy” (Harper-Shipman and Bako 2021; see also Smith 2006).

Across diverse registers and geographic points of departure, scholarly analyses of Covid-19 in Africa have also contested such claims (Lee, Meek, and Mwine-Kyarimpa 2021). Suglo and Sibiri (2021) debunk African tragedy narratives by showing how African nations have often responded more effectively to Covid-19 than have many countries in the Global North. Meanwhile, Ng'weno (2021) probes the very practice of “predicting” across time and scale, arguing that “predictions, if made at all, cannot be abstracted, narrow, or universal.” Other authors analyze how tropes of Africa's vulnerability obscure the *longue durée* of neo/colonial medical violence on the continent. These writers insist that vaccine hesitancy in Africa is a rational response to “grievous acts of racist human experimentation and medical coercion” (Nyalile and Loo 2021) and the ensuing “failure of biomedicine's moral legitimacy” (Haruyama 2023, 172). Finally, scholars ask us to think beyond colonial tropes by attending to the individual and collective agency of African actors, where what might seem like “indifference” could actually be a form of resistance to neoliberal and necropolitical state power (Banjwa 2021; Mwine-Kyarimpa 2021; Ssentongo 2021). It is from this critical and historically attuned perspective that we might also grasp the persuasiveness of the so-called “conspiracy theories” that followed in the wake of President Magufuli and Prophet T. B. Joshua's deaths.

“Cautionary Tales” and “Conspiracy Theories”

Many accounts within and beyond Tanzania revealed in the possibility that Magufuli died of Covid-19 as this would seem to prove the ineffectualness of his Covid-19 denialism, his anti-imperialist stance, *and* the promise of Pan-African solidary and self-sufficiency (Busari and Princewill 2021; Dahir 2021b; Reuters Fact Check 2021). For some in the Global North, his death offered reassurance that our philanthropy and global health interventions are needed. *BBC News* ended a piece on his passing with the sentence: “It is an irony that the pandemic he strenuously denied has outlasted him, turning his once-heralded presidency into a cautionary tale for the region and the continent” (Olewe 2021). While “cautionary tales” seek to

make the workings of power transparent, “conspiracy theories,” on the other hand, are “discourses of suspicion [that] generally assert – contra transparency claims – that power is inherently ambivalent and that it operates in ambiguous ways” (West and Sanders 2003, 12). Across Sub-Saharan Africa, just such a discourse of suspicion has been proliferating.

So-called “conspiracy theories” around T. B. Joshua’s death insist upon a different truth; one in which (white) power is far from transparent in its machinations. Such accounts posit that the Prophet’s sudden demise was in fact an assassination orchestrated in order to prevent a Black leader from acquiring too much authority or influence. At first, news reports following T. B. Joshua’s death claimed that the pastor had predicted his own death (Oduor 2021). Later, others claimed that T. B. Joshua’s was not a natural death at all. For instance, a Ghanaian cleric, Bishop Sam Owusu of Pottersville Church International, gave a sermon that later went viral in which he told his congregation that T. B. Joshua was killed by “conspirators” (Opejobi 2021; Vanguard 2021). Owusu directly links T. B. Joshua’s death to global anti-Blackness and white supremacy, claiming that his death was not natural and that he was killed because “in the history of the Black race, there is no Black man that is so popular as compared to T. B. Joshua,” remarking on his properties in Africa as well as “a school in Israel, a school, land and property in the Philippines.” He concludes that “they calculated” his death and “what they used to kill him, I know and the person they sent, I saw” (Owusu, quoted in Opejobi 2021).

In this sermon, Bishop Owusu harnesses the power of prophetic vision – the very ability for which T. B. Joshua was renown – in order to aver that Black power is cast as a threat to the current world order, as evidenced by profound global disparities in wealth and influence. Accordingly, he claims that T. B. Joshua was assassinated for having amassed such great social, economic, and spiritual capital.

The problem with too quickly dismissing this interpretation as a “conspiracy theory” lies in the type of work that such a designation does. The label “conspiracy theory” not only conveys that particular truth claims are flawed or improbable; such a designation *also* functions as a perpetuation of colonial epistemic violence by removing certain questions from consideration at all and, in so doing, rendering mute the voices of marginalized populations whose distrust and suspicion are, in fact, well founded. As Justin Haruyama (2023, 172) notes,

[T]he discursive work performed by the invocation of the category of ‘conspiracy theory’ is to consign the very suspicion that there might be a malicious conspiracy to a domain of primordial irrationality, treating the suspicion of conspiracy as a paranoid one whose epistemological bases bear no serious consideration or engagement. (See also Fassin 2007; Fiske 2016; Knight 2003)

Bishop Owusu and others’ claims about T. B. Joshua’s death gained traction precisely because of the truths they did convey, truths which point to the place of Africa in the “shadows” of world power. Such truths recall, for instance, the *longue*

durée of African leaders being extinguished by Western powers, including the CIA's role in the assassination of the Pan-Africanist Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba (Williams 2021). At the same time, the Western invocation of President Magufuli's Covid-19 denialism and subsequent death as a "cautionary tale" reactivates colonial tropes by "echo[ing] colonial imperatives to civilize and 'save' physically and morally threatening Black colonial subjects through the logics of science" (Charles 2022, 16). This is, after all, precisely the imperial logics that Magufuli so vehemently refused.

Conclusion

By interrupting our knee-jerk reaction to dismiss Magufuli and T. B. Joshua's Pan-African and Pentecostal views as "conspiracy theories," we might better attend to the truths that these leaders articulated in their quests to reposition Africa within global power relations. It is from this perspective that we may grasp the persuasiveness of the ideas and practices they promoted, as well as the ones which followed in the wake of their deaths. Such "Black counterknowledge" – as John Fiske (2016) famously dubbed HIV/AIDS "conspiracies" among Black communities in the US context – operates in contemporary Africa to similarly denounce and refuse the legacies of ongoing imperialism and anti-Black racism. In so doing, these narratives recast the continent not as a place of shadow, but as a bastion of light leading the struggle against shadows located elsewhere – whether in the neo/colonial West or in the spiritual realm.

Today, the lived consequences of President Magufuli and Prophet T. B. Joshua's actions are still unfolding. Among their effects will likely be a diverse range of political, spiritual, bodily, and social impacts. This list includes both healing and sickness, deliverance and denial, anti-imperial aspiration and international condemnation, as well as the centralizing and decentralizing of power across multiple scales. Unfolding within even a single Covid-19 "conspiracy theory" are thus a multiplicity of divergent effects, which can simultaneously include the buttressing of an increasingly authoritarian state and the mobilization of transnational African networks to challenge the hegemony of the Global North. I therefore conclude with the caution that we must refuse the impulse to grant ourselves the conceit of already knowing in advance what such practices of suspicion and counterknowledge might afford, lest the very idea of the "conspiracy theory" blind us to its generativity.

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12

“THE TRUTH IS NOT KNOWN”

Covid-19 Vaccine Hesitancy as a Failure of Biomedicine’s Moral Legitimacy in Zambia

Justin Lee Haruyama

Over the course of 2021, a series of chilling videos circulated across Zambian social media, linking Covid-19 vaccines with a global scheme to reduce the world’s population and cement white supremacy through the mass murder of Africans. These videos demonstrate how there are hidden, malign forces at work behind the visible, explicit pronouncements of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other formal institutions to be promoting public health and social welfare. As such, these videos operate as a theory of conspiracy, in that they are a worked-out and coherent discourse that elucidates the workings of a secretive and illegal plot to murder millions of African people. But if, in a literal sense, it is certainly accurate to describe these videos as explaining a theory (or theories) of global conspiracy, to place them in the well-recognized and oft-invoked, if sometimes poorly defined, category of “conspiracy theory” is more problematic. Partially this is because “conspiracy theory” operates as both a folk category widely deployed in Western popular and journalistic discourses as well as a more technical concept employed by scholars. More seriously, it is because in popular and scholarly discourses alike “conspiracy theory” is a category that does work. Very often, the discursive work performed by the invocation of the category of “conspiracy theory” is to consign the very suspicion that there might be a malicious conspiracy to a domain of primordial irrationality, treating the suspicion of conspiracy as a paranoid one whose epistemological bases bear no serious consideration or engagement.

In this chapter, I do the opposite. Taking seriously my Zambian friends and interlocutors, themselves too often relegated to a place of shadow (Ferguson 2006) in imaginaries of global knowledge production and authority, as savvy consumers and analysts of global information, I treat the theories of conspiracy presented in the videos and texts they shared with me as the alarming call to awareness and vigilance that they should be. Our different foundations of epistemological justification led my Zambian interlocutors and me to (sometimes) very different truth claims

regarding the Covid-19 vaccines and their safety and efficacy. Tabling a discussion of the “truth of the matter,” I suggest that my Zambian friends’ and my vastly different experiences of and stories about moral legitimacy constitute the basis of our different forms of epistemological justification.

As of writing in December 2021, Zambia has experienced at least three waves of Covid-19 infections, with around 300,000 confirmed cases and 4,000 confirmed deaths: at various times, morgues in the country have become overwhelmed with the number of dead.¹ There are two vaccines currently available in Zambia: Astra-Zeneca and Johnson & Johnson, both donated through the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) initiative by countries such as the United States. Skepticism of the vaccines in Zambia is high, however, and only 4.3 percent of the population have received at least one dose of a vaccine.

In one of the most extensively shared videos on Zambian social media in 2021, entitled “Wake up Africa, Wake up Black Man,” Nevers Mumba, the former vice president of Zambia and former Zambian High Commissioner (ambassador) to Canada, gives forceful remarks at the beginning and end of the video addressed directly to the viewer. In these remarks, Mr. Mumba states the following:

Zambia must not inject any vaccine in any Zambian body before strenuous verification and validation is done to this vaccine. . . . We must declare that the vaccine is unsafe until it is scientifically proved to be safe . . . by our own scientists and our own doctors. I heard somebody say: “where are we going to get scientists and doctors?” Well, if you can’t verify what is given you by your own people, then I suggest you don’t get involved in catching things that are meant by others. . . . Then you can be poisoned, and we can all die like fools like Martin Luther King, Junior said. . . . We may be poor, but we are not stupid. We can read when they write on the vaccine this is not for distribution in the United States, and this cannot be used in the European Union. . . . They’re even telling you that this is not for us, because they have got some other substandard stuff that they make for us. How do you know the injection given to President Biden is the same vaccine as the one which is coming here? . . . You can watch it on CNN and say even President Biden got a dosage of it. Are you sure? Did you see it? Did you get the drop and analyze it that it is the same drop getting into an African’s body? . . . Our salvation, outside God, will be from responsible government on the continent of Africa. . . . We shall die like fools if we have a government which is corrupt and is only waiting to be given money by the international community.

Between these opening and closing remarks made by Mumba are spliced a number of ominous pieces of footage of different interviews and recorded panels in which white men discuss the overpopulation of the world, and how it is necessary for “three billion people,” beginning in Africa, to be eliminated in order to return the global human population to balance. The video continues with footage of an interview in which a retired member of the South African Institute for Marine

Research (SAIMR), a bogus front for a mercenary organization with ties to the former Apartheid regime in South Africa, admits to working with SAIMR to infect large numbers of black Africans with HIV under the guise of philanthropic vaccination campaigns. The rhetorical effect of this repeated interview footage is to make it seem quite plausible, when the video returns at its conclusion to Mumba's remarks, that white actors might once again use the cover of a mass vaccination campaign to murder large numbers of Africans.

"Vaccine hesitancy" has proved to be one of the buzzwords of the Covid-19 era, with many, especially in the Global North, concerned that Covid-19 vaccine "conspiracy theories," such as the one promoted in the "Wake up Africa, Wake up Black Man" video, might seriously depress vaccination rates. What if tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of additional people were to die of Covid-19 due to "vaccine hesitancy" promoted by popular videos such as this one? What if, as the Covid-19 virus circulates unrestrained among a largely unvaccinated population in Zambia, new variants continue to mutate and follow upon the heels of Delta and Omicron, spreading to once again threaten already-vaccinated populations concentrated in the Global North? What if, in short, the unruly epistemologies of people in Zambia and elsewhere in the Global South refuse to submit themselves to the authority of hegemonic knowledge-producers in the Global North, most particularly in the biomedical establishment, and thus threaten the lives and physical safety not only of Zambians themselves but also of those who subscribe to the knowledge claims of these authorities and choose to become vaccinated? This, then, is an epistemological contest in which the stakes, both moral and practical, are extremely high. Countless lives hang in the balance, no matter whether it is true that mass Covid-19 vaccination programs poison and kill millions of Africans, as Nevers Mumba suggests when he says, "we'll die like fools," or whether new Covid-19 variants mutating in bodies of unvaccinated Zambians return to kill millions of already-vaccinated people, as some in the biomedical establishment fear.

The moral urgency and imperatives of the theories of conspiracy presented by the "Wake up Africa, Wake up Black Man" and other similar videos regarding Covid-19 vaccines are not new. In an analysis of strikingly similar theories of conspiracy regarding the origin of the HIV/AIDS pandemic circulating among Black American communities in the 1990s, John Fiske (2016) suggests that these theories are well grounded in all-too-accurate understandings of the continuing murderously anti-Black intentions of the American state. Fiske does not exactly endorse these theories of conspiracy, despite the fact that they employ significantly different discursive and knowledge-legitimizing practices than do the norms of academic scholarship or even mainstream journalism. But Fiske does not dismiss these theories of conspiracy, either. Describing (approvingly) the knowledge contained within these theories of conspiracy as "Blackstream knowledge" or "Black counterknowledge" and its intrepid producers as "knowledge gangsters," Fiske situates these theories of conspiracy within the histories of the Tuskegee Experiment, of Henrietta Lacks, of National Security Memorandum 200 (the Kissinger Report), and of other knowledge by Black Americans of the murderous and exploitative

intentions the American state and other hegemonic biomedical institutions carry toward them. In the end, Fiske concludes that though the theories of a conspiracy that the American state engineered the HIV/AIDS virus to kill gay and Black Americans may never be confirmable through certain standards of evidence, the context and history of institutional anti-Black racism (and homophobia) in the United States mean that these theories should nevertheless be taken seriously and granted a certain degree of credence.

In a later volume, Mark Fenster (2008) takes strong issue with Fiske’s analysis, arguing that it is only the fact that the Blackstream theories of conspiracy described by Fiske arise from a radical leftist and anti-racist political position that makes them seem at all plausible to Fiske, who shares this political orientation. Fenster points out that if we as scholars were to turn our attention to conspiracy theories emerging from the right-wing and white supremacist regions of the American political spectrum, such as those articulated by *The Turner Diaries* (1978), this impetus to grant credence to theories of conspiracy based on political sympathy would disappear. Fenster argues that for consistency then, all conspiracy theories, whether emerging from the radical left or right or any other political-discursive space, should be approached by scholars in the same (epistemologically) skeptical way.

Fenster suggests that, though skeptical of theories of conspiracy, part of his intervention is to repudiate the pathologization (associated most prominently with Hofstadter [1965] 1996) in America of conspiracy theories and those who believe in them and, thus, in some sense to rehabilitate these theories. But if it is in some sense true that Fenster’s argument serves to rehabilitate the *political* role of conspiracy theories in American society, it is nevertheless very much also the case that unlike Fiske in his restrained description of Blackstream counterknowledges, Fenster’s analysis is extremely pathologizing of the *epistemological* bases of theories of conspiracy. In his rehabilitation of conspiracy-theory-as-politics mode, for example, Fenster writes: “given the history of [actual] conspiracy and the inequitable distribution of access to capital and political power, the notion that conspiracy theory necessarily expresses a *political* pathology ignores the fact that it can correctly identify present and historical wrongs” (Fenster 2008, 11; my emphasis). But, switching from the political to the epistemological, Fenster continues in the next two sentences: “Conspiracy theory is frequently wrong – and outrageously, even seemingly pathologically so. . . . Totalizing conspiracy theories frequently lack substantive proof, rely on dizzying leaps of logic, and oversimplify the political, economic, and social structure of power” (11). Later, Fenster expands on his analysis of the epistemological underpinnings (and pleasurable seductions) of conspiracy theory:

The resolution that a conspiracy theory ultimately offers appears at once procrustean, fitting complex events into a simple schema, and increasingly ramshackle as it attempts to accommodate a proliferation of complicated and conflicting data. More troubling still, the narrative faces the nearly impossible burden of finding an ending. A conclusion would call a halt to interpretation – conspiracy theory’s key practice and source of pleasure – by suggesting either

that the conspiracy has won or that it did not represent the existential threat it seemed to promise. Either ending is unsatisfactory: the former offers defeat by an enemy, while the latter suggests a formal defeat of what was clearly a lesser conspiratorial threat.

(14)

By rehabilitating the political role of conspiracy theories in American society while simultaneously denigrating their epistemological bases as “procrustean”, “ram-shackle”, “troubling”, “outrageous”, and even, seemingly, “pathological,” Fenster thus continues to construct a super-preeminence for his own theorizing on the sociopsychology of conspiracy theories, a preeminence that precedes and thus overrides the knowledge claims of (alleged) conspiracy theorists themselves. Like most “God-eye” or “views from nowhere,” the preeminence of his own epistemological framework assumed by Fenster is itself atheoretical, in the sense that it is not something that Fenster questions, considers, or theorizes in his work.

This asymmetry constructed by Fenster (and many other social scientists who have written on the topic of “conspiracy theories”) between his own knowledge claims and those of the alleged conspiracy theorists he describes short-circuits the discussion, because it precludes any serious engagement with the content of the theories themselves. Although actual illegal “conspiracies” (e.g., Watergate or Iran-Contra) may exist and may from time to time even be uncovered, it is well understood by all involved that the appropriate way to refer to this knowledge of conspiracy is not with the term “conspiracy theory” but with some other knowledge-legitimizing phrase such as “investigative journalism” or “historical research.” Everyone, from social science scholars to journalists to alleged conspiracy theorists themselves, understand that in the language game of contemporary English, “conspiracy theories” are, by definition, wrong (Knight 2003). As Fenster notes, they are, indeed, seemingly pathologically wrong. But if this is so, then Fenster undertakes a major power play when he not only titles his volume “conspiracy theories” but, as the title suggests, takes “conspiracy theory” as his prime analytical object as well. He never has to engage seriously with the substantive claims of these “conspiracy theories” (as truth or fact, rather than as political expediency) since they are already, merely by being categorized as such, defined to be factually wrong (even if they may play a positive political role).

Though Fiske confines his attention to only a single strand of “conspiracy theory” (which, signaling his epistemological openness, he does not call such), his analysis is more careful in this respect because he does not assume an a priori knowledge that can or does override the claims of the “knowledge gangsters” he describes. Instead, Fiske applies an analysis that is neither entirely skeptical nor entirely credulous and pushes readers to critically (re)consider as much the theories of conspiracy themselves as the strategies of *disbelief* by which they are so easily disregarded. My approach in this chapter is similar to Fiske’s in that, though acknowledging my own positioned knowledge practices which do not admit the plausibility that Covid-19 vaccines are produced with the intent to murder

Africans, I do not assume *a priori* that these knowledge practices trump those of my Zambian interlocutors. Indeed, I suggest that the storied knowledge of my friends in Zambia, though different than my own or of the academic field I work in, nevertheless points to some glaring omissions and serious blind spots in blithe liberal disregarding of the knowledge that Covid-19 is part of a plot to murder Africans. Still, Fenster’s critiques are important here, because the political valences at work are both serious and troubling. Unlike the Blackstream counterknowledge of AIDS-as-bioweapon that Fiske describes, which could plausibly be critiqued as mistaken or misguided but not so plausibly as immediately dangerous to public welfare, theories of conspiracy regarding Covid-19 vaccines are locked within a fierce public debate about mass vaccination, upon which huge numbers of lives depend. Moreover, though in some ways clearly an echo of the Black radical leftist political orientation that Fiske recounts, the “Wake up Africa, Wake up Black Man” video is in the current moment closely associated with political voices that in the Global North would be recognized as coming from the hard right. One of the other videos frequently circulated in Zambia alongside “Wake Up Africa, Wake Up Black Man,” for example, is a clip showing (Republican) governor of the US state of Arkansas, Asa Hutchinson, conducting a town hall in the community of Siloam Springs (a small town with a population of 17,000). As chairman of the National Governors Association, Governor Hutchinson was a vocal proponent for encouraging voluntary Covid-19 vaccination, though he also signed an Arkansas law prohibiting the state government from implementing vaccine or masking mandates. The participants of the Siloam Springs town hall, all of whom are white and none of whom in the video are wearing masks, accost Governor Hutchinson regarding the vaccine in the following way:

- Hutchinson:* Covid is real. People get sick from – [in response to audience shouting]: shhhhhhhh shhhhh.
- Man 1:* You’re lying. We know the truth. You’re lying, we know the truth governor.
- Hutchinson:* Would you like to be recognized with a microphone? Or would you just like to yell? [continued shouting from audience] We’re gonna be living with people dying, if we do not increase our vaccination rates. I still need to get that message out. And so, it sounds like some people want low vaccination rates, OK [great applause from audience].
- Man 2:* So, explain to me why there are so many who have the vaccine, that are getting the virus.
- Man 3:* What’s in the vaccine? Give me the insert sheet [great applause from audience]. So informed consent means you tell me what you put in my body. If Mr. Doctor gives me a vial and says “trust me;” I’ll give you a vial, you trust me!
- Woman 1:* Every SARS-2 Covid vaccine that’s available on the market is manufactured using aborted fetal tissue. I have been praying that God Himself will step in so that Christians are not forced by their employers

and a mandate to get the vaccine. Yet even if God does not, I will not bow [pauses as audience applauded loudly]. And with all respect governor, we love you and appreciate you, but [woman puts great stress on each word] GOD WILL NOT HOLD YOU GUILTLess if you fail to stand up for the Christians who believe it is in their right to abstain from the vaccine.

Woman 2: The numbers again are being manipulated to try to force unvaccinated people towards a mandated vaccine and I know you may not see that now, but it's down the road: everything that was a conspiracy six months ago is now coming to fruition and six months from now the story's gonna be different!

Woman 3: My whole family had Covid, but let me tell you something, all of us took the therapeutics from Day 1. And [woman raises her voice and begins shouting words] if doctors were allowed to tell the truth and treat their patients with these therapeutics, we would not have hospitals full of sick people dying! [great applause] Don't smirk at me governor! You should care on both sides of the aisle on what works. What will save lives, Governor? And it's not the vaccine!

In the context of the extremely polarized and divisive contemporary US political environment, the statements of the Siloam Springs town hall participants in this video are no doubt quite troubling to scholars in left-aligned disciplines such as cultural anthropology as much as cultural studies. As an ethnographer of Zambia, in this chapter, I speak to the contexts of why and how the epistemological claims of these residents of Siloam Springs and others in videos such as “Wake Up Africa, Wake Up Black Man” appeal to my interlocutors in Zambia. I cannot speak directly to the epistemological contexts in which the residents of Siloam Springs themselves articulate this knowledge, except to note of course that poor whites in rural America too have often been the object of state and biomedical indifference and disregard, even if they have not been the active targets of genocide (Buck 2002). The moral, epistemological, and political stakes at play make it even more important, I suggest, to slow down and think carefully. We must, as Fiske encourages, undertake the much harder labor of reconsidering the strategies of disbelief deployed by hegemonic liberal ways of understanding the world rather than the easier task of pointing to the ways that knowledge labeled as “conspiracy theories” might be flawed.

Taking seriously an imperative to slow down and think carefully through these competing knowledge claims, in this piece I reflect upon issues raised by the question of epistemological justification. In traditional Anglo-American analytic philosophy, epistemology is often framed as an analysis of “justified true belief,” sometimes glossed as the “JTB” view of knowledge (Ichikawa and Steup 2018). Of course, what counts as truth is inexorably linked to prevailing power relations, as has long been demonstrated by scholars in feminist, queer, and Black studies (Ahmed 2007; Haraway 1988; Weheliye 2014; Wynter 2003). There is no universal, non-positioned stance from which to judge absolutely what is “true” and

what is “false,” even if it is the case that within any particular language game (Wittgenstein 1969) or regime of veridiction (Foucault 2008), it is possible to advance certain claims of truth and falsity. Here, I wish to shift focus from the notion of “truth” to the less-often considered notion of “justification,” without thereby relegating the knowledge claims of the “Wake up Africa” video to a different mode of existence (Latour 2013), separate and therefore unjudgeable within the regimes of knowledge inhabited by the claims of the mainstream biomedical establishment. In short, I ask: in a global system that at its ideological foundations continues to be violently anti-Black (Harney and Moten 2013; Jenkins and Leroy 2020), what are the evidentiary bases that can form appropriate justification for knowledge?

One important consideration is the question of how epistemological authority, and therefore the epistemological justification that authority can grant, is related to moral legitimacy. As a subject who subscribes to the knowledge claims of the scientific, biomedical establishment concentrated in the Global North, I of course rely upon the epistemological authority of others to form my own knowledge, which I believe to be justified, just as much as does anyone in Zambia who subscribes to the knowledge claims of the “Wake up Africa” video. To state the perfectly obvious: as a non-scientist, non-medical practitioner, I had absolutely no unmediated knowledge regarding the Covid-19 vaccine (in my case, Pfizer/BioNTech) before I allowed a nurse to inject it into my arm. I took it on blind faith that the news reports and health advice I had received were not part of a conspiracy to do me harm and that the vaccine I received would fill me with life-preserving antibodies and not life-murdering poison.

As Evans-Pritchard (1937) long ago demonstrated, however, knowledge systems of all kinds tend to be anchored by closed loops of self-reinforcing poles of justification that allow for little doubt. For the Azande, Evans-Pritchard argued, these poles were witchcraft, oracles, and magic. I might say that the poles of my own knowledge system are the mainstream Western news media (the *New York Times*, BBC, etc.), the claims of university-trained “experts,” and the advice of government and inter-governmental agencies (CDC, WHO, etc.). Any particular source in this scheme can of course be doubted. But, crucially, I can only doubt any of these poles in terms of the other two: I can only doubt the reliability of the WHO because I read critical reports of it in the *New York Times*, etc. Because this is the language game and way of life (Wittgenstein 1969) I inhabit, I am not really able to evaluate knowledge claims made outside of this system, nor am I likely to wonder if all three poles of my knowledge system might all agree and yet be giving me false (or even malicious) knowledge.

But all knowledge is also storied (Ingold 2011). The story I accept of my justified knowledge is plausible precisely because as a straight, (partially-) white, cis, American man, the powerful institutions that surround me, including the American state, the university, and the capitalist news media have served to protect me and people who look like me for most of my life. A story of biomedical science as a gradually progressing field over centuries that is constantly pushing to develop new methods of serving the health needs of my body is plausible to me precisely because it accords with

my lived experience. Meanwhile, for my friends and interlocutors in Zambia, other kinds of stories are more salient. Biomedical mass vaccination campaigns and clinical drug trials in Africa have a long, storied history of being accomplished through violent coercion (Feldman-Savelsberg, Ndonko, and Schmidt-Ehry 2000; White 2000) with sometimes murderous effects (Nyalile and Loo 2021). Moreover, as a “front-line state” once surrounded by hostile and aggressive white minority regimes in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa, Zambia has a specific history of being targeted for violence intended to maintain white supremacy in the region. As the different clips of video spliced together in the “Wake up Africa” video demonstrate forcefully, in the twenty-first century Zambians are still keenly aware of global discourses of anti-Blackness which figure them as the least desirable and therefore most expendable members of the global population. At one point in the “Wake up Africa” video, a certain Dr. Robert Young provides testimony to the “ITNJ Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Weaponization of the Biosphere,” providing the following comments, ostensibly regarding the Covid-19 vaccine:

For the purpose of sterilization and population control. There’s too many people on the planet we need to get rid of, in the words of Bill Gates: at least three billion people need to die. So, we’ll just start off in Africa, we’ll start doing our research there and we’ll eliminate most of the Africans because they’re deplorable, they’re worthless, they’re not part of this world economy, so they have their rights taken away, and they’re suppressed and they’re experimented.

Though sometimes contemporary Africa is held to be relatively isolated from “American-centric” discourses of racism and anti-racism, as Pierre notes “the very production of ‘Africa’ – its colonial history, its geographical, political, and cultural mapping as well as ongoing discursive constructions of the continent’s incorrigible difference – occurs through ideas of race” (2013, 5). The “Wake up Africa” video’s very ubiquity across Zambian social media in 2021, not to mention its explicit endorsement by a prominent Zambian elder statesman, similarly suggests that the story – and therefore knowledge – of murderous anti-Black racism the video tells is more real for many Zambians than alternative stories of philanthropic care emanating from the Global North.

If then knowledge is “justified true belief,” as many philosophers have it, what justification would people in Zambia have, as one of my friends there recently asked me, to trust the pro-vaccine pronouncements of the BBC, CNN, and Al-Jazeera? These powerful media corporations are part and parcel of a global capitalist system founded upon the often-times murderous racialization, exploitation, and dispossession that disproportionately affects Black and Brown people (Bhattacharyya 2018; Jenkins and Leroy 2020; Robinson 2000), especially in Africa (Mbembe 2017). Operating from my own positioned realm of knowledge, I respond to my Zambian friends over social media with links to articles in the BBC and *The New York Times* that seek to document and discredit various “conspiracy theories” regarding the Covid-19 vaccine(s). I consider the knowledge I derive from these sources well-justified, even if

I cannot be sure it is true. But that is precisely the point. My knowledge that there is no plot to drastically reduce the world’s population through Covid-19 vaccines does not feel risky, or precarious, or naive, because the type of racialized subject I embody has never been the target of similar such plots. Other racialized subjects have.

As one of my good friends in Zambia, Miyanda Miyoba, phrased it to me bluntly:

My biggest concern is why are there too many contradicting theories about the vaccine? Am concerned. You seem not so concerned about that. For you, these guys opposing [the vaccine] are fake unless guys from the WHO, the same people with an agenda of depopulating the world, agree with it.²

Miyanda’s comments raise starkly the issue of moral legitimacy. I agree with Miyanda that powerful institutions such as the WHO headquartered in the Global North probably have a compelling interest in checking and even reducing the world’s population, probably starting in places with high population growth like Africa. But, insulated as I am from violent histories of biomedical control and exclusion, I remain blithely unconcerned that this vaccine is part of such an attempt to depopulate the world. But from Miyanda’s perspective, such nonchalance is irresponsibly risky. In a situation of ambiguity (Giles-Vernick, Traoré, and Bainilago 2016) arising from contradictory theories about the vaccine, the epistemological dictates of hegemonic institutions such as the WHO cannot be trusted, precisely because of their long history of complicity with regimes of anti-Blackness and inequality that have created widespread disease and death in Africa (Fassin 2007; Tilley 2011). No matter, then, whether the Covid-19 vaccines poison and kill millions or whether widespread vaccine hesitancy arising from lack of trust in biomedical institutions causes dangerous new variants to emerge: the immoral histories of anti-Black biomedical practices in Africa have come to threaten us all.

Notes

- 1 There is also a strong possibility that these numbers are vastly underreported.
- 2 Miyanda requested to be identified with his real name in this piece to make clear that these comments were his own.

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COVID-19-RELATED CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE BALTIC STATES

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This chapter gives an overview of the Covid conspiracy theories that have been circulating in the Baltic states either openly or semi-openly, that is, those which are or have been freely accessible on the Internet or via the search engines of popular social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Facebook) where registering as a group member is not a set pre-requirement to access content. First, the selection is influenced by the code of ethics of internet studies which means respecting the privacy of the members of non-public groups and informing them that a study about them is being carried out (Segerstad et al. 2017). Another aspect that should be pointed out in the context of our choice of material is the problem of hidden virality emerging in connection with the spread of misinformation, including conspiracy theories. The conspiracy theories and fake news that tend to be more dangerous and intense (e.g., those advocating violence, breaching the law, or exhibiting harmful health-endangering behavior) often circulate in closed groups on popular social media platforms thus fly under the radar of the critically minded audiences who might question the explanations or flag these as inappropriate. In the case of coronavirus conspiracy theories spreading in the Baltic states, it is important to realize that they are actively spread not only in closed Facebook groups, but also via instant messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) or shared documents on Google Docs, and sometimes they never reach wider audiences. Focusing on the conspiracy theories that are freely available on the web is the best way to provide a survey of the most popular theories.

As conspiracy theories are often classified as misinformation, the differences in official measures for combating misinformation in the Baltic states should be pointed out. Latvia is the only one of the Baltic states that resorts to the penal code in combating misinformation and where state institutions have detained people spreading fake news. In Latvia's neighboring states, people spreading fake news do not face criminal penalties. Estonia and Lithuania are currently relying on media

literacy to educate society. In Estonia, a special team at the Government Office is working on the issue. Lithuania has engaged military analysts (Springe 2021). Differences in the penal code affect the public spreading of conspiracy theories, which is why our study relies on reports and expert opinions that have been issued by misinformation monitors working at the aforementioned institutions, official Facebook fact-checking partners, and scholars researching mostly publicly accessible channels.

The Main Topics of Covid Conspiracy Theories in the Baltic States

The main topics of Covid conspiracy theories in the Baltic states were relatively similar to each other in terms of their general outline. Several reports show that the most popular conspiracy theories have been imported, as it were, and that their main content coincides with that of conspiracy theories disseminated elsewhere in the world (Palkova and Bikovs 2020; Springe 2020). The differences appear primarily in the depictions of local-level conspirators and their minions. At the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, during the first wave, topics circulated around five main centers: the origin of the virus, measures taken against Covid-19, manipulations related to 5G, dangerous vaccines, and the fake pandemic or questioning the existence of the coronavirus (cf. also Grunskis 2020). Drawing such dividing lines is somewhat arbitrary, as different topics – even those that would cancel one another out (e.g., denying the existence of Covid-19 and presenting 5G radiation as a factor boosting the virus) – can appear in the same posts (Osula 2020). Generally, these topics also remained predominant during the second wave, with minor changes in their emphases. The spread of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories thus intensified as the first vaccines were being developed (Bolt et al. 2021; Laine 2020a), while explanations connected to 5G shifted to the background (Springe 2020). In the following section, we depict the main coronavirus conspiracy theories circulating in the Baltic states and point out some of their local distinctive features.

The Origin of the Coronavirus

Conspiracy theories focusing on the origin of the coronavirus could be broadly divided into two: first, those emphasizing the human-made origin of the virus, with the often-made claim that Covid-19 is a deliberately developed biological weapon that has been disseminated in the world on purpose, with another group of conspiracy theories claiming that the virus escaped from the laboratory accidentally; yet its escape was deliberately kept secret.

Most conspiracy theories claimed that China was to blame for the origin of the virus because Covid had been connected to the city of Wuhan and a laboratory located there. To a lesser extent, conspiracy theorists also pointed to the United States, Russia's chemical weapon industry, and Big Pharma, a standard villain of conspiracy theories. The common denominator of these conspiracy theories was

the claim that biological weapons had been developed with the purpose of weakening people or enacting genocide, which would supposedly help the conspirators to execute even more grand scheme plans. The main aim that was referred to was decimating the population numbers under the condition of universal scarcity of resources, which supposedly would help the conspirators to maintain and increase their power. Genocide was also discussed as a means to redraw the geopolitical power balance: conspiracy theories that saw Chinese activities behind the biological weapon connected this with Beijing's attempts to unsettle the global economy. To balance these theories, other conspiracy theories circulated that saw the accusations being launched toward China as devious actions of the US administration. Such theories emphasized that the virus must have been a secret American biological weapon and that accusing China would support Washington in their economic competition with China (Ventsel, Madisson, and Hansson 2021).

The local aspect of the conspiracy theories concerning the deliberate engineering of the virus became apparent mostly in the emphases laid on the connections of Big Pharma with the local health care workers. Special attention was paid to simulation events aimed at fighting pandemics that were organized in the Baltics as well as in the rest of the world. Often, references were made to Event 201 that took place in New York on October 18, 2019, where 130 medical experts played out a situation in which an unstoppable pandemic spread around the world. This was seen as proof for the deliberate orchestrating of the Covid pandemic and a sign of its links with Big Pharma. The conspiracy tales treated the pandemic simulation events that had taken place in the Baltic states in a similar fashion. Thus, the claim spread on social media that Arkadi Popov, the medical emergency leader of the Estonian Health Board, had known about the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in advance and accordingly planned a crisis-training event named Wuhan Silence for Autumn 2020. Actually, this was a follow-up event of the crisis training called Pattaya Wind that had taken place in September 2019, and the name was randomly chosen. The conspiracy theorists, however, considered this to be a sign for the connection between the medical institutions and the outbreak of the pandemic (Raudsik 2020a). A similar connection to the start of the pandemic was seen in the activities of the virologist Irja Lutsar, Head of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Covid crisis. In 2015, Lutsar participated in a study together with Yanpeng Li, scientist at the Wuhan Institute of Virology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which, in the eyes of conspiracy theorists, proved that she had been involved in the creation of the coronavirus and was now "leading" the Estonian scholars' efforts to keep the virus in check.

5G and Covid Conspiracy Theories

At the beginning of 2020, conspiracy theories connecting 5G technology with the origin and/or spread of the coronavirus circulated in social media groups in the Baltic states. Their main claim was that 5G weakened people's immunity, making them more susceptible to coronavirus, or that 5G waves themselves helped spreading the

virus, while the general public, first and foremost the mainstream media and the political elite, would not acknowledge this information. When speaking of the dangers of 5G, parallels were often drawn between X-ray imaging and microwave ovens (“Kas 5G vandenõuteooria” 2020). Another broader cluster of conspiracy theories claimed that in the shadow of the chaos caused by the coronavirus, the erection of 5G masts had been secretly started (“Koroonavandenõud meie seas” 2020) and that Covid vaccines serve as a pretense for injecting people with microchips. It was said that Wuhan was the first city in China which developed a 5G network and started applying the technology extensively, and, therefore, it could simply be no coincidence that the novel virus was first identified in Wuhan.

Often, these conspiracy theories cannot be linked to any particular conspirator. And, if so, mostly to the so-called top globalizers such as Bill Gates, George Soros, and Big Pharma who were thought of as engaging in joint plan to enforce mandatory global vaccinations, with the vaccines containing microchips that are activated by 5G waves (The Conversation 2020).

Characteristic for the Baltic states was the use of narratives which predicted a future dystopian surveillance society on the basis of 5G technology and microchip injections. Parallels were often drawn with censorship by the repressive organs of the Soviet State Security Service (KGB) and with the surveillance society that supposedly accompanies the introduction of 5G technology.

Furthermore, parallels were drawn between different fact-checking institutions cooperating with mainstream media and Soviet-era KGB organs. For example, Delfi in Estonia and Re:Check in Latvia were said to be working like the Soviet-era KGB agents or “chekists” (a pun on the words “Cheka” and “to check”). A petition was launched against Re:Check to stop its activities, and its employees were labelled prostitutes, “libersluts,” “the Ministry of Truth,” and heirs of Goebbels (Sprünge 2020). It should be added that parallels have been drawn among Soviet repressive bodies, fact checkers, and professional journalists, as well as other state institutions whose job it was to introduce anti-Covid measures, and that these parallels can also be found in other conspiracy theories, most often in the context of the fake pandemic narrative.

Fake Pandemic Conspiracy Theory

One of the most widespread, persistent, and comprehensive Covid-19 conspiracy theories claims that the pandemic is a malicious hoax, of which there are several versions. Thus, various influential Kremlin channels, as well as alt-right social media posts, emphasize that a corrupt elite, led by the US Deep State and influential international organizations, is trying to stir up unfounded fear of the coronavirus. The overthrow of Donald Trump, the preparation of forced vaccinations and an unprecedented profit for the corrupt pharmaceutical industry, the microchipping of the population, the enforcement of mind controls, or even the imposition of genocide, etc., have been mentioned as hidden goals of a conspiracy. A common denominator of these types of conspiracy theories was the notion that mainstream

media reports of the coronavirus were overly blown out of proportion and too frightening and, therefore, represented a rather malicious cover-up of the true situation or a false maneuver. The other *éminence grise* in the fake pandemic narrative is Big Pharma, which supposedly compels people to use various medicines, including vaccines, by scaring them in order to multiply its own profit. In addition, the global elite is accused of using scare tactics to restrict people's freedom, force them to use dangerous vaccines, or make them comply with anti-Covid measures.

Although the main actors in the pandemic denial conspiracy theories are similar in all three Baltic states, several local individuals and institutions are nevertheless involved. Thus, the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs was referred to as the main institution executing Covid policies having “ties with the big conspiracy” (Raudsik 2020a). More curious stories that undermined the reliability of medical establishments circulated: for example, an anonymous employee of the Infectious Diseases Clinic of the West Tallinn Central Hospital had told the portal Vanglaplaneet [Prison Planet] that the hospitals were half empty. In addition, the CPAP is said to have misused the ventilators, from which patients have allegedly died. The report also claimed that many relatives made unsubstantiated statements that the deceased died of Covid, as this would help keep the “imaginary” pandemic alive (Raudsik 2021c). The fact that very few people are thought to have died from Covid-19 has also been suggested as a sign of a fake pandemic (Raudsik 2020c).

During the first wave, several European countries imposed strict restrictions to contain the spread of the virus. In this context, Latvia turned out to be a country where the number of the infected population was relatively low. At the same time, these positive results made some people feel that the virus did not actually exist, as many were able to claim that “they did not know anyone who had fallen ill.” This became one of the leading “arguments” in different explanatory schemes of the fake pandemic conspiracy narratives (Springe 2020).

Anti-Covid-19 Measures

The most widespread conspiracy theories saw the government-enforced anti-virus measures as a malicious threat to people's health or reckless experiment. It has often been claimed that wearing a mask increases the risk of contracting Covid-19, that masks block oxygen, and that the requirement that they be worn is unlawful (Palkova 2021). The goal of the conspirators, usually the global elite, was portrayed as weakening or even decimating the population; furthermore, the measures were described as a means of scaremongering to make people manipulable (Madisson and Ventsel 2022).

Occasionally, local references were included in the internationally disseminated narratives about the anti-Covid-19 measures. For example, some Facebook posts went viral in Estonia claiming that Covid-19 rapid tests were coming straight out of the box with predetermined results (Raudsik 2021a) and that the first vaccination against Covid-19, which took place in Estonia on December 27, 2020, was a staged photo shoot. The Facebook group of anti-mask and anti-Corona protesters

called “Make Estonia Free Again” shared a post claiming that masks cause cancer. In the Baltic states, it was the top local politicians who were implied to be the main conspirators executing the evil plans of the global elite in the shadow of Covid-19. It was claimed that in cooperation with the mainstream media, the pandemic was used as a justification for restricting people’s rights and freedom of speech and enforcing a police state (Palkova and Bikovs 2020; Laine 2020b). At the same time, demonstrations against the government-imposed Covid measures took place in the Baltic states. In Estonia, the largest meeting took place early in April 2021 as several hundred people participated in protests in front of the Estonian Parliament against legislative amendments that in their opinion would turn Estonia into a police state. In Lithuania, the demonstrations (together with the protests against the Lithuanian–Byelorussian migration crisis) culminated in August 2021, while in Latvia the largest protest meetings, bringing together four thousand people, took place on August 18, 2021. The largest joint action against vaccination was held on August 23, 2021, under the name “Baltic Way,” which calls to mind the mass protest of the same name on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in 1989. It certainly cannot be claimed that such protest meetings against Covid measures have been triggered solely by conspiracy theories, but calls for participation in these have been actively shared on social media channels that disseminate conspiracy theories.

Anti-vaccination Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories popular during the first wave claimed that an anti-virus vaccine had been developed even before the outbreak of the virus and that people were being manipulated into having “voluntary” vaccination in the atmosphere of fear accompanying the virus outbreak. During the second wave, when the vaccines had already been developed, the character of conspiracy theories and the supposed “effects” of the vaccines became more specific. Thus, it was suggested that millions of women had been rendered infertile under the cover of Covid vaccines; it was also claimed that dozens of times more people had died from the vaccines than those who died from the disease itself (Raudsik 2020b). In addition, it was stated that the medical personnel executing the conspirators’ plans were propagating vaccines with the help of deceit, blackmailing, and orders and that the vaccines had already seriously harmed people’s vitality and the health of future generations (Raudsik 2021b).

An analysis of the anti-vaccine social media communication conducted by the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism and covering the Baltic states outlined that the main conspirators were said to be Big Pharma and Bill Gates, who were considered to be a global population decimator (“Who Spreads Vaccine” 2021). References were also made to a secret collaboration of state structures and medical corporations – the conspiracy theories claimed that public talk of vaccine deaths had been forbidden and that the state power structures made health care workers sign papers prohibiting the exposure of actual information on Covid-related deaths (“Who Spreads Vaccine” 2021).

As a separate topic, Covid-related conspiracy theories emerged in the context of the Sputnik vaccine that had been developed in the Russian Federation. According to research conducted by the Global Engagement Center, Russia-linked social media accounts have run a coordinated campaign to spread disinformation on various Covid-19 related topics, including anti-vaccination conspiracy theories (“US Denounces Russian” 2021). The primary aim of such conspiracy theories has been to spread distrust in vaccines developed in the West, which simultaneously would make it possible to demonstrate against “soft power” with the help of the Sputnik vaccine and earn credentials in view of the international public.

Media Landscape of the Corona Conspiracy Theories: Popular Texts, Dissemination Channels, and Mediators

To put it briefly, the popular Corona conspiracy representations spreading in the Baltic states are conspiracy videos or articles of a predominantly foreign origin to which translations into the local language have been added. Analyses of Estonian (Laine 2020c) and Latvian (Palkova and Bikovs 2020) media pointed out that during the first wave of the coronavirus, the scandalous English-language video “Plandemic” – which focused on the anti-vaccination activist and former scientist Judy Mikovits and represented the Corona pandemic as a hoax of a global proportion – gathered tens of thousands of viewers among the Baltic audiences before it was removed from YouTube. In Estonia, the video “The hoax of the Corona pandemic!” that originated in Germany also proved to be very popular. In the video, Billy Six, who calls himself a journalist, claimed that there was no severe risk of virus infection, but it was a large-scale hoax and that German hospitals were actually empty of Corona patients. It is remarkable, though, that the film did not gain particular popularity in Germany (Laine 2020d). In the case of Lithuania, it has also been pointed out that it is not so much original Lithuanian-language content that goes viral among the local social media users, but Russian- and English-language texts, often with added subtitles in Lithuanian (“Who Spreads Vaccine” 2021). Estonian fact-checkers (Laine 2021) also pointed out that a video of Latvian origin (with Estonian subtitles) spread remarkably among Estonian social media users concerning a case in which Marina Kornatovska, who calls herself a physician assistant at the Riga East Hospital, claims that the treatment of Covid-19, the vaccines, and protective masks are dangerous and part of a large-scale hoax and that harmful secret experiments are being carried out on patients at the hospitals. Before reaching Estonia, the video went viral among Latvian social media users, whereas it is worth noting that Marina Kornatovska was detained with criminal charges for spreading dangerous misinformation (“Two Persons Detained” 2020).

In broad outlines, it can be said that in all three Baltic states, the sources promoting these conspiracy theories are connected with three types of actors. The first type of sources can roughly be treated as organs of alternative knowledge in opposition to institutionalized discourses (e.g., the dominant systems of education, media, and medicine) and offering alternatives to these (Madisson and Ventsel

2021, 64). For instance, in Lithuania, it was social media groups such as Unfollow 15min.lt,¹ Unfollow Delfi.lt, and UNFOLLOW MAKARONVIRUS MEDIA Covid-19 (Weitz and Pieciukaitis 2021, 3), whose very names underscore their opposition to the so-called lying mainstream information channels, which were notable importers and disseminators of coronavirus-related conspiracy theories and other misinformation (Weitz and Pieciukaitis 2021, 3). In the Estonian context, Telegram.ee and Vanglaplaneet.ee – the best-known local websites specializing in alternative news and conspiracy theories that have been disseminating stories of a secret and systemic submission of people to the New World Order regime and their malevolent harm with various vaccines – robustly started to spread and transmit Corona theories.

When the Covid-19 pandemic first erupted, numerous social media groups of anti-vaxxers and vaccine sceptics started to cross-use the shared content of such sources and brought new references to conspiracies into circulation. Estonian partners of Facebook fact-checkers (Laine 2020a) noted that in spring 2020, posts from US anti-vaxxer influencers (e.g., Del Bigtree and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.) started to circulate in anti-vaccine groups, connecting the Covid vaccines with Big Pharma and the dastardly plans of the so-called top globalists (e.g., George Soros or Bill Gates). Similar tendencies have also been noticed in the social media scenes of Latvia and Lithuania where Corona conspiracy theories also started to spread on channels propagating/advocating alternative medicine, including anti-vaccine attitudes and so-called panaceas. Thus, Latvian Janis Plaviņš, who has connections to a business selling “Memory Water” and whose Facebook page *Gaismas tīmeklis* (Network of Light) became highly popular (Sprinģe 2020), and Lithuanian politician Viktor Uspaskich, who has also advertised water that can allegedly cure Covid-19, were among the first super-spreaders of Corona conspiracy theories that covered the typical tropes of a biology lab, 5G, and the NWO (“Who Spreads Vaccine” 2021).

The second group of actors who have been enthusiastically spreading Corona conspiracy theories and advocating protests against restrictions connected with masks, vaccination, and the Covid situation, in general, consists of persons and organizations whom security services and journalism have been connecting with the Kremlin’s information influencing. Several reports and media monitoring surveys have pointed out that during the first half of 2020, Baltic (Social) Media users came into contact with the Russian Federation’s disinformation campaign during which stories were spread about the malevolent development of the coronavirus in a (US) laboratory or a fake pandemic whose aim was to frighten and muzzle people (Mölder and Sazonov 2020; Taranas 2020) as well as propagate 5G conspiracy theories (Weitz and Pieciukaitis 2021; Bolt et al. 2021). Both accounts on Twitter and VK have been identified as propagating such conspiracy theories (Fredheim and van Sant 2020), as have the Lithuanian-language Sputnik (Weitz and Pieciukaitis 2021) and news portals that are popular with the Russian-speaking population of the Baltic states such as RuBaltic.ru, Baltnews.ee, Inosmi.ru, Взгляд.ру, and РИТМ Евразии (Mölder and Sazonov 2020). It has also become apparent that media channels connected with the Russian Federation have been spreading conspiracy stories

about dangerous vaccines as well as unfair denigration of the Russian-developed Sputnik vaccine by European and US media and power elites (Palkova 2021). Studies have found that the conviction that the local politicians and media are secretly and malevolently using the coronavirus to serve their own ends is stronger among Latvia's Russian-speaking population than with the Latvian-speaking population (Palkova 2021); also, people who remain in the Russian media influence sphere are more skeptically disposed toward the Corona vaccines used in the EU ("Kas izplata Covid-19" 2021; "Who Spreads Vaccine" 2021; Bolt et al. 2021).

We consider it important to emphasize that it is extremely difficult to measure the influence of strategic communication, including that of deliberately disseminated conspiracy theories, on the formation of the audience's sense of the situation and their decision processes (Szostek 2020; Madisson and Ventsel 2021). The actions of media channels working for the Russian Federation certainly must not be considered as the only reason for the lukewarm interest in vaccination among the Russian-speaking population of the Baltic countries. In addition to influencing activities on part of the Russian Federation, also cultural and sociodemographic factors undoubtedly play a significant role in the formation of negative attitudes toward vaccination. It should also be borne in mind that while the influencing channels of the Russian Federation have been referencing numerous Corona conspiracy theories, the content of such stories often does not need to support the conspiracy references. A qualitative analysis conducted in the first half of 2020 shows that many stories that have appeared on RT and Sputnik ridicule the 5G and biolab conspiracy theories and present their vigorous spread as a sign of the moral panic and ungrounded scaremongering rampant in the West (Madisson and Ventsel 2022; Ventsel, Madisson, and Hansson 2021). On the basis of interviews conducted in Estonia, the local Russian-speaking people's motivation to consume content via the Estonian National Broadcasting or other local professional media outlets has increased in connection with the coronavirus outbreak; on the one hand, this is connected to the local nature of Corona information; on the other hand, it can be linked to an increased trust in Estonian media (Kõuts-Klemm 2021).

It has been noticed in 2021 that the influencers and organizations connected with the Russian Federation's influencing activities take an active part in the content creation of social media groups opposing the measures against coronavirus and invite their audiences to take part in various protests (Springe 2021; Weitz and Pieciukaitis 2021, 5). In Estonia, the leading figures of the Kremlin-supporting non-profit association Eesti Vanemad (Estonian Parents)² and of the Night Watch³ group are actively spreading conspiracy narratives about the dangers of masks and vaccines and a scaremongering campaign ostensibly taking place in the shadow of the Covid pandemic (Kelomees 2021). Dissemination of similar conspiracy theories and the presence of Kremlin-minded activists were also observed in the protests against vaccination certificates on August 10, 2021 held at the Lithuanian Parliament that took a violent turn (Saldžiūnas 2021).

Dissemination of Corona conspiracy theories and advocating anti-restriction actions have given rise to the appearance of some unexpected bedfellows,

including Kremlin-minded activists and populist (right-wing) opposition politicians. The latter could be seen as the third group of actors amplifying the Corona theories. It is telling that the content they post is shared by accounts connected with the Kremlin and that their comments are often shared in the aforementioned social media groups of alternative knowledge. In the Estonian context, it is the members of the populist, right-wing Conservative People's Party of Estonia, particularly Kalle Grünthal and Peeter Ernits, who stand out as disseminators of conspiracy theories focusing on the dangerousness of vaccines and malevolent fanning of the fear of the virus (Kelomees 2021). During the first wave of the virus, the party belonged to the government coalition that enforced relatively strict mobility restrictions in Estonia, and the spreading of the conspiracy narratives about the Covid-19 hoax and scaremongering were started after its relegation into the ranks of the opposition.

Nika Aleksejeva, a researcher at the Digital Forensic Research laboratory, has pointed out in the case of Latvia that the right-wing populist politician Aldis Gobzems spread corona-related misinformation, particularly narratives directed against masks and elites, while his messages on social media have been amplified by the "Memory Water" entrepreneur and anti-vaccine conspiracy theorist Janis Plaviņš (Aleksejeva 2020). Both men have actively contributed to the protests against mandatory vaccination and Covid-19 restrictions that escalated in August 2021 (see also the anti-Covid-19 measures). In January 2021, Gobzems founded the political party *Likums un kārtība* (Law and Order) that has been using several narratives directed against the anti-Covid measures in order to win public attention. Thus, the party has called upon people to resist vaccination and wear yellow stars on their clothing as a sign of the Latvian Government's alleged discrimination against non-vaccinated people being comparable to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. In the case of Lithuania, no names of particular opposition politicians have been given, but it has been pointed out that corona-themed conspiracy theories have been actively spread by political forces on the extreme right, who were also the initiators of the protests against Covid restrictions that resulted in violence on August 10, 2021 (VÄLISMAA 2021).

