



CONSPIRACY THEORIES

POPULISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORY

Case Studies and Theoretical Perspectives

EDITED BY

Michael Butter, Katerina Hatzikidi,
Constanze Jeitler, Giacomo Loperfido
and Lili Turza



ROUTLEDGE

POPULISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORY

This book explores the close connections between populism and conspiracy theory. *Populism and Conspiracy Theory* contributes to filling the gap in the research in this area. The individual contributions in Part I provide in-depth analyses of specific configurations of populism and conspiracy theory. Part II includes nuanced considerations of more theoretical issues. The case studies cover both right-wing and left-wing manifestations of populism, while highlighting that populist movements often cut across the traditional left-right divide. Chapters focus on the twenty-first century and the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the impact of history and memory on contemporary discourses. Geographically, the case studies consider the Americas as well as Europe and Northern Africa. Theoretical discussions include the aesthetics and forms of populist conspiracism, or its dependence on new media. The disciplines represented in the volume range from political science and sociology via anthropology and history to linguistics and cultural studies. It will appeal to those interested in politics, specifically conspiracy theory, populism, democracy, and leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

Michael Butter

Donald Trump claims that the 2020 presidential election was rigged, Viktor Orbán contends that, masterminded by George Soros, a “Great Replacement” of the Christian population of Europe is underway, and Javier Milei, the new Argentinian president, has repeatedly expressed his belief in a Cultural Marxist plot to destroy civilization. This is not a coincidence. Around the globe, populist leaders tend to employ conspiracist rhetoric far more frequently than other politicians, accusing allegedly sinister elites at home and abroad not only of neglecting the needs of the people but actively conspiring against them. Moreover, several studies have shown that the supporters of populist parties and movements—from the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) via the Italian *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement) to the Australian One Nation Party—are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than supporters of other parties and movements.

Populism and conspiracy theory, then, are clearly connected. However, the relationship between the two has so far been hardly systematically explored. What Kirk Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, two leading scholars of populism, observed a few years ago, still holds true: “Despite the fact that various scholars have pointed out the link between populism and conspiratorial thinking . . . , there is a dearth of empirical research on this argument” (2017, 530). While several studies on the link have been published in the last five years, the topic has not received nearly as much attention as its obvious relevance would merit. There is still a lack of case studies of specific actors, parties, movements, or countries, especially with regard to left-wing populism and conspiracism. What is more, the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory as such has not yet been satisfactorily theorized. There

have been some attempts in recent years, but, as I discuss below, they are not yet quite satisfying, mostly because they tend to draw broad conclusions based on a limited number of or very similar case studies.

The volume at hand contributes to filling these two gaps in research. Its contributions either provide in-depth analyses of specific configurations of populism and conspiracy theory (Part I) or nuanced considerations of more theoretical issues (Part II). Ideologically, the case studies pay as much attention to left-wing manifestations of populism as to those on the right, while highlighting that populist movements often cut across the traditional left-right divide. And while most chapters focus on the twenty-first century, some go back to the first half of the twentieth century while many others take the impact of history and memory on contemporary discourses into account. Geographically, the case studies focus on the Americas and Europe, but chapters are also devoted to the Philippines and Tunisia. The more theoretical chapters explore, among others, the aesthetics and forms of populist conspiracism or its dependence on new media. The disciplines represented here range from political science and sociology via anthropology and history to linguistics and cultural studies. In the remainder of this introduction, I quickly define populism and conspiracy theory and then provide an overview of existent research on the connection between the two. Along the way, I introduce the different contributions to this book and situate them in the current scholarly debate.

Populism is a highly productive but also contested concept (Rovira Kaltwasser 2019) with a complex history (Skenderovic 2017). Scholars disagree on its definition and nature, and some even question the usefulness of the concept as an umbrella for historically, regionally, and politically diverse movements and parties. Over the past 20 years, populism has been conceptualized, among others, as a rhetorical strategy (Weyland 2001), a discourse (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014), a style (Moffitt 2016), and a thin ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The dividing lines in these discussions run both within and between disciplines; frequently, they are related to more fundamental disagreements about, for example, the nature of democracy, representation, or ideology. For example, scholars who subscribe to the ideational approach to populism usually regard the phenomenon rather negatively and stress the danger that populism can pose to democracy. They also often focus on right-wing populism. By contrast, scholars from the discourse-analytical camp usually focus on left-wing populism. Moreover, they tend to view populism far more neutrally and often even favorably, as at least potentially beneficial to democracy. At the most extreme, scholars from this camp try to purge populism of everything negative—nationalism, xenophobia, or conspiracy theory—by arguing that when other scholars, politicians, or the media highlight the links of these phenomena to populism, they are misusing the concept. What they are describing, the argument goes, is not populism but right-wing extremism (Markou 2022).

This is not the place to intervene in this debate, let alone resolve it. Suffice it to say that from my perspective the different approaches to populism agree on key features. As Woods, drawing on Stanley (2008), convincingly argues, different definitions of populism converge in the identification of four core elements: (1) the existence of the two groups of the people and the elite; (2) their antagonism; (3) the celebration of popular sovereignty; and (4) the moral glorification of the people and the critique of the elites (2014, 11). Proponents of the discursive approach to populism of course reject the claim that populism is more invested in morality than any other form of politics (see, for example, Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020) but I find this argument unconvincing. Binaries such as the one between the people and the elite, which they too consider constitutive of populism, are never neutral but always morally loaded as one part of it is invariably valued higher than the other.

Moreover, the debates about the nature of populism are to a certain degree moot because different definitions focus on different aspects of a more comprehensive phenomenon. Rhetoric and style, on the one hand, and ideology and discourse, on the other, are, as Woods also points out, “integral to each other” (2014, 15). In fact, it is one of the central tenets of my discipline—American literary and cultural studies—that form and content are inextricably connected. Ideas do not exist independently of their representations: Language, narrative, and discourse do not simply express preexisting ideas but shape them in the process of articulation (Hall 2007). What is important to keep in mind, however, is that the different contributors to this volume perceive populism often very differently.

By contrast, the understanding of conspiracy theory is less contested—both among the contributors to this book and scholars in general. Because of their specific disciplinary backgrounds, different scholars have highlighted different aspects, but in general there is considerable agreement across the disciplines: A conspiracy theory is the usually baseless assumption that a group of evildoers, the conspirators, are secretly manipulating events to achieve sinister goals. Moreover, conspiracy theories assume (1) that nothing happens by accident, i.e., everything has been planned, (2) that nothing is as it seems, i.e., the conspirators are operating in secret, and (3) that everything is connected, i.e., that there are links between people, events, and organizations that escape those who do not assume a conspiracy (Barkun 2003, 3–4). Obviously, “everything” and “nothing” are not to be taken literally in this definition. Not even the most fervent conspiracy theorist would claim that the shorts he is wearing while surfing the net to connect the dots are linked to the plot he seeks to expose. What Barkun means is that compared to other explanations conspiracy theories always overemphasize intentional action and connectivity and underestimate coincidence.

Moreover, like populism, conspiracy theories provide both a specific form and content: They employ a particular style and rhetoric to articulate specific

ideas. Until recently, scholars would have agreed that conspiracy theories do this by offering a distinct narrative template to make sense of events (Fenster 2008 [1999]). In the past few years, however, the idea that conspiracy theories always assume narrative shape has been challenged. In an influential book, political scientists Muirhead and Rosenblum have argued that the old, narrative conspiracism has in the United States been largely replaced by what they call “the new conspiracism” in recent years. Whereas the old conspiracism depended on evidence, the new one, they argue, thrives on repetition. An accusation is repeated over and over again, but no attempt is made to prove it. It is, in their memorable phrase, “conspiracy without the theory” (2019, xx), or, we could say, without the narrative.

What Muirhead and Rosenblum neglect is that their argument applies mostly to conspiracist utterances on the platform formerly known as Twitter, whose specific affordances favor statements and their repetition (or retweeting) over narrative, and not to conspiracist discourse in general. By contrast, taking a media-sensitive approach and drawing on Gregory Bateson’s theory of the ecology of mind, Leticia Cesarino argues in her chapter that the context of cybernetic media determines the logic of contemporary conspiracy theories. In a similar fashion, Sebastian M. Herrmann suggests in his contribution that contemporary conspiracism is marked by how it taps into formal principles other than narrative, such as “database” or “play,” and that it gains its cultural and political traction from inviting its audiences to utilize the specific affordances of these forms. Both Cesarino and Herrmann also stress that the forms of conspiracism they describe are often closely tied to right-wing populism.

The connection between populism and conspiracy theory is, as the few examples I offered above show, rather obvious. Since Richard Hofstadter’s seminal essay on “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in which he never uses the term “conspiracy theory” but ties what he calls “visions of conspiracy” to populism (1996 [1964], xx), it has often been remarked upon by scholars. Hofstadter’s essay was a reaction to the rise of right-wing populism in the United States during the 1950s—a moment to which Mark Fenster returns in this volume’s closing chapter, asking what we can learn from Hofstadter’s timely intervention to understand and intervene in the present moment, where populism is again on the rise in the United States and elsewhere.

Because of the seemingly ever-growing influence of populism worldwide, the link to conspiracy theory has received increased attention in the past two decades. It has been argued that “populism fosters a conspiratorial mindset” (Edis 2020, 6) or that we have even entered “the era of . . . the conspiratorial populist” (Bergmann 2018, 8). Conspiracy theories have been described as “the logic of populism” (Runciman 2018, 65) or its “currency” (Fieschi 2019, 160). However, these and many other studies tend to merely mention the link, often treating it as given and thus apparently not requiring further

analysis, before they move on to different topics. There are a few studies that discuss why populism and conspiracy theory are so often connected, but they usually highlight only a single parallel to explain the affinity. Oliver and Rahn (2016) and Castanho Silva et al. (2017) identify distrust of elites as the most important common element; van Prooijen (2018) argues that since populists offer simplistic answers to complicated problems, they often employ conspiracy theories because they are a convenient means to reduce complexity; Gadinger and Simon highlight the nostalgia that populism and conspiracy theory share (2019, 29); and Golec de Zavala and Keenan (2021) claim that collective narcissism drives both populism and conspiracy theories.

More recently, a number of studies have focused on the strategic deployment of conspiracy theories by populist politicians. Thalmann (2019, 198) stresses that populists can use conspiracy theories to fashion themselves as antiestablishment figures because both populism and conspiracy theory are stigmatized by the mainstream and the elites. Sawyer (2020) argues that populist candidates for office use conspiracist rhetoric strategically for mobilization; and the same goes for populists once they have been elected, according to Balta et al. (2021). On the basis of data from Turkey, they suggest that populists in government can rally long-lasting support by blaming foreign conspirators for the problems of the country. Their findings are corroborated by Pirro and Taggart (2022) who have found that populists in power in different countries employ conspiracy theories to demonize and disqualify the opposition and to secure the support of the voters although their policies do not improve the situation of the “people.” In much the same vein, Müller (2022) has suggested that populists who have lost at the polls blame sinister forces for manipulating the election, while those who have won elections often accuse enemies on the inside, such as the “deep state,” or on the outside to explain to voters why they are not doing what they promised they would do during their campaigns. The chapter most closely aligned with this line of research is Eirikur Bergmann’s discussion of the weaponization of conspiracy theories by populists in the United States and Europe. However, the strategic deployment of populist conspiracism is addressed in a number of other chapters as well, for example, in Franciszek Czech’s analysis of Rodrigo Duterte’s rhetoric and Tarek Kahlouï’s contribution on Tunisia.

There have also been a few attempts to theorize the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory more generally. Broadly speaking, these studies fall into two categories. The first group of studies argues that conspiracy theories are a necessary element of populism in general or at least the variant commonly referred to as right-wing populism, and that therefore all (right-wing) populist movements rely on conspiracy theories. Among others, Wodak (2015), Rydgren (2017), and van Kessel et al. (2020) have made this argument for right-wing populism; Stoica (2017) and Vassiliou (2017) for populism in general. The second group of studies argues that

conspiracy theories are a secondary element of populism and that they therefore frequently but by no means always occur in populist movements. Fenster considers conspiracy theories “a nonnecessary element of populist ideology – which is to say that . . . not all populist movements rely upon or even use conspiracy theories to build support” (2008 [1999], 84). This argument has been reiterated by Taggart from the perspective of populism studies. He argues that “[a]n opposition to an elite or an ‘establishment’ will naturally lead to the assumption that this grouping is somehow unified not only in ends but means.” However, he also stresses that this assumption is not made in all populist movements and therefore classifies conspiracy theories as one of the “secondary features” of populism that “occur commonly enough for us to suggest that they have some association with populism” (2019, 84, 80).

Recently, Bergmann and I have further developed the theorizations by Fenster and Taggart. We draw on both quantitative and qualitative research that shows that even when conspiracy theories are central to a populist movement not everybody believes and articulates them (Ehrenfreund 2016; Hammel 2017). In fact, even in cases where such theories are extremely visible, their proponents usually only constitute a significant minority within the movement. This point has also implicitly been made by Bobba and Roncarlo who observe that “[t]he elites are generally accused of being incompetent and self-interested when not actually conspiring against the people and seeking to undermine democracy” (2018, 53). Accordingly, we proposed an amendment to theorizations of conspiracy theory as a secondary feature of populism:

Conspiracy theories, then, offer a specific explanation as to why the elites act against the interests of the people. This explanation tends to co-exist within a populist movement or party with other explanations such as negligence or personal enrichment. In other words, conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of populist discourse and ideology, and they are not necessarily believed by everybody in the populist movement or party in which they are circulating.

(Bergmann and Butter 2020, 334)

However, this take on the connection between populism and conspiracy theory is not entirely satisfactory either. Like the studies by Taggart and Fenster it does not allow any predictions about the importance of conspiracy theories to a specific populist movement or the ways in which they are articulated. Moreover, the claim that believers in conspiracy theory usually constitute a “significant minority” (2020, 333) within populist movements rests on the tacit assumption that conspiracy theories are always stigmatized counter-knowledge and not widely accepted. But as the polls we draw on (Germany and the United States) and the case studies they conduct

(the Nordic countries and the United States) show, we have exclusively western countries in mind here. Since earlier studies have shown that conspiracy theories indeed constitute “stigmatized knowledge” in these countries (Barkun 2003, 26), it is to be expected that they are usually not believed by a majority even within a populist movement. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Butter 2020, 105), conspiracy theories are much less stigmatized and even still accepted as orthodox knowledge in other parts of the world. An appropriate theorization of the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory should take the different status and acceptance of conspiracy theories in different parts of the world into account.

The contributions collected here cannot provide this theorization. That’s the task of the project “PACT: Populism and Conspiracy Theory” whose team is editing this volume. Many of the chapters, however, intervene in the discussion about the role of conspiracy theories in left-wing populist movements and parties. When Karl Popper coined the modern meaning of “conspiracy theory” in the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* by identifying “a *conspiracy theory of society*” (1962 [1945], 93), he was criticizing Marxist scholars who, so Popper claimed, were not blaming structural causes and the logic of capitalism as such for the oppression of the working classes, as Marx had done, but a sinister conspiracy of those in possession of the means of production. Thus, the critical scholarly discourse on conspiracy theory began with a critique of left-wing conspiracism.

But despite this beginning and the findings of various quantitative studies that show that conspiracy theorizing occurs nearly as frequently on the left side of the political spectrum as on the right (for example, Imhoff et al. 2022), many scholars still consider conspiracy theories as the more or less exclusive propriety of right-wing populism. This goes for the scholars that I mentioned above who, influenced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, consider populism as discourse, but also for those, mentioned two paragraphs earlier, who see conspiracism as a defining feature of right-wing populism—and, by extension, also extremism—as well as for many others. Political scientist Armin Pfahl-Traughber (2020), for example, has argued that right-wing thinking is more prone to conspiracy theorizing because it always focuses on individuals and not on structures, as left-wing thinking usually does. By contrast, Helge Petersen and Hanna Hecker argue in their chapter in this volume that the post-Marxist theories of Laclau and Mouffe, while not fully-fledged conspiracy theories, share many characteristics with such theories. That left-wing conspiracy theories are often a somewhat simplistic and confused critique of capitalism is surely one reason why they have not yet received that much scholarly attention. As they are often—unless they are explicitly or implicitly antisemitic—less racist or sexist than right-wing conspiracist articulations, they appear (and maybe are often) less dangerous. Another reason why scholars and the public at large are usually less bothered by left-wing populism

might be the style of right-wing populism, as Clare Birchall suggests in her chapter on Trump in which she connects Trump's aesthetic style—which she calls “haute baroque bling”—with his conspiracist-populist rhetorical style.

Taken together, the chapters concerned with the relationship between left-wing populism and conspiracy theory paint a complex picture. Nina Pilz's analysis of the alternative German newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand* (Democratic Resistance), which came into existence during the Covid-19 pandemic, shows how central conspiracy theories are to the worldview of its authors. By contrast, Leo Roepert finds only elements of conspiracy theories but no fully developed ones in the online discourse of *Aufstehen* (Stand Up), a left-wing movement initiated by the populist politician Sahra Wagenknecht. Conspiracy theories are, however, absolutely central to the discourse of Kais Saïed, the current president of Tunisia who embodies a specifically Arab version of left-wing populism, as Tarek Kahloui demonstrates in his chapter. The same is true for the left-wing grassroots movement *Popolo degli Ulivi* (The Olive Trees People), which Giovanna Parmigiani analyzes in her contribution. The Olive Trees People movement offers a conspiracist explanation for a disease that has been affecting more and more olive trees in Southern Apulia, Italy since 2013. On the whole, then, these chapters show that left-wing populism is not at all immune to conspiracist thinking, without being absolutely essential to it, thus corroborating the claim that conspiracy theories constitute a non-necessary or secondary element of populist discourse.

However, it is very often not that easy or even possible to classify a populist movement or a conspiracy theory as left-wing or right-wing, as both populism and conspiracy theory have the tendency to overcome such traditional divisions by appealing to diverse groups. This is the case for the hybrid populism that Franciszek Czech identifies in his analysis of the Philippines and the rhetoric of its former president Duterte, as it is for the critique of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which assumed the form of conspiracy theory both on the left and on the right, as Helen Murphey shows in her chapter. In other contexts, however, left-wing and right-wing populists may be equally prone to conspiracy theorizing but differ significantly in the conspiracy theories that they articulate, as Nebojša Blanuša concludes in his study of populist conspiracism in Croatia.

All of these chapters display an acute awareness of the long history of specific conspiracy theories and the transformations they undergo when they are actualized by populists at concrete historical moments. Some contributions, however, focus on this dimension. Adam Koper demonstrates how Henry Ford's articulation of antisemitic conspiracy theories at the beginning of the twentieth century was integral to a right-wing populist discourse that sought to defend capitalism by introducing a distinction between good productivism and evil finance capitalism imagined as a devious Jewish plot. By contrast, Rodrigo Patto Sa Motta's chapter on Brazil analyzes how the specter of a

communist plot is drawn on and updated again and again by right-wing populists at different historical moments.

While the enemy in this case ultimately remains the same despite all changes, there are also cases where the enemy image is more radically updated, and the new enemy replaces or at least supplements the old one. This is the case, for example, in the conspiracy theory about Cultural Marxism, which claims that scholars of the Frankfurt School and their successors have infiltrated universities to indoctrinate people with harmful ideas and thus change society. This conspiracy theory is currently very popular in many countries, but especially so in the United States, where it has largely replaced ideas about a communist plot, and Brazil, where it co-exists with such fears. As Andrew Woods shows in his chapter, the United States and the Brazilian right are so closely entangled that the reception of the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory in Brazil is best described not as an adaptation of US-American ideas but as a hybridization. Such transnational entanglements and hybridizations of both populism and conspiracy theory deserve more scholarly attention. The path for future research is thus cut out.

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PART I

Case Studies



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1

MAKERS VERSUS GETTERS

Productivism in Henry Ford's *The International Jew*

Adam John Koper

Introduction

In the first of the articles that comprise Henry Ford's antisemitic conspiracist text, *The International Jew* (published between 1920 and 1922), the automobile manufacturer makes a surprising claim about capitalism:

That which we call capital here in America is usually money used in production, and we mistakenly refer to the manufacturer, the manager of work, the provider of tools and jobs—we refer to him as the 'capitalist.' Oh, no. He is not the capitalist in the real sense. Why, he himself must go to capitalists for the money with which to finance his plans.

(Ford 2011, 9)

Separating production from capitalism in this way is a bold, dubious move for Ford to make. Today, we associate his name with a period in capitalism's history, namely Fordism, characterized by the growth of mass production and mass consumption (Jessop 2013). How could this pioneer of the assembly line effectively deny that he is a capitalist? What does Ford take capitalism to be, and how does this fit into his antisemitic conspiracy theory that the Jews are sowing discord and revolution in order to take over the world?

In this chapter, I draw attention to this hitherto under-studied aspect of Ford's conspiracy theory, that is his productivist critique of capitalism, whereby production is taken to be non-capitalist and good while finance alone is described as capitalist and corrupt. From the productivist perspective, industrial production and the labor it entails are seen as natural, good, and more real than the realm of finance and money. In this way, the toil that

goes on in factories such as Ford's is reframed as honest good work, while the ills of capitalism are attributed to malicious activities of parasitic financiers alone. Put simply, Ford has a one-sided view of capitalism, failing to see the interrelation of production and finance in capitalist society.

To analyze *The International Jew* and its productivist aspect, I draw upon a combination of Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (2015, 2001) and Alan Finlayson's Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) (2012, 2007, 2004). Taken together, these two approaches encourage us to see the text not simply as reflecting an underlying ideology but as actively working and shaping ideas to suit the political moment the text is addressing. I argue that productivism in *The International Jew* functions to externalize internal social divisions—most notably, class. These tensions are projected outwards onto the figure of the Jew, which serves as Ford's personification of social problems. In this way, productivism enables an anti-capitalist rhetoric while nevertheless serving to protect the status quo, depicting finance and the Jews as a parasitic force impinging on an otherwise ordered and harmonious society (Bonefeld 2014).

The articles included in *The International Jew* were initially published during the early 1920s, but the productivist view they articulate has not been consigned to the past. Rather, I show that this aspect of Ford's conspiracy theory can also be found today in some cases of populist discourse, in which the good people are linked with the realm of production, while the corrupt elite are equated with finance. Such a view has been expressed by the likes of Donald Trump in the United States, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. While such discourses still risk veering into conspiracy theory and antisemitism, the context they inhabit is different from that of *The International Jew*, and so I suggest that further research is required into the function of productivism in this particular context.

A number of scholars writing about conspiracy theories have noted Ford's global influence on antisemitism and conspiracism (see Bangerter et al. 2020; Butter 2014; Kuzmick 2003; Ruotsila 2003). Though the two are not synonymous, antisemitism has long occupied an influential place within the conspiracy theory tradition, to the extent that it can be difficult for conspiracy theorists in the present to avoid its motifs (Byford 2011, 102). For example, Markku Ruotsila sees Ford as a key influence on the content of both antisemitic and Illuminati conspiracy theories, and as "responsible for the unprecedented spread and popular acceptance of the Jew-Bolshevik equation, which coincided with his period of greatest antisemitic activity, the years 1920–1927" (Ruotsila 2003, 83). Michael Butter refers to Ford, along with the Catholic priest Charles Coughlin, as American antisemitism's "most vocal spokesmen in the first half of the twentieth century" (2014, 31). Victoria Saker Woeste observes that the influence of *The International Jew* persists to the present day due to it being readily accessible on the internet (2012, 330–31).

Despite agreement about the influence of Ford's antisemitic writing upon conspiracy theorizing, no in-depth analysis of *The International Jew* or the conspiracy theory it articulates has so far been published. Several compelling studies about Ford's antisemitism have been published, but none of these have analyzed the text as a piece of political thinking or a conspiracy theory (see Woeste 2012; Baldwin 2003; Foust 1997; Lewis 1984; Ribuffo 1980). Moreover, while others have noted Ford's dislike of capitalism, none so far have analyzed his anti-capitalism in detail nor how it was articulated in his conspiracist writing. For example, James C. Foust refers only briefly to Ford's "distrust of big business, bankers, and Wall Street" (1997, 413). Similarly, Leo P. Ribuffo (1980, 443) notes that Ford saw the First World War as a capitalist conflict but does not delve deeper into his peculiar critique of capitalism. Victoria Saker Woeste also notes that "Ford's pacifism was grounded in a scorn for a certain kind of capitalist, those who he believed controlled the money supply," but goes no further (2012, 32–33).