Conclusion

Already at the beginning of 2020 when Covid-19 became the central point of public discussion, explanations linking the virus to various conspiracies started to spread in the Baltic states. Spurred on by social media and internationally popular conspiracy threads that crossed national borders, five globally viral topics related to Corona conspiracies spread in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: the origin of the virus, the connections of the contagion with 5G, the false pandemic, anti-virus measures, and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories. Coronavirus-related theories were drawn from sources in English, Russian, or German videos, to which subtitles in the local languages were occasionally added, which proved particularly popular.

There were also viral conspiracy texts of local origin, but these could be classified under the topics listed earlier as well.

Covid theories reached the Baltic users of (Social) Media mostly via three types of mediators. A major impetus to the spread of Covid theories was provided by organs of alternative knowledge or diverse websites, social media groups, and influencers who would often have been active in mediating content offering alternatives to mainstream media and medicine. Corona theories started to spread particularly rapidly in social media groups that bring together anti-vaxxers; as could be expected, conspiracy stories blaming Big Pharma have turned out to be particularly popular there. In addition, Corona theories were being advocated by accounts connected with (right-wing) populist opposition politicians and influence campaigns from the Russian Federation. The two latter groups of actors accused global elites (international organizations such as WTO, NATO), mainstream media, top globalists such as Gates and Soros, as well as local political power parties.

Covid-related conspiracy theories have created a noticeable common ground between the three groups of actors who otherwise operate in relatively different information spaces. They often share one another's content on social media, express similar negative attitudes toward Covid restrictions and vaccination policies, and participate side by side in protests against Covid restrictions, including the introduction of vaccination certificates, held near government buildings. They use similar conspiracy rhetoric to point out scapegoats and sketch dark scenarios for the future, in which in our estimation (particularly in 2021), the motifs of scaremongering and controlling the frightened people have emerged as significant foci. In the case of conspiracy theories alleging not only a fake pandemic, but also the dangerous anti-Covid measures and harmful vaccines, it is the expression of *phobophobia* that emerges forcefully.

Phobophobia is based on an understanding that society has been gripped by a wave of fear that inhibits any capacity for rational analysis and renders people short-sighted and easily manipulable (Madisson 2017, 19). It is emphasized that the people rendered uncritical by fear will allow measures that affect them which they would never concede to in different circumstances; they are often described as "sheeple" who have lost their capacity for critical thought. The self-appointed critics of malicious scaremongering campaigns position themselves as external observers, which allows them to observe the events taking place in society objectively and unemotionally. Due to the rhetoric signaling the author's rationality and moral superiority, texts expressing phobophobia tend to hide the arbitrariness and subjectivity of the judgments and future scenarios contained in them.

It is typical of phobophobia that the dangerousness of the fear that has gripped the masses is spoken of conditionally; as a rule, future dangers are spelled out, and the possible results of the risks are sketched in a rather abstract manner (Ventsel and Madisson 2019, 144–45). Conspiracy theories expressing phobophobia indicate that the ostensibly harmful vaccines, masks, restrictions to people's mobility, apps detecting close contacts, etc., constitute but the beginning of the avalanche

of danger and that the world is rapidly moving under the total control and power of a malevolent group of conspirators in a systemically elevated fear of the virus.

Such phobophobic explanations are a typical part of the NWO conspiracy theories that speak of the establishment of a global system of evil. On the (alternative) media landscape of Estonia, an outbreak of these could be noticed in connection with the Snowden leaks and the PRISM tracking system coming to light (Madisson 2017). We noticed their high proportion also in the media channels RT and Sputnik that are financed by the Russian Federation (Madisson and Ventsel 2022). It is remarkable that stories manifesting phobophobia often enlist analogies with literary dystopias or descriptions of totalitarian societies in order to sketch dark visions of the future. The Corona theories circulating in the Baltic states frequently draw parallels with the atrocities committed by the surveillance and security system of the Soviet era.⁴

Notes

- 1 15min.lt and Delfi.lt are the largest news websites in Lithuania.
- 2 Eesti Vanemad is a nonprofit organization that states protecting the rights of children as its central mission. It brings together activists who are predominantly of Russian origin and fight against alleged discrimination of Russian families by the local child protection organizations in Western countries. The organization has spread the Kremlin's narratives and collaborated with the nonprofit organization Impressum that the Estonian Security Police have deemed to be a propaganda organization of the Russian Federation.
- 3 The Night Watch (Ночной дозор) is a group of Kremlin-minded activists who forcefully participated in the street unrest of April 2007, which was unleashed in connection with the translocation of a monument erected in 1947.
- 4 This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council grants PRG1716 "Relational analysis of strategic history narratives" and MOBTP1009 "A Semiotic approach to e-threat discourse: Analysis of Estonian media".

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14

COVID-19 CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN FRANCE

Julien Giry

March 16, 2021: President Macron's television announcement of "a fifty-day lockdown, at least" constituted a crucial step in the management of the pandemic in France. While Emmanuel Macron developed a new set of restrictions on civil liberties, his discourse, and the government's communication in general, was confusing for many French people because of the many contradictory injunctions formulated since the beginning of March. Combined with an existing suspicion among the population toward politicians and the media generally, and the rise of a new and unknown disease, this cacophony of communication opened a window of opportunity for alternative discourses and explanations for the pandemic, some of which were conspiratorial in nature.

With this in mind, I will first examine the sequence of communication at the beginning of the pandemic and its effect on conspiratorial theorizing in France. Next, I will present the content of Covid-19 conspiracy narratives that circulated in France, mainly on the internet, in comparison to those of previous epidemics: the 1889–90 influenza, the 1918–21 "Spanish" flu, AIDS since 1982, and the 2009 swine flu. Finally, I will tackle the political uses of those conspiracy theories by far-right activists on the internet, politicians from the smaller parties in the context of the 2022 presidential election, and during street demonstrations against de facto mandatory vaccination and the introduction of a Covid health certificate.

The Beginning of the Pandemic: Awkward Political Communication as an Opportunity for Conspiratorial Discourse

As I argued elsewhere (Giry 2022), the combination of three factors opened a window of opportunity for alternative modes of political and social regulation

such as conspiracy theories. First, there was the development of a *new* coronavirus, for which the scientific community had not reached a consensus in understanding or treatment. Second, there was the long-established mistrust of politics and the media (Blondiaux 2021; Cheurfa and Chanvril 2019; Kantar 2021). Third, at a time that required strong, clear statements, French official communication had been contradictory and confusing since the very beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020. On March 3, for example, a government spokeswoman insisted that: “We won’t close the schools. Even if stage 3 is reached, that is to say a pandemic that circulates all over the country, we won’t stop the everyday life of France.” President Macron, on March 5, said: “At this time, we all know that the pandemic is inexorable.” Two days later, the French president, after attending a play in a theater, declared that, “There is no reason, except for vulnerable people, to change our habits and hobbies,” while clusters were already reported in several parts of France (Oise, Val d’Oise, Haut-Rhin, Bas-Rhin, Morbihan, Corsica, etc.). On March 9, France banned rallies of more than 1,000 people, and on March 11, visits to retirement homes were suspended. The very same day, while visiting a grammar school, the minister of health told accompanying journalists, “Children do not constitute a vulnerable public. There is no reason to fear bringing them to school.” Those words were confirmed the next morning by the minister of education – “We never thought to close schools” – while in the evening President Macron ordered a set of restrictions to combat “the most serious health crisis in one century,” including school closures. During his statement, the president also called upon people to stay at home, except to vote in the municipal elections the following Sunday. On March 14, the then prime minister announced more restrictive measures, such as the closure at midnight of “all non-essential” public places. After a historical rate of abstention for municipal elections – 55 percent – President Macron declared on March 16 that France was at “war” and announced “a fifty-day lockdown, at least.” Under threat of fines or other punishment, “non-essential” travels were prohibited; “essential journeys” were subjected to self-authorization through an official form.

In addition to the uncertainty caused by the new virus itself (even including its name: *le/la* Covid-19, coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, 2019-nCoV, “Chinese virus” etc.), these episodes illustrate the confusion and contradictions in government communication since the very beginning of the pandemic. Indeed, this contradictory and unclear messaging has been constantly repeated since then. Masks were deemed useless in March 2020, but then became imperative to wear in public in April; the idea of introducing a “health passport” was dismissed as pure fantasy in April 2020, only for Covid-19 health passes to be established in August (which became a “vaccine pass” in February 2022). Likewise, the *quid pro quo* concerning the suspension for a couple of days of the AstraZeneca vaccine in March 2021, all the while described as safe and beneficial according to the health authorities. It is no surprise that many French citizens, combined with a preexisting suspicion of the political class, doubted that the government could efficiently fight the Covid-19 pandemic (Perrineau 2020).

The combination of these aforementioned factors provided a “window of opportunity,” that is, a sociopolitical configuration that favors the emergence and spreading of alternative modes of regulation and comprehension of the health crisis, such as conspiracy theories or medical populism.

Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in France: New Wine in Old Bottles?

Generally speaking, conspiracy theories thrive in periods of crisis and social turmoil. A conspiracy theory is defined as “the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof circulates solely on the margins of society” (Fenster 2008, 1). From a functionalist point of view (Giry 2017), political entrepreneurs use conspiracy theories to offer concurrent, alternative, and determinist explanations, symbolically reassuring, of literally extraordinary events, like terrorist attacks, assassinations, natural catastrophes, or pandemics. I will now summarize the main conspiracy theories that have spread in France since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and examine parallels with those that flourished in previous pandemics dating from the end of the nineteenth century.

Among the first concerns was the foreign origin of the virus. This process of *othering* is a common feature in times of pandemic: the flu was “Russian” in 1889–90, “Spanish” in 1918–21, and “Mexican” in 2009, while the contemporary virus is “Chinese.” At the beginning of the pandemic, while most scientists argued in favor of the zoonotic origin of a new coronavirus that developed first in China, many alternative theories emerged on the French internet: a deliberate lab leak in Wuhan or a biochemical weapon¹ created on purpose by Israel or the United States. According to this line of thinking, Covid-19 is part of a conspiracy led by hostile foreign countries to destroy France for their own benefits. Alain Soral, a prominent French far-right conspiracy theorist and antisemitic activist, assumed that Israel and its “agents” like the-then Minister of Health Agnes Buzyn (or *Buzyn-Lévi* as he insisted on saying), Bill Gates, and George Soros, in association with “Big Pharma,” were responsible for the spread of the virus. The same was true in 1918, when, after World War I, the newspaper *L’Echo d’Alger* claimed that the so-called Spanish flu was in fact a German vengeance plot: “This infection is spread by evil Boche chemists who have introduced their corrupted bacillus in cans, who have sprinkled it on fruits and vegetables” (quoted in Omari and Doucet 2020).

“Big Pharma” and notably the Pasteur Institute were also accused of being responsible for the pandemic. The main accusation was that Covid-19 was created in labs to sell vaccines for huge profit. This thesis was supported not only by most of the well-known French conspiracist leaders (Soral, Cassen from *Riposte Laïque*, or Laibi a.k.a. *Le Libre Penseur*, etc.), the newly created “re-information” website Ré-info Covid (Giry and Nicey 2022), but also YouTube influencers specializing in alternative medicine or new-age theories such as Silvano Trotta, Thierry Casasnovas, or Jean-Jacques Crevecoeur. In addition to those leading conspiracist

figures, people like the humorist Jean-Marie Bigard and the singer Francis Lalanne argued that the government had purposely banned cheap and efficient early cures such as hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, or azithromycin (see Box 14.1). This “Big Pharma” conspiracy theory played a central part in a French internet blockbuster *Hold-Up!*. Viewed almost six million times, this features physicians, scholars, and well-known political personalities² who defend, like *Plandemic* in the English-speaking world, the idea that the Covid-19 pandemic was voluntarily (mis)led by the authorities to advance a Great Reset agenda, just like with AIDS in the

BOX 14.1 DIDIER RAOULT, A TYPICAL CASE OF “MEDICAL POPULISM”

Didier Raoult emerged into the public eye in February–March 2020 as a polarizing figure, loved or loathed. An advocate of hydroxychloroquine as a cure for Covid-19, the French microbiologist personifies the “medical populism” of the likes of Professors Even, Andrieu, and Venet in the beginning of the AIDS pandemic in the mid-1980s with the “cyclosporine affair” (Dodier 1999). Medical populism consists of “a political style that constructs antagonistic relations between ‘the people’ whose lives have been put at risk by ‘the establishment’” (Lasco and Curato 2019, 1), which takes advantage of the crisis, and the uncertainty it develops, to publicly advance, in terms of agenda-setting, heterodox/marginal positions in the medical field and the public sphere. Medical populism, then, is based on three cumulative criteria: (1) The call to the people, common sense, and righteousness in opposition to expert and established knowledge as well as medical, industrial (“Big Pharma”), or political elites considered to be corrupt and incompetent; (2) the urgency of strong and immediate action to contain the ongoing crisis in opposition to long-term medical research; (3) the simplification, the dramatization, and the spectacularization of the crisis and its issues.

In this respect, even if Raoult does not overtly support conspiracy theories, it is not surprising that his positions are backed or exploited, in part at least, by conspiracist far-right activists. Indeed, medical populism and conspiracy theories share key features: the rejection of elites and institutions of regulation or socialization (media, government, public health agencies, etc.) on behalf of the supposedly true people; the denunciation of purported secret or unlawful interests (conflict of interest, corruption, “Big Pharma”); the advocacy of miraculous and cheap treatments in opposition to established knowledge (hydroxychloroquine, azithromycine, or ivermectine); and bypassing mainstream communication channels in favor of alternative ones and social media (YouTube, Twitter).

BOX 14.2 CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN FRANCE: A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

It is often argued that modern conspiracy theories in France started during the French Revolution (Tackett 2000, Oberhauser 2020), mostly through the writings of Abbé Barruel, who claimed that “in the French Revolution, everything, even down to the most frightful excesses, was foreseen, intended, contrived, determined, decided upon: everything was the effect of the most profound wickedness, since all had been prepared and brought about by men who alone held the threads of long-fomented conspiracies in the secret societies and who knew how to choose and hasten the moments most favorable for their plots” (quoted in Giry 2020). Those “men” according to Barruel have names: the “demagogues” (i.e., the philosophers of the Enlightenment), the “freemasons,” and “a society even more secret,” that is, those who John Robison famously mistakenly called the Illuminati.

As Leroy (1992) and Cubbit (1993) noticed, what would become known as the “Jesuit myth” was the culmination of a huge conspiratorial imaginary from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Accused of being a “mysterious Sanhedrin” aiming to topple France and destroy Catholicism, the Jesuits were typical figures of hatred, like the Knights Templar were the century before (Giry 2020).

From the nineteenth century to the end of the Vichy regime, Jews and freemasons were targeted in right-wing newspapers as the cause of France’s decay. Maurras, for instance, developed the conspiracy theory of “four confederate states” he named “Anti-France, secretly acting in cahoots to take over the country: foreigners (*les métèques*), Protestants, freemasons, and Jews.

After World War II and the Holocaust, conspiracy theories in France were confined to covert far-right circles. It is only during the early 2000s, immediately after the 9/11 attacks, that they reappeared in the public sphere, first with the publication of Meyssan’s *9/11: The Big Lie (L’effroyable imposture)* in 2002 and, even more spectacularly, in 2015 after the jihadist attacks which gave birth to so many conspiracy theories. Since then, successive French governments have engaged in a struggle against conspiracy theories.

1980s. The video also claims that the New World Order agenda began with the introduction of liberticidal measures such as lockdowns or mask-wearing in public spaces.³ Mask-wearing and “Big Pharma” conspiracy theories echo narratives that were circulating in 1898–90 when physicians and chemists (nicknamed “Potards”) were accused of making scandalous profits and in 1919 when mask-wearing was presented as an unlawful assault on civil liberties (Vagneron 2014).

Another common feature in pandemic conspiracy theories is neophobia, that is, the incrimination of new technologies allegedly responsible for the disease or its cover-up: radio waves during the 1918 “Spanish” flu, 3G in the 2002–04 SARS epidemic, smartphones themselves during the 2009 H1N1 flu, and now 5G technology. Interestingly, the theory that 5G is responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic was first argued on January 20, 2020, by a prominent French conspiratorial website *Les Moutons Enragés* (The Angry Sheep) (Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe 2020), even though 5G was not yet in use in France.

Another set of conspiracy theories arose in the public sphere, claiming that government officials were deliberately exaggerating the dangers of Covid-19. They were supported by activist groups such as *Aude digitale* (Digital Dawn), crank physicians like Christian Perronne or Louis Fouché (Ré-info Covid), and professional conspiracy theorists like Alain Soral, who famously promoted in France the “empty hospitals theory” that spread on Twitter through the hashtag “#Film-YourHospital.” This theory is particularly interesting because it triggered conflicts among French conspiracists, notably between Alain Soral and his former sidekick Vincent Lapierre, founder of *Le média pour tous* (The Media for All). Lapierre, who tried to reposition himself during the Yellow Vest movement as a legitimate “citizen journalist,” found here a new opportunity to condemn his former boss of antisemitism and conspiracism. In return, he was accused of “BFMization” (from BFM TV, a 24-hour mainstream information channel, claimed to be Israel-led in conspiratorial discourses) and bowing down before the Israeli lobby.

From the Internet to the Streets: “Anti-pass” Protests and Political Uses of Conspiracy Theories in the Context of the 2022 Presidential Election

Although Covid-19 conspiracy theories have mainly circulated on the internet, some far-right politicians pushed them in the public sphere: National Front leader Marine Le Pen – although supporting “freedom of vaccination” and against the Covid-safe ticket (CST) – or the far-right polemist Eric Zemmour – who proposed removing the CST – rejected Covid-19 conspiracy theories about 5G, Bill Gates, or biochemical weapons (while still supporting Great Replacement ones). Florian Philippot, former *National Front* deputy leader; Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, leader of the sovereigntist party *Debout la France!*; or François Asselineau, leader of *Union Populaire pour la République* support conspiracy theories about a forthcoming “health dictatorship” in which de facto mandatory vaccination and the introduction of a Covid-safe ticket (transformed in February 2022 into a “vaccine pass”) play a decisive part. During the 2022 presidential election, those “little candidates,” or outsiders, were trying to make political gains by adopting unconventional, not to say heterodox, and conspiratorial positions in the political field. Indeed, since the middle of 2020, Philippot has organized in Paris a weekly protest against “health dictatorship and for civil liberties.” Step by step, other street protests developed throughout France, joined by leading conspiratorial and “anti-vax”

figures like Pierre Cassen or Christine Tasin from Riposte Laïque, Richard Bourtry (ex-journalist of the new *FranceSoir*),⁴ crank physicians like Louis Fouché and Alexandra Haurrion-Caude from Ré-info Covid with its self-proclaimed “independent scientific committee,” and artists likes Jean-Marie Bigard and Francis Lalanne. Whereas more than 90 percent of the French population over the age of 12 is vaccinated,⁵ and more than 60 percent of French people approved the introduction of the CST for public events, those “anti-pass” protests, while struggling to mobilize after September 2021, were evidence of the huge polarization of French society on the eve of the 2022 presidential election. President Macron’s legitimacy is highly contested (and even more so after he declared he wanted to “piss-off” – *emmerder* – non-vaccinated people); the traditional right-wing candidate Valérie Pécresse is marginalized in the public debate; the left is divided, and the polls indicate that the far-right leader Marine Le Pen could qualify for the second round of the election.

Notes

- 1 A viral video posted on March 25, 2020, on Facebook by @laurentjlc assumed that the pandemic was already planned in 2018 and was revealed in a Korean series, *My Secret Terrius* (S. 1, E. 10), which referred to “a mutant coronavirus” used as “a biochemical weapon.” See Fourneau and Pailleux 2020.
- 2 After the film was broadcast, some participants asked to be withdrawn, including former Minister of Foreign Affairs Philippe Douste-Blazy or the sociologist Monique Pinçon-Charlot. They alleged that the edit and general tone of the film did not fit with their own views or words.
- 3 The second part of the film, released on November 18, 2021, argued that the virus was manufactured on purpose by “Big Pharma.”
- 4 FranceSoir, a highly conspiratorial website, should not be confused with the former daily newspaper *France-Soir*.
- 5 Accessed on November 22, 2021, <https://covidtracker.fr/vaccintracker>.

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15

COVID CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN GERMANY, AUSTRIA, AND SWITZERLAND

Michael Butter

I am writing this introduction in early May 2022. Until a few weeks ago, tens of thousands took to the streets all over Germany each week to protest the Corona restrictions imposed by the government and a law that would have made vaccination obligatory for every adult in particular. Recently, the demonstrations have shrunk because infections numbers have decreased and restrictions have been lifted, the obligatory vaccination is at least for the time being off the table, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine now occupies the discussion in publics and counter-publics alike. In Austria, the Covid vaccination became obligatory in February 2022 but was suspended a few weeks later, which took the air out of the protests there as well. In Switzerland, an obligation to vaccinate was never discussed and restrictions were less severe, resulting in fewer and much smaller demonstrations. In all three countries, the protests – just as Covid skepticism in general – have been rife with conspiracy theories.

Accordingly, there has been an intense public debate about conspiracy theories as an obstacle in overcoming the pandemic for the past two years, and not only many politicians, journalists, and scientists, but also ordinary citizens have voiced concerns. On the most basic level, they worry that protestors who refuse to wear masks and abide by social distancing rules might fuel the pandemic. They are also concerned that conspiracy theories about the vaccines are responsible for Germany's relatively low vaccination rate of currently about 76 percent of the population. And they fear that circulating conspiracy theories about the pandemic and the alliances between diverse groups of protesters are a danger to democracy. This fear is particularly pronounced in Germany where the public has been alarmed about the harmful effects of conspiracy theories since the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015 and the subsequent rise of the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). Because of the Holocaust, many German observers see conspiracy theories inextricably connected to antisemitism and right-wing extremism.

The participation of neo-Nazi groups in the protests in Germany and Austria and the sight of protesters wearing yellow stars saying “unvaccinated” thus have sparked fear. The unprecedented presence of conspiracy theories in people’s daily lives – many realized for the first time that they had relatives and friends who believed in them – has led to the impression that conspiracy theories are on the rise and eroding democracy.

In this chapter, I trace the development of Covid conspiracy theories, the protests they sparked, and the public discussion about them in the German-speaking countries. I focus on Germany but cast occasional glances at Austria and Switzerland as well. The three countries cannot be treated independent of each other anyway, since their conspiracy theorists have been part of a transnational community that exchanged ideas and narratives even before the pandemic. For example, the Swiss conspiracy entrepreneur Daniele Ganser has long been a key player on the German scene, and so is the Austrian conspiracy theorist Hannes Hofbauer. During the pandemic, many German conspiracy theorists, among them the lawyer Markus Haintz, travelled to Vienna to participate in the demonstrations there.

I begin with an analysis of the most popular conspiracy theories in the region, which all claim that the pandemic is a hoax that has been staged by dark forces to achieve sinister goals. Afterward, I consider the protests against the Covid restrictions, their development, and the role that conspiracy theories have played in them. I will argue that since the summer of 2020, conspiracy theories have been the kit that has held together diverse groups of protestors with different political beliefs and from various milieus. At the same time, the protests have gradually moved further to the right. Claiming that democracy in Germany and Austria is in danger, the protests themselves have increasingly been fueled by anti-democratic sentiments. However, since the number of people protesting is fairly small and since overall belief in conspiracy theories has not increased over the past two years, as quantitative studies show, there is at the moment no genuine threat to democracy. Accordingly, it is worth asking, as I do by way of conclusion, why the public concern about the protests and the conspiracy theories they are based on has, especially in Germany, been so great.

The Conspiracy Theories

As everywhere around the world, the new coronavirus became a topic for the German conspiracy theory community in the early weeks of 2020. With public concern about the virus rising and the danger of a pandemic on the horizon, conspiracy theorists began to focus on the topic in February and early March. For a while, various contradictory conspiracy theories were pondered on. The by-now defunct website kenfm.de, whose archive is no longer accessible, became an important forum where diverging claims were discussed. Some authors claimed that the virus was an intentionally or accidentally released bioweapon; others argued that there was no virus as viruses generally did not exist. Some blamed the Chinese, others the Americans. Around mid-March, as public life in Germany came to halt,

a dominant version emerged that has remained hegemonic within the community ever since: the pandemic is a hoax, as the virus is not more dangerous than the common flu or does not exist at all.

Importantly, there is until today no agreement on who is behind this deception, and what the ultimate goal is. But conspiracy theorists agree on two points: the official version is a lie, and the virus, if it exists, is no danger to the population. The reason why a bundle of conspiracy theories with this least common denominator emerged is most probably the so-called “prevention paradox” (Rose 1981). The German-speaking countries were much less severely hit by the first wave of infections than other countries. Even before the first lockdown began on March 22, most people, scared by news footage from northern Italy, had significantly reduced their contacts, and the lockdown kept infection rates low. Until the fall of 2020, most people did not know anybody who had died of Covid-19, and many did not even know anybody who had been infected. For the conspiracy-minded among the populace, however, this signaled that the danger was vastly blown out of proportion. The readiness of the majority to accept temporary infringements on their civil liberties was for them evidence that the government and those behind it were manipulating the people.

The idea that the pandemic is a hoax has served as a bracket for a variety of Covid conspiracy theories since the spring of 2020. As in most other countries where such theories gained traction, the ones popular in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are not new theories. The “Coronavirus hoax” was simply latched onto already existing ones as the newest strategy of the conspirators to reach their goals. As in other countries, there had been conspiracy theories about vaccines and even the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation before, and their proponents saw their worst fears confirmed when vaccines were immediately hailed as the way out of the pandemic. The right-wing extremist magazine *Compact* claimed on the cover of the April 2020 edition that “They are coming! The New Flood of Asylum Seekers in the Shadow of Corona,” claiming that the pandemic was just a pretext to accelerate the Great Replacement, the alleged Islamization of Europe. Those concerned about the new 5G technology saw the pandemic in that light, while those who had long worried about a “Merkel dictatorship” saw the events as a crucial step into that direction. More economically minded conspiracy theorists like Norbert Häring, to give a final example, interpreted the urgent recommendation to pay with cards as part of the plot to do away with civil liberties by abolishing all cash payments.

As in many other countries, the Covid conspiracy theories popular in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland either claim that the scientists voicing these positions are corrupt or challenge the scientific paradigm altogether (Mede and Schäfer 2020). The majority of the conspiracist texts fall into the first category (Eisenmann, Koch, and Meyer 2021, 201–3). They do not position themselves against science as such but claim that the scientists who have dominated public discourse over the past two years and whom the government has constantly relied on are either intentionally lying or ideologically blinded. For example, Christian Drosten, virologist at the Charité in Berlin and the most important scientific voice in the official discourse

on the pandemic, was repeatedly attacked by conspiracy theorists as being incompetent and even as being a fraud (see, e.g., Van Rossum 2021). To challenge his claims, conspiracy theorists highlighted the opinions and publications of the few genuine experts such as scientist John Ioannidis or microbiologist Sucharit Bhakdi who voiced diverging opinions or played up the expertise of conspiracy theorists who, in reality, possessed little or no expertise to voice opinions about the dangerousness of the virus. German-speaking conspiracy theorists, for example, have claimed repeatedly that Wolfgang Wodarg, a former internist and representative in the German parliament for the *Social Democratic Party* (SPD), is better qualified than Drosten to assess the situation because he served as chief medical officer of the city of Flensburg for more than a decade and thus allegedly has experience with epidemics. Most importantly, of course, Ioannidis, Bhakdi, and Wodarg are hailed as honest experts because they confirm what the conspiracy theorists believe anyway.

The ultimate trust that science, when engaged with in genuine fashion, confirms their allegations explains why many German conspiracist texts about the pandemic are at first sight indistinguishable from other popular-scientific engagements with the virus. They obsessively quote from scientific articles, often preprints, published in German or English, interpret graphs, and present statistics from official sources to corroborate their claims. It would therefore be wrong to dismiss these conspiracy theories as simply wrong or even intentionally deceptive. Instead, conspiracy theories are better understood as “half-truths” – narratives that make some valid claims, distort other information, leave crucial bits out, and thus construct narratives that “are not concerned with knowledge and provability but with belief and plausibility.” They are characterized by a high degree of internal coherence but only correspond to external reality in a very limited way (Gess 2022, 168).

A minority of Covid conspiracy theorists, however, challenge the scientific knowledge on the pandemic in a far more radical way. They do not hold that the better scientists are on their side but do away with the scientific paradigm altogether in favor of alternative epistemologies. These conspiracy theorists sometimes claim that viruses do not exist or that a healthy lifestyle, exercise, and nutrition protect the body against the disease Covid-19 as they allegedly strengthen the immune system enough to fend it off. Those who suffer from the disease, the argument often goes, lack inner balance and have strayed away from the natural and healthy state of being (Eisenmann, Koch, and Meyer 2021, 212–13). They often also draw on anecdotal evidence how they or their acquaintances either did not contract the disease yet or had only mild symptoms to prove their points. These conspiracy theories, which circulate in esoteric or anthroposophical milieus, have received disproportionate attention in the media, creating the impression that all or most Covid conspiracy theories position themselves against science.

Importantly, however, no matter which exact conspiracy theory they believe in and how they position themselves vis à vis science, the Covid conspiracy theorists are united in their convictions that the official version is wrong and that the pandemic has been staged for sinister reasons. As the pandemic was latched onto a plethora of existing conspiracy theories, links were established between

groups who believed in sometimes very different conspiracy theories before and come from very different ideological milieus. While there were certain links and exchanges between these different conspiracist communities before the pandemic, as I discuss further down, these connections have been considerably strengthened by the pandemic. In a certain way, the coronavirus has come to function as an empty signifier that ties together very different grievances in a chain of equivalence and allows for their articulation. This explains something that has puzzled many observers: the rather heterogeneous make-up of the protests that began in spring of 2020 and have been going on until today.

The Protests

The so-called “hygiene demonstrations” that took place in many German cities in April 2020, when Germany was still in a lockdown, and May 2020 marked the first of three waves of protest that year (Grande et al. 2021, 5). They were followed by two big demonstrations in Berlin in August to which protesters travelled from all over Germany. The same happened during the third wave in fall and winter when the second lockdown triggered another series of demonstrations. Over the course of 2021, the protests increasingly focused on the vaccines that were now available. As the pressure to get vaccinated increased, and unvaccinated people were represented in the media and politics as blocking the way out of the pandemic, the protests gained renewed momentum. As the first politicians proposed to make vaccination obligatory for all adults in the fall of 2021, they increased further, climaxing in the winter when new restrictions for the unvaccinated were imposed, and concrete plans for a law were being discussed in parliament. In the spring of 2022, the protests gradually subsided, as restrictions were lifted, no proposal for a vaccination law found a majority, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine put a new item on the conspiracist agenda.

In Austria, the demonstrations only gained momentum toward the end of 2020 and continued throughout the next year, bringing more people to the streets as the government’s plans for making vaccination obligatory became concrete in the fall of 2021. On November 20, one day after Chancellor Schallenberg announced that the dice had been cast, more than 40,000 people demonstrated against this decision in Vienna, with other small protests following until the law, passed by parliament in January, was temporarily suspended because infection rates were declining. In Switzerland, the protests were always much smaller, although roughly as many people appear to believe in Covid conspiracy theories as in Germany (Kuhn et al. 2021). However, as restrictions were never as severe as in the other two countries and since obligatory vaccination was never seriously considered, people felt less of a need to protest. In Switzerland, too, however, the demonstrations peaked in the fall of 2021, for example, with roughly 3,000 people taking to the streets in Rapperswil-Jona on October 16.

In Germany, the different waves of the protests centered around different cities and were dominated by different actors who fueled them. The social composition of the protests changed over time, and so did the role of conspiracy theories for

the protests. The protests of spring 2020 were decentralized events, and the type of people who attended them depended heavily on the region. While right-wing extremists were already very visible at this early stage in Eastern German cities (MOBIT 2021), they made for only a small fraction of attendees in other places. The epicentrum of these early protests was Stuttgart where “Querdenken 711,” a group founded by the entrepreneur Michael Ballweg, organized weekly protests. The group’s name combined “querdenken,” which means “thinking outside the box,” with Stuttgart’s postal code, implying that the people there were immune to the official narrative of the pandemic and made up their own minds. Since then, “Querdenken” has become an umbrella term for the German Covid protests and the conspiracy theories they rely on. The demonstrations organized by “Querdenken 711” peaked in May, with roughly 5,000 people attending on May 9. That day, Ken Jebsen, founder of the website kenfm.de, whose role as a platform for conspiracy theories I discussed before, was the main speaker at this event.

However, at this early stage, the protests were neither in Stuttgart nor in other places dominated by conspiracy theorists. Rather, the composition was that of a typical populist movement with conspiracy theorists being a significant minority among the attendees (Bergmann and Butter 2020, 332). In Stuttgart, they were flanked by people from both religious and esoteric milieus who are also prone to conspiracy theorizing but had not yet formed them about Covid. There were “normal” citizens who have no sympathy for conspiracy theories but who were using the event to protest against certain restrictions (e.g., the highly restricted access to nursing homes that separated them from their loved ones for weeks). Some teenagers attended too because nothing else was going on, and the protest was a chance to be among people again after weeks of isolation.

During the next wave of protests, which centered around two big demonstrations that took place in Berlin on August 1 and August 29, the situation was already quite different. These demonstrations were centralized events to which people travelled from all over Germany – with roughly 30,000 people attending the first one and a few thousand more the second. Importantly, the Berlin protests mark the moment when conspiracy theories became the kit that held the protests together. As many restrictions had been temporarily lifted over the summer, the events were predominantly attended by those who suspected a sinister hidden agenda behind the events of the past months and the measures taken by the government to allegedly contain the spread of infections. As discussed earlier, the different groups coming together in Berlin on those days – there were rainbow flags and peace signs next to QAnon T-shirts and neo-Nazi insignia – did not all believe in one specific Covid conspiracy theory but harbored several that coalesced in the conviction that the pandemic was a hoax staged to achieve different goals (Grande et al. 2021, 19).

Evidence of the ever-growing relevance of conspiracy theories for the protests over the summer and fall of 2020 is also found in the study by Oliver Nachtwey and his colleagues (2020) on the political sociology of protests in the German-speaking countries. Based on a questionnaire distributed in open Telegram groups run by Covid skeptics, the team found a disproportionately high agreement with conspiracist claims. That the study is non-representative – the authors suspect that many of those

particularly strongly opposed to institutionalized science did not participate – only confirms the central role that conspiracy theories play for the *Querdenken* movement, as it is highly likely that those who refused to participate believe in such theories at least as much as those who filled out the questionnaire. The study also found that – contrary to what was often claimed in the media at that time – the protests were not at all carried by people from the right and extreme right. Rather, 23 percent of participants had voted for the Green Party and 18 percent for *Die Linke*, the leftwing populist party, in the general election of 2017. However, hardly any of these people intended to vote for them again in the next election, with the majority favoring either *Die Basis* (The Base), an anti-Covid restriction party founded on conspiracist claims in July 2020, or right-wing populist *Alternative for Germany* (Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020, 10), whose supporters tend to believe in conspiracy theories disproportionately more than those of other parties (Butter 2020, 136).

The study thus also captures developments that had given rise to public concerns since the Berlin demonstrations in August and that dominate the public discussions about the protests until today: increasing radicalization, a shift to the right, and the emergence of alliances between protesters from different positions of the political spectrum. Many of those still regularly joining demonstrations in the fall of 2020 when the third wave of protests unfolded had lost faith in the German political system and felt that they were no longer living in a democracy. Because of the long tradition in radical leftwing protests to detect a continued history of fascism in Germany, comparisons to the Nazi past were readily available, with many protestors feeling that it was indeed 1933 again and that democracy had to be defended against those who called themselves democrats but who were apparently using the pandemic as a pretext to strip the people of their most basic constitutional rights. This take on events had been important for some of the protestors from the beginning – the weekly journal *Demokratischer Widerstand* (Democratic Resistance) was launched as early as April 2020 by the German journalist Anselm Lenz – but now it came to dominate the movement as a whole.

This had three consequences. First of all, some of the protestors became more aggressive against security forces and journalists covering the events as they viewed them as part of an oppressive regime. Second, protestors increasingly compared their perceived plight to that of the victims of the Nazis. At a rally in Hannover in November 2020, a young woman compared herself to Sophie Scholl, a widely revered heroine of the resistance against the Hitler regime who was executed in 1943, because she felt that she was part of a similar resistance movement. Many others started to attach yellow stars – reminiscent of the signs that Jews had to wear in Nazi Germany – to their clothes that said “ungeimpft” (unvaccinated). These actions upset many critical observers of the protests who felt that such actions did not only relativize the Holocaust but were antisemitic as well. This evaluation was aided by the third consequence. While some protestors had initially been disturbed by the participation of neo-Nazis in the demonstrations, they increasingly formed alliances with them now, often denying that these people were right-wing extremists when challenged by observers.

As I have suggested elsewhere, such alliances amount to a new *Querfront* (transverse front) (Butter 2021, 41). Whereas the term originally refers to the coalition of the antidemocratic extreme right and the equally antidemocratic extreme left during the Weimar Republic, the new *Querfront* unites the extreme right with members of the moderate left – the former *Die Linke* and *Grünen* voters mentioned before. This approximation was helped by the feeling of community that the joint protests provided and that many participants cherished, especially at a time when such moments of communitization were rare because of social distancing rules (Eisenmann, Koch, and Meyer 2021, 193). Not only did the protesters appear to share a common cause, but they were also united against media, police, and counter-demonstrators, facilitating an “us vs. them” mentality. Most importantly, though, such an alliance was only possible because the diagnosis of the leftist or moderate protesters that Nazism was returning to Germany and imposing the Corona restrictions met with a strategic positioning of the New Right.

As, among others, Volker Weiß (2017) has shown, the most important difference between the “Old” and the “New” Right is the way they position themselves toward National Socialism. The intellectual leaders of the New Right are well aware that positive references to the Nazi era will not win any significant support in Germany. Accordingly, the New Right has been trying for many years to cast Hitler’s NSDAP as a left-wing party. After all, the argument goes, it was a National *Socialist* party. By the same token, concepts such as “representative democracy” are reinterpreted in order to disqualify the Federal Republic of Germany and to construct parallels with the Nazi regime, casting the current political system as a dictatorship. Thus, the strategic but often genuinely believed positionings of the New Right perfectly fit the beliefs of the leftist or moderate protesters. And since many members of the New Right do not look like many people expect neo-Nazis to look – they do not shave their heads or wear combat boots – those who march side by side with them can tell themselves that they are not forming an alliance with right-wing extremists.

Accordingly, the assessment that the *Querdenken* movement “is coming from the left but moving to the right” (Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020, 52) is overall correct, and it applies to Austria as much as it does to Germany. However, it would be a mistake to assume that all those who accept neo-Nazis at their protests have ideologically moved to the right as well. Rather, differences of opinion and in values remain, but, in the practice of protest, they are overridden by the shared conviction that Germany is no longer a democracy. This is the lowest common denominator of the different groups that come together at the demonstrations (Osthus 2021, 27), and it positions them against the democratic order, which they consider merely a sham. Accordingly, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the German internal secret service, warned about a new form of extremism that did not fit the traditional patterns in November 2020 (Hurtz 2020) and established the new category “Delegitimization of the state relevant for the protection of the constitution” to systematically address the protests (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2021).

It needs to be stressed, however, that an alliance between left and right facilitated by the shared belief in conspiracy theories is not that new after all. It already occurred in 2014 and 2015 with the Vigils for Peace, which in many ways are the blueprint for the protests during the pandemic. The Vigils began in March 2014 as decentralized events in many cities in Germany and Austria in reaction to events in Ukraine, with the protesters taking a pro-Kremlin stance and blaming the United States and NATO for the escalation of the conflict. Many openly articulated the conspiracy theory that the revolution in Kyiv that preceded it had been a coup d'état orchestrated by the United States (Hammel 2018). The protests against the Corona restrictions brought many who had participated in the Vigils back together. Since all gatherings of people during the pandemic were eyed suspiciously by many people, the anti-Covid protests received much more public attention than the Vigils ever had.

What is more, the current protests have also proven to be more long-lived than the Vigils, which quickly lost their momentum and disintegrated early in 2015. By contrast, the demonstrations against the measures to contain the pandemic continued until the spring of 2022. In the fall and winter of 2020 and 2021, protestors met about every fortnight for a larger demonstration in a single city. On November 7, 2020, for example, the movement brought 10,000 protestors to the streets in Leipzig. Over the course of 2021, then, as vaccines became available, the demonstrations increasingly focused on the pressure to get vaccinated and, as plans to make vaccination obligatory for all adults, on opposition to this initiative. As in other countries, several of the circulating conspiracy theories began to focus on the "Great Reset," an alleged plan by Klaus Schwab, chairman of the World Economic Forum, and other business leaders to radically transform the economy and people's way of life. In the final months of 2021 and the first of 2022, when new restrictions had been imposed on the unvaccinated, these protests became decentralized. Reminiscent of the Vigils for Peace, protestors met in many towns and cities mostly on Monday evenings for what they called "walks" – a designation used to circumvent the prohibition of protests and other gatherings in place in many locations. Somewhat ironically, the protests lost their momentum for the time being when the lifting of restrictions and the ruling coalition's failure to make vaccination obligatory coincided with the invasion of Ukraine, bringing the movement full circle to its roots. So far, however, the war has failed to mobilize significant conspiracist protests. The discussions take place almost exclusively online. It remains to be seen if a new wave of infections and new restrictions for the unvaccinated or another attempt to pass a vaccination law will revive the protests in the future.

Conclusion

As in many countries, the popularity of Covid conspiracy theories and their power to mobilize people have greatly concerned many people. Over the past two years, countless articles have been written about the dangers of conspiracy theories, initiatives have been started to counter them, and the topic is now frequently addressed in schools. There have been hearings in parliament, counseling for those affected by conspiracy theories in their family, and a privately funded think tank, CeMAS

(Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy), was founded to monitor and analyze conspiracy theories. As one of the few German experts on the topic, I have participated in many of these events. In 2021 alone, I did nearly a hundred talks for schools, NGOs, community colleges, or politicians.

Much of the concern about conspiracy theories is well justified. There is by now ample evidence that believers in Covid conspiracy theories are extremely reluctant to get vaccinated, thus endangering themselves and others and making it more difficult to bring the pandemic to an end (Jensen et al. 2021). Moreover, as is also well-known, conspiracy theories can be a catalyst for violence (Butter 2020, 154), and many protesters displayed aggressive behavior toward journalists and police over the past two years, at times even marching to the homes of politicians and threatening them. On September 18, 2021, a 50-year-old Covid conspiracy theorist shot a young gas station attendant in the small town of Idar-Oberstein because the attendant asked him to wear a mask inside the shop as required by law. Finally, as discussed before, large parts of the *Querdenken* movement now position themselves openly against democracy, while believing that they are defending it.

However, the movement is very small, and security forces are monitoring it closely. It is quite likely that there will be further outbursts of violence but not on a scale that can shake the political system in any of the German-speaking countries. Populists in Austria and Germany have been trying to capitalize on the protests since the early stages of the pandemic without much success. In Austria, the *Freiheitliche Partei* (FPÖ), the *Liberty Party*, under its chairman Herbert Kickl has been at the forefront of the protests against the Corona restrictions and the obligatory vaccination from the very beginning. After an initial loss of support and a period of recovery, the party has for the past six months stabilized around the numbers it reached before the pandemic began (PolitPro 2022). In Germany, the *AfD*'s attempts to capitalize on the protests have met with some success in Eastern Germany but proven unsuccessful on the national level (Salheiser and Richter 2021). In fact, in the federal elections of 2021, the party lost votes for the first time in its history, because it had moved too far to the right for some of its previous supporters over the past years, and because *Die Basis*, founded even more explicitly on conspiracy theories than the *AfD*, garnered some of the votes of the Covid skeptics.

Moreover, it is clear by now that belief in conspiracy theories has not increased in Germany over the past two years. Several polls show that the numbers remain stable or that there even has been some decline. For example, in the 2019 *Mitte-Studie*, which gathered its data in the spring of 2019, 37.7 percent of respondents agreed partly or fully with the claims that politicians and other leaders are merely the puppets of powerful actors in the background (Rees and Lamberty 2019, 214–15). Two years later, when the data was gathered a year after the beginning of the pandemic, this number came down to 20.5 percent (Lamberty and Rees 2021, 290–91). These results have to be taken with a grain of salt because interviewees were certainly more sensitized about conspiracy theories than in previous polls because of the media coverage during the pandemic, and some probably denied their true convictions. But the decline is too significant to be explained by such factors alone, and the trend is borne out by other polls. Thus, it appears likely that

while the pandemic has strengthened some of those prone to conspiracy theorizing in their convictions, it has had the opposite effect on others. Conspiracy theories are not exponentially spreading. The number of those who believe in them remains stable or has even decreased.

The public perception is different because conspiracy theories have never been as visible and relevant for many people's daily lives with many having had to realize that some of their friends and family believe in them. This has created the impression that conspiracy theories are gaining in popularity. However, most people who believe in them used to keep their views to themselves and only express them among like-minded people. Even a topic like vaccination, which has a tangible impact on one's life, could be left out of conversations with friends and family. But during the coronavirus, this was no longer possible, as the restrictions required constant positioning – especially when dealing with friends and family.

The general impression that conspiracy theories are gaining in popularity is one reason for the veritable conspiracy theory panic that has enthralled parts of the German public. Another factor is that media, politicians, and civil society have been increasingly sensitized for the topic over the past years. The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 put the topic on the agenda, and the influx of refugees in the summer of 2015, the election of Donald Trump, and then the Brexit campaign made it more and more important. Because of the role that conspiracy theories have played in the Holocaust, many German observers mistakenly assume that all conspiracy theories are antisemitic and therefore always extremely dangerous (Blume 2020). Confronted with protesters who are likening their fate under the “Covid regime” to that of the Jews under the Nazis, many therefore jumped to the conclusion that the demonstrations were a hotbed of antisemitism (Bringt and Klare 2021, 69; Eisenmann, Koch, and Meyer 2021, 215–16).

But while the protests – just like all conspiracy theories – are not free of antisemitic elements, it would be wrong to consider antisemitism as constitutive for them. It is not the intention of most protesters to relativize the Holocaust – a key component of modern antisemitism – but an unintended effect of their ill-advised and tasteless comparisons, which intend to highlight that what is happening to them is indeed equal to the suffering of the Jews. Moreover, there is no victim–perpetrator reversal at work in these comparisons – another key element of antisemitic discourse. Thus, condemning the protesters rather indiscriminately as antisemitic misses the point. Moreover, it might work to strengthen the bonds between the New Right, whose members of course often really are antisemitic, and other protesters who are not. If protesters who are not antisemitic are labelled as such by those they demonstrate against, they might be driven to the conclusion that such designations are only employed to stigmatize them and other protesters, and that those labelled (neo-)Nazis are not that either.

It is unlikely, however, that this is going to change in the near future. For much of the non-conspiracist public, concerned about conspiracy theories and confused by their seeming increase, it is easier to cast those who believe in them as “the other” than to differentiate among believers or even inquire which anxieties might drive some of these theories (Birchall and Knight 2022). And the diagnosis

of antisemitism performs this boundary work even better than that of conspiracy theory. Moreover, the public discussion on the protests and conspiracy theories in general is by now dominated by the thinktank CeMAS, which, according to its website, “consolidates years of interdisciplinary expertise on the topics of conspiracy ideologies, disinformation, antisemitism, and right-wing extremism” (CeMAS n.d.). While the researchers at CeMAS have published some interesting data over the past year, their analyses often remain superficial. What is more problematic, though, is their tenet that conspiracy theories are inextricably connected with antisemitism and right-wing extremism. Each of their reports therefore reifies these links, eclipsing more nuanced analyses and making appropriate responses more difficult. Accordingly, conspiracy theories do not constitute a threat to democracy in the German-speaking countries at the moment, but the public is not yet equipped well enough to address the challenges they pose indeed.

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16

CONSPIRACY ENTREPRENEURS, FRINGE MOVEMENTS, AND THE PERVERSIVE STYLE OF CONSPIRACY DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

The Case of Hungary

Lili Turza

Introduction

On September 11, 2020, approximately a thousand people gathered at Liberty Square, Budapest, to attend a protest titled “COVID 9.11 – Demonstration for a Normal Life.” The protest was organized by one of the leading figures of the Hungarian Covid- and vaccine-skeptic milieu, pharmacist-turned lifestyle consultant, body builder, influencer, and vlogger – also infamous for his involvement in the “fake political party business” – Dr. György Gődény. Lining up an array of dissatisfied citizens and fellow alternative medical celebrities (such as Dr. Gábor Lenkei) relativizing the severity of the coronavirus pandemic, Gődény and other invited speakers at the demonstration addressed the “futility” of the restrictive measures in place, defied social distancing rules and masks, expressed their dissatisfaction with what they deemed a mere “media panic,” demanded back their “civil liberties,” and advocated for a collective return to “normal life.”

The protest, showcasing well-known anti-lockdown vernacular and demands, had a quite explicit added layer signified by its date, its title “COVID 9.11,” and its location in front of the US Embassy in Budapest at *Liberty Square*. When Gődény was asked by reporters if he had a specific message in mind, he suggestively responded that everyone could put together their own conclusions what the story is about, adding “911 is a well-known emergency number, therefore we are crying for help” (AZONNALI 2020). 9/11, in this context serving as a cue, a conspiracy fragment, relying on “user knowledge of longer form conspiracy theories elsewhere” (Birchall 2021, 99), a bare assertion without the theory to connect the alleged dots (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020), left open the possibility for the gathered protesters to insert the information and arguments heard at the demonstration into their own belief systems or conspiracy imaginaries, according to their tastes. Signaling toward a larger, well-known narrative without explicitly

drawing up conclusions allowed the diverse crowd at the demonstration – some being merely dissatisfied with masks, border closures, and lockdown measures, others promoting full-fledged conspiracy theories (Sarkadi 2020) – to stand “united in their opposition to dominant cultural orthodoxies” (Harambam 2020, 283), despite their potentially diverging opinions on what is *actually* going on.

The protest back in September 2020 was followed by several others in the following year, supplemented with anti-vaccination conspiracy narratives, as Covid-19 vaccines started to roll out, coupled with vaccination campaigns and the introduction of immunity certificates. With the Covid-19 pandemic, alternative medical experts and conspiracy entrepreneurs quite literally found a market for both their products and online contents expressing their counter narratives and views on the current health crisis. In addition to that, they even started a movement, a somewhat unified platform, for various conspiracy theorists, Covid-skeptics, general vaccine-skeptics, hardliner anti-vaxxers, and all those in between. Studies highlight, that while the Hungarian anti-vax milieu previously consisted of worried parents debating childhood vaccination on obscure websites, the pandemic fundamentally changed that scene, and with the help of alternative lifestyle and health experts such as Dr. György Gódcény, and Dr. Gábor Lenkei transformed it into a “mass movement” (Győri 2021). Aside from the mobilization and semi-institutionalization of the alternative medicine, vaccine-skeptic milieu, far-right fringe media sites, and the most prominent player of the far-right subculture, *Mi Hazánk Mozgalom* (Our Homeland Movement), also quickly adapted Covid-related and anti-vax conspiracy theories mainly with a geopolitical focus (Győri and Istrate 2021), adding to the supply of such platforms, and in competition with the previously discussed scene.

However, the newly formed movement around Covid-skeptic and anti-vax narratives, the rise and economic success of alternative medical celebrities as conspiracy entrepreneurs, and the seamless adaptation of Covid-related conspiracy narratives by radical right groups, are only one part of the interesting and complicated story of conspiracy theories and the coronavirus pandemic in Hungary. The political context in which such movements, actors, and narratives gained momentum is equally important. The conspiracist populism of Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, specifically his permanent anti-Soros campaigns, has gained heightened academic attention in recent years (see Szombati and Szilágyi 2020; Plenta 2020; Wodak 2021a). And while the Hungarian government did not embrace Covid-related conspiracy theories and relied on scientific expertise throughout the health crisis, in an effort to contain the spread of the virus and mitigate its social and economic effects, they nevertheless have been employing a crisis discourse that pits the strenuous efforts of the Hungarian government in protecting the people against the malevolent machinations of international elites and internal “traitors.”

The chapter unpacks the particular dynamic between the disseminators of varying kinds of conspiracy theories during the coronavirus pandemic, arguing that while the contents of their narratives might be different, fringe groups and

mainstream political discourse employ the same conspiracist *style* in Hungary. After an overview of key country-specific factors, the chapter first explores the emergence of conspiracy entrepreneurs and fringe Covid-skeptic and anti-vaxxer movements and then contextualizes the political climate in which such conspiracy narratives emerged, placing them against the background of populist governance and communication during the pandemic.

“The Country of 10 Million Virologists”

Exemplifying the cacophony of opinions, interpretations, and conspiracy narratives around the pandemic, “the country of 10 million virologists” became the favorite trope of Hungarian public discourse, especially in the initial stages of pandemic. Overbidding each other with new information, ordinary citizens, as well as medical experts of all kinds touring the media to provide new interpretations of the coronavirus and all its effects, causes, and consequences, tried to add themselves to the already populous array of potential epistemic authorities. Conspiracy theories, counter-narratives to official explanations about the virus’ origins, the vaccines’ safety, and intended purposes soon found their ways into the Hungarian public. A representative study conducted jointly by Policy Solutions and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, based on the data collected in September 2021 by Závecz Research, found that the most widely accepted conspiracy theories among the Hungarian public were (1) the theory that China deliberately let the coronavirus loose to assert world domination – 9 percent of the sample fully agreeing with it, while 28 percent leaning to agree with it – and (2) the theory that pharmaceutical corporations had developed the virus in order to boost their revenues by selling medications and vaccines – 6 percent of the sample fully agreeing with it and 27 percent leaning to agree with it (Bíró-Nagy and Szászi 2021, 81). The third most popular conspiracy theory about the Covid-19 vaccine causing infertility and its secret goal being control of population growth was fully supported by 5 percent, 20 percent leaning to agree with it, while 18 percent being unsure or not willing to reply, which was a striking number compared to the percentage of non-respondents to other proposed statements on the questionnaire. Conspiracy theories about the virus being non-existent and vaccines containing microchips were the most rejected (81).

While it is true that some of these conspiracy theories have a wide, strong, sometimes even radical supporter base, on the grand scale they face more rejection in Hungary than unquestioned endorsement. They might present distorted versions of social reality; however, they mostly tap into deep-seated fears, concerns, anxieties, and perceived injustices that preoccupy people especially in times of a global crisis that has multiple facets and bring such explanation into the limelight, giving them exposure. In light of the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic, while it would be easy to explain the proliferation of virus-related conspiracy theories as results of “crippled epistemology” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 204) arising from a lack of sufficient (relevant) information or people not processing them properly;

however, by doing so, we would fail to understand how conspiracy theories can function, in the words of Peter Knight, “as an act of communal political identification” (2021, 197–98). In the case of Hungary, this argument especially holds true.

Astapova et al. (2020) argue that politically related conspiracism is even higher in (Central) Eastern Europe than in the United States, where strong political association drive belief in conspiracy theories (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016). The region’s historical trajectory – the fight for social and national emancipation and sovereignty – is quite often strongly reflected in mainstream political narratives in many countries, and Hungary is no exception to that. Narratives depicting “Brussels” as the “new Moscow” striving to cut back Hungary’s national sovereignty, coupled with the alleged evil, destructive grand plan of American-Hungarian philanthropist-billionaire George Soros, are long running conspiracy theories incorporated into official governmental communication in Hungary.

Prior to the pandemic, the most visible producer and disseminator of conspiracy theories had been the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz-KDNP government, ruling Hungary with a supermajority in the National Assembly since 2010. Tapping into the historical resonance of “freedom fighter” narratives, based on the experience of limited national sovereignty (Krekó 2021), Fidesz, and more specifically Orbán, depicted George Soros as an “umbrella enemy” (Krekó and Enyedi 2018), arguing that the all-mighty 90-year-old billionaire, as a representative of the so-called “global elite,” seeks to undermine the country’s national sovereignty by sponsoring migration and thus creating an ethnically mixed open society.

Given this utilization of conspiracy theories as political propaganda techniques pushing a specific agenda (Astapova et al. 2020; Cassam 2019), studies have shown that party affiliation in Hungary has a rather strong effect on conspiratorial beliefs (Molnár and Szicherle 2020). Studies conducted by Political Capital from 2018 and 2020 showed that supporters of Fidesz and far-right movements and parties, such as *Mi Hazánk Mozgalom* (Our Homeland Movement), were highly receptive to anti-West, anti-Soros, anti-Muslim, and antisemitic political conspiracy theories (Political Capital 2018; Molnár and Szicherle 2020). Commentators, academics, and journalists often like to list Orbán among the honorable circle of right-wing conspiracist-populist leaders such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. However, contrary to his international colleagues, Orbán did not embrace coronavirus-related and anti-vaxxer conspiracy theories but instead kept sticking strongly to the politically charged conspiracy narratives listed before, using them as interpretive frames to justify his actions throughout the pandemic.

The novelty that the global health crisis has brought to the Hungarian conspiracy theory scene is that on the one hand, health- and vaccine-related conspiracy theories have gained much larger visibility than before, and on the other hand, medical influencer celebrities emerged as conspiracy entrepreneurs, bringing together various segments of the alternative medicine milieu, coronavirus-skeptics, vaccine-skeptics, and conspiracy theorists, aiming to give them not only a unified platform, but potentially political representation as well.

“A Bathtub of Coronavirus”: The Subtle Appeal of Conspiracy Entrepreneurs

Conspiracy theory and *conspiracy theorist* are not by any means neutral labels. They are evaluative terms with often times negative, pejorative connotations (Byford 2011). In the words of Michael Barkun, conspiracy theories are “stigmatized knowledge” (2013, 26), and in the same vein, the term *conspiracy theorist* is often being thrown around in public (and even academic) discourse with an aim of discrediting the speaker. Relying on stigmatization, however, can also be a lucrative business opportunity for conspiracy theorists, allowing the “construction of their (corporate) identities” (Thalmann 2019, 17). Perhaps the most well-known examples of conspiracy theorists who turned their activities into entrepreneurial ventures are David Icke and Alex Jones. While one could list quite many such theorists, video bloggers, and authors from Hungary (such as János Drábik, or László Bogár among quite a few), two medical celebrities particularly stand out for whom the pandemic brought widespread notoriety: vitamin businessman Dr. Gábor Lenkei and Dr. György Gődény.

Gábor Lenkei’s corporate identity is defined by his fight against Big Pharma and the medical establishment to which he frequently refers to as “drug mafia” or “the assembly line of the disease industry.” According to Lenkei’s mission statement from one of his many websites (www.drlenkei.com/), a better life is achievable that circumvents official medicine with the help of health-improving properties of vitamins. Dr. Lenkei is a well-established name in the alternative medicine scene, and he posits himself as the outcast of the medical community. Embracing his fringe status, his 2003 book *Censored Health: On the Conveyor Belt of the Disease Industry* is claimed to be a bestseller that sold over 170,000 copies. Lenkei’s corporate profile includes his vitamin business, his clean food business, his public-benefit nonprofit corporation called “Right to Health Association,” as well as his online video content page (<https://drlenkeichannel.com/>), where he has a wide array of videos exposing the conspiracy of the “drug mafia” and the “disease industry,” his journey within the medical community, his approach to vitamins and nutrition, and to what he deems a “media lie” or the “coronavirus terror.” Many of Lenkei’s videos were also available on his YouTube channel, however, by now the Covid-related ones had been removed from the platform.

Lenkei jumped in on controversial statements about the coronavirus quite early into the pandemic: just a few days after the announcement of the first confirmed Covid-19 cases in Hungary in March 2020, he published a Facebook post discussing the current situation “calmly and scientifically.” This was followed by a video in which he uttered his infamous statement “I could get into a bathtub of coronavirus, and that would not even hurt me the slightest” that quickly travelled through Hungarian media, Facebook removing his post and video later on (Ács 2020). Deplatforming virus-skeptical conspiracy entrepreneurs, such as Lenkei, however, does little-to-no harm to their revenue streams. On the contrary, Lenkei’s claims

and conspiracy theories about Big Pharma, vaccines, and the health care industry received much wider attention during the coronavirus pandemic, and his increased notoriety boosted his vitamin business. According to G7, a Hungarian financial news portal, the joint revenue of Lenkei's business groups rose by 60 percent to HUF 3.5 billion in 2020 (Fabók 2021). Even before, but especially during the pandemic, Lenkei's alternative, countercultural appeal proved to be a lucrative business model, benefiting from the very same mode of neoliberal corporatism he is so eager to expose and criticize.

Apart from Lenkei, the activities of György Gődény have received the same, if not even more, increased volume of attention. Pharmacist and lifestyle influencer Dr. Gődény similarly jumped on the Covid-skeptic bandwagon early on into the pandemic, uploading videos to YouTube where he explained his views on the coronavirus in a calm, scientific manner with statistics, claiming that it is no more serious than a seasonal flu. Gődény organized several anti-lockdown, virus-skeptic, and anti-vaccination demonstrations throughout 2020 and 2021 (Lenkei being present at most of them), including the infamous "COVID-9.11" protest discussed earlier, that, apart from generally dissatisfied and coronavirus-skeptic citizens, mobilized anti-vaxxers and several strands of conspiracy theorists. Being a medical celebrity, Gődény based his appeal on his counter-cultural stance against what he deemed a mere "media panic," claiming repeatedly that obligatory mask wearing was only a "tool of propaganda," so that people would be tricked into believing that there is a dangerous disease out there, labeling Covid-19 vaccines as "experimental drugs."

Since the beginning of the enactment of emergency measures by the Hungarian government, besides the organization of numerous offline events, Gődény played a key role in establishing an anti-vax movement around Covid-skeptics claims, largely thanks to his extensive experience in setting up new organizational structures to financial ends (Győri and Istrate 2021, 7). Gődény first received attention because of his involvement in the "fake party business" back in 2018, with his party *Közös Nevező* (Common Denominator). The term "fake party" (or "bogus party") refers to political parties in Hungary established with the sole purpose of receiving state funding, thus taking advantage of the simplification of the political party registration. Since the 2014 elections, several investigative reports¹ have scrutinized the phenomenon, with these parties receiving only a marginal number of votes, while absorbing large amounts of state subsidies granted for their campaigns. Gődény's involvement in the "fake party business" has come to the forefront in recent years, especially in light of his successful mobilization around Covid-19. During the pandemic, Gődény successfully channeled anti-establishment attitudes, organized protests, set up websites (<https://doktorgodeny.hu/>) and Facebook pages (his first one got removed by Facebook), remained active on social media, and aiming to provide political representation for the supporters of his movement, he established a political party as well, called *Normális Élet Pártja* (Party for Normal Life). Besides his fake party business, Gődény had been the in-house expert and face of a vitamin and dietary supplement company called *Nutriversum*, featuring in videos on the company's YouTube channel with hundreds of thousands of views

(now removed from the platform). While the company has by now broken ties with Gődény, the alliance brought them considerable financial success, along with a fine of HUF 20 million imposed on them by the Economic and Competition Authority for misleading consumers by advertising their food supplements with a pharmacist, alluding to the medical approval of their products. According to G7, Nutriversum's sale revenue almost tripled from 2019 to 2020, from approximately HUF 600 million from the year before the pandemic to HUF 1.77 billion in 2020 (Fabók 2021).

Gődény also played a crucial role in establishing a unified platform for like-minded, conspiracist, anti-vax health experts, called Doctors for Clarity (Orvosok a Tisztánlátásért), an organization that besides Gődény counts the previously introduced vitamin entrepreneur Gábor Lenkei, former internal medicine physician Dr. József Tamasi and orthopedic specialist and former leader of the Heves county branch of the Hungarian Chamber of Doctors (MOK) Dr. Alfréd Pócs among its ranks. The experts “who do not want to sacrifice the truth on the altar of belonging to the flock,” according to the mission statement on their website (<https://orvosokatisztanlatasert.hu/>), organized scientific conferences in 2020 and 2021, with a lineup of fellow international vaccine-skeptics, Covid-skeptics, and conspiracy theorists. Interestingly, in both cases, the venue for the conference was provided by the World Federation of Hungarians (Magyarok Világszövetsége), a far-right outlet that aims to bring together Hungarians around the world.

The convergence of different interest groups around conspiracist claims and the fusion of nationalistic (sometimes antisemitic) and anti-globalization narratives with new age, esoteric, alternative medicine, and self-made movements occurred in Hungary as much as elsewhere (Krekó 2021). In fact, with the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has seen up front how these groups can join forces during anti-lockdown protests, occasionally resulting in a merger of different conspiracy narratives “into one Byzantine, integrated mega-theory” (Knight 2021, 205–6). But it is important to note that in Hungary, this merger of interests has not been unproblematic, and despite some overlaps in both their claims and supporter base, the alternative health and far-right milieus should be treated separately.

With regard to the far-right milieu, apart from obscure fringe websites, the political party that has managed to seamlessly integrate Covid- and vaccine-related conspiracy narratives into their agenda – joining them together with anti-semitic, Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theories about global financial elites, and the Bilderberg Group, grand conspiracy theories about the New World Order, and more recently picking up the Great Reset mega theory – is Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement), the splinter party of the formerly right-wing radical Jobbik. Mi Hazánk organized several anti-lockdown and anti-vax protests and a poster campaign against mandatory vaccination – which has not been on the government's agenda in Hungary, apart from the government decree that allows employers to prescribe mandatory Covid-19 vaccination for their employees (which of course triggered considerable public outcry). Besides the party's numerous protests mobilizing “second class citizens” (i.e., the unvaccinated)

against a “Covid dictatorship,” which always took place separate from the alternative health milieu’s gatherings, party chairman, László Toroczkai, has been a rather active presence on YouTube. Toroczkai’s elaborate conspiracy theory-themed videos on his channel have been viewed several hundred thousand times. Complete with English subtitles, they reach an international audience as well. Toroczkai’s Covid-related “superconspiracy theory” (Barkun 2013, 6) problematizes the Western neoliberal financial elites’ ties to China in a manner that the name “Rothchild” in Toroczkai’s narration is uttered nearly as often as the indefinite and definite articles jointly.

While some of their claims around Covid-19 and the vaccines coincide, György Gődény emphasized several times that his movement has nothing to do with Mi Hazánk, accusing the party of solely adopting their Covid-skeptic narratives for “political profiteering” (for a more detailed overview of the enmity, see Györi and Istrate 2021). Gődény also criticized Mi Hazánk representatives² voting in favor of the infamous “Authorization Act” in the National Assembly back in March 2020, which gave the Hungarian government emergency powers to rule by decree without including a sunset clause in the bill. However, what makes this dynamic between these fringe groups and the Hungarian government even more complex is their mutually shared (although slightly divergent) conspiracist narratives and crusade against global financial elites.

Great Minds Think Alike: The Conspiracist Styles of the Fringe and the Mainstream

A notion that has dominated conspiracy theory research since the 1960s and that still continues to operate as one of the most (in)famous and overused concepts in the discussion of contemporary conspiracism of political leaders and fringe movements of all kinds is Richard Hofstadter’s “paranoid style” (1996 [1964]). While the harmful impact of the pathologizing approach Hofstadter takes toward conspiracy theorizing, ascribing it solely to the fringes, relying on exclusively American and conservative examples, and dismissing the potential of such theories to reflect on the nature of modern political and economic power dynamics has been emphasized by many (see Knight 2021; Fenster 2008; Butter 2021; Butter and Knight 2019; Barkun 2013), viewing Hofstadter’s concept through a strictly narratological, rather than psychopathological lens (Melley 2021) and understanding it as a distinctive style (Butter 2021; Birchall 2021) are undeniably helpful in grasping the similarities among disparate movements, groups, and conspiratorial articulations. As Mark Fenster argued:

[Hofstadter’s] conception of conspiracy theory as a *style*, a complex political and cultural rhetoric and means of seeing the world, was brilliant, his understanding of it as *paranoid* was confused and confusing in his own work, and has only become more simplistic and useless as it has been taken up by others. (2008, 36)

Indeed, without reinforcing the harmful, simplistic, and rather outdated “paranoia” thesis, and focusing solely on the aesthetic and narrative dimension of conspiracy theorizing, this “stylistic” approach allows for the identification of shared features in the rhetoric of distinct political and interest groups even with seemingly diverging narratives and political and/or social aims and agendas. Dr. György Gódegy’s open letter to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán from November 2021 perfectly illustrates this overlap of stylistic features and the overarching, pervasive style of conspiracy replicated in both fringe and mainstream discourses in Hungary.

As already highlighted, conspiracy theories are not restricted solely to the fringes, but they can be permanent contenders in mainstream political discourse as well. Hungary’s case is a quite well-known illustrative example of that. Conspiracy theories about billionaire financier and philanthropist George Soros’ alleged plan to accelerate migration and make Europe an “immigrant continent,” disrupting the continent’s “civilizational” heritage, while simultaneously abolishing national frameworks and placing decision-making into the hands of “global elites” (Szombati and Szilágyi 2020; Plenta 2020; Wodak 2021a), coupled with the apocalyptic depiction of the “declining” West (Krekó and Enyedi 2018) has reached the level of an all-encompassing interpretive frame for the Fidesz government that is applied to each and every political event, situation, and crisis they may encounter.

Viktor Orbán’s conspiracist populism – merging the distinctive political style and discursive logic of populism that creates a vertical distinction between “the people” as a large group of underdogs, and “the elites” as a small group having illegitimate power and deemed to be unfit to properly represent “the people” (Moffitt 2016; De Cleen and Speed 2020; Laclau 2005) with the narrative style of conspiracy theory – applied its specific interpretive frame to the coronavirus pandemic as well. On the one hand, the Hungarian government introduced lockdown measures with the aim of containing the spread of coronavirus, organized vaccination campaigns, and relied on scientific expertise throughout the public health crisis. On the other hand, the primacy of political communication over balanced information campaigns remained, relying on conspiracist narratives, constructing internal and external enemies the government can fight against. As Bene and Boda argue, “Fidesz simply adapted its communication patterns and political logic to the circumstances” (2021, 88) relying on a populist governance throughout the pandemic, shutting opposition parties completely out of decision-making and pushing a “propaganda of success,” labeling every criticism of their decisions and policies as threats against the nation and a “politically motivated” attack against them.³

Orbán utilized a bellicose crisis discourse, relying heavily on war metaphors (Szabó 2020; Wodak 2021b) in his “fight” against the coronavirus, combined with anti-West, anti-migrant, and anti-opposition narratives (Political Capital 2020). Orbán continuously tried to establish a connection between the pandemic and “illegal immigration,” while criticizing the West and more specifically the European Union, accusing “Brussels” of “blackmailing Hungary” based on the EU’s continued efforts to end rule of law abuses in the country. George Soros was quickly integrated into the narrative as well, after publishing an op-ed⁴ that urges the EU

to issue perpetual bonds (that would supposedly solve financial problems), accusing Soros of pushing nations into “debt slavery” and profiteering from the pandemic. Körösenyi, Illés, and Gyulai (2020) argue in their influential book on the Orbán regime that this *modus operandi* of the governmental communication is part of a so-called “populist myth” (see also Casullo 2020) that resembles a folk tale, an epic battle between good and evil with a moment of betrayal at the center, in which Orbán is depicted as the defender and savior of the Hungarian people fighting against the powerful and hostile international bureaucratic and financial elites and their domestic servants (equals opposition parties, civil organizations, independent media). This has morphed into the theory during the pandemic that claims that the international and domestic criticisms – coming from Western democracies, the EU, and from opposition parties – triggered by the “Authorization Act” (and quite a few other controversial steps of the Hungarian government) are all part of a master plan, a conspiracy aiming to weaken the outcast Hungary’s national sovereignty (Illés, Körösenyi, and Gyulai 2020). The fringe conspiracy milieu and the Hungarian government’s matching conspiracy styles, rhetorical strategies, and the targeting of similar enemies caught György Gődény’s eye as well.

In an open letter⁵ to Viktor Orbán published on his newly established political party’s website (<https://normaliselet.hu/>), Dr. Gődény hits a “constructive oppositional,” respectful tone as a “compatriot,” trying to bring to Orbán’s attention on 18 pages that he has been “misguided” by medical experts during the pandemic. Gődény richly references globally well-known conspiracy fragments, alternative scientific studies, demonstrating a familiarity with the international Covid- and vaccine-skeptic milieu, claiming that the Hungarian PM should treat his letter as a “notice of liability” after which he cannot say he did not know about the clandestine conspiracy “scam” behind the coronavirus pandemic. In Gődény’s narration, Dr. Anthony Fauci (Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and Chief Medical Advisor to the President of the United States) appears as the arch-enemy, “the most important supporter of Big Pharma,” “frequently consulting” with investors in Silicon Valley. The pharmaceutical plot depicted by Gődény allegedly involves other key actors, such as the WHO, national governments, US-based medical agencies, Bill Gates, and Orbán’s favorite bogeymen George Soros and the “Brussels bureaucracy.” Gődény repeatedly stresses that “science is driven by financial interests,” and global financial elites are profiteering from the coronavirus. The “profit-oriented financial elites” argument has been part of Orbán’s conspiracy narrative as well, even though his exploration of financial interests and their connections with the pandemic aimed to uncover a different kind of conspiracy (one that aims at weakening nation states), without doubting the seriousness of the health crisis.

Gődény, in his letter, identifies key points that, according to him, signal that Orbán might have sensed something was “fishy” about the pandemic as well, highlighting that the Hungarian government opted out from the joint EU vaccine procurement scheme with Pfizer (in classic Orbán fashion with the aim of provocation and proving that Hungary was smarter and had plenty of vaccines from both

Western and Eastern manufacturers, and then silently opting back in in the end),⁶ introduced lockdown measures haphazardly (lifting them for football matches, the pope's visit, and a pro-government march in October), and finally noting that the government was reluctant to make vaccines mandatory (delegating the responsibility of the decision to employers who can decide to make it obligatory for their employees). Gódeény also expresses his appreciation for Orbán because, according to him, he sensed well the underlying dynamics behind some international issues and events, finally assuring him that since he repeatedly stated that he is willing to confront global powers fighting for the interest of Hungarian people, now would be the time to prove this further and "deliver on his promises." Gódeény manages to identify quite well that with Viktor Orbán's restless struggle against global financiers, even if the contents of their narratives are different, they are on a shared mission uncovering some kind of an elite plot against the "underdogs." Accordingly, their aims and agendas might be completely different, sometimes even contradictory, however, based on their narrative styles, Dr. György Gódeény (and the related alternative health scene) and Viktor Orbán (and his government and political party, Fidesz) are rhetorically connected in their efforts to challenge Western ontologies of social reality.

Conclusion

Objecting to and refuting other people's conspiracy theories while being a conspiracy theorist yourself is a challenging task (see Cassam 2019, 114) and an interesting paradox that the Hungarian government had to face during the Covid-19 pandemic. The governmental communication did not miss a chance to apply the label "anti-vaccine opposition" to the anti-Orbán multi-party alliance and to everyone criticizing the government's Eastern vaccine procurement (i.e., buying vaccines from Chinese and Russian manufacturers) and the related politically charged public information campaign. In the meantime, they turned a blind eye to actual anti-vaxxer groups such as the alternative health movement and the far-right milieu including Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland Movement), the political party with such a considerable appeal that led them to win six seats in the National Assembly during the 2022 elections, openly embracing an anti-vaccine standpoint, making it the most important element of their agenda. Specific to the current era, this also touches on the issue that while Viktor Orbán is riding the wave of "post-truth" politics, it often requires a careful balancing act of keeping stigmatized narratives and ideas close enough but not fully embracing them in order to appeal to a wide base of right-wing voters, from moderate to radical ones.

As for the alternative health conspiracy entrepreneurs, in September 2021, Dr. György Gódeény got a suspended prison sentence concluding a police investigation launched against him based on "scaremongering" charges during the special legal order.⁷ However, as discussed earlier, deplatforming, fining, or sanctioning conspiracy entrepreneurs hardly has lasting deterrent effects, given their portfolio of multiple online and offline platforms and revenue streams and the chance to further

play up the appeal of their stigma, advocating for their suppressed, counter-cultural claims. While the wide array and diverging profiles of fringe and mainstream conspiracy theory disseminators in Hungary might appear perplexing at first sight, it shows how fringe groups and mainstream groups alike can narrate their perceived social realities through a similar style.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the in-depth investigative video series on Partizán YouTube channel, including the following documentary with English subtitles: Partizán, “Rablópártok – A TELJES FILM [with ENG sub],” *YouTube video*, 1:34:19. April 27, 2019. www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymXH4mODDfk.
- 2 Mi Hazánk was established in the aftermath of the 2018 elections by the radical wing of Jobbik, who were dissatisfied with the party’s new line that left extremist stances behind. Some representatives who later went on establishing Mi Hazánk got parliamentary mandates from Jobbik’s party list in 2018, and upon leaving Jobbik, they became independent representatives in the National Assembly without belonging to parliamentary fraction. In 2022, Mi Hazánk got into the parliament in their own right, passing the 5 percent electoral threshold, successfully maintaining their appeal even after the government lifted Covid-related restrictions prior to the elections.
- 3 Indeed, Orbán’s Fidesz government received quite some negative attention and heavy international criticism after they declared a “state of danger” and adopted the so-called Authorization Act in March 2020 that granted the government the power to rule by decree without incorporating a sunset clause in the bill. In the end, the “state of danger” ended in June 2020, Viktor Orbán proudly stating on his Facebook page that “Those who cried dictatorship home and abroad can now extend their apologies!” (see Orbán, “97. Szavazás a rendkívüli jogrend megszüntetéséről. Fantasztikus, vissza nem téró lehetőség! A nemzetközi és hazai diktatúrázók olcsón megúszhatják!,” *Facebook*, June 16, 2020. www.facebook.com/orbanviktor/videos/3392411610772035). However, the story did not end there. With the adoption of new bill that had been tailored for the specific circumstances of the pandemic, a “state of medical emergency” has been introduced. For a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the emergency regimes introduced by the Hungarian government during the pandemic, see the Hungarian Helsinki Committee’s dedicated page: <https://helsinki.hu/en/emergency-regimes-in-hungary-under-the-pandemic/>.
- 4 See his piece in Project Syndicate via www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/eu-member-states-should-issue-perpetual-bonds-by-george-soros-2020-11.
- 5 The full text is available in Hungarian via: https://normaliselet.hu/download/level_a_miniszterelnoknek.pdf.
- 6 See Zsiros, “Hungary Silently Rejoins the EU’s Joint Vaccine Pool.” *Euronews*, November 26, 2021. www.euronews.com/2021/11/26/hungary-silently-rejoins-the-eu-s-joint-vaccine-pool.
- 7 Gódehy’s party, while managed to collect enough signatures to run, only managed to garner a marginal support; 0.7 percent of the electorate voted for them in 2022.

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17

ITALIAN UPRISING FROM COVID SKEPTICISM TO SOCIETAL POLARIZATION

Cecilia Vergnano

Introduction

Censis, one of the most important Italian institutes for socioeconomic research, titled its annual report of 2021 “The irrational society.” According to Censis researchers, Italian society is hit by a wave of irrationality never experienced before: surreal hypotheses, unfounded theories, blunders, and conspiracy theories have leaked into the social fabric. Beside heterodox statements concerning the realm of astronomy, physics and history (i.e., statements such as “the Earth is flat” or “men never landed on the moon,” believed by 5.8 and 10 percent of Italians respectively) Censis’ list of irrational beliefs also contains other items: for instance, that factual power in Italy is concentrated among a group of powerful men, including high bureaucrats, politicians, and business men (67.1 percent of respondents believe so), or that big corporations are responsible for what happens to us (64.4 percent). The very first lines of the Censis report are noteworthy:

Effective vaccines available in a short time, allowances and welfare payments for everybody, a robust economic growth and a remarkable recovery plan funded by the European Union: such news, after the panic of the last year, should be a reason for a sigh of relief and make people proud of the socio-economic endurance of the country. It is a victory for reason, for the rational human ability to solve problems. However, while the pressure of emergency is relaxing, not only sigh of relief or echoes of exultation are audible, but also moans, complaints, accusations and resentments.

(Censis 2021, 3, emphasis added)

How is it possible, the authors seem to ask, that anybody is complaining, when everything is going well? Censis’ taxonomy of irrationality received its share of

criticism, which can be summarized in the title of an article published after Censis report on the Italian newspaper Domani: “The critique of power is not conspiracism” (Coppola 2021).¹

Censis report is representative of the increasing concern for conspiracy theory in the aftermath of the pandemic outbreak. But is the “conspiracist trend” really going upward? Since it is the first time that Censis is collecting this kind of data, it is impossible to affirm that the aforementioned conspiracist trend is growing. Other research findings actually suggest the opposite trend. While it is possible that conspiracy theory believers might not be increasing but just more visible, precisely because of a long-lasting stigmatization process started in the post-war period (Thalmann 2019; Butter 2020), Censis report can be interpreted in the light of a wider epistemic struggle to establish the boundaries of acceptable (or hegemonic) discourse in a context of health emergency.

Throughout this chapter, I will analyze Italian conspiracism concerning Covid-19 in the context of the increasing societal polarization characterizing the country in the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak. After a preliminary contextualization of the Italian socioeconomic and political landscape (immediately prior to and after the pandemic outbreak), I will explore some specificities of Italian conspiracism concerning Covid-19. Successively, I will show how media reactions, which tend to assimilate conspiracist and non-conspiracist critical stances into a homogeneous subversive movement, share some of the features of conspiracism itself and work to increase societal polarization.

Research findings are based on critical discourse analysis of contents retrieved from Italian webpages which are prominent in the conspiracist milieu (e.g., Databaseitalia, Maurizio Blondet’s blog, *Autismovaccini and Imolaoggi*), as well as the Telegram channels “*Vax: le cavie siamo noi?*” (Vax: are we guinea pigs?), with more than 14,000 subscribers in November 2021 and “*Effetti Collaterali Vaccino Sperimentale*” (Side Effects of Experimental Vaccine), with more than 5,000 subscribers in the same period. Contents retrieved from media, which support governmental measures for the pandemic emergency (including Ansa, La Stampa, La Repubblica, Open, among others) are also analyzed. For analytical purposes, I will adopt here the definition of “conspiracy theory” provided by Cubitt (1989), according to whom conspiracy theories are explanatory accounts of human affairs characterized by intentionalism (events are explained as the result of deliberated intentions), dualism (the world is divided between a good, or innocent, non-conspiratorial majority, and an evil minority), and occultism (the appearance of human affairs is different from their true nature, which is hidden).

The Italian Landscape

While Italy does not differ from other Western countries in its reliance on vaccination as the main and sole strategy to address Covid-19 outbreak, some specificities concerning the Italian context need to be mentioned concerning pre-pandemic socioeconomic inequalities and preexisting social conflicts. I will refer here, in

particular, to the persistence of the post-2008 economic crisis, which was not yet over by the time the Covid health crisis began, and the preexistence of a vocal anti-vaxxer movement. Political changes that occurred after the pandemic outbreak are also an important element of the Italian context, since they resulted in the establishment of a new government that adopted a specific pandemic governance.

Preexisting Social Conflicts and Exacerbation of Socioeconomic Inequalities

At the time of the pandemic outbreak, Italy had not recovered yet from the economic-financial crisis of 2008, so that the Covid-19 crisis increased preexisting social inequalities in a context already characterized by a public health system under strain as a consequence of budgetary cuts, high rates of unemployment, and high public debt. In 2020, more than two million families were classified by the Italian National Institute of Statistics as living “in absolute poverty” (7.7 percent of total population, with an increase of 1.3 percent compared with 2019 – this means an increase of almost 800,000 individuals) (Istat 2021). Forty-four percent of people supported by Caritas in 2020 were “new poor,” namely persons who had never sought support before (Caritas Italiana 2021). Most of them did not match the “traditional” profile of poverty: they were Italian nationals and residents in the north of Italy – which is traditionally richer than the south.

At the same time, Italy was celebrated as country of the year in 2021 by *The Economist* for its quicker economic recovery and higher rates of vaccination compared with other EU countries, the international reputation of its president Mario Draghi, and the political stability provided by his government of national unity (The Economist 2021). However, this praise does not correspond to the general perceptions of Italians, whose outlook on the future is quite pessimistic: as Italy is the only OECD country where the average wages decreased since 1990s, it is hardly surprising that 66.2 percent of Italians deem life conditions in the past to be better than now, 69.6 percent are very concerned about the future, and 81.1 percent believe that time and resources invested in higher education today are not a guarantee of social and economic recognition anymore (Censis 2021).

Another important feature to understand social conflicts triggered by the pandemic in Italy is the existence of a vocal anti-vaxxer movement, whose origin can be located back in 2016, when the then government announced the intention to make vaccination for children compulsory. Indeed, in Italy, as well as in United Kingdom, United States, and most of the Western world, vaccination rates against childhood diseases started to decrease at the end of the 1990s. Unlike most of Western countries, where vaccination rates among children plummeted but no specific measures were taken, Italy adopted a policy based on compulsoriness. In 2017, the Lorenzin decree, named after former Health Minister Beatrice Lorenzin, increased the number of mandatory vaccines for children from four to ten. This way, in Italy since 2017, children between zero and six are excluded from day care

and kindergartens if their parents do not provide proof that they are vaccinated, while parents of children aged between six and 16 years are fined in absence of such a proof.

It is in these circumstances that the Italian anti-vaxxers movement became more radical and vociferous, with demonstrations in the main Italian cities (La Repubblica 2017). Conspiracy theories flourished also as a response to the punitive character of Italian vaccination policies. In particular, conspiracists interpreted the nomination of Italy as global leader for vaccination strategy in the Global Health Security Agenda Summit of 2014 as a supposed demonstration that Italy had been selected as a “laboratory” to test mandatory vaccination policies (Autismo e Vaccini 2017). Anti-vaxxer protests in 2017 were supported by the *Five Star Movement* and *The Ligue* that at that time were at the opposition (and changed their position after winning the elections: contrarily to their promises, they maintained the compulsory nature of vaccines for childhood diseases; see Paun 2019). The reactions against the national Covid-19 vaccination campaign must be seen against this background. Protests, complaints, fears, concerns, anxieties, related with the safety of vaccines against Covid-19, as well as conflicts related to the conceptualization of “health” itself, also built on the preexisting resistance to compulsory vaccination for children.

Two Different Governments – and the Measures Adopted

Italy was the first Western country where Covid-19 outbreaks were reported at the beginning of 2020. On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and the first reported infections in Italy date back to the day after, that is, January 31. On the same day, the Italian government declared a State of Emergency, which concentrated the power in the hands of the cabinet and allowed the suspension of some fundamental freedoms.

Since then, the country has been led by two different governments. In fact, the pandemic governance can be divided so far into two main phases: a pre-vaccine phase and a post-vaccine one, roughly corresponding to the governments of Giuseppe Conte and Mario Draghi. While during the first and second pandemic waves (in the spring and the fall/winter of 2020) Conte, a representative of the populist *Five Star Movement*, was president, Draghi, an internationally renowned neoliberal who played an important role in Italian post-2010 austerity politics, has been leading the country since February 2021. Indeed, at the beginning of 2021, the government led by Conte lost its majority in parliament and had to resign. To avoid new elections and ensure reliability to EU institutions (which were requesting the submission of a national recovery plan as a condition to allocate funds), the president of the Republic assigned to Mario Draghi, the former president of the European Central Bank (ECB), the task to form a new government. This way, a government of national unity was formed, headed by Draghi himself with the participation of all main parties except the far-right *Fratelli d'Italia*. While Conte conducted the negotiations in the EU Council for the allocation of the

post-coronavirus recovery package, Draghi conducted the vaccination campaign and elaborated the “National Plan for Resilience and Recovery” (PNRR).²

The main measures adopted by Conte to contain the pandemic were hygienic measures such as the mandatory use of the mask (both in indoors and outside) and lockdowns. The latter were uniformly imposed on the whole country in the spring of 2020. This way, Italy was the first country worldwide to declare a lockdown on the whole national territory.³ Successively, lockdowns were regulated at regional level, according to a “color system” in which Italian regions were classified as “green,” “yellow,” and “red” (each color being associated with a different extent of restrictions) depending on the alert level.

Draghi’s government maintained the aforementioned measures; furthermore, it adopted a policy strongly aimed to incentivize vaccination. Indeed, Italy has been the only country worldwide where 1) the Covid certificate (called “Green Pass”) was required for the entire working population (even those working remotely), under penalty of having one’s own salary suspended, and 2) access to public transport was not allowed without a so-called “Super Green Pass”. While a simple negative test (as an alternative to vaccination or recovery certificate) was sufficient to obtain the Green Pass, the Super Green Pass was available only through vaccination or recovery certificate. In January 2022, a decree made a Green Pass obligatory not only for all workers, as mentioned, but also made vaccination compulsory for everybody above 50, regardless their occupational status (compulsory vaccination until the moment had only applied to certain professions, such as health professionals, security forces, teachers, and administrative staff in public schools). Unvaccinated people over 50 were suspended from their work and therefore did not receive any salary. At the same time, supermarkets were among the few commercial services whose access was not regulated; the access to the majority of shops, indeed, was possible only with a Green Pass.

Besides health measures, specific directives to guarantee public order were issued: on the November 10, 2021, in a moment in which several protests against the Green Pass were taking place daily or weekly, a directive from the Minister of Interior banned traditional protest demonstrations from urban centers, allowing only “static” demonstrations (so-called “sit-in”). While media presented the directive as a measure specifically adopted against the No Green Pass movement (see for instance *Il Corriere* 2021, among others), it did not explicitly address a particular target, thus making any demonstration “on the move” potentially punishable.

Covid-19 and Conspiracy Theories in Italy

Conspiracy theories circulating in Italy about Covid-19 and the management of the pandemic are identical with (or variants of) conspiracy theories spread in broader Western world (Stephens 2020). They include theories about the engineered origin of the virus; the use of the virus as a weapon within a global war between foreign powers; the intentional inflation of figures about infections and

deaths to impose an authoritarian turn into Western democracies; the connection between vaccination, microchips and the installation of 5G; and infections through swab tests and others (Stein et al. 2021). Since the big social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, are very active in suppressing them, they circulate mainly in Telegram groups (Hohlfeld et al. 2021). The specificities of Italian conspiracy theories on Covid-19 concern: 1) the specific character of Italy and other southern EU countries as “sacrificial victims” of EU due to the double burden inflicted with austerity politics to address the financial crisis of 2008 and restrictive measures to address the Covid crisis of 2020 and 2) the links between pharmaceutical industries and some exponents of the Democratic Party and other exponents of the “deep state.”

One meme and the related comment, retrieved from the Telegram channel “*Effetti Collaterali Vaccino Sperimentale*” on January 14, 2021, can be considered an emblematic example of theories concerning the role of Italy as an EU victim, because of its high levels of public debt. The meme is a kind of table enumerating different types of use of Covid certificate on one axis (to access crowded spaces, for health professional, for employees in the public sector, for some categories of workers, for all workers) and different countries on the other (Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Greece, Austria, Switzerland, the UK, the US, and Canada). For each country, red circles (evocating a traffic light) show for which purposes or social categories the Covid pass is requested. Italy and Greece are the countries with more “red lights.”

The meme was accompanied by the following comment:

Freedoms suppressed in the two countries with higher public debt [Italy and Greece]. Is there a connection? Are we under blackmail? Is it true that big finance imposed vaccination (with vaccines by their own companies), otherwise they would have forced us into default?⁴

Regarding the connection between Big Pharma and representatives of the Italian state (and specifically the *Democratic Party*, PD), the conspiracy theory concerning the case of doctor De Donno is particularly emblematic. Giuseppe De Donno was Head of Pneumology at the hospital of Mantova. During the first wave of infections, in the spring of 2020, he started to treat Covid patients with convalescent plasma, already known for its safety and efficacy in the treatment of SARS (Soo et al. 2004; Lai 2005). De Donno’s experimental protocol generated considerable expectations, to the point that the Italian Medicine Agency (AIFA) and the Italian Institute for Health (ISS) authorized a clinical trial for the experimentation of convalescent plasma. However, the assignation of the trial to another hospital generated controversies, as did the exclusion of De Donno from the scientific committee (Salvini 2020). The assignation was criticized for conflicts of interests, since the pharmaceutical company to which the production of plasma-derivates should have been commissioned, in case of official authorization, was headed by a

PD senator's brother (Manti and Montolli 2020; Salvini 2020). After issuing some controversial statements, such as “Plasma is democratic. From the people, to the people,”⁵ “They want to silence me,”⁶ and “I am very frank: there is the will to hide this treatment,”⁷ De Donno resigned from his position as Head of Pneumology and started to exercise as a general practitioner. A couple of months after his resignation, on July 27, 2021, De Donno committed suicide.

De Donno's suicide, together with Public Prosecutor's investigation for incitement to suicide, generated an avalanche of conspiracy theories on social media (Carisio 2021; Open 2021a) – among them, the theory of homicide, with the argument that plasma therapy was cheaper than vaccination. Among other interpretations, conspiracy theorists pointed to the aforementioned conflict of interest between pharmaceutical industry and PD. According to them, such conflict of interest dates back at least to 2014, when Minister of Health Lorenzin (PD), as already mentioned, represented Italy in the Global Health Security Agenda summit at which Italy was selected as global leader for vaccination strategy (Carisio 2020).

It is remarkable that conspiracist narratives were not limited to Telegram channels and well-established conspiracist websites. Political representatives of *The League* also contributed to their spread in different ways. In particular, at the very beginning of the pandemic, they scapegoated China and Chinese residents in Italy for the spread of the virus, also leaving the way open for conspiracist interpretations. Indeed, beyond the request of “self-isolation” of Chinese children in the school by some regional presidents (all of *The League*) (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2020) and declarations by one of them about Covid-19 as a consequence of Chinese' lack of hygiene and custom of eating “living mouses” (Corriere del Veneto 2020), on March 25, the leader of The League Matteo Salvini went a step further. He posted on his Facebook page a video from a television broadcast of 2015, which shows how one coronavirus, potentially lethal for humans, was created in a Chinese laboratory by mixing coronavirus of bats with a protein of the virus SARS-Cov-2 of mouses, responsible for serious pneumonitis. Salvini's post triggered criticisms since at that time the WHO had excluded that the coronavirus responsible for Covid-19 was artificially created. The video ends with the sentence “Here is who we have to thank” (referred to China), thus leaving the open question whether the spread of the (supposedly engineered) virus was accidental or deliberate. By blinking to the conspiracist milieu among his electors, Salvini reproduced also in this occasion his well-established populist style of calculated ambivalence, which also reiterated in his ambivalent support to the vaccination campaign.⁸

Exclusions from Public Debate Through the Derogatory Use of the “Conspiracy” Label

In Italy, as elsewhere in the Western world, the “exit strategy” from the pandemic has been based almost exclusively on vaccination campaigns. The vaccination campaign in Italy is very successful when compared to other EU countries. More

than 80 percent of the population over 12 was fully vaccinated by February 2022. As highlighted earlier, the measures adopted by Italian government to incentivize vaccination against Covid-19 are particularly restrictive if compared to other countries. The campaign was conducted on a slippery ground, with a vocal minority (the so-called “No Vax” movement) questioning vaccine efficacy and safety. They are part, in turn, of a wider movement questioning the legal basis of the Green Pass, as well as its efficacy as a tool to preserve public health (the so-called “No Green Pass” movement).

As highlighted by Butter,

Not every opponent of vaccination is a conspiracy theorist. . . . That label should only be applied to those who believe that there are forces seeking to conceal the fatal consequences of vaccination from the public, or even to use it to manipulate or subdue the population.

(2020, 26)

In practice, such an analytical boundary is difficult to set in a context where hesitation, criticism, and doubt (not necessarily about vaccines but also, more broadly, about the introduction of the Covid certificate) are difficult to articulate. During the pandemic, critical perspectives on specific narratives and measures have often been excluded from the spectrum of the socially acceptable discourse (Lello and Bertuzzi 2022). As highlighted through the case of Censis report, presented at the beginning of this chapter, in this epistemic struggle, the thresholds of conspiracist discourse have been lowered to include expression of social critique, political opposition or simple hesitancy, and doubt which does not feature the characteristics of a conspiracy theory (Walker 2018).

In this sense, media coverage of the self-named *Commissione DUPRE* (Commission for Doubt and Precaution) is noteworthy. The Commission was inaugurated on December 8, 2021, on the initiative of Ugo Mattei, lawyer and mayoral candidate in Turin, who adopted a critical stance toward the pandemic governance and the regulation of social life through the Covid certificate. Other members of the commission are the philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Massimo Cacciari (the latter is the former mayor of Venice) and the journalist and theorist of communication Carlo Freccero. Their main claim is that two important ethical principles are ignored in the vaccination strategy and, more broadly, in the management of the health crisis: doubt and precaution. One month before the day of the inauguration, some media had already labelled the Commission as “the conspiracy party”⁹ (Villanetti 2021).

The inaugural event of the “Commission for doubt and precaution” was an online, one-day long workshop, consisting in a series of pre-recorded interventions by invited epidemiologists, virologists, bioengineers, biochemists, historians, lawyers, epistemologists, and (former) representative of Italian institutions and a final debate, for a total of 9 hours and 50 minutes (Commissione Dubbio e Precauzione 2021). Among others, they stressed that media contributed to reproduce a

positivist and deterministic image of science, which did not correspond with main shifts in the epistemological paradigm that had occurred in the last centuries. This way, media representation of science does not reflect complexity and the impossibility to make certain predictions in complex systems. Andrea Saltelli, an epistemologist at the University of Bergen presented the findings of his research, published in well-ranked journals, about the phenomenon of the “regulatory capture” (the penetration of great corporations in national and international regulatory bodies). Presenters insisted on the need to strengthen first-line medical services and, in general, public health system in parallel with the vaccination campaign. While a few newspapers partly covered the variety and complexity of the contents presented (Strippoli 2021), other focused on particular details of the event – for instance, the comparison between No Green Pass and Jesus Christ (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2021), made by one the invited presenters, or discredited the event by bringing the attention exclusively on the organizers, labelled as negationists and conspiracy theorists: “Cacciari, Agamben and the road to ruin: voices acting as a megaphone of seediest negationism”¹⁰ (Di Cesare 2021; see also Open 2021b).

Dualism, Secrecy, and Intentionality in Mainstream Discourses

Since the beginning, a dualist representation of society, divided between a “good” majority of citizens compliant with the rules and an “evil” minority responsible for the spread of the virus, characterized pandemic media narratives. As already mentioned, the first social group to be scapegoated for the spread of the virus were Chinese residents in Italy (to the point that many Chinese restaurants in Italy closed even before the official declaration of a Public Health Emergency by the WHO). After Chinese people, it was the turn of runners (running being one of the few activities allowed outside when the general mandate was to stay home) and young people crowding public spaces in the evening and the night (when shops, bar and restaurants reopened after the first lockdown). Later in the pandemic, the role of those responsible for the spread of the virus was assigned, in the “mainstream” media, to anti-vaxxers and the “No Green Pass” movement – often reduced, in media representations, to its Far Right elements.

Increasingly, public statements against anti-vaxxers, No Green Pass, and simple critics of specific measures have been marked by violent, dehumanizing tones, at the same time that protestors’ violence was publicly denounced. On February 26, 2021, the journalist Selvaggia Lucarelli tweeted

Oh God, how much I want a virus that eat your organs in 10 minutes and reduce you to a greenish mush that can be contained in a glass to see how many inflexible anti vaxxers remain in the world.¹¹

On July 22, 2021, in a very controversial statement, President Draghi declared that “An appeal not to get vaccinated is an appeal to die”¹² (ANSA 2021a). The

following day, the journalist of Repubblica Sebastiano Messina tweeted “Dogs can always get in. Only you will stay out, as is only right,”¹³ and the virologist Roberto Burioni, well-known for his participation in prime-time tv shows, tweeted “I propose to pass the hat to pay a Netflix subscription for anti vaxxers, because soon they will be locked in their houses like mice”¹⁴ (the virologist used the Italian word “*sorci*,” which is stronger than the English “mice” and usually referred to fascists).

Successively, public incitements were made to even kill anti-vaxxers and no Green Pass, also citing historical, quite problematic quotes such as “*vanno sfamati col piombo*” (literally, “they should be fed with lead”). The sentence, originally pronounced by general Fiorenzo Bava Beccaris, remembered for his brutal repression of riots because of high food prices in Milan in 1898 (80 people were killed and 450 wounded), was also pronounced by the Italian politician, journalist, businessman, and former union official Giuliano Cazzola in a prime-time TV broadcast on August 30, 2021, in reference to anti Green Pass: “It is necessary to reenlist Bava Beccaris, he knows how to treat these people. These terrorists. Let’s reenlist the merciless Bava Beccaris, who fed the starving with lead.”¹⁵ Following the same line of war metaphors, a local representative of the Italian industrial association Confindustria, Michelangelo Agrusti, in a press conference on November 1, 2021, compared anti-vaxxers to deserters, specifying that “they shouldn’t be executed but just burdened for their desertion”¹⁶ (ANSA 2021a). At the end of October 2020, the journalist Andrea Scanzi, usually invited in prime-time talk shows and therefore well-known in Italy, wrote on his social media platform that “I would enjoy to see them die like flies” (Laganà 2020).

In some cases, dualism in pandemic narrative was accompanied by secrecy and intentionality, thus taking on all the characteristics of a conspiracist discourse. This is the case of discourses about the potentially subversive character of the No Green Pass movement. According to the National Anti-Mafia Prosecutor, Federico Cafiero De Raho, the attempt to lead the movement hides a subversive plan which goes much beyond simple demonstrations, and such plan “can bring us back to the dark years of terrorism” (Foschini and Tonacci 2021). Criminologist Arjie Antinori (Università La Sapienza, Roma) also defines the strategy of No Green Pass as “subversive:”

There is no doubt, it is a subversive strategy that aims to erode institutions on the long term. . . . Extremist organizations that have their ideological roots in the last century, such as neofascism and Marxism-Leninism, have adapted. Before, they were trying to reach the masses. Now, with social media they aim to reach individual vulnerabilities.

(Bechis 2021)

The same expert considers plausible that No Green Passes are directed by external organizations, close to the Russian government (he refers to an external direction as *regia esterna*). De Raho’s and Antinori’s declaration culminate a trend started in

the summer of 2021, when the infectious disease specialist Matteo Bassetti, famous for his participation in several talk shows, suggested to investigate about the existence of subversive organizations behind the anti-vaxxer movement (Il Messaggero 2021) and continued with articles on Secret Services' mobilization prior to protests of September 1, 2021 (which was the day of the official introduction of the Green Pass requirement to access public transport, schools and universities) (Ludovico 2021).

It is noteworthy that in some cases the media, in their attempt to portray conspiracy-theory believers, copied the pattern of conspiracist narratives. This is the case, for instance, in the article "The same guidance behind different anti-vaxxer conspiracy theorists," published by the *Huffington Post* on December 22, 2021 (Pierangeli 2021). This is the beginning of the article:

A common thread connects conspiracist and radical movements in Europe and North America: they use the corona virus, vaccines and third jabs to attack the governments in a violent way, blaming them for the suppression of our freedoms in the name of a health dictatorship. It seems like these groups, which are radicalised and very viral on the Internet, are the avant-garde of a common direction, which is using them for a dirty job.¹⁷

In the article, it is not clear what exactly the "dirty work" these groups are claimed to be doing consists of, but it is possible to deduce that is, once more, a work of subversion or destabilization of the democratic order. In general, the narrative is based on the existence of a secret plot; similarly to conspiracist narratives, there is no space for coincidences. The author uses the term "coincidences" once in the text, ironically and preceded by the adjective "strange" in quotation marks, to explain that she found references to the New World Order in the discourse of three different groups: a far-right anti-vaxxer group, an anti-vaxxer one, and QAnon followers.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have presented some specificities of the Italian conspiracist narratives in the context of an ongoing epistemic battle in which some elements of mainstream narrative also play an important role. Concerning the Italian conspiracist milieu, I have highlighted the interpretation of particularly severe restrictive measures, compared with other countries, as a result of a "blackmail" by finance powers that aim to hit Italian economy and the interpretation of doctor De Donno's death as the direct or indirect result of hidden interests of the Democratic Party in the pharmaceutical sector. Furthermore, I have shown the role played by a populist party, *The League*, in propagating doubts toward the origin of the virus and the safety of vaccines, without explicitly endorsing conspiracy theories, but rather leaving the way open to them.

On the other side, media narratives supporting government measures played a role in the process of societal polarization that took place in the aftermath of the pandemic outbreak. The reduction of heterogeneous forms of dissent to the category of “conspiracy” led to the exclusion of critical perspectives from the spectrum of acceptable, hegemonic discourse, since specific critiques on particular narratives and measures are vilified as conspiracy theories even if formally they do not feature the characteristics of a conspiracy theory. On the contrary, such characteristics (namely, dualism, secrecy, and intentionality) can be found in some of those “mainstream” media and political discourses which precisely aim to support government measures and condemn conspiracism. I have shown, indeed, that dualism is particularly prominent in several forms of hate speech against anti-vaxxers promoted by institutional and media representatives. When dualism is combined with intentionality and secrecy, such as in some mainstream representations of No Green Pass demonstrators and conspiracy theory believers, the resulting narrative has all the features of a conspiracy narrative, thus contributing to a sort of vicious circle leading to societal polarization.

Notes

- 1 Such a claim is in line with a long-standing tradition in conspiracy theories’ critical scholarship that highlights the central role of power in the definition of what we regard as conspiracy theories, and in the usage of the term as a political instrument of exclusion (Clarke 2002; Miller 2002; Husting and Orr 2007; Bratich 2008).
- 2 In the summer of 2022, Conte himself left the government of national unity headed by Draghi, thus making necessary a call for new elections in September, which resulted in a victory of a new coalition led by the far-right.
- 3 Until then, only China had imposed a lockdown to prevent the spread of the disease, but only at regional level.
- 4 “Libertà soppresse nei due paesi con il piú alto debito pubblico. Ci sarà un nesso? Siamo sotto ricatto? Che sia vera la storia che la grande finanza ha imposto la vaccinazione (di società da loro possedute) altrimenti ci avrebbero fatto finire in default?”
- 5 “Il plasma è democratico. Del popolo, per il popolo.” See Floris 2020.
- 6 “Vogliono zittirmi.” See ANSA 2020.
- 7 “Io sono molto franco: c’era e c’è la volontà di nascondere questo trattamento.” ANSA 2020.
- 8 Salvini never fully embraced the vaccination politics against Covid-19. On the contrary, he opposed the Green Pass requirement to work. The way he portrayed the moment of his own vaccination on his social media is particularly interesting, since it can be considered an exercise of calculated ambivalence. Unlike many Italian political leaders, Salvini did not post a picture of the very moment of the inoculation on his social media. On the contrary, he chose to portray the moment immediately after the vaccination with a picture of himself sitting in a bar terrace with a coffee. The only elements which suggested he had just been vaccinated were a paper with a QR code on the table and the vaccination center on the background (recognizable only for those who know Milan). The picture was accompanied by the message “health, work and freedom have to go hand in hand.”
- 9 “Il partito del complotto” (“party” intended here as political group).
- 10 “Cacciari, Agamben e la china rovinosa: voci che fanno da megafono ai negazionismi piú beceri.”

- 11 “Madonna come vorrei un virus che ti mangia gli organi in 10 minuti riducendoti a una poltiglia verdastra che sta in un bicchiere per vedere quanti inflessibili no-vax restano al mondo.” The tweet was then removed but is still visible as a screenshot in other tweets replying to it (see, for instance, Parisi 2021).
- 12 “L’appello a non vaccinarsi è un appello a morire.”
- 13 “I cani possono sempre entrare. Solo voi, come è giusto, resterete fuori.” (Messina 2021).
- 14 “Propongo una colletta per pagare ai No vax gli abbonamenti Netflix per quando dal 5 agosto saranno agli arresti domiciliari chiusi in casa come dei sorci” (Burioni 2021).
- 15 “Richiami in servizio Bava Beccaris che sa come trattare questa gente. Questi terroristi. Richiamiamo il feroce monarchico Bava che con il piombo gli affamati sfamò” (FsSolutions Agency 2021).
- 16 “Se questa è una guerra, questi sono dei disertori. Non dobbiamo fucilare nessuno, ma dobbiamo far pesare la loro diserzione.”
- 17 Jessica Pasqualon/ANSA
Un comune filo conduttore lega i movimenti complottisti e radicali sparsi tra Europa e Nord America. Sfruttare il coronavirus, i vaccini e oggi le terze dosi per attaccare in modo violento i governi in carica, rei di aver soppresso le nostre libertà sull’altare della dittatura sanitaria.
Sembra quasi anzi che questi gruppi, radicalizzati e molto virali sulla rete, non siano altro che le avanguardie di una regia comune che li usa per il lavoro sporco.

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18

THE PROLIFERATION OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

How Corona Conspiracy Theories in the Netherlands Fostered New Social Movements

Jaron Harambam

Introduction

As in many other countries around the world, in early 2020, the unfolding SARS-CoV-2 pandemic immediately led in the Netherlands to various speculations about what was really going on. Some argued that the virus was secretly engineered as a bioweapon, others pointed to the introduction of the 5G mobile phone network which – they claimed – coincidentally seemed to take place where Corona outbreaks happened. In the months that followed, many more suspicions toward the official information offered by mainstream authorities emerged, and all kinds of competing explanations about the Corona virus and how we are dealing with the pandemic gained traction in everyday conversations and on social media platforms alike.