This chapter starts by outlining the methodology used in my analysis of Ford's conspiracist writing. Following this, I describe the background to the composition and publication of *The International Jew*, as well as Ford's business activities more generally. I then examine the text's construction of a binary division between an in- and an out-group, namely Ford's division between the Gentiles and Jews. This moves us on to the analysis of the text's productivist anti-capitalist position, which depicts production as natural and good in contrast to finance, which is depicted as artificial, unproductive, and ultimately parasitic. Finally, I examine the implications of Ford's productivist anti-capitalism for our understanding of populism and conspiracy theories today and argue that similarly productivist criticisms of capitalism can be found in populist and conspiracist discourses today.

Methodology

One of my aims in this chapter is to show how a political theorist might go about analyzing conspiracy theory texts like *The International Jew*, and so take conspiracy theories themselves as objects of study, as opposed to only treating them as symptomatic of broader social, cultural, or psychological conditions.¹ This is not to suggest that the approach used here is the only way of making sense of conspiracy theories—an understanding of underlying conditions can certainly strengthen the analysis of a conspiracy theory text. However, this approach does entail viewing conspiracy theories as more than just by-products of these conditions, and so as intervening in political discourse. Conspiracy theory belief cannot be understood simply as the result of an individual psychological fault, and instead, we need to consider a conspiracy theory's content—what it is claiming—and the context in which it is situated (Butter and Knight 2015, 24).

When focusing specifically on a conspiracy theory's politics, we should also consider the role of rhetoric, and so examine the setting in which the conspiracy theory is expressed, the audience to which it is addressed, and how the conspiracy theorist tries to be persuasive in light of such factors (Koper 2023). Questions about the truth or falsity of a conspiracy theory are not the priority here. While an epistemologist like Quassim Cassam (2019) may dismiss conspiracy theories as just pieces of political propaganda, the questions for us should be: What is this political propaganda trying to achieve? How does the conspiracy theorist try to win over their audience? What political ideas are they promoting, and how are they expressed?

To answer such questions, the methodology I use in this chapter draws on two approaches to analyzing political discourse, the first of which is Ruth Wodak's DHA (2015, 2001). This approach belongs to the field of CDA, a category of discourse analysis stemming from critical social science that is concerned not only with describing discourse but also with highlighting its ideological underpinnings, and so showing how discourse could be different (Fairclough 1995). Wodak's approach has been particularly influenced by Frankfurt School critical theorists, such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas (see Reisigl and Wodak 2005; Wodak 2001). Examples of the topics that have been studied with the DHA include right-wing populist discourse (Wodak 2015), the discursive strategies used by Holocaust deniers (Engel and Wodak 2013), and the discursive construction of British identity by David Cameron (Wodak 2018).

When analyzing a text, understood in a broad sense as including both oral and written sources, the DHA encourages us to look for five main categories of discursive strategies (see Wodak 2001). These are: referential strategies (how are groups named?); predication (what is attributed to groups?); argumentation (how does the author or speaker justify their conclusions?); perspectivation (how does the author or speaker position themselves in relation to the discourse?); intensification and mitigation (are any parts of the text played up or toned down?). Examining these strategies, and asking these questions about a text, can help us to understand how different identities are constructed in a text. Moreover, the DHA encourages us to examine the impact of multiple layers of context, from the position of an extract within the broader text to the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which the text is situated (Wodak 2001, 67). The DHA also pushes us to consider intertextual relationships, something that is key when studying conspiracy theories, which so often make connections with other texts and adapt narratives, arguments, and claims from earlier texts.

The second approach informing my methodology is Alan Finlayson's RPA (2012, 2007, 2004). This is an approach to analysis that is chiefly concerned with cases of everyday political discourse, whether they be career politicians

delivering a speech (Finlayson 2018), or political commentators spreading their message online (Finlayson 2022). RPA pays particular attention to rhetoric—how a speaker or author tries to persuade their audience—and so a text is once again taken as being deeply influenced by contextual factors such as the identity of the particular audience, the setting in which the text or speech is presented, and the audience's expectations in that setting. The text does not simply represent a particular political ideology in a passive sense but rather adapts that ideology to fit the context of the text's creation. Instead of only reflecting a set of beliefs, an author or speaker will have to make decisions about how to win over their audience, which concepts and claims they should use, and how these concepts should be presented. In the course of this creative process, the political ideas they express are not left unaffected. Some aspects of an ideology may be emphasized, toned down, or omitted. Different ideas may be presented in a new light, and incorporated into ideologies to which they did not previously belong.

A key part of RPA is thus its focus on a speaker or writer's use of doxa-commonplace views held by an audience, that a speaker may appeal to in their effort to persuade them. For example, in his analysis of a speech by the former British prime minister, David Cameron, in favor of continued membership of the European Union, Finlayson (2018) points to Cameron's acceptance of and appeal to the Conservative Party's commonplace view of Britain as exceptional and distinct other European nations. In this case, Cameron's appeal to his audience's Eurosceptic and exceptionalist view of British identity undermined his argument in favor of EU membership, such that "Cameron was dancing with doxa but . . . always dancing to someone else's tune" (Finlayson 2018, 74). Moreover, Finlayson identifies three types of rhetorical appeal to look for in a text, including an appeal to emotions (termed *pathos*), an appeal to one's character (*ethos*), and an appeal to reason (*logos*).

Not all of these features of the DHA and RPA will appear every time we analyze a conspiracy theory text, nor am I using these approaches in a strictly programmatic sense. What these approaches provide are ways of studying political discourse's dynamism, acting upon as well as responding to a specific context. Drawing on the DHA and RPA in the analysis of *The International Jew* will therefore mean that we do more than simply identify the ideology that is being expressed, but also consider what Ford is doing with that ideology, and how this may have been impacted by the context in which the text was written. Before proceeding, it is worth briefly clarifying what material has been selected for the analysis. Ford's antisemitic articles were published in a series of four volumes, after their initial appearance in his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent* (Ribuffo 1980, 437). Due to the length and number of these volumes, it would be unfeasible to analyze each and every article in this chapter. For the purposes of my analysis, then, I will be analyzing select extracts from two editions of *The International Jew*:

firstly, a selection of Ford's articles from across the four volumes published in 1931 under the title *The Jewish Question*; secondly, some extracts will come from articles included in the complete first volume of *The International Jew* (Ford 2011), but which were omitted from the 1931 collection.

The International Jew

Ford is popularly remembered as the automobile company that still bears his name today.² Founded in 1903, the Ford Motor Company stood out from its competitors thanks to its Model A car being “lighter, less expensive, and less mechanically daunting” than other cars on the market (Baldwin 2003, 21). The company pushed things further with the Model T, which “brought down his focus to a single, simple, egalitarian, and uniform car, each one manufactured as much like the next as pins or matches” (Baldwin 2003, 22). With the Model T, Ford sought to make travel by car more accessible and affordable for Americans, at one point selling the car for the low sum of 260 dollars (Ford UK n.d.). Charles E. Sorensen, one of the most powerful of his employees, described Ford's greatest achievement as “changing the face of America and putting the world on wheels” (Sorensen and Williamson 2006, 301).

Ford's name is also associated with a period in the history of capitalism—Fordism— which saw the expansion of mass production and consumption, along with increasing compromise and cooperation between organized labor and business owners (Jessop 2013). Ford himself is remembered for introducing a five-dollar-a-day wage for his workers, though this move was less benevolent than is often remembered. As Neil Baldwin describes, this wage was only offered to workers who acquiesced to the company's intrusion into their private lives:

To qualify for the five-dollar day, an employee had to put up with an exhaustive domestic inspection, show that he was sober, clean of person, saving money through regular bank deposits, ‘of good habits,’ and not living ‘riotously’ or taking in too many boarders.

(2003, 39)

Ford's intervention in the lives of his employees went further still with his program to Americanize those who were originally from outside the United States. Immigrant workers were encouraged to abandon their particular national language, traditions, and heritage, and instead adopt Anglo-Saxon American habits and culture.³ This effort was led by the company's Sociological Department, comprised of investigators who assessed the private lives and habits of Ford employees and gave compulsory English language classes, in a bid to enforce uniformity and discipline among the workforce (Baldwin 2003, 38–41). The program of Americanization culminated in a bizarre

graduation ceremony, in which graduating workers would climb into a model of a melting pot, wearing the traditional clothing of their countries of origin; they would then emerge from the melting pot, “dressed in derby hats, coats, pants, vests, stiff collars, polka-dot ties, . . . singing the *Star-Spangled Banner*—and wearing the distinctive Ford Motor Company badge on their lapels” (Baldwin 2003, 42).

The articles that make up *The International Jew* were first published in Ford's newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, as part of an antisemitic campaign that ran between May 1920 and January 1922 (Foust 1997). Ford bought the newspaper in 1919, using it as a mouthpiece through which he could communicate his ideas to a large audience (Baldwin 2003, 69). To aid him in this venture, Ford hired William J. Cameron, a “moralistic word-smith” to be his ghostwriter, turning Ford's utterances into lengthy written articles that would give readers an insight into his thoughts on the pressing matters of the day, in a column titled “Mr. Ford's Own Page” (Baldwin 2003, 74; Foust 1997, 414). As Foust describes, these articles were based on “impromptu talks with Cameron,” with Ford himself being rather aloof from the running of the newspaper prior to the start of its antisemitic campaign (1997, 414). Ribuffo makes much the same observation, explaining that Cameron “listened to Ford's ruminations and then wrote ‘Mr. Ford's Page’” (1980, 444). Cameron would later accept responsibility for the articles in the libel case that caused the *Independent's* ultimate demise (Lewis 1984, 5). However, Ribuffo also describes Ford's increasing involvement in the newspaper once its antisemitic campaign was underway, noting that “Ford visited the *Independent* almost every day, concerning himself only with ‘Mr. Ford's Page’ and *The International Jew*” (Ribuffo 1980, 446).

It would therefore be a mistake to see these articles as the product of a single creator. While Ford provided the ideas that went into these articles, it was Cameron who “translated” his employer's beliefs into a weekly column ready for public consumption (Baldwin 2003, 74). We should nevertheless be wary of diminishing Ford's role in the publication of *The International Jew*, and of accepting the claim made in the 1927 trial that Cameron alone was responsible for them. It is clear that Ford's antisemitism predated the publication of his articles in the *Independent*. For example, during a meeting with anti-war campaigner Rosika Schwimmer in 1915, Ford repeatedly blamed the outbreak of the First World War on German-Jewish bankers—Schwimmer was herself Jewish (Baldwin 2003, 58–60).

The conspiracy theory expressed in these articles is not revealed gradually over the course of the books, but each article deals with a particular topic or issue and relates this back to the broader conspiracy Ford has supposedly detected. For example, the articles frequently refer back to the earlier antisemitic forgery, the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (n.d.), a text which has itself had a deep influence on the tradition of conspiracy theory.

As Jovan Byford (2011, 102–7) observes, even conspiracy theorists who distance themselves from antisemitic texts like the *Protocols* struggle to avoid the motifs and tropes it has imparted upon the conspiracy theory tradition, such as focusing on Jewish names while downplaying the importance of non-Jewish industrialists, as well as incorporating occultism, freemasonry, and the Illuminati into the narrative. In these articles, Ford deals with topics such as the question of whether there is a Jewish conspiracy at all (Ford 1931, Art. IV); the Jewish conspirators' involvement in the Russian Revolution (Art. XIX); Jewish control of motion pictures (Art. XXXII); Jews' promotion of jazz music (Art. XLVII); Jewish involvement in bootlegging (Art. LXIV); and an address to gentiles about what they can do to counter the conspiracy (Art. LXXX).

As is the case with the earlier *Protocols*, Ford's articles attribute control over large areas of society to the Jews: he blames them for the First World War and claims that they control national economies and governments; he blames them for jazz and the popularity of "sport clothes," the latter of which he describes as having had "so deleterious an effect on the youth of the times" (2011, 65). Other things attributed by Ford to the Jews in the articles include Marxism, Darwinism, Nietzscheism (92), both the French and Russian revolutions (71), the decline of Christianity (63), and the collapse of society into competing factions (58). Drawing again on the *Protocols*, Ford's text is largely focused on depicting the Jews as a threatening out-group, one whose members are "individually excellent but socially harmful" (18).

While Ford cites the *Protocols* repeatedly and positively throughout *The International Jew*, there are still some changes that differentiate his conspiracy theory, mostly arising from the particular contexts in which these texts were produced and the different commonplaces upon which they draw. Though the exact origins of the *Protocols* are unknown, what is clear is that the text first came to prominence in Czarist Russia in the early twentieth century (Hagemeister 2022). The *Protocols* was promoted by the conservative religious figure Sergei Nilus, who took the text as evidence of an apocalyptic clash between Satan and Christianity (in which the Jews are aligned with the former), though this religious interpretation was ultimately overtaken by a secular reading that saw the Jews as "a threatening modernity, who destroy traditional ways of life and social orders" (Hagemeister 2022, 6–7). Indeed, the conservative, religious reading of the *Protocols* is largely absent from Ford's writing. For instance, the defense of aristocracy that one finds in the *Protocols* has little room in Ford's interpretation. Instead, Ford's reading of the *Protocols* appeals to American democracy, as he accuses the Jews of lacking democracy and of being naturally autocratic, claiming that "the Jew wherever he is found forms an aristocracy of one sort or another" (Ford 2011, 41). This is the most striking

way in which *The International Jew* differs from the *Protocols* and a prime example of how a conspiracy theory may be altered or built upon by other conspiracy theorists to fit with their own particular political context.

As the title alone suggests, much of *The International Jew* is concerned with constructing the category of “the Jew.” Even the basic referential strategy being used here—the way in which individuals and groups are named and referred to—provides an insight into how Ford constructs this category in the articles. The use of the singular rather than plural term—*The International Jew* instead of *Jews*—already implies homogeneity and a lack of individuality among Jews. This use of the singular is prominent throughout the text—for example, in asserting that Jews are overrepresented in national and international elites, Ford states that “we meet *the Jew* everywhere in the upper circles” (Ford 1931, 21, emphasis added).

Elsewhere, Ford attributed the supposed homogeneity of the Jews to what he deems to be their uniquely strong sense of *racial* or *national* unity, such as when he writes that “the Jew will go on thinking of himself as the member of a people, a nation, a race” (Ford 2011, 23). He asserts that the Jew “avails himself of a racial loyalty and solidarity the like of which exists in no other human group” (Ford 1931, 24). Ford shows comparatively little concern with the Jewish religion, as, “There is really nothing in his religion to differentiate the Jew from the rest of mankind” (Ford 1931, 25). The language of race and nationality functions to fix the qualities attributed to the Jew in place, treating them as though they were innate to all Jews and unable to be erased or changed. From Ford’s perspective, then, whether or not a Jew is directly involved in the conspiracy is of little concern. In his view, the tendency toward conspiring is a natural part of the character of “the Jew,” one that can be explained by their race. As Ford writes elsewhere, these are part of the “qualities which are inherent in their Jewish natures” and their “Jewish character and psychology” (Ford 1931, 27). In this way, their persecution is able to be framed not simply as desirable but as a necessity, stemming from the harmful and immutable traits Ford attributes to them.

This characterization of the Jews as homogenous and racially loyal stands in opposition to Ford’s construction of another social category, that of the Gentiles. For instance, he claims that the “cement of racial unity, the bond of racial brotherhood cannot in the very nature of things exist among the Gentiles as it exists among the Jews” (Ford 1931, 30). In Ford’s construction of the binary categories of Jew and gentile, the racial unity of the former is what enables their conspiracy to dominate the latter. Indeed, in his view, it is this unique unity that has prevented the wider acceptance of views like his, as he claims that “there is nothing more ridiculous to the Gentile mind than a mass conspiracy because there is nothing more impossible to the Gentile himself” (Ford 2011, 33).

Production and Parasitism

Having summarized the context in which *The International Jew* was created, as well as Ford's construction of the categories of Jew and gentile, in this section, I return to the question posed at the very start of this chapter: How could this captain of industry deny that he is a capitalist? One might assume that this is simply a cynical move on Ford's part, but in analyzing *The International Jew* we find that this denial is part of a broader productivist critique of capitalism. "Productivist" is a term I borrow from the heterodox Marxist Moishe Postone, who describes a productivist critique as affirming the concrete aspects of capitalism such as industrial production and proletarian labor, while attacking its abstract aspects like finance and money (Postone 1996, 17).⁴ The former are left untouched by such a critique, while the latter are criticized for causing an unjust imbalance in the distribution of profits across society (Postone 1996, 309). Werner Bonefeld identifies much the same view in modern antisemitism, which sees money "as rootless and existing not only independently from industrial capital but also over and against the industrial endeavor of the nation" (2014, 324). Such a productivist view is evident in the extract quoted at the start of this chapter, and persists in the lines that follow it in *The International Jew*:

There is a power yet above [the manufacturer]—a power which treats him far more callously and holds him in a more ruthless hand than he would ever dare display to labor. That, indeed, is one of the tragedies of these times, that 'labor' and 'capital' are fighting each other, when the conditions against which each one of them protests, and from which each one of them suffers, is not within their power to remedy at all, unless they find a way to wrest world control from that group of international financiers who create and control both these conditions.

There is a super-capitalism which is supported wholly by the fiction that gold is wealth. There is a super-government which is allied to no government, which is free from them all, and yet which has its hand in them all. There is a race, a part of humanity, which has never yet been received as a welcome part, and which has succeeded in raising itself to a power that the proudest Gentile race has never claimed—not even Rome in the days of her proudest power. It is becoming more and more the conviction of men all over the world that the labor question, the wage question, the land question cannot be settled until first of all this matter of an international super-capitalistic government is settled.

(Ford 2011, 9–10)

Here, we encounter another of Ford's binary distinctions, this time between producers and financiers. The more familiar division between labor and capital

is erased, dismissed as obscuring the truly fundamental division between those involved in production and finance. As we saw with his construction of the category of the Jews and Gentiles, the two groups stand in opposition to each other, such that individuals working in production (irrespective of their position in the production process) are defined by their common enemy, the capitalist or international financier, whom Ford describes as the source of the problems afflicting both workers and their bosses. In this way, Ford is able to write himself out of the category of capitalist, defining that role as involving solely finance rather than production.

This productivist aspect of Ford's writing is not entirely without precedent and can also be found in the language used by the Populists that gained support among American farmers in the late nineteenth century. As Margaret Canovan describes, according to the Populists' rhetoric "society is divided into two unequal parts, the honest toilers and the parasites who rob them of their reward" (1981, 52). However, Canovan also argues that, despite this rhetoric, Populists ultimately saw an impersonal monetary system as their opponent (1981, 52). In Ford's case, however, the binary distinction is taken to be just another aspect of the division between Jews and Gentiles, with Ford constructing the former group as financial capitalists and the latter as non-capitalist producers. In the same article as quoted above, Ford asserts that the Jews control global finance and exercise "the power behind many a throne" (2011, 4). In the description of the Jew that follows, Ford states that "he is in business" (2011, 4). Later on in the article, this aspect of Ford's characterization of Jews is developed further:

The Jew is the only and *original international capitalist*, but as a rule he prefers not to emblazon that fact upon the skies; he prefers to use Gentile banks and trust companies as his agents and instruments. The suggestive term "Gentile front" often appears in connection with this practice.

(Ford 2011, 5, *emphasis added*)

Ford's construction of the Jews here as international, and as exercising power obliquely rather than directly, is strikingly reminiscent of descriptions of the abstract dimension of capitalism. Postone's (2008) work is once again helpful here, specifically his critique of modern antisemitism as a misrecognition of how capitalism operates. Through his reinterpretation of Marx's critique of political economy, Postone argues that the categories of the capitalist economy are noteworthy for their double character, in that they combine a concrete dimension with an abstract dimension. As Marx himself states, commodities are "something two-fold, both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value" (Marx 1992, 13). They combine a use-value (the particular use of the object) with a value realized in exchange (putting qualitatively different objects into relation with one another). The same is true

for the category of labor: concrete labor (the particular productive activity carried out by the worker) is in tension with abstract labor (the source of value, which also allows the comparison of qualitatively different types of activity). These two dimensions—the concrete and the abstract—are reliant on each other, despite their contradiction; abstract labor can only appear in the material form of the commodity, while concrete labor is itself shaped by the expansion of value (Postone 2008).

The tension within the commodity is externalized, however—“It appears ‘doubled’ as money (the manifest form of value) and as the commodity (the manifest form of use-value)” (Postone 2008). Thus, the abstract and the concrete appear to be separate and in conflict with each other—they appear as an antinomy (Postone 2008). Modern antisemitism fails to recognize that these are two aspects of the same system and that each needs the other in order to persist. Instead, the antisemite vilifies the abstract aspect of capitalism while treating its concrete dimension as natural and good and mistakes the former for capitalism as a whole (Bonefeld 2014; Postone 2008). For instance, as indicated both by the title of the text and Ford’s claims that the Jews constitute a “super-government” controlling the governments of the world, he attributes an international quality to the Jews (Ford 2011, 5). Similarly, he depicts them as almost omnipresent and yet unable to assimilate into other nations, claiming that “Jews never become assimilated with any nation. They are a separate people, always were and always will be” (Ford 2011, 14). Elsewhere, he states this sentiment more brutally, by means of quoting an unnamed young Jew: “A Jewish American is a mere amateur Gentile, doomed to be a parasite forever” (Ford 2011, 123).

So far, we have seen how a productivist ideology is articulated in *The International Jew*, and how this ideology misrepresents capitalism. My aim, however, is to not merely criticize Ford’s productivism as a false description of capitalism—others, such as Postone (2008, 1996) and Bonefeld (2014) have already written critiques of productivism and antisemitism that are far more eloquent and compelling than anything I can say here. Instead, having established how Ford was able to exclude himself from the category of capitalist in the first place, the next step should be to question what this productivism is accomplishing in the text. What I have in mind here is neither Ford nor Cameron’s intention (how would we even go about determining who intended what?). Rather, I am interested in the function of the productivist critique in this conspiracy theory text—what it is doing for the authors?

One thing is already clear: The figure of the Jew acts as a personification of (the abstract aspects of) capitalism, rather than as a reflection on any actual Jewish person—the category is assembled in the text and could be read as an aspect of Ford’s antisemitic conspiracist ideology that is then projected onto reality. As Jean-Paul Sartre observes: “Far from experience producing [the antisemite’s] idea of the Jew, it was the latter which explained his experience.

If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him” (1965, 13). This is not to imply that Jewish identity is in any way false but rather points out that antisemitism is a problem stemming from antisemites themselves and not Jews (Sartre 1965, 152). Brian Klug similarly describes antisemitism as “a form of hostility to Jews as Jews, where Jews are perceived as something other than what they are. Or more succinctly: hostility to Jews as *not* Jews” (2013, 473, emphasis in original). The figure of the Jew, as we encounter it in a text like Ford’s, can thus be seen as a discursive construction by the antisemite, developed by drawing on earlier antisemitic and conspiracist traditions such as those stemming from the *Protocols*, and fitting them into the context of the United States in the 1920s. It acts as a scapegoat onto which problems that are internal to capitalist society can be projected and thus externalized. It thus “provides the excuse for a damaged life” (Bonefeld 2014, 317).

Productivism also serves to obscure Ford’s own involvement in exploitation and domination, by erasing the category of class. As we have seen from Ford’s comments on wages, labor, and land, his antisemitic productivist view enables these economic problems to be reframed as racial problems, stemming from the Jewish conspiracy against all non-Jews. Ford is thus able to position himself as an ally of the (in his mind, presumably, gentile) workers and as a victim of oppression himself, despite his own position of power and domination over his workers. Internal divisions within the in-group are depicted as distractions from the more fundamental division between Jews and Gentiles, or even as having been manufactured by the Jews as part of their conspiracy. The erasure of the social relationship of class, and its replacement with discursively constructed group identities, is especially visible in the 65th article in *The International Jew*, titled, “ANGLES OF JEWISH INFLUENCE IN AMERICAN LIFE” (Ford 1931, 266–80). Partway through this article, Ford constructs an opposition between two economic characters: the “maker” and the “getter” (1931, 268). In this extract, we see that these categories echo the earlier distinction between capitalist financiers and non-capitalist producers:

The creative, constructive type of mind has an affection for the thing it is doing. The non-Jewish worker formerly chose the work he liked best. He did not change employment easily, because there was a bond between him and the kind of work he had chosen- Nothing else was so attractive to him. He would rather draw a little less money and do what he liked to do, than a little more and do what irked him. The ‘maker’ is always thus influenced by his liking.

Not so the ‘getter’. It doesn’t matter what he does, so long as the income is satisfactory. He has no illusions, sentiments, or affections on the side of work. It is the ‘geld’ that counts. He has no attachment to the things he makes, for he doesn’t make any; he deals in the things that other men make

and regards them solely on the side of their money-drawing value. ‘The joy of creative labor’ is nothing to him, not even an intelligible saying.