Most of these ideas were quickly dismissed by the Dutch mainstream news media as bizarre and dangerous conspiracy theories (e.g., Bakker 2020; Van der Beek 2020). Following alarming statements by the World Health Organization (WHO) about a looming collateral pandemic of disinformation aggravating an already challenging pandemic (Zarocostas 2020), most news media organizations reported about the virulence of all kinds of unfounded claims circulating on social media. Such news items discussed the (ludicrous) contents of these ideas, why people fall for them in times of great uncertainty, and how to counter those (e.g., Bakker 2020; Bouma 2020). In addition, the Dutch news media reported on how the major social media platforms now actively work against the spread of disinformation. These efforts to curb the spread of conspiracy theories by either debunking or content moderation take center stage nowadays, but their efficacy is questioned (Drażkiewicz and Harambam 2021).

While the familiar Dutch conspiracy theorists instantly shared their conspiratorial ideas, various new publics were lured by the concerns and explanations they

offered. Because these conspiratorial ideas circulating in the Dutch off- and online worlds are similar to those popular in the rest of Western Europe and the United States (De Coninck et al. 2021; cf. Harambam 2020c; Uscinski et al. 2020), I will only briefly explain in this chapter what they are about. What is, however, more relevant to the Dutch case are the specific practices, social activities, and communities these ideas have set in motion. This chapter will not focus on the arson attacks on 5G telecom towers (Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe 2020), nor the increased tendency to disregard Corona mitigation measures (Bierwaczonok, Kunst, and Pich 2020), nor prepping behavior (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020).

Instead, I will explain from a cultural sociological perspective how Corona conspiracy theories fostered the emergence of new social movements by drawing on my ongoing ethnographic research in the Dutch conspiracy world (Harambam 2020a). While many (Corona) conspiracy theory studies focus on the misinformation built into conspiracy theories and the psychological functions they serve during such crises as coping mechanisms (Pummerer et al. 2022; Uscinski et al. 2020), in this chapter I highlight their role as concrete drivers of cultural change from an epistemologically and morally agnostic perspective (Harambam 2020a). This means that I argue against the prevalent stigmatization of people as conspiracy theorists and in favor of trying to understand where their distrust comes from. Moreover, conspiracy theories are often conceptualized as ideas of *individuals*; instead, I wish to show their collective or social dimensions as well. As such, this chapter contributes to the sparse but growing academic work on the social movements that conspiracy theories set in motion (Bertuzzi 2021; Harambam 2020b; Sternisko, Cichocka, and Van Bavel 2020).

After briefly presenting the various conspiracy theories that gained traction in the Netherlands, I show how these ideas fostered the emergence of new social movements. More specifically, I explain how the experienced uniformity in mainstream media reporting contributed to the emergence and consolidation of various alternative conspiracy theory media outlets. These popular initiatives, ranging from personal blogs and podcasts to fully fledged media platforms with increasingly professionalized operations, make use of the open and participatory infrastructure of today's digital information landscape but extend to the offline world as well. The (Dutch) media landscape is profoundly more pluralistic than before, although some may question whether that is a positive development or not.

Because social scientific research on Corona conspiracy theories in the Netherlands specifically is quite limited (Achterberg 2021; Meder 2021; van Prooijen et al. 2021), I will draw on a wider variety of sources. First, I will use my own ethnographic accounts of my engagements with various conspiracy theorists in the Netherlands. Second, I will draw on media analysis of the mainstream news coverage about Corona conspiracy theories (February to June 2020). Third, I supplement that with Dutch quality and investigative journalism about newly emerging anti-Corona or conspiracy theory movements. Fourth, I will draw on the opinion polls conducted by Ipsos (2020, 2021) about the popularity of conspiracy beliefs in the Netherlands. Note that during the pandemic, in which the plausibility of

information or common understandings can rapidly change, defining who or what counts as a conspiracy theory/theorist is even more complex (Harambam 2020c; Husting and Orr 2007; Pelkmans and Machold 2011). However, I will use the term here with a clear understanding of the politics of labeling, but for reasons of clarity continue with what is commonly seen as conspiracy theory/theorist.

Distrusting Official Knowledge in an Unfolding Pandemic

Soon after the first cases of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 emerged across Europe in February 2020, numerous speculations about the crisis gained traction in the Netherlands. While information about the dire situation in Wuhan was picked up by the Dutch media, there was still much uncertainty about the virus and the disease it caused. Aggravated by the Chinese government's efforts at concealment, the lack of reliable information coincided with speculations and allegations about what was instead going on.

Remarkably, these messages accentuated the idea that governments, virologists, and media were actually *downplaying* the severity of the outbreak. Posts circulated with images of empty streets in enclosed Wuhan, arguing how its 11 million inhabitants were left to die or showing newly built mass graves (the image actually came from the 2011 Hollywood film *Contagion*) and even moving images of Chinese “zombies” crawling from under a half-closed shutter of a convenience store looking for food (Thijs 2020), just like in a bad horror movie. The point was that there many scary things going on over there, while our governments were still conveying messages to stay calm as the virus would stay contained in China.

At the same time, rumors about the concealed origins of the virus emerged as well. Traveling from the United States, allegations that the virus may have not originated from that infamous live-stock market in Wuhan, but from the nearby Institute of Virology, found their way to a Dutch audience as well. Conspiratorial posts discussed whether the virus was engineered as a bioweapon or escaped from the high-tech facility during research experiments. The police arrest and subsequent sudden mysterious death of the doctor Li Wenliang (who first rang the alarm bells about this new virus) only added to these suspicions. What were the authorities trying to hide?

In the weeks that followed, this circulation of speculation on Dutch social media platforms intensified, leading to various streams of conspiratorial alternative theories about the virus and the disease it causes. Topics included the true origins of the virus, the way it makes people sick, the mitigation measures taken, the fear campaign in the media, the unlawful suspended civil rights, the looming totalitarian state, the inflated numbers and statistics used, the connection with 5G, the suppression of possible cures and medications, and the role of Bill Gates in it all. But what about the popularity of these ideas? While social media abound with such statements (before they are taken down and disappear again), and news media frequently report about their disturbing societal presence, there is still little quantitative data on conspiracy beliefs in the Netherlands.

There have been, however, some opinion polls in the Netherlands that gauge conspiracy beliefs. Ipsos did research in cooperation with the Dutch public TV program *Nieuwsuur* on Corona conspiracy theories in April 2020. Three concrete questions were asked to a societally representative sample (N = 1017): (1) the coronavirus is a biological weapon engineered in a laboratory (15 percent agree, 29 percent did not know); (2) the coronavirus outbreak is related to construction of the 5G Internet network (4 percent agree, 13 percent did not know); and (3) Bill Gates is behind the development of the coronavirus (5 percent agree, 18 percent did not know). While these statements gauge only a specific subset of the aforementioned conspiracy theories, and could have been framed in a different way making it more likely for people to agree with them, these are still significant numbers, especially when taking the “I don’t know” category into account. Ipsos noted that numbers were much lower than in the UK where they did a similar study. What was perhaps more revealing about their study was the demographics and political orientation of those who agreed: the younger generations, the lower- and middle educated, and the political extremes (both left and right) were overrepresented. These findings corroborate previous quantitative research done on conspiracy beliefs in the Netherlands (van Prooijen et al. 2021).

In the run up to the Dutch national elections in March 2021, Ipsos did more research on the beliefs of people along their party affiliations in February 2021 (nationally representative sample, N = 3,009). For the extreme/populist right party *Forum for Democracy* (FvD), they gauged conspiracy believers. Both FvD leader (Thierry Baudet) and his popular number two (Wybren van Haga) were explicitly against the Corona measures taken in the winter of 2021 (lockdown, curfews, etc.) and often made (more or less) conspiratorial statements. The Ipsos results indicated that about 50 percent of their following thought the coronavirus was engineered in a lab (1) and developed to suppress citizens worldwide (2). In the average population, this was only 13 and 11 percent, respectively. This party quadrupled in parliament seats (from two in 2017 to eight of 150 in 2021), mostly because of their position against the Corona mitigation measures of the government, gaining many new voters who would have otherwise never voted for them.

Complicit Mainstream Media and the Emergence of Alternative Media Outlets

The institutionalized corporate and public service media in the Netherlands played an important role in the rise of conspiracy beliefs throughout the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. At first, they followed governmental downplaying of the coming epidemic. But this quickly turned around as infections began to explode in March 2020, and the country entered the so-called “intelligent lockdown.” The Dutch media coverage drastically changed into an alarmist discourse in which images of the dire situation in Italy and overflowing hospitals in the Netherlands dominated (Wilderom, Bröer, and van Rijsewijk 2021). The coronavirus was here to stay, and it was going to create a serious crisis.

The existing alternative media outlets and private conspiracy theory channels and websites also made a turnaround: suspicions were no longer that the authorities were downplaying the pandemic, but that they were actually exaggerating it. Their reporting made claims about inflated infection numbers and hospitalizations, how Corona is much less deadly than widely proclaimed, that most dying people had serious underlying issues, and that this pandemic is therefore no more than a bad flu season.¹ To support their points, they often showed media items of several critical scientists (Sucharit Bhakdi, Wolfgang Wodarg, Yoram Lass, Hendrik Streeck) who argued similarly: there was a dangerous media panic going on.² They also suggested that extreme lockdown measures were more dangerous in terms of collateral damage than the disease itself.

While some of those arguments (turned out) to make sense, especially those not taken to the full extreme, they were hardly heard in the mainstream media coverage in the Netherlands. Instead, news items and talk shows predominantly portrayed epidemiologists and virologists who all emphasized the great dangers of this novel virus and warned about the disastrous consequences if the government let up on the stringent measures. Perhaps intimidated by the unfolding events across Europe and a felt responsibility to convey governmental public health communications, most media outlets continued to publish articles emphasizing the severity of the crisis. Only a few journalists and academics (e.g., Ira Helsloot, Marli Huijjer, Jort Kelder, Marianne Zwagerman) went against the dominant narrative of mayhem, panic, and fear and pointed to the bigger picture: is the cure not worse than the disease? But these non-virological/epidemiological experts had little political influence as they were not part of the governmental advisory public health committee OMT (Outbreak Management Team), nor were they able to break through the dominant media discourse. Instead, most of these people received much public resistance in the form of (online) aggression, moral outcry, and allegations of Nazism or social Darwinism.

In the absence of such heterodox perspectives on the pandemic, various alternative media channels saw a niche to occupy. This counted especially for the existing Dutch conspiracy theory media outlets which all saw a significant increase in audience numbers and published articles during the pandemic. Besides the conspiracy news websites that have existed for over ten years (Harambam 2020a: 40–44), the social media revolution of the last decade enabled the emergence of more participatory and visual, TV-style, conspiracy media as well.

Consolidating the Alternative Conspiracy Theory Media Space

One major player in the Dutch conspiracy media sphere existing before the Corona pandemic is Cafe Weltschmerz (CWZ), founded in 2014 by Max von Kreyfelt. It is, as it proclaims, a “completely independent” multimedia platform, boasting news articles and video interviews. The latter is their signature dish: conversations recorded in a dark studio with only a table, two chairs, and a table light. The

interviews cover all kinds of heterodox voices on various “societally relevant topics” ranging from “EU,” “Big Tech,” “Geopolitics,” and “Climate,” and then obviously, the Corona crisis. Their mission is to

[U]se citizen journalism as a means for change . . . the government and mainstream media don't tell the whole story. We let experts speak that you don't find in your everyday newspaper. Our interviewers are autonomous cross-thinkers, and experts in their fields.

(*Café Weltschmerz n.d.*).

While that latter claim can be disputed, they do have a wide variety of interviewees, ranging from (marginalized) scientific experts and active politicians to amateur journalists and ordinary citizens. The platform is run by volunteers and operates financially through “donations of people who appreciate the platform” and revenues from social media platforms where they publish their videos as well.

The main focus of CWZ is to provide a platform for “discussions and perspectives that are not present (enough) in mainstream media” (*Café Weltschmerz n.d.*). According to various mainstream newspapers (Heck 2019; Smithuijsen 2020), they have a rather right-wing bent, although that is contested by CWZ who say to “welcome all political leanings. CWZ is objective and neutral” (Smithuijsen 2020). Similarly, those media reports accuse CWZ of spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories. Again, CWZ respond dismissively, saying how “that label is insulting and unhelpful,” that “even the most outrageous ideas are worth listening to, there may be a grain of important information in it” (Smithuijsen 2020) or that “we should not put aside ideas because they contain a conspiracy. The official story is often not true either” (Heck 2019). On their site, they say that “we prefer to call ourselves *complete* thinkers” (FAQ n.d.). This is a now widely used *emic* tongue-in-cheek for the Dutch word for conspiracy theorist (*complotdenker*) and an addition to their rhetorical stigma deflection strategies (Harambam and Aupers 2017). In addition, they say that

CWZ tries to make visible mechanisms – financial interests, political ambitions, ideological goals, psychological games – that we believe determine world developments. If one of our guests can make it plausible that there is collusion, then that may be mentioned. We never shy away from the facts. That doesn't make us conspiracy theorists.

(FAQ n.d.)

Again, it shows how the “conspiracy theorist” label is used in rhetorical warfare to attack the other's (epistemic) authority and credibility (Harambam 2021b; Husting and Orr 2007; Pelkmans and Machold 2011). With CWZ, this may sometimes be a legitimate disqualification, as they can make unfounded or insufficiently supported allegations and conspiratorial conjectures. At other times, this disqualification of their reporting as conspiracy theory is unwarranted, when they voice

legitimate critiques of the dominant narrative. The difficulty is that their reporting is a hodge-podge of both, and the disqualification is directed at their operations as a whole.

The Return to Printed Newspapers

While many conspiracy theory media operate in the digital domain, there are two notable exceptions as they appear (predominantly) in *printed* form: *De Andere Krant* (The Other Newspaper) and *Gezond Verstand* (Common Sense). These newspapers offer what many online conspiracy theory media do, but then on paper: they publish alternative perspectives on various societal issues that are written by a variety of authors, ranging from (former) scholars and journalists to volunteers. *De Andere Krant* (AK) was founded in 2018 as an effort “to broaden the public debate by highlighting the other side of subjects for which there was and is no room for in the existing press.” *Gezond Verstand* (GV) offers “news without censorship” and emerged during the Corona crisis in 2020 with critical reports on the “artificial pandemic.” GZ was founded by Karel van Wolferen who was widely esteemed as a Japan and geopolitics expert, as correspondent for the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, and as professor in Comparative Politics at the University of Amsterdam. The latter severed ties with him after the first publication of GZ for “ruining trust in scientific research and in factual information, for example when it comes to Corona” (ANP 2020). Like AK, GZ holds that there is too much uniformity in the Dutch press landscape: “there is no space for alternative perspectives on world events, leaving the Dutch public with a one-sided image of reality.”

While both newspapers claim to be objective and truthful in their reporting, they have been accused of spreading disinformation, propagating conspiracy theories, and of having ties with Russia. Several mainstream newspapers and investigative journalists have tried to show their financial and intellectual dependence on dubious actors and have framed them as “part of Russian influence operations” (Kouwenhoven and Heck 2020; L’Ami 2020; NOS 2020). Hard evidence is missing, but since these newspapers run on private donations, it is hard to tell the difference between “being completely independent” (as they claim) and being steered by invisible (Russian) actors operating behind the scene. AK and GV newspapers claim that “this is all one big conspiracy theory coming from established journalism,” which “dismiss[es] deviants from the norm as conspiracy theorists, extreme-righter or X-denier” (De Andere Krant n.d.). The conspiracy theory label is a clear weapon in rhetorical warfare used on both sides.

Both newspapers do not serve a marginal crowd. AK started as a bimonthly newspaper with varying print runs, going from 50,000 to 500,000 and once even 1.1 million (summer 2020) when it was distributed door to door for free.³ Interested readers can subscribe or buy them in bookstores and newsstands (three to

four euro). The same counts for GZ which not only has an average print run of 100,000 but also had some editions distributed massively across the Netherlands in 2020.⁴ These unrequested mass distributions caused much concern and moral outcry: members of parliament called to stop this spread of disinformation, journalists warned for the untruthful and biased reporting, bookstores had to explain why they continued to sell “conspiracy theory magazines” (Nu.nl 2020), and everyday citizens filed petitions against these newspapers (NOS 2020). These mass distributions also raised questions (again) about their financing, which would be impossible from everyday sales and subscriptions. Despite these societal pushbacks, both newspapers are still alive, current (May 2022) publishing weekly, with a steady subscriber base. They clearly fulfill a societal need.

Bloom of Alternative Online Media Channels

More remarkable, however, was the emergence of several *new* alternative media initiatives due to the experienced lack of diversity and critical voices in mainstream media during the Corona pandemic. While some of these are individual blogs (*De Kleine Activist* and *The Hanging Tree*) and YouTube podcasts (*The Trueman Show*) in which everyday citizens turned to broadcasting themselves and their ideas, others are more professionally produced online media platforms with video content. All of them explain on their websites why they started with their projects, and they all highlight their disagreement with the Corona mitigation measures, and with the uniformity of the mainstream media which allegedly censored alternative or critical voices. It is important to note that they generally do not identify as “conspiracy theory media” but are framed and seen by others in the mainstream as such (Harambam 2020a: 33–39). This is because they invite people considered conspiracy theorists and share counter-hegemonic perspectives or because they convey conspiratorial accusations themselves.

The people behind the individual journalistic initiatives have markedly different professional backgrounds: Isa Kriens (*De Kleine Activist*) is a lawyer formerly working for Dutch ministries and municipalities, but she quit her job a few months into the pandemic to fully dedicate herself to her activism, because she was concerned about the massive contraction of state powers and the (temporary?) suspension of civil liberties with the new emergency laws installed. She started speaking out on social media and in interviews on alternative media channels: “by informing people about their civic rights, the law and their implications, I hope to push back” (Kriens 2021). She quickly garnered many followers (more than 30,000) who donated enough money for her to research the juridical underpinnings of the Corona pandemic, including the role of the WHO. As these emergency laws were implemented in the Netherlands, she realized how this resistance was an “illusion, which crushed my belief in democracy and public institutions. Gradually I awakened and realized the matrix we live in” (Kriens n.d.). She recently started with a podcast (RadioIsa) and continues to write blogs about the situation in which she

wishes “to connect, share love and consciousness, and tell the naked truth” (Mariettenieuws 2021).

Another Twitter-activist (43,500 followers) turned journalist is Annelies who runs the website *The Hanging Tree*. She similarly got active during the Corona pandemic in which she criticized the mainstream media for having

[L]ost their watchdog function, which is crucial during a crisis. As a former journalism student, I know what journalists should do: be the counterweight to those in power. Established journalism is failing in that respect. This is why I started asking the questions real journalists should be asking.

(*The Hanging Tree n.d.*)

Because many people liked her Twitter activism, she started her website on which she publishes critical articles about the Corona measures and writes reports about each official press conference in which she poses her pressing questions. She hopes that her

[A]rticles will make people conscious of the role journalism should play, and inform readers about the many critical doctors, scientists and lawyers who are currently heavily censored. In a free society there should be no place for censorship of alternative or critical voices.

(*The Hanging Tree n.d.*)

Formerly working in the music and dance industry, Jorn Luka started his website and YouTube video podcast series during the pandemic as well. He explains:

[T]he last months have been a true rollercoaster for me. My businesses have been taken away from me and everything I assumed to be true, turned out to be different. I started to delve into topics that concern us all as human beings and I came across a lot of things. With this channel I would like to contribute to more awareness of our complex world by bringing positivity, but also by really searching for the truth

(*Luka n.d.a*)

His series is called *The Trueman Show*, a clear wink to that 1998 Hollywood production in which the main protagonist (Jim Carrey) slowly finds out that he is living a staged life (*The Truman Show*). Luka produces video interviews (between one and three hours) with a wide variety of guests (from formerly known conspiracy theorists to recent Corona activists and national politicians) and publishes them on his YouTube channel (71,000 followers, top videos 500,000 views),⁵ his own website, and through popular podcast channels. On his website, he publishes “critical documentaries that lay bare many things, because they are being taken away from mainstream social media platforms” (Luka n.d.b).

Professionalization of Alternative Media

Of particular interest is the development of Flavio Pasquino, a former sports television producer, whom I came to know personally in the beginning of the pandemic. He reached out to me after having read an interview of mine on the largest online news site of the Netherlands in which I argued against the prevalent stigmatization of people as conspiracy theorists, and in favor of trying to understand where their distrust comes from (Harambam, Grusauskaite, and de Wildt 2022). Pasquino told me how he did not understand the way the pandemic was dealt with and reported on. He got suspicious and started searching online for more information which only aggravated his concerns: “something big is going on, and they are not telling us about it. This is not about the virus” (Personal Archive). In that period, he lost most of his projects since not only all sports events got cancelled, but also he got into fights with his wife who was not interested in these issues and lost touch with others in his social surroundings. Hitting rock-bottom, he realized he had to turn his anger into something productive and got back to what he was good at: making television.

And so he started interviewing people in his car, like James Corden’s *Carpool Karaoke*, but then with a serious tone and topic and publishing it on YouTube. When he approached me, he had done only one video, with Dr. Erwin Kompanje, a clinical ethicist working at Erasmus Medical Center Rotterdam, one of the prime hospitals in the Netherlands and headquarters of many top virologists.⁶ Kompanje wrote a critical blog on his website about the inevitability of dying at old age, and whether Corona was not just the last push, but mostly about the disastrous social consequences of locking the elderly up in care homes.⁷ This led Pasquino to interview him: Kompanje is not a crazy conspiracy theorist but a respected professional explaining what was wrong with the Corona measures. Pasquino told me many times how he decided to be very selective with inviting people, because the last thing he wants is to be stigmatized as a conspiracy theorist. The video hit a societal nerve, and within weeks it was viewed over 300,000 times.

When Pasquino asked me to be part of his production, I hesitated at first for fears of blurring the boundaries between my research objects and myself. But because Pasquino’s first video was produced rather professionally, and he was sincere in his objective to shine a different light on the matter, I agreed to an interview about conspiracy theories and the Corona truth wars specifically (Harambam 2020c). The resulting video with me was viewed over 100,000 times. Since then, I have been in good contact with Pasquino who professionalized his alternative media channel in the 20 months hereafter. He produced a dozen other car interviews, and flirted with Cafe Weltschmerz, before turning his former production office into a veritable late-night talk show studio. In November 2020, he rebranded his media channel into BLCKBX.TV and opened a new YouTube channel.⁸ From then onward, he would invite guests in his own studio, instead of his car, and the whole channel professionalized greatly with a special intro tune and a visual design that comes back in his videos and studio.

His format, however, remained the same: interviews with reputable people, who hold heterodox opinions about the Corona crisis and its repercussions. These people are generally given little attention in mainstream media outlets but find on BLCKBX.TV the opportunity to share their perspectives with a willing audience. Invited people include (emeritus) professors, television celebrities, various medical experts including immunologists, activists, lawyers, philosophers, and so on. Discussed topics include the Corona conspiracy theory themes: PCR-tests, origins of the virus, the collateral damage of the mitigation measures, vaccinations, restrictions of civil rights, the Great Reset, and so on. About three times a week, Pasquino adds a new video, with almost 200 to date (May 2022). And they are popular. Most videos hit at least 50,000 views, some even up to one million, while his channel has 150,000 subscribers. Adding to his success is not just the professional studio and visuals, but also his sharp, critical, and engaged way of presenting.

Because Pasquino discusses these controversial topics in full detail, some of his videos get banned from YouTube as they violate their “Community Guidelines” on disinformation. This forced him to reconsider his operations. At first, this entailed renaming videos and cutting out disputed moments, which are common diversion strategies in response to widespread content moderation on social media platforms (Harambam 2021a), but he found that more videos were banned anyway. In an audacious move, he then decided to become independent from the main social media platforms by establishing BLCKBX.TV as an “independent news channel, with its own website, professional team and in a larger studio” (BLCKBX n.d.a). To finance it all, he started a crowd-funding campaign in March 2021 aiming to raise 250,000 euros, which it surpassed within a few months. In the summer of 2021, he opened a larger studio, introduced new anchors, and even started live broadcasting shows with an audience during and after official Corona press conferences.

BLCKBX.TV and Flavio Pasquino himself embody the complex, blurred, and shifting lines between open critical interrogations of power and enclosed conspiratorial thinking that is characteristic of alternative media channels under discussion here. On his website, he writes about his mission and argues that global governance comes about when “political decision-making happens out of sight,” and “citizens no longer understand who is leading them, and need interpretations of this non-transparent geopolitical chessboard.” He notes that people are increasingly losing trust in the mainstream media. In contrast, “BLCKBX.TV wants to be a candle in the dark.” With its “critical, investigative and sincere content,” it hopes to create a better society “in which everything can be questioned, and where respect, democracy and freedom of speech is central” (BLCKBX n.d.b).

Likewise in his videos, Pasquino oscillates between a firm belief that we are ruled by opaque powers and the desire to be a critical and open interviewer. Pasquino is driven by the conviction that there is a bigger agenda behind the Corona pandemic, and that definitely colors his perspective and guides his questions. Yet, his guests sometimes push back, and he publishes interviews with those holding opposing views as well. It is hard to dismiss him as merely crazy, a radical, or dogmatic fanatic, yet his reporting is far from being neutral. BLCKBX.TV is a

fascinating mix of investigative journalism and suggestive conspiratorial reasoning. And given the large numbers of people he attracts, his formula falls on fertile grounds.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how conspiracy theories fostered the emergence of new cultural forms and social movements in the Netherlands during the Corona pandemic. Because of a widely experienced lack of diversity and critical voices in mainstream media, various alternative or conspiracy theory media emerged and gained societal traction. These media outlets, ranging from individual blogs and podcasts to fully fledged online TV channels, make use of the participatory infrastructure of today's digital information landscape (Downing 2000; Fenton and Barassi 2011) but extend to the offline world as well. Conspiracy theories are important drivers of cultural change: the (Dutch) media landscape is profoundly more pluralistic than before. While some may dread this development, these conspiracy media offered important critiques and alternatives to the mainstream Corona discourse.

Now that the Corona pandemic is receding, these media platforms have shifted their attention to the war in Ukraine (Kouwenhoven and Heck 2022). They claim that the mainstream Dutch media reporting is one-sided all over again: blaming Putin as the evil aggressor who is attacking the innocent and freedom-desiring Ukrainians, while not considering our own (Western) complicity in Russia's radicalization due to the imperial politics of the EU and NATO encroaching upon them. Again, while this critique is reasonable in some ways, they often push it to the extreme by explicitly supporting and legitimizing Putin's ugly war. This is a missed chance for such media since they also offer distinctively different and informative perspectives on the complex geopolitics that have led to this war – perspectives that are now easily put aside as dangerous, appalling, and ludicrous. What is obvious, however, is that these alternative conspiracy theory media outlets will not disappear after Corona but are a stable part of the contemporary (Dutch) media landscape.

This development is not tied to the Netherlands: various “alternative media” emerged in other Western countries both in Europe and North America (Holt 2018; Rae 2021; Rauch 2015; Schwarzenegger 2021). Some regard these media outlets similarly with great concern as they spread disinformation and lead to a fragmented public sphere (Sunstein 2018). Following such analyses, these “hyper-partisan news outlets” are not civic organizations aiming for truth-finding but are part of the populist establishment which promotes distrust in public authorities and fuels societal polarization (Rae 2021). While these media organizations should be monitored and held accountable for their operations and funding like all others, it is important to not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Alternative (conspiratorial) media can be important voices of public discontent and necessary competitors to hegemonic information powers in democratic societies (Rauch 2015).

However, to assess the democratic and journalistic value of these media organizations, it is necessary to make substantive evaluations based on their ideologies, practices, and finances (cf. Couldry and Curran 2003; Schwarzenegger 2021). But that is not easily done. In this chapter, I have shown how they often freely oscillate between open critical interrogations of power and enclosed conspiratorial thinking. Simply going against the orthodox view does not constitute critical thinking or speaking truth-to-power, and “just-asking-questions” can be a rhetorical strategy of sowing doubt. Their alleged independence can similarly be questioned as undesired financial ties are difficult to show. But their suspicious analyses can be important and nuanced challenges to the status quo, so their dismissal as dangerous conspiracy theorists is not always warranted.

With this chapter, I hope to have planted seeds that will spark the curiosity of future scholars. Our contemporary media landscapes are much more diverse than in previous decades, and this cultural flourishing invites sociological and normative analyses based on in-depth empirical research. Regardless of those much-needed studies into the practices, ideologies, and (financial) commitments of such media, the popular desire for alternative perspectives on world events is not likely to disappear, meaning that these alternative conspiracy theory media outlets will continue to exist in the future as well.

Notes

- 1 For example, De Jensen, 2020. “DE Angst-Oorlog – De Jensen Show #127,” *You Tube* video, 42:08, March 18, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRYVQ4HIDLQ. Or Robin De Boer, “Totale Coronapaniek? Onzin of niet?” *9 News*, March 15, 2020, www.ninefornews.nl/totale-coronapaniek-onzin-of-niet/. Or “Coronavirus? Wees maar niet bang,” 2020, Coronavirus? Wees maar niet bang’s *Facebook* page, accessed April 29, 2022, www.facebook.com/CoronavirusWeesMaarNietBang.
- 2 Robin De Boer, “Deze 12 Experts Laten Een Heel Ander Geluid Horen Over Corona,” *9 for News*, March 27, 2020, www.ninefornews.nl/deze-12-experts-laten-een-heel-ander-geluid-horen-over-corona/.
- 3 “De Andere Krant,” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 29, 2022, https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Andere_Krant.
- 4 “Gezond Verstand (tijdschrift),” *Wikipedia*, accessed April 29, 2022, [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezond_Verstand_\(tijdschrift\)](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezond_Verstand_(tijdschrift)).
- 5 Jorn Luka, “*You Tube* channel,” accessed May 2, 2022, www.youtube.com/c/JornLuka.
- 6 Cafe Weltschmerz, “Natuurlijke selectie & evolutionaire aanklacht | Dr Erwin Kompanje en tv maker Flavio Pasquino,” *You Tube* video, 10:20, June 10, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=U49onktGQ3A.
- 7 Erwin J.O. Kompanje, “Over mij,” *Kompanje.org*, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://kompanje.org/2020/04/15/een-verwacht-overlijden-op-hoge-leeftijd-of-een-coronadode/>.
- 8 “BLCKBX,” *You Tube* channel, accessed May 2, 2022, www.youtube.com/c/BLCKBX.

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COVID, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

Asbjørn Dyrendal

Introduction

Sweden, Denmark, and Norway are all high-trust societies, the language differences are small, and their social and political systems, derived from long, post-WW2 periods of social democratic governance, are highly similar. Sweden and Denmark are members of the European Union, while Norway is integrated in the same system of laws and treaties through the associated European Economic Area.

While their social and political systems are similar, they are not identical. There are, for instance, minor differences in the roles of different actors within crisis management. These differences contributed to how the different countries acted in reaction to the pandemic. In Sweden, the central government has a less formal role and authority than the Danish and Norwegian governments during crises. Swedish authorities rely more on specialized institutions and departments, while the Danish and Norwegian governments use these in a more limited, advisory capacity (Hermansson 2021). In addition, all countries have policies that delegate some decisions to regional and local authorities in accordance with a principle of decision-making at the level closest to the situation. This has created its own challenges.

When Covid-19 was pronounced a public health emergency of international concern in early 2020, the Nordic countries adopted a wait-and-see approach. When a pandemic was declared in March 2020, a range of different restrictions were authorized. Mitigating measures were mainly trust-based and advisory all over the Nordics, but Norway and Denmark implemented stricter emergency actions and empowered the central government more than Sweden did (Saunes et al. 2021). They were quick to close borders and to give guidelines for a general lockdown. Schools closed and measures for social distancing and staying at and working from home when possible were put in place. Sweden opted for a less restrictive approach with fewer travel restrictions and more relaxed guidelines for social distancing (Strang 2020). It kept schools open, and while some restrictions

applied, regular city life, such as bars and restaurants, was available to a much larger extent. Advice on restricting unnecessary travel and the number of social contacts was similar throughout the region.

These differences reflect not merely pre-existing differences in powers of decision-making, but also the countries' early attitudes toward Covid. Denmark and Norway tried to keep R (basic reproduction number) below one, thus suppressing rather than merely containing transmission; Sweden went for a less ambitious plan of protecting the aged and other vulnerable groups and to "flatten the curve" somewhat (Hermansson 2021, 21–34). However, this still included limits on people's social lives. Those who could worked from home for long periods, and high schools and universities switched to mostly online teaching. While some mitigation strategies got more aligned over time, a degree of difference between the countries has prevailed (Saunes et al. 2021).

Covid restrictions have thus hit the countries differently, and some have opened lines of dissatisfaction both between citizens and government and between governments. The latter largely revolve around business and travel across borders. Although the Nordic countries have a long internal history of open borders, Denmark and Norway implemented fairly strict border controls. Norway not only implemented obligatory quarantine for most who were allowed across the border, even after the central government had loosened restrictions; local and regional authorities at times implemented internal regulations on citizens who tried to travel outside their municipalities. With mixed authority and fluid guidelines that were changed as circumstances did, communication may have been regular and fairly transparent, but rules were not always clear to the public, contributing to a later increase in distrust as pandemic fatigue grew (Petersen et al. 2021).

Both internally and between countries, the mitigation strategies of the early phase of the pandemic have thus had the capacity of laying down lines of possible conflict and distrust, countering the general, early "rally around the flag"-response that strengthened trust in science and authorities (Baekgaard et al. 2020; Evensen 2020). The opposite response was visible in both the international and the Nordic conspiracist milieu or conspiracy culture. Participants in the conspiracy milieu are generally distrustful of establishment authorities, especially government and science, and interpret any event through the lens of conspiracy lore. It was therefore not unexpected that already at a very early stage, a number of conspiracy narratives circulated within this milieu, and older predictions, for example, warnings against a coming dictatorship, were recycled. These are long-standing international tropes of conspiracy culture, featuring in apocalyptic crisis narratives which claim that ultimate values such as "freedom" are currently threatened by evil others. They were also prominent in the conspiracy milieu of the Nordic countries.

Conspiracist Reactions and Their Context

Nordic conspiracy cultures have thrived in previous waves, arising from, for example, international events such as 9/11 or the financial crisis of 2008–09 (Astapova et al. 2021). The pandemic renewed and reactivated interest, and it revitalized

conspiracist sites. In Sweden, the conspiracist site *Vaken.se* currently returns 64 pages of hits on a search for “Covid.” They appear almost exclusively to be new articles. The Norwegian conspiracy site *Nyhetsspeilet*, which was almost defunct before the pandemic, returns more than 1,000 page hits on the same search. Many of these are comments to older articles, which is interesting in itself. These websites come in addition to other alternative news sites and social media channels that cater to the same interests (Fjell 2021).¹

Conspiracist speculations about diseases are common, as people seek to make events meaningful (Douglas 2021). Speculations target everything from origins, vectors, causes, and effects to cures (Önnerfors 2021). *Contagious* diseases, and especially epidemics, have historically been well-suited to such speculations, especially those targeting minorities and enemy outsiders (Malešević 2020). At the early stage of the pandemic, for instance, speculations about the possible origins of Covid-19 included it being a bioweapon that was planted in the West by China. This version often competed with established lines of Western conspiracy lore that targets “the enemy above,” such as the CIA or “Big Pharma,” “finance capital,” and named actors on behalf of “the Elites.” At the earliest stage, this role was often filled by George Soros, a convenient figure to include antisemitic tropes. However, due to his prominent, global role as vaccine advocate and entrepreneur, Bill Gates quickly became the main individual target (Peters 2020).

Conspiracy theories that would seem to compete do not necessarily have to. We know, for instance, that many people believe in conspiracy theories that contradict each other directly (Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012; Imhoff and Lamberty 2020), and theories about the enemy outside combine easily with accusations of the enemy above. One variant of the Soros conspiracy theories, for instance, included allegations that he owned the Chinese lab that created the virus. This international version also reached the Nordic countries, as most of the Nordic conspiracy theories circulating during Covid-19 have been glocalised versions from international templates. Conspiracy culture is international in character, and tropes travel quickly in online spaces, but part of the *context* is local. Some speculations regarding Covid relate to relations of trust and distrust in local as well as global authorities, and some relate to even more local relations and conflicts. While they may all reflect tensions, most of these speculations were not directly conspiracist.

The most immediate references to local relations concerned speculations about the *vectors* of the disease. Typically, borders were watched for the flow of the disease from the outside, and the concomitant allegations concerned those either coming from or seen as representatives of the outside. Migrant workers and ethnic minorities were, as usual, among those presented as spreading the disease (Jensen 2021, 66; Jacobsen, Kühle, and Christensen 2021, 153–54). In conspiracist and racist narratives, they were either part of a concerted effort or they spread the disease “because of their culture.” However, there were also elements of generational and class conflict involved. Partying youths were shamed for spreading the disease in society when one needed to protect the aged, while international travelers, mostly wealthy, middle-aged tourists, were presented as selfishly going abroad and dragging the

disease back home (Önnerfors 2021). In Norway, one such set of public anger involved skiing tourists going to Austrian resorts during the pandemic's early phase. Later, similar anger was expressed toward “unscrupulous capitalists” and “weak government,” relating to claims that migrant workers were imported to work at low salaries and in cramped living conditions, with low levels of disease control.

In regions with low levels of both disease and distrust, these accusations were rarely folded into conspiracy narratives, and, if they were, then typically (and marginally) by those who already maintained conspiracy beliefs about certain groups – like anti-Muslim hate groups. Speculative narratives about who spread the disease thus mostly served as context to the more consistently conspiracist speculations about the origins, purpose, and danger of SARS-CoV-2 and Covid-19. These speculations followed international conspiracy lore in detail: At the earliest stage, allegations that 5G rather than SARS-CoV-2 was the cause of Covid were prominent (Jensen 2021, 40). Rather than a novel virus, the real cause was “radiation,” and the stories about the virus were merely a cover-up. The evil intent behind this cover-up included both control over the population and a planned decimation of it. Sometimes, these theories existed in competition and sometimes, they were alleged to be phases in the same evil plan. In similar ways, allegations about 5G as a cause of Covid were not always separate from other causes. From my own observations, 5G theories were even at an early stage combined with anti-vaccine theories in speculations about Covid as a manufactured disease to reduce the world population substantially. However, unlike in other regions (Jolley and Paterson 2020), there were no successful attacks on 5G towers, and while Covid-conspiracy theories drove the membership of open anti-5G groups on Facebook to increase manifold, there was little talk of sabotage or violence. Language suggesting violent action was quickly criticized and mostly stopped.²

Another set of early conspiracy theories, the “bioweapon”-speculations, concerned SARS-CoV-2 as a virus constructed by humans. A version attacking the Chinese government was not very prominent in the conspiracy milieu, but it gained traction in mainstream discourse with two Norwegian scientists claiming to have found evidence of the virus being constructed in Wuhan. The paper on which this was founded (Sørensen, Susrud, and Dalglish 2020) was largely disregarded in the scientific community, but interviews in which the authors were explicit that the virus was man-made sparked public debate. However, there was little attempt at claiming that the virus was *intentionally released*, and so the Nordic debate was limited. When, however, the authors were used in conspiracist discussion, their argument tended to be folded into pre-existing narratives about biological warfare.

The paper received positive but limited interest in central conspiracist circles (Delavante 2021), perhaps because it did not reflect important conflicts. Moreover, while some within the milieu were happy to blame the Chinese government, Nordic conspiracy culture has long displayed a fondness for authoritarian regimes, claiming that Western countries are the *real* dictatorships. Western actors are given more agency than the rest of the world. Combined with the strong tendency to recycle tropes and narratives, this meant that the usual set of suspects was more

likely to be blamed: the CIA, “Israel,” “Big Pharma,” the “globalist elites,” allied with the World Health Organization, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations, and anyone involved in making decisions (Johansen 2021).

This kind of focus is not surprising, since conspiracy theories tend to be distorted representations of real conflicts (Butter 2014). There are few points of contact and conflict between regular actors within the conspiracy milieu and China. There are few immigrants from China, Chinese ownership has not yet become a big issue, and their role in the culture war is limited. Conspiracist quarrels are local, often ideological, and their general concerns are “inwards-looking” toward the direction in which they think their own societies are heading. “Big pharma” was thus a more attractive villain to many. It could combine, for example, ideological and practical adherence to alternative treatments with a generalized suspicion about the corruption of big business and “globalist elites.”³ This could be tied back to local political conflicts through claims of tyrannical behavior (Lehrmann 2020), with “freedom” being a rallying cry against government regulations. These combinations were attractive to multiple actors, causing practical alliances that seemed strange to those new to the scene (Dyrendal 2017).

Actors, Alliances, and Activism

The steps from social media to street protests are many and long. Some conspiracists are veterans at public action, most are not. Who took to the streets at which points in time and where, and what were their central talking points?

Street activism in 2020 and 2021 mostly concerned topics other than the pandemic, and the context matters. The Nordic countries are, to varying degrees, highly oriented toward US politics, and following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, there were multiple Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests all over the Nordic countries. There were also large demonstrations from climate change activists tied to Extinction Rebellion (XR). Both types of protests were often larger than those tied to conspiracy theories about Covid and created more disturbances than the anti-lockdown conspiracists. Moreover, several of the legal disturbances during “anti-lockdown” demonstrations were conducted by counter-protestors attempting violence on known far right-figures taking part in them.⁴

These “left wing” demonstrations played a role in the rhetoric of those who protested against government measures: protestors adopted the role of opposition in the culture war, largely imported from US politics. The Trump presidency and its public communication about the pandemic added more conservative Christians and their specific cultural warfare themes to the mix. Climate change was quickly folded into a larger conspiracist plot, with conspiracy theories about “the great reset” – the topic of a 2020 World Economic Forum meeting that included sustainability as a central theme – being set in motion by a world conspiracy. This conspiracy was sometimes presented as Marxist or a more hidden cabal of ruling elites establishing an autocratic, dystopian “New World Order.” Coming mostly from the

populist and far right corner, and out of the context of the American culture wars, the stress was on blaming “the leftists,” and the motifs could be combined, not least among those who saw this as apocalyptic signs of the end times. The BLM protests were equally folded into theories about hostile, leftist forces tearing down culture and introducing authoritarianism. The trope of “freedom versus tyranny” was central. Anti-lockdown protests and conspiracy theories about Covid often revolved around the topic of individual freedom. Protestors and conspiracists saw themselves as freedom fighters against an increasingly totalitarian state, with the general public a brainwashed flock of sheep that needed to be awakened.

The American influence also showed in mobilization against face masks and social distancing and in the politicization of vaccination. The various Nordic “freedom”-movements were especially eager in their campaigns against face masks and vaccines. Religiosity generally predicted conspiracy beliefs about Covid (Dyrendal and Hestad 2021; Jacobsen, Kühle, and Christensen 2021), and among participants from different religious groups, opposition to these measures was also made emblematic of religious identity. The early pandemic saw a “conspiratoriality” (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015) surge as many in the alternative spirituality milieu sought alternative explanations and presented government behavior as tyrannical (Lehrmann 2020).⁵ Inspired by international networks, some of them took the unusual step (for them) and started public demonstrations (Færseth 2021; Önnersfors 2021). They were not alone in taking motivation partially from religion: there were also vital contributions from nationalist, charismatic circles. Proudly promoting their “Make America Great Again” credentials with paraphernalia supporting Donald Trump, groups of charismatic, conservative Christians downplayed the pandemic, promoted fake cures, and demonized vaccines. Some also played a part in organizing protests.

The coalition was broad. Having adopted Trump as a hero, some were actively spreading QAnon-related theories (Færseth 2021; Önnersfors 2021). Norwegian fact-checkers analyzed a large number of social media posts and found that nationalist, “anti-globalist” actors became more involved in anti-vaccine conspiracy theories (Dahlback and Skiphamn 2020) and contributed to protests, as the coalition included parts of the counterjihad-scene and the antisemitic alt- and far right. Some of these tenuous alliances had been in place during earlier conspiracy waves (see Dyrendal 2017). They were revitalized by reactions to the pandemic, and new actors were brought into the mix as well. In Norway, protests aligned with the international “World Wide Rally for Freedom,” centered around a group calling themselves “Red Hats.” This name refers to resistance symbolism during the WW2 German occupation, ironically while including participation from Norway’s miniscule neo-Nazi movement and its sympathizers (Færseth 2021). With some protestors adopting yellow vests, there were also direct references to the French *gilets jaunes* protests. A conspiracist milieu coalescing around the person and media site of the former leader of the Maoist “Workers’ Communist Party,” Pål Steigan, brought relative newcomers to the coalition. These, however, like some of the neo-Nazis, included people with considerable experience in conducting disciplined,

well-behaved public demonstrations. The less collective action-oriented conspiracy milieu thus had access to resources more experienced in organizing activities and co-operating with police during street protests. This may partly explain why the often extreme rhetoric and violent language of the protests did not result in actual violence.

The fault lines within the coalition are many. Since demonstrations started late in October 2020, they have manifested several times. The Red Hats began with a fairly clear focus on Covid and restrictions, but demonstrations expanded into general anti-government theories and the various other practical and ideological griefs and conspiracy theories of the participants. Not all protestors were equally happy with the company they saw. The prominence of known neo-Nazis in Trondheim during one of the few times they succeeded in arranging anything outside the capital seems to have made it harder to mobilize for another event. Over time, then, Norwegian activists splintered into several, partially competing factions online but maintained some participation in common protests.

Danish activists started protesting earlier than the Norwegians. Inspired by international demonstrations, multiple organizations, small political parties, and interest groups have taken initiatives to organize or participate in demonstrations. Possibly the first protest against face masks and vaccines took place in August 2020, organized mainly by the miniscule conspiracist party “Jorden, Frihed, Kundskab” (“Earth, Freedom, Knowledge”; JFK21) (Lange 2020). The party, founded in 2016, has a platform that echoes the central conspiracy notions represented in, for example, QAnon-circles: the world is run by a “globalist,” satanic, pedophile conspiracy represented by, for example, secret lodges and the ultra-rich. The seemingly liberal democracies are in reality creeping fascism, and while the group prefers a strong state, it sees the current regime as illegitimate and totalitarian (Mencke 2018). As in Norway, these topics and tropes have, at times, also been prominent in their protests. The party’s protests were coordinated with those of the “World Freedom Alliance” and were usually smallish (with less than 200 demonstrators) and peaceful. JFK21 was also one of the organizers behind the so-called “klinke-klanke”-demonstrations started in front of the parliament in November 2020, where demonstrators used pot lids to make noise and “wake up the Danish people.” The demonstrations were weekly, conducted in daytime, and although demonstrators were told to make less noise because they scared police horses and disturbed parliament, they were peaceful.

With the start of a second wave of activism in December 2020, others came to dominate the public space (Jensen 2021, 28). An organization calling itself “Men in Black,” originally a Facebook group, started organized demonstrations against Covid restrictions. Police and several media sources have pointed out that some participants have a background in football “hooliganism,” and early demonstrations resulted in multiple arrests for rioting, vandalism, threats, and violence against the police. Later ones have largely been peaceful. While spokespersons have often been people who agree that Covid is real, but express sharp criticism of the government’s harsh mitigation measures, participants also include Covid-deniers, anti-vaccine activists, and people with much broader conspiracist leanings, for example, JFK21

(Jacobsen, Kühle, and Christensen 2021, 144; Olsen 2021). While organizers tend to disavow them, the political spectrum also includes participants from the far right. The broad alliance between political activists, those affected by strict measures, and those who desire action more than anything else is also in line with the slogans and appeals to disregard left and right and to focus on “the people,” Denmark, and freedom (Marker and Lykkesoft 2021).

Appeals to these populist and nationalist slogans are common throughout the Nordic countries. The tropes are also replicated in the central slogans for the Swedish so-called “Thousand Man March” protests: “freedom and truth.” These empty signifiers serve as place holders for conspiracist ideas: the notion of freedom constituted the opposition to the alleged state- and “globalist” dictatorship, and the notion of truth represented the pandemic as either fake or a “plandemic” caused by hidden techniques of a conspiracy.

Springing out of the same background as the Danish JFK21 and collaborating through the “World Freedom Alliance,” the Swedish protests started only in early March 2021. At the time, Swedish restrictions only allowed for eight people in a demonstration, and so the several hundred activists participating were engaging in illegal activity from the start. The situation devolved into conflict with the police, with five police officers hurt and 50 people arrested. The demonstrations have continued, but at longer intervals than in the other Nordic countries. The language of confrontation has been strong, with very clear anti-government ideas originating from, among other sources, the American sovereign citizen movement and its offshoots (Vergara 2021b; Önnersfors 2021). Indeed, one of the dominant figures in “Freedom Sweden” seems to be a self-declared sovereign citizen (Vergara 2021a). Reportedly, many participants also have ties to the paramilitary neo-Nazi “Nordic Resistance Movement” (Vergara and Leman 2021). The Swedish arm of the latter, arguably the only one that currently matters, has also organized their own protests, including against the Danish government for the introduction of “globalist” vaccine passes (Dalbro 2021).

Swedish street protests have thus been dominated by groups and ideas similar to those in other countries. However, if reports are correct, the Swedish protests have had a stronger presence of the extreme right than the other Nordic countries. This may reflect their relative strength and experience in street activism. However, the reporting about right-wing activism may be skewed by interests and knowledge of the journalists. The same may also hold true for Norway. Just as their Swedish counterparts, Norwegian reporters have a stronger background in investigating far right conspiracism and thus may both show it extra attention and be more able to recognize it than their Danish counterparts.

While the conspiracist protests in Sweden started late, there had been protests before the advent of these “Thousand Man Marches” and the “Freedom Sweden” movement. Some protested because they did not think the government’s mitigation measures were strict enough; others protested specific measures that were economically harmful to their profession and business. Conspiracist ideas were circulating online and in relevant circles, and they were similar to those found in

the other Nordic countries, but they were not yet expressed in public demonstrations. This delay may have been a result of the relatively light Swedish government restrictions. The narrative about Sweden as an “open” society during the early pandemic may have been mostly misleading, but it was used to turn Sweden into a counter-example for protestors in other countries. With the gradual tightening of some measures and the advent of violent protests, these narratives seem to have become less popular.

Conclusion

Street activism may have been the loudest, but it was neither the only form of activism nor the one with most effect. Local officials and health authorities have, as was to be expected, received threats. Organized groups have distributed anti-vaccination misinformation, not only through social media, but also in the form of leaflets in mailboxes, doctor’s offices, schools, and on street corners. Similar tactics were used to spread anti-masking messages and, to a lesser extent, general messages that Covid was a hoax. This fits well with the general conspiracy culture-attitude that “information shall set you free” (see Dyrendal 2013). The far right Norwegian party “Alliansen” strategy of offering money to adolescents who refused to vaccinate, on the other hand, may be seen as either a further escalation or as taking “shit-posting” to live politics.

Throughout the Nordic countries, the conspiracist alliances seem to have hinged on some elements of conspiratorship and other religious conspiracism. The discourse on alternative cures, opposition to 5G, and vaccines, with tropes of globalist tyranny acting against the natural or God-given freedom of individuals, all resonate with the general lore of these conspiracist coalitions. The tropes are flexible enough to appeal broadly. The combination of empty signifiers such as “nation,” “people,” “freedom,” and “truth” in the mobilization rhetoric opens up several types of inclusion. For most, the nationalist and populist readings suffice, in that they evoke national chauvinism and degrees of dissatisfaction with the “elites” in contrast to the goodness of “the people.” The concept of the “nation” also stands in contrast to the globalist cabal and is open to ethno-nationalist conspiracism about contagion from dangerous outsiders. “Truth” evokes the conspiracist trope of the suppression of real truth, and the special insight of “truthers” awake to reality, in contrast to “sheeple” falling for the lies of the elites. In Sweden and Norway, sovereign citizens can read “the people” and “nation” as appealing to their particular fetishization of constitutions in their juridical imaginary, and the struggle for “truth” and the people’s “freedom” from tyranny as their fight to enlighten others about the right to be “freemen on the land.”

While the conspiracist tropes flourish and conspiracy narratives mostly follow global trends, the conspiracists’ anger and threats are directed more locally against government representatives, officials, health care workers, and those criticizing them in public (e.g., journalists). This is where the charges of “fascist dictatorship” and “tyranny” are directed, and remedial action, including proposals for radical

measures, is directed. On the other side, public anger at vaccine deniers and related conspiracy theories has become common, public, and sharp enough that media, health officials, and (some) academics have started warning about the possible negative consequences. Public conspiracy theorists are few, and vaccine deniers a small percentage of the population, but they make visible targets and give the opportunity to express frustrations arising from the pandemic while confirming communal solidarity against the perceived selfishness or stupidity of conspiracy believers. With the pandemic entering its third year, and with Omicron the most contagious variant to date, the frustration is growing on either “side,” and impatience and anger both among and toward conspiracy believers seem to be growing apace.

Notes

- 1 For Denmark, these interests seem to mostly thrive on social media (Jacobsen et al. 2021, 144; Peters 2020).
- 2 When Facebook and Twitter became stricter in their actions against misinformation, some actors moved their content to other social media (e.g., *Telegram*), and other groups (e.g., QAnon- and anti-vaccination groups) started communicating in “code” more frequently.
- 3 These went together with conspiracy theories about testing methods and vaccines as actually being vectors of the disease and with sales pitches for the usual range of alternative cures from homeopathy and regular supplements to “miracle mineral solution” (bleach). In addition, there were new ones originating with the pandemic, for example, ivermectin and hydroxychloroquin.
- 4 The BLM and XR protests were also widely criticized for breaking with pandemic advice, and there were widespread speculations about these demonstrations becoming so-called super-spreader events. As with the anti-lockdown protests, these outdoor events seem to never have played an important role as disease vectors.
- 5 Interestingly, the only quantitative study to follow developments found that support for conspiracy theories stating that the pandemic was planned *fell* among Danish respondents regarding themselves as “spiritual” from May to October 2020. In May 2020, alternative spirituality predicted conspiracy belief; by October 2020, it no longer did so (Jacobsen et al. 2021, 145).

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20

THE USUAL SUSPECTS? CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN POLAND

Olivia Rachwol

Introduction

Soon after the party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) carried an absolute majority in the 2015 parliamentary elections, *The Guardian* commented that Poland had just been taken over by conspiracy theorists. It seemed outrageous that an older, rather inconspicuous man by the name of Jarosław Kaczyński had managed to convince the country of a “shadowy leftwing cabal” and catapulted his party, publicly known for trying to reshape Poland’s democracy, into government (Davies 2016). In the preceding two decades, Poland had been praised for its successful transformation from a socialist to a liberal democratic country. Why would the Poles give a right-wing populist party with a penchant to conspiracy theories permission to regress from this tedious process? After conspiracy theories had undergone a thorough stigmatization in many Western countries, they were not taken at face value by public institutions and experts of public relevance anymore. The PiS-party’s triumph, fueled by positive reception of their vigorous rhetoric in a considerable part of Polish society, seemed inexplicable in a country acclimated so well to Western standards of living.