Now, previous to the advent of Jewish socialistic and subversive ideas, the predominant thought in the labor world was to ‘make’ things and thus ‘make’ money. There was a pride among mechanics. Men who made things were a sturdy, honest race because they dealt with ideas of skill and quality, and their very characters were formed by the satisfaction of having performed useful functions in society. They were the Makers. And society was solid as long as they were solid. Men made shoes as exhibitions of their skills. Farmers raised crops for the inherent love of crops, not with reference to far-off money-markets. Everywhere The Job was the main thing and the rest was incidental.

(Ford 1931, 268–69)

In presenting the maker as existing prior to the getter, Ford implies that it is in some way transhistorical or natural. This chimes with another text by Ford, namely his book *My Life and Work* (Ford and Crowther 1923). In this title, which sets out his business philosophy, Ford states that laboring is natural and good, while the avoidance of work is the cause of social ills (Ford and Crowther 1923, 3). In Ford’s view, the ideas behind his approach to business form “something in the nature of a universal code” and should be seen as “not a new idea, but as a natural code” (Ford and Crowther 1923, 3). This leads Ford to decide that production (making) should re-establish its priority and dominance over finance (getting); it is only “when held in company with ‘make’ and as second importance, [that getting] is legitimate and constructive” (Ford 1931, 269).

The abstract domination experienced by the worker under capitalism—the impersonal imperative to sell one’s capacity to work in order to survive—is omitted from Ford’s rose-tinted view. Tensions over the separation of the worker from the means for life (see Bonefeld 2001), or of domination experienced by the worker in industrial production, are hidden from view, and instead, those structural problems of capitalism are treated as external impositions, as part of the Jews’ plot to disrupt an otherwise harmonious economy. This productivism can thus be seen as “an anticapitalism that seeks a capitalism without capitalism” (Bonefeld 2014, 319). In erasing such tensions, Ford’s productivist view leads to a naturalization of anti-pluralism, whereby differences within the in-group are denied. As Jan-Werner Müller (2022, 613) describes, anti-pluralism involves the moral and political exclusion of others, along with “a claim to a distinctly *moral* monopoly of representing the people” (611). Indeed, Ford’s claims to have grasped the true nature of modern society are exhibited not only in his rose-tinted view of laboring and in his erasure of class boundaries from this worldview, but also through his policies toward his employees—including his attempts to homogenize and erase cultural differences in his workforce.

Productivism in Contemporary Populist Discourses

We have already seen how the talk of an opposition between producers and parasites in Ford's writing is not without precedent, with a similar division appearing in the rhetoric of the People's Party in the nineteenth century. However, the productivism we detect in Ford's conspiracist writing is not consigned to the past either. Productivism can still be seen in some populist discourses today, on both sides of the political spectrum. In the final section of this chapter, I turn briefly to one of these recent examples of productivism, the case of a political commercial released for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. While a complete account of the relationship between antisemitism, conspiracy theory, and populism is beyond the scope and limits of this chapter, I nevertheless reflect briefly on what productivism can tell us about this relationship.

A clear example of the mingling of productivism and populism, and the danger of its descent into antisemitism, can be seen in the language used by Donald Trump. In a political commercial for Trump's 2016 presidential election campaign, the images of three Jewish figures working in finance were used: George Soros, Janet Yellen, and Lloyd Blankfein. In the voiceover accompanying these images, Trump draws on populist tropes, as he criticizes the "political establishment" for having "bled our country dry" (Team Trump, 00:29). The video caused controversy upon its release, with multiple news outlets highlighting its implicitly antisemitic tone (see Kampeas 2016; Marans 2016; Milbank 2016). This suggestion of a parasitic elite harming the speaker's in-group is combined with a productivist outlook similar to that of Ford, as Trump blames this elite for the decline of manufacturing in America. In the same video, Trump criticizes "the destruction of our factories, and our jobs" (Team Trump, 00:47). He describes a "global power structure that is responsible for the economic decisions that have robbed our working class, stripped our country of its wealth" (01:00).

As Müller (2022) rightly points out, criticism of those in power for the impacts of the decisions they have taken should not be misconstrued as necessarily populist, nor as inevitably anti-democratic. As he argues, what *should* worry us are cases of populist figures claiming a moral monopoly on the representation of the people, and so adopting an anti-pluralist position. Indeed, that is what we find in the case of this Trump video, as he informs the viewer that "The only force strong enough to save our country is us. The only people brave enough to vote out this corrupt establishment is you the American people" (01:24). Finally, he tells us that he is "doing this for the people" before ending with his infamous promise to "make America great again" (01:37).

While the commercial lacks the open allegation of a conspiracy, it nevertheless shares a number of features with Ford's writing. As with *The International Jew*, Trump here accuses a Jewish-coded elite of playing a parasitic role

in the American economy, with production being their main victim. Moreover, the productive economy is discursively tied to the in-group—these were *our* factories, *our* jobs. The Jewish figures visually identified in the video are implicitly separated from this in-group, such that they belong only to the corrupt elite and not to the American people. In this way, Trump’s productivist discourse emphasizes the homogeneity of the groups he is discursively constructing, as was the case with Ford. Once again, productivism points to a misrecognition of how capitalism operates, with the decline of manufacturing being depicted as a deliberate decision taken by a group of individuals, rather than as a process facilitated by the structural problems of capitalism. Most strikingly, we once again find a wealthy businessman positioning himself as belonging to the same side as the working class in a struggle against an unproductive elite, whom he positions as being external and alien to the American people. Overt conspiracy theorizing may be absent here, but the commercial is nevertheless open to conspiracist readings—is Trump attacking the political establishment for its incompetence, or is he suggesting a more deliberate plan to weaken America? The ambiguity here may indeed be helpful in appealing to a broader audience, allowing Trump to reach both voters with a penchant for conspiracy theorizing and those who subscribed to the commonplace disdain for conspiracy theory.

What is this productivist, antisemitic rhetoric doing for Trump in this video? First and foremost, it serves much the same function as in Ford’s writing, constructing a binary distinction between two groups and externalizing social divisions. In this case, the language is not explicitly antisemitic, and takes on more populist language, with Trump contrasting the American people with the political establishment, their opponents. Again, belonging to this group is framed by one’s relationship to the economy, that is whether one produces wealth or has a supposedly parasitic role. However, it is also worth noting the different context in which this video was made, one in which the speaker is seeking political office and so appealing for the viewer’s vote and achieving electoral success.

Another example of productivism being expressed in contemporary populism is the case of former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro has combined a denial of pluralism that veers into racism with support for expanding the productive use of land for resource extraction and agriculture. For instance, in a speech given to Club Hebraica (a Jewish-Brazilian community organization) during his initial campaign for the presidency, Bolsonaro criticized *quilombolas* (inhabitants of *quilombos*, settlements founded by the descendants of escaped African slaves) for their supposed laziness and unproductivity: “I went to a *quilombo*. The lightest afro-descendent there weighed over 100 kilos. They don’t do anything. I don’t think he [the afro-descendent] is even good for procreating. More than 1 billion Reais a year are spent on them” (Bolsonaro quoted in Congresso em Foco 2017).⁵

Later in the same speech, Bolsonaro states broadens his criticism of Brazil's indigenous communities:

Those tramps will have to work. You can be sure that when I get there if it's up to me, everyone will have a firearm at home, you won't have a centimetre demarcated for an indigenous reserve or for a *quilomba*.

(*Bolsonaro quoted in Congresso em Foco 2017*)

In these extracts from the speech, Bolsonaro conveys the assumption that contributing to society is synonymous with work and production, such that anyone who does not work is a tramp. The same goes for land—it is there to be put to productive use, not protected. Elsewhere, Bolsonaro has characterized Brazil's indigenous population not only as Other to the majority but as non-human, stating that indigenous people “are undoubtedly changing . . . They are increasingly becoming human beings just like us” (Bolsonaro quoted in Phillips 2020). Here, the idea of humanity is used in a racist fashion to deny equality to minority groups, treating difference from the majority as something negative that needs to be overcome before one can be called a human being. As with Ford's attempts to erase cultural differences and anglicize his workforce, Bolsonaro's rhetoric here implies that for minority must assimilate wholly in order to participate in society.

While an in-depth analysis of this productivist aspect of Bolsonaro's discourse is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting how this example shows that productivism is not always deployed in the same manner. Whereas Ford constructs a Jewish financial elite, and Trump attacks Jewish-coded financiers for having supposedly stripped the American working class of manufacturing jobs, Bolsonaro's productivism in this example does not characterize its target as an elite group. Rather than attacking an elite that is secretly controlling the country from above, in this case, Bolsonaro is targeting communities that have been oppressed and impoverished, but which in his view are nevertheless an obstacle to the nation's productivity.

Such cases of productivism in populism suggest that productivism's primary function is to deny modern society's pluralism and to externalize the divisions and problems emerging from its economic structure. In this way, the reasons for its use by populists, antisemites, and conspiracy theorists alike become clearer and can be seen to be down to its Manichaeian outlook. In each case, we find the construction of a binary distinction between two groups—the people against the elites, for populists; the Gentiles against the Jews, for antisemites; and the unwitting victims against the conspirators, for conspiracy theorists. Of course, these three categories are not mutually exclusive, as we have already seen from our examples of *The International Jew* and Trump's election commercial. Instead, these three categories can be mixed, sometimes connected in a more overt manner—as in Ford's case—and

sometimes combined in a more implicit way—as in Trump’s case. As Mark Fenster (2008) has written, we should not prejudge the politics of a populist movement—there is no necessity for such a movement to belong to either the left or the right, not for it to be exclusionary and authoritarian. Not every populist and conspiracy theorist will incorporate productivism or antisemitism into their discourse. Nevertheless, both remain risks for populism so long as they rely on the anti-pluralist binary categories we have examined in this chapter. And while we cannot prejudge a populist movement’s politics, we must also keep in mind Fenster’s other observation—that conspiracy theory and populism misperceive the operation of power—along with the risks that result from this.

Conclusion

Fenster (2008, 89) argues that conspiracy theory misrecognizes how power operates, but in doing so has a creative effect, constructing group identities such as the oppressed people and conspiratorial elite. In *The International Jew*, Ford’s productivist criticism of capitalism operates in much the same way, constructing two opposing groups—the Jews and the Gentiles—to replace class as the salient social division. Ford thus tries to contest commonplace understandings of the economy, collapsing economic and racial categories together. For him, one’s role in the economy is defined by one’s race, such that one is a capitalist parasite because one is Jewish, or a non-capitalist producer because one is not Jewish. Of course, such sweeping generalizations do not hold up to inspection but serve to deflect scrutiny away from the activities of industrialists like Ford onto an out-group. Ford is thus cast as belonging to the same side as the laborers papering over the inequality and domination experienced by the latter.

Today, productivist beliefs can be found in the populist discourses of figures like Trump and Bolsonaro, functioning again to construct group identities based on one’s role in the economy and attack those deemed to be unproductive. In some sense, this recasting of social divisions taps into genuine anxieties around economic uncertainty and inequality. Employment in the manufacturing industry in the United States has declined (Fort et al. 2018; Binvillian 2016), and wages have stagnated for many employees (*KelloggInsight* 2019). Attacking finance and promising to restore the jobs in production may indeed be a vote-winner. However, as the case of Trump’s election video illustrates, antisemitism and conspiracy theories are a risk whenever a nuanced account of capitalism as a system is sacrificed for a simplified struggle between personifications. Similarly, while Bolsonaro’s attack on groups he deemed to be unproductive may have appealed to voters at a time when Brazil was recovering from severe economic problems (Leahy 2017; Strategic Comments 2016), hateful scapegoating once again seeks out personal causes for impersonal social problems. The critique of productivism may therefore

help us to develop our understanding of the relationship between conspiracy theory, populism, and antisemitism.

The approach I have used to analyze Ford's conspiracist writing in this chapter, which combines the DHA with RPA, pushes us to look at the particular political content of a conspiracy theory, situated within its specific social and historical context. It encourages us to ask questions about the political claims, issues, and identities constructed in a text—who is named? How are they described? Where does power lie in the eyes of the conspiracy theorist, and where do they think it *ought* to be instead? Asking such questions is not part of an apologist attempt at recovering some aspects of Ford's conspiracy theory, nor any other conspiracy theory—clearly, his claims are absurd and hateful. Rather, the intention behind this approach is to examine what Ford is doing in expressing his conspiracy theory. Instead of simply asking questions of categorization—whether a particular text counts as a conspiracy theory—this approach encourages us to see conspiracy theorizing as creative (minus that adjective's usual positive connotations), with the conspiracy theorist drawing on a pre-existing idea while also making their own changes, adding or omitting material, playing up certain aspects, and toning down others.

Notes

- 1 For example, Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009) take conspiracy theory belief to be the product of a lack of relevant information. They go on to consider how governments should respond to the spread of harmful conspiracy theories and suggest cognitive infiltration of conspiracy theorist groups as one possible solution, whereby agents join such groups in order to expose members to other sources of information and raise doubts about the truth, logic, and implications of conspiracy theories (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 224–26). Another example is Alfred Moore (2018), who sees the broader phenomenon of “conspiracy political discourse” centered on the suggestion of a hidden power behind a phenomenon—as driven by a distrust of politics that may threaten democracy. Moore considers how elected representatives ought to respond to conspiracy politics among their constituents but indicates that there are no hard-and-fast solutions to this problem.
- 2 For a detailed discussion of Ford's career, his anti-trade union activities, and his antisemitic beliefs, see *The Empire Never Ended* (2021) podcast.
- 3 For an overview of antisemitism in the United States during this period, its relation to the development of American national identity, and a comparison with German antisemitism, see Frankel (2019).
- 4 Other scholars have used the notion of productivism in slightly different ways than Postone. For example, Sarah Vitale pushes back against the criticism that Marx was “a productivist essentialist, who defines the human as the productive animal” (Vitale 2020, 633; see also Vitale 2016). Michael Löwy's (2005) use of productivism is more similar to Postone's, as he argues that Marx was highly critical of the logic of production for its own sake, while nevertheless accepting that both Marx and Engels and Marxism have been guilty of seeing the expansion of production as the route to progress.
- 5 Many thanks to Ricardo Silva Pereira for translating these quotations from the original Portuguese.

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2

ANTICOMMUNISM AND CONSPIRACY MYTHS IN BRAZIL

From the 1937 “Cohen Plan” to the Bolsonarist “Red Menace”

Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta

Introduction

Denunciations of communist conspiracies linked to foreign powers have circulated among right-wing groups in Brazil since the 1920s. The culminating point was the disclosure of the “Cohen Plan” in October 1937, an apocryphal text that revealed an imminent (and non-existent) communist coup. This was followed by the consolidation of an anti-communist imaginary and the implementation of a right-wing dictatorship whose main justifications were to protect Brazilians from the “red menace” and to enhance national unity.

More recently, in the context of the Workers’ Party’s rise to power (2002–16), far-right groups reappropriated the issue of a communist conspiracy linked to foreign forces in order to mobilize support during the campaigns for the removal of the Workers’ Party from government (culminating in Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016) and for Bolsonaro’s election in 2018 and reelection attempt in 2022.

Hence, in this chapter I intend to connect the events that took place in Brazil during the 1930s¹ with Jair Bolsonaro’s recent rise to the presidency through an analysis that highlights the complex links between myth and reality. In both contexts, authoritarian right-wing forces used the rhetoric of a “red menace” to ascend to power or to tighten their political control. Conspiracist narratives were used in similar ways to manipulate public opinion through a deliberate distortion of events and mobilize support for one’s own position. Although they grossly misrepresented the truth, these myths possessed some connection to the social and political reality, which lent the conspiracist discourses some degree of plausibility.

The main goal of this text is to focus on the central role played by conspiracy theories in right-wing discourses. I analyze the reasons for this recurrent use of the theme of a foreign-backed communist menace and explain why such a strategy still remains effective at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although the focus here will be on Brazil, these past and current anti-communist mobilizations have transnational and global dimensions, as will become clear later.

The Origins of Anticommunism in Brazil and the First Conspiracist Narratives

As in other regions of the world, the 1930s in Brazil were a period of violent political struggles inspired by diverse ideologies like socialism, communism, fascism, and nationalism. But discourses and movements of an “anti” nature, such as anticommunism, antifascism, and antisemitism, also revealed a considerable potential for mobilizing different sectors of the population.

Demonstrations against communism began to appear in the Brazilian press immediately after the Bolshevik revolution² and continued throughout the 1920s when the topic became a primary concern of the dominant classes. A set of anti-communist representations established at that period provided a repertoire of arguments to be used in the offensive against leftists, very broadly conceived, that would soon begin. However, in the 1920s the “social question” and the political risks attached to it were not yet predominantly associated with communism, mainly because anarchists had more strength and political visibility in Brazil than the followers of Lenin (Dulles 1977). The anti-communist campaign gained more traction and visibility in the following decade as a response to a changed political landscape.

The political situation in Brazil became more complex and conflicted after the October 1930 insurrection supported by dissenting sections of both the armed forces and the political elites that brought Getúlio Vargas to power. Vargas governed as a dictator until 1934 when a new constitution was established and he was elected by parliament to remain in office for another four years, after which time a popular election would be held to choose the next president. During the same period, the political temperature in Brazil started to rise more seriously with the growing activism of groups on the left and right of the political spectrum. Polarization between fascists and leftists, along with a return to institutional normality propitiated by the promulgation of the new constitution, not to mention the political attrition experienced by the Vargas government after four years in power, stimulated the rise of radical political activism.

The Communist Party of Brazil (PCB, founded in 1922) grew significantly in the early 1930s after the popular leader and former Army Captain Luiz

Carlos Prestes joined the party, a fact that enhanced communist propaganda within the lower military ranks. The impression that the communists were on the rise was corroborated by a series of workers' strikes in different areas, especially in the railway system. Still in 1934, PCB militants engaged in another form of activity that contributed to raising their political visibility, the antifascist struggle. Mainly in the second half of that year, the communists dedicated themselves to forming antifascist organizations and staging events, seeking to attract the cooperation of other left-wing groups.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum, the Brazilian Integralist Action (AIB), a local fascist party, was expanding its forces and opposing—sometimes in violent confrontations—the left-wing militants. The AIB was founded in 1932 allegedly as a reaction to the growth of communism and aiming especially to fight the Reds (Trindade 1979). In reality, however, the Integralist party had other motivations besides fighting communism. Its emergence reflected a global expansion of authoritarian ideas and antiliberal reaction, a phenomenon related to the crisis arising from World War I and later fueled by the 1929 stock market crash. In Brazil, this authoritarian and fascist tendency was mainly embodied by the Integralists, who opposed the oligarchical liberalism and federalism inherited from the “Old Republic” (1889–1930).

Just like its European fascist brother organizations, the AIB held that the problems of the modern world were rooted in liberalism, whose materialistic eagerness was said to have destroyed traditional order and thrown society into the chaos of class war (Gonçalves and Caldeira Neto 2022). Accordingly, the emergence of communism was considered by the AIB's leaders a direct consequence of liberal capitalism. Following this line of reasoning, the Integralists believed that the struggle for a harmonious and conflict-free society, driven by a centralized state that guaranteed the supreme values (God, Fatherland, and Family), required the destruction of both liberalism and communism. Faced with the alleged bankruptcy of the liberal model and the uncertainties concerning Brazil's future, the AIB sought to channel the growing fear of communism in its favor. It is worth noting that conspiracy theories were an essential resource in the AIB propaganda, which accused Jews, liberals, and Freemasons—among other enemies—of acting in the shadows to promote the “Reds.”

By the end of 1934, the political tension between anti-communists and antifascists had increased significantly, giving rise to street fighting and shootings (Prestes 1997). In the beginning of 1935, the left increased its presence in the political arena with the creation of the National Liberation Alliance (*Aliança Nacional Libertadora*, ANL). The organization was a result of the antifascist initiatives undertaken in the previous year, which had brought together communists and leftists of various hues. The “extremist”

radicalization, an expression that came into vogue at the time and, depending on the context, could signify communism alone or the two extremes simultaneously, persuaded the government that it needed to issue specific legislation to defend order, the National Security Law, which came into force in April 1935.³ Showing its ideological preference for the right, in July 1935 the Vargas government used the Security Law to close the ANL's offices. This action only strengthened the revolutionary disposition of a part of the leftist militants who attempted an armed uprising in November of the same year, supported by the Communist International. The main results of the 1935 uprising were the temporary seizure of some army barracks in Rio, Recife, and Natal. In the latter city, left-wing leaders also maintained a provisional government for a week (Costa 1995).

The impact of these events was far bigger than the revolutionaries' real strength would have merited and its capability to seize power was greatly exaggerated. For many conservatives, it was not a common rebellion but a leftist armed attempt that could have brought about important transformations in Brazil's society. The public impact was further exacerbated when the press began to disclose clues, found by the police, that suggested the involvement of a group of foreign participants linked to the Communist International in the attempted revolution.

The government's crackdown in response was harsh, leading to the arrest of thousands across the country, in many cases people with no involvement in the leftist insurrection (Vianna 1992). Most of them were detained without formal prosecution or trial, revealing the arbitrariness of police action during the period. In his prison memoirs the writer Graciliano Ramos left a harshly realistic testimony of everyday life in the infectious political prisons at that time, narrating the miseries faced by the State's enemies.⁴ The campaign against the "red menace" also led to the creation of agencies and laws aimed at political repression that would remain in existence until the end of the twentieth century.⁵

In addition to these concrete measures and simultaneously fueling them, a broad anti-communist imaginary was built on the basis of the 1935 uprising. Official propaganda used the term "Intentona" to describe the uprising, since "intentona" means "crazy intent." Hence, in the wake of the large repressive wave following November 1935, state and private entities launched a propaganda campaign that repeatedly disseminated images associating the communists with evil: They were depicted as violent by nature, atheistic, immoral, and treacherous—in this case, due to their alleged links to foreign powers. From a distinctively religious and Manichean perspective, communists were identified with demonic forces (Motta 2020).

The November 1935 leftist insurrection thus had a strong impact, especially among the authoritarian and conservative right. A revolutionary

uprising was indeed attempted, but official narratives distorted the events to facilitate the anti-communist propaganda—for example, by accusing revolutionaries of committing sexual violence against young virgins, an allegation without any empirical evidence. In the aftermath, an anti-communist imaginary was consolidated and shared over time by influential sectors of the population, especially the military and various religious groups. For the military, this imaginary became an important tool to consolidate conservative values within its ranks. This anti-communist tradition became a constant feature of political campaigns and struggles during the following decades, albeit not always manifesting with the same intensity. At some moments, anticommunism's presence was weak, almost residual. However, whenever the PCB's influence was growing, the imaginary could quickly be drawn on to reawaken the specter of a communist plot.

But let's return to the political events following the "Intentona." Claiming that exceptional powers were needed to repress the communists, the Vargas government rallied support to establish a State of War in December 1935, which entailed the suspension of most constitutional guarantees. In May 1937, after a year and a half of intense repression, the State of War expired and there was no more political support for its renewal. This was largely due to a section of the elites wanting to ensure the presidential elections scheduled for January 1938 would take place, and therefore create conditions for electoral campaigns to take place freely and without fear of state repression. Aligning with this push for political normalization, in early September 1937, the Supreme Court took various decisions supporting the rights of political prisoners.

Authoritarian and conservative leaders reacted by expressing their dissatisfaction with the restoration of civil and political rights (Motta 2020). While some believed that authoritarianism was superior to liberalism and necessary to maintain social order, others were simply interested in keeping Vargas in power. For their part, AIB fascists pursued two strategies at the same time: They launched their leader (Plínio Salgado) as a candidate for the presidential elections and simultaneously indicated their willingness to back a coup that would institute an authoritarian nationalist government.

On September 17, 1937, Catholic bishops published the "Pastoral Letter of the Brazilian Episcopate on Atheistic Communism," which warned that "the Reds" were not defeated and that the conservatives should stay alert. On September 23, civil and military leaders held a public demonstration in Rio de Janeiro in memory of the military personnel (about 30) who had died fighting the 1935 uprising. This event was attended by Getúlio Vargas himself (Motta 2020). A few days later, the press began to report that state authorities had evidence of new revolutionary acts being planned by the communists, and this news stirred public unrest.

The “Cohen Plan” and the *Estado Novo* Dictatorship

When the newspapers announced the “discovery” of a new “Red plot” on September 30, 1937, therefore, the news provoked apprehension but not surprise. One of the most sensationalist headlines appeared in the Rio newspaper *O Jornal*: “A terrorist plan of international communism to be executed in Brazil.”⁶ Despite the scandalous headlines, few newspapers published the document in full; most made only vague comments about its content.

In fact, the text leaked to the press was written by army captain Olympio Mourão Filho, who was also head of the fascist AIB party’s information service. Initially, Mourão Filho identified the supposed author of the plan as Bela Kuhn, a well-known figure who had led the failed 1919 Hungarian revolution. But Mourão Filho eventually chose the name Cohen (perhaps because it was a more common Jewish name in Brazil) for the document’s alleged author with the intention of linking communist activism to a global conspiracy associated with “international Judaism” (Dantas 2015). Thus, the “Cohen Plan” had the essential elements of a conspiracy theory, exposing powerful hidden conspirators, connected to foreign forces, plotting evil and violent actions to impose their power on the population.

In a later statement, Mourão Filho claimed that the text had only ever been intended for training Integralist leaders and its dissemination as an authentic document had been a ploy (another conspiracy!) of the Army General Staff (Silva 1980). Whatever the case, the effect of the fake communist conspiracy was to clear the way for the establishment of a right-wing dictatorship. Immediately after the release of the document, the Vargas administration asked Congress to restore the State of War, which had expired in May 1937. Thanks to the press-generated alarm, parliamentarians came under intense pressure to approve the measure quickly. The only sources informing the parliamentary debate were the stories published by the newspapers and the concise official request from the government, based on a document produced by Brazil’s military command that was initially kept secret.

Adopting a risky position at a moment of hysteria and witch-hunting, some parliamentarians and journalists expressed skepticism about the alleged conspiracy, the sensational aspects of which raised doubts in more lucid minds. For example, the “Cohen Plan” contained picturesque details, such as instructions for the revolutionaries to hide machine guns in violin boxes when entering buildings that they intended to attack, or sexualized passages like the one describing popular mass participation in the insurrection, which should target wealthy neighborhoods in order to loot them and commit robberies, conferring, to quote the original text, “a distinctly sexual connotation” (Apud Silva 1980, 281) to the proposed violent action. In sum, the document revealed far more about the conservative imagination than

about the actual communist mentality. Its disclosure, along with the request for renewal of the State of War, also raised suspicions among opposition leaders that state leaders planned a coup given that the country was just months away from a presidential election.

Despite some critical voices in the press and in parliament,⁷ along with some votes against the measure by a few deputies (from São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul states), the State of War was immediately approved. In the following days, probably to placate the skeptical voices, the government decided to publish a document in which the Ministers of War (General Eurico Dutra) and the Navy (Admiral Aristides Guilhen) justified the request for exceptional measures. It is worth quoting some excerpts from the document:

It is not a fantasy of the authorities; it is not fear that dominates us. Documents of communist origin, coming from abroad or edited in our own territory, are copious and precise. The aggressive attitudes of the recently released elements are public and evident. . .

Communist propaganda invades all sectors of public and private activity. Trade, industry, the working classes, society in general and family itself live in constant fright.

The Nation already knows about the communist plan of action uncovered by the Army's General Staff. . .

None of this is fantasy. . .

The police have secure information that the explosion will occur before the general elections of January 3 of the coming year, elections whose realization communism decided to prevent.

Despite this information, which is reliable and accurate, the police will be unable to abort the coup that is being prepared because the current laws constitute an obstacle to the authorities' actions and consequently a powerful incentive to practice offences against the Fatherland. . .

In the presence of this threatening and deplorable spectacle, everyone may fall silent, except the Armed Forces. . .

The Armed Forces constitute the only element capable of saving Brazil from the catastrophe about to explode. . .

Against this imminent nefarious action, an honest action is imperative to save the national institutions.

The fight will be violent and merciless. It is all a matter of taking the initiative: whoever loses it will be compromised, at least at the outset. There is example given by Spain, flagrant, expressive, irrefutable.

Thus, it is necessary to act and act immediately, without pausing even before the most respectful considerations.

Above all is saving the Fatherland.⁸

The document signed by Dutra and Guilhen corroborated the sense of alarm at an imminent communist attack and sought to intensify public fears by comparing the Brazilian situation to the Spanish Civil War, whose dramatic violence was well-known. As an appeal to those concerned about the electoral calendar, the military commanders used a “bait” that revealed the cynicism of their plotting. According to Dutra and Guilhen, the communists intended to prevent the elections and, to ensure voting went ahead, it was indispensable to hand the government exceptional powers to destroy the “red conspiracy.” The institutions were under threat but they themselves were an obstacle to their own preservation. Hence, there was an urgent need to overthrow the institutions, suspending their normal operation, so they could be saved. The prestige of the military chiefs helped convince skeptics that the government’s intentions were honest. Such was the case of one of the few newspapers to express doubts about the “Cohen Plan,” *O Estado de São Paulo*, which, after the publication of the document by the military Ministers, stated in an editorial: “to combat communism, we shall not refuse the government any and all measures afforded by the Constitution.”⁹

The re-establishment of the State of War in the early days of October 1937 allowed the government to intensify its repression of opponents and pave the way for a *coup d’état*. The media were tightly controlled, and hotspots of the opposition were eliminated. One of the main actions was federal intervention in the state of Rio Grande do Sul where the governor, Flores da Cunha, represented an obstacle to Vargas’ plans to stay in power. On October 14, 1937, the governor’s police forces were placed under federal control and soon afterward he went into exile (Skidmore 1996). On November 10, 1937, came the actual coup: An authoritarian Constitution was established, elections were suspended, Congress was closed and the “Estado Novo” dictatorship was inaugurated under the leadership of Getúlio Vargas.

The “Cohen Plan” was a complete farce and only became possible due to the revolutionary uprising of November 1935, which lent some plausibility to the discourses about new left-wing conspiracies. But while it allegedly revealed left-wing conspiratorial plans, the “Cohen” document was actually part of a real conspiracy to prevent the 1938 elections and institute a right-wing dictatorship. Conspiracy theories can thus also serve conspiratorial strategies. I return to this theme in the conclusion.

The Estado Novo dictatorship did much to consolidate the anti-communist imaginary as it was an important element of its ideological substrate. The representations of communism as the nation’s enemy and the identification of revolutionaries with evil forces became deeply rooted in society, to the extent that they could be recuperated later when new critical conjunctures appeared on the political horizon.

The Cold War and the 1964 Dictatorship

Over the following decades anti-communist discourses circulated broadly, but they had a particularly relevant impact at two moments in the twentieth century, in 1946–48 and in 1961–64. The first period was marked by an authoritarian reaction to a short democratic interregnum in which the communists were allowed to emerge from their clandestine lives and take part in politics openly. This context was in part the result of the impact of World War II, as in early 1945 the *Estado Novo* dictatorship started a decompression strategy by granting amnesty to political prisoners and allowing the legalization of the PCB, followed by the diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union. But right-wing groups soon reacted to those initiatives, and also against a series of workers' strikes for better wages, which unsurprisingly were presented as resulting from red conspiracies. As part of a political offensive marked by the circulation of abundant conspiracy theories, the government of General Eurico Dutra (elected in December 1945) shut down the PCB and broke relations with the Soviet Union in 1947.

The second large anti-communist wave produced even more serious results, as it ended in the 1964 military coup for which the “red conspiracy” narrative was the main spark. The crisis began in September 1961 when vice-President João Goulart assumed power in the wake of President Jânio Quadros' sudden resignation. Goulart was a moderate left-wing leader who was elected vice-President thanks to the support of unions and other social movements (Ferreira 2011). He was feared by the right-wing due to his alliance with the left, particularly the communists, although he was a rich entrepreneur and farmer with no red inclinations. But the conjunction of a scenario of domestic political radicalization against the background of the global Cold War made the Brazilian situation more complex.

During his term, Goulart promised to support a number of social movements composed mainly of peasants, workers, and students that demanded “basic” reforms to democratize Brazil, especially agrarian reform (land distribution), political reform (the right for the illiterate to vote) and educational reform (expansion and modernization of the university system). Such demands were perfectly compatible with capitalism but because of the specter of radicalization many conservatives considered them a path to empower the left and open the way to communism. Hence, during Goulart's government, the right-wing forces launched a massive campaign against a supposed communist infiltration in Brazil. That offensive was connected to US agencies which provided local supporters with propaganda material of all sorts, but also trained military and police officers to crush down the Reds (Huggins 1998).

Although foreign powers, especially the United States throughout the 1950s and 1960s, undeniably exerted significant political influence, we must be cautious in interpreting its impact. The local elites did not act in a purely

passive way, as though fighting communism was something alien to their concerns. In many cases, external support was not just considered welcome, it was actively solicited by groups who saw themselves as part of a global war against communism, which provided them with a welcome source of legitimation and support for their own actions (Motta 2020).

Conspiracy theories were central elements in this propaganda campaign, and they ranged from the claim that the Soviets had built a strong espionage net that derived in sensationalist press narratives with a 007 flavor, to the supposition that the communists were behind each and every social conflict in the country. It is worth mentioning that although the narratives referring to the 1935 insurrection had ample circulation, being mobilized to enhance the idea that the communists were violent and immoral then and would be just the same now, the antisemitic tone of the “Cohen Plan” was outdated and was avoided by the 1960s crusaders. Still, the allegation that the “Reds” were plotting to destroy the sacred institutions as they had supposedly done in 1935 strung a cord with the conservative military and certain religious groups.

Thus, fear of communism was the “cement” of the anti-Goulart mobilization, the ingredient that enabled the unification of heterogeneous groups in a front favorable to overthrowing the president, resulting in the March 31, 1964 military coup that gave birth to a two-decade-long dictatorship. The obsession with communist conspiracies generated ridiculous episodes, such as the arrest of a Chinese cook only because of his nationality¹⁰ or the apprehension of a Soviet oil tanker on the suspicion that it was supplying weapons to the local communists.¹¹ What is most relevant is that once more a repressive dictatorship was built in the name of protecting the Brazilians from “red” totalitarianism—a dictatorship that tortured and killed political dissidents, but also targeted social movements and used violence against indigenous peoples and other minorities.

The Recent Right-Wing Turn and the Rise of Bolsonarism

Just as in the 1930s and the 1960s, Brazil in the twenty-first century has been, like other parts of the world, marked a strong left versus right polarization. The present political polarization arose from the reaction of various right-wing sectors to governments led by the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT; 2003–16), especially during Dilma Rousseff’s presidential term (2011–16). Especially since the days of the street protests of June 2013 and the 2014 general elections, Brazil has experienced a lurch to the right, and its more radical segment has considerably grown. This process culminated in Jair Bolsonaro’s election in 2018 when he received 57.8 million votes in the second round, that is, 55 percent of valid votes. It was a result without parallel in the country, since far-right candidates in previous elections had never even reached 10 percent of votes.

The roots of this development lie in the second half of the 1980s, when, soon after the end of the dictatorship, different right-wing groups organized to confront the left, which had returned to the public scene and successfully inscribed a progressive spirit into the 1988 Constitution. This led to the formation of groups working to defend rural business interests against agrarian reform, or neoliberal ideas against state interventionism and the increase in social outlays entailed by the 1988 Constitution. A little later, in the 1990s, when the state began official investigations into murders and disappearances during the dictatorship and initiated the first reparation policies, military groups from the reserves organized to defend a positive memory of the dictatorship and denounced the influence of the left on the post-military dictatorship (1964–85) governments (Santos 2022).

The rise of the Workers' Party to power led to intensified activism by these different right-wing groups. Various public right-wing intellectuals rose to prominence in the traditional media and on the new social media platforms, especially Olavo de Carvalho, the future ideological guru of the Bolsonaro family. His success encouraged the emergence of other figures competing in the same market, either cooperating or rivaling with him, but soon equally famous. They appropriated the deep-rooted anti-communist tradition in Brazil and mobilized it to construct anti-PTism, that is, visceral rejection of the Workers' Party, which is considered by them (wrongly) a communist party (Motta 2019). At the beginning of the 1990s, Carvalho popularized a central argument in recent Brazilian right-wing discourses: After defeat in the armed struggle in the 1970s, the left had allegedly adopted a strategy of (Gramscian) culture war aiming to colonize positions in academia and the media in order to impose its ideas on the country (Puglia 2018). Until today, the claim that a communist-Gramscian-inspired plot explains the Workers' Party rise to power is one of the central conspiracist myths disseminated by the ultra-right.

I don't have the space to explain the process in detail, but it is important to note that the recent rightward turn has involved a reaction to various cultural and social policies implemented by PT governments. Authoritarian and conservative social sectors were troubled by the PT government's income distribution policies, social quotas, human rights programs (which included further investigations into the crimes of the 1964–85 military dictatorship), defense of the rights of sexual minorities, and diplomacy based on multilateralism.

Hence, the recent situation was marked by a broad circulation of anti-PT discourses that to some extent connected to the previous anti-communist traditions, including its conspiracist features. The Workers' Party is close to European social democratic models and during the 2003–16 period presided over moderate center-left governments. Nevertheless, right-wing anti-leftists associated these governments with historical communism and mobilized

themes from the “red menace” arsenal, including accusations of ties to leaders from the former Soviet Union, Cuba, Bolivarianism, and even the Colombian FARC. The PT was denounced for supposedly acting in the shadows to create a mini-Communist International in Latin America and a caricatural Union of Socialist Republics of Latin America. The party was also accused of involvement with a globalist conspiracy orchestrated by the UN and George Soros, an argument that circulates among radical right-wingers worldwide. The “evidence” used to convince people of the PT’s involvement with socialist foreign powers was scant and sometimes laughable, for example, the fact that Cuban doctors were hired to work in Brazilian regions unattended by health services, the engineering projects by Brazilian state companies in Cuba (favoring Brazilian construction companies) or the simple presence of PT leaders at international events attended by left-wing parties.

The anti-leftist rhetoric increasingly used since the beginning of the twenty-first century follows a discursive pattern similar to that employed throughout the twentieth century, save for the use of new technologies and some original themes. In short, ultra-rightist discourses state that the left-wing governments that recently came to power in Brazil conspired against the country’s traditions and its social order, against the homeland, against Christian morality and religion, and against the right to property. The natural wear and tear of the PT governments during their considerable time in power, as well as the beginning of an economic crisis during Dilma Rousseff’s second term, contributed to the growing appeal of these discourses and eventually to her impeachment as president in 2016.

At the same time, the anti-corruption investigations and speeches promoted by the Operation Car Wash investigation were also fundamental to the success of the impeachment since they provided the anti-PT forces with another powerful argument. The Operation Car Wash was established in March 2014 and consisted in a task force that combined police and public prosecutors aimed initially to investigate and combat corruption in Petrobras state company. But it gradually became clear that their work was used to destabilize Rousseff’s government and to smear PT’s public image, as the agents used the media to publicize findings or mere suspicions before the actual investigation, and Judge Sergio Moro disregarded law and due process in order to achieve political impact (especially by releasing telephonic conversations of President Rousseff and ordering that former President Lula da Silva’s testimony should be collected through police force).¹² In the case of Operation Car Wash and other anti-corruption cases, conspiracist elements were also present since the center-left governments were accused of destroying the economy with corrupt practices and intending to use corruption to institute a dictatorship.¹³

Jair Bolsonaro’s rise to power took place in this context. Within a few months the obscure parliamentarian became a national celebrity. His strategy

was to show himself an implacable enemy of both leftism and corruption—true only in the case of the former. The fact is that Bolsonaro assumed the leadership of growing right-wing forces in the country at a time when the traditional leaders of this field were perceived as old, corrupt, or implicated in obsolete power structures. The former army captain appeared to be a new and more vigorous option for those seeking leadership on the right.

Bolsonaro consolidated his leadership among the radical right-wing groups through his opposition to the work of the National Truth Commission (2012–14), an initiative launched by the Rousseff government to deepen investigations into the human rights violations perpetrated by the military dictatorship (1964–85). Bolsonaro adopted a stance applauded by the army by attacking the NTC as though it were a leftist initiative seeking to punish the military who had defeated the “communists” during the dictatorship. For Bolsonaro, it was an opportunity to improve relations with the high-ranking military who had so far rejected him because of his history of indiscipline in the army (Oyama 2019).

Bolsonaro’s profile fitted well with the surge in anti-PT and anti-leftist feelings, which manifested themselves in attacks on socialist countries or those considered as such (Cuba, China, Venezuela, Bolivia), green-yellow patriotism as a rejection of communism, moral conservatism (machismo, homophobia, misogyny) veiled in religious discourses, the defense of violent actions in response to crime (including the proposal for the uncontrolled sale of guns) and specious accusations that the left was primarily responsible for corruption in public institutions. The right-wing mobilization and growing popularity of Bolsonaro contributed to valorizing the memory of the military dictatorship, which was increasingly represented as a champion of the anti-leftist struggle and a period in which *bandidos* (criminals) were punished.

Bolsonaro invested heavily in promoting conspiracy theories. In fact, he articulated them so frequently that is difficult to summarize his manifold claims. Accordingly, I shall cite just a few examples. A few days before the Chamber met to decide Dilma Rousseff’s future, for instance, Bolsonaro accused her of planning a terrorist attack in partnership with FARC (which she and her alleged conspirators would then blame on ISIS) in order to justify the implementation of authoritarian measures preventing her impeachment (Vieira 2022). Perhaps Bolsonaro’s most important investment in conspiracy theories, though, was the accusation that the attack on his life during the 2018 election campaign resulted from a leftist plot, a possibility investigated by the police and disproven.

During Bolsonaro’s campaign for re-election in October 2022, a similar arsenal of conspiracy theories was mobilized to explore themes related to anticommunism and to spin the narrative that the PT had destroyed the country through corrupt practices. But another conspiracy theory gained traction as the elections approached and opinion polls showed that Lula would likely

win. Bolsonarist circles increasingly claimed that the electoral system was unreliable and was manipulated by enemies to prevent him from winning the re-election. This escalated when the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) acted to repress possible electoral crimes committed by Bolsonaro and his supporters. For example, the TSE acted to block the circulation of fake news on social media and to investigate the right-wing entrepreneurs who financed such campaigns, and opened investigations against companies accused of harassing their employees to vote for Bolsonaro. These actions were presented by Bolsonarists as evidence of the TSE's involvement in a communist plot to favor Lula da Silva. At the time, such narratives were strategically used to prepare Bolsonaro's supporters for his defeat at the polls and to mobilize them for an authoritarian move against Lula's inauguration. The only doubt—and fear—maintained by independent and democratic observers was whether the armed forces would engage in the probable coup.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, immediately after his electoral defeat thousands of Bolsonaro's followers organized blockades on roads, while others camped in front of army barracks throughout the country. The protesters claimed that Lula's victory derived from a plot and that under no circumstances could the "communists" be allowed to rule Brazil. Therefore, they called on the military to intervene to save the country, mobilizing a speech very similar to those applied in 1937 and 1964. On January 8, 2023, a crowd of about 4,000 people went further and attempted a riskier action: They stormed the central area of Brasilia and occupied the buildings of the Supreme Court, Congress, and the Presidency, the powers of the republic that they considered corrupt and infiltrated by the left. The buildings were in fact devastated by the ultra-rightist mob that hoped that such an audacious move would finally put their military allies into action against the newly sworn-in Lula government.

As predicted by most analysts the high-ranking military did not support the attempted coup, not for democratic devotion and more due to fear of following a risky authoritarian adventure. The January 8 events are still under investigation and as of this writing (May 2023), there are no conclusive assertions about the responsible, but information already released shows that many military and police officers were involved. Besides, there is evidence that Bolsonaro's inner circle tried to convince the military leaders in command of troops to engage in a sort of *coup d'état*, but there was not enough support for it. Unsurprisingly, and as a strategy to deceive public opinion and try to protect Bolsonaro, his supporters spread the version that the January 8 attack on Lula's government was planned by the new President himself.

A less predictable consequence of these events is that the Lula government was strengthened by the failed coup in Brasilia, and that the Bolsonarist group had to retreat to a defensive position trying to minimize losses. Let us hope that the authorities of the Republic will indeed apply justice in defense

of the democratic order. But even in the likely scenario that the ultra-right will lose some of its recent influence, it will remain active, perhaps seeking another leader.

Conclusion

As various scholars have demonstrated, conspiracist discourses express real fears and anxieties: fear of social change, fear of foreigners, and fear of the new (Cohn 1983). Moreover, communists and other leftist movements obviously do exist; they are not merely ghosts invented to frighten naïve people. As for the farcical “Cohen Plan,” some contemporaries believed in it because of the actual leftist insurrection of 1935, while the anti-communist narratives that justified the 1964 coup were based on the growing social reformist demands and the global Cold War logic. In recent years, the Bolsonarist discourses denouncing leftist conspiracies have found broader acceptance partly due to the rejection of social and cultural programs implemented by the Workers’ Party (PT) governments. But my analysis has also shown that these conspiracy theories are also opportunistically exploited. The specter of left-wing conspiracies has been used repeatedly to justify repressive and authoritarian actions against social movements and to keep certain privileged groups in power.

This suggests that it is worth analyzing conspiracy theories from another angle given that, in certain situations, they not only make their claims plausible by references to real conspiracies but also lead to real conspiracies to counter the workings of the imagined ones (Butter and Knight 2020, 2). However, it is important to emphasize that this does not mean adopting a conspiracist mentality and believing in the existence of perfectly planned and fully effective conspiracies, nor accepting that history is driven by secret evil forces. The point is simply to recognize that some conspiracy theories may also conceal real conspiracies, aimed at opportunistic ends that do not coincide with their discourses—a line of research not yet sufficiently explored, though a few authors have acknowledged that conspiracy theories often imply an intricate relationship with actual political conspiracies (Senkman and Roniger 2019; Giry and Gürpınar 2020; Motta 2020).

Notes

- 1 The first part of the chapter is based on my doctoral thesis (2000), a study on anti-communism in Brazil that analyzes the construction of the image of the red enemy (communist, Jewish, immigrant) that was used to spread fear and justify authoritarian interventions (in 1937 and in 1964) aimed at maintaining the traditional social order. That study was recently published in English (Motta 2020). At the time, I was unaware that simultaneously a transnational field of studies dedicated

- to conspiracism was being established, the bibliography of which I have tried to incorporate into this chapter.
- 2 See for example *Diário de Minas*, December 2, 1917, p. 2.
 - 3 Preparatory studies on the draft bill began in October 1934. The government's proposal was sent to Congress in January 1935 and the parliamentarians approved the final version at the end of March. The president ratified the law on April 4, 1935. *O Diário*, April 5, 1935, p. 2.
 - 4 *Memórias do Cárcere* was published only after Ramos' death, in 1953.
 - 5 The last National Security Law was extinguished in 2021, by decision of the Brazilian Congress.
 - 6 *O Jornal*, October 1, 1937, p. 7. Some newspapers released the scoop on September 30, boasting that they had good sources ("New communist revolution being prepared in Brazil," *O Diário*, September 30, 1937, p. 1) but most did so only on October 1. It is interesting to note that practically none of the contemporary sources used the expression "Cohen Plan." Its widespread adoption came later.
 - 7 One of the opposition leaders criticized the government by saying there was no proof of a new communist plot and that it was unconstitutional to declare a State of War without an actual war. *O Estado de S. Paulo*, October 2, 1937, p. 1.
 - 8 *Jornal do Brasil*, October 5, 1937, p. 7.
 - 9 "Notas e informações." *O Estado de S. Paulo*, October 7, 1937, p. 3.
 - 10 RG 59, box 1943. National Archives and Records Administration.
 - 11 RG 59, box 1945. National Archives and Records Administration.
 - 12 For more information about Operation Car Wash see Hatzikidi and Dullo (2021, 2–3).
 - 13 Even before Operation Car War was established, journalist Reinaldo Azevedo became famous for investing in attacks linking the Workers' Party to corruption and communism. Azevedo (2008).

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3

THE WEAPONIZATION OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES¹

Eirikur Bergmann

Populist politicians have weaponized a range of conspiracy theories for their own gain, leading to disruption in contemporary politics. In the worldview of conspiratorial populists, politics is controlled by clandestine powerful elites, who malignantly are manipulating the world for their benefit, and—most importantly—to the detriment of the wider public.

Populism has as of now well gone mainstream (Bergmann 2020). It can thus be argued that we have entered the era of the conspiratorial populist. Both conspiracy theories and populism are now deeply integrated into contemporary democratic politics (Bergmann and Butter 2020). To properly understand the functions of contemporary politics we, thus, must both examine the impact that conspiracy theories have on people's understandings of the world, and on how populist politicians appeal to these beliefs. Many scholars have examined the former, including for example Karen Douglas and her collaborators (Douglas et al. 2017). In this chapter, I will focus on the latter. I maintain that it is indeed timely to explore how nativist populists weaponize contemporary conspiracy theories.

When studying conspiracy theories, it is important to separate between those in society who receive and subscribe to them and the political actors who produce and promote them for political gain. Much of the scholarly work, as well as in media reporting, into both populists and conspiracy theorists has focused its attention on those on the margins of Western societies. In other words, on relatively powerless actors who challenge the mainstream political order from the fringe. The focus here is on the rapid proliferation of conspiratorialist populism spread from within the very power centres themselves. Conspiracy theories have indeed spread widely as a political weapon in contemporary Western democracies, turning conspiracy theorists

away from only the fringe and the underprivileged. In a way, this leads to a process of mainstreaming the margins. When upheld by the powerful, previously discredited conspiracy theories enter a process of legitimization and, thus, pose a threat to the liberal political system stemming from the very power centres themselves.