Fast forward to the end of 2021, when Poland is on the brink of a fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Polish state media channel TVP emphatically reminds their viewers in the newscast *Wiadomości* to protect others and get vaccinated. Previously launched vaccination campaigns have only yielded short-term results. Be it a national lottery promising monetary and material prizes, a vaccination-competition between the Polish municipalities or educational campaigns at schools: none of these efforts ultimately turned out to be convincing enough. Neither for the large number of vaccine-skeptics making Poland one of the most vaccine-reluctant countries in Europe (Kość 2021), nor for oppositional critics who believe that the PiS government was never serious about their fight

against the widespread vaccine-skepticism in Poland in the first place (Gajek and Ćwiklak 2021). Too often President Andrzej Duda and other politicians of the PiS spoke negatively about vaccines in the past, even going as far as denouncing flu-shots, taking the stance that vaccinations were a matter of individual preference and Covid-19 vaccines were legally questionable experiments on children (Gajek and Ćwiklak 2021). Such ambiguous messages likely helped the government win voters for the presidential election in 2020 on both sides of the vaccine debate. In September 2021, close to the vaccine lottery's final, the government's inconsistency ultimately got its comeuppance as Poland lagged behind many other European countries, with barely 60 percent of its citizens having received their first dose (Forsal 2022).

Since the early stages of the pandemic, the World Health Organization has warned against the global dangers arising from the worldwide spread of Covid-19-related misinformation, often manifesting in conspiracy theories and fake news. The contemporary variety and visibility of conspiracy theories might give the wrong impression that the world has entered a golden age of conspiracy theories (Butter 2020, 6). The unprecedented technological advancement has indeed contributed to a faster and therefore more dangerous, less controllable spread of information countering traditional epistemic authorities such as governments, scientific experts, and media outlets. In many countries, however, conspiracy theories were already *en vogue* before the pandemic hit, and in Poland, Covid-19 conspiracy theories have only been the tip of the iceberg.

Notwithstanding, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided an exceptional starting point for beginning to uncover the trajectory of conspiracy theories in Poland. Many conspiracy theories circulating during this time are not entirely new but adapted versions of already familiar narratives, with previously known conspirators woven into the new setting. Accordingly, I focus on how the pandemic has affected the belief in conspiracist content by covering some of the latest trends in Poland. I discuss how global conspiracy theories differ from local ones and explain how some of the political and historical conditions specific for Poland have affected the conspiracist trends observable during the Covid-19 pandemic. The premise of this chapter is that conspiracy theories are not only means of finding truth in times of uncertainty but also central for the affirmation of already existing values and premeditated conceptions in their respective societies that are in need of further validation (Bailey qtd. in Sobo and Drażkiewicz 2021, 69).

An Inventory of Poland's Difficult Relationship with Vaccines

Public health organizations, governments, media, and scientists have paid a great deal of attention to vaccine-skepticism, anti-vaccination, and their respective connections with conspiracy theories as it became clear that SARS-CoV-2 could only be vanquished with an appropriate vaccine and its extensive distribution among the population. Mandatory inoculation has been met with harsh criticism all around

the world, but in Poland where vaccine-skepticism and anti-vaccine sentiments already run deep, it has turned out to be a particularly loaded topic.

Anti-vaccine movements have existed since the eighteenth century but only gained widespread popularity in the 1990s. Particularly in Poland, there has been a significant influx of such movements in the last decade. Whereas the number of unvaccinated Polish children used to stagnate at around 4,000 per year between 2006 and 2010, after 2010 it had been steadily rising and reached 48,000 in 2019 (Demczuk 2021, 89). In many Western countries, flu-shots also enjoyed an overall greater popularity than in Poland, where barely 4 percent got vaccinated (Sobierański qtd. in Sieradzka 2020).

The anti-vaccine movement that acquired most attention in the Polish media is Ogólnopolskie Stowarzyszenie Wiedzy o Szczepieniach STOP NOP [Polish Association of Knowledge about Vaccines STOP NOP]. NOP is short for *Niepożądane Odczyny Poszczepienne* and translates to “undesirable post-vaccination reactions.” STOP NOP is an association which in 2018 became famous for initiating an anti-vaccine petition that was signed by 120,000 Polish citizens and was supported especially by politicians of the far-right in Poland. During the Covid-19 pandemic, STOP NOP’s Facebook webpage has played a central role in the distribution of Covid-19-related myths about vaccines and masks (Demczuk 2021, 86). What is more, long-known conspiracy theories thematizing the safety and efficacy of vaccines and the clash of interests between the vulnerable patient and Big Pharma experienced a renaissance during the pandemic (114). During their demonstrations, which were documented on Facebook, representatives of STOP NOP availed themselves of various historical tropes to underline their claims.

Drawing on George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, the activists stood up against the circumstances imposed upon them by this “plandemic” in which Covid-19 measurements caused a “segregation” of vaccine proponents and insurgents, sought to “totally control” the citizens and deprive them of their freedom. The demonstrators, who dressed in line with the prisoners’ clothing from Auschwitz-Birkenau and carried “vaccination sets free” banners reminiscent of the cynical concentration camp gate inscription “Arbeit macht frei,” were convinced that their situation in 2021 was comparable with that of the Jews in the Third Reich (Demczuk 2021, 114–17). The medical experiments imposed upon them were proof that “Dr. Mengele is killing again” (116–17), that history was repeating itself, and the atrocities of the “plandemic” conspirators therefore needed to be answered with a second edition of the Nuremberg trials (Norymberga 2.0 2021).

Whereas anti-vaccine protests certainly played an important role in voicing such conspiracy theories, the gateway to a broad and fast spread of conspiracy theories particularly befitted social media groups which turned to hotspots for the accumulation of conspiracy theories surrounding Covid-19. Facebook groups such as “STOP NOP,” the Covid-19 denying “Nie wierzę w Koronawirusa – Grupa wsparcia: NIE JESTEŚ SAM” [I don’t believe in the coronavirus – Support group/YOU’RE NOT ALONE], or the profile “Przeciwko układom szkodzącym Polsce” [“Against deals hurting Poland”] have been harbor to 160,000, 100,000,

and 120,000 members, respectively (Bodziony 2020; Ogólnopolskie Stowarzyszenie Wiedzy o Szczepieniach STOP NOP 2022; Przeciwno układom szkodzącym Polsce 2022).

Polish celebrities and influencers, spreading their critique and skepticism toward Covid-19 and vaccines on social media, further instigated the debate around Covid-19 conspiracies as their “expertise” won them large support among their followers. The presumably most prominent example is Edyta Górniak, a renowned Polish singer who achieved the second place in the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest (*Kafkadesk* 2021). Górniak drew attention to herself with inconsistent claims about the pandemic such as Covid-19 being a “sign from heaven” and the Covid-19 patients in hospitals actually being crisis actors. Other celebrities such as former model Viola Kolakowska or pop singer Ivan Komarenko also spread doubts about the nature of Covid-19 and vaccines. It is beyond question that those celebrities’ own personal views in regard to the Covid-19 pandemic have served as an example to their thousands of followers (*Kafkadesk* 2021).

At the end of the year 2020 when Covid-19 skepticism and an antipathy toward masks peaked in Poland (Cybulska and Pankowski 2020, 15), the daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* (RP) commissioned a survey to investigate the levels of the Covid-19 vaccine acceptance rates in Poland. The researchers found their respondents to be divided almost equally along the lines of approval and disapproval of the vaccine: when the respondents to the RP survey were asked whether they would consider getting vaccinated when there was an opportunity to do so, only 47 percent declared their willingness, while 44 percent refused to do so (Dąbrowska 2020).

In a follow-up question investigating the specific reasons for a vaccine refusal among those who had declined to get vaccinated, 42 percent of the respondents voiced skepticism about the hasty admission of the vaccine. Among respondents of the remaining 58 percent, a combined number of 48 percent of the respondents reflected vaccine myths typically associated with Covid-19 conspiracy theories; they compared the nature of Covid-19 to that of the flu (17 percent), considered Covid-19 conquerable with a healthy lifestyle (15 percent), found vaccines generally unhelpful (14 percent), or believed the pandemic was fake and created by corporations (2 percent) (Dąbrowska 2020).

Obviously, only a confined number of the respondents phrased explicit anti-vaccine sentiments paired with concerns about potential conspiracies. The majority, rather implicitly reflecting that their knowledge might have been influenced by scientifically unorthodox facts, belongs to the group of vaccine-skeptics. As their responses vary, the motives of vaccine skeptics can be quite different, ranging from a general skepticism toward scientific expertise via a general reluctance toward vaccinations to the belief that an infection with Covid-19 can be controlled with a healthy nutrition.

A psychological study on the multidimensional factors inducing vaccine hesitancy in Poland adds further insight to these findings. Researchers found vaccine hesitancy to be persistently high throughout different stages of the pandemic and subject to various factors. Among demographic predictors such as age, sex,

financial capabilities, and income level, belief in conspiracy theories was confirmed to be an important predictor of vaccine abandonment (Sowa et al. 2021, 13). The high levels of vaccine hesitancy in Poland and its connection to conspiracy theories testify to a widespread lack of scientific knowledge about vaccines and a recourse to magic spells and superstition (Sobierajski qtd. in Sieradzka 2020). Magical thinking, which is based upon simplified thought patterns, inherently forestalls scientific reasoning – a condition which substantially benefits conspiracy theorizing (Kozik 2021, 4).

Religious observance has also been associated with a greater disregard for governmental health restrictions, less knowledge about Covid-19, and a higher acceptance of conspiracy theories (Boguszewski et al. 2020, 8). In Poland, where “in the course of over 1,000 years, Polish nationality has become closely identified with the Catholic faith” (Hruby 1982, 318), the Catholic Church is an important moral authority. As religious practices increased during the first months of the pandemic (Boguszewski et al. 2020, 1), it became a heated public matter whether clergy members recommended protection from the coronavirus by following the health restrictions imposed by the government or bypassed them by downplaying the seriousness of the virus. While many churches adapted to the new restrictions, some others did not. It was found that clergy members distorted the nature of the virus, framing it as comparable with a flu or linking its origin to the “sins of abortion and homosexuality,” a notion typically found in LGBT-related conspiracy theories (Koschalka 2020).

It is undeniable that the functionality of social media, with their echo chambers and insufficiency of *gatekeeping*, served as prerequisites of Covid-19 conspiracy theories and other forms of alternative knowledge to catch on so widely (Wróblewski 2020, 29; Veltzé 2021, 26). Celebrities, influencers, and social media groups followed by hundreds of thousands helped distribute alternative knowledge. Apart from phenomena conditioned by a digital transformation that affected not only Poland but countries all over the world as well in a similar fashion, there are indications that the barrier between orthodox and unorthodox knowledge is more negotiable in Poland than in other European countries. The observation that traditional authorities such as government officials, politicians, or the clergy facilitated vaccine skepticism by spreading conspiracy theories or at least failing to distance themselves clearly from them indicates that conspiracy theories might have a different status in Poland than in other European countries where conspiracy theories are more likely to be stigmatized and their political use frowned upon.

Global Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories and the (Far-) Right in Poland

It is important to note that the spreading of conspiracy theories about the pandemic seems to be fitting to the politicians of the far-right in Poland, who have given unequivocal support to anti-vaccine movements and their conspiracist thinking. This has subsequently given such conspiracies the power to move some of the

debates found in social media groups to the Polish parliament where the anti-vaccine coalition of parties *Konfederacja* has raised particular attention over the course of the pandemic. Emerged from a consolidation of the libertarian and euroskeptical party *KORWiN* (an allusion to its founder Janusz Korwin-Mikke), the nationalist *Ruch Narodowy* [National Movement], and the monarchist *Konfederacja Korony Polskiej* [Confederation of the Polish Crown], *Konfederacja*'s supporters are known for causing furor and regularly challenging the Polish government under PiS. Their openly displayed antipathy toward vaccines as well as “Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU” (Szczerbiak 2020) makes *Konfederacja* currently the coalition of parties with the highest relative percentage of conspiracy theorists (Czech and Scigaj 2020, 9–10).

The relationship between political affiliation and belief in conspiracy theories has been thematized repeatedly in research and the media landscape, leading to an almost commonsensical – although not in all cases justified – correlation between right-wing political affiliation and conspiracy theories (Czech 2018, 664). In a comparative study encompassing all four Visegrád countries Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, researchers found that narratives criticizing the West and their democratic systems, suggesting the danger of global control aspirations, or voicing concerns about vaccines or the actual circumstances of the pandemic, proved to hold a particular popularity among political groupings of the Polish (far-) right political spectrum (Political Capital 2020, 2–7).

Similar conclusions can be drawn from a survey in which belief in global conspiracy narratives – claiming for instance that the virus was created and spread by a Chinese lab, produced as a biological weapon to reduce the world population, or to enforce purchases of unsafe vaccines to the benefit of pharmaceutical companies – was investigated for correlation with support of a particular party. In this multi-partisan comparison of Polish parties, global conspiracy narratives thematizing plots of foreign actors were found to be relatively more accepted among the electorate of the United Right (*Zjednoczona Prawica*) – a conglomerate of EU-skeptical, national conservative and Christian-democratic parties with the ruling PiS at the top – and the far-right Confederation (*Konfederacja*) as compared to other parties, typically situated more on the liberal or left side of the political spectrum (Czech and Scigaj 2020, 30).

However, a similar inclination to conspiracy theorizing does not imply a homogeneity of right-wing voters in Poland. In contrast to the ruling PiS which became particularly famous for causing stir around their conspiracist interpretations connected with the Smolensk airplane disaster in 2010, the far-right *Konfederacja* is oppositional, anti-systemic, and Poland's strongest vaccine opponent in the *Sejm*. In politically deeply polarized countries like Poland, conspiracy theories are not unusual in mainstream parties but even more popular in anti-systemic parties. While the PiS has distanced itself from spreading conspiracy theories candidly, *Konfederacja* has shown to be unvarnished about voicing conspiracy theories. Over the course of the pandemic, Gregorz Braun, a parliamentarian of the *Konfederacja* and renowned conspiracy theorist, frequently attracted negative

attention with controversial historical tropes. To illustrate the perceived intolerance of the health restrictions imposed by the Polish government, Braun likened wearing masks to the first forceful procedures of Nazis against Jews, which later culminated in their extinction. He called “those responsible for the current situation . . . war criminals” and predicted that health minister Adam Niedzielski would be hanged for his activities one day (Wądołowska 2021). These statements appear paradoxical in the light of Gregorz Braun’s own “long history of antisemitic conspiracy theories” but only at first sight. When in June 2020, President Andrzej Duda visited the United States, the Polish national television heralded that, following a promise from then US President Donald Trump, Poland would be the first country to receive the coronavirus vaccine (Sobo and Drażkiewicz 2021, 77). This announcement was met with harsh criticism on behalf of vaccine skeptics. A discussion among members of the aforementioned Facebook group “I don’t believe in the Coronavirus – Support group/YOU’RE NOT ALONE,” in which tropes from World War II were mixed with allegations of Duda being a representative of the “Jewish lobby” and Poland a battlefield for the experiments of Big Pharma, exemplifies the regularly tensed and contradicting level of conspiracist discussions specifically among followers of the *Konfederacja* (Sobo and Drażkiewicz 2021, 77). Such content-wise incompatible conspiracy theories can be also seen as reflections of a “generalised political attitude” toward the few powerful who are perceived to harm society (Imhoff and Bruder 2014). Antisemitic and other foreign enemy images, which are an essential component of many conspiracy theories all over the world, are particularly important for the radical nationalist supporters of the *Konfederacja* as they draw on “locally rooted sentiments and already-internalised culturally specific tropes” (Sobo and Drażkiewicz 2021, 77). It is therefore not unusual to read about antisemitic chants during *Konfederacja*-supported anti-vaccine protests and simultaneous calls for the Norymberga 2.0 trials on behalf of the anti-vaccine organization STOP NOP, which has been tightly connected with *Konfederacja*.

Despite a few significant differences between the parties of the right-wing in Poland, the PiS-party’s electorate often overlaps with that of *Konfederacja*. During the presidential elections, the run-off and ultimate decision is typically a matter of choice between the conservative and the liberal camp, usually represented by someone respectively associated with the national conservative PiS on the one side and the more progressive but traditionally center-right *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO) on the other. The PiS-party has long noticed *Konfederacja*’s importance for their political success, not least during the presidential elections in 2020 which occurred during the pandemic and further polarized the political sphere. With the young and eloquent representative Krzysztof Bosak as *Konfederacja*’s candidate (Szczerbiak 2020), the party initially attracted many young Poles to vote for him. When the presidential election came up to a run-off between the PiS-affiliated candidate Andrzej Duda and the liberal, PO-affiliated Rafał Trzaskowski, both had to contend for the remaining voters from the other parties. Respectively, it comes

as no surprise that current-day President of Poland Andrzej Duda did not go out on a limb with vaccine praises and other controversial topics during the electoral campaign.

Local Conspiracy Narratives and the Opposition's Upheaval against the PiS

The Polish government's politics of concessions and restrictions have been a specific cause for concern during the pandemic. On various occasions, critics accused the PiS-party's leaders of trying to exploit the circumstances of the pandemic to enforce their own political interests and restrict Polish citizens' freedom through unlawful means (Tilles 2021). Determined to let the presidential election take place on May 10, 2020, as originally scheduled, the ruling PiS did not flinch from trying to change the electoral law to their own and undermine legal obstacles to let the election happen via mail – a way that the PiS had previously rejected due to its alleged potential for manipulation (Bucholc and Komornik 2020, 55). The PiS-party's attempts to bypass the opposition in a vote about a postponement of the election were denounced as a “coup,” especially because it would have been more favorable to the governing PiS than to oppositional parties to let the election take place as planned (Wanat 2020). Accordingly, there is evidence which suggests that during the pandemic, the degree of political polarization in Poland has been further deepened and the popularity of conspiracy narratives stabilized as skepticism toward the righteousness of the Polish government's restrictions and legal changes in the light of the 2020 presidential election grew (Czech and Scigaj 2020, 9).

Local conspiracy narratives, which thematize potential plots made by domestic instead of foreign actors, turned out to enjoy an overall even higher approval than global conspiracy narratives. Sixty-eight percent of all respondents to Czech's and Scigaj's multi-partisan study at least displayed a tendential agreement with the claims that the Polish government has been hiding information about the actual scale of the pandemic and adjusting health restrictions in a way that would benefit them during the presidential elections in 2020 (Czech and Scigaj 2020, 21). Sixty-three percent at least somewhat agreed with the statement that the Polish government was exploiting the pandemic to restrict democracy in Poland. Interior allegations toward the Polish government were least supported by voters of the United Right while all the other, oppositional parties observed – especially the far-right *Konfederacja* – displayed a considerable support for local conspiracy assertions (30–31).

Insinuations about the Polish government, such as their attempt to hide the actual scale of the pandemic to enhance their chances to win the presidential elections, are no spawn of oppositional conspiracy theorists but a recurring theme in the private, oppositional media channels in Poland (Sobo and Drażkiewicz 2021, 78). In contrast to the conspiracy theories supported by the far-right oppositional *Konfederacja*, however, the conspiracy narratives voiced by the other, more

liberal-left opponents to the ruling party “have retained their status as a justified form of political criticism” (78) as their content is different than that of other conspiracy theories. Since oppositional critique has been suppressed by epistemic authorities such as state-affiliated media and other governmental institutions, narratives suspecting the government of clandestine actions have become conspiracist in the sense that they constitute heterodox knowledge from the perspective of the current government.

Conspiracy Theories Between Poland’s Past and Future

The currently observable popularity of conspiracy theories in Poland is not merely a result of the pandemic but a phenomenon, which was already described by researchers a few years ago. In 2018, a study claimed even that the variety and popularity of conspiracy theories in Poland are a result of a “collective conspiracy mentality.” This collective mental state in which the perceived trustworthiness of one’s in-group is distinctly separated from that of out-groups is substantial and momentous for intergroup relations because it typically imputes out-groups with an ill-intendedness and willingness to conspire “against the in-group” (Soral et al. 2018, 1). The “collective conspiracy mentality” in Poland feeds off the specific history of the country and applies to Poles with a “particular type of Polish national identity,” who assume that Poland’s painful historical experiences remain applicable to present political dynamics (1). With the Polish people having

[E]ndured struggles for independence from Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the nineteenth century, from Fascist Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II, and from Communism in the 1940s–80s’, the spectrum of potential foreign and local conspiracists is broad.

(Sobo and Drązkiewicz 2021, 77)

However, from the perspective of a never-ending victimhood of Poland, former occupying powers like Germany or Russia can unfold a significance for conspiracy theories just as much as other out-groups like the Jews, Muslims, or the “liberal powers” of the opposition, the LGBT-community or the European Union. The fact that it was not uncommon for Poles to be involved in some clandestine plot to protect their national sovereignty against the foreign occupants underlines the finding that conspiracy theories unfold ever more importance in societies with a history of actual conspiracies (Soral et al. 2018, 2; Schlipphak, Bollwerk, and Back 2021, 11).

The propensity for conspiracy theories in Poland is important for understanding Poland’s break with liberal democracy and its turn to a “non-liberal democracy” (Reykowski, quoted in Kofta and Soral 2019, 2) when the PiS-party’s 2015 accession to power came to happen. To those unfamiliar with the country’s sociocultural predispositions, the PiS-party’s win was unexpected and seemingly came out of the blue. In fact, quite the reverse is true, as the takeover of the PiS marked just

another escalation between the liberals and conservatives in a gradual process of political polarization. The 1989 Round Table Talks between the ruling communists and representatives of the resistance movement *Solidarność* (Solidarity), in which Lech Wałęsa, latter President of Poland, other prominent figures of the liberal elite as well as the Kaczyński brothers had participated, first seemed like a promising basis for Poland's future without communism. But the Solidarity was a diverse social movement where some tensions between conservatives and liberals had already emerged before 1989. The enmities escalated with the Round Table Talks as some members of the Solidarity had preferred a revolution instead of negotiating a compromise with the communists (Kofta and Soral 2019, 3). These disagreements yielded increasingly diverging visions for Poland's political direction, which ultimately ended up dividing Poles into two major camps: proponents of liberalism and progress who considered the Western model to be the legitimate one for Poland, and those who rejected Poland's forceful integration into the Western world. A conspiracy theory, which accompanied this political cleavage, denounced the Round Table as a "hoax" (Kofta and Soral 2019, 4), and the current political system in Poland as the result of a treacherous pact between communists and liberals, who had sacrificed the future of the "real Poles" to their own, primarily economic, benefits, the "real revolution" yet to come (Davies 2016).

These allegations against liberals were further fueled in the years preceding the parliamentary elections in 2015 when Poland was governed by the liberal-conservative *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO), the strongest political opponent of the PiS. While the PO clearly supported Poland's liberal transformation and further integration into the European Union, the PiS-party constantly cast doubt on this development, pointing out that only those well-off would benefit from it. The PO's long-standing leader Donald Tusk seemed to be a particularly painful thorn in the side of Jarosław Kaczyński, the PiS-party's perpetual leader. As a political opponent who kept a good relationship with Germany and France, Tusk and his supporters from the PO appeared as an epitome of liberal treachery who tried to sell out Poland to foreign enemies in the West under the pretext of a liberal transformation and did not shy away from depriving the Poles of their deserved prosperity by increasing taxes, raising the retirement age, and estranging themselves from the Polish society they had claimed to represent.

The seething hostility between Tusk and Kaczyński experienced its show-down with an event in 2010 which would become the foundation for the most powerful conspiracy theory in contemporary Polish history. On April 10, 2010, an airplane with the then President, Lech Kaczyński, Jarosław Kaczyński's twin brother, and other members of the Polish elite took off to Smolensk in Russia to commemorate the anniversary of the Katyn massacre in 1940, in which over 20,000 Polish military officers and members of the intelligentsia had been killed by the Soviet secret police (Cichowlas 2016, 13). This memorial event was soon overshadowed by the airplane crashing near Smolensk and killing all passengers aboard. With Russia, a long-standing enemy in Poland, trying to deny its culpability for the massacre in 1940 for decades, it was unimaginable for many Poles

to accept the deaths of members of the Polish elite as an accident. What the vernacular soon framed as “Katyn 2” called for an explanation and an accountability of those responsible for “yet another crime that Poland’s enemies inside and outside the country would prefer to cover up” (Cichowlas 2016, 13). When the then prime minister Donald Tusk failed to install an international commission to clarify the circumstances instead of handing the investigation to the Russians, his government was accredited full responsibility for the catastrophe. For Kaczyński and his followers, Tusk’s flawed management of the catastrophe served as a suitable reason to believe that the airplane crash had been a result of a conspiracy between representatives of the PO government and Russia, induced by bomb explosions on board.

The PiS succeeded in recycling historical trauma and well-established prejudices toward common enemies by binding them together into conspiracy theories that could finally explain the disenchantment with various contemporary political realities. Many Poles were not only distressed by the discrepancies surrounding the happenings in Smolensk but also disappointed overall, with the European Union and Poland’s role within it, with liberal democracy as they had experienced it after the fall of communism, and with the PO’s form of government. Kaczyński’s elucidations that their miserable state was an effect of secretive machinations coming from the other side of the political spectrum caught on and made even more sense to those who already believed in a circular course of history in which Poland was the “Christ of Nations,” destined to suffer “over and over again” (Davies 2016).

In that way, the PiS-party’s rhetoric of distrust and interior hostility certainly paved the way for an unprecedented use of conspiracy theories in the Polish political sphere. At the same time, the post-1989 political system in Poland inherited the presumption rooted in Poland’s experience with communism that the government is generally “the enemy of the people,” which “should never be trusted,” irrespective of “who is in power” (Sobo and Drązkiewicz 2021, 78). As the coronavirus has become a constant companion, its relevance as a polarizing force has been slowly fading into the background. With Donald Tusk’s recent return to Polish politics and the emotionally charged coverage on the war in Ukraine piling up in Poland, it remains yet to be seen how alleged conspiracies surrounding the pandemic will even play a role in the 2023 Polish parliamentary election – and which usual suspects make a comeback.

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21

A (COLD) WAR FOR VACCINES

Retro-Conspiracism in Kremlin-Aligned Russian Discourse on Sputnik V

Boris Noordenbos

In August 2020, Vladimir Putin proudly reported “the world’s first-registered vaccine against the new Corona-virus”¹ (Putin 2020). Developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, it received the brand name “Sputnik V,” a nod to the pioneering Sputnik-1 satellite launched by the Soviets in 1957. The period following the announcement saw a steady outpouring of allegations leveled by, and at, Russia. Western governments and media outlets frequently denounced the Russian spread of fake news on traditional and online media platforms insisting on the health risks of Western-produced vaccines. Conversely, the Russian public was flooded with pro-Kremlin media stories on concerted efforts by Western governments, news agencies, and medical regulatory bodies to smear the country’s success, frustrate the Russian vaccine’s European certification, and delay its global rollout.

Focusing on the period between the summer of 2020 and the fall of 2021, this chapter discusses conspiracy-based interpretations of the fate of Sputnik V (and its “competitors”) in the global arena. It analyzes such vaccine conspiracism² in Russian-language Kremlin-aligned television programs;³ in statements by political leaders; and on Sputnik’s official, multi-language website. Proposing the conceptual label “retro-conspiracism” for this state-sanctioned rhetoric, I argue that it derives its persuasiveness from a combination of conspiratorial interpretation (keen to unveil hidden intentions and concerted manipulations) and commemorative gestures, of which the Sputnik name is only the most obvious manifestation. On the one hand, retro-conspiracism borrows profusely from the contemporary lingo of a globalized conspiracy culture. On the other, it relies on affectively charged invocations of Soviet-era events, symbols, and explanatory paradigms, which are inserted into, or projected onto, the reading of current affairs.⁴

The state-backed conspiracy view of “vaccine diplomacy” comes in different tonalities, ranging from mild cynicism (characteristic of TV magazine news shows)

to high-pitched agitation, the latter being the default mode of political talk shows on Russia's major television channels. In an information landscape still strongly centered around television,⁵ such programs play a vital role in the frantic top-down efforts to align public opinion with the agenda of the political leadership, who keep tight control over the selection and framing of the shows' topics (Sharafutdinova 2020, 151). A central strategy in the consolidation of consensus is the ceaseless expression and incitement of fear, anger, and sarcasm in these programs, all of which are directed at Russia's (and the government's) "others." Critical views – when articulated at all – are voiced in subdued tones by talk show guests representing the "systemic opposition" or by (often inarticulate) "useful idiots" – for example, liberal opponents of the government, (former) Ukrainian politicians, or Moscow-based American journalists. They are routinely bashed and ridiculed by guests and moderators alike, adding to the general mood of triumphant nationalist outrage that dominates these platforms of "agitation" (Tolz and Teper 2018).

Apart from the discussions among the guests, these shows feature a carefully curated assemblage of content that comes in different media, for example, video interviews with Russians abroad, snippets from White House press conferences, official statements from the Kremlin, and accounts taken from (Russian and foreign) news websites. For my discussion of vaccine-related conspiracy stories, such programs are a suitable starting point. They spotlight the various ingredients of pro-Kremlin vaccine conspiracism as well as the centrally sanctioned interpretive and emotional frames in which these elements acquire their meaning. After zeroing in on one example, a broadcast of the program *60 Minutes*, I fan out to further explore the constitutive parts of Sputnik-related retro-conspiracism as it is channeled through other state-aligned platforms.

60 Minutes of Outrage

Hosted by the husband-and-wife team of Olga Skabeeva and Evgenii Popov, and broadcast on weekdays by the state-owned television channel Russia-1, the political talk show *60 Minutes* [*60 Minut: po goriachim sledam*] is one of the main outlets of Russian agitation. The program of March 15, 2021, was almost entirely devoted to a statement just released by three Russian press agencies loyal to the state. Its content was purportedly based on an "anonymous, high-ranking source within the Kremlin." While the opening theme music plays, Skabeeva and Popov walk onto the stage, which is flanked by two semi-circular counters behind which the program's guests are positioned. Skabeeva sums up the news:

Against the background of a growing demand for the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in all countries, including those in Europe, the United States and its allies – according to data of our special services – intend to conduct a large-scale information campaign against the Russian vaccine. This time, the Americans plan to play the game covertly: Faking ["instsenirovat"] massive [numbers of] victims, that is, making up stories about people who have

allegedly died after vaccination with Sputnik V. The goal is to intimidate Europeans, especially [in] those [countries] that have already certified Sputnik . . . with the aim, of course, to enhance trust in their own vaccines, Pfizer and AstraZeneca. Yet, almost everyone across Europe has lost confidence in these [vaccines] in light of the relentless cases of mortality and thrombosis.

(2021a)

The show then sets out to contextualize the exposed American scheme, showing news footage from across Europe to illustrate the social unrest and political cleavages caused by vaccine shortages, worries about safety, and disagreements over the (non-)approval of Sputnik V. Among the featured material are dubbed fragments from biased reporting on the Russian vaccine by “mainstream media” in Western Europe as well as a prerecorded audio interview with Putin’s press secretary, who advocates a composed and level-headed attitude toward the “unscrupulous politicians and provocateurs” from the West.

There can be no debate (or talk show) without a critic. The role is here fulfilled by Alexei Naumov, a foreign affairs expert and journalist for the newspaper *Kommersant*. He is worried that the Kremlin has been deceived and is skeptical about the “anonymous source” (who may be, he speculates half-ironically, a “Ukrainian or, I don’t know, perhaps a European or American mole”). Naumov is especially taken aback by the statement’s assertion that the Americans will cover up their involvement in the smear campaign by channeling it through nongovernmental organizations as well as major global news agencies (among others, the BBC and Reuters). Imitating the gestures of a ventriloquist holding a dummy, Naumov (admitting that there have been “provocations”) comments that “the hand of Washington or London” does not control Reuters from within. He is cut off by the moderators, who now allow the other guests to double down on their support for the official interpretation. One of them adduces anecdotal evidence as proof of the highly refined methods by which “they,” as in the West, manipulate the digital media landscape using commissioned “bloggers” to spread online lies about Sputnik V; another recalls Putin’s recent address to the FSB in which the president had praised the agency for its collection of information about Sputnik-related provocations.

The overheated denunciations of Western manipulations culminate when Igor Korotchenko – a member of a public council advising the Ministry of Defense and editor of the journal *National Defense* – is invited by the moderators to weigh in. The camera zooms in, establishing a symmetrically framed close-up of his head. Looking not at his discussion partners, but straight into the camera, Korotchenko delivers his analysis of the situation. The Kremlin’s information, he reminds the viewer, is based on reliable intelligence obtained through “sources in the West.” Underpinning the Western scheme is a battle for geopolitical influence, a “vaccine race” that could turn out to be

[E]xactly the same as the space race [and] the nuclear arms race in the 1960s of the past century. . . . Since Russia is successful in this realm [of vaccine

development], the discrediting of our vaccine is inevitable, because it is an element of soft power, an element of influence, an element of state prestige.

Many more provocations, he assures, are to be expected.

Meanwhile, the camera alternates between close-ups of Korotchenko and overview shots of the studio, allowing a view of the vaccine's promotional clip playing on the immense screen in the background and showing a Sputnik satellite circling around a planet-shaped virus particle. Korotchenko ends his speech with a piece of advice directed at the security services in those European countries that have already bought doses of Sputnik V, not awaiting approval by the European Medicines Agency (EMA):

I would recommend the counter-intelligence services in . . . Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia and other countries . . . to closely monitor their senior brothers in the intelligence community – the Americans, the British, perhaps even the German BND [Federal Intelligence Service] – so that they won't play you the nasty trick of staging, on your territories, massive cases of side effects purportedly caused by the Russian vaccine.

Korotchenko's contribution, typical of the wider retro-conspiracist vilifications of the West during the pandemic, propels the audience back in time: not only to a bygone communist-capitalist rivalry for military and technological supremacy, but also to conspiratorial Soviet propaganda narratives about nefarious imperialist foes eager to undermine the country's values and aspirations. This perspective, tinted by espionage romanticism, appears to be untouched by the digital revolution and the ensuing deterritorialization of information flows. For Korotchenko, information is still firmly grounded in geographical space: intelligence is obtained through Russian "sources in the West," while clandestine Western agents and provocateurs encroach on Eastern European "territories," attempting to plant their compromising material there. Korotchenko's analysis sits awkwardly with the twenty-first-century concerns expressed earlier in the show, which hinged on biased reporting in the "mainstream media," the vulnerability of the online sphere to political manipulation, and the threats posed by "fake news." Yet, this anachronistic alternation between current affairs and Cold War-era myths and constellations elicits no questions from the participants in the *60 Minutes* episode.

The Open Secret of a Western Plot

Before probing deeper into this combination of contemporary and history-based paradigms in pro-Kremlin conspiracy discourse, we should assess Russian reporting on the vaccine more broadly. Its tone and focus can be gauged from the discussions on another talk show, *Time Will Tell* [*Vremia pokazhet*] (*TWT*). Broadcast by the state-controlled Channel One, and airing on weekdays, this two-and-a-half-hours political discussion program is longer but otherwise structured like *60*

Minutes. During the fall and winter of 2020–21, the show’s guests and alternating hosts tirelessly reiterated that vaccine development is a race, or a war, not merely between the spreading virus and the advancements of medical science, but primarily between national governments. These governments, according to the overriding consensus, initially competed to be the first to produce an effective vaccine against Covid-19 and are now engaged in a bitter economic and political struggle to promote their vaccines and discredit “competitors.” In one broadcast, the program’s host, referring to this second stage of Covid-era competition, exclaims, “The vaccine race has begun!” (Vremiia pokazhet 2020b).

In *TWT* and other news and discussion programs, Russia’s stake in this race is symbolized by two Sputnik V flacons with red and blue lids, representing the Russian flag, the white labels on the flacons completing the tricolor. These are brought into the studio and shown to guests and viewers, or they feature in photographs on the studios’ screens. This “nationalized” notion of vaccine competition is further expressed in graphs and tables showing the varying efficacy of different vaccines, their names often accompanied by little flags signaling the vaccines’ respective national origins. As the host of *TWT* admits, “I look at these tables as one looks at the [results of] the Olympic Games or a world championship, when you want to see how many of your flags are [listed] there” (Vremiia pokazhet 2020b). However, the competitive rhetoric often extends beyond the metaphor of a sportive test of strength, taking on the more belligerent connotations of a “vaccine war” (Vremiia pokazhet 2020c). The prevailing image is that of a bitter struggle for markets as well as a more consequential battle for prestige and (soft) power over populations and territories. During one of the *TWT* broadcasts (Vremiia pokazhet 2020b), the host vividly articulates this geopolitical outlook via the newly minted adage “whoever controls the vaccines, controls the world.” This perspective is further fleshed out in another episode (Vremiia pokazhet 2021b) featuring the writer and journalist Nikolai Starikov, one of the main voices in the Russian milieu of anti-Western conspiracy theorists (Yablokov 2018, 54–56). Joining the overheated debate on the Ukrainian rejection of Sputnik V, Starikov explains that the Zelenskii government’s decision not to use the vaccine has been dictated by the country’s new American bosses, who fear any rapprochement between the neighboring countries: “In terms of its economy, politics, and diplomacy, Ukraine is an American occupation zone. In this zone, decisions can only be made with the blessings of the occupier’s administration.”

The repeated terminology of a “race” or “war” serves multiple rhetorical purposes at once. First, and most obviously, it gives center stage to Russia’s world-changing triumph over both microbial and political “enemies.” Second, this double discourse of Russia’s success allows for an alternating stress on the scientific and the political implications of the recent victory. Indeed, adding to this convenient rhetorical flexibility is the ambiguous “V” in Sputnik’s name, which the developers and their financial backers alternatively link to “Vaccine” and “Victory.”⁶

The ubiquitous space-race theme further troubles the official presentation of this “Victory” as merely one over the virus. Third, the insistence on global competition

keeps the discussions' focus securely on foreign affairs (the preferred domain of the Russian government's persuasive strategies [Sharafutdinova 2020, 148]), thus deflecting attention from domestic problems at a time when less than 40 percent of the Russian population was willing to get vaccinated with Sputnik V (Levada Center 2021). In the rare instance when such domestic problems are raised, they are juxtaposed with stories about substantial numbers of foreigners who are allegedly eager to travel to Russia for vaccination with Sputnik V (Vremiia pokazhet 2021c).

Finally, and most importantly, the emphasis on competition opens the door to conspiratorial explanations that identify foul play by Western companies, governments, and media agencies, all of which apparently operate in cahoots with each other. Subscribing to the central conspiratorial premises that everything is connected, and nothing is ever as it seems (Butter and Knight 2020, 1), the rhetoric of the *Time Will Tell* show frequently pivots on what Todor Hristov has called "the offstage," a realm of obscured knowledge that is nevertheless conceived as being transparent. In conspiracy discourse the offstage, Hristov writes, acts as "an open secret," one that is "both kept and revealed" (2019, 74). Indeed, identifying gloomy machinations and muddy motivations under the surface of Western policies and statements, the show constantly reveals what the audience presumably already knows. Acting as an arbiter in the "vaccine race," the EMA is prejudiced against Russia and has applied "double standards." Moreover, Western reports about the cutting of corners in Sputnik V's clinical trials are "paid by those who don't want our vaccine on their markets" (Vremiia pokazhet 2021b). That vaccine development has become a "race" is itself presented as a lamentable result of the aggressive market-logic and Russophobia of Western companies and governments. The West's spite, greed, and conniving behavior are contrasted with Russia's humanitarian commitment to solve this worldwide crisis, that is, to create "a 'Sputnik moment' for the global community," as the vaccine's website has it ("Sputnik Moment" n.d.a; emphasis added).

The insistence on a political and economic conspiracy against the Russian vaccine is also reflected, though in more subdued tones, in the press releases of the Gamaleya Institute and the financial sponsor of the vaccine's development, the Russian Direct Investment Fund. Characteristic is a statement published on the English-language version of Sputnik V's website on October 21, 2021. It claimed that "misleading" attacks "from anonymous sources" against the Sputnik vaccine increased "after official studies showed that mRNA vaccines' efficacy . . . falls to below 50% in just five months." After adducing data to prove Sputnik V's "superior efficacy and longer-lasting immunity" compared to mRNA vaccines, the statement ends with a recommendation that, instead of "attacking" Sputnik, producers of mRNA vaccines in the West should use the "one-component Sputnik Light as a booster." It goes on to insist that the media should not rely on "inaccurate anonymous sources" but instead rely on the "official position of regulators." It condemns what it sees as the "unscrupulous media attacks organized by some big pharma

companies,” which it thinks are not only “unethical” but delay the roll-out of vaccination programs as well, allegedly allowing new virus mutations to emerge which will cost lives (“On Information Attacks” 2021).

More noteworthy than the vigorous promotion of Sputnik V (and its single-dose version) is the text’s adherence to the ambiguous logic of the “offstage.” Indeed, the statement both keeps and reveals an “open secret,” emphasizing the anonymity *and* the identity of the forces behind the misleading information. It first suggests a causal relation between the intensification of disinformation and the disappointing efficacy of Western-made mRNA vaccines (pointing to Moderna and Pfizer, not to AstraZeneca with whom Sputnik by this time conducted trials on the combined use of the two vaccines). Then it implies – apparently by asking “who benefits?” (the age-old justification for “intentionalist interpretations” [Byford 2011, 41–43]) – that “Western mRNA vaccine producers” are the organizers (and the “anonymous sources”?) behind the media attacks against Sputnik V. Without spelling out the narrative, the statement adheres to the Russian establishment’s go-to account of Western actors as sore losers, whose spite and pursuit of financial gain prove more important than the protection of human lives. Yet, the declaration mixes this perspective with hints borrowed from globalized narratives of suspicion regarding the limitless power of “Big Pharma” and the political and financial elites’ control of the mainstream media. While these elements do not come together to form a full-fledged conspiracy theory, they invite the reader to connect the dots. Surprisingly, the statement combines conspiracist insinuations with a defense of evidence-based medicine as well as accurate and unbiased journalism. Such an ardently expressed commitment to procedures, values, and norms that Russia has often been accused of violating aligns with recent attitudes and practices in Russia’s international diplomacy. Central among these is a strategy of “overidentification,” which “endorses but indirectly subverts the normative frameworks within which it is performed” (Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021).

Soviet Retro

It is time to return to the historical references in Sputnik V conspiracism in order to analyze the temporal relations it cultivates and ask how these bolster the discourse’s rhetorical and emotional persuasiveness. As noted earlier, Korotchenko’s analysis in *60 Minutes* found former Cold War rivalry lurking under the surface of vaccine-related intrigues. More implicitly, Starikov’s analysis of Ukraine as an American occupation zone echoed Soviet propaganda stories about the United States as “an overly militarized, evil country bent on world domination” (Sharafutdinova 2020, 76). Yet, for a more in-depth discussion of the retro-element of state-backed vaccine conspiracism, I turn to a section on the Sputnik V website devoted entirely to the history of Soviet space exploration. Accessing this section, the visitor first encounters an image of the curved, blue surface of the Earth as seen from outer

space, with a ball-shaped satellite apparently orbiting our planet. Visual hints to medical science are absent, but a short, superimposed text invokes the connection:

In 1957 the successful launch of the first space satellite Sputnik-1 by the Soviet Union reinvigorated space research and exploration around the world. The announcement of the new Russian Covid-19 vaccine created a so-called ‘Sputnik moment’ for the global community. The vaccine is therefore called Sputnik V.

(“Sputnik Moment” n.d.)

Further down, the Sputnik V promotional clip – also shown on *60 Minutes* – is included. The short video continues to juxtapose the dimensions, producing a composite of Soviet history and current affairs, space exploration and vaccine development, and macro and micro perspectives on life on Earth. In the video, a Sputnik satellite orbits a virus particle recognizable due to its extending spike proteins. With each circle of the satellite, this “viral” celestial body loses parts of its brownish surface, revealing a progressively more familiar, “cleaned-up” version of planet Earth.

The clip (or imagery taken from it) was featured in countless news and discussion programs throughout 2020 and 2021. A broadcast of the news program *Time [Vremia]* used the video to assure the audience that “in microbiology, as in space exploration, our specialists have long-proven technology at their disposal.” Adding to the space theme, it showed a computer-animated rocket launch to illustrate that Sputnik V’s vector vaccine technology “transports any harmless virus into the cells as if it were into the orbit, thus triggering immunity” (August 15, 2020). On other occasions, the invocation of the space race facilitates projections about scientific breakthroughs in the future. In a summer 2020 *Time Will Tell* episode, the host rebuts the skepticism of one guest (the liberally oriented political scientist Andrei Nikulin) about the speed of the upcoming Russian vaccination campaign. From now on, the host notes assuringly, things will progress quickly: “It’s like the flight into the cosmos. You understand that without the Sputnik [satellite] we would never have reached [the point of] piloted space flights. After Sputnik there were other. . . .” When interrupted by his opponent, the camera zooms in on the show’s second moderator, who directly addresses the audience at home and reminds them that the first human being was sent into space only four years after the Sputnik satellite (*Vremia pokazhet 2020a*).

The seemingly far-fetched resonances between a twenty-first-century vaccine and a twentieth-century satellite do not take shape via a simple analogy between two historically discrete moments of scientific innovation. Instead, the rhetoric of a “Sputnik moment” overlays these achievements to create a vision of permanent East–West rivalry and Soviet/Russian supremacy. This perspective can only be communicated by suspending one’s awareness of the obvious differences and complications which seem to render the suggested continuity untenable: Russia is not the Soviet Union; the post-Soviet nationalist framing of the global “vaccine race” sits uncomfortably with the simultaneous invocation of Soviet-imperialist prestige;

and the current Russian leadership lacks a coherent and up-to-date ideological basis for pitting Russia's aspirations against those of "the West."

Scholarship on contemporary Russia has adopted various perspectives on this (often ambiguous) Putin-era "reconciliation with the Soviet" (Dubin 2006) and its multifaceted manifestations in the realms of culture, media, and politics. Kevin Platt has coined the term "Soviet retro" to describe the "ongoing reconstitution of Russian and Soviet history as a continuous fabric." Retro, in his use of the term, is different from nostalgia as "it describes the revival or continuation of traditions that appear never to have been lost" (2013, 464). Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has recently zoomed in on the socio-psychological dimensions of this politically expedient promotion of Russia as the "main bearer of the legacies of the Soviet state" (2020, 79). She points to the Putin government's "well-coordinated media machine" that relentlessly fuels the public's wounded pride (167). Emotions of shame, fear, and outrage regarding Russia's denigrated role in global affairs are harnessed for a revanchist national unification around a set of selectively rekindled paradigms drawn from Soviet culture and propaganda. The first among these is a resuscitated "sense of exceptionalism – of living in a country that was unique and superior to the rest of the world" (64), while the others build on a Soviet notion of "capitalist encirclement" (91) and on an understanding of the country as a "besieged fortress" (21).

In the wake of the annexation of Crimea, the Russian leadership and the media platforms it controls have doubled down on narratives involving foreign foes and their treacherous domestic allies. These stories always insist on the urgency to "unmask . . . and denounce . . . the 'enemies,' whether they are Russian liberals representing the 1990s, fascists from Ukraine, or Americans, the global troublemakers" (161). Ilya Yablokov, too, identifies the reverberations of jingoistic Soviet propaganda in the current state-led mass production of anti-Western conspiracy theories. A case in point is the government's protracted legislative attempt to curtail the activities of NGOs in Russia, a project that culminated in a 2012 law requiring NGOs – those that receive donations from abroad and engage in "political activities" – to register as "foreign agents." Yablokov notes that the phrase "recalled the accusations levelled against numerous Soviet citizens during the Great Purges in the 1930s" (2018, 125) and observes that the term's use in the new law demonstrates "the dependance of the official political discourse on the vocabulary of the Soviet era" (125–26). In 2020, the law was expanded and made applicable to independent media platforms and to individuals, which further reinforces the uncanny parallels with violent Soviet histories of political paranoia and state terror.

For Platt, Sharafutdinova, and Yablokov, such constructed historical reverberations, however, do not signal an actual full-fledged "return" to Soviet times or policies. Rather, as Sharafutdinova explains, these echoes are employed to capitalize on the "emotional sore-spots" of post-Soviet Russians in strategic attempts to manufacture an ever more comprehensive pro-Kremlin unanimity among them (2020, 176). She characterizes the resulting situation as "a moment of consolidation, emergence, and the coming together of a post-Soviet collective identity envisioned through the central symbolic pillars of the Soviet identity" (19).

This instrumentalized “retro” vision of Soviet/Russia – as a country always at the forefront of history even as it is constantly threatened by its age-old adversaries – is at the heart of official vaccine discourse. Its retro element takes on different yet related guises. It manifests itself as a rearticulation of past achievements in the present; as a story of political and identarian continuity which glosses over the seismic changes wrought by the transitions of the 1990s; and as an affect-laden interpretive lens onto present affairs, one that takes its cues from a selective set of Soviet conspiracy tropes.⁷

Typically, the inevitable anachronisms of retro-conspiracism do not diminish its rhetorical and emotional force. Characteristic in this regard is one of Igor Korotchenko’s rants during another episode of *60 Minutes* (60 Minut 2021b). After proudly noting that “the Russian word ‘Sputnik’” has recently been “resonating across the entire globe,” he fulminates against the (orchestrated) Western media skepticism toward the Russian vaccine. Only Western envy and fear could explain “why those Western lapdogs [i.e., American-controlled media personalities] now bark so nastily!” Fired up by his own self-righteous revanchism, he declares that Russia would prevail regardless: “Even if these lapdogs bite at our pants, we will proceed forward!” Boris Nadezhdin, a *Just Russia* politician, advocates a more level-headed, less “politicized” approach. Not hiding his enjoyment of Korotchenko’s performative and oratory skills, he also stresses its out-of-placeness: “You should have [addressed the audience from] the stage of the Party Congress in 1937, condemning those enemies of the People. I haven’t heard something like this for a long time, ‘these Western lapdogs,’ well done!” With the hosts condemning Nadezhdin’s mild irony and attacking his blindness to “what’s happening abroad” as well as his presumed “infatuation with everything American,” the show continues.

On this occasion and others, retro-conspiracism does not culminate in a seamless integration of disparate historical settings and traditions of explanation. Its logic is better understood as one of superimposition, by which the diverse historical strata each retain a level of distinctness while also acquiring a degree of transparency, thus allowing for a vision of the one through the other. Accordingly, this retro-conspiracist outlook does not equate the twentieth-century satellite launch with the twenty-first-century development of a vaccine. Yet, in the overlay of these events, the prestigious contours of the former shine through in a vision of the latter, producing an historically composite “Sputnik Moment.” Likewise, the capitalist-imperialist enemy of Soviet propaganda may differ from Russia’s manipulative opponent today. Yet, the portrayal of contemporary foes through Soviet-era templates works to add affective “colouring” to the interpretation of events. This process – confirming Sara Ahmed’s analyses of the “stickiness” of affect (2004, 2014) – serves as a reminder that retro-conspiracism involves not only interpretive, but also emotional re-arrangements of meaning. In Korotchenko’s rhetorical and performative superimposition of paradigms, the affective weight adhering to the “enemies” from Soviet propaganda is pressed onto Russia’s presumed post-Soviet adversaries and comes to stick to these latter figures (i.e., “the Americans” and those obediently serving them). Once more illustrating the “sticky” dynamic of

affect, this resentful rhetoric itself glues together a hated (but persevering) Russian “us,” interpellating the television audiences as a cohesive collective of ardent supporters of the (externally threatened) state. Finally, the others’ hate and threats confirm Russia’s (continued or restored) significance in global affairs, a message further soliciting prideful collective identification with the nation.

Spotlighting the Hidden Front

To further illuminate the retro-conspiracist stratification of histories, one of its hallmarked “layers” must be discussed in greater detail. Frequently undergirding the rhetoric of vaccine conspiracism are the central tropes and figures of Soviet espionage fiction, which itself (like its Western equivalents) was often premised on an imagination of (political) reality as “layered.” As Valerii V’ugin argues in his analysis of the genre’s evolution from the 1920s to the 1980s, the spies, agents, and saboteurs of Soviet literature and cinema were more than a “theme.” They acted as rhetorical figures, inculcating an (evolving) understanding of Soviet society and its social, cultural, and geographical boundaries. Particularly relevant here are the genre’s postwar permutations, in which spies and saboteurs were less frequently spotted or confronted by ordinary Soviet citizens and were increasingly handled by Soviet security agents who battled the country’s obscure adversaries on an “invisible front,” as the Soviet phrase had it (2017, 304).

In the often ambivalent discourse on Russia’s vaccine-facilitated victories, the country’s indiscernible enemies (whether the spreading virus or furtive foreign provocateurs)⁸ acquire a significance inflected by espionage tropes. During one of the debates on *TWT* (*Vremiia pokazhet 2020a*), for instance, Sputnik V is presented as a participant in an “arms race” with the ever-evolving virus, a competition ambiguously characterized as a battle against an “invisible enemy.” In many of the previously discussed cases, an “invisible front,” even when not labeled as such, is invoked in more explicitly political terms.

The analyzed media coverage constantly presents the unfair and inaccurate Western reporting on Sputnik V as a matter of intelligence and state security. And it is this framing that allows the espionage trope of an “invisible front” to lend its weight to vaccine conspiracism. A case in point is the aforementioned statement from the Kremlin in March 2021 which declared that Russian intelligence services had revealed a secretly planned American propaganda offensive “of unprecedented aggression” to be conducted under the cover of commissioned NGOs.

The narrative of disguised enemies being heroically confronted by Russian counterintelligence stood out even more vividly in Vladimir Putin’s public speech three weeks earlier at the Collegium of the FSB (Putin 2021). In this address, broadcasted live by the state-owned television channel *Rossiiia24*, the president thanked the agency for their vital work in countering the relentless attempts to “obstruct our development . . . to provoke domestic instability, undermine the values that unite Russian society, and, ultimately, to weaken Russia and put her under foreign control.” Hinting at Ukraine, he added: “This, as we see, as we know, is

happening in certain countries of the post-Soviet territory.” Referring to Sputnik V, the President warned that, notwithstanding the friendly responses from many of Russia’s partners, “a purposeful information campaign is being conducted against us, with stubborn and unprovable accusations.” He emphasized, however, the FSB’s success in delivering “to the country’s political leadership information regarding certain provocations that are being planned in this sphere” and continued to say that “we have long been used to [such provocations] and are prepared [to respond to them].” Consequently, any attempt to meddle in Russia’s affairs was “absolutely prospectless.”