I will examine three main overall conspiracy theories in this regard: In Western Europe, the Eurabia conspiracy theory has been activated by many nativist populists and applied in stoking actions against those that are deemed as being dangerous *Others*, in contemporary times most often Muslims. In the USA, the Deep State conspiracy theory has gained traction, the notion of a covert network of bureaucrats, professional politicians and interest agencies controlling society behind the scenes. This theory was forcefully promoted by Donald Trump, weaponizing it when inserting his supporters to act in his defence after he lost the 2020 presidential election. In Russia, Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin have for long applied a range of anti-Western conspiracy theories, even turning to weaponize them when rallying up support for the invasion of Ukraine.

While several unifying features can be identified in all these three cases, as here is examined, there are also significant points of divergence. For instance, while the first two cases revolve around political leaders operating within democratic systems, the situation in Russia differs significantly, Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin have currently steered Russia away from democratic principles, moving Russia into a more autocratic state. Scholars have debated whether to classify Putin as a populist or authoritarian leader. Here, I treat his politics as fitting into authoritarian populism (see, for example, Manonova 2023).

The concept of weaponization is approached from a two-dimensional perspective in this chapter. The first involves the exploitation of conspiracy theories by politicians as a rhetorical mace for their own political interests. The second, then, is the (unwitting) promotion of violent actions by followers influenced by such discourse. Both aspects are present in all three cases here examined. Before delving into the separate cases, I will briefly discuss the function of conspiracy theories in politics, explore their link to populist politics, and frame how they are weaponized for political gain.

Political Conspiracy Theories

Political conspiracy theories are of various kinds and ranges, reaching from unravelling only isolated plots—such as who killed Kennedy—to describing the entirety of human order in contemporary times as well as in history. Conspiracy theories have played a role in politics throughout history. Classical tales of the radical right often revolved around Zionist plots to take over control of the world. Many versions of such New World Order

conspiracies have suspected a wide range of concealed cabals of establishing an authoritarian world government, which is to replace the system of the sovereign nation-state. The real-life Bilderberg group—named after a meeting of the world elite of businessmen and politicians gathering at the Bilderberg Hotel in the Netherlands—was for long a favourite culprit of conspiracy theorists. Other groups suspected of such plots include for example Marxists and feminists, aiming at ending the Western-dominated capitalist order.

These kinds of suspicions have also been stoked around international actors and institutions. The far-right Front National in France (now named National Rally, in French *Rassemblement National*), founded by Jean Marie Le Pen in 1973, provides a good example of how populists weave conspiracy theories into their political discourse. By entangling conspiratorialism and populism in their rhetoric, the party aligned the corrupt elite with the alleged conspirators and the pure people with the unknowing, i.e., the victimized. Here, conspiracy theories are applied to discursively turn the mainstream political elite into traitors and, thus, enemies of the people. The party started out by fighting a communist conspiracy but has since moved on to unpack a kind of New World Order-type globalist covert conspiracy led by international institutions such as the EU. Later, they turned their focus much more firmly on immigration and on opposing what they saw as an Islamist infiltration.

In history, many societies have been infested with conspiratorialism, such as in the Roman time when Emperor Nero was, for example, himself suspected of igniting the fire that engulfed the city in CE 64 (Brotherton 2015). The Cold War also proved to be a very favourable environment for conspiracy theories to thrive in society, with widespread suspicion and spies roaming around in all sorts of covert action. The Soviets were presented as the main enemy of the West, and many anti-communist conspiracy theories of evil deeds by the Eastern bloc thrived. The dramatic changes around the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union then opened up a new space in the conspiratorial milieu in the West. The enemy vanishing into thin air left a vacuum which was increasingly being filled by New World Order theories of the far-right. Similarly, conspiracy theories about Western infiltration were also thriving in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block countries. During the Cold War, both the West and the Eastern Bloc were heavily invested in disseminating conspiracist propaganda.

In the wake of the Second World War conspiracy theories were largely stigmatized in the Western world (Thalman 2019). The period that followed was indeed the heyday of the controlled flow of information via editorial boards who served as gatekeepers to data the public was exposed to. Alongside transformative changes in media, which I will return to later, conspiratorialism has (again) become increasingly prevalent in contemporary politics. Theories of false flag operations are one such category. Most commonly, these are tales of horrendous acts covertly carried out by authorities and

blamed on others. Perhaps the most persistent and influential false flag theory in contemporary times arose around the terrorist attacks in the USA on September 11, 2001, killing 2,996 people, when various branches and agencies of the US government were suspected of being behind the attack, such as the CIA, clandestine Deep State actors, and even the President himself.

Amongst the most common types of conspiracy theories are indeed tales of malignant deceptions of governments and other powerful forces. Several of those revolve around medical issues. These kinds of conspiracy theories were blazing during the Covid crisis. The pandemic invoked fear, it was thus perhaps not unexpected that the crisis brought an avalanche of all sorts of conspiracy theories. A vast range of evildoers was suspected of having weaponized the virus, such as China, Muslims, Sinti and Roma, Jews, CIA, global capital, etc. Suspicions of this sort were not exclusively distributed from the periphery by marginalized people, but increasingly also voiced by people in power. Prominent people in the Republican Party maintained that the virus had indeed been made as a weapon in the Chinese lab in Wuhan, precisely to hurt Donald Trump in America.

The visibility and impact of conspiracy theories have in recent years grown in clear correspondence with a rise in populist politics, which has primarily been aimed against the liberal democratic order established in the West in the wake of the Second World War. Over the past half-century, Neo-Nationalism—populist nativism, which I argue is distinct from earlier versions of nationalism—has emerged in opposition to these liberal democratic values.

One of the defining features of especially nativist and right-wing populists—and arguably much of their appeal—is their willingness to dismiss the once universal values of liberal democracies: rule of law, diversity, openness, free cross-border trade, human rights, free press, etc. Indeed, they tend to base their very claims to power precisely on disrespect for established democratic norms—against the establishment they claim is manipulating the innocent public (Mounk 2018).

In my research, I have identified three waves of Neo-Nationalism in the post-war era, each rising in the wake of a crisis (Bergmann 2020). The first wave rose in Western Europe following the Oil Crisis in the early 1970s. The second began after the fall of the Berlin Wall, first mainly in opposition to migrants from Eastern Europe seeking work in the West, later rising in the East when a promise of prosperity accompanying new-found liberal democracy was failing to materialize in many places. The third wave was triggered by the Financial Crisis of 2008, heightened by the refugee crisis of 2015 in the wake of the Syrian War.

When analysing the discourse spurred by these multifaced socio-economic and political crises, I have identified a threefold claim that nativist populists put forth in their support of the people: *First*, they tend to discursively create an external threat to the nation. *Second*, they accuse the domestic

elite of betraying the people, often even of siding with external aggressors. *Third*, they position themselves as the true defenders of the “pure people,” against both the elite and these malignant outsiders, that is, against those that they themselves have discursively created. These traits are very much shared by populist conspiracy theorists, and people who are susceptible to populism have also been proven to be more prone to believe in conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2020; Butter 2020; Thórisdóttir et al. 2020; Castanho Silva et al. 2017).

Conspiracy theories have come to function as a form of populist discourse, moving from the periphery and firmly into the mainstream. Like populism, conspiracy theories also tend to articulate a critique of powerful institutions and they depart from progressive analysis by substituting a simplistic populist vision of antagonism between the people and the elites in place of a detailed analysis of complex power structures. Both populists and conspiratorialists unite in a Manichean worldview, in which societies are seen as divided between evil elites who are in control of the pure people (see Butter 2020).

Disinformation and Destabilization

The proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories coincided with the emergence of digital media. Spreading lies and fabricated news stories to demonize political opponents is of course nothing new. Rumours, urban legends, folklore, and other kinds of oral transmissions have always existed in human societies. And fabricated news was also spread by mainstream media outlets in the twentieth century. However, the emergence of the 24-hour rolling news broadcasts proved to be especially fertile for conspiratorial populists in transmitting distorted information. The take-off for these tales then became exponentially faster with the rapid growth of first online and then the social media outlets that followed.

These changes in the media environment have facilitated the weaponization of conspiracy theories, which now are spread more easily than before. Disguised as news, conspiracy theories have recently thus been blazing like a snowstorm across the political scene on both sides of the Atlantic. Consequently, populist conspiratorialism has become deeply integrated into contemporary democratic politics. It is no longer only a tool of powerless protestors and no longer merely a symptom of a crisis of democracy.

Increased support for populists and the growing spread of conspiracy theories can have destabilizing effects on societies. This is for example due to populist conspiracy theorists being prone to reject established scientific knowledge, claiming instead that one’s own gut feelings about the world are equal to conclusions coming out of careful scientific research. In other words, conspiracy theories can be dangerous like many of the most influential scholars of the field have indeed warned (e.g., Hofstadter

1964; Byford 2011; Popper 1945; Barkun 2013; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014; Jolley and Douglas 2014).

Jan-Wilhelm van Prooijen (2015) and his colleagues have, in their extended studies into social psychology, found conspiracy theories to be a catalyst for extremism and that they fuel violence, for example by encouraging unstable people to act against authorities whom they perceive as conspiring against them. In this regard, conspiracy theories can be seen as posing a danger to society. Ergo, similar to populists more broadly, conspiracy theorists often serve to disrupt the trust between the people and their governments.

The Eurabia Theory

One of the most widespread and influential conspiracy theories is that of Eurabia, the fear of Muslims replacing the Christian population with Islam in Europe. The theory has progressed through all the above-mentioned three waves of Neo-Nationalism, moving from the margins and into the mainstream. The theory was reignited in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. It was though only in the third wave that the Eurabia theory firmly rose to prominence, especially after the Refugee Crisis hit in 2015. Since then, the theory has even been upheld by several political leaders, such as Victor Orbán in Hungary, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and Donald Trump in America.

The Eurabia theory falls under the broader Great Replacement conspiracy theory, the fear of a local population being replaced by newcomers. The term was for example used as the title of a book by French philosopher Renaud Camus (2011), arguing that European civilization and identity were at risk of being subsumed by mass migration, especially from Muslim-dominated countries. Proponents of the theory maintain that immigrants were flocking to predominantly white countries for the precise purpose of rendering the native population a minority within their own land or even causing their extinction.

This notion of replacement, or white genocide, has echoed throughout the rhetoric of many anti-migrant and nativist movements in the West. Many other ethnic groups are also suspected of aiming to replace the European population. In his dystopian novel, *Le Camp des Saints* (The Camp of the Saints), French writer, Jean Raspail (1973), for example, depicts the cultural demise of Western civilization through the mass migration of sex-crazed Indians. His writings echoed UK Conservative politician and former Classic professor, Enoch Powell, who, in an infamous speech in Birmingham in 1968, coined the *Rivers of Blood* phrase, which later was to be picked up by many Neo-Nationalists (Bergmann 2020). Powell criticised mass immigration to the UK of people from the Commonwealth. Quoting a line from Virgil's *Aeneid* poem he said: "like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood" (Powell 1968).

In contemporary times, Great Replacement theories have, however, predominantly centred on Muslims, portrayed as invaders, often seen as soldiers in a coordinated cultural and religious quest of conquering Europe (Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2010). Now, to be clear, a political position of warning that an influx of migrant Muslims to Europe will alter the face and fabric of the continent is not necessarily a conspiracy theory, not as such. However, when insisting that an identifiable group of plotters in the Middle East are covertly acting to take over Europe, then we have entered the conspiratorial world. And when adding to the mix, tales of domestic traitors collaborating with the external plotters—for instance, Cultural Marxists—then a fully-fledged populist conspiracy theory has been built. This is indeed why the Great Replacement theory can be so powerful for populists. It functions as both a conspiracy theory and a non-conspiracist but racist tale of warning, thus catering to two audiences at once. The threefold populist rhetorical model is, then, first fully completed when nativist leaders position themselves as the protectors of the good people against both the external threat (which they themselves have discursively created) and against the domestic elite they accuse of betrayal.

Numerous Neo-Nationalist leaders in Europe, such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Marine Le Pen in France, and Nigel Farage in the UK, have indeed promoted the replacement theory in that populist style. In recent years, anti-Muslim sentiments have largely become legitimized in the West. Inherent in the theory is an apocalyptic view of Muslims dominating and destroying liberal and democratic Europe.

The terrorist attack of Al Qaeda in the USA on September 11, 2001 not only marked a turning point in US politics. The horrible event also had far-reaching effects in Europe, where populist parties were fast claiming legitimacy by pointing to their previous warnings against the evil of Islam. Islamophobic prejudice was indeed spreading around the Western world, bringing with it the White Genocide conspiracy theory back to the forefront.

This fear was for instance nurtured by Geert Wilders of the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, who said that immigration was the greatest threat facing the European culture (quoted in Bergmann 2020). He once wrote: “Our population is being replaced. No more” (@geertwilderspvv). Wilders then turned his accusations to the domestic elite: “In the Netherlands, we are dealing with a social elite who are undertaking, what I call, an attack on the nation-state, who undermine the Netherlands, who are hostile to the Dutch identity – hence multiculturalism, open borders, the European Union” (see in Duyvendak and Kesic 2018).

In Austria, Hans Christian Strache of the Freedom Party wrote that a Great Replacement had already taken place under mainstream governments (Bergmann 2020). In Belgium, Dries Van Langenhove of the Flemish Block simply insisted that “we are being replaced” (Davey and Ebner 2019). In

France, Marine Le Pen, who had succeeded her father as leader of the French National Front, wrote on Twitter in 2015 that France was under migratory submersion. She painted a picture of Europe being invaded by hordes of “stinking” dark-skinned migrants and “rat people” flowing in a “river of sperm” (Symons 2017).

The Eurabia conspiracy theory has been a central feature within the *Identitarian* movement in Europe, which maintains that Europe’s spiritual demise and cultural destruction had already gone so far that it would only be reversed via radical methods. They blamed mainstream liberal democratic leaders for facilitating the dilution of European culture by opening gates to migrants and foreign cultural influences.

Anti-immigrant Neo-Nationalists were even surging in Germany in the third wave, where such parties had up until then met difficulties in finding success in the post-war era. Alternative for Germany (AfD) moved in the wake of the Refugee Crisis to promote the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. Migrants were placed as the external threat to Germany, while mainly the Western German political elite was cast as the domestic traitor. Before the 2019 European Parliament election, the party for example ran posters depicting a naked white woman surrounded by Muslim men, having a brown-skinned finger placed in her mouth. The caption on top said: “Vote for us so that Europe won’t become Eurabia” (see Bergmann 2020).

Similar trends were occurring in Sweden, which in the Refugee Crisis accepted more refugees and asylum seekers per capita than any other country in Europe. The Sweden Democrats (SD) insisted that migrants had caused segregation, rootlessness, criminality, conflict and increased tension in society (Hellström 2016). They implied that the Social Democrats had effectively turned these places into foreign-held territories, occupied by Muslims who were the country’s greatest foreign threat and had even partially introduced Sharia laws on Swedish soil (Åkesson 2009). Party leader Jimmie Åkesson claimed that Western societies were becoming Islamized and under threat from Sharia law, maintaining that Muslim refugees posed the “biggest foreign threat to Sweden since the Second World War” (Becker 2019). Surveys of the SOM institute at the University of Gothenburg have shown that voters of the SDs correlated significantly higher on a scale of conspiracy thinking than the population at large (“The SOM Surveys” 2023). In the 2022 General Elections, the SDs won a full fifth of the vote and subsequently entered into a coalition agreement with other parties on the right, turning much of their stance on immigration into becoming a governmental policy (Borevi 2020), and, thus, marking their full acceptance in Swedish politics.

The Eurabia theory was even gaining ground in areas almost void of Muslim migrants. Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, for instance, placed refugees seeking asylum in Hungary as a threat to the ethnic Christian nation. Orbán was extremely consistent in promoting the Eurabia conspiracy theory,

often connecting it to George Soros, referring to it as the “Soros Plan” (Novak 2017). He also blamed Muslim migrants for Covid, referring to the first known Covid-patient in the country, a student from Iran, arguing that the problem stemmed from an external penetration (Katsambetkis et al. 2020).

Over in Poland, the leader of the then ruling party, Law and Justice, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, pointed to refugees as contaminating the Polish people and argued that Europe was facing a serious crisis of consciousness, saying that accepting refugees showed the willingness of EU leaders to sacrifice the European cultural and ethnic identity. Similar trends were evident in many eastern European countries, such as by Andrej Babis ANO party in the Czech Republic, and the neo-fascist Ataka in Bulgaria.

In recent years, these kinds of views that previously were only heard on the populist periphery, have filtered into the rhetoric of more mainstream politicians as well. One example of that came before the 2017 General Election in the Netherlands, when the centre-right Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, took out advertisements in several national newspapers where he criticized immigrants who refused to align with Dutch society. One line read “Act normal or go away.” Similar moves were seen within the Social Democratic Party of Denmark under the leadership of Mette Fredriksen (see Bergmann 2020).

The Brexit debate in the United Kingdom proved to be highly conspiratorial. While dismissing the fact that all EU member states have a veto of new members, Vote Leave still insisted that the UK would not be able to stop the Turks from getting their hands on EU passports. Nigel Farage, who had become the primary voice of the UK’s anti-EU rhetoric, forcefully maintained that 75 million poor Turks were on the verge of gaining access to the UK, “to use the Health Service, to use our primary schools, to take jobs in whatever sector it may be” (Bennett 2016). They insisted that the Brexit vote was indeed a referendum on the massive migration of Muslims into the UK. Farage went on to argue that even combatants of the terrorist organization ISIS would, as well, filter through to the UK with Syrian refugees coming from Turkey (see Bergmann 2020). The EU was cast as a traitor to the British people, facilitating the uncontrolled flow of Muslim migrants to the UK. Nigel Farage referred to them as “hordes of foreigners” (Harrison 2018). The discourse was highly xenophobic. Migrants were linked to a loss of identity and the erosion of British culture.

One of their posters showed a photograph of a seemingly endless flow of refugees crossing through the Balkans, mostly young males. Its text read: “Breaking point—the EU has failed us all.” At the bottom, the message continued: “We must break free from the EU and take back control of our borders.” Collectively, this constitutes a systemic campaign of disinformation. With the focus in the campaign shifting to imagined Turkish membership and invented increased Muslim migration into the UK, the polls started to move in favour of Leave.

Here I have demonstrated how nativist populists have applied the Eurabia conspiracy theory as a discursive weapon in their political campaign. However, sometimes the recipients of these messages can lead to more violent actions than is ever foreseen by those upholding this rhetoric (van Prooijen et al. 2015). Let's mention just a very few examples here.

One of the most notorious terrorist attacks by a believer of the Eurabia conspiracy theory was perpetrated by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway in 2011, killing 77 of his countrymen. Breivik was convinced that domestic traitors were conspiring to turn Norway—and, indeed, most of Europe—into an Islamic society. He saw himself as a Christian knight, fighting against both external evil and domestic traitors. His targets were those he called cultural Marxists within the Norwegian Labour Party, whom he accused of being responsible for ruining his country's Nordic heritage.

Many others have followed. A week before the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom in June 2016, a lone wolf attacker, Tomas Mair, murdered Labour Party MP, Jo Cox, citing similar reasons. In 2019, Muslims were targeted by a shooter in Christchurch, New Zealand, and another shooter turned on Latinos in the US border town of El Paso.

Although most of these groups have recently turned to suspect Muslims of malignant intentions in the West, antisemitism was still a surprisingly central theme. This, for instance, became evident in the alt-right and white supremacist riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA in 2017, where ideas of a white genocide were also still afloat.

Now, granted that conspiratorial politicians and activists campaigning against migration cannot, of course, be held directly responsible for a horrendous act of madmen, it is still equally impossible to completely escape from the fact that political messages are sometimes received in different ways than they are intended to be interpreted.

Deep State

Among conspiracy theories suspecting a malignant elite ruling a nation or region, is the theory of a Deep State operating beneath the surface. The term coins the belief that society is not ruled by its official visible authorities, but instead, by a secret cabal of hidden potentates, such as a bureaucratic class covertly controlling the state, effectively rendering those democratically elected as powerless.

Although deep-state conspiracy theories date back a long time and have been present in various forms in different countries and periods, the current incarnation in the USA can be traced to the 2016 US presidential election when Donald Trump and his supporters claimed that a shadow authority within the federal government was working to undermine his presidency (Horwitz 2021). Conspiracy theories have long been prevalent in the

USA, such as those spurred in the wake of the killing of Kennedy. In this contemporary American version, political pundits have tended to use this notion of a Deep State interchangeably with the bureaucracies of the military and spy agencies. The theory was also embraced by the President himself, who frequently used the term to describe his perceived enemies within the government. Trump described the Deep State as “real, illegal and a threat to national security” (quoted in Porter 2017).

The notion of a Deep State gained renewed momentum as Trump faced multiple investigations into his campaign’s alleged ties to Russia, with some of his supporters arguing that these investigations were part of a larger effort by the Deep State to remove him from office. Newt Gingrich, who for a long time has been in a position of authority within the Republican Party, for example, dismissed the Special Counsel investigation into Russian interference in the elections by alleging that the investigator, Robert Mueller, belonged to the Deep State (Tomasky 2018).

The mainstream media covering the news was furthermore branded as being enemies of the people, claiming that it was systematically producing and broadcasting false stories that were specifically aimed to harm the American people. This version of the Deep State conspiracy theory rising alongside the election of Donald Trump was fast spreading in society. Already in 2017, a poll by *ABC News* and *The Washington Post* found that almost half of Americans believed in a conspiratorial Deep State existing in the USA (Blake 2017).

Now, suspecting actors within a state administration, or even entire bureaucracies, of undermining policies and decision-making of elected officials is not necessarily a conspiracy theory, not as such. Sometimes, that is indeed a plausible analysis of how authority within states works. Similar to the Eurabia theory, discussed above, tales of a Deep state can thus also be told in a non-conspiratorial version. However, when insisting that a specific band of covert actors are systemically controlling the state behind the scenes to the detriment of democracy and the public good, then we have entered the realm of conspiratorialism.

The term Deep State derives from polities with a history of military coups and strained democratic practices, such theories were for example simmering mainly in Middle Eastern and North African politics since the 1960s. In Turkey, the term *derin devlet* refers to a shadowy network of individuals and institutions, including military and intelligence agencies, who are believed to exert influence behind the scenes and control important aspects of government and society (Gürpınar 2019). Although fears of a Deep State have long existed in the USA, it was first with the rise of the Tea Party in the USA that the contemporary version found renewed prominence in America. It was then enhanced much further by the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016.

Earlier versions of the Deep State theory in the USA, the fears of covert actors operating behind the scenes, were for example noted in a landmark essay published by historian Richard Hofstadter (1964), titled *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Hofstadter insisted that conspiracy theories were rampant in the USA. Many conspiracy theorists have set out to unravel a plot of evildoers in the USA. One of those is, for example, Larry Abraham, who in his book, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*, published by the highly conspiratorial Birch Society in 1971, insisted that a plot was well underway with the establishment of a United Socialist States of America (Allen and Abraham 1971).

Amongst those believing in these earlier versions of the Deep State and related theories in the USA was for example Timothy McVeigh, who on April 19, 1995 blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and injuring hundreds more. McVeigh belonged to an anti-government survivalist militia movement, which, after the fall of communism shifted from warning of Soviet conspiracies to ones aimed against the US federal government. They, for example, insisted that then US President Bill Clinton's campaign for gun control was a "prelude to tyranny" (Russakof and Kovaleski 1995). Anti-government patriot groups—like those Timothy McVeigh belonged to—are abundant in the USA and scattered all over the country. Many of them believe that the US government is covertly conspiring to deprive US citizens of their civil liberties (Potok 2017).

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 triggered a range of conspiracy theories in the USA, several of which pointed to the existence of a Deep State in America. Perhaps the most widespread and persistent one insisted that US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair knew about the attacks in advance and let them happen. These seemingly far-fetched conspiracy theories are significant as conspiratorialism was in the aftermath of the event being transferred further into the mainstream than perhaps ever before in contemporary history (Byford 2011).

As mentioned before, Donald Trump was especially conspiratorial. After coming to power, he systematically insisted that an illegitimate shadow network of unelected bureaucrats was subverting his transformative agenda. When studying specifically Trump's claims of a Deep State within the federal government working against him and his agenda many examples can be taken. In a tweet from 2018, he wrote: "The Deep State and the Left, and their vehicle, the Fake News Media, are going Crazy - & they don't know what to do" (quoted in Carter 2020). At a rally in 2019, Trump said, "We caught them doing some really bad things. We have a lot of them now, don't we? Deep State. We have it all figured out" (Trump 2020).