The image emerging from the speech is one of unwavering security officers who conduct their work, as Putin put it, “under irregular circumstances” and with a “ceaseless and tense rhythm,” and who invariably see through the Western smoke-screens and counteract the provocations. The battle they wage, out of public sight, is one of existential importance as ultimately, Russia’s stability and very sovereignty are at stake. The FSB agents, Putin added, knew very well that this presentation of affairs was not an exaggeration.

This rhetoric of the state’s hidden life-and-death struggle not only recycles a Soviet espionage genre but also evokes the doublings of reality characteristic of the early European spy novel, as discussed by Luc Boltanski. In this tradition, the enemies of the state are typically confronted in a “war” fought “under the cover of what appears to be peace” (2014, 126). Describing the key premise of the genre, Boltanski notes that

[o]rdinary citizens and even sometimes those responsible for the state . . . believe naively that the state is at peace and act accordingly – whereas in fact the state has never ceased to be at war. What the spy novel seeks to tell us – and this is its key mechanism – is that the state is always at war, always threatened, always fragile, even when ordinary – that is unseeing – people are unaware of this.

(127)

In the Russian cases discussed, the espionage notions that the state has “never ceased to be at war” and is “always at war” take on an even more pronounced temporal dimension. In retro-conspiracism, the country’s threatening enemies, their subversive tactics, and the heroism of those combating the foes are all marked by a particular permanence. Though twenty-first century-surface realities shroud the constant scheming, they are translucent enough to allow for occasional glances of the “invisible front” lurking underneath. This imagined semi-transparency also facilitates the superimpositions of distinct historical strata, which engender the temporality of the “always at war” condition identified by Boltanski. Interestingly, the blatant anachronisms of retro-conspiracism seem only to add to this rhetorical logic. They confirm the notion of a deceptively peaceful contemporary cover imposed on unchanging conflicts, and they invite interpretive gestures of “seeing through” the deception.

Returning to the president's address to the FSB, one should not overlook the participation of Putin's persona in these temporal layerings. Commentators have remarked on the political significance of his reputation as a former KGB officer. They note that the president's pose of a sober patriot and witty trickster has been electorally successful due in part to its resonances with the most beloved (fictive) spy figures from late-Soviet literature and cinema (Lipovetskii 2007; Norris 2013, 161–62; Noordenbos 2021, 164–67). As Sharafutdinova remarks, Putin confirms the old saying that “you never have a *former* security officer” (2020, 176). Indeed, the cultivation of the Soviet spy under the skin of the post-Soviet president adds another twist to the warped temporalities of retro-conspiracism.

Conclusion

Any claims regarding the uniquely Russian qualities of retro-conspiracism would be debunked by an article published by the British tabloid *The Sun* in the fall of 2021. The piece alleged, on the basis of information from “security services,” that “one of Vladimir Putin's spies” had stolen AstraZeneca's “blueprint” from the drug firm: “It is understood the data was stolen by a foreign agent in person.” Subsequently, the blueprint had allegedly been used to develop Sputnik V (Reilly and Cole 2021). In close alignment with its Russian equivalents, the story identified a Cold-War-inspired scenario lurking under the surface of contemporary circumstance that renders it improbable: the Gamaleya Center has a long-standing track record in vaccine development, and it had been developing its distinct two-vector-adenoviral technology long before the pandemic.

In talk shows like *60 Minutes* and *TWT*, vaccines had, by the second half of 2021, receded into the background, with other topics, especially those concerning Ukraine, taking the center stage. Consequently, these shows did not seize this opportunity for speculations about yet another meticulously planned anti-Russian propaganda campaign. *TWT* only discussed *The Sun*'s correction, which was published in the tabloid soon after the release of the news. The *TWT* hosts condemned, with fatigued resignation, the fact that the article's headline was left unchanged: “Sputnicked: Russian spies ‘stole formula for Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid jab and used it to create Sputnik vaccine.” The condemnation on the English version of the Sputnik V website was more stinging, characterizing the article as a “blatant lie,” convincingly explaining why the theory made “absolutely no sense scientifically.” In a surprising inversion of its rhetoric, the declaration ended with a defense of AstraZeneca (with whom Sputnik V conducted joint clinical trials): “Rather than spreading fake stories, the UK media and government services should better protect the reputation of AstraZeneca, a safe and efficient vaccine that is constantly attacked by competitors in the media with facts taken out of context” (“Sputnik V Team Statement” n.d.).

Referencing the story in *The Sun*, I do not intend to imply symmetry between Russian and Western practices of retro-conspiracism. The affect-laden Russian accounts of Western connivance in late 2020 and early 2021 were far more

ubiquitous and prominent than their equivalents in Western Europe or the United States. They also acquired their distinct political significance in the context of exceptionally tight state control over traditional information channels. Still, the affair underlines the urgency of critically analyzing Western (media) practices which, like their Russian variants, pinpoint historical scripts and constellations under the semi-transparent cover of contemporaneity. Such scrutiny would be a first step toward countering the self-confirming rhetoric of retro-conspiracism and the endlessly proliferating logic of “who benefits?” In the aforementioned case, that question would inevitably lead to the assumption that *The Sun* had fallen victim to a clever Russian intelligence operation, one that facilitated yet another self-presentation of Russia as the defender of evidence-based science and unbiased journalism.

Notes

- 1 All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 I borrow the term “conspiracism” from Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, who, in the contemporary American context, observe a digitally fueled “new conspiracism.” In their analysis, this burgeoning mode of suspicion typically lacks a (reasoned) *theory*, “defies common sense” (2019, 27), and is “powered by resentment and spite and righteous anger” (28). While focusing on another context, and not subscribing to the authors’ somewhat nostalgic attitude toward “classic conspiracy theory” (20), I use the term “conspiracism” to signal a suspicious and affect-laden rhetoric that does not always crystallize into a full-blown conspiracy theory. Yet, at least in this state-backed Russian context, conspiracism *does* (strive to) make “common sense,” even though the emotional dimensions of this “sense” occasionally overshadow its cognitive ones.
- 3 I’m grateful to Ilya Malafei for his invaluable assistance in collecting data for this chapter.
- 4 This chapter was written before the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine that started in late February 2022. Since then, the propagandistic use of retro-conspiracist gestures in Russia’s state-controlled information landscape has gained even more traction, as the official attempts to justify this unprovoked war are frequently governed by the two-pronged rhetoric of mythologized history and conspiracy theory.
- 5 As a 2021 poll by the Levada Center shows, 60 percent of the Russian population still gets their news from television (Volkov et al. 2021).
- 6 The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has given an additional impulse to such multi-interpretable letter symbolism. In 2022, the “V” and “Z” signs, widely displayed by Russian citizens as markers of their pro-war and pro-government attitudes, have triggered a proliferation of diverse interpretations as to their exact symbolic meaning and ideological significance.
- 7 Already in 1989, Geoffrey Cubitt coined the phrase “conspiracy myth” to theorize how conspiracy theories constantly detect established, mythologized scenarios of manipulation in “fresh sets of events” (18). While I take inspiration from Cubitt’s argument, I do not employ his concept of “conspiracy myth” for my analysis as its static and fixed qualities do not do justice to the often eclectic and flexible nature of the retro-conspiracism analyzed here.
- 8 Helpful for understanding these alternations between viral realities and imagined conspiracies are Susan Sontag’s remarks in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), and especially in her 1989 addendum to that essay titled *Aids and Its Metaphors*. Here, Sontag comments on the frequent translation of conspiracy ideas into metaphors of virality. Invisible to the unaided eye, viruses invade the body, where they introduce “information,” which serves as a reproducible script for transformations in the genetic make-up of cells. In cultural imagination, these traits often resonate metaphorically with military and political notions

of traitorous infiltrations, insidious take-overs, and foreign undermining of the (political, social, or cultural) body (Sontag 1989, 68). It is this metaphorical potential of virality that is harnessed, whether overtly or implicitly, in Russian Sputnik V conspiracism, with the “invisible enemies” alternately serving as the metaphor’s source domain and target domain.

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22

A COMMUNIST COUP BY LOCKDOWN

Covid Conspiracy Theories in Spain

Alejandro Romero-Reche

Introduction

While not as massively attended as those of 2018 or 2019, the 2020 Women's Day March was reportedly a moderate success in Spain, with an estimated total of 120,000 demonstrators in Madrid (El País, March 8, 2020) despite concerns about the then slowly increasing number of coronavirus cases detected after the first one being confirmed in mainland Spain two weeks before. Dismissing any risk of contagion, prominent members of the progressive government who actively participated in the march, such as socialist vice-president Carmen Calvo, had called for Spanish women to "fill the streets" (Cadena Ser, March 7, 2020).

When the situation depicted by official data changed dramatically the next day and, less than a week later, on March 14, the government decreed a state of alarm entailing full home lockdown for the Spanish population, the Women's Day March was re-examined in hindsight by the opposition parties. Several times since then, the conservative *People's Party* (PP) has accused the government of prioritizing ideology over public health, stating that it had deliberately misrepresented the risk of infection to entice the public into attending (InfoLibre, March 25, 2020; elDiario.es, January 31, 2022).

Some of those accusations contained conspiratorial overtones even before the state of alarm was decreed. For instance, on March 10, 2020, several right-wing outlets published pictures of socialist ministers wearing purple latex gloves during the march. Starting with Santiago Abascal, president of the far-right party *Vox*, a number of politicians from the conservative PP and the liberal *Ciudadanos* claimed that the pictures proved that the government was aware of the danger but decided to withhold information and protect only its own members. In fact, only two ministers out of several in attendance, and not for the full duration of the march, wore the gloves, which were the same kind of purple gloves used in the marches of previous years as a feminist symbol (Maldita.es, March 12, 2020).

The controversy surrounding the Women's Day March illustrates that the political dynamics of conspiracy theorizing about the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain were decisively shaped by confrontations between the country's coalition government, formed by the *Spanish Socialist Workers' Party* (PSOE) and left-wing populist *Unidas Podemos*, and the right-wing opposition, with the main conservative force, PP, struggling to maintain its lead over challengers *Vox* and *Ciudadanos*. Spurred by competition among the right-wing parties, rhetorically heightened criticism of the allegedly ideological motivation behind the government's decisions in the management of the health crisis has lent plausibility to those decisions being construed as steps in a hidden radical plan of social engineering, often connected to the usual evil agents singled out by pre-existing conspiracy theories.

A Government Never to Be Trusted: The Political Context

The government that decreed the lockdown in March 2020 had emerged from a general election held in November 2019, after a period of political instability during which the Spanish party system had substantially changed due to the economic crisis, corruption scandals, and territorial conflicts (Rodríguez Teruel et al. 2017; Rama, Cordero, and Zagórski 2021). Between 1993 and 2015, an imperfect two-party system had allowed PSOE and PP to alternate in government. The rise of new contenders both to the left (*Podemos*) and right (*Ciudadanos* and *Vox*) fragmented it into a multi-party system where general elections were repeated in short succession (first in December 2015 and June 2016, then in April and November 2019) due to the inability of the different parties to reach agreements for government formation (Simón 2020). Hence, from December 2015 to March 2020, Spain had seen four general elections, two votes of no confidence – one in June 2017, unsuccessful, led by *Podemos*, and the second one, successful, led by PSOE in June 2018 –, and five different governments. The contrast with the preceding four-year period, during which PP had undisturbedly held a majority government since the 2011 general election, is stark.

The emerging multi-party system is polarized between two ideological blocs, each of them animated by internal competition for leadership (Simón 2020), the traditional left and right parties (PSOE and PP) being challenged by new ones who claim to represent the “true” left (*Podemos*) and the “true” right (*Vox*). On the left, competition between PSOE and *Podemos* prevented the formation of a coalition government after the April 2019 election (Orriols and León 2020), with the then caretaker prime minister Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) stating that he would not be “able to sleep” if he had to preside over a government with members of *Podemos* (*El País*, September 20, 2019). This remark, and in general such sort of contentious rhetoric, has been highlighted by the right-wing parties to prove the untrustworthiness of Sánchez and the radical nature of the coalition government when, after the November 2019 election, he agreed to form it with *Podemos*, the party that he had previously disparaged as populist.

On the right, the first new contender was *Ciudadanos*. Originally modelled as a liberal hinge-party that would negotiate both to right and left, from 2015 to 2019,

it improved its electoral results primarily to the detriment of PP. This led to its ideological outlook being redesigned aiming to become the main force in the right-wing bloc. The second new contender, *Vox*, created by ex-members of PP who felt betrayed by their old party's government policies from 2011 onward, presented itself as a far right party from the outset, but did not appear as a serious challenger until the December 2018 regional election in Andalusia, where it first gained parliamentary representation. The popular support increased in the subsequent 2019 general elections, from 10 percent (April) to 15 percent (November) of the vote.

The polarizing strategy initiated by *Ciudadanos* in its bid for supremacy of the right, denouncing the left as Bolivarian and electorally dependent on Basque and Catalan nationalists, was echoed and surpassed by the more extreme accusations that *Vox* started heralding. PP, ridiculed by *Vox* as “*derechita cobarde*” [wimpy right], its position jeopardized by the two challengers – in the April 2019 election, *Ciudadanos* had won 15.9 percent of the vote, close behind PP's 16.7 percent –, chose to defend it by reinforcing its right-wing and Spanish nationalist credentials and thus further feeding polarization (Rodríguez-Teruel 2020).

Crucially, the potential hinge between the left and right blocs, which have tended to obtain almost matched aggregated electoral results in the current election cycle, chiefly consists in a number of Catalan and Basque nationalist parties. Some of these parties have provided parliamentary support to PP governments in the past, but the polarization dynamic makes it unlikely to happen again, were PP in a position to present a candidate to an investiture debate. Most of the nationalist parties supported the 2018 vote of no confidence led by PSOE's Pedro Sánchez, which unseated a PP prime minister on the grounds of a corruption scandal. They have also supported the minority coalition government after the November 2019 general election.

Hence, competition within the right – where three parties, including the self-styled centrists, vie to be regarded by voters as the best defender of a country endangered by a radical left in cahoots with Basque and Catalan nationalist – and the contradictions between PSOE's pragmatic alliance policy and its previous electoral strategies have propitiated a converging discourse in the right that depicts the socialist prime minister as an unscrupulous schemer willing to do anything to remain in power, and the coalition government as an existential threat to the nation itself. Since the 2018 vote of no confidence, despised by PP as legal but illegitimate, parties in the right bloc have been regularly accusing prime minister Sánchez of dismantling the unity of the Spanish nation underhand in exchange for the nationalists' support of his government (Romero Reche 2021).

The irruption of *Vox* has strongly contributed to the creation of such political climate. Its electoral success is consistently related to its opposition to Catalan nationalism in a time of territorial crisis (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019), which makes decrying any compromise between the left and the nationalists a winning strategy for *Vox*. Moreover, partly in emulation of national-populist parties around Europe, it has brought into the mainstream political discussion conspiracy theories in support of its anti-migration, anti-feminism stance (Bernárdez-Rodal, Requeijo Rey,

and Franco 2020; Romero Reche 2021). Some of those theories, which will be briefly outlined in the next section, have provided the basis for later theories on the Covid pandemic and the Spanish government's role in it.

In summary, by March 2020, when the Spanish government started implementing severe measures to contain the spread of the virus, a bloc of parties representing nearly half of the Spanish voters had been branding its prime minister as a self-serving, treacherous political hack for almost two years. His was an illegitimate government that could never be trusted.

A Tradition of Conspiracies against the Spanish Nation

Distrust toward the left-wing coalition government was not fostered solely on the grounds of recent political action of the parties forming it. There is a repertory of earlier conspiracy theories about the Spanish left that has fed, to varying extents, new conspiracy theories about the pandemic and the government's role in it. These include the "Judeo-Masonic-Bolshevik connivance," the theory about the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, and the Muslim and gender ideology conspiracy theories.

The Jewish world conspiracy was reworked in 1930s Spain as the "*Judeo-Masonic-Bolshevik connivance*" (Ferrer Benimeli 1982), which eventually justified Francisco Franco's coup against the second Spanish Republic in 1936. According to the conspiracy theory, Jews, freemasons, and communists were collaborating in a plan for world domination in which Spain was a key piece to conquer due to its spiritual relevance as a Catholic nation and its geostrategic position. A Sovietized Spain, at the Western end of Europe, would be able to coordinate attacks with the USSR.

Since its proclamation in 1931, the second Republic had been perceived by the right as a radical anti-Catholic regime. Shortly thereafter, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were published in Spain and used as an explicit inspiration by propagandists who warned the Spanish people about how the Republic was furthering the evil plan (Preston 2021). Civil war propaganda by the Francoist side abundantly featured the conspiracy theory, which was later an integral component of the official ideology that justified repression during Franco's dictatorship. During the transition to democracy in the 1970s, the radical right invoked it again, claiming that the transition itself was part of the plan outlined in the *Protocols* (Álvarez Chillida 2002, 473).

Although the "Judeo-Masonic-Bolshevik connivance" appears to be completely discredited in twenty-first-century Spain, and the term is often used as a joking synonym of "conspiracy theory," it still provides the basic template for right-wing conspiracy theories, including those circulated during the pandemic: The left is secretly collaborating with foreign forces to undermine the Spanish nation and establish a totalitarian regime that will persecute Catholic traditions and replace them with a fraudulent ideology. Besides the broad structural similarities, Covid conspiracy theories have also retrieved specific elements of the theory, particularly about Freemasonry.

Proponents of the *11-M theory*, perhaps the main political conspiracy theory in contemporary Spain, argue that the March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid were

not committed by Jihadists, or not only by Jihadists, but also by the Basque terrorist group ETA, or under its direction (García Tojar 2010). According to the theory, the terrorists intended to interfere with the general election that took place three days later, on March 14, so the incumbent (PP) would lose, and PSOE would win, an outcome that would further their interests in a future negotiation with the Spanish government. Variations of the theory differ on the extent of PSOE's complicity, ranging from direct collaboration with the terrorists to just covering up the real authorship for political benefit.

The pattern is congruent with Uscinski and Parent's (2014) model: The party losing power uses a conspiracy theory to explain defeat, identify the culprits, and reinforce internal cohesion polarizing public opinion and thus mobilizing supporters. The theory was mostly propagated during the two terms of PSOE governments after the attacks (2004–11) and disappeared almost completely from public discussion when PP returned to power in 2011, until it was revived in the pandemic. In any of its versions, the theory establishes a precedent that supports later accusations against the Spanish left. Since PSOE had exploited a terrorist attack to be in government, the socialists should be expected to betray the nation for power in any other ways, even if it implies stepping over dead compatriots.

In Spain, both the *Muslim* and the *gender ideology* conspiracy theories tend to be connected to the notion of a “globalist agenda” designed to destroy Christian nations in Europe and all around the world (Romero Reche 2021). Heterosexual white men, and the Catholic families they head, are systematically persecuted by the totalitarian left through secularist laws, the tyranny of political correctness and inclusive language, sexual indoctrination in schools, and migration policies that enable a demographic invasion. While accusations about “gender ideology” undermining the moral fabric of the country had emerged occasionally in Spanish mainstream media during the 2000s, often voiced by bishops, and particularly at the time of the legalization of gay marriage by a PSOE government (Cornejo Valle and Pichardo 2017), *Vox* has consistently pushed them, together with allegations about “migratory invasion,” into the foreground of political discussion since the party acquired institutional representation.

Elements of these theories have surfaced in the pandemic, from the interpretation of the Women's Day March as a radical left affair intending to set women against men, to the purported control of the government's migration policy by George Soros (El País, October 21, 2020). But, beyond the specifics of each theory, a fuzzy conflation of all of them constitutes a general background of grave suspicion against the Spanish left, exacerbated by a highly polarized political atmosphere.

Behind the Measures: Uncovering the Communist Coup in Real Time

Conspiracy theories about Covid have evolved with the pandemic and its management by the government. Presuming guilt, every measure, either implemented or proposed, is interpreted as part of the plan, which can be endlessly rearranged to

make all the different pieces fit. The common core of most theories circulated in Spain is a power-hungry government collaborating with foreign agents to subdue the Spanish people to a totalitarian hold. Covid might be completely fictitious, more virulent or milder than mainstream media purport it to be, or designed in a laboratory in communist China. In any event, it is seen as a tool for unprecedented social control. Starting with the *origin of the pandemic*, it has been linked to the Spanish government in at least three ways: claiming that *Podemos*, as a far left party, is connected with communist China, denouncing PSOE's subservience to the "globalist elite" that intends to control the population through abortion and other anti-life devices (Martín Jiménez 2020), and, more colorfully, deeming the virus a sort of divine plague unleashed through the exhumation of dictator Franco's remains by the socialist government in October 2019 (InfoLibre, April 9, 2020).

During the early days of the pandemic, the government was mostly criticized for its *tardiness to react*, which the right-wing parties attributed to the ideological commitment to celebrate the Women's Day March even if it meant recklessly downplaying the risk or, in conspiratorial accounts, willfully deceiving their own supporters. The lockdown, as the PP leader would insist, should have been decreed at least one week earlier (El País, April 23, 2020). Once the lockdown was decreed, suspicion about official figures branched into two lines. For some, including the three right-wing parties in Parliament, the real figures were much higher than those released. For others, soon labelled as "Covid negationists," the figures were completely false because the virus did not exist: Other illnesses were deliberately misdiagnosed as Covid, and deaths due to other causes were equally misattributed. Prominent among those "other causes" in conspiracy theories were the influenza vaccine, which was repeatedly blamed for the high number of deaths among the elderly, targeted in the plan for population reduction (Maldita.es, October 7, 2020), and deadly radiation emitted by 5G antennas.

The *lockdown* was originally decreed for a 15-day period and extended until June through fortnightly votes in Parliament to secure the necessary majority support. It was easily secured in the first vote in April 2020, even if the previous debate bustled with fierce criticism of the government's management of the crisis. Subsequent votes proved increasingly difficult while objections grew harsher, with the PP leader calling the state of alarm "a covert state of exception", "an overstepping of legal boundaries" and "a constitutional dictatorship" (El País, May 6, 2020), and the *Vox* leader warning that the government was trying to institute a Bolivarian regime in Spain.

In this context of grievous political accusations, pot-banging protests against the government began in wealthy districts of Madrid (El País, May 17, 2020) and spread to other Spanish cities, demanding the end of the lockdown. While some participants criticized what they deemed incompetence in the government and the negative effects in the economy, others rejected the lockdown not just as a circumstantial grab for power, but as a *de facto* coup that would establish a communist regime in Spain, deliberately strangling the economy to make the population reliant on subsidies, if it was not stopped. For some, the next step would be the

creation of concentration camps in the outskirts of big cities, as a “Jewish revenge against Europe and particularly against Spain for their expulsion in 1492” (Romero Reche 2021, 183–85).

Prime Minister Sánchez announced that *restrictions would be gradually lifted* until the country would reach “the new normal” stage in summer 2020. This term was also derided by the opposition as an attempt at manipulation and was heavily featured in conspiracy memes presenting “the new normal” as an Orwellian dystopia of masked citizens subjected to the absolute power of the socialist prime minister. For right-wing conspiracy theorists, this graduation of restrictions, which would continue through subsequent waves of the pandemic, intended to regulate mass events following the government’s globalist agenda: The lockdown was lifted in summer 2020 to allow the celebration of Gay Pride, they contended, but restrictions would be back in place for Christian festivities, such as Christmas or Holy Week. This anti-Christian plan was also supposed to have been behind the state tribute to coronavirus victims in July 2020: The secular ceremony was disparaged as a Masonic ritual by several right-wing pundits, including the *Vox* speaker in Parliament (El Mundo, July 17, 2020). Measures were seen as a tool to suppress Catholic ceremonies while promoting radical feminist, queer, and Masonic gatherings.

The first of several *mask mandates* was issued in May 2020, and the director of the Coordination Center for Health Alerts and Emergencies admitted that the Ministry of Health had not previously recommended the use of masks because of their scarcity in Spain (La Vanguardia, May 20, 2020). This acknowledgment, together with further inconsistencies in outdoor mask mandates until early 2022, has been pointed at as proof of the fictitious nature of the pandemic and the totalitarian plans of the government, who would be training the population in a regime of blind conformity, in cahoots with globalist institutions such as the WHO. Conspiracy theorists refer to masks as “muzzles,” symbolizing an alleged stifling of free speech.

The notion of a *Covid passport* was first suggested in summer 2020, as a way for people having already recovered to be able to avoid restrictions. It was not implemented until summer 2021, when the massive vaccination campaign was well under way, as a means to revive international tourism and local economies. Conspiracy theories have interpreted it both in secular – as a totalitarian tool of control, comparing it to Nazi health cards – and religious ways – taking the Covid passport for the “mark of the beast” without which “no man might buy or sell.” As conspiracist online newspaper *Las voces del pueblo* (September 1, 2021) summarized:

The Vaccination Certificate (Covid Passport or Covid-19 Certificate) will . . . [eventually] be digitally implemented through a microchip or quantic tattoo which is the mark of the beast’s system and is provided with a QR code with the number of the beast 666.

Naturally, the *vaccination strategy*, arguably the most successful health measure implemented in Spain, has been understood as a central element in the plan. Religious interpretations consider the vaccine to be, again, the “mark of the beast.”

Others merge religious and secular elements: Long before vaccines were available in Spain, the president of the Catholic University of Murcia delivered a speech blaming Covid on “the dark forces of evil,” who needed a convenient excuse to implant microchips, disguised in “vaccines” by Bill Gates and George Soros, which would control every man and woman in the planet (Cadena Ser, June 17, 2020).

Besides condemning them as pernicious or dangerous in their side effects, which would have been overlooked by complicit media participating in a massive scale experiment using the whole population as guinea pigs, conspiracy theorists have claimed that vaccines were designed to alter the subject’s DNA (Herrera-Peco et al. 2021), or simply to kill, and thus control the population growth. Many of these theories are shared by believers who do not consider themselves right-wing but vaguely libertarian. However, a conservative, often explicitly Catholic stance is apparent in most versions of them – for instance, in theories about the use of aborted fetuses in the elaboration of the vaccine (Newtral, November 23, 2020).

Finally, since every conspiracy needs to be covered up to some extent, all the theories concur in accusing *mainstream media* and, particularly, *fact-checkers* of collusion with the puppet-masters. While, according to the theories, TV and print news are devoted to “fear-mongering,” fact-checkers ridicule independent thinkers calling them “conspiracy theorists” and suppress the truth in Twitter and Facebook. In Spain, mainstream media are seen as dependent on government subsidies that compromise information. The main Spanish fact-checkers are also seen as connected to the government or their allies: *Newtral* is regarded as a spin-off of left-wing TV channel *La Sexta*, and *Maldita.es* is allegedly funded by Soros’ Open Society. Rebelling against the state of affairs they perceived, conspiracy theorists self-organized in Telegram groups to infiltrate in hospitals and make videos with their phones to uncover the sham and show that there were no corpses nor any risk of hospital collapse (elDiario.es, February 2, 2021).

Conclusion: Effects and Side Effects

The spread of Covid-related conspiracy theories might produce at least three types of relevant social effects: On the compliance with health measures (and, more specifically, with the immunization strategy), on public opinion in general, and in political attitudes in particular.

If conspiracy theories construe health measures as stages in a totalitarian plan, it seems reasonable to expect that those who sincerely believe in the theories would not comply with the measures. Current research appears to confirm this. Worse compliance with social distancing measures was found in respondents of a survey who believed that Covid “is a conspiracy to take away citizen’s rights for good and establish an authoritarian government” or agreed with the “politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions” item in the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Gualda et al. 2021). In congruence with the ideological polarization discussed before, political ideology also seemed to be associated with compliance, right-wing respondents showing lower compliance.

A similar pattern seems to emerge in data about vaccine hesitancy. According to a report by the Spanish Federation for Science and Technology (FECYT) based on three surveys conducted in Spain between June 2020 and January 2021, belief in conspiracy theories significantly increases vaccine hesitancy (FECYT 2021, 16). The study also shows how vaccine hesitancy in general decreased between those months, a pattern that can be confirmed in data obtained by Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), as shown in Figure 22.1.

There is a visible shift between the November and January surveys when those willing to be vaccinated strongly surpass those who do not want to be vaccinated, who ended up being just 5.3 percent by April 2021 after having been almost half of the sample in November 2020. Tellingly, in the December 2020 survey, in the middle of the opinion shift, there is a sudden increase in those who say they are willing to be vaccinated “if the vaccine is previously tested.” This is probably enlightening about the predominant reasons for hesitancy: Concerns about the safety of a novel vaccine. Those were rapidly put aside due to the approval of the first vaccines by the European Medicines Agency, the immunization campaign kicking off, and a change in risk perception in the third wave (FECYT 2021, 9). This development shows a parallel with the pattern of diffusion of conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine messages in Spanish-written Twitter, with pro-vaccine messages dominating after the start of the immunization campaign (Larrondo-Ureta, Fernández, and Morales i Gras 2021). These results suggest that there might have been a window of opportunity for widespread belief in anti-vaccine conspiracy theories in Spain that could have built upon those concerns about a vaccine perceived as still untested,

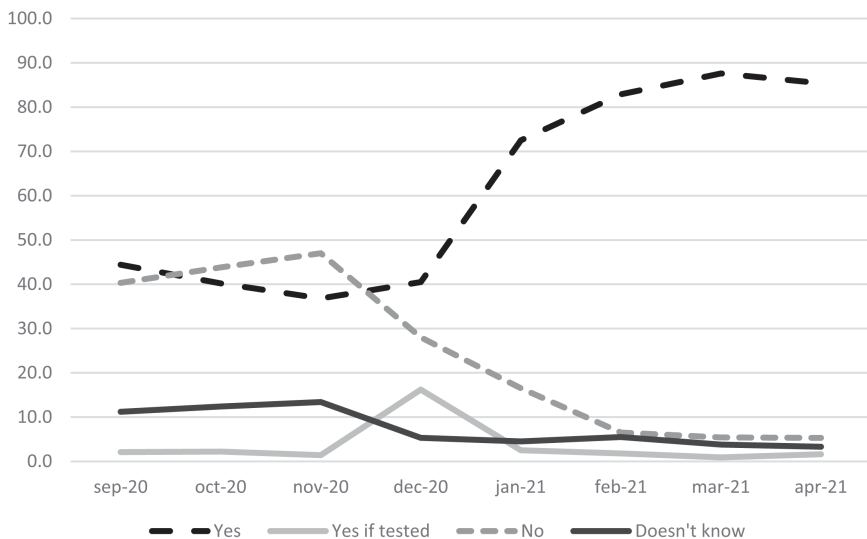


FIGURE 22.1 Willingness to be Vaccinated when Offered the Chance (%)

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas

but it was duly closed when the vaccination program started. “Covid negationists” are a meager minority within the minority that does not want to be vaccinated (roughly 3 percent of the 5.4 percent who reject vaccination in the CIS surveys for March and April 2021).

Such a disparity between the potential effect of Covid conspiracy theories and their impact on health measures, in a context of high polarization and relative institutional discredit, begs further research. There is also much research to be conducted on the effect on public opinion and political attitudes. The Covid pandemic and political polarization in Spain have boosted the visibility of conspiracy theories, not just through the propagation of the theories themselves, but also through news items and scholarly work about them. They have entered mainstream public discussion, both as a social problem that needs addressing, and in the specifics of particular conspiracy theories whose allegations are seriously discussed when debunked by fact-checkers.

Regarding political attitudes, the relation among conspiracy theories, vaccine hesitancy, and the right-wing can be surmised from data about *Vox* voters, who show decidedly higher rates of vaccine hesitancy and the public discourse of *Vox* leaders (Olivas Osuna and Rama 2021). In the November 2020 CIS survey, only 25.7 percent of *Vox* voters were willing to be vaccinated, while 62.3 percent were not. In April, vaccine hesitancy had decreased among them too, but to 16.6 percent, while the figure for the whole sample was 5.3 percent. In the March and April 2021 surveys, those, among respondents who rejected vaccines, who justified their choice denying the existence of Covid were voters of the three right-wing parties or had cast a blank ballot or abstained. Unsurprisingly, considering that those rejecting the vaccine make up a sizable proportion of his own voters, *Vox* president Santiago Abascal, besides defending conspiracy theories in Parliament and media appearances, has avoided declaring if he has been vaccinated (elDiario.es, September 28, 2021).

However, it is yet to be established if the relation between Covid conspiracy theories and right-wing stances in Spain implies that belief in such theories can lead to self-identify with the right or to shift the political attitudes of believers in that direction. Spanish right-wing parties have been trying to capitalize the dissatisfaction with the government’s management of the pandemic and translate it into electoral support. The highly polarized political context described in the first section has propitiated an escalation in aggressive rhetoric that might have lent plausibility to conspiracy theories, occasionally incurring explicitly in them. Again, while we do not know yet to what extent this may have changed political attitudes in the citizenship, it has meant that conspiracy theories have been taken into account and debated in Parliament, which is hardly a negligible effect in itself.

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PART 5

North America



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23

ANTI-COLONIALISM MEETS ANTI-VAX SUSPICION

The Case of Guadeloupe

Nicole Simek

On January 8, 2022, several hundred people gathered on the esplanade of Guadeloupe's Mémorial ACTe, or Center for the Memory of Slavery and the Slave Trade, to condemn the use of violence in protests that had been rocking the island for weeks over a national French mandate requiring that all health care workers be vaccinated against the SARS-CoV-2 virus or face suspension without pay. This mandate went into effect in mainland France in September 2021. A delayed implementation date was set for Guadeloupe and Martinique, in recognition of the challenges the law would pose for these departments, where the potential for personnel suspensions would put a dangerous pressure on health care systems at a moment when infection rates were high. While the mandate, and the suspensions that ensued, sparked protests across France, resistance in the Antilles was particularly intense, especially in Guadeloupe, where demonstrators blocked streets and set cars and buildings on fire, and picketers at the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire in Pointe-à-Pitre – the university hospital known by its acronym as the CHU – deployed aggressive tactics, setting up barricades, hindering or preventing access to the complex, slashing employees' car tires, verbally attacking hospital personnel, dragging workers out of their cars, and sequestering administrative staff. This violence came to a head on January 4, 2022, when CHU Director Gérard Cotelon was knocked unconscious by a blow to the head, and Deputy Director Cédric Zolezzi was assaulted and doused with urine while being extracted from their offices by the police (Le Monde and AFP 2022). The protestors who gathered at the MACTe a few days later gave personal testimonies describing the anguish and challenges health care workers had been facing and called for an end to violent demonstrations and any interference with the delivery of care. "Today we are on the esplanade of the Mémorial ACTe, where we fought to survive, to escape from pain and poverty and see better days," declared Serge Romana, a geneticist and activist known for his advocacy of public memorializations of slavery. "It feels

today like people want to drag us back to medieval times, to prehistoric times,” he continued.

I defend the honor of my fellow doctors, who have been called murderers and criminals for wanting to provide care. I defend them firmly and will always stand up to defend their honor, their ability to do their work in a hospital . . . because to be a doctor is to refuse to ignore pain.

*(Rayapin and Duflo 2022)*¹

The choice of the Mémorial ACTe as the gathering place for this counter-protest is not insignificant, as Romana’s invocation of the site’s importance in his speech underlines, for it represents an attempt to marshal a particular form of political memory and anti-colonial discourse against another, the anti-statist, anti-colonial discourse of the worker unions and demonstrators rising up against the vaccination mandate. Syndicate documents and protest chants frequently frame worker movements as emerging in opposition to colonial structures of power stretching back to slavery and overdetermining economic, political, and social relations at both the local and national levels. In the following pages, I would like to take a closer look at the historical specificities of the Guadeloupean context in which this most recent conflict over health care has developed, with an eye in particular for the ways in which anti-colonial theory has shaped anti-vaccination sentiment, violence, and adherence to conspiracy theories, on the one hand, and counter-protests against these movements at the same time.

Guadeloupe, like Martinique, is an Overseas Department and Region of France and home to about 400,000 people. The island emerged from the first global wave of Covid-19 infections in March 2020 relatively unscathed, due to an early and effective lockdown that, paradoxically, fostered a false sense of natural immunity among a number of Guadeloupeans and led many to question whether the French state was overreaching in its imposition of protective measures (Mulot 2021). Infection rates rose during two subsequent waves in Guadeloupe, in September 2020 and February 2021, but then spiked dramatically in August 2021. At that point (as of mid-July 2021), only 23 percent of adults (aged 18 and over) in Guadeloupe had received at least one dose of vaccine (at the national level, by comparison, the rate was 55 percent) and that gap has persisted; as of this writing, 40 percent of Guadeloupeans have received at least one dose, as compared to 81 percent nationally.² Vaccine hesitancy in Guadeloupe stems from multiple causes, some of which are common to many communities across the globe, including misinformation circulated on social media, distrust in government spokespeople charged with leading vaccination campaigns, concerns that new mRNA technologies have not been adequately tested and may produce unforeseen short- or long-term side effects, or more conspiratorial fears that vaccines have been deliberately engineered to kill, in an effort to reduce worldwide population or to eliminate Black and Brown peoples more specifically. Yet, the particularities of Guadeloupe’s public health infrastructure, history of anti-colonial activism, and cultural conceptions of autonomy and

well-being – along with, notably, the major public health scandal and ongoing crisis surrounding chlordecone pesticide pollution – also shape vaccine reluctance and conspiracy thinking in specific ways that set it apart not only from global trends but also from other similarly minoritized and formerly colonized communities.

Though the attacks on hospital personnel in Pointe-à-Pitre represent some of the most serious and spectacular expressions of anti-mandate resistance in Guadeloupe, I would like to linger first on a more surprising moment in the protest movement that better shows how mandate resisters understand the contours and stakes of the struggle. This was a fashion show that took place at the resistance's main *rendez-vous* point at the grounds of the CHU. Dubbed “Konsians an boté” in Creole, or Beauty Awareness, the show featured suspended care workers, men and women, as models, who walked the catwalk clothed by Les Créateurs Antilles, a team of local, Guadeloupean high fashion designers (Schol and Fadel 2022). Looks featured contemporary, tribal-inspired prints, silhouettes, makeup, hairstyles, jewelry, and accessories. Some models carried the flag adopted by Guadeloupe's independence movements, and the enthusiastic audience could be heard chanting the protest song made famous during the 2009 general strike: “*La Gwadeloup, sé tan nou, la Gwadeloup sé pa ta yo*” (This is our Guadeloupe, Guadeloupe does not belong to them).

I find in this event rich food for thought because of the way it encapsulates several converging ideological strands of the anti-mandate movement that sociologist Stéphanie Mulot recently brought to light in her detailed study of Covid-19 vaccine resistance in Guadeloupe. These include, first, what she describes as an “identitarian stance” underpinning nationalist and workers movements in Guadeloupe in recent decades, one that defines Guadeloupean collective identity through an antagonistic self-other binary in which that self, individual and communal, is posited as whole, homogenous, pure, and engaged in “heroic resistance to domination” imposed by the colonizing other. A second crucial strand of thought Mulot identifies is the belief that colonial domination, and thus resistance to it, extends to all spheres of life – not only the political sphere, but also cultural production, ecology, economic life, linguistic practices, and health care. Third, in the realm of health, a culturally specific attitude toward the body plays an important role in shaping attitudes toward disease and care. On this view, the body is not only a key source of resistant strength but also a vulnerable site in need of defense in the battle against domination. In this conception of the body, the perception of the skin as being one of a number of “protective envelopes” whose integrity must be maintained in order to preserve the self is one key element driving wariness surrounding injections more broadly in Guadeloupe that Mulot and other researchers have noted in their studies; the history of slavery in the Antilles, along with a history of economic exploitation and medical and environmental racism, to which I will return later, also drives a fierce suspicion of any attempt to commodify the body or its parts, particularly on the part of for-profit corporations like the major pharmaceutical companies offering new vaccine technologies (Mulot 2021).³ If the English term “Big Pharma” points to the massive size of behemoth corporations

too big to stop in their search for financial gain, the Creole term “*pwofitè*” – “profiteurs,” or those who take advantage, abusively, of others for profit – focuses on the exploitative relationship between “*nou*” and “*yo*,” or “us” and “them.” The “*yo*” here are not just multinational corporations out to profit off the little guy, but also, and more commonly, the local white minority planter class, or *Békés*, who hold monopolistic control over land and major sectors of the economy in the Antilles. Against this “*yo*” (increasingly cast not as internal antagonists but as outsiders and traitors, those who are not really of Guadeloupe and its people), resisters posit that which is “made in Guadeloupe” (from language to traditional medicine to solidarity with independence movements) as the expression and vehicle of Guadeloupean autonomy and well-being. This hardening of the identitarian stance perhaps also explains in part the unusual level of violence directed at hospital director Gérard Cotellon – who, as Serge Romana suggests, was attacked precisely because he was born and raised in Guadeloupe (Rayapin and Duflo 2022), and so his dissent from the anti-mandate position threatens the coherence of the us–them/colonized–colonizer framework structuring the resistance’s thinking and actions.

In light of these intersecting investments in the body as the home of Guadeloupeanness and personhood itself, a body whose physical integrity must be protected from external sources of contamination and those conspiring to exploit the people on both the microbial and socio-political levels, the *Konsians an boté* fashion show takes shape as a means to reassert both the worth of individuals and the resilience of collective Guadeloupean identity, as participants’ comments demonstrate. Explaining the aims of the fashion show to the press, creative director Claudia Portecop stressed the importance and difficulty of raising the suspended workers’ morale:

My team rehearsed the models, and it’s not easy, you know? When you’ve gone nine months without working, as far as your self-esteem goes, you don’t even know if you exist anymore! So, giving you back your confidence, so you can shine today. . . . They all look magnificent! They’re living every moment of it to the fullest!

Mona Hedreville, one model suspended from her job, touched on similar points: “We’ve been rehabilitated,” she stated. “We’ve reclaimed our dignity. We’re not giving up!” (Schol and Fadel 2022). Seeing one’s conspiracy beliefs affirmed by others is psychically rewarding; it gives meaning and coherence back to the resisters of Guadeloupe, shoring up a sense of self-worth in danger of erasure. Lawyer Josélène Gelabale and UGTG union representative Gaby Clavier focused on the righteousness of the anti-mandate cause and how the fashion show reflected the strength of the Guadeloupean people. Gelabale described the honor she felt in being invited to stand in solidarity with those Guadeloupeans representing the “essence” of the people, while Clavier declared that the fashion show’s success meant that the resistance is right. “We are right to demand that we be respected, that our dignity, our beauty, be respected,” he told the press. “We’ve shown what

Guadeloupeans are capable of doing, even in difficult times, even when we're suspended, we are very proud" (Schol and Fadel 2022).

The repeated reference to dignity in these comments points to the complex psycho-social dynamics marking Guadeloupeans' relationships with the French state, relationships fashioned by a long history of colonialist paternalism that we might describe as intrusive, inequitable, and indifferent all at once. As Richard D. E. Burton underlines in his study *La famille coloniale: La Martinique et la mère patrie, 1789–1992*, the metaphor of the family, and in particular the “*mère patrie*,” the mother-country or, more literally, the mother-fatherland, shapes Antilleans' interpretation of their role in the state, their desires to be brought into the family fold, and their frequent feelings of both infantilization and abandonment (Burton 1994). Since departmentalization in 1946, France's image has vacillated between that of the protective motherland on the one hand, the purveyor of social benefits who remedies starvation and safeguards its children against the most severe consequences of poverty, and, on the other hand, that of the “devouring or castrating wicked stepmother, even the leech or vampire” of old, to use Burton's terms (Burton 1994, 164–65). If assimilation into the French state granted the Antilles statutory equality with other French *départements*, this process of integration has been marred by the lack of land reform and economic diversification, the failure to correct infrastructural deficiencies, and a habit of exempting the Antilles from certain laws (such as minimum wage requirements, to take an example from the past, or, more recently and notoriously, laws banning the use of the pesticide chlordecone). This history, as Mulot notes, has led anti-mandate protesters to adopt an ambivalent stance toward the French state; syndicates couple calls for Guadeloupean sovereignty in the name of Guadeloupean singularity with demands for recognition by the state, resource allocations and equal participation in the nation of France under the law. “The state,” Mulot writes, “is in fact accused alternately of failing to protect the people or of imposing overly authoritarian measures to protect them in spite of themselves” (Mulot 2021). In either case, the state is posited as a powerful agent with the capacity to change lives and as a parental figure that stunts its children's growth, either through neglect or through invasive and misinformed, if not maliciously motivated, directives.

The personification of the state appears on the one hand as a phantasmatic projection that both stems from and fosters conspiracy thinking. And indeed, the anti-mandate movement frequently expresses such theories, from the notion that Covid-19 vaccines are designed to reduce the world's population, or even to target Black people more specifically for elimination, to the belief that pharmaceutical companies, with the collusion of the French state, have run roughshod over regulators, prioritizing profit over public safety. Thus, in a July 12, 2021 publication titled in Creole “*Panga a vaksen a yo la!*” or “Watch out for their vaccine!,” the UGTG syndicate (*Union Générale des Travailleurs de Guadeloupe*) declares that the Covid-19 pandemic has been “an exceptional financial manna and weapon for domesticating and muzzling the people” for “the West, international capital, the pharmaceutical lobby, the health industry lobby, and the masters of a dehumanized,

dematerialized, globalized media.” The Union goes on to explain that this view is dismissed by those powers as “conspiracy thinking” but insists that “we demand our right to mount our own conspiracy so we can stay strong” (UTS-UGTG 2021). The declaration proceeds to detail the UGTG’s concerns that mRNA vaccines may alter recipients’ DNA in ways that are then passed down to their future children, grandchildren, and “the whole of humanity,” faulting the French state for focusing so narrowly on vaccines after having neglected the underlying health of the Guadeloupean people, who suffer high rates of co-morbidities including diabetes, hypertension, obesity, leptospirosis, dengue fever, and prostate cancer, as well as high rates of poverty and unemployment. The UGTG declares that “they” have mistreated “us” and even “killed more than 300 Guadeloupeans” through mismanagement of the pandemic and the health care system more generally. The statement ends with a series of declarations in capital letters, including “NO, NO, AND NO, WE ARE NOT GUINEA PIGS;” a refrain that was repeated on banners and posters over the ensuing months of protest.

While the mistrust of the pharmaceutical industry and the state that is evident in this declaration is abetted in part, as it is across the globe, by fake news circulating on social media, this mistrust must also be situated within a history of public health missteps and abuses in Guadeloupe. Two recent national media controversies hint at the deeper problems at work here. In one example, Dr. Hervé Boissin, a general practitioner from Paris invited to a news program on the French television station LCI in August 2021, claimed that a culture of rum and voodoo was to blame for vaccine resistance in the Antilles, displaying a colonial posture of superiority and a dismissive ignorance of actual cultural practices on the islands, where only a tiny and mainly Haitian immigrant minority practices voodoo, and where traditional medicine does play a role in understandings of health, but a much more complex one involving a panoply of plant-based remedies and healing practices taken up alongside Western medical approaches (de Rousiers 2021). Another even higher profile example from April 2020 that sparked international outrage and a statement from WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus condemning the comments was a discussion between two scientists on this same television station who suggested casually that Africa would make an ideal site to test out the effectiveness of Covid-19 treatments (Busari and Wojazer 2020). “Should we not do this study in Africa, where there are no [face]masks, no treatments and no ICUs?” asked Dr. Jean-Paul Mira, “A bit like it is done for some studies on AIDS, where with prostitutes, we try things because we know that they are highly exposed and they don’t protect themselves.”⁴ His interlocutor, Camille Loch, agreed and noted that plans for such a study were in the works. As Helen Tilley has put it,

In just a few minutes [Mira and Loch] had resurrected several formidable colonial tropes: that the African continent had few leaders or institutions able to address disease threats effectively; that impoverished conditions were pervasive and would mean constant exposure to infectious disease; that people would choose to put themselves in harm’s way, even if told the risks (because

they ignored the facts); that foreign interventions on matters of health were by definition benevolent and necessary; and that people in the continent were most useful to European scientists as experimental subjects and sources of biological data.

(Tilley 2020, 158)

For Guadeloupeans as for many others, such insults are not simply anomalous gaffes, but also symptoms of persistent, colonial and racist frameworks of thought and governance shaping day-to-day life and health. Important civil service positions in Guadeloupe and Martinique, for example, are frequently filled by metropolitan experts with little knowledge of local conditions, and public health messaging surrounding the coronavirus can miss the mark for this reason. Something as simple as admonitions to wash your hands frequently can spark frustration, not because people disagree, but because access to running water in Guadeloupe is now routinely disrupted due to aging, leaking pipes, forcing residents to travel frequently to stock up water supplies. Chronic deficiencies in the health care system similarly erode trust in officials who seem to focus on the problem of the day while remaining oblivious to underlying structural issues or disdainful of local concerns. The eruption of a fire in 2017 that destroyed major portions of the CHU in Pointe-à-Pitre grimly validated residents' complaints that hospital facilities were being neglected, for instance, while the slow pace of the repairs has both impeded care and further confirmed the opinion that Guadeloupeans' needs are not a priority for leaders. An entirely new facility is currently under construction but not set to open until fall 2023. In the meantime, services have been set up in temporary locations while more serious conditions require medical evacuation to Martinique or the mainland.⁵

The most damaging public health scandal of all, however, has perhaps been the revelation that the French state authorized the use of chlordecone, an insecticide banned in the United States in 1976 for its known health hazards and classified as a potential carcinogen in 1979 by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, in the Antilles until 1993 (Boutrin and Confiant 2007). Chlordecone is a highly persistent chemical that can remain in the soil for centuries without breaking down; it is an endocrine disruptor that is also bioaccumulating, building up in the body over time. It was used so extensively in the French Antilles for three decades that it has durably contaminated major tracts of land, rivers, springs and coastal waters, and the near totality of the Guadeloupean and Martinican people themselves; 93 percent of adults in Guadeloupe and 95 percent of adults in Martinique have chlordecone traces in their blood, according to a study done in 2013–14 (Peter 2019). Although reports from the French National Institute for Agricultural Research raised concerns about the growing level of chlordecone pollution in the French Antilles as early as 1977, chlordecone was not outlawed in France until 1990; moreover, when the banana lobby – controlled by a small number of *Béké*, or white planter families – successfully petitioned the Ministry of Agriculture for exemptions, the Ministry obliged, allowing planters to continue using the product

for another three years (Boutrin and Confiant 2007). It took years of activist pressure to obtain recognition of the problem from the state and then years again for more studies to be conducted and remediation plans to be devised, implemented, revised, and extended. To date, four governmental chlordecone remediation plans have taken effect, beginning in 2008, with the current Plan IV running from 2021 to 2027, under the aegis of the national Ministry of Solidarity and Health.⁶

Given this history, it is not difficult to see why history itself appears to many to be governed by a colonialist caste, if not an outright cabal, of *Béké* landowners – descendants of the same planter families that have steered the economy since the seventeenth century – with the collusion of national officials concerned more with geopolitical and economic gains than with the rights of Antillean citizens. The chlordecone scandal revealed a startling level of indifference to citizens' health – a failure to account for the difference that this pollution would make, a systemic laxness or lack of vigilance, if not a deliberate, callous poisoning of the population. And as Jean-François Niort has noted, the current rhetoric surrounding the vaccine mandate – which insists that the same laws must apply to all French citizens and that universal mandates are fair and just – strikes a very raw nerve in the Antilles, where states of exception have long been created to the detriment of the masses, from the early tolerance of chattel slavery in France in a kingdom that previously understood itself to be slave-free, to the special chlordecone authorizations granted just a few decades ago (Niort 2021). It is also not difficult to see how very difficult it is to refute conspiracist suspicions in the absence of material, structural reforms to back up counterclaims about the state's legitimate public health concerns and efforts to protect its people.

On this question, the persuasive approach taken by Luc Reinette, a leader in the independence movement famous for his militancy in the 1980s, is instructive for its anti-colonial yet pro-vaccination stance. In an August 2021 open letter, Reinette describes being chastised by his elderly mother for not speaking out more publicly in favor of vaccinations. He moves then to situate his remarks in relation to the landscape of Guadeloupe, in a move reminiscent of Édouard Glissant's parallax, a shift in vantage point sparking a change in perspective on a problem.⁷ Haunted by a "guilty conscience," Reinette states:

I withdrew a bit to reflect, sometimes facing the majestic mountains of our Country to contemplate their contours, sometimes facing the sea – as my elderly father and I used to do – searching the horizon in hopes of finding an answer there. What to do, and what to say, in the midst of this widespread upheaval?

(Reinette 2021)

Looking inward, to "our Country" or "*notre Pays*," with a capital P, establishes his commitment to Guadeloupe's singularity and his attachment to its collective people, the "*nous*" or "us" who belong to this place. Yet, inner turmoil pushes him to look outward, to Guadeloupe's connections with other places in the world,

a move he further legitimizes by anchoring it in history, recalling that his father before him did the same (and, in a play on the homonyms “*mer*” and “*mère*,” “sea” and “mother,” Reinette frames what he is about to say as issuing from two ancestral lineages, the maternal and paternal, thereby connecting as well his mother’s present apprehensions to his father’s past concerns). What Reinette finds in his contemplations is, first, a harrowing image of “the irrational, nonsensical hate characterizing relations between Guadeloupeans today,” which, along with the pernicious influence of fake-news, brings to mind what he describes as “two humanitarian tragedies” that continue to “haunt” him: the first is the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the second is South African president Mbeki’s disastrous response to the AIDS epidemic during his tenure from 1999 to 2008. What do these have to do with the social crisis in Guadeloupe? For Reinette, the Rwandan example provides two warnings: first, the role media can play in inciting racial hatred and genocide (as did the RTLM radio station in Rwanda) and, second, the need to hold not only France, the former colonial power, but also Rwandans themselves accountable for their distinctive roles in this genocide. This second point links Rwanda’s lesson to the seemingly disparate example of South Africa, in that both show how zealous, anti-colonial misinterpretations of causality can lead to catastrophic results and failures to find remedies to harm. In the South African case, Reinette explains that Mbeki denied links between HIV and AIDS, claiming that the latter resulted from “poverty and colonial exploitation” and refusing to distribute antiretroviral medications in favor of alternative medicines, hastening hundreds of thousands of deaths and ironically furthering the interests of other countries, like China, looking for territories favorable to their economic expansion (Reinette 2021).