The fact-checking site, *PolitiFact*, found more of Trump's statements to have been "absolutely false" than of any other candidate in the race (The Economist 2016). In their discourse analysis of campaign speeches, Eric Oliver and Wendy Rahn (2016, 189) found that in the 2016 presidential

election, Trump was far more frequently and more extensively than any other candidate prone to apply “rhetoric that is distinctive in its simplicity, anti-elitism and collectivism.” Trump, for example, upheld bogus claims of diverse topics such as Obama’s birthplace, climate change and immigration as well as, indeed, those of the Deep State. In many communications, Trump for instance claimed that climate change was a Chinese plot, designed to damage the US economy (Aistrope 2016). Still, Michael Butter argues that Donald Trump strategically deployed conspiracy theories by rather referring to them than actually fully embracing them (Butter 2022).

Trump and many supporters also subscribed to claims of an internal elite of Marxists subverting Western society. In 2017 a memo written by White House aid Richard Higgins was passed to Donald Trump, describing a left-wing conspiracy of “Cultural Marxism, foreign Islamicists, and globalist bankers,” and the news media, working to destroy his presidency (Smith 2017). When indicted in 2023 for unlawfully stashing secret documents after leaving the White House, Trump argued that this cabal of Marxists led by President Biden was abusing the judicial system in political persecution against him, insisting that President Biden, “together with the band of his closest thugs, misfits and Marxists [were] trying to destroy American democracy” (quoted in Singman 2023).

When analysing the contemporary Deep State conspiracy theory in the USA we can here easily detect how the beforementioned three-step rhetorical model of nativist populists is applied. First, proponents of the theory point to a threat to the American people stemming from a covert cabal of bureaucrats, spy agencies, and globalists, also including international finance. The next step is in casting the Democratic Party elite in the role of internal traitors, in sync with the covert actors betraying the good people into the hands of the evil doers. The third step, then, is to position oneself as the defender of the people, here the defenders are Donald Trump and the MAGA movement.

The full-fledged conspiracy theory of a Deep State in America was perhaps most forcefully upheld by the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory, which was promoted through cryptic online drops on an imageboard website called *8chan* by an anonymous poster known as “Q”—insisting that the US government was controlled by a cabal of elite paedophiles and Satan-worshipping globalists. Followers believed that President Trump or someone close to him was working with Q to expose this Deep State. They furthermore believed that a “Great Awakening” was coming, in which the truth would be revealed, and the Deep State would be defeated (Marwick and Partin 2022).

While QAnon droppings were largely discredited by mainstream media and fact-checkers, they still gained a significant following among far-right and anti-government groups. QAnon’s promotion of the Deep State conspiracy theory helped to fuel distrust in government institutions and further polarized an already divided political climate. The QAnon conspiracy theory

rose to new heights during the Covid Crisis, when for example suspected the Deep State of having developed the virus in its ongoing warfare against Donald Trump. During the pandemic, QAnon turned into a cacophony of all sorts of conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2021).

The relentless flow of distorted information has serious effects. Opinion polls indicate that more than a third of the US population is susceptible to conspiracy theories (Henley and McIntyre 2020). Conspiratorial thinking can lead to anti-social behaviour and in some cases to violence. Here I will only mention two further examples of violent acts perpetrated by believers in the Deep State theory in the USA.

In December 2016 one Edgar Welsh from North Carolina stormed a pizza parlour in Washington DC called Comet Ping Pong with his assault rifle to save abused children he believed were held there by a paedophile ring run by Hilary Clinton and other Democrats. The preposterous tale had been blazing on social media, tagged as pizza-gate. It was for example spread by one of Trump's aid, Michael Flynn Jr. (BBC News 2016). By the November 2016 presidential election, more than a million tweets had been sent with the hashtag #pizzagate (Douglas, Ang, and Deravi 2017). After quite a commotion and a couple of shots fired, Welch was finally faced with the fact that no children were being tormented there, it was just a pizza joint.

On January 6, 2021, an angry mob of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol building, in a chaotic attempt to prevent Congress from certifying the election of President Biden. At a rally that day, Trump repeated his false claims of election fraud, urging his supporters to march to the Capitol and “never give up” and “never concede” (see Naylor 2021). Here, the weaponization of conspiracy theories becomes very evident, when an angry mob incited by the outbound President, broke windows, looted offices, and engaged in violent clashes with police. The riots resulted in the deaths of several people, including a Capitol police officer, and dozens of arrests, and criminal charges.

Although perhaps extremely ill-planned and lacking in coordination and resources, this insurrection was still an attack against American democracy. What is perhaps most interesting here, and what needs monitoring in the coming years, is how fast norms and conventions were being eroded through disinformation, the spread of conspiracy theories and populist actions in US politics.

Out of Russia, Anti-Western

Conspiracy theories have always been a prevalent feature in Russian culture. Throughout Soviet times, anti-Jewish conspiracy theories were, for example, upheld in national patriotic literature and promoted by even the communist party (Yablokov 2018). However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in

1991, an avalanche of nationalistic sentiments overtook Russia, leading to the fast proliferation of conspiracy theories.

After coming to power, Vladimir Putin gradually started to abandon Boris Yeltsin's policy of bringing Russia into the international family of liberal democracies. Instead, Russia has travelled far on the path of post-Cold-War illiberalism, turning this Eurasian superpower into an at least quasi-authoritarian regime. On the way, the West was, after having for a short while been considered a partner in a shared quest for a liberal future, redefined to again become the archenemy of Russia. One of the most powerful tools in this turn was the use of conspiracy theories aimed against Western hegemony.

Ilya Yablokov (2018) illustrates how tales of anti-Western sentiments framed the nation-building discourse in Putin's Russia and that by doing so, the strong leader was able to suppress dissident voices. The European Union was especially targeted and portrayed as decadent and hostile. Putin systematically played on the notion that Western powers were engaged in covert manipulations to enervate Russia's sovereignty and undermine its geopolitical influence. Their aim, he insisted, was to destabilize Russia, with the intent of overthrowing the legitimate Russian government and ultimately dismantling the very statehood of Russia.

The Russian state media played a pivotal role in this turn. The Moscow-based state-controlled English language 24-hour television news station, *Russia Today* (RT), established in 2005, was for example made available to a global creed of conspiracy theorists (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody 2022). Collectively, this turn constituted a systemic campaign of disinformation upheld by the authorities themselves, leading to what Peter Knight (2000) has defined as conspiracy culture.

The unifying notion of the vast array of anti-Western conspiracy theories in Russia is found in the insistence that Western powers are through covert actions actively working to curtail Russia's power and influence in the world. The enlargement of NATO has for example been seen through that prism by the Kremlin, arguing that the USA and other Western countries are conspiring to encircle and weaken Russia by expanding NATO and deploying military forces near its borders (Marten 2023).

Another theory of this kind is that the West was behind the pro-democracy protests that were rampant in Russia mainly in the early second decade of the century. Here, the West is cast in the role of external threat and domestic protesters as internal traitors. The discursive creation of both the external threat and internal traitors allowed the Kremlin to turn most of its adversaries into enemies of the state, for example allowing Putin to dismiss both opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the domestic punk rock band Pussy Riot as infiltrators working on behalf of the external enemies.

Western governments and intelligence agencies are accused of being responsible for several violent incidents in Russia, such as aiding Chechnyan

terrorists in the 1999 series of apartment bombings in several Russian cities and being behind the 2004 Beslan school siege (Tuathail 2009). Putin has even claimed that chemical weapons attacks in Syria were staged by Western countries to create a pretext for military intervention, with a primary interest in stemming Russia's influence in the region (France 24 2017).

Perhaps more creatively, the West was suspected of promoting moral decay and cultural degeneration in Russia to weaken the social fabric of the country. A recurring theme in Russian state media is that advocating for gender equality, queer rights and other forms of liberal social policy are simply proxies for Western aggression against Russia.

Fear of Western subversion was in fact turned into a key instrument for the social cohesion of the Russian nation. Gradually, there was, though, a shift from fears of Western forces as the primary threat to Russia towards also including fears of migrants. This turned into an evolving belief in a migrant conspiracy that external forces were now also plotting to ruin Russian society through migrant infiltration (Yablokov 2018).

These discursive creations of external plots served to rally support for taking on the foreign enemy. It is however in the treatment of internal traitors where Russian conspiratorialism becomes even more intriguing. By portraying domestic dissidents as covert aggressors from abroad, the Russian state not only claimed the right to crush nonconformist voices within Russia but also insisted that it was obliged to do so. Taking them on at home was, thus, part of the good fight against foreign enemies. Here, the case of the feminist protest punk band, Pussy Riot, sheds light on the mechanisms at play.

Ahead of the February 2012 presidential elections, the all-girl punk band began to lead a wave of protest aimed against Vladimir Putin's regime. At first, the young women were dismissed as some sort of hooligans. But soon they were treated as enemies of the Russian nation. Since then, several members of the band have faced repeated arrests and incarcerations (Borenstein 2020). The young Russian women were depicted as being agents of a Western-led plot, sent by foreign intelligence agencies to demoralize the Russian nation. They were branded traitors of the people, posing an existential threat to the Russian nation and its cohesion (BBC News 2021). Putin suggested that the band was paid by foreign interests to carry out its protest: "They were paid for this, of course. We know who paid them" (Lerner and Pozdorovkin 2013). In this discursive creation, domestic criticism of the Russian regime was, thus, dismissed as mere undermining tactics of Western forces, to weaken Russia for their own geopolitical gain.

The Kremlin went further and dismissed the young girls of Pussy Riot as immoral deviants, sexual perverts, witches, blasphemers, and provocateurs who were supported by the West and utterly alien to the ordinary Russian people (Yablokov 2014). Via media reporting, the young women of Pussy Riot were discursively turned into others and thus made distinct from the

Russian nation. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several members of the band fled the country and relocated to Iceland.

The case of Pussy Riot was only one of many leading to a highly conspiratorial discourse flowing through in the Russian media. The treatment of the late opposition leader, Alexei Navalny was of a similar kind. On dubious grounds, he was repeatedly incarcerated and barred from standing in elections. Like Navalny and Pussy Riot, almost all domestic dissenting voices in Russia were subsequently portrayed as part of the overall Western conspiracy of ruining Russia. In the media campaign, the protesters were depicted as being a conspiring minority within the nation, perhaps much like cancer that needed to be uprooted. Furthermore, all criticism from abroad of the harsh treatment of the young women of Pussy Riot and other domestic protestors could be scorned as part of the external plot. This political construction furthermore provided authorities with means to blame almost anything that went wrong on the external enemy and its internal covert collaborators.

In addition to fabricating a foreign threat and manipulating internal protestors as being traitors, the conspiratorialist leader was in this way able to complete the beforementioned three-step rhetorical model of Neo-Nationalism by placing himself as a protector of the nation against the external threat, which he himself had discursively created in the minds of the domestic people. By applying this simplistic dualist worldview he could turn against any disobedient voices domestically as they could simply be branded as traitors of the people in the good fight. Here, the leader equates himself with the people against both external threats and domestic traitors. Discursively, the people and their leader become a single entity. This is like what, for example, Donald Trump attempted in the USA when applying the Deep State theory discussed above.

Domestic conspiratorialism in Russia has led the Kremlin to actively promote disinformation tactics also across its own borders. The Kremlin was for example accused of interfering in both the Brexit referendum debate in the UK in 2016 and the US presidential election later that year. It is estimated that leading up to the European Parliament election in 2019, more than half of the voters had been exposed to disinformation campaigns emanating from Russia (Scott 2019).

The Kremlin catered to a vast range of conspiracy theories aimed against the West. One maintained that the West was deliberately spreading homosexual propaganda around the world to reduce birth rates in Russia, and therefore weakening the Russian state (Snyder 2018). In these stories, Russia, however, was usually seen as the innocent and moral actor under siege by an iniquitous and violent Western aggressor. Putin was prone to elevate Russia from not only being a nation-state on planet Earth but also into some kind of divinity.

In an article prior to the 2012 presidential elections, Putin described Russia not as a state, but as a “spiritual condition” (quoted in Snyder 2018, 61).

The Covid-19 pandemic led to an avalanche of conspiracy theories blazing through the world (Bergmann 2021). Putin suggested that Western governments might have artificially created and spread the virus for political reasons. Indeed, many of the anti-Western conspiracy theories here discussed were reinforced during the pandemic, revolving around suspicions of the virus being part of a Western plot of emasculating the Russian state. Spreading these sorts of conspiracy theories has an impact. In March 2021, an opinion poll published by Reuters showed that 64 percent of Russians believed that the virus had been made in a lab. Many suspicions were also raised against vaccines, making many Russians hesitant to receive one (Reuters 2021).

Russian conspiratorialism perhaps culminated leading up to the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The Kremlin gave three main justifications for its military action: They were (a) defending against an imminent threat, (b) seeking to remove a Nazi-led government in Kyiv, and (c) protecting ethnic Russians, which the Ukrainian government was persecuting in the country’s eastern regions. Let’s look just very briefly at these justifications.

Some of these news stories were mere falsehoods rather than genuine conspiracy theories, such as tales of a military build-up of Western forces on its border. These stories were often intertwined with fabricated reporting of military actions of Ukrainian forces against Russia. Three days before the invasion, the Russian news agency TASS reported alleged shelling by Ukrainian forces against a Russian border checkpoint in the Rostov region (Blanco 2022). Another video widely distributed showed Ukrainian saboteurs entering Russian territory, wrecking vehicles, and ruining buildings (Blanco 2022).

Moving further into the realm of conspiratorialism, the Kremlin then insisted that these actions were being orchestrated and promoted by Western-led forces, which had effectively turned Ukraine into a puppet state controlled by the West, especially by NATO and the USA (Vlamis 2022). The weaponization of the theory, for example, occurs when the Russian invasion of Ukraine was in this way depicted as merely being an unavoidable act of self-defence against Western aggressors.

Putin has, however, not only questioned Ukrainian statehood by it being a vassal to the West but also by insisting that it is really a Russian territory. He insisted that Ukraine was “not just a neighbouring country, it is an inalienable part of our history, culture and spiritual space” (see Blanco 2022). All of this led to the notion that Russia was thus forced to act when Ukraine had already fallen into the hands of the enemy.

The second justification revolved around the necessity of removing Nazi forces from within Ukrainian state authorities (Wesolowski 2022). As a result, the fight of Russian soldiers across the border could be presented as protecting the innocent against external evil. The Kremlin ran for instance a

series of fabricated stories claiming that pro-Western authorities in Kyiv were crucifying children (EUvsDisinfo 2016).

Thirdly, this discursively created neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv was then accused of persecuting the Russian-speaking minority in eastern Ukraine. Here, thus, Moscow was simply seeking to protect ethnic Russians against foreign aggression. In this depiction, the Ukrainian government is turned into an external threat to Russia, even when acting within its own border. When announcing the military action in a speech two days before the invasion Putin claimed that Russia was forced to act against a genocide that was being carried out against ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine by the Kyiv government. *RT International* for example quoted Putin saying that Kyiv's operations in eastern Ukraine "looks like genocide" (RT International 2021).

Conclusion

When examining these three overall conspiracy theories (Eurabia in Europe, Deep State in the USA, and anti-Western in Russia) several common features spring forth. All three theories are based on concerns amongst the public which in some versions might be deemed as being legitimate, whether those are fears of rapid immigration bringing about an ethnic change in Europe, worries of a far-reaching bureaucracy in the USA holding too much control over public policy, or suspicions in Russia of the West working against their interests. All of these can be sensible concerns. However, in all of these cases, we have also seen how these apprehensions have been turned into full-fledged conspiracy theories. A strength of all three theories resides in their narrative's versatility as they can serve both as conspiracy theories and as non-conspiracist warnings, effectively appealing to two different audiences simultaneously. In all of these cases, conspiratorial populists have been able to manipulate the widespread fears among the public.

Often, populist politicians only hint at these kinds of theories without fully fletching them out. Sometimes, however, proponents of these stories have alluded to the full conspiracy theory, such as pointing to malignant actors orchestrating a population change in Europe in a campaign of ethnic cleansing aimed against the Christian white population; suspecting a clandestine evil state of effectively decapitating democratically elected leaders in the USA, or; fearing an imminent Western invasion into Russia.

In all these cases populist leaders have been found to apply the before-mentioned three-step rhetoric of Neo-Nationalists, i.e., discursively creating an extraneous threat to the nation; accusing a domestic elite of betraying the people into the hands of the aggressors; and, positioning themselves as the true defenders of the pure people they vow to protect against both the elite and these malignant outsiders. In the case of the Eurabia theory, the externals are Muslim migrants. In Russia, the West, in general, is deemed as a foreign

threat. And although those accused of belonging to the Deep State in the USA might be Americans, they are still rhetorically externalized. In the role of the traitor, proponents of the Eurabia theory have most often cast an internal elite of globalists and social liberals. Advocates of the Deep State generally point to globalists and the Democratic Party elite. In Russia, most dissident voices have been dismissed as infiltrators acting on behalf of Western enemies. In all three cases, the populists, such as Le Pen in Europe, Trump in the USA, and Putin in Russia, have placed themselves as the true defender of the good internal people.

In these pages I have demonstrated the two-dimensional meaning of the weaponization of conspiracy theories. In addition to discursively applying conspiracy theories as rhetorical weapons, in all cases, followers of the conspiratorialist leaders have also been prompted to take violent actions.

Note

- 1 Some parts of the material found in this chapter were later repurposed for use in my book, *Weaponizing Conspiracy Theories*, which is also published by Routledge.

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4

POPULISM AND CONSPIRACISM IN CROATIA AND THEIR ARTICULATIONS AMONG CITIZENS FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Nebojša Blanuša

Introduction

The relationship between populism and beliefs in conspiracy theories as a potentially anti-democratic political amalgamation has intrigued many scholars (e.g., Hofstadter 1965; Fenster 1999; Hawkins 2009, Hawkins et al. 2012; Castanho Silva et al. 2017; Bergmann 2018; Hamzawy 2018; Bergmann and Butter 2020; Hameleers 2021; Christner 2022), as well as the mainstream media of the so-called Western democratic world. Following the social science discourse developed since the 1930s, the media often stigmatized these two separate but complementary phenomena in a similar way (Barkun 2015; Thalmann 2019). In such a frame of interpretation, populism, and conspiracism are described as dangerous forms of political unreason. They are usually recognized at the fringes of the political spectrum ultimately striving to undermine pluralist society, tolerance, and the democratic order, both at the level of political parties' supply and citizens' demand. Viewed through such lenses, both populism and conspiracism express proto-totalitarian tendencies which, once in power, end in systemic violence and oppression. However, this is not the only view of populism and conspiracy theories. Regarding populism, Finchelstein (2017, 144) contends: "While authors who adhere to the model of liberal democracy usually diagnose populism as a pathology, scholars who sympathize with the notion of radical democracy tend to think of populism as a healthy, even at times an emancipating, force that strengthens political representation." Regarding conspiratorial thinking, Pigden (2007) contends that the normative popular understanding of conspiracy theories as a priori incorrect and dangerous leads us to official blindness to some of the most serious threats to democratic liberties, making inconceivable

history and politics that are full of actions and processes such as *coup d'état* assassinations, mass murders, etc. For him, we are rationally entitled to believe in conspiracy theories, if that is what the evidence suggests (Pigden 2007, 220). If we take both positions seriously, then it is possible to assume that populism, accompanied by conspiracism, which often serves to map usual suspects in such a thin-centered ideological framework (Mudde 2007), might oscillate between reactionary and progressive articulations through the whole ideological spectrum. Such assumption goes beyond previous empirical studies (e.g., van Prooijen et al. 2015; Imhoff et al. 2022) which identify higher levels of conspiracism at the extremes of the left-right ideological spectrum, especially for proponents (either political actors, or citizens) with special affinity to populist ideology. However, both conspiracism and populism are no longer isolated on the fringes of politics—if they ever were—and have become “deeply integrated into contemporary democratic politics” (Bergmann 2018, 7–8). For those reasons, we would like to explore their joint articulations through the whole left-right political spectrum in Croatia as a specific case. Croatia has a turbulent history of the twentieth century, inheriting the past of civil war during the Second World War with still active divisions regarding its interpretation, which are embedded in the split between today’s left and the right. Furthermore, Croatia inherits the past of a real-socialist authoritarian regime from 1945 to 1990, in which conspiracism was part of the official political vocabulary, but also the legacy of the war for independence from 1991 to 1995, as well as numerous problems in its democratic transition. All these collectively traumatic processes inform its left-right political divisions. Therefore, the specific aim is to discern major differences in populism and conspiracism between left, center, and right. In that sense, the aim of this chapter is to offer more a nuanced picture of conspiratorial populism by exploring relationships between several indicators of conspiracist beliefs (related to local, global, and ideological content) and populism, expressed in its core components of Anti-Elitism, People-Centrism, and Manicheism.

In this study we adopt an ideational approach to populism understood “as a set of ideas. . . which opposes the good people against an evil elite, in a Manichaeian division of politics where the voice of the good people should prevail” (Castanho Silva et al. 2019, 150–51). Its core components are People-Centrism or considering people as good and homogenous political actors with a unified will; Anti-Elitism, an idea that elites are corrupted, crooked, and greedy, who work only for their own interests at the expense of people; and Manicheism, black and white moralistic perception of politics as a struggle between good and evil, which is usually expressed as a form of polarized or antagonistic thinking embedded in people-centrism and anti-elitism. Such an approach uses the minimalist definition¹ of populism and assumes its core structure as common to various ideological variations of populism. The concept of conspiracy theory we understood here as a socio-cultural

interpretation that attributes sinister plans and doings to powerful and often “shadowy” groups acting in secrecy which are detrimental to the people, state, or society. To avoid the usual reductionism of this phenomenon, we also assume that conspiracist beliefs can be unwarranted but sometimes warranted and reasonable, even unavoidable, especially when historical traces point to real conspiracies.

In this study we focus on populist attitudes and conspiracist beliefs of citizens in Croatia from 2018 to 2022 to discern:

- 1 Is it possible to establish the structural model explaining the relationship between populism and conspiracism in Croatia? Can we build a model common for both samples from 2018 and 2022, and groups of citizens who identify themselves as leftists, center-leftists, center-rightists, and rightists? Are there some differences between those groups of citizens regarding the explanatory power of various conspiracism used to predict their populist attitude?
- 2 How prevalent are conspiracism and populism in Croatia, generally in 2018 and 2022, and among citizens of different ideological orientations, i.e., is there a shift or stability in the populist demand in time, from 2018 to 2022, and among the citizens of different ideological orientations?

Method and Measurement

In this study we use the data from two surveys conducted in 2018 ($n = 1014$) on a nationally representative sample of Croatian citizens, and in 2022 ($n = 1401$) on a nationally representative sample of internet users, from the age of 18 to 65. The first survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews, while the second one was an online survey which does not involve the oldest citizens (above 65 years) because they rarely use the internet.²

To measure populist attitudes, we used the scale developed in the previous international study (Castanho Silva et al. 2019), which included nine countries (Argentina, Belgium, Croatia, Greece, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland, the UK, and the USA). As Croatia was an outlier in this study in terms of invariance of several items (Castanho Silva et al. 2019, 158)—which were then obtained from student samples—we were especially interested in testing it on nationally representative samples to get a more valid insight into the character of populist attitudes in Croatia. A special goal was therefore to determine whether the above-mentioned scale can measure the components of populism in Croatia in the same way as it has been done in other included countries, i.e., through the empirically operationalized concepts of People-Centrism, Anti-Elitism, and Manichaeism.

Conspiracist beliefs/conspiracism are measured on several dimensions with Likert-type items, each on a scale from one to five, expressing their

level of (dis)agreement about each item. The first dimension covered *beliefs in local conspiracy theories*, which were initially assessed through the battery of fourteen items developed in our previous studies (Blanuša 2009, 2011, 2014), containing the most controversial political events and processes in political life in Croatia since 1990s, such as war conspiracies and crimes, malversations during the transition to market economy, secret-service underground activities, depiction of human rights activists as national traitors, nefarious role of international organizations such as ICTY, EU, IMF, and so-called great powers. The second dimension covered *beliefs in global conspiracy theories*, which were initially assessed through the battery of 12 items expressing beliefs in Big Pharma conspiracies, GMO as a source to control population growth, global warming hoax, chemtrails, Jewish world conspiracy, Freemasons and Illuminati, The New World Order, George Soros, 9/11, and cover-ups of contacts with extra-terrestrials.