Lest anyone mistake these claims for a shift in his independentist views, Reinette reiterates Guadeloupeans’ frustrations with being placed in the position of “impotent spectators” while a “series of foreigners,” such as the “colonial Prefect,” the Director of the regional health agency, and the chief education officer, appear on their TV screens and give directives to Guadeloupeans when, as Reinette puts it, Guadeloupeans themselves would better serve the people if they occupied these positions. Yet, the answer to this crisis, in Reinette’s view, is to distinguish between different battle fronts – the war against colonial domination being one, and the war against the Delta variant being another – and not confuse the methods required for one with the methods required for the other. The best “shield” against the virus, Reinette states emphatically, is the vaccine, no matter where it comes from (“America, China, Cuba, or, tomorrow, Guadeloupe”). Vaccination is “necessary but not sufficient,” he goes on to claim, just as traditional medicine is “useful but not sufficient.” To bolster his claim that the two, vaccination and traditional medicine, are not incompatible, Reinette reiterates his anticolonial message but situates vaccination as a weapon of the autonomous who dare to use it. Against a colonial power that continues to treat the people as “minors,” Reinette proposes that Guadeloupeans act as “*majeurs*,” as full-fledged adults in this battle: “We are fighting for our Country’s accession to sovereignty and this common cause is sacred.” He goes on to argue that if, like some neighboring Caribbean islands, “we were in charge of

our Country and had as our mission to keep our People alive at all costs, would we not be favorable to a vaccine that preserves all of us, collectively?” In those circumstances, he insists, vaccination would be widely recommended for as many people as possible, rather than merely left to personal choice. If that is the case, he concludes, “let us dare to think as if we were free!” (Reinette 2021). Decision-making power becomes the aim of the war on colonial domination; yet, its absence on a political level, Reinette stresses, does not prevent the people from exercising this power in the areas of life over which they do have control; conversely, accepting the vaccine does not compromise, on this reading, one’s anticolonial goals.

Reinette’s open letter did not of course convince everyone; some accused him of treachery, of betraying Guadeloupe (Mulot 2021) – remarkably, for a militant who spent time in prison for participating in bombings in the 1980s, and who still today adamantly advocates independence. Yet, his intervention keenly points up an important strategy for public health officials to heed because it attempts not to depoliticize the issue of vaccination but rather to re-politicize it otherwise. This “politics of refusal”⁸ is not a blanket rejection of anything related to the metropole. Nor, however, is Reinette after recognition and accommodation from the French state. Far from it, his position might be best understood as that of “an anti-anti-vaxxer.”⁹ Suspicion of manipulation and distortion is not to be negated, as if one could simply affirm an unproblematic faith in vaccination and bracket the colonial situation, so to speak. Rather, Reinette insists that vaccination is indeed a political issue, one that affects the polity and that implicates colonial history; to focus solely on science in efforts to persuade or to chalk resistance up to culture alone is to miss or misconstrue what is at stake for Guadeloupeans. Whether one advocates full independence for Guadeloupe, greater autonomy without national sovereignty, or smaller-scale reforms to the current system, what is at issue, Reinette’s argument suggests, is the constitution of an effective, historically and culturally grounded anticolonialism that does not mistake its target. In other words, the question to pose is not simply how to dispel conspiracy theories. Rather, the question to ask is how best to conspire against colonialism’s legacy while at the same time combating threats to the collective that intersect with that legacy yet originate elsewhere, threats that exceed the colonizer–colonized dynamic.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are my own.
- 2 July 2021 data for Guadeloupe provided by ARS Guadeloupe (accessed July 1, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210720152307/www.guadeloupe.ars.sante.fr/covid-19-l-campagne-de-vaccination>); all other figures provided by the Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (accessed July 1, 2022, <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/grands-dossiers/vaccin-covid-19/article/le-tableau-de-bord-de-la-vaccination>; in May 2022, this ministry was split in two, the Ministère de la Santé et de la Prévention and the Ministère des Solidarités, de l’Autonomie et des Personnes Handicapées, but as of this writing, the two ministries share the same website and Covid dashboard).
- 3 Other contributing factors Mulot found in her study include high rates of social media use in Guadeloupe, the timing of local elections and the reluctance of political candidates to take a public stance on vaccination for fear of upsetting constituents, faith-based

interpretations of disease as caused by moral failings, and neoliberal individualist ideologies valorizing the care of the self over care for others.

- 4 This translation is Busari and Wojazer's.
- 5 On the pandemic's aggravation of these intersecting infrastructural crises, see for example, Achraf Abid and Harold Girard's report for France24, "On French islands of Guadeloupe, an unequal fight against Covid-19" (Abid and Girard 2020).
- 6 For a summary of Plan III and an outline of Plan IV, see accessed July 1, 2022, <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/sante-et-environnement/les-plans-nationaux-sante-environnement/article/le-plan-chlordecone-iv-2021-2027>.
- 7 For a more extended discussion of this concept, see Simek 2016, ch. 4.
- 8 For an account of the politics of refusal, see Indigenous scholars Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014.
- 9 This is akin to Fredric Jameson's conception of "anti-anti-Utopianism" (Jameson 2005, xvi).

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A PERFECT STORM

Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories in the United States¹

Clare Birchall and Peter Knight

A Perfect Storm?

On February 15, 2020, the director-general of the World Health Organization warned that “we are not just fighting an epidemic . . . we’re fighting an infodemic” (Ghebreyesus 2020). The pandemic has indeed been a terrifying event with profound consequences, at both the individual and societal levels. It is also the first truly global event that has taken place in the age of widespread social media. According to many commentators, in the United States, the coincidence of the coronavirus pandemic and the presidential election of 2020 created a “perfect storm” of misinformation and conspiracy theories (e.g., Doughton 2020). The reality, however, is that most of the building blocks of these conspiracy theories and the communities that have promoted them existed long before the outbreak of Covid-19. The pandemic has produced an intensification of existing trends within conspiracism, rather than an explosion of an unprecedented fixation with conspiracy explanations. In this regard, the metaphor of the “infodemic” can be misleading, as it evokes the idea that social media has an unstoppable power to infect minds (see Simon and Camargo 2021).

In the United States, the pandemic took place in a political context that already included populist distrust of expert knowledge, democratic institutions, and the mainstream media. Covid-19 coincided with the presidency of Donald Trump, whose rhetorical and political strategy relied not merely on a refusal to correct misinformation but on endorsing it, with talk of “alternative facts.” Trump launched his presidential bid by nailing his colors to the mast of conspiracism with the racist “birther” conspiracy theory about Obama’s citizenship, and his term in office ended with accusations of voter fraud and an appeal to “stop the steal.” In an era of information overload, more emphasis is placed on what you feel has an air of “truthiness,” as talk show host Stephen Colbert put it, rather than what experts

have verified to be true. In this context, it makes sense that the mantra of conspiracy theorists in the age of the Internet is “Do your own research!” Neoliberal calls to individualism produce citizens who are hyper-suspicious of the state and society in general. At the historical moment when the welfare state in the United States is most ineffectual, conspiracy theorists imagine it as an omnipotent mechanism of conspiracy. Populist politicians like Trump also turned to ethnonationalist and xenophobic conspiracy narratives in their accounts of the emergence of the coronavirus, coupled with calls for border closure and quarantine that were driven more by racist assumptions than evidence-based public health decisions.

The convergence of a major health crisis, economic precarity, populist skepticism of scientific expertise and media impartiality, the proliferation of social media, and the increased isolation of individuals thus created the perfect conditions for the increasing prominence of conspiracy theories. Responses to Covid-19 were increasingly folded into the polarizing culture wars and political events of 2020, from the Black Lives Matter protests to the rise of the QAnon movement, the disputed presidential election, and culminating with the Storming of the Capitol in January 2021. This situation created, in Anna Merlan’s phrase, a “Conspiracy Singularity” (Merlan 2020). Even if many of the building blocks of the conspiracy narratives were familiar, the particular coalitions of distrust forged by the pandemic were unexpected.

Levels of Belief

The volume and visibility of conspiracy theories and related forms of mis- and disinformation increased (especially in the online environment) during the pandemic in the United States. They have also become of significant public concern, given the connection between some conspiracy theories about the pandemic and health behaviors such as vaccination. However, it is unclear whether popular belief has reached unprecedented levels. Conspiracism has a long history in the United States, and levels of belief in Covid-19 conspiracy theories are not necessarily any higher than in previous moments of historical crisis (Uscinski et al. 2020).

There have been a large number of opinion polls aiming to measure belief in Covid-19 conspiracy theories. Although there are differences in emphasis or results, there are some broad areas of convergence in many of the studies, suggesting a sliding scale of belief from the far-fetched to the not-impossible. Roughly 10 percent of respondents claim to believe in the 5G story, 20 percent in the microchips in the vaccine theory, 30 percent in the notion that the pandemic was planned, and 40 percent in the claim that the virus was man made (Schaeffer 2020; Uscinski et al. 2020). However, beneath these aggregated figures, there are significant differences. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in June 2020 found that the level of belief varied by education and political affiliation, with 48 percent of Americans with a high school diploma or less finding the idea that the pandemic had been planned in advance probably or definitely true, compared to 15 percent of those with a postgraduate degree (Pew Research 2020). Belief in conspiracy

theories also varied along partisan political lines, with 34 percent of Republicans supporters agreeing with the theory, compared to 18 percent of those who lean toward the Democrats. Likewise, a September 2020 American Perspectives Survey found that 42 percent of Republicans (compared to 5 percent of Democrats) believe that hydroxychloroquine is a safe and effective treatment. A detailed study of conspiracy beliefs in the United States over time did not find evidence of any significant increase (Uscinski et al. 2022). If anything, the researchers found that belief in some coronavirus-related conspiracy theories has faded slightly as the pandemic has progressed (Drochon 2021), although these results ignore the possibility conspiracy theorists seem quite willing to latch onto and champion whatever new position becomes a matter of partisan faith in the culture wars.

Covid-19 Conspiracy Narratives

The pandemic has seen a range of conspiracy narratives become prominent in both new media and legacy media. Some theories focus on the origins of the virus, especially the idea that it was the result of a bioweapon program or the result of covered-up lab leak; some concentrate on the supposed real mode of transmission (e.g., 5G or chemtrails); some fixate on imagined revelations of government or scientific cover-up concerning the progress and treatment of the disease (e.g., exaggerated numbers of dead or dangers of vaccines); and some speculate on the imagined ultimate purpose behind the conspiracy (control of the masses, genocide, or profit). Many conspiracy claims merge elements from all these theories. None of these theories is entirely new, but they have been combined in novel ways and have created new political alignments. Despite the variety of narratives, some broad themes have remained constant. The notions that “we are being lied to” and “THEY are trying to control us” are at the heart of many conspiracy theories about the pandemic, from the swirling community of QAnon to the prominent anti-lockdown and anti-vaxx movements. The pandemic provided “confirmation” to many conspiracy theorists of their existing conviction that there is a vast conspiracy by globalist elites to remove individual sovereignty and freedom. Most of the underlying narratives and interpretive communities were already in place, and the pandemic was incorporated into existing and emerging concerns such as QAnon and the allegation that the US presidential election was rigged.

Lab Leak and Bioweapon

On platforms rife with conspiracy-speculation such as 4Chan, Reddit, and Alex Jones’s InfoWars, commentators had already in January 2020 latched onto the fact that the Wuhan seafood market (which Chinese officials believed to be the origin of the outbreak) is only a few miles from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). Many conspiracy theories thus started from the assumption that it was no coincidence that the outbreak of the virus occurred close to China’s only BSL-4 lab, which was also working on novel coronaviruses. Confined at first to dedicated

conspiracy forums on fringe platforms and comment sections of online media outlets that leaned toward conspiracy talk, speculations about the origins of the virus quickly gained wider traction with two publications on January 26. First, a piece titled “Coronavirus Bioweapon: How China Stole Coronavirus from Canada and Weaponized It” was published by Great Game India, a comparatively obscure website that had prior form in publishing conspiracy rumors about geopolitics (Great-GameIndia 2020). The original item on the Great Game India website only gained 1,600 interactions on social media (likes, shares, and comments), but it was picked up the same day by Zero Hedge, a cult financial blog with more than half a million followers and a history of flirting with alt-right conspiracy theories. The Zero Hedge piece was in turn reposted by Red State Watch, a popular partisan website that amplifies right-wing content.

Those more fringe discussions were picked up and amplified by partisan media outlets and political influencers, leading in turn to a further, much larger wave of online conspiracy talk, now “legitimated” by the appearance of previously marginal theories in more mainstream venues. Republican senator Tom Cotton was one of the most high-profile public figures to take seriously the possibility that the virus might have originated in the WIV, with the suggestion that it was not simply an accidental leak. In a tweet on January 30 that included a clip of him in a Senate committee, Cotton used the rhetorical pose favored by conspiracy theorists of “just asking questions” and “innocently” raising a skeptical eyebrow at seemingly improbable coincidences:

We still don't know where coronavirus originated. Could have been a market, a farm, a food processing company. I would note that Wuhan has China's only biosafety level-four super laboratory that works with the world's most deadly pathogens to include, yes, coronavirus.

(Bandeira et al. 2021, 22; Cotton 2020)

Coming under heavy criticism from Democrats and newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, Cotton subsequently dialed back his comments, instead listing the bioweapon hypothesis as one among a number of logical possibilities concerning the origins of the virus, which also included (as he noted) the prevailing scientific consensus of zoonotic transmission as still the most likely option. If Cotton tried to seem measured, all the while hinting at conspiracies that had already been debunked by scientists, President Trump's estranged former adviser Steve Bannon had no such qualms. Bannon did an interview with his billionaire benefactor, the exiled Chinese businessman Guo Wengui, on G News, a website known for publishing fake news. In the interview, Bannon suggested that if the Chinese Communist Party did not actually manufacture the virus, its spread was nonetheless down to their incompetency.

New versions of the bioweapon theory quickly gained ground, including the speculation that China had deliberately created a virus either to which Asian people were naturally immune, or for which the Chinese had already secretly created

a vaccine. Most of the theories were also accompanied by the assumption that the Chinese government, possibly in collusion with the WHO, were involved in a conspiracy to cover things up. What held these various conspiracy narratives together was an overriding suspicion of China. This was not a fringe position, but a key part of the Trump presidency. His anti-China stance continued with his insistence on calling the coronavirus the “China virus,” the “Wuhan flu,” or the “Kung flu” (Wong 2016). At a press briefing on April 30, 2020, Trump claimed that he had seen classified information indicating that the virus had come from the WIV. But when asked what the evidence was, he said, “I can’t tell you that. I’m not allowed to tell you that” (Singh, Davidson, and Borger 2020). Trump was the president who cried wolf, always hinting at vast conspiracies but never providing any concrete evidence (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019). It is therefore understandable that in the spring of 2020, much of mainstream science and the media were initially skeptical about the lab leak theory, suspecting that it might just be part of an anti-Chinese propaganda campaign to deflect attention away from failings in the US response to the pandemic (Elliott 2021). By the summer of 2020, the idea that the coronavirus had escaped from a lab in Wuhan (whether accidentally or deliberately) had been dismissed by the vast majority of scientific experts and the mainstream media as being not merely factually wrong but inevitably tied to racist and conspiracist assumptions about China. However, in May 2021, the lab-leak-and-cover-up theory came back on the agenda when President Biden ordered the US intelligence agencies to reinvestigate the issue. Even if the lab leak theory turns out to be true (and there are still good reasons to think it will not; see Lewandowsky, Jacobs, and Neil in the present volume, Chapter 2), the *way* in which the theory was promoted by both politicians and keyboard warriors in the spring of 2020 has all the hallmarks of conspiracy thinking: confirmation bias, claims to secret information, blaming all problems on a demonized enemy, sliding quickly from the idea of an accidental laboratory leak to a deliberate program of bioweapons research, and so on.

Hoax

The lab leak and bioweapon theories placed the blame for the pandemic on a foreign enemy. In contrast, another strand of conspiracy talk took aim at enemies within. These narratives drew on and resonated with the populist political rhetoric that was a conspicuous feature of the Trump administration. In addition to the many misleading and outright false claims made by Trump about the pandemic (Stolberg and Weiland 2020), at the outset the president framed it in terms of one of his existing pet themes: the notion that Democrats and the mainstream media were using “fake news” to criticize his administration and damage his chance of reelection in November. As fact-checkers later pointed out (when the claim cropped up in the presidential debates in the autumn), Trump did not directly claim that the virus or the pandemic was a hoax. However, throughout the last year of his presidency, in public Trump downplayed the seriousness of Covid-19 (Qiu,

Marsh, and Huang 2020), while in private he expressed far more concern about the seriousness of Covid-19.

Even if Trump himself was circumspect about directly calling the pandemic a hoax, some of his loyalist followers – especially those into QAnon – took this view literally, incorporating it into a range of conspiracy narratives. Some of the talk about coronavirus being a hoax was little more than a claim that the authorities were inflating the seriousness of the pandemic. In effect, it was a politicized and deliberately provocative way of expressing disagreement with public health measures, and in some versions it formed part of a legitimate debate about the balance between individual freedom and collective security. However, much of the hoax talk was quite literal, drawing on the right-wing conspiracist narratives of “false flag” events and “crisis actors,” which have become increasingly common stock reactions to events such as mass shootings.

One of the oddest strands of conspiracy-themed discussion during the spring of 2020 was the #FilmYourHospital craze (which began in the United States but spread to other countries). The theory was that the pandemic was wildly exaggerated, if not entirely invented. The “proof” was that hospitals were not overwhelmed with Covid-19 patients but were quieter than usual. Social media users began posting their own drive-by videos with voiceovers, showing how the hospital car parks were empty; some even filmed themselves walking into the hospital and showing corridors and waiting areas empty, not realizing that patients were being treated in intensive care units far from the public gaze. The trend began on March 28 with a tweet of a clip filmed outside a New York hospital. It was made by Todd Starnes, a former Fox News commentator, and was viewed 1.3 million times that weekend (Zadrozny and Collins 2020). Although researchers did not find evidence of automated bots or other coordinated inauthentic behavior in the spread of the hashtag, it was, nevertheless, amplified by conservative politicians such as Deanna Lorraine (who encouraged her 150,000 followers to “get #FilmYourHospital trending”), partisan media figures, including Fox News contributor Sara Carter (who retweeted it to her one million followers), and prominent right-wing social media influencers such as Candace Owens (who shared the hashtag with her two million audience).

QAnon

Although the QAnon community engaged in a variety of conspiracy speculations right from January 2020, the person (or people) posting as Q were actually late to the game. In January and February, Q continued to post the usual fare of ominously-vague prophecies, attacks on the so-called Deep State and pro-Trump statements but ignored the emerging global health crisis – which, like pretty much everything else of significance, Q had failed to predict. In the ensuing months, Q echoed the partisan conspiracist notion that the pandemic was engineered by the Deep State to disadvantage Trump in his reelection bid. With Q comparatively silent, QAnon “bakers” (as these Q-decoders were called) were active in

interpreting the pandemic. After the WHO declared a pandemic on March 11, and the Trump administration began taking it more seriously, some in the QAnon community suggested that the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown were not hoaxes by Trump's political enemies to damage his chance of reelection but a clever cover story created by Trump and his fellow "white hats" in their counter-conspiracy struggle against the Deep State and global elites. The idea was that stay-at-home orders would ensure that the alleged cabal of pedophile Satanists would not be able to flee the country as the mass arrests were to begin imminently. Some in the QAnon movement suggested that the pandemic was unfolding according to "the Plan" that would see the white hats triumph. Others, however, were concerned that the mobilization of the state in response to the pandemic – which many liberal commentators decried as being far too slow and small – was a forerunner of the removal of individual liberty and mass incarceration of "patriots" in FEMA camps – a long-running fear in conspiracy communities since the 1980s.

By the summer of 2020, some in the QAnon community began to frame events in terms of the master narrative of Satanic-worshipping pedophiles and child trafficking. In effect, this shift was a return to some of the themes of the #Pizzagate trend that began during the US election campaign of 2016 (and which, in turn, was a reprise of earlier Satanic panics). As Mike Rothschild puts it in his study of QAnon,

[A] new coalition of Instagram influencers, wellness devotees, and far-left anti-vaxxers flocked to QAnon's simple explanations for complex and fast-moving events. Many did not even know anything about the mythology underlying the group, but liked the anti-authority and anti-expertise messages they saw in it. Thus QAnon, a movement that had been founded on the promise of a great and bloody reckoning for liberals, somehow absorbed progressive wellness moms and Bernie Sanders voters.

(2021, 104)

There was thus an uneasy convergence between alt-right anti-lockdown protesters and "pastel Q" who rallied under the banner of "#SaveTheChildren" (Tiffany 2020; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). This newer, Q-adjacent community are not the usual demographic of conspiracy theorists. However, in lifestyle, wellness, and alternative health spaces – especially on Instagram – they have combined an existing distrust of medical experts with an emotive, moral outrage about an imagined vast conspiracy of global child trafficking. In effect, they form a bridge between the alt-right (and often hypermasculine) universe of the original QAnon following and the more liberal, yoga, alt-health, and anti-vaccination world of "QAmom" (Guerin 2021). The activism began to move from the online world to IRL ("in real life") meet-ups, not just in the United States but around the world. The movement combined with other anti-lockdown, anti-5G, anti-vaxx, and anti-globalist protests in the spring and summer of 2020 and in some cases led to violence.

Anti-vaxx

Pastel-Q was often closely connected to anti-vaccination activism. Anti-vaxx conspiracy theories emerged early in the pandemic, but they spread far more widely as the rollout of the vaccines came closer to reality in late 2020. When the coronavirus pandemic began, there was already a well-developed anti-vaxx community which was quick to interpret it through their existing narrative frameworks. But those groups have swelled during the pandemic (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2020b). Some anti-vaccination conspiracy theories made vague claims that Big Pharma was either covering up what it supposedly knows about the dangers of vaccines or deliberately plotting a global genocide. Some theories latched onto the unfounded (but understandable) fear that the mRNA technology involved in some of the Covid-19 vaccines would change the recipient's DNA. Other theories posited that the vaccine contains a microchip that will be used to track and control the world's population. Sometimes, this theory is framed in terms of a familiar right-wing conspiracist narrative about the incipient introduction of a globalist, godless New World Order that will bring about totalitarian enslavement of the masses. The idea of an apocalyptic New World Order often draws on evangelical Christianity and its notion of the End Times.

The anti-vaxx movement is diverse and complex. Vaccine hesitancy and refusal are not simply a result of a lack of education or limited access to accurate information. Researchers have found that, in general, people in the anti-vaxx movement in the United States tend to have a higher level of education, are more likely to be liberal in their political outlook than other conspiracy-minded interest groups, and women outnumber men three to one. They therefore do not fit the usual stereotypical image of a conspiracy theorist (Smith and Graham 2017). In addition to an emphasis (like many conspiracy-inclined communities) on "doing your own research," there is also a strong faith in the authority of personal experience, often in opposition to established medical wisdom. Unlike some conspiracy forums online which are animated by an alt-right trolling sensibility, the anti-vaxx movement is marked out by its earnestness and grass-roots activism. At the same time, however, the world of anti-vaxx – like other conspiracy communities – has its fair share of influencers and grifters. A study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), for example, found that a dozen anti-vaccination campaigners are responsible for 65 percent of all the vaccine-related disinformation appearing on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (2021). However, it is not just individual "super-spreaders" who have pushed anti-vaccination disinformation during the pandemic. The platform design – in particular, the recommendation algorithms – of the social media companies has contributed to the growth of anti-vaxx narratives, especially the more extreme and "sticky" conspiracist versions. A study conducted by CCDH using simulated user accounts found that Instagram's recommendation algorithm (introduced in August 2020) is designed to increase engagement in order to boost ad revenue. It does this by promoting high engagement content such as conspiracy theories, misinformation, and extremism: "if a user follows anti-vaxxers, they are fed QAnon conspiracism and antisemitic hate; if they engage with conspiracies,

they are fed electoral and anti-vaxx misinformation” (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2020a, 4). There is also evidence of coordinated inauthentic behavior campaigns by right-wing groups who have promoted anti-vaccination disinformation along partisan lines, for example, by cynically exploiting the fears of conservative anti-abortion groups or whipping up opposition to Bill Gates. After the defeat of Trump in the election and the dismaying spectacle of the storming of the Capitol on January 6, some far-right extremists have pivoted from “Stop the Steal” to “Stop the Vaccine” (MacFarquhar 2021).

Many of the vaccine-related conspiracy theories revolve around Bill Gates as the arch conspirator pulling the strings – although the details about the ultimate purpose of Gates’s plan are often surprisingly hazy. They insinuate, for example, that Gates is at the heart of a global pedophile ring that is also supposedly plotting to introduce mandatory vaccinations as part of a grand plan to control all people and/or bring about mass depopulation. These theories are not confined to the fringes: according to a Yahoo News/YouGov poll carried out in June 2020, 44 percent of Republicans in the United States believe that Gates plans to use a Covid-19 vaccination to implant microchips in people and monitor their movements (Romano 2020). One popular rumor that circulated early in the pandemic was that Gates had planned the pandemic in advance. Conspiracy theorists have latched onto accounts of pandemic preparedness exercises that took place before the outbreak of Covid-19, most notably Event 201, organized in October 2019 by Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in conjunction with the Gates Foundation and others.

Many of these conspiracy tropes were already circulating before the pandemic and, in any case, draw on a deep wellspring of fears about surveillance, bodily control, and the megalomaniac power of plutocrats. The Gates–vaccine conspiracy theories served to bring together seemingly unlikely bedfellows, including 5G, QAnon, New Age, and anti-vaxx constituencies. As the pandemic progressed, Gates became the shared antagonist who served as a focal point for disparate conspiracy communities. Like many conspiracy theories, the Covid microchip stories resonate with longer histories of medical mistrust and racial inequalities and cannot, therefore, be dismissed as being merely crazy. At the same time, however, they distract us from asking other important questions, such as whether we should be relying on individual billionaire philanthropists to fund global vaccine distribution and to plug the shortfall when the United States withdrew from the WHO. Ultimately, what united these disparate communities and issues was a deep-seated sense that the authorities are lying and that people’s individual freedoms are being assaulted. Conspiracy theories provided both an explanation for the pandemic and a sense of community for the like-minded who felt they had managed to see through the lies they were being fed by the mainstream media and scientific authorities.

Boogaloo Boys

Although the QAnon and anti-vaxx online forums often contained rallying cries to action, usually this involved nothing more than the injunction to “do your own

research,” “#FilmYourHospital,” or “refuse the vaccine.” In contrast, ideologically motivated extremists issued more direct calls for action in response to what they viewed as an overweening curtailment of individual liberty with government-mandated lockdowns and mask wearing. Far-right and libertarian groups reworked traditional scaremongering conspiracy theories, in effect using the pandemic to opportunistically recruit new members to their cause. On platforms such as 4Chan, 8kun, and Telegram where the alt-right congregated, the discussion often returned to an idea – half-ironic, but increasingly taken at face value – that had become prominent during the Trump presidency and the ascendancy of QAnon, namely an impending second civil war or American revolution, dubbed the “boogaloo.” The boogaloo movement encompassed a loose cluster of libertarians, gun rights activists, militias, anti-government nationalists, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis. What they had in common was a conviction that the US government was dangerously restricting the rights of the sovereign individual, contributing to an “accelerationist” stance that openly fantasized about a coming race war. It therefore came as little surprise that the “boogaloo boys” viewed the pandemic as a plot by the government to further erode individual liberty, and heavily armed groups associated with the boogaloo movement became an increasingly visible and active presence during the summer of 2020 at anti-lockdown gatherings and agitating against Black Lives Matters protests, culminating in the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2020 (ISD 2020). On March 24, for example, law enforcement officers in Belton, Missouri, shot and killed a man, Timothy Wilson, suspected of plotting to attack a hospital in the Kansas City area treating Covid-19 patients (Goldman 2020). Affiliated with the neo-Nazi group the “Atomwaffen,” Wilson had posted on Telegram shortly before the shoot-out with police that the coronavirus pandemic was being controlled by Jews. In October 2020, 14 men (half with ties to a paramilitary militia group) were arrested on suspicion of plotting to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the Democrat governor of Michigan, and overthrow the state government. The inept yet disturbing plot was seemingly in reaction to the strict coronavirus pandemic lockdown measures in Michigan ordered by Whitmer. Indeed, encouraged by an incendiary tweet by Trump on April 17 (“LIBERATE MICHIGAN!”), heavily armed anti-lockdown protesters had stormed the Michigan state capitol building on April 30.

MMS, HCQ, and Ivermectin

During the pandemic, many prominent conspiracy theorists built on an existing explanatory framework and marketing infrastructure to exploit the crisis for self-promotion and profit. In the United States, there has been a long tradition of snake oil, miracle cures, and alternative therapies, but, in recent decades, these have turned increasingly conspiratorial. Often the governing idea behind miracle cures is that doctors, medical researchers, “Big Pharma,” and now “Big Tech” are plotting to keep from the public knowledge of these cheap, alternative (and usually “natural”) treatments, supposedly because “they” want to keep a monopoly on profit and

prestige. Instead, as with so much conspiracy culture, those promoting alternative remedies challenge the knowledge of mainstream experts, favoring instead their autodidactic wisdom.

Although there are valid criticisms to be made of the pharmaceutical industry, the public health policy choices made by governments and global institutions, and the failure of science to communicate with the public effectively, a great deal of this alternative health conspiracism is animated as much by grift as it is by a genuine resentment of powerful and insufficiently democratic organizations. Right from the outset, conspiracy theorists touted alternative cures for the novel coronavirus. Many prominent conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones had already before the pandemic heavily promoted “Miracle Mineral Solution” (MMS) on the e-commerce section of his InfoWars website. With the news about the novel coronavirus, others jumped on the bandwagon. Sodium chlorite, the active ingredient of MMS, when coupled with citrus extract produces chlorine dioxide, an industrial bleach. Proponents claim that spraying yourself with MMS, gargling it, or even taking small doses solves many medical complaints. In reality, however, MMS is not merely ineffective in curing the various diseases it is claimed to combat (including HIV, malaria, and cancer), but it is actively dangerous if ingested. Despite warnings from the FDA, advocates for MMS are still convinced of its healing powers. Conspiracy talk usually takes the FDA’s efforts to regulate or ban it as proof that the authorities are concerned that ordinary people have seen through their supposed lies. Claims about the healing powers of MMS made their way through the right-wing media ecosystem, possibly as far as Trump. In a White House press briefing on April 23, 2020, Trump wondered aloud in a very garbled manner whether ultraviolet light and chemicals such as disinfectant might be part of a cure for Covid-19:

And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in one minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning, because you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs, so it’d be interesting to check that, so that you’re going to have to use medical doctors with, but it sounds interesting to me.

(PolitiFact 2020)

(Trump later unconvincingly rowed back on the remarks, to suggest that it had been a sarcastic question at the expense of the press.)

Others on the conspiracy circuit plugged additional quack remedies, including colloidal silver and vitamin supplements (Merlan 2022). Yet, it was two existing, licensed therapeutics that gained most attention (at first in the United States, but then around the world) as potential Covid-19 cures. The first drug to be hyped was hydroxychloroquine (often abbreviated to HCQ in conspiracist talk) and its related compound chloroquine, a medicine used to prevent malaria and treat other conditions such as lupus. Much of the popular discussion about HCQ was framed in terms of a vast conspiracy by Big Pharma to suppress a cheap and effective cure. Q posted multiple times about hydroxychloroquine in April and May, and the

narrative spread widely in QAnon communities online which were monetized (as usual) with ads from well-known brands. As with so much else in the pandemic, HCQ quickly became politicized and polarized. Trump began to promote the use of HCQ in March 2020, presumably on the back of considerable traffic on right-wing conspiracist social media and reports on Fox News. In response to a warning issued a few days later by the FDA about hydroxychloroquine, Trump dismissed the federal agency's notification as a "Trump enemy statement" (Rupar 2020). Inevitably, some Trump supporters preferred to follow his advice rather than that of health experts, and in one tragic case in March 2020, an Arizona man died (and his wife was hospitalized) after ingesting chloroquine phosphate, a compound related to chloroquine, but which was in fact a treatment for parasites in fish tanks.

The second drug to be championed by right-wing populists and alt-health gurus – not just in the United States but in South Africa and many South American countries – was ivermectin, a treatment used (in both human and veterinary medicine) against parasites. Many of the websites and organizations presenting misleading pseudoscientific information about its benefits were related to the ones that had also promoted HCQ (Merlan 2021). As with other cases of conspiracy theories in the pandemic, the rumors spread from the margins to the mainstream (and back again) through a complex mixture of social media, broadcast media, and unwise comments from politicians and other influencers. Again, the narrative pushed by ivermectin's champions is about a potentially "game-changing" cure for the pandemic being suppressed by powerful financial and political figures. Populist conspiracy theories about the suppressed truth of ivermectin spread widely on social media. While these conspiracy theories are often delusional, they nevertheless resonate with frustrations and anxieties about the health care system in the United States. They also speak to justifiable concerns about the role of the profit motive in the creation and distribution of medicines. Making health and medicine subject to competitive open markets invites conspiracist reactions. Rather than focusing on the all-too-obvious ways in which the worst excesses of capitalism exploit people, conspiracy theorists instead insist not merely that pharmaceutical companies will profit from the pandemic, but also that they caused it in the first place for that very reason.

5G

Like miracle cure conspiracy theories, conspiracist suspicions about 5G mobile phone technology were already circulating before the pandemic. But their proponents opportunistically used fears about coronavirus to promote them to new audiences. There were different variations of the 5G-coronavirus conspiracy theories, not only sometimes overlapping but also sometimes making contradictory claims. One of the first versions of the theory falsely claimed that it was no coincidence that 5G technology was trialed in Wuhan, where the pandemic began (in reality, 5G was already being rolled out in a number of locations around the world). Some claimed that the coronavirus crisis was deliberately created to keep

people at home, while 5G engineers installed the technology everywhere. Others insisted that 5G radiation weakens people's immune systems, making them more vulnerable to infection by Covid-19. Another variation asserted that 5G directly transmits the virus – a claim usually coupled with a conspiracist narrative about a plan by global elites to bring about mass depopulation. Conspiracist suspicions about mobile phone technology have been circulating since the 1990s and have long historical roots. The theory about 5G radio waves transmitting or activating the virus, for example, is a reworking of long-running conspiracy fears about mind control experiments, subliminal messaging, and supposed secret US military weapons projects.

The different 5G stories were often combined with other Covid-19 conspiracy theories into a toxic cocktail of disinformation. The usual conspiracy theory bogeymen George Soros and Bill Gates were also woven into the narratives, along with transnational institutions like the United Nations and the World Health Organization. The Illuminati, as a convenient signifier of a secret elite, also frequently appeared in these allegations. While often ludicrous in their assertions, 5G conspiracy theories nevertheless emerge out of and speak to justifiable unease about the privatization and lax regulation of telecommunications, the overweening power of mobile phone companies, and anxieties among policy makers in the United States and the United Kingdom about the threat of espionage from Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant. These potentially legitimate concerns are, however, inevitably eclipsed and ignored, as much discussion during the pandemic about communication technology was sucked into the vortex of conspiracist claims about vast plots and sci-fi powers.

Great Reset

In the autumn of 2020, the “Great Reset” conspiracy theory became a central star in the Covid conspiracy cosmos, with its gravitational pull drawing other conspiracy narratives into its orbit. Covid skepticism joined climate denialism to create a swirling mass of fears about a global elite plotting to control our lives. The Great Reset refers to the theme of the World Economic Forum's fiftieth annual meeting, which presented the idea that unfettered capitalism needed “resetting” in order to now include stakeholders and environmental concerns. The WEF's rhetoric about a Great Reset is little more than vague idealism at best and corporate greenwashing at worst, but, in the eyes of conspiracy theorists of many different political persuasions, it is a frightening master plan for total domination by the globalist elite. The conspiracy interpretation of the Great Reset includes tropes familiar to Covid-19 such as 5G, microchips, and population control but now inserts them in a dystopian master narrative of mass surveillance, forced vaccination, and erosion of individual liberty that extends far beyond the pandemic. Many commentators have assumed and hoped that Covid-19 conspiracy theories would begin to fade, with the successful rollout of vaccines, the reduction of restrictive measures, and increased medical knowledge about the causes and treatments of the disease.

However, the convergence of conspiracy theories about the pandemic with ones about the climate crisis suggests that there is unlikely to be a reduction in online conspiracism any time soon. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there is the unsavory but unsurprising spectacle of a convergence between right-wing conspiracists and pro-Putin propagandists, with both groups pushing the story, for example, that the invasion is really a campaign to destroy US-funded biolabs in Ukraine where (so the claim goes) Covid-19 was manufactured as a bioweapon (Ling 2022). This convergence is based partly on a shared fantasy of the Russian leader as the embodiment of anti-woke traditional values, partly on the logic that the pandemic is a hoax and so too is the war in Ukraine, and partly on the idea that the war is a harbinger of the Great Reset.

Note

- 1 This chapter is adapted from C. Birchall and P. Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003315438> © 2023 Clare Birchall and Peter Knight. Reproduced with permission of The Licensor through PLSclear.

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PART 6

South America



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25

VULNERABILITY AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Latin America in the Time of Covid-19

Luis Roniger and Leonardo Senkman

Introduction

In late February and March 2020, as the pandemic took over the news cycle on a global scale, Latin American governments reacted in highly different ways. Some were prepared and proactive, adopting early measures of containment. Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Paraguay stood out for their relatively successful measures to cope with the first waves of the pandemic – in contrast to Brazil, Mexico, and Ecuador. Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru, and Uruguay imposed strict measures and restrictions. Since it foresaw the collapse of its health system, Guatemala declared a state of emergency and closed its borders with Mexico. In Ecuador, the city of Guayaquil soon became an epicenter of contagion, with an exponential growth in the number of the severely sick and dead (“América Latina” 2020).

The Mexican government delayed its response, even as collective hysteria dominated public opinion in the country (Cedeño 2020). Presidents Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua denied the danger of infections and rejected isolation or quarantine measures (“Varied Responses” 2020). Throughout the region, and in Venezuela in particular, citizens were more afraid of “running out of food than getting the virus” (“Caraqueños” 2020; our translation). The media reported that Venezuelans entrusted themselves to God, for they lacked even running water (Itriago 2020). By March 2020, Brazil was forced to close its borders with eight South American countries, among them Argentina and Paraguay, in addition to its already closed border with Venezuela. The population reacted to the pandemic with anxiety and alertness, a response which has served to confront looming threats and dangers since ancient times. The pandemic created a collective tension without respite, replicating the hindsight of the social sciences on the politics of fear (Tudor 2003; Kalil et al. 2021; see also Katerina Hatzikidi’s chapter on Brazil in this volume).

Leaders and administrations that reacted swiftly to the pandemic received far higher rates of approval, irrespective of their ideological-political leanings, stretching from populist leftist to conservative leaderships. In Peru, the popularity of President Martín Alberto Vizcarra (2018–20) reached an approval rate of 82 percent during the onset of the health crisis due to his efforts to contain the spread of the virus. However, even his prompt response could not halt the rise in mortality due to structural constraints such as poverty, overcrowding, and the need of many Peruvians to participate daily in the informal sector for their economic survival. Soon, the number of people infected and the number of deaths skyrocketed (see Table 25.2).

Governments failed to manage the health crisis appropriately, partly because they could not outbid more affluent countries when seeking to purchase supplies, but also because of corruption. The acute crisis allegedly enabled overpricing of testing kits by Ecuadorian officials and the inflated purchase of ventilators by Bolivian officials with Inter-American Development Bank funds. The deficiencies of these countries' health systems in dealing with the pandemic were evident as patients died from a lack of timely intervention, scarce medical equipment, and mistakes. Countries such as Ecuador and Brazil had slashed their health care budgets, and accordingly, their hospitals were underfunded and unfit to meet the challenges of the pandemic. Adding to the constraint of failing health systems were

TABLE 25.1 Covid-19 in 19 Latin American Countries (as of 15 June 2020)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of People with Covid-19</i>	<i>Number of Dead from Covid-19</i>	<i>Cases per One Million Inhabitants</i>	<i>Dead per One Million Inhabitants</i>
Argentina	32,785	854	726	19
Bolivia	19,073	632	1,635	54
Brazil	891,556	44,118	4,196	208
Chile	179,436	3,362	9,390	176
Colombia	53,063	1,726	1,423	34
Costa Rica	1,744	12	342	2
Cuba	2,262	84	200	7
Dominican Rep.	23,271	605	2,146	56
Ecuador	47,322	3,929	2,684	223
El Salvador	3,826	76	590	12
Guatemala	10,272	399	574	22
Honduras	9,178	322	927	33
Mexico	150,641	7,580	1,166	136
Nicaragua	1,464	55	221	8
Panamá	21,422	448	4,968	104
Paraguay	1,296	12	182	2
Perú	232,982	6,860	7,071	208
Uruguay	848	23	244	7
Venezuela	3,062	26	108	0.9

Source: Based on www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries

TABLE 25.2 Covid-19 in 19 Latin American Countries (as of 2 November 2021)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of People with Covid-19</i>	<i>Number of Dead from Covid-19</i>	<i>Sick per Million Inhabitants</i>	<i>Dead per Million Inhabitants</i>
Argentina	5,289,945	87,368	115,631	2,535
Bolivia	500,950	18,714	9,125	341
Brazil	21,814,693	607,954	101,665	2,833
Chile	1,696,786	37,777	87,758	1,954
Colombia	5,003,997	127,311	96,966	2,467
Costa Rica	560,563	7,078	108,718	1,373
Cuba	952,634	8,240	84,174	728
Dominican Rep.	382,476	4,133	34,793	376
Ecuador	515,859	32,958	28,659	1,831
El Salvador	113,422	3,638	17,370	557
Guatemala	601,657	15,137	32,776	825
Honduras	375,778	10,256	37,153	1,014
México	3,808,205	288,464	29,129	2,206
Nicaragua	16,422	207	2,440	31
Panamá	472,736	9,251	107,313	1,661
Paraguay	461,086	16,249	63,604	2,241
Perú	2,202,189	200,276	65,573	5,963
Uruguay	394,053	6,080	112,916	1,742
Venezuela	407,866	4,902	14,398	173

Source: Based on www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries

other issues: poverty, congested home environments, the need of members of the lower classes to continue working (outside of the home), and a lack of running water in some parts of the countries (Roniger 2022, 255–58).

By June 2020, the number of people in Latin America who had contracted the disease reached over a million and a half individuals, while the number of deaths was about 71,000 (see Table 25.1), although countries such as Venezuela and Nicaragua did not register the real numbers of those affected by the pandemic – which were probably much higher than the official record stated. A year later, those numbers had grown exponentially due to the spread of the disease, the lack of access to vaccines, and the ever-evolving nature of virus variants. In the case of Peru, the early success in countering the pandemic had turned into a disastrous toll of nearly 6,000 cases per one million inhabitants, followed by Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Paraguay, and Mexico with over 2,000 cases per one million inhabitants, and Chile coming close to that number as well (see Table 25.2).

Due to the uncertainty surrounding the virus, its effects, and remedies, the pandemic became a dangerous breeding ground for individuals spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories. When stakes are so high, people fall victim to cognitive biases, logical fallacies, and moral panics. Social psychology has shown that under such a constellation, resistance to analytical, expertise thinking may prevail (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1996; Kahneman 2011). Moreover, unlike the diabolical fears of the era of religious wars and persecutions (Cohn 1975; Poliakov

1980), the global and transnational dynamics of the early twenty-first century have added to the univocal character of the causality of old-fashioned conspiracism. As the world is interwoven digitally on an unprecedented scale, the speed of recurring messaging which has flooded the cyberspace at this moment of crisis has given rise to conspiracy theories of a mimetic causality, reproducible in seconds and thus able to impact wider circles.

The exponential increase in Covid-19 cases did not reduce the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Social media platforms registered an explosion of narratives that discredited expert advice and magnified skepticism. As vaccines were made available by early 2021, the echo chambers of social media saw arguments repeated multiple times, ranging from statements that vaccines contain graphene, that they turn people into “wolf men,” and that they are made from aborted fetuses to that they contain chips geared to gain mental control over those vaccinated, possibly designed by financial and other elites conspiring to create a New World Order – a claim which took a racist turn in certain circles.

By mid-March 2021, Ecuador had started vaccinating specific groups, primarily medical personnel, security personnel, and the elderly. A week after taking office in late May 2021, the new government headed by Guillermo Lasso of the right-wing party CREO presented an ambitious plan, assisted by the World Bank, which aimed to vaccinate nine million people in just 100 days. The state invested over 320 million dollars in different vaccines and secured vaccine donations from many countries, among them the United States, China, Canada, Spain, and Chile. The government deployed 1,700 brigades of medical personnel and opened 520 vaccination centers throughout the country. It also involved private companies, universities, the armed forces, police, firefighters, the Red Cross, and local governments in developing joint vaccination logistics. This way, Ecuador increased its daily vaccination rate from 80,000 to 414,000 by July 2021, reaching a record of vaccinated people a month later (“Ecuador” 2021). However, the concerted effort of the new administration generated resistance. By July 2021, marches against the vaccine were organized in major cities, including in Guayaquil, an early epicenter of the virus, where thousands of people had lost their lives during the first wave of the pandemic. People took to the streets to protest city mayor Cinthya Viteri’s decision to impose mandatory vaccination. Protesters claimed that it was their right to decide whether or not to get vaccinated (“Los antivacunas” 2021; “Marchas” 2021).

Likewise, in Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru, a network calling itself the Revolutionary Humanist Action (*Acción Humanista Revolucionaria*) questioned the existence of the virus and called on people to resist official health mandates. In Bolivia, activists connected to the network held town meetings in La Paz and Cochabamba, claiming that it was a “false pandemic” and demanding, among other things, scientific evidence of the absolute need for vaccines and sound confirmation that it would not generate harmful effects on citizens’ health. In addition, they demanded transparency about the manufacturers, partners, and shareholders of companies from which the country had acquired vaccines. They also asked that the government “respect the right to voluntary and informed decision of those who do

not want to be vaccinated, and do not weigh sanctions or coercion against them” (Saavedra 2021; our translation).

“An Abuse of Power and a Lie”

The drastic preventive measures taken by some leaders were often critically opposed by parts of their publics. When the Mexican government imposed quarantine measures by May 2020, it was met with mass demonstrations. Likewise, in Argentina, people took to the streets to protest an abuse of power and the “lie” of confining the population as a means of containing the disease. In Buenos Aires, people were lifting banners with the slogan “5G and the vaccine = genocide,” even though at that stage, Covid-19 had already taken the lives of 500 out of the 16,000 citizens who had contracted the virus (Euronews 2020). Protestors claimed that the pandemic was nothing more than a regular flu, and that its severity was a lie woven by an international conspiracy led, among others, by George Soros and Bill Gates and used by the local political establishment to dominate citizens and push unpopular measures such as a constitutional reform (“La marcha” 2020). The antivaccination movement was also supported by the political opposition. In Argentina, mass demonstrations against the measures proclaimed by the Alberto Fernández-CFK administration were led by opposition figures such as Patricia Bullrich, president of the PRO or Republican Proposal, a center-right political party; Hernán Lombardi, former head of the public information services of the previous Macri administration; and Luis Brandoni, leader of the UCR (*Unión Cívica Radical*) party.

In September 2021, Colombian citizens, too, participated in mass demonstrations against the vaccination in the cities of Bogotá, Medellín, Cartagena, and Barranquilla (Capital 2021). Inciting the antivaccination movement was a widely watched video claiming that vaccines produce male erectile dysfunction (“Las afirmaciones” 2021). Included was a message from Marco Fidel Suárez, an individual claiming authority on this matter by being the general secretary of the UN Council for Truth and Life in Colombia (*Concilio de las Naciones Unidas por la Vida y la Verdad* or CONUVIVE), an organization defending human rights “against the pandemic and transgenetic immunizations.” Also participating in the video was Guillermo Amador, legal director of the World Coalition for Health and Life (*Coalición Mundial Salud y Vida* or COMUSAV), an organization promoting the use of dioxide chlorine. Amador claimed that the Covid-19 vaccination violates the Nuremberg Code and the 2005 UNESCO Bioethics Code. The former sets limits to experimentation with human beings, the latter was promulgated to regulate the relationship between science and society and to respect human dignity and basic freedoms such as an individual’s choice in medical procedures.

Several individuals and organizations have figured prominently among those spreading resistance to Covid measures by using misinformation and disinformation. Bombarding publics with a mix of factual and fictitious information, conspiracy theorists reinforced fears by recommending alertness toward imminent dangers, most of them fabled threats rather than real health concerns. The conspiracy theories

that these “disinformants” projected caused an immense human toll among those who avoided sound medical advice and preferred to skip vaccination or the use of masks, believing instead in fabricated truths despite the rise in contagion. The individuals who collaborated in spreading such messages shaped suspicion toward conventional medical expertise and advised to be on guard regarding the conspiratorial plans which negligent individuals would ignore at their own risk, while favoring the success of corrupt interests and forces lurking in the dark (see Roniger and Senkman 2022).

The organization TierraPura, whose motto is “*Información sin censura*” (information without censorship), soon reached close to 37,000 subscribers at whom it was pushing the idea of the vaccine’s inefficacy. Promoting disinformation was, for example, Pastor Nelson Zavala who claimed that vaccines were developed and used to attain mind control over human beings. Through their Twitter accounts, many people pushed similar messages (e.g., Urso 2021). On Instagram, Eliana Cabrera (@ElianaCabrera9) claimed that the number of those vaccinated in Israel equals the number of people who got Covid-19 and that there were therapies that could replace the vaccine with greater success (July 17, 2021). Likewise, on Telegram, chats such as *La marcha de la bestia* (the march of the beast) promoted fake information on Covid-19. Arguing from a religious perspective, it claimed that vaccination runs against God’s will.

Fact-checking networks such as *Salud con lupa* and *Latam Chequea*, a network of 35 organizations, created a platform to identify the main spreaders of false health information. The platform, called *Desinformantes*, listed 42 people prominent in spreading misinformation and disinformation. Those mega-spreaders were citizens of 13 Spanish-speaking countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay, in addition to Spain and the United States. The list included physicians, politicians, attorneys, journalists, and even a Chilean TV anchor, an Argentine model and media influencer, and a Mexican Cardinal (“Desinformantes” n.d.).

Prominent among the 42 people identified were physicians associated with the Physicians for Truth network, known in Latin America under the name of *Médicos por la Verdad* (MPLV) and replicated at the state level by networks such as the Argentine *Epidemiólogos argentinos metadisciplinarios*. Negating the severity of the pandemic, those physicians were committed to tell their truth about the coronavirus by questioning the official version of politicians and the media. They joined and bolstered the anti-vaccination movement, spreading the idea that, at best, the vaccines are inefficient, and at worst – and more likely – harmful. Many of these physicians as well as those supporting them believed in a variety of unproven claims, among them that the vaccines implant genes which change the human genome and that they cause male infertility or autism in newborns. They tried to convince the public that Covid-19 is not more harmful than the flu, that it can be cured with guava leaf tea, with home remedies, or with hydroxide-chlorine or chloride-quinine. Some even claimed that maintaining a good mood will suffice, since “all

illnesses are the product of emotional states of mind,” as the Argentine model and media influencer Ivana Nadal has declared (“Ivana Nadal” 2021; our translation).

A “Plandemic” – Not Just a Pandemic

Also widely expressed was the belief that Covid-19 was manufactured in a Chinese lab with US financial support as part of a hidden plan to establish a New World Order. According to this interpretation, the pandemic was planned and orchestrated in a concerted effort to convince the population to get vaccinated and surrender to those willing to control people’s minds. Uruguayan attorney and politician Gustavo Salle Lorier used the neologism “plandemic” in lieu of pandemic to emphasize that it is a plot (Lorier 2021). Certain professionals and influencers claimed that the vaccines, or even the PCR tests, implant a nanochip or “nanorobot” which turns citizens into cellular-controlled individuals, subject to the malicious design of the New World Order elite. Such was the message expressed and widely shared by, among others, physicians Atilio Fariña, president of *Médicos por la Verdad* in Paraguay, Bolivian physician Patricia Callisperis Vieira Dias of *Coalición Mundial Salud y Vida* (“Internacional” 2020), and Argentine physicians Chinda Brandolino (of *Profamilia*, the Association for the Promotion and Defense of Family), and Mariano Arriaga (Nasanovsky and Prieto 2021). Naturally, these claims took a dangerous turn as they spread among the medical profession.

Peruvian attorney Rosa María Azapa Estaño, president of *La Organización Médica Peruana de Investigación* (OMPEI), the self-proclaimed Peruvian Medical Organization of Investigation, repeated the claim that those pushing the vaccination campaign “want to turn citizens into [individuals] controlled through a little chip.” She arrived at this conclusion through a bizarre interpretation of an interview by Bill Gates, who stated to foresee the use of digital certificates to know who had been vaccinated. Azapa Estaño saw this as a confirmation of the intimate connection between 5G technology and Covid-19. She thus insisted that the vaccine contains alien nano-genes and harms human cells. Statements such as hers resonated in media circles and were expressed by media figures such as the Mexican TV anchor and actress Patricia (Paty) Navidad (García 2021) and Argentine journalist Verónica Ressa (Gardel 2021).

The plandemic narrative was also promulgated by religious leaders. In Cartagena, Colombia, pastor Miguel Arrázola, leader of the Christian church Ríos de Vida, with thousands of followers in the city and many more worldwide, negated the existence of Covid-19 in 2020, declared that the media frenzy was orchestrated by Bill Gates and others for the purpose of profit, and claimed that the pandemic was the first step in preparing the way for the anti-Christ. He even called on citizens to “stop obeying diabolical laws.”¹ Mexican Cardinal Juan Sandoval Íñiguez went even further, calling the vaccine “a sign of the Devil” designed to control human minds as part of a New World Order (“Juan” n.d.). In the Dominican Republic, some evangelical pastors objected the idea of mandatory vaccination. Juan José

Rodríguez, pastor of the Church Camino de Santidad in Santo Domingo, concluded that the move was likely intended to plant a chip in people's bodies, thus fulfilling prophecies in the Bible about the End of Times, associated with the mark of the Anti-Christ or the number 666.

I am not going to get it, and neither is my congregation, because of those measures that we are seeing. It is not that we do not respect earthly laws, but there is something there that is not right and that is why we are not going to get the vaccine. We believe that there is something strange there.

Putting his faith in God, the preacher was quoted as saying that “We are not going to give in to the vaccine. If we must die for Christ's sake, we are going to die, but we are not going to bow down on the vaccine.” As for the reasons for such reluctance, he clarified:

I don't think that it's the chip . . . but it is the platform that they are creating for the future arrival of the Antichrist. The Bible indicates that the time will come when they will put a chip that you will not be able to buy, sell or do anything with.

(Remo 2021; our translation)

Apart from medical professionals, politicians, media personalities, or religious leaders, even judges believed in Covid-19 conspiracy theories. In Peru, a court chamber trying to justify a delayed resolution in an urgent case blamed the delay on the pandemic. As part of its justification, the collegiate court of the Superior Court of Justice of Ica claimed that “no world government, natural and legal persons, nor the defendant's defense can maintain that this pandemic has the quality of predictability, except for the creators of the New World Order such as Bill Gates, Soros, Rockefeller, and others” (“Basado” 2021; our translation). The three judges of the court seemingly believed candidly in the conspiracist narrative about the malign intent of “criminal elites” spread, among others, by people sharing the hashtag #YoNoMeVacuno.

Throughout the continent, polls revealed a significant percentage of individuals fearing mass vaccination and resisting some of the administrations' efforts in reaching high percentages of vaccinated citizens. In Costa Rica, ombudsperson Catalina Crespo Sancho claimed in October 2021 that at least 800,000 individuals – over 15 percent of the population – were against mandatory vaccination. In her role as comptroller of state agencies, she agreed to meet the heads of those protesting the official health policy and to hear their complaints (Campos 2021). In Colombia, where some areas were hit by a third wave of infections and deaths by late 2020, many citizens contacted by DANE, a national statistics organization, expressed doubts about the vaccine. In a phone poll with 11,000 participants between November 9 and December 10, 44 percent expressed unwillingness to get vaccinated – for multiple reasons, but primarily because of distrusting its efficacy or

security. A Colombian newspaper reported those findings and suggested that evangelical pastors were at the forefront of those advising against vaccination (Álvarez 2021).

Conclusion

The impact of the recurring waves of the pandemic in Latin America will be long lasting, aggravating existing health and economic deficiencies. In March 2020, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean forecast that out of the 620 million inhabitants of the region, the pandemic could increase the number of the poor from 185 million to 220 million, and the number of those living in extreme poverty from 67.4 million to 90 million (“Covid-19 tendrá graves efectos” 2020). Some countries, such as Mexico, Honduras, and Ecuador, have been particularly hit economically during the pandemic.

Under such a dire combination of health and economic hardship, official policies of compensation for the sectors most affected by health measures were able to ameliorate the economic impact of the crisis, especially where a substantial part of the population works in the informal sector and could hardly make a living pre-pandemic in the first place. Among such programs were the Emergency Family Income program in Argentina, the Covid-19 Bonus in Chile, the Solidarity Income in Colombia, the Proteger Bonus in Costa Rica, and the Emergency Bonus in Brazil. Through this kind of assistance, even countries such as Brazil and Panama, where governments refused to vaccinate the population, managed to register a reduction in the rates of poverty and extreme poverty between 2019 and 2020, from 5.5 and 6.6 percent to 1.4 and 6.4 percent, respectively. Both countries focused a large part of budget disbursements on the lower income sectors, whose participation in the economy was particularly affected (“Covid-19 en América Latina” 2021).

Throughout the region, the interface of health measures and economic policies produced several paradoxical situations. Brazilian President Bolsonaro had a denialist attitude toward the pandemic for a long time; yet, his administration allocated a comparatively high budget to support those affected by the pandemic. While those social programs were in force in Brazil, the president’s popularity rose, but once the stimuli began to be withdrawn, his popularity declined. Furthermore, while fiscal aid was implemented in both Brazil and Mexico, Brazil allocated about 8 percent of its GDP, whereas Mexico spent barely 0.7 percent. Yet, the popularity of Mexico’s President Andres Manuel López Obrador was not affected to a substantial degree despite the poor performance of his health and economic policies (Díez and De la Cruz 2021).

The pandemic created a peculiar mixture of anxiety, expectations, and disappointment with sitting administrations which could not solve the strenuous health and economic needs of Latin American populations, among them mental health issues. These have skyrocketed because of virus anxiety as well as the impact of confinement and self-isolation, unemployment, financial difficulties, and social

exclusion. According to the PSY-COVID-19 survey conducted by the Autonomous University of Barcelona in 30 countries, including 12 Latin American countries, the pandemic has exacted an immense toll on individuals, causing mental health symptoms such as anxiety or depression, especially due to a sense of loneliness and lack of contact with others. Because of a shortage in appropriate state mechanisms, several initiatives have emerged from civil society, among them *No estás solo* (you are not alone), an Argentine phone service launched by Jesuits with the assistance of lay volunteers, and volunteer programs writing letters to lonely and hospitalized persons such as *Cartas contra la soledad* (letters against solitude), launched by AMIA, the Jewish Community Association, in Argentina or “Te escribo porque” [I write to you because] in Chile (“Cada vez” n.d.).

The political repercussions of the ongoing health and economic crisis may likely further weaken the vitality of Latin American democracies. In May 2020, political scientist Manuel Alcántara indicated that the pandemic has generated opportunities for executives to dedicate even more decision-making powers to the center, postponing elections or putting other popular consultations on hold, while once again imposing exceptional measures to control the population. He characterized this as a transition “from tired to quarantined democracies” (2020; our translation), highlighting that the pandemic added even more pressures to the persistent structure of socioeconomic inequality and weakness of representative democracies (Roniger 2022, 257–58).

Last but not least, the pandemic has once more turned Latin America into a playground for competing world influences. A report by Global Americans refers to the “vaccine diplomacy” that countries in the region, avid to receive vaccines, have been subject to. The report specifically mentions China’s strategy of using contracts for vaccine purchases to gain geopolitical concessions from Paraguay:

China reportedly dangled the promise of hundreds of thousands of coveted Sinovac shots to [Paraguay’s] President Mario Abdo Benítez if he were to sever Paraguay’s official diplomatic relations with Taiwan (Republic of China) and recognize the communist, mainland People’s Republic of China instead.

(Mentel and Bacha 2021)

Global Americans argues that, in addition to those explicit pressures, there has also been an equally crucial trend of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracism stemming from US right-wing media (e.g., FOX), China’s Xinhua en Español and CGTN Español, and Russia’s RT Actualidad and Sputnik Mundo, all disseminated in Latin America and consumed by Latin American audiences.

Our inquiry has identified local networks to be mega-spreaders of resistance, misinformation, and disinformation, carrying out campaigns of opposition to medical advice and protective policies on digital and social media, making them spread transnationally in the Americas. Within an evolving digital environment in which social media became ever more prominent, partly because of measures of personal distancing and disease containment, individuals and organizations disseminating

misinformation and disinformation had a growing pool of audiences receptive to conspiracy theories. These networks, which, among others, include physicians, religious leaders, and media influencers, have instilled distrust in the medical establishment, and some of them have implanted conspiracy narratives, mischaracterizing the pandemic and its treatment. Latin American public opinion will likely continue to be affected by those narratives for years to come.

Note

- 1 Probably as he witnessed the consequences of his message, even Arrázola recanted months later and announced that he had led a vaccination campaign in his church and that his entire family had been vaccinated.

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26

“THE COMMUNAVIRUS IS HERE”

Anti-Communist Conspiracy Theories in Brazil’s Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Katerina Hatzikidi

Introduction

On October 27, 2021, a congressional panel investigating the Brazilian government’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic submitted its final report. Concluding six months of investigations and public hearings, the senators who voted in favor of the nearly 1,200-page report were seeking criminal charges against President Jair Bolsonaro (and about 70 other people and legal entities, including high-ranking members of the federal government) for considering that he intentionally encouraged the spread of Covid-19 in the country and is therefore partly responsible for the more than 600,000 deaths of Brazilians. Articulated by the president and members of his government, conspiracy theories influenced health policies (Kalil et al. 2021) and determined the federal government’s actions and inactions in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on findings of the aforementioned congressional panel report and contextualizing current events against a broader historical background of the role and relevance of conspiracy theories in Brazil, this chapter will give an overview of the kinds of conspiracy rumors and conspiracy theories that proliferated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conspiracy theories have been explored in the literature as “indicators of larger anxieties and concerns” (Butter and Knight 2018, 40), with meaning-making being one of their key modalities. By reducing the complexities of the phenomena they purport to dissect, they offer explanations that clearly identify malevolent agents behind observable realities that are established as threatening. Such concerns, however, are historically and conjuncturally situated so that “the ways in which conspiratorial narratives take particular shapes in different socio-political settings may reveal the sort of anxieties or desires they express and the externalities they assume and target” (Saglam 2020, 21). It is hence relevant to ask who creates and circulates a specific conspiracy theory, which social groups does it target and which are likely to embrace it, and for what purpose?

In Brazil, as elsewhere, parallel to the pandemic, a “disinfodemic” was spreading: a strategic deployment of disinformation and conspiratorial narratives that mostly built on older and larger conspiracy structures. As Michael Butter has discussed, conspiracist discourse has changed with the popularization of the Internet, with rumors – rather than fully fledged theories – circulating more online (2020, 136–37). Rumors, which simply allude to evildoers rather than delving into details about a specific theory, may be more useful politically than conspiracy theories, which can alienate supporters (149). Atkinson and DeWitt include “conspiracy theory politics” in their definition of “politics of disruption,” describing the former as one of the most effective “strategic choices available to rational political entrepreneurs” (2018, 124). In their analysis, however, such “innovative and unorthodox” (122) means of game change are limited to “losers:” out-of-power politicians who need radical ways to get attention. Hence, for Atkinson and DeWitt, resort to conspiracy theory politics is a “tool for the weak” (122). Against the view that sees the deliberate employment of conspiracy theories in politics as the prerogative of “losers,” this chapter will explore the circulation of conspiracy rumors and theories in official government discourse.

In what follows, I will discuss the main findings of the congressional panel investigation suggesting that conspiracy rumors and theories were strategically employed insofar as they contributed to the federal government’s aim for Brazil to reach “herd immunity” through contagion. I will be using Geoffrey Cubitt’s (1989) definition of “conspiracy myths” as being distinct from “conspiracy theories” to discuss the structural and long-lasting dimensions of anti-communism in the articulation and circulation of new conspiracy theories. Fear of “communism” emerges as a common thread underlining a vast part of the numerous conspiracy rumors and theories that inundated Brazilians during the pandemic. In the concluding remarks, I will briefly discuss some of the reasons behind the spread of conspiracy theories about the pandemic and how their strategic employment may not always go as planned.

The Congressional Panel Investigation on the Pandemic and Its Findings

The chaos of Jair Bolsonaro’s government will go down in history as the lowest step of human and civilizational decadence. He sabotaged science, he is unprepared, dishonest, malicious, arrogant, authoritarian, of a coup-plotting nature, bellicose, a liar, and he acted like a mad missionary in a mission to kill his own people. This rapporteur is quite convinced that there is a murderer hiding in the Planalto Palace.

With these words, Brazilian Senator Renan Calheiros submitted, in late October, the final report of a congressional panel (Federal Senate 2021), which had been investigating the government’s management of the pandemic. The CPI was created on April 8, 2021, by the decision of Supreme Court Justice Luís Roberto Barroso.

Justice Barroso accepted a January 2021 request, submitted by Senator Randolfe Rodrigues in the aftermath of the Manaus crisis (Phillips 2021), to create a parliamentary committee with the aim to examine “the actions and inactions” of the federal government in handling the pandemic. There were 66 sessions, of which 58 were congressional hearings (*oitivas*), all televised and livestreamed; 61 people testified (Federal Senate 2021, 31).

Among the most important findings of the congressional panel investigations was that the federal government, and President Bolsonaro in particular, adopted a strategy that opted to favor the free circulation of the coronavirus with the aim to attain “herd immunity” through contagion. This strategy was, according to the CPI report, the effective federal government’s response to the pandemic and included different discursive tactics such as the dissemination of conspiracy theories. Above all, it was premised on the exploitation of uncertainties, fears, and hopes among the population in the face of an unprecedented crisis. The CPI report’s conclusion is supported by further independent research conducted by the Center for the Study and Research on Health Law in cooperation with the Public Health Faculty at the University of São Paulo (CEPEDISA, FSP, and USP 2021), as well as by a commissioned expert report submitted to the CPI (Reale Júnior et al. 2021). The decision to adopt this strategy was based on a false distinction between the economy, on the one hand, and public health, on the other, as if the two could be dissociated from one another. Estimating devastating consequences on the country’s economy if non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) were to be implemented, the Brazilian government decided to openly oppose them and actively encourage a “return to normality.”

The federal “strategy of dissemination of the virus” (CEPEDISA, FSP, and USP 2021, 3–4) is concretized, beyond declarations and bodily performance (as when inciting and joining mass gatherings), in the government’s normative acts (27). The president used, for example, his discretionary powers to expand the list of “essential services” that could remain open during the pandemic, authorizing, among other things, hair salons and lottery retailers. In March 2020, the Secretary of State for Communication (Secom) launched the campaign titled “Brazil cannot stop” (*O Brasil não pode parar*), spearheaded by a widely circulated video which encouraged people to return to their everyday activities and which was later banned by a Supreme Court’s decision. Members of the Bolsonaro administration also explicitly and implicitly supported the government’s strategy. For example, former Minister and lawmaker Osmar Terra repeatedly affirmed in public that “it is not the vaccines that will end the pandemic; what will end the pandemic is herd immunity” (Federal Senate 2021, 48). Brazil was also the only emerging country in the world to oppose the proposal to lift Covid-19 vaccine patents (19). If the aim was to preserve the national economy (and the government’s survival) by encouraging the Brazilian population to return to everyday activities as before the pandemic, their deaths were a sort of collateral damage or necessary evil (Hatzikidi 2020). As the CPI report soberly affirms: “the ensuing deaths of the general population were considered an acceptable burden to preserve the economy, but not an aim in themselves” (Federal Senate 2021, 526).

To achieve “herd immunity” through contagion, the federal government openly and repeatedly opposed and boycotted non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), such as social distancing, facial masks, and lockdowns and even delayed the acquisition of vaccines. On the other hand, it actively encouraged a “return to normality” by appealing to a range of cognitive registers. The president and members of his cabinet first denied the gravity (and/or existence) of the virus and its effects on health. Then, they instilled fear of financial and even food insecurity if NPIs were to be implemented and respected, blaming restrictions imposed by mayors and governors for a potential economic collapse. The president also repeatedly presented the possibility of contagion as inevitable (“this virus is like rain; it will get you”) and mocked those concerned about the virus, suggesting they lacked bravery, patriotism, and even masculinity. At the same time, Bolsonaro and members of his administration exalted the values of individual freedom which were seen as obstructed by the supposedly communist local (municipal or state) government restrictions to circulation and conduct.

An essential aspect of the herd immunity strategy was the propagation of the belief that cure was available, and there was hence no reason to be afraid of exposure to the virus. In this respect, no drugs were more popularized than chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine. These, which were often used and referred to interchangeably, together with a few others, such as ivermectin and azithromycin, were included in the so-called early or initial treatment (*tratamento precoce/inicial*). As the CPI report acknowledges, from May 20, 2020, onward, when Eduardo Pazuello, an army general with no medical expertise, takes over at the Ministry of Health, the “early treatment” becomes “a declared federal government health policy,” and more than 30 million reais (nearly half a million euros) were spent for the production and purchase of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine (94; 102).

According to the testimony of former Minister of Health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta (who resigned in April 2020 due to conflicting approaches to how to best manage the Covid crisis and, especially, due to his disagreement with President Bolsonaro), the federal government was fully aware that it was inducing the population to use drugs without scientific proof of efficacy (84). What is more, Mandetta testified in front of the CPI that during an official meeting at the Planalto Palace, a draft of a presidential decree was presented which proposed changes to chloroquine’s Patient Information Leaflet to indicate it for treating Covid as part of the “early treatment.” Although this change was not materialized, the president continued to defend the “early treatment” even after evidence of the drugs’ inefficacy for treating Covid were overwhelming. “I am living proof of the early treatment’s efficacy” repeated Bolsonaro in 61 public statements according to the CPI report (649), claiming that it was these drugs that cured him when he had allegedly contracted Covid. More than knowingly defending inefficient drugs, the president also encouraged the population to distrust their medical doctors in case they were not willing to prescribe them the “early treatment” drugs. As he said in a livestreamed address on January 14, 2021: “In Brazil, hydroxychloroquine, azithromycin, ivermectin, Annita (nitazoxanide), zinc, vitamin D, have all proved efficient. Ask your

doctor. If he thinks this isn't so, then ask a different doctor" (93). The video was later removed from YouTube for violating the platform's community guidelines.

Evidently, the federal government's strategy vis-à-vis the pandemic involved much more than conspiracy theories. It was a complex, multi-layered discursive and normative strategy which ranged from denialism to instilling doubt and from disinformation to shifting health guidelines. However, mistrust of NPIs; of mayors, governors, and politicians defending such measures; and of medical doctors who refuted the existence of "early treatment" was, for the most part, premised on conspiracy theories that, as we will see next, drew on an old anti-communist conspiracy myth.

Covid Conspiracy Claims in Brazil

A great part of the conspiracy rumors and theories that circulated "on-line" and "off-line" during the pandemic targeted "communists," machinating against the "free world" well into the twenty-first century. China, where the Covid-19 virus was first detected and assumed to have originated, was the obvious target. But "communism" in Brazil historically operates as an empty signifier for the anti-communists, stretching out to include anyone and anything that do not align with their own ideological commitments. In this way, China and Cuba are communist, but the World Health Organization, whose recommendations during the pandemic directly opposed those of President Bolsonaro, is also communist.

Members of the federal government and its allies inside and outside the political world reflected such views on social media and in public statements. For example, federal lawmaker and son of the president, Eduardo Bolsonaro, nearly caused a diplomatic episode with China in March 2020 when he posted on his Twitter account:

Anyone who watched Chernobyl will understand what happened. Replace the nuclear plant with coronavirus and the Soviet dictatorship with the Chinese. Once more, a dictatorship preferred to hide something serious that had to be exposed to avoid its weakening, but which would have saved numerous lives. It is China's fault and freedom would be the solution.

(Federal Senate 2021, 651)

The Chinese Embassy in Brazil replied to this post, not without a dose of irony: "Your words are extremely irresponsible and sound familiar. They are nothing more than an imitation of your beloved friends. Upon return from Miami you contracted, unfortunately, a mental virus, infecting the friendship between our people" (Embaixada da China no Brasil 2020).

While Eduardo Bolsonaro was compelled to issue an apology to Brazil's most important international commercial partner, others continued to flaunt their anti-communist sentiments. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ernesto Araújo, while in office in April 2020, tweeted about his latest blogpost titled "The Communavirus

is here.” With it, he takes issue with Slavoj Žižek and the globalists’ (including Žižek!) project of using the pandemic to install the “new communism;” “a world without nations, without freedom, without spirit, run by a central ‘solidary’ agency in charge of surveilling and punishing” (Araújo 2020). The ultraliberal Minister of the Economy, Paulo Guedes, casually mentioned during an interview in April 2021 that “the Chinese invented the virus and his [sic] vaccine is less effective than that of the American” (Della Coletta 2021). City councilor for Rio and son of President Bolsonaro, Carlos Bolsonaro, posted a conspiracy rumor suggesting that the pandemic emerged to hinder employability in the country (just when things were taking off) (Federal Senate 2021, 663).

Alongside cabinet members, bolsonarista supporters and allies expressed similar views. Allan dos Santos, a blogger under investigation for disseminating fake news and conspiracy theories, affirmed on his popular Twitter account that “the Chinese vaccine is for INCREASING [sic] the spread of the virus” (Federal Senate 2021, 686). On his Telegram channel, he also accused China and the WHO of being responsible for the ongoing “genocide” for “omitting the cure and spreading the disease” (773). Career politician, Bolsonaro ally, and former president of the *Brazilian Labour Party* (PTB) until his arrest in August 2021, Roberto Jefferson, used his Twitter account to warn Brazilians (without providing details) of a Satanist plan to shut down churches and install Communism in the country (709). Another Bolsonaro ally tweeted that the pandemic was just a pretext for China’s war on Brazil (789). The CPI report includes hundreds of similar posts and declarations, representative of the numerous conspiracy rumors and theories that circulated in on- and off-line spaces during the pandemic. By gathering this material and by showing the ideological affinities and financial associations between the different propagators of disinformation and conspiracist narratives, the congressional panel evinced the strategic employment of such narratives for political purposes.

Considering the blurred boundaries between official public discourse and “fringe” conspiracist narratives, Quassim Cassam’s discussion of “the politics of conspiracy theories” offers a useful approach to the strategic uses of conspiracy theories by (electoral) winners and losers alike. For Cassam, conspiracy theories promote political agendas and are hence “a form of political propaganda” due to “the fact that what they are spreading *is* fake news, together with the actual ideological associations and political implications of their stories and theories” (2019, 12; original emphasis). What makes a particular conspiracy theory attractive to some is, according to Cassam, the fact that “it fits their *broader* ideological or political commitments” (2019, 48; original emphasis). Or, as Butter and Knight put it: “political convictions and situations determine which conspiracy theories individuals believe in” (2018, 38).

In the case under discussion, Bolsonaro supporters appeared to be more prone to consider the “early treatment” as an effective Covid cure and even become suspicious of the Chinese Covid vaccines. A preliminary study conducted by the Institute for Health Policy Studies (IEPS) found a positive correlation between the percentage of votes for Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections and the geographic

concentration of Covid-related deaths in 2021, suggesting that Bolsonaro supporters were more susceptible to flouting restrictions and adhering to the president's rhetoric than non-supporters (Rache et al. 2021, 3; see also Ajzenman, Cavalcanti, and Da Mata 2021). As the CPI hearings were also able to establish by hearing family members of Covid-19 victims, many refused to wear masks or social distance because they were convinced that the virus was either not real or not particularly dangerous, counting as well on getting treatment in case of contagion.

The politics of conspiracy theories have consequences that can be particularly burdensome, and even potentially deadly, for those who embrace them and for others indirectly affected by them. Although thousands of Brazilians who had voted for Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections grew increasingly disappointed at his administration's management of the pandemic and at his personal stance on this humanitarian crisis, many remained faithful supporters, trusting his recommendations and distrusting what he portrayed as evil and dangerous. This is not surprising as by holding the country's highest office, "his declarations are the equivalent of official decisions and strongly influence the population" (Federal Senate 2021, 650). As the discussion of the history of the anti-communist myth will show, the politics of conspiracy theories have always entailed the danger of gaining great dimensions and having catastrophic effects, whether on democracy and the rule of law, or on public health and the right to life.

Anti-Communism in Brazil: A Deep-Seated Conspiracy Myth

As mentioned earlier, Geoffrey Cubitt distinguishes between conspiracy theories and conspiracy myths, suggesting that the latter correspond to large narrative structures which accommodate the former. In his words:

[A] conspiracy myth tells the supposedly true and supposedly historical story of a conspiracy and of the events and disastrous effects to which it has given rise. The interpretation of fresh events or developments . . . in the light of such a myth, and in such a way as to assimilate them to the myth, is what I mean by a conspiracy theory.

(1989, 13)

Cubitt's definition of conspiracy myths offers a useful approach to anti-communism in Brazil and its manifold expressions throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Historian Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta analyzes the structural nature of anti-communism in the country and its lasting influence on public discourse, illustrating how it has shaped important political developments. He describes two major anti-communist waves in Brazilian history, during which the communist menace was perceived as most threatening to the established status quo. Both waves culminated in civil-military coup d'états (the first in 1937 and the second in 1964). Hence,

Motta suggests that anti-communism in Brazil results "from an intricate mixture of opportunistic manipulation and conviction, which combined in different ways and intensity over the course of history" (2020, 5). This is an important point as it speaks about conspiracy theory not only making a "leap into public discourse" (Barkun 2015, 114) but also being articulated by and helping reinforce the powers that be (Bevins 2020).

While there is nothing by definition conspiracist in anti-communism, the historically political uses of anti-communist fear correspond to Cubitt's definition of conspiracy myth. At different moments in history, when the political conjuncture allows the myth to gain relevance, new chapters, that is, conspiracy theories, are added to the old communist saga, and the fear is rekindled and intensified. For Motta, Christianity, nationalism, and liberalism are at the root of anti-communist representations in Brazil. These matrices are closely, though not exclusively, linked to the Catholic church (and, more recently, also to conservative evangelical churches), the armed forces, and the business world, respectively. Segments of the aforementioned institutions see communism and, very often, progressive leftist politics in general, as a threat to notions of freedom, hierarchy, and order that inform the very foundations and values around which such institutions are structured. For such reactionary segments, "democracy" is the antonym of "communism," and they profess their love for this empty signifier in an effort to align themselves to the "free world."

An important element that informs the Brazilian anti-communist imaginary is the conviction that communism is an intrinsically alien idea implanted from outside and essentially "irreconcilable with the traditions of the Brazilian character and soul" (Motta 2020, 36). Hence, communism is essentially a foreign menace that wants to "destroy order, tradition, and Christian society" (48) and the result of a conspiracy that once formed part of Soviet imperialism and, later, as is also the case with the Covid-19 pandemic, of global communism (involving China and, closer to home, Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, and an expanding list of "enemy" neighbors).

Making use of the communist specter to deliberately distort reality or create overblown narratives of fear to serve their political and financial aims in the name of freedom, anti-communist entrepreneurs have made a forceful comeback since 2013 in Brazil. In a world where malevolent forces perpetually struggle to conquer the world and establish the reign of evil, conspirators personify this intangible evil making it hence easier to be targeted and fought against (Motta 1998, 96). The faces of the conspirators may change (the Soviet Union and Jewish communist "infiltrators" on national territory in the past; China, the WHO, and "communist" governors during the pandemic), but the underlying narrative remains essentially unchanged: the communist menace is here and if "real patriots" do not stand their ground, communists will succeed in taking away their freedom and imposing a dictatorship.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the old conspiracy myth of "communism" was embellished with new chapters that ranged from supposedly suspicious ongoing

developments (e.g., the damaging effects of face masks, social distancing, and [Chinese] vaccines) to contemporary global conspiracy theories. Rumors and theories that circulated during the pandemic, and often incorporated into official political discourse and health policies, weaved the alleged plans of Globalists and the Great Reset conspiracy theory into the anti-communist conspiracy myth and intricately connected them to scientific health recommendations and guidelines for movement restriction. Unsurprisingly, such conspiratorial discourse resonated with some of Bolsonaro's conservative supporters whose ideological commitments and political views and assumptions largely overlapped with those of the government.

The federal government's approach to Covid-19 vaccines illustrates quite well the role anti-communism played in critical decision-making. As the CPI investigation made known, the federal government scrutinized or ignored offers from certain vaccine providers while showing little or no meticulousness when negotiating with others. While officially the justification given for this was the priority given to health protocols and vaccine safety (Federal Senate 2021, 680), the CPI showed that ideological, and potentially also illicit financial, criteria guided the federal government's approach instead. For instance, negotiations for the acquisition of the Indian Covaxin vaccine were strikingly expeditious, even though the vaccine, at the time, had not yet the approval of the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (Anvisa), each dose would cost five US-dollar more than Pfizer's, and the agreement would involve the intermediation of a private Brazilian enterprise suspected of involvement in corruption schemes in the past (211; 238–41; 283–383). President Bolsonaro even personally sent a letter to India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi to let him know that Covaxin was selected for the national immunization program. On the other hand, a day after the announcement by Minister of Health Pazuello that the country would produce 46 million doses of the CoronaVac vaccine in collaboration between the Chinese Sinovac and the Brazilian Butantan Institute, without technical justification, Bolsonaro publicly declared that Brazil would not buy "Chinese vaccines:" "I already had [the order] cancelled; I am the president, I do not yield my authority" (228; 232).

Concluding Remarks: Cui Bono?

An indispensable question in most conspiracy theories is: "Cui Bono?" Who benefits from the plot? The same question, however, can be asked back at the "conspiracy entrepreneurs" (Cassam 2019, 34). Who benefits from the dissemination and political uses of conspiracy rumors and theories? More specifically for the case at hand: why would the Bolsonaro administration choose to pursue the herd immunity through contagion theory, sabotage and delay the acquisition of vaccines, and promote the use of ineffective, and potentially dangerous, drugs even when there was overwhelming evidence that this would only aggravate an already significant health crisis?

While determining the exact reasons that impelled the Brazilian government to adopt this strategy would be like establishing a writer's intention (Butter 2020, 80),

there is compelling evidence that suggests that what the Bolsonaro administration hoped for was to prevent a major economic crisis that would risk making the government extremely unpopular in the run up to the 2022 presidential elections (Ricard and Medeiros 2020). By strategically tapping into the anti-communist conspiracy myth to blame others (mayors, governors, the WHO, China, etc.) for potential economic consequences that may result from the pandemic, the president refused to take responsibility over errors or neglect. He effectively used what Letícia Cesarino (2021a) has called “narrative hedging:” a strategy of risk management that allows one to appeal to various fronts at the same time, minimizing risks and maximizing benefits (Cesarino 2021b). If contracting Covid was unavoidable, or if a cure was available, then why stay at home and risk losing one’s job? If a “communist dictatorship” has been set on foot through the restrictions imposed by mayors and governors, then flaunting them is a patriotic duty to reclaim liberty. If the president is trying hard to save the country from economic collapse and domination by the Globalists, then anyone who opposes his efforts is a communist enemy of the nation.

As the congressional panel report was able to demonstrate, strategies for political survival together with ideological criteria guided the government’s responses to the pandemic. The investigations found that high levels of the government and institutional bodies, like Secom, the Ministry of Health, TV Brazil, and even the Presidential Palace “actively participated in the process of creation and distribution” of conspiracist rumors and disinformation (Federal Senate 2021, 620, 825). Steering a calamity into a direction that was easier to manage, the Bolsonaro administration attempted to handle an unexpected crisis with crisis tactics that were more familiar. The communist menace was a familiar conspiratorial trope that had been used successfully in the past, including by Bolsonaro in his 2018 electoral campaign and in previous years (Hatzikidi and Dullo 2021, 8–9, 19). Being able to perform the “right” kind of crisis (Moffitt 2015), one that suits specific political goals and increases chances of maintaining popular support at a given conjuncture, is important for the populist politics of conspiracy theories.

It is equally important to note that it was not only questions of ideology, loyalty, or political strategy that motivated those involved in the politics of conspiracy theories during the pandemic, but financial gain as well (Federal Senate 2021, 242–43). As Cassam has observed: “there’s good money to be made by peddling such theories” (2019, 35). Indeed, support of the government’s pandemic strategy was proved to carry an element of monetization. For example, many social media and influencers received large sums of money to disseminate conspiracy rumors and disinformation about Covid. Sales from hydroxychloroquine, chloroquine, and ivermectin gave the same pharmaceutical manufacturer an astronomical percentual increase in 2020 compared to 2019 (Federal Senate 2021, 112). Some of the companies that sold drugs included in the “early treatment,” such as Vitamedic, were also sponsoring medical associations and individual doctors who recommended and helped disseminate the “early treatment” (115–19). The network of parasitic economy that grew large during the pandemic does not stop there; land invaders

and illegal miners and loggers also greatly benefited. As the CPI report emphasizes, the incentive to intruders to invade indigenous territories and protected environmental reserves, alongside the deliberate negligence of the federal government to protect and attend to the indigenous, quilombola, and riverine populations, became strong allies of the virus-producing devastating combined effects (526).

However, not everything always goes as planned. While Bolsonaro was able to maintain the support of a segment of his electorate, a large number of Brazilians were appalled at the denialist and irresponsible stance of their president and stopped supporting him. Many people who lost loved ones to the virus while the president was unable to show empathy and doubled down on his denialism find it hard to trust his recommendations or vote for him again in 2022. Former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva appears to be comfortably outstripping Bolsonaro in the upcoming presidential elections with some polling scenarios giving him a win in the first round. While a lot may change until then, it is important to consider the negotiated relationship between (populist) leaders and their publics (Curato 2021), even as the latter seem to be embracing the former's discourse. As anthropologist Annika Rabo (2020, 91) notes, paying attention to signs of doubt and uncertainty is essential to the study of conspiracy theory belief: people may profess conviction but doubt and uncertainty often continue to be present. For as long as they help people make sense of the world and its realities, they also eventually make cognitive shifts possible.

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PART 7

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27

COVID-19 IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

The Darker Side of Paradise

M R. X. Dentith

Introduction

This chapter looks how the infodemic associated with the Covid-19 pandemic affected Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter referred to as “Aotearoa”). Depending on which news source you relied upon – especially in the early stages of the pandemic – Aotearoa was either a utopic vision of a Western society’s best response to the novel coronavirus (Farrer 2020) or, according to former US President Donald J. Trump, the country was a hellhole of rampant Covid infections (Thornber 2020).

Of course, the views of people outside Aotearoa with regard to the Covid-19 response led by the Labour Government were a source of amusement for many within the country, given they mirrored other episodes when overseas stories failed to reflect the issues on the ground (such as erroneous reports of riots erupting across the country after both the earthquake in Ōtautahi/Christchurch in 2011 and the Ōtautahi Mosque Shootings of 2019). It is fair to say that New Zealanders are used to the world not really knowing what is happening in our far-flung part of the southern hemisphere. For the average New Zealander, life in the pandemic continued largely as normal: while the country went through a nationwide four-week total lockdown (with cities like Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland being in lockdown for longer), New Zealanders only had to endure two other lockdowns (lasting on average a couple of weeks a piece) for a few small and scattered outbreaks. Generally, the only visible difference to life with Covid-19 was a lot more mask wearing on public transport, supply chain issues for overseas goods, and a lack of international tourism and music acts.

This rosy view is not the entire story, however, because resistance to the government’s pandemic response has not just rumbled away in the background but has also had an evident effect on public discourse. For one thing, Aotearoa has moved from an elimination strategy in the first stage of the pandemic to one of “living with the virus.”

Some of this resistance was, admittedly, predicated on the feeling of ongoing economic issues caused by the Covid-19 health response and the related restrictions: members of the business community, for example, have lamented the lack of tourism and a downturn in the hospitality trade (New Zealanders might love their flat white coffees, but with everyone working at home, coffee sales have been on the downturn).

On the other hand, some of the resistance to the pandemic response was couched in terms of narratives involving mis- and disinformation, as well as conspiracy. Given that researchers locally were aware early on in the pandemic that these narratives were potentially confounding factors in a government-led response to the novel coronavirus, a team of researchers – working for one of the University of Auckland’s research centers, Te Punaha Matatini (TPM) – embarked on *The Disinformation Project*, examining the role such narratives might be playing in the infodemic in Aotearoa.

Conspiracy Theory in Practice

My background is in the philosophical study of conspiracy theories, and I was recruited into the *Disinformation Project* not just because of my expertise, but also because my theoretical approach is not to dismiss such theories simply because they have been labeled as “conspiracy theories.”

Philosophers have largely agreed, since Charles Pigden’s (1995) and Brian L. Keeley’s (1999) seminal works in the mid-to-late 1990s, that belief in conspiracy theories is not *inherently* irrational. Rather, the epistemologically interesting question is whether belief in *particular* instances of conspiracy theories is warranted or unwarranted with respect to the available evidence. This is the thesis of what has come to be known as “particularism:” individual conspiracy theories have to be appraised on the basis of the evidence for or against them rather than judged as a class.

As I have argued elsewhere (Dentith 2019), a lot of how we academics interested in conspiracy theories (the *conspiracy theory* theorists) operationalize talk of “conspiracy theories” hinges on how we define what counts as exemplars of “conspiracy theory:” our choice of definition often builds in implicitly whether or not belief in such theories is *prima facie* irrational or suspicious.

Now, we might think that particularism could be seen as a problematic position during a pandemic with an associated infodemic filled with mis- and disinformation about the origin and supposed purpose of the novel coronavirus. Given the danger of some (possibly many, if not most) of the unwarranted conspiracy theories we see circulating pose to public health, as well as trust in governmental responses (both local and international), taking conspiracy theories seriously in the *particularist* sense could be seen as “mad, bad, and dangerous” (terms often applied to conspiracy theories themselves). Yet, given the context under which *some* conspiracy theories have arisen in Aotearoa, the particularist position cannot be ignored.

This was the context of why I was invited to participate in the *Disinformation Project* and the central thesis of this chapter. There are reasons in a range of cases

to suspect, if not outright conspiracy, then at least duplicity by people in positions of power. Even if we accept that the vast majority of conspiracy theories about Covid-19 are unwarranted,¹ the context under which some of these conspiracy theories emerge is crucial. As I have argued previously, people infer to the existence of conspiracies on the basis of their understanding of the kind of polity in which they live; people are often primed to accept conspiracy theories because of the situation they find themselves in (Dentith 2016). Sometimes this leads to the uncovering of an actual conspiracy, and sometimes it does not. Whatever the case, any analysis of the supposed problem conspiracy theories are playing in the pandemic in Aotearoa cannot ignore the context under which people come to form said theories.

The moral of the following analysis, then, is that sometimes conspiracy theories are a consequence of unaddressed issues in a society. The lesson is that if we want to lessen the impact – which is to say prevent such theories from either forming or gaining popularity – then we ought to address the underlying and often unaddressed causes of which such conspiracy theories are often just a symptom.

What follows are three examples of conspiracy theories in Aotearoa surrounding the pandemic. These examples should not be considered comprehensive: I have elected to not focus on some of the more extreme examples due to the fact that discussing them has previously led to death threats and the like toward some of fellow researchers in the Disinformation Project; relitigating them here could cause further harms.² Rather, these examples are merely illustrative of some of the issues associated with unwarranted conspiracy theories in the age of the novel coronavirus.

The Loyal Opposition

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) produced by Transparency International places (at the time of writing) Aotearoa, Denmark, and Finland at joint first place (Transparency International 2021). The CPI measures the *perception* of corruption in a society, and this sense is generated from polling businesses and other large organizations on how corrupt (or uncorrupt) they *feel* a particular nation to be. With this in mind, one mistake people might make is conflating the notion of a society being *perceived* as uncorrupt with the idea it is *actually* uncorrupt.³

Why is this important? In August 2020, Gerry Brownlee, the then deputy leader of the major opposition party, the National Party, said in a press conference that “I just think it’s interesting” with respect to the timing of new mask guidelines and a visit by the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, and the Director-General of Health, Ashley Bloomfield, to a mask production line. When pressed by journalists as to what he meant, he continued with “It’s interesting. An interesting series of facts” (Grieve 2020). This was a dog-whistle about the government and what it knew (or claimed not to know) about the state of the pandemic and the public health response: Brownlee was signaling that there was something underhand or even corrupt about the Ardern and Bloomfield visiting a place which produces masks

and then having an apparent change of heart about the use of masks to combat Covid-19.

This was not Brownlee's first foray into dog-whistling about the government's Covid response: a week earlier he had questioned the government's new push for renewed plans to deal with a Covid-19 outbreak by proclaiming "Why is it now, when we've got 94 days of no community transmission, and apparently secure borders, that they're wanting to bring this up?" (Grieve 2020).⁴ Brownlee backtracked on his comments a few days later, claiming he had not meant to insinuate a conspiracy theory. *He was just asking questions and trying to get information out there.* He even went so far to say he was not comfortable to have aided conspiracy theorists (Leahy 2020).

We might think this was too little too late: while Brownlee claimed to be *just asking questions*, claiming to be blissfully unaware of the implications those questions carried, some in the public and the media recognized this as a dog-whistle to those who believed the government was not being entirely truthful about what it knew about the state of the pandemic. The problem with dog-whistles, of course, is that they encode claims which can only be "heard" by a target audience, while looking innocuous to people not in that target audience. Brownlee had not *explicitly* said that the government was engaged in any deliberate deception: he was simply *curious* about the timing of certain events, events which invited questions. To many people, this was just a case of the loyal opposition asking questions of the government of the day: it would, indeed, be a dereliction of Brownlee's duty as a member of the opposition to not question the emergency powers the government had given itself for the duration of the pandemic. However, for another audience – the target audience of, say, a dog-whistle – such questions suggested that Brownlee (and potentially his colleagues)⁵ were signaling to them that members of the National Party knew something was up.

Brownlee was not alone in making such claims: pundits and columnists also argued that the government was keeping information about – for example – the harsh economic impact of their pandemic policies, or that the lockdown of early 2020 had led to a significant increase in suicides.⁶ But as Lee Basham (2011) and myself (2016) have argued in separate papers, the way in which we judge whether we should treat some conspiracy theory seriously depends on just how prone to conspiracy you *think* your society is.⁷ So, a member of the opposition – especially a prominent member of the previous government – engaging in a dog-whistle lends credence to the idea that maybe there is something secretive, even sinister in the government's pandemic response. It normalized the idea there was something sinister at the heart of the government response to the pandemic, which lent support to claims that the country was more conspired than the government and its supporters would like people to think.

Plan B

Early on the pandemic, a rival pandemic response to that offered by the government was proposed: a "Plan B." It was propounded by not just anyone: its most

notable architect was Dr. Simon Thornley, an epidemiologist at the University of Auckland's School of Population Health. Other members included fellow Auckland academics Dr. Gerhard Sundborn; Professor Ananish Chaudhuri; along with Prof. Grant Schofield, Professor of Public Health from the Auckland University of Technology; and Victoria University of Wellington academics Associate Professor Grant Morris and Dr Michael Jackson.

The people behind Plan B were not cranks: these were health professionals and economists who were arguing that Aotearoa should learn to live with the virus rather than follow the government's choice of seeking to eliminate Covid-19 within Aotearoa's borders.⁸ Yet, the public response to Plan B could be described as "mediocre at best"; by and large, polling showed the public trusted that the government was following scientific advice and best practice. Not just that, but the public (both in Aotearoa and abroad) was skeptical – given the evidence – that the Swedish model the Plan B architects touted as superior was working. Academics were also not kind in their criticisms of the Plan B model or the reasoning behind it (Daalder 2020; Thomas 2020).

Unlike Brownlee, the people behind Plan B were not – at least at first – “just asking questions.” They were arguing that the science supported another – to their mind better – pandemic response. As such, how the Plan B modelers handled criticism was curious. Rather than accept that the public, academics, and the government of the day were not swayed by their proposal, they blamed the lack of serious attention to it on their views being suppressed, a claim they went so far as to argue in the media itself (Reidy 2020). Thornley also threatened to sue another scientist for voicing her opposition to Plan B (Giovannetti 2021).

Then things got even weirder. The group *Voices for Freedom* (VFF) has spent most of the pandemic advocating for the end of lockdowns, mask mandates, and the vaccination program itself. Like Plan B, VFF was largely ignored by the public (which, in turn, also led to VFF claiming their views were being suppressed). Unlike Plan B, but a lot like Brownlee, VFF claimed to “just be asking questions.” Part of this involved arranging meetings and online conferences to sell people on the “real science” behind the pandemic. One of the scientific voices VFF turned to was Thornley and Plan B (Meier 2021). When challenged on his participation in VFF events, Thornley claimed that his appearances should not be taken as an explicit endorsement of the views of VFF. Rather, he simply shared some of their concerns, as well as their goal to bring an end to the government's elimination strategy.⁹ Yet, this excuse became less and less tenable: he also later provided an affidavit for anti-vaccine activist and lawyer Sue Grey's effort to stop the vaccine rollout (Thornley 2021).

Then, in late 2021, Thornley co-authored a paper, “Spontaneous Abortions and Policies on COVID-19 mRNA Vaccine Use During Pregnancy,” with Aleisha Brock. The paper was published in *Science, Public Health Policy, and the Law*, an unindexed journal known for publishing anti-vaccine articles. Upon release, the paper was heavily criticized by medical researchers, including the authors of a *New England Journal of Medicine* study Brock and Thornley used to come to their conclusion that there was a higher incidence of miscarriage among those who had been vaccinated against the novel coronavirus.

Initially, in the wake of the criticism, Thornley said he would issue a correction, but after the paper was singled out in a weekly email to staff at the School of Population Health by Professor Robert Scragg, the paper was retracted without comment (Retraction Watch 2021), with Brock and Thornley preferring to issue a press release on the Plan B website (Thornley and Brock 2021).¹⁰

Unfortunately, like Gerry Brownlee's "just asking questions" routine, the damage was already done. The paper had been published and was being touted as evidence of the evil of the vaccines.¹¹ Thornley went from offering a rival path for Aotearoa's pandemic response to not just associating with conspiracy theorists but actively spreading Covid-19 misinformation. His journey is not merely an interesting case study, but it also speaks to the difficulty of talking or addressing Covid-19 conspiracy theories more generally. When members of the political and academic class end up engaging in dog-whistles (Brownlee) or even explicitly endorsing unwarranted conspiracy theories (Thornley), this lends some credence to the notion that the public should take some of these conspiracy theories they have been hearing more seriously.

At the time of writing, Simon Thornley is still a member of the University of Auckland's School of Population Health (albeit somewhat of an outcast [Mitchell 2021]).

Outside Influences and Disturbing Consequences

The reason why this matters for the discussion of conspiracy theories in Aotearoa over the course of the pandemic is that, while much of the talk of conspiracy theories and mis- and disinformation campaigns have (rightfully) focused on international movements around vaccine hesitancy and anti-mask mandates, the role of dog-whistles and outright endorsement of conspiracy theories by establishment figures cannot be understated. Put broadly, it is much harder for *unwarranted* conspiracy theories to get traction in a society if trusted or respected figures do not trade in them.

We cannot ignore the role of people outside Aotearoa in the promotion of Covid-19 mis- and disinformation. For example, the GTV Media Group, founded by Stephen Bannon and Guo Wengui, provided the New Zealand-based talk show, *Counterspin*, with the production facilities to regularly present stories which feature dis- or misinformation about, among other issues, the Covid-19 pandemic, stories which draw from the conspiratorial narratives we have seen elsewhere in the West (Clark and Farrier 2021). Add to this the role of social media and other more traditional methods of informational spread, and it was always going to be the case that Aotearoa's infodemic would not be entirely of its own making. To suggest that outlets like *Counterspin* are part of a concerted effort by people outside of Aotearoa to influence public opinion on matters like the governmental response to the Covid-19 pandemic is itself to engage in conspiracy theory. But overseas, existing groups have adopted the rhetoric of Covid-19 conspiracy theories in order to launder their preexisting unwarranted conspiracy theories. However, one tragic

part of this concerns the systemic racism still prevalent in Aotearoa and its tricky intersection with Covid-19 conspiracy theories.

Racism in Aotearoa

Aotearoa is a colonized polity, with Pākehā (descendants of the original colonizers, largely from the United Kingdom) and Tauīwi (more recent immigrants to Aotearoa) making up the dominant culture, with tangata whenua (the indigenous people), Māori, being a minority. The history of colonialism in Aotearoa is heavily imbued with conspiracy: the Crown (the Pākehā or Settler Government) has repeatedly deceived or misled Māori. From legitimizing William Wakefield's selling of nonexistent parcels of land to English immigrants in the nineteenth century, signing and then immediately breaching a treaty (Te Tiriti O Waitangi – AKA the Treaty of Waitangi) promising co-governance of the country, to agreeing to reparations based upon the breaches of said treaty only to continue such breaches to the current day, Māori can be understood as standing in an uncomfortable position with the Crown leading the pandemic response.

Indeed, one of the consequences of the systemic injustice of Aotearoa's colonial history is that there is still a marked difference in health care provision between Māori and Pākehā and Tauīwi. Māori, for example, have a lower life expectancy, as well as greater morbidity with respect to most different diseases and ailments (Jansen 2021). This difference in health outcomes is regularly attributed to systemic racism (Ministry of Health 2012). One likely effect of such a disparity is a suspicion by some Māori toward the health care system as operated by the Crown, an issue compounded by the fact these disparities have not been adequately addressed by a series of successive governments.

Systemic issues in the health system, especially those which affect an already marginalized group, can have unfortunate consequences in the case of a pandemic. After all, systemic racism has been shown to play a role in the government's response to the pandemic. The government ignored recommendations by health professionals to target the initial round of vaccinations for Māori, the part of the population that was most at risk due to those aforementioned health disparities (NUMA 2021). While the government has strongly denied the allegations that racism played a part in these decisions, the consequence is that Māori once again have yet more reason to treat the Crown and its public health policies with due suspicion.

If a segment of the population has a reasonable belief that they have been systematically misled, then it is reasonable for them to suspect that such behavior is still continuing. This is not to say that Māori are more inclined to believe unwarranted conspiracy theories in the pandemic. Rather, it is the more modest claim that when people who are already skeptical about the behavior of the government see more evidence of misbehavior, this raises reasonable questions and doubts. That is, it becomes reasonable in this kind of case to *just be asking questions* about the government's pandemic response.

This explains, then, why people with other agendas have sought to co-opt Māori (or, at least, the symbols of Māori culture) into their own conspiracy theories. The most curious and vicious examples in the pandemic have been white nationalists/supremacists in Aotearoa extending olive branches to people they have previously targeted in order to join forces and uncover the “real” conspiracy. Alt-right figures like Damien de Ment, Lee Williams, Philip Arps, and the like, all of whom have had history of attacking both Māori and people of color as part of their promulgation of race-based conspiracy theories surrounding things like the Great Replacement or Great Reset theses, have tried to leverage Māori groups in order to make their particular conspiracy theories more palatable to the public (Clark 2021).

It was not unexpected that existing communities of conspiracy theorists would seek to leverage the pandemic to garner both sympathy and support: as we saw with Brownlee and Thornley, when establishment figures are also raising similar concerns, then views many thought were marginal can become part of the mainstream. Thornley and Brownlee’s claims may have had little traction in among the average New Zealander, but among certain communities of conspiracy theorists, their dog-whistles and endorsements were evidence that some people in positions of power (the elites) were sympathetic to the cause.

In a similar way, groups which we might think are traditionally opposed (white supremacists and indigenous people) can become strange bedfellows if one side can create a narrative where they share a common enemy, or have a shared problem. These people and their fellow travelers have also sought to gain favor with Māori, tapping into a current of vaccine hesitancy among some communities, or by co-opting the language and symbols of Māoridom in order to seemingly legitimize their “protests” (Weir 2021).

Recall that vested interests like those represented by Steven Bannon play a role here: in October 2020, Bannon claimed “New Zealand, they’re the canary in the mineshaft, that’s why we’ve gotta pay attention to what’s going on in New Zealand and Australia” (Bannon 2020). Co-opting Māori for political purposes (which, arguably, even this chapter has engaged in) by white supremacists and the like is, unfortunately, part of a long and terrible tradition. The fear is not just that such co-option masks the underlying racism of particular conspiracy theorists/conspiracy theories, but also that by co-opting Māori causes (or the symbols of the indigenous people of Aotearoa), it can make the protests of otherwise small, unconnected groups of people seem newsworthy. A protest against vaccine and mask mandates motivated by an unwarranted conspiracy theory which co-opts or uses the symbols of tangata whenua can look native (excuse the pun) to Aotearoa, masking that often these stories are coming from or sponsored by people outside the country.

Conclusion

It would be easy to assume, given the examples in this chapter, that the situation in Aotearoa has deteriorated since the beginning of the pandemic. Indeed, at the time of writing, a protest in the nation’s capital of Wellington, ostensibly demanding an

end to vaccine and mask mandates, has turned into an occupation of the suburbs surrounding the seat of parliament, the Beehive, with nooses hanging off of trees and anti-Semitic slogans chalked on walls and vehicles.

This portrayal would not be entirely inaccurate; according to most polls, New Zealanders have shown majority support for the government's pandemic response, and, like most polities worldwide, Aotearoa has not succumbed to widespread belief in unwarranted Covid-19 conspiracy theories. Rather, like our neighbors, we have "woken up" to the realization that conspiracy theories need to be taken more seriously because whether they are popular or not, they can be influential. The salience of certain conspiracy theories to contemporary debates is a topic we are finally beginning to realize we should have been paying attention to for a long time; all it took was to realize that sometimes these theories come with negative social consequences – particularly in the course of a pandemic.

What is troubling for the kind of work we conspiracy theory theorists engage in is, however, the Brownlees, the Thornleys, and the unaddressed systemic issues of the polities we live in. When people in positions of power – academic or political – dog-whistle or endorse conspiracy theories, especially in the context of a society where disparities between groups are acknowledged but unaddressed, this can lead people – depending on the evidence available to them – to reasonably or unreasonably think that conspiracies have gone, and still are going on around them. This is why philosophers have argued – in the particularist tradition – that the role of evidence in our inferential practices concerning whether particular conspiracy theories are warranted or unwarranted is key. Even if you disagree with the philosophical contention that we ought not to treat conspiracy theories as *prima facie* irrational, the plausibility of certain conspiracy theories can *seem* high, given the circumstances conspiracy theorists find themselves in, even if it turns out that in some objective sense the conspiracy theory ought to be treated as unwarranted.

Aotearoa might well have survived the first few years of the pandemic better than most other Western nations, given a strong economy and a low death toll. However, this has not meant that it has done better with regard to the associated infodemic. In part this is because Aotearoa has the same issues as other Western nations (who have their own Brownlees and Thornleys) and because, as a colonized space, Aotearoa's history unfortunately makes it reasonable to at least think medical misadventure by the government might well be going on. After all, if we know the government's pandemic response ignored the threat of Covid-19 to Māori, then it is reasonable to ask what else it has side-stepped or ignored. Thus, conspiracy theory.

Notes

- 1 For the sake of clarity, lest I be accused of promoting unwarranted conspiracy theories, the conspiracy theories I think might be plausible (i.e., worth investigation) are those which suggest some governments might have covered up either their lack of preparedness for a potential pandemic or that they deliberately downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic.

- 2 For discussion and analysis of some of them, see the current work of the Disinformation Project, including *The Disinformation Project* (2021) and Hannah, Hattotuwa, and Taylor (2021).
- 3 After all, Aotearoa, Denmark, and Finland (the joint “winners” of the CPI in 2021) only score an 88: these nations can and could do better.
- 4 At the time of Brownlee’s remarks, outbreaks of Covid-19 in neighboring Australia had our government worried the same could happen in Aotearoa: both Australia and Aotearoa had largely mirrored each other’s health policies, so it was suspected that outbreaks in Australia signaled the potential for similar outbreaks in Aotearoa in the near future.
- 5 The National Party has, unfortunately, been the home of several MPs who have engaged in the “just asking questions” routine over the course of the pandemic. Maureen Pugh was reticent to get vaccinated (*The New Zealand Herald* 2021), while Herete Hipango had to delete Facebook photos showing her support for an anti-vaccine mandate protest (Palmer 2022), something Pugh also has had to do (Cooke 2022). In both cases, the MPs claimed to be blissfully unaware of what it was they were supporting.
- 6 See, for example, regular columns from Mike Hoskings, Heather du Plessis-Allan, and Kerre McIvor. In each case, experts disagreed with the conclusions about the supposedly negative social and economic consequences of the pandemic response these pundits alleged (in the mainstream media no less) that the government was reportedly hiding or covering up.
- 7 People can, of course, be wrong in their calculation of whether they live in a conspiring society or not; the inference to whether a given conspiracy theory is the best explanation tells us what it is plausible for people to believe, *given the evidence available to them*.
- 8 TPM also provided epidemiological modelling of the pandemic for the Government of New Zealand, which the members of Plan B disputed. The author was not involved with the epidemiological modelling provided by TPM but acknowledges that the criticisms of Plan B could be seen as a conflict of interest.
- 9 The Plan B academics also directed people to the organization *The White Rose*, which claims, among other things, “There is no pandemic: Your own government is waging psychological warfare on you.” When questioned on this, the Plan B academics had no comment (Daalder 2021).
- 10 In the email Scragg noted:

There is a major error in the Brock and Thornley paper which led them to conclude that 80–90 percent of pregnant women will miscarry if they have the Covid-19 vaccination. . . . The actual observed value in this study is six times lower than that calculated by Brock and Thornley who used the incorrect denominator. Brock and Thornley should immediately publicly retract their article because of the anxiety it is creating for expectant parents and those planning to have a child (Jul 2021).
- 11 See, for example, Zimmerman (2021), Liberty Council (2021), and Wilson (2021).

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