The third dimension covered conspiratorial beliefs assuming that some secret internal and external evil agents are *taking away the country* from its citizens and destroying their rights and liberties. It represents a sense of conspiratorial threat to the political community. For that purpose, we used a previously developed scale (Parker and Barreto 2013; Parker 2021) adopted for the Croatian context (Blanuša, Tonković, and Vranić 2022). Contrary to the measures of local and global conspiracy theories, this scale does not contain historically exact events and processes but the more general statements about various threats to the nation that are applicable in most countries. In that sense, this scale measures the sense of conspiratorial endangerment of the nation.

To answer our first research question, we carried out the following analytical procedure: First, we checked the latent dimensionality and measurement invariance (Putnick and Bornstein 2016) of our data on each scale for both surveys separately (2018 and 2022) and then together. For that purpose, we performed the multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) by using the structural equation modeling (SEM) procedure in the software Jamovi. The aim was to test whether the obtained latent variables are in accordance with theoretical assumptions (in case of populism, taking-my-country-away conspiracism, and global conspiracy theories), or in accordance with obtained results in previous studies (in case of local conspiracy theories).

In the second step, we built the full structural model by including all scales from the previous step of analysis, in which we considered populism as a criterion variable, while different measures of conspiracism as predictors. Multigroup analysis is also applied in this step to test the measurement invariance of the full model. In practical terms, it tests whether different groups of citizens apply similar meaning to the content of used items, i.e., whether our model meets the required statistical conditions that we can justifiably compare results of different groups, and on which level we can compare the

results from both surveys and among different left-right ideological groups. Such a procedure enabled us to analyze if there are differences in the structure of conspiracism and populism among respondents of different surveys and the left-right self-identification groups.

To answer our second research question, in the third step, we calculated factor scores for each latent variable in our full model and compared in detail our results from 2018 to 2022 and among left-right ideological groups.

Results

Measurement Model of Populism

To establish our criterion/dependent variable of populism first we checked the assumption of the previous international study (Castanho Silva et al. 2019) that the scale of populist attitudes should be comprised of three latent dimensions: People-Centrism, Anti-Elitism, and Manichaeism. However, our results did not confirm the starting hypothesis. As the results in Table 4.1 show, the three-factor model is far below the goodness-of-fit criteria. Furthermore, allowing several residual correlations according to the modification indices didn't obtain significantly better results. Then we tested an alternative hypothesis—based on the supposition from the originating study that the three basic dimensions of populism are strongly correlated—assuming the existence of one common factor of populism. However, this solution turned out to be even worse, as is evident from the goodness-of-fit statistics in Table 4.1.

It is obvious—from the factors' mutual correlations in the first model and factor saturations in the second model—that the main trouble comes from Manicheism. Contrary to the originating study, the items of this factor are negatively correlated with others and do not fit into the theoretical supposition and previous results. As it is always hard to construct the international measure of a political phenomenon, it seems the items meant to measure Manichaeism do not work well in Croatia. That could be a specificity of the country, but also a problem of measuring Manicheism separately from the other dimensions of populism. As populism expresses an antagonism between supposedly honest and pure ordinary people and the corrupt elite, it already contains the Manichaeian style of thinking in People-Centrism and Anti-Elitism. Therefore, future studies should consider the idea of giving up the separate dimension of Manichaeism. That will open the space for more People-Centrist and Anti-Elitist items that should be stylistically constructed in a Manichaeian way.

To get a viable measure of populism in this study, in the next step we excluded the items of Manichaeism from the analysis and then re-run the analysis. Through the analysis we excluded a few more items to get the most stable solution with the acceptable goodness-of-fit. The final choice was comprised

TABLE 4.1 The first two unproved structural models of the full scale of populist attitudes³

<i>Items</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>SRMR</i> ⁴ <i>crit:</i> < 0.08	<i>RMSEA</i> ⁵ <i>crit:</i> ≤ 0.08	<i>CFI</i> ⁶ <i>crit:</i> ≥ 0.8	<i>TLI</i> ⁷ <i>crit:</i> ≥ 0.8
PC1. Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people.	Common model (3 factors)	0.087	0.131	0.662	0.493
PC2. Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job.*	2018	0.090	0.132	0.737	0.588
PC3. The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics.	2022	0.063	0.097	0.775	0.663
AE1. The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.					
AE2. Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives.*	Common model (1 factor)	0.092	0.142	0.557	0.410
AE3. Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked.	2018	0.112	0.154	0.578	0.437
Man1. You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics.	2022	0.091	0.144	0.515	0.321
Man2. The people I disagree with politically are not evil.*					
Man3. The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed.					

* reverse-worded items

Source: Created by the author; factorial structure figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

of three items measuring common factors of populism (see Table 4.2). According to their content, retained items express the core definition of populism (see for example Mudde 2007), and core populist attitudes, at least in Croatia.

In the following step, to check whether this model is applicable to both surveys (2018 and 2022), and consequently to be able to compare them on the common measurement level, we performed the multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA). Our data met the criterion of scalar or strong measurement invariance, which allows us to compare factor variances/covariances and determine relative group comparisons on the latent dimension (Bovan and Baketa 2022).

TABLE 4.2 Final three-item structural model of Populism

Items	Year	SRMR	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
		crit: < 0.08	crit: ≤ 0.08	crit: ≥ 0.8	crit: ≥ 0.8
PC1. Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people.	Common model	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
PC3. The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics.	2018	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
AE1. The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.	2022	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
	MGCFA	RMSEA	CFI	ΔRMSEA	ΔCFI
				crit: ≤0.015	crit: ≤0.02
	Configural	0.000	1.000		
	Metric	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Scalar	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000
	Residual	0.053	0.975	0.053	0.025

Source: Created by the author; factorial structure figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

Measurement Models for Predictors of Populism

Our next steps were committed to construct the set of predictors supposed to measure various types of conspiracism. The first types were *local conspiracy theories* we have tracked since 2007 (Blanuša 2009, 2011, 2014; Blanuša and Kulenović 2018; Blanuša, Tonković, and Vranić 2022), and which were previously analyzed through exploratory factor analysis. As in previous studies, the structure of local conspiracy theories varied over time showing a partial change in meaning and factorial alignment and we wanted to test if it is possible to discern a common structure in two surveys from 2018 and 2022. Therefore, we performed MGCFA through the SEM procedure, starting with 14 items. The hypothesis, based on results from the previous studies, supposes two factors, one comprised of items describing various criminal affairs of the state authorities since the 1990s, and the second one describing conspiracies of the so-called internal and external enemies. As our starting model didn't perform well for all items, we excluded more than half of them, mostly those referring to the late 1990s and 2000s, ending up with the common structure which is presented in Table 4.3.

TABLE 4.3 Final structural model of the local conspiracy theories

<i>Items</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>SRMR</i> <i>crit:</i> <i>< 0.08</i>	<i>RMSEA</i> <i>crit:</i> <i>≤ 0.08</i>	<i>CFI</i> <i>crit:</i> <i>≥ 0.8</i>	<i>TLI</i> <i>crit:</i> <i>≥ 0.8</i>
P48_1 Serbian intellectuals and politicians, in collaboration with the Yugoslav Peoples' Army, have initiated the wars in Croatia and B&H, with the aim to create Greater Serbia.	Common model	0.024	0.079	0.975	0.925
P48_2 Presidents Tudjman and Milošević have arranged the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Karadjordjevo.	2018	0.018	0.057	0.989	0.967
P48_3 In the course of aggression against Croatia, some great powers deliberately undermined its independence in order to preserve Yugoslavia.	2022	0.025	0.077	0.971	0.913
P48_4 Vukovar was sold in 1991 as part of a secret plan of territory swap.	MGCFA	RMSEA	CFI	ΔRMSEA <i>crit:</i> <i>≤ 0.015</i>	ΔCFI <i>crit:</i> <i>≤ 0.02</i>
P48_5 Transition to market economy and privatisation were mostly the result of conspiracy between the Mob and the Government.	Configural	0.069	0.979		
P48_7 The International Court in the Hague was founded with the intention of punishing those responsible for the disintegration of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, abolish distinctions between the aggressor and the victims and conceal the real role of great powers.	Metric	0.060	0.977	0.009	0.002
	Scalar	0.051	0.979	0.009	0.002
	Residual	0.048	0.976	0.003	0.003

Source: Created by the author; factorial structure figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

Also, to improve our model we allowed three residual correlations according to modification indices. As such, this model met the highest criterion of residual or strict invariance. Retained items confirmed our starting hypothesis about two factors and partially about their content. As most of them were referring to the early 1990s, we named them accordingly as *Conspiracies against Croatian independence* (CA_IN) and *Government conspiracies in the early 1990s* (GOV_C). Our results suggest that there is a consensus among Croatian citizens about the general frame of interpretation of Croatia's early days of recent conspiratorial history, while the later conspiracy theories still fluctuate in terms of their wider ideological meaning. Also, these two factors are significantly correlated (0.64), suggesting that conspiracist perceptions of grave international enemies of the state do not prevent Croatian citizens from being critical of the government that ruled during the same period. However, we should be also aware that the data for our analysis are from 2018 and 2022. They are obtained more than 25 years after those critical events occurred and through that time these interpretations became sedimented historical perceptions, and consequently a sort of cognitive heuristics of local conspiracism.⁸

The second type of conspiracism we used as a predictor of populism were beliefs in *global conspiracy theories*. They are measured through the 12 items. In our previous research (Blanuša and Kulenović 2018) these beliefs formed the single-factor solution, suggesting that they form a monological style of thinking (Goertzel 1994). In this study we obtained the same results through the MGCFA, hypothesizing one common factor for all items. The results are shown in Table 4.4.

TABLE 4.4 Structural model of the global conspiracy theories

<i>Items</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>SRMR crit: < 0.08</i>	<i>RMSEA crit: ≤ 0.08</i>	<i>CFI crit: ≥ 0.8</i>	<i>TLI crit: ≥ 0.8</i>
P49_1 It is hidden from the public that the vaccines are harmful to health.	Common model	0.024	0.054	0.975	0.967
P49_2 Large pharmaceutical companies deliberately spread diseases in order to boost the sales of their medical products.	2018	0.038	0.077	0.947	0.929
P49_3 Genetically modified food (GMO) shortens human life through which the global elite seek to control population growth on Earth.	2022	0.025	0.051	0.978	0.971

(Continued)

TABLE 4.4 (Continued)

<i>Items</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>SRMR</i> <i>crit:</i> <i>< 0.08</i>	<i>RMSEA</i> <i>crit:</i> <i>≤ 0.08</i>	<i>CFI</i> <i>crit:</i> <i>≥ 0.8</i>	<i>TLI</i> <i>crit:</i> <i>≥ 0.8</i>
P49_4 Global warming is a hoax of corrupt scientists who want to continue to spend public money on their research.	MGCFA	RMSEA	CFI	Δ RMSEA <i>crit:</i> ≤ 0.015	Δ CFI <i>crit:</i> ≤ 0.02
P49_5 The white stripes in the sky that remain behind the plane are actually the chemicals used to perform experiments on humans.	Configural	0.060	0.970		
P49_6 Everyone using their computer online is being secretly monitored and is under surveillance.	Metric	0.058	0.969	0.002	0.001
P49_7 Jews control most important world events.	Scalar	0.054	0.970	0.004	0.001
P49_8 The Freemasons and the Illuminati have influenced governmental decisions in many countries for a long time.	Residual	0.055	0.966	0.001	0.004
P49_9 There is a secret organization in the world whose aim is to destroy nation states and impose a New World Order.					
P49_10 George Soros spies on and undermines the states in which he works through the organizations that he funds.					
P49_11 The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the WTC buildings in New York were secretly organized by members of the USA secret services.					
P49_12 Contacts with extra-terrestrial beings are hidden from the public.					

Source: Created by the author; factorial structure figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

This model also met the highest criterion of residual or strict invariance. In comparison to the previous group of local conspiracy theories, which contain several statements that can be seriously supported by primary and secondary historical sources, the group of global conspiracy theories is mostly comprised of unwarranted statements.

The last battery of items we used to build another type of conspiratorial predictor was a scale developed by Parker and Barreto (2013) in their analysis of the Tea Party. The difference between the original and our version of the scale is that we replaced the word “America” or “Americans” with “Croatia” and “Croats.” In our structural modeling of this predictor, we obtained a strong single-factor solution for both surveys and the MGFCA obtained the highest (residual) level of invariance. Only the items P32_6 and P32_8 showed weaker factor saturation and we excluded them for the sake of getting a better measurement instrument. The results are shown in Table 4.5.

TABLE 4.5 Structural model of the scale *Taking my country away*

<i>Items</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>SRMR crit: < 0.08</i>	<i>RMSEA crit: ≤ 0.08</i>	<i>CFI crit: ≥ 0.8</i>	<i>TLI crit: ≥ 0.8</i>
P32_1 Croatia that we know, and love is slipping away, and changing too fast.	Common model	0.017	0.041	0.993	0.986
P32_2 There are forces in Croatian society that may be changing the country for the worse.	2018	0.017	0.041	0.993	0.986
P32_3 Most people in Croatia don't realize how much our lives are controlled by plots hatched in secret places.	2022	0.017	0.041	0.993	0.986
P32_4 The people who really run Croatia aren't even known to the voters.	MGCFA	RMSEA	CFI	ΔRMSEA crit: ≤0.015	ΔCFI crit: ≤0.02
P32_5 I often feel that the really important matters in Croatia are decided by people we never even hear about.	Configural	0.062	0.985		
P32_6 No sooner do most foreign immigrants get here than they try to bring Croatia down by refusing to abide by our laws.	Metric	0.057	0.983	0.005	0.002

(Continued)

TABLE 4.5 (Continued)

<i>Items</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>SRMR crit: < 0.08</i>	<i>RMSEA crit: ≤ 0.08</i>	<i>CFI crit: ≥ 0.8</i>	<i>TLI crit: ≥ 0.8</i>
P32_7 The true Croatian way if life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.	Scalar	0.050	0.984	0.007	0.001
P32_8 Regardless of what some people say, there are certain races in the world that just can't mix with real Croats.	Residual	0.052	0.979	0.002	0.005
P32_9 I am afraid there isn't going to be as much freedom in Croatia as time goes on.					

Source: Created by the author; factorial structure figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

Building the Full Structural Model

As all the “building blocks” of the full model were tested individually and it is assured they have acceptable goodness-of-fit, we approached the final step of building the full model containing four conspiracist predictors and populist criteria. In this process, we allowed correlations between predictors and residual correlations in each individual structural modeling. To improve the goodness-of-fit of the full model we further allowed 12 additional residual correlations between manifest variables according to modification indices.⁹ The results which indicate a sustainable model for both 2018 and 2022 and a stable model of latent structure on all levels of measuring invariance are shown in Table 4.6.

Although the latent structure is identical for both investigated years, there are also indicative differences between them in terms of the general predictive power of the model and of individual predictors. The most striking one is the difference in the overall predictive power of the full model for the two surveys. In 2018 the model predicts 77 percent of the variance of populism ($R^2 = 0.773$), while in 2022 it is only 34 percent ($R^2 = 0.340$). So, the model is significantly stronger for 2018, which means that Croatian citizens' populism in 2018 was more strongly leaning on conspiracy theories than in 2022. However, we should not forget that explaining 34 percent of populist attitudes variance in 2022 is still an indication of the strong reliance of populism on different types of conspiracism.

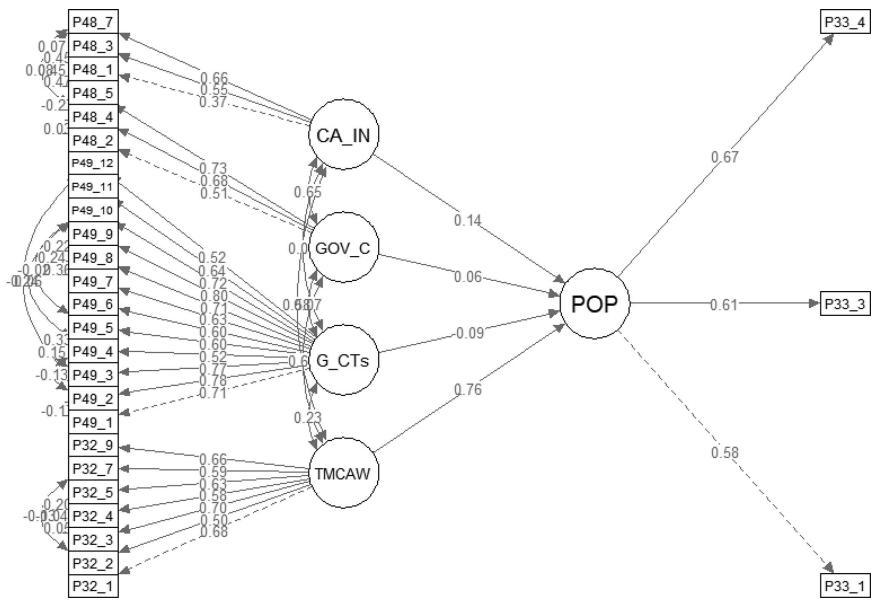
The predictive power of individual predictors, measured through standardized direct paths, also varies in these two years. In both surveys the strongest individual predictor is the *taking-my-country-away* endangerment

perception, whose predictive power somewhat decreased from 2018 to 2022 (from $\beta = 0.76$ to $\beta = 0.60$, both $p < 0.001$). Another interesting result, contrary to findings of previous research in the USA (Castanho Silva et al. 2017; Castanho Silva et al. 2020), is the negative predictive power of belief in *global conspiracy theories* on populism in both investigated years, which significantly increased from 2018 to 2022 from very small ($\beta = -0.09$, $p < 0.051$) to moderate ($\beta = -0.21$, $p < 0.001$). Such finding suggests that, at least in Croatia, citizens with populist inclination have a more-less critical

TABLE 4.6 Structural model of conspiracist predictors and populist criterion for two surveys (2018, 2022)

Year	SRMR <i>crit: < 0.08</i>	RMSEA <i>crit: ≤ 0.08</i>	CFI <i>crit: ≥ 0.8</i>	TLI <i>crit: ≥ 0.8</i>
Common model	0.061	0.056	0.915	0.900
2018	0.067	0.062	0.891	0.870
2022	0.053	0.054	0.922	0.908
MGCFA	RMSEA	CFI	Δ RMSEA <i>crit: ≤0.015</i>	Δ CFI <i>crit: ≤0.02</i>
Configural	0.056	0.915		
Metric	0.058	0.907	0.002	0.008
Scalar	0.056	0.908	0.002	0.001
Residual	0.057	0.901	0.001	0.007

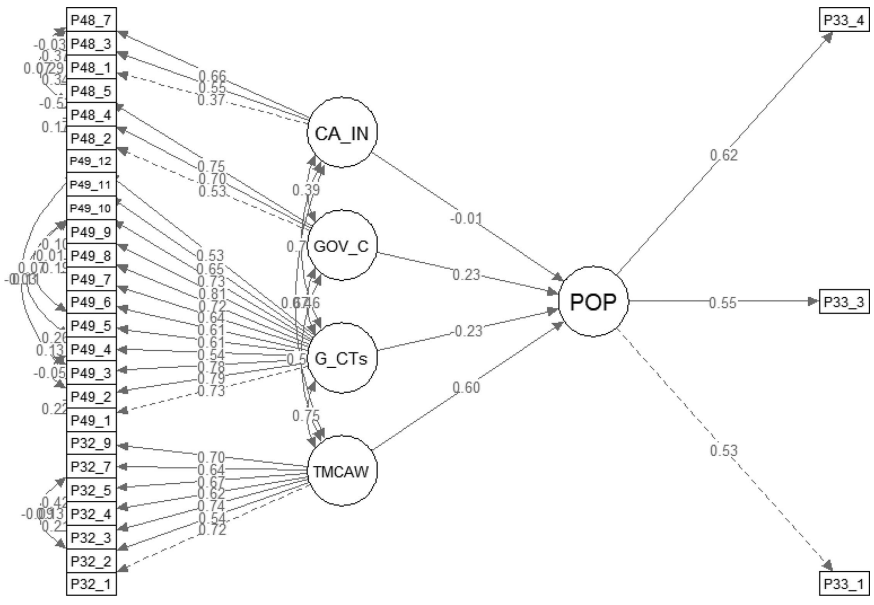
YEAR = 2018



(Continued)

TABLE 4.6 (Continued)

YEAR = 2022



Source: Created by the author

distance toward the most unwarranted global conspiracism. Is this a rare finding that populist citizens do not fall prey to at least the most simplified conspiratorial frames? Does this result show that only the experience of the disintegration of the national community and beliefs in local conspiracy theories are important for the populism of Croatian citizens, or is it also an indication that populists recognize real problems, but interpret them in a way that is potentially unjustified and dangerous for the democratic order? Also, how unjustified is such a way of thinking in a country that is heavily burdened with corruption and state capture (Račić 2021; Kotarski and Petak 2021)?

The question remains in which way other types of conspiracism fuel citizens' populism and how different conspiracism contributes to the populism of right-wing and left-wing citizens. According to our results, which were collected in different socio-political contexts of 2018 and 2022, the relationship between conspiracism and populism is not so stable, which is also visible in the case of beliefs in local conspiracy theories. In both 2018 and 2022, the predictive power of belief in conspiracies against Croatian independence was non-significant (in 2018 $\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.126$, while in 2022, $\beta = -0.01$, $p < 0.879$). On the other hand, belief in Government conspiracies in the early 1990s was non-significant in 2018 ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.446$), while in 2022, it has a moderate predictive power ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$). Is this a matter of political context? In our previous research (Blanuša 2009, 2011, 2013; Blanuša and

Kulenović 2018) belief in conspiracies against national independence was more related to the Croatian right-wing narrative, while belief in government conspiracies in the early 1990s was more related to the Croatian left-wing narrative. If we consider just the tendential inclination of our results in these two years, do they indicate that our model better explains the right-wing populism in 2018, and the left-wing populism in 2022?

The most suitable way to test this hypothesis would be to run a separate MGCFA for each year that would analyze whether this model is appropriate for all left-right groups. For such an analysis, we created four groups representing citizens who lean toward leftist, center-left, center-right, and rightist ideological self-identification.¹⁰ Unfortunately, it was not possible to run such an analysis as some of these groups were too small for MGCFA (under 200 respondents). For that reason, we obtained the MGCFA for both years together, and after that, performed a multiple regression analysis for each ideological group to test the predictive power of the model. The results show acceptable goodness-of-fit indicators, as well as the highest (residual) level of invariance and are presented in Table 4.7 and Figure 4.1. The results of the predictive power of a model for each ideological group is presented in

TABLE 4.7 Structural model of conspiracist predictors and populist criterion for four groups on the left-right dimension¹¹

<i>Year</i>	<i>SRMR</i> <i>crit: < 0.08</i>	<i>RMSEA</i> <i>crit: ≤ 0.08</i>	<i>CFI</i> <i>crit: ≥ 0.8</i>	<i>TLI</i> <i>crit: ≥ 0.8</i>
Common model	0.061	0.056	0.915	0.900
Left	0.079	0.063	0.900	0.882
Center-left	0.060	0.056	0.911	0.895
Center-right	0.076	0.063	0.885	0.864
Right	0.068	0.067	0.883	0.861
MGCFA	RMSEA	CFI	ΔRMSEA crit: ≤0.015	ΔCFI crit: ≤0.02
Configural	0.061	0.898		
Metric	0.060	0.896	0.001	0.002
Scalar	0.058	0.900	0.002	0.004
Residual	0.056	0.899	0.002	0.001

Source: Created by the author with Jamovi

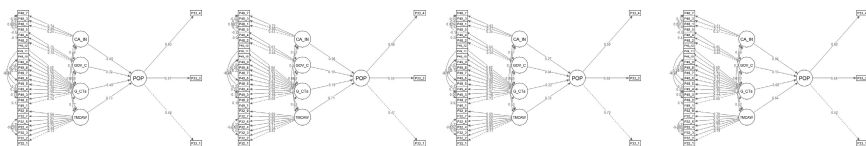


FIGURE 4.1 Model structures for four ideological groups on the left-right dimension

Source: Created by the author with Jamovi; enlarged figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

TABLE 4.8 Predictive power of the model for each ideological group on the left-right dimension

<i>Group</i>	<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Predictor</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Left	Populism	TMCAW	0.72870	< .001**	0.453
	Populism	G_CTs	-0.49345	< .001**	
	Populism	GOV_C	0.31742	< .001**	
	Populism	CA_IND	-0.00285	< .984	
Center-left	Populism	TMCAW	0.70938	< .001**	0.454
	Populism	G_CTs	-0.19139	< .009°	
	Populism	GOV_C	0.18552	< .031*	
	Populism	CA_IND	-0.07501	< .476	
Center-right	Populism	TMCAW	-0.33114	< .026*	0.256
	Populism	G_CTs	-0.21605	< .006°	
	Populism	GOV_C	0.03861	< .733	
	Populism	CA_IND	0.26760	< .142	
Right	Populism	TMCAW	0.64149	< .001**	0.560
	Populism	G_CTs	-0.06288	< .512	
	Populism	GOV_C	0.15315	< .319	
	Populism	CA_IND	0.04346	< .794	

Source: Created by the author

**p < 0.001, *p < 0.05

Table 4.8, while the following multiple regression analysis for all groups per each year is shown in Table 4.9.

If we analyze the predictive power of the structural model for each ideological group, regardless of the year of the survey, it is not equally efficient through the whole left-right spectrum. However, it clearly shows that populism and conspiracy theories are not a distinguishing feature of ideological extremes, i.e., far-left and far-right citizens. This is evident not only at the structural level, in terms of the amount of explained variance of populism by conspiratorial predictors, but also at the level of adoption/prevalence of conspiratorial and populist beliefs in different left-right groups (see Figure 4.2).

Regarding the structural level (see Table 4.8), the picture is not so simple. In terms of the overall predictive power of the model, it is highest for the rightist group of citizens ($R^2 = 0.560$) and lowest for the center-right group ($R^2 = 0.256$), but equally strong for leftists ($R^2 = 0.453$) and center-leftists ($R^2 = 0.454$). When we analyze the contribution of individual predictors, we get a more nuanced picture of their predictive power. While the rightist populism is significantly explained only by the perception that evil internal and external enemies are taking their country away ($\beta = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$),¹² it seems their center-rightist ideological fellows' populism follow the same tendency but in a much smaller degree ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .026$), while also expressing

disbelief in global conspiracy theories ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.006$), and by that showing more critical stance toward unwarranted conspiracism than their rightist fellows ($\beta = -0.06$, $p < 0.512$).

On the contrary, populism of the leftist and center-left groups is informed significantly by more predictors. Both left-wing groups' populism is very strongly predicted by the perception of nefarious forces which are taking their country away ($\beta_L = 0.73$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta_{CL} = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$), which is accompanied by the belief in Government conspiracies from the early 1990s ($\beta_L = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta_{CL} = 0.19$, $p < .031$). The strongest predictor is almost equal in both left-wing groups, while the belief in government conspiracies, as well as the *disbelief* in global conspiracy theories ($\beta_L = -0.49$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta_{CL} = -0.19$, $p < 0.009$) are stronger in the leftist group. In a nutshell, it seems that our model is better suited for making nuanced insights into conspiracist mindset of the left-wing populism, but also points to some significant differences on the right-wing ideological spectrum. It seems that especially the center-right and in some degree rightist populism are less informed by the conspiracism we used in our structural model. However, it is a matter of future research to get an insight if there are some other types of conspiracism that accompany this part of the ideological spectrum or some other non-conspiratorial predictors.

As we are interested in entering the rabbit hole even deeper—to analyze the differences in the predictive power of conspiracism for the populism in each ideological group per year—we performed the a series of multiple regressions.¹³ The results are shown in Table 4.9. As we already supposed for the model based on 2018 and 2022 data, these results slightly better explain the rightist populism in 2018 and the left-wing populism in 2022. These results can be contextually explained by the interaction between the populist “supply and demand” on the Croatian political scene. The period since the early-2010s—especially after the long process of accession to the EU and the consequent loosening of Brussels' demands for the improvement of the democratic system—has been marked by the strengthening of right-wing populism in Croatia. This was manifested not only at the fringes of the political spectrum (e.g., among parties such as HSP, HSP-AS, HDSSB) but also in the mainstream right-center party (HDZ) (Inglehart and Norris 2016), whose populism decreased after the fall of its government in 2016 and the change of the leadership of that party. However, their coalition partner at the time (BRIDGE) increasingly developed a right-wing populist profile, as well as some ultra-conservative associations on the civic scene (e.g., “In the name of the family,” “Vigilare”). Also, since the beginning of the decade, the “Living Wall” party with a floating populist and antisystem profile emerged from the activist scene, gathering protest voters, but collapsed in the meantime due to internal party problems. On the other hand, since 2016 the mainstream left-centrist party (SDP—social-democrats) gradually lost its voters and part

TABLE 4.9 Multiple regression analyses of conspiracisms on populism for the left-right groups per year

	2018 <i>Left</i>				2022 <i>Left</i>				2018 <i>Center-left</i>				2022 <i>Center-left</i>			
TMCAW	0.748**				0.943**				0.780**				0.978**			
G_CTs	-0.301**				-0.377**				-0.242**				-0.320**			
GOV_C	0.271*				0.278**				0.277**				0.210**			
CA_IND	-0.082				-0.108				-0.037				-0.175*			
R ²	0.673				0.641				0.749				0.596			

**p < 0.001, *p ≤ 0.005

Overall	F	df1	df2	p<	F	df1	df2	p<	F	df1	df2	p<	F	df1	df2	p<
Model Test	44.7	4	81	.001	120	4	263	.001	108	4	140	.001	176	4	470	.001
Cook's distance	Mean	\bar{x}	SD		Mean	\bar{x}	SD		Mean	\bar{x}	SD		Mean	\bar{x}	SD	
	0.0119	0.0036	0.0224		0.0045	0.0016	0.0144		0.0087	0.0018	0.0300		0.0025	0.0007	0.0064	
K-S test of normality	Statistic	p			Statistic	p			Statistic	p			Statistic	p		
	0.0644	0.845			0.0447	0.659			0.0537	0.797			0.0444	0.307		
G-Q test of heteros.	Statistic	p			Statistic	p			Statistic	p			Statistic	p		
	0.987	0.516			0.911	0.702			0.968	0.552			0.874	0.847		
Collinear. Statistics	VIF	Toler.			VIF	Toler.			VIF	Toler.			VIF	Toler.		
TMCAW	1.93	0.517			4.43	0.226			2.84	0.353			3.55	0.282		
G_CTs	1.30	0.771			3.32	0.301			1.29	0.776			2.75	0.364		
GOV_C	2.09	0.479			1.74	0.574			1.75	0.571			1.66	0.601		
CA_IND	2.15	0.466			3.64	0.275			2.37	0.422			3.44	0.291		
Durb.-Wats. Test	Autoc	DW	p		Autoc	DW	p		Autoc	DW	p		Autoc	DW	p	
	0.151	1.68	0.118		-0.0376	2.07	0.544		0.207	1.57	0.004		0.0003	1.99	0.968	

Source: Created by the author

2018				2022				2018				2022			
<i>Center-right</i>				<i>Center-right</i>				<i>RIGHT</i>				<i>RIGHT</i>			
0.841*				0.801**				0.993**				0.889**			
-0.322*				-0.252**				-0.253**				-0.215*			
0.072				0.218**				-0.007				0.235*			
0.048				-0.076				-0.028				-0.183*			
0.748				0.505				0.793				0.550			

F	df1	df2	p<	F	df1	df2	p<	F	df1	df2	p<	F	df1	df2	p<
93.9	4	121	.001	67.9	4	258	.001	96.8	4	96	.001	45.3	4	141	.001
Mean	\bar{x}	SD		Mean	\bar{x}	SD		Mean	\bar{x}	SD		Mean	\bar{x}	SD	
0.0097	0.0026	0.0198		0.0040	0.0014	0.0109		0.0112	0.0039	0.0242		0.0077	0.0026	0.0140	
Statistic	p			Statistic	p			Statistic	p			Statistic	p		
0.0352	0.998			0.0696	0.157			0.0496	0.965			0.0459	0.918		
Statistic	p			Statistic	p			Statistic	p			Statistic	p		
1.24	0.211			0.841	0.835			1.35	0.157			1.08	0.371		
VIF	Toler.			VIF	Toler.			VIF	Toler.			VIF	Toler.		
3.20	0.313			3.36	0.297			3.43	0.291			3.88	0.258		
1.22	0.822			2.59	0.386			1.32	0.756			2.99	0.335		
2.26	0.443			1.57	0.639			2.33	0.429			1.51	0.662		
3.22	0.310			2.89	0.346			2.49	0.402			2.76	0.362		
Autoc	DW	p		Autoc	DW	p		Autoc	DW	p		Autoc	DW	p	
	Stat				Stat				Stat				Stat		
0.116	1.76	0.156		0.0709	1.85	0.228		0.00177	1.92	0.586		-0.0828	2.16	0.302	

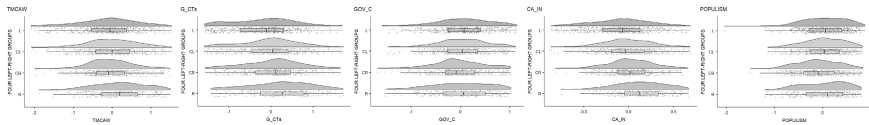


FIGURE 4.2 Distribution of conspiracism and populism across the left-right ideological spectrum

Source: Created by the author with Jamovi; enlarged figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

of them switched to new green-left parties with a clear populist profile (e.g., WE CAN! which took its name directly from PODEMOS, then New Left, Workers Front, etc.). Most of these parties, who joined the coalition, won power in the capital city at the last municipal elections in 2021. Also, they won several mandates in the 2020 parliamentary elections, as did some new right-wing populist parties (Homeland Movement, Croatian Sovereignists, Croatian Christian Democratic Party, Block for Croatia). In our opinion, these contextual waves on the side of political “supply”—at least partially—resonated at the structural level with populist and conspiracist “demand” among citizens and their discontent with the very slow “escape” from the Balkans in the internal and international sense.

As we already expected, the results of multiple regression in Table 4.9 generated more significant predictors than previous SEM results. Furthermore, there are more significant predictors for the left-wing than for the right-wing populism in 2018 in line with previous findings obtained by SEM. In 2022, this picture is not so clear. Leftist and center-right populism are explained by three significant predictors, while the center-leftist and rightist populisms engage all four predictors significantly. Besides that, similarly, as in SEM, taking-my-country-away sentiment is the strongest predictor in all groups. The belief in global conspiracy theories consistently has a negative predictive power. The belief in government conspiracies was less supported among the right-wing groups in 2018 but increased in 2022, probably in the process of disillusionment from the idea of the exceptional historical role of the Croatian state leadership in the early 1990s. Another interesting finding from 2022 is that the belief in conspiracies against the Croatian independence appeared as a significant negative predictor in the center-left group, which can be easily explained by their opposition toward national myths of the unsullied righteousness of the Croatian war for independence. However, the open question of why it didn’t prove significant for the leftist populism, who usually critically question such simplified interpretations remains. Even more interesting is that the same negative predictor also appeared in the rightist group, which usually leans exactly on these myths in proving their own patriotism and populist legitimation. But this can be an indication that the populist right started to doubt hegemonic narratives built in the last 30 years

mostly by proponents of the center-rightist mainstream. Maybe this is a sign of their antisystem radicalization? To add a little bit more “supply” context in this explanation, we should not forget that the right-wing populist parties lost their share in power from the mid-2010s and became bitter opponents of the mainstream center-right. On the other hand, the left-wing parties are consistent ideological opponents of the center-right mainstream which, was in power for 25 of the last 32 years.

Changes in Support for Populism and Conspiracism from 2018 to 2022

After the structural analysis of our results—which was necessarily scrupulous in building the viable and reliable common model of populist conspiracism with all its contextual and ideological variations—we can finally answer what the relative level of support for populist and conspiratorial beliefs between 2018 and 2022, and among all analyzed ideological groups was. To get an insight into general change in time, we first performed the t-tests on populism and all predictors. In the following steps we performed one-way ANOVA between all ideological groups in both years on populism and predictors. As Table 4.10 and Figure 4.3 show, there is no significant change in the general level of populism among Croatian citizenry in time. Contrary to that, all

TABLE 4.10 Changes in conspiracism and populism from 2018 to 2022 – t-test results

Independent Samples T-Test

		<i>Statistic</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Mean difference</i>	<i>SE difference</i>	<i>Effect size</i>
POPULISM	Welch's t	0.0896	715	0.929	0.00227	0.0253	Cohen's d 0.00495
TMCRAW	Welch's t	7.3836	983	<.001	0.23511	0.0318	Cohen's d 0.37309
G_CTs	Welch's t	8.3387	861	<.001	0.29355	0.0352	Cohen's d 0.43642
GOV_C	Welch's t	10.0636	828	<.001	0.26509	0.0263	Cohen's d 0.53248
CA_IND	Welch's t	14.1319	942	<.001	0.18708	0.0132	Cohen's d 0.72207

Source: Created by the author

Note: $H_a \mu_{2018} \neq \mu_{2022}$

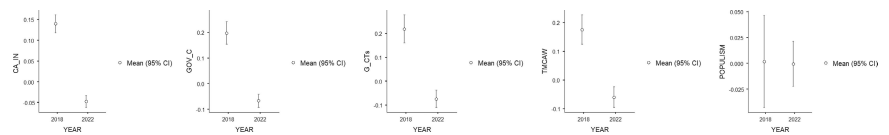


FIGURE 4.3 Changes in conspiracism and populism from 2018 to 2022

Source: Created by the author with Jamovi; enlarged figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

types of conspiracism significantly decreased from 2018 to 2022. According to Cohen's d indicators, such a decrease is moderate.¹⁴

According to the effect size of the change in the results (Cohen's d), the biggest decrease from 2018 to 2022 is in the belief in conspiracies against Croatian independence ($d = 0.72207$),¹⁵ while the smallest is regarding the taking-my-country-away sentiment ($d = 0.37309$). Such a decrease in conspiracism may seem unexpected due to the recent global explosion of conspiracy theories in the context of pandemics and the war in Ukraine. However, our survey in 2022 was conducted during the month when most anti-pandemic measures were lifted, while Croatian citizens were on average in the EU in terms of personal concern about the war in Ukraine.¹⁶ Besides this micro-contextual situation, we should not forget that belief in conspiracies against Croatian independence is the weakest and, in most of our analyses, an insignificant predictor of populism. It is logical that such beliefs decrease in most citizens as independence was gained a long time ago and Eurosceptic fears about losing national sovereignty proved unsustainable after almost ten years since joining the EU.¹⁷

Furthermore, we should consider the wider context to interpret this change from 2018 to 2022. For example, since early 2017 and throughout the whole of 2018, Croatia was burdened by the protracted scandal of saving the biggest agro-food company "Agrokor" which contributed 16 percent to the Croatian BDP. This scandal produced the breakup in the then-ruling coalition between HDZ and the BRIDGE and almost caused the fall of the government. The scandal revolved around conspiratorial interpretations regarding machinations between the government and an informal group of economic and financial experts, who first wrote the *lex specialis* to save the company and then participated in its restructuring with abundant profit. Based on the content of leaked emails, the public nicknamed this group the "Borg."¹⁸ Even today, the affair is sometimes mentioned on the margins of public discourse, but it is far from its final solution. Besides being suppressed, it is often referred to in the context of state capture, and conspiracy theories about the deep state. It was also considered as an event crucial for the loss of trust in state institutions, which was already significantly eroded at the time. Whether such a context in 2018 made Croatian citizens more prone to conspiracism in general, which significantly decreased by mid-2022, is our provisional assumption that we cannot further prove here.

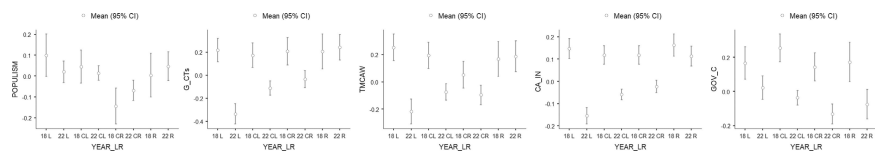
Regarding the left-right groups, the picture about the change of populism and conspiracism is more complex. The results of the one-way ANOVA are shown in Table 4.11 and Figure 4.4.

Although all analyses indicate significant differences between ideological groups in populism and conspiracism, these differences are not of the same size. The smallest differences are in populism. The performed Games-Howell post-hoc tests show that only the center-right group from 2018 expresses a

TABLE 4.11 Changes in conspiracism and populism from 2018 to 2022 among the left-right groups

<i>One-Way ANOVA (Welch's)</i>				
	<i>F</i>	<i>df1</i>	<i>df2</i>	<i>p</i>
POPULISM	3.80	7	469	<.001
TMCAW	13.57	7	489	<.001
G_CTs	19.45	7	484	<.001
GOV_C	13.46	7	477	<.001
CA_IND	37.45	7	485	<.001

Source: Created by the author

**FIGURE 4.4** Changes in populism and conspiracism from 2018 to 2022 among the left-right groups

Source: Created by the author with Jamovi; enlarged figures are available at: https://osf.io/kf8xt/?view_only=f32af53bfe8b4cc49000ae466ea5d6d6

significantly smaller level of populism in comparison to other groups, except in comparison to the same ideological group from 2022.¹⁹ In the 2018 sample the total share of the center-right group was 13.1 percent of citizens. A large majority of them (85 percent) stated that they would vote for HDZ. Their voters in this sample also expressed the second smallest level of populism on average ($M = -0.164$). This highly corresponds with the decrease of populist rhetoric in the party leadership since 2016, but as we don't have a panel data it is not possible to completely corroborate if the voters of that party followed the same change in populist attitudes. The graph on populism in Figure 4.4 suggests a slight decrease in left-wing populism and an increase of the right-wing populism in time, but these tendencies are too small to be statistically significant (see Table 4.12 in the Appendix).

Regarding conspiracism, the differences are much bigger. However, comparing the general differences in conspiracism between left-right groups in two surveys shows that they are significantly smaller in 2018 than in 2022. The results of the post-hoc tests (Tables 4.12–4.16 in the Appendix) and the graphs (Figure 4.4) suggest that, except for the rightists, the belief in global conspiracy theories, taking-my-country-away sentiment, and belief in conspiracies against Croatian independence significantly decreased from 2018 to 2022 among all other ideological groups. The rightist group seems to show stable support for all these interpretations. Furthermore, the decrease in these

conspiratorial beliefs is larger among the left-wing groups. On the contrary, in case of beliefs in government conspiracies, the right-wing groups show a larger decrease.²⁰ Taken together, analyzed fluctuations in conspiracism look expected from the point of the imaginary relations of ideological groups to their real conditions of existence (Althusser 1971, 163).

Conclusion

Populist conspiracism or conspiratorial populism in Croatia may seem, according to our analysis, a strange bird, especially in terms of the rare finding that populists from left to right are critically distanced from the global conspiracy theories or the most unwarranted and simplistic conspiratorial beliefs. However, our findings clearly show that both conspiracism and populism are not isolated on the fringes of the political spectrum, but deeply ingrained across the whole ideological space. They are perhaps even more widespread on the political scene, especially during the electoral campaigns, but that is another story about the burden of the authoritarian past in Croatia and the elite's strategic production of anxiety among voters. The model we built to analyze populism and conspiracism among Croatian citizens also shows that their articulations in terms of the structure, as well as support, are not stable but contextually conditioned. In that sense, it seems that pre-pandemic conditions were even more conspiratorial and various kinds of conspiracism were more powerful predictors of populism due to the local issues. This should be taken into further consideration against tendencies to locate conspiracisms and populism among peculiar and often stigmatized groups as their stable characteristics. Both phenomena are part of everyday politics. How they can endanger democratic system or give a voice to the voiceless is another question beyond the scope of this chapter. In terms of nuanced prediction, our model is better suited for the left populism, but also points to some significant differences in the conspiracist mindset of right-wing populists. To improve our model, our further research should try to find other types of conspiratorial beliefs, more directly related to populism as an ideology. For example, new empirical instruments should be developed to measure an anti-elitist conspiracism, as well as the support for the shadowy rule of elites, which might be an expression of affinity of populism to elitism, already observed in some previous studies (e.g., Hawkins et al. 2012; Akkerman et al. 2014). In this sense, this research has made only a few small steps that require further verification.

Notes

- 1 However, there is a debate about what constitutes the core elements of populism (e.g., Katsambekis 2022; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018; Panizza and Stavrakakis 2021). As I cannot see the way how it is possible to establish any anti-elitist binary without relying on good vs. bad overtone, at least implicitly, my position includes Manichaeism as the core ingredient of populism.

- 2 Such sampling difference do not significantly constrain the comparison of results between 2018 and 2022 because the results show the same latent structure of responses. This issue is more relevant for the second research question about the prevalence of populism and conspiracisms in older generations, but here we can only speculate about their level of expression of respective beliefs.
- 3 In all our models we used the maximum likelihood method of estimation. Also, the chi-square tests are omitted from the tables because our samples contain more than 400 respondents. In such cases, as in ours, most of the chi-square tests are statistically significant and therefore not suitable as indicators of the goodness-of-fit.
- 4 Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is an absolute measure of fit, defined as the standardized difference between the observed correlation and the predicted correlation. It is considered as a good fit if its value is smaller than 0.08 (Hu and Bentler 1999).
- 5 Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is another absolute measure of fit. The acceptable limit value of this indicator is 0.08 (MacCallum, Browne and Sugawara 1996).
- 6 Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is a relative fit measure which analyzes the model fit by examining the discrepancy between the data and the proposed model. It is considered excellent if it is equal to or greater than 0.95, good between 0.9 and 0.95, mediocre between 0.8 and 0.9, and unacceptable if it is less than 0.8 (Portela and Pina 2012).
- 7 Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) is a combination of a measure of parsimony with a comparative index between the proposed model and the null model. It is usually smaller than CFI, but the same criteria of acceptability are applicable to this indicator (Portela and Pina 2012).
- 8 This model is identical to the previous one.
- 9 Previous waves of our surveys didn't show such strong correlation between these two factors, which were previously a proxy to left-right ideological alignment. Left-wing citizens were more prone to belief in government conspiracies while the right-wing citizens to belief in conspiracies against Croatian independence. It would be interesting to explore how in time these two factors became more correlated and does it show some structural transformation of local conspiracism and differences between generations with or without direct experience of 1990s.
- 10 Allowed residual correlations were between the following manifest variables: P48_1 ~ P48_5, P49_4 ~ P49_10, P49_7 ~ P49_8, P49_1 ~ P49_2, P49_2 ~ P49_12, P49_8 ~ P49_9, P49_3 ~ P49_5, P49_7 ~ P49_9, P49_2 ~ P49_4, P49_5 ~ P49_10, P48_1 ~ P48_3, P48_4 ~ P48_5, P48_5 ~ P48_3. All of them were within the same type of predictors, taking into consideration their theoretical meaning and justifiability. None of them changed the meaning of factors built in the previous step of analysis.
- 11 The survey question was: When talking about politics, the terms “left” and “right” are usually used. Where would you place yourself on that scale? The original left-right scale ranged from 1 (far left) to 10 (far right). In creating four groups, we recorded the data in a way that the answers 1–3 were categorized as left, 4–5 as center-left, 6–7 as center-right, and 8–10 as right.
- 12 Other β coefficients were statistically non-significant.
- 13 Multiple regression analysis can be considered as a special version of SEM with the idealistic supposition that variables are measured without error or with perfect reliability, while the SEM corrects path/regression coefficients for measurement error. For that reason, we can generally expect higher coefficients in multiple regressions and more significant predictors than in the previous analysis. We are aware that there are small sample solutions explained in Rosseel (2020), but inspected discussions about this problem have shown that existing software solutions are problematic in performance.

- 14 These results are obtained on factor scores of populism and conspiracism, based on the delete listwise procedure of dealing with missing values. Alternatively, we also calculated the factor scores based on the FIML procedure which produces a smaller number of missing values. The results are almost the same for conspiracism, while the decrease in populism was significant, but the effect size of that change was very small (Cohen's $d = 0.165$).
- 15 To check if this result is influenced by omitting the oldest (65+) citizens from our 2022 sample, we performed additional ANOVAs on previous survey results regarding three items (P48_1, P48_3, P48_7) which comprise the CA_IND factor. Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb periodically conducted face-to-face surveys on nationally representative samples including conspiratorial items from 2007 to 2020. The oldest citizens did not show a significantly higher tendency to believe in conspiracy theories regarding Croatian independence. On average, they expressed a similar level of such beliefs as their younger fellow citizens of two nearby age groups (51–65 and 40–51). Thus, we can conclude that their omitting from the 2022 sample probably did not influence our general finding regarding the decrease of beliefs in conspiracy theories in 2022.
- 16 I here refer to the data from the Flash Eurobarometer FL506: EU's response to the war in Ukraine, available at https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s2772_fl506_eng?locale=en.
- 17 To support this claim, we additionally performed the t-test between samples from 2018 and 2022 on the item P48_12 (The European Union is a conspiracy of big business the aim of which is to destroy national states) and observed a significant difference in the belief in this conspiracy over time (Welch $t = 7,81$, $df = 1693$, $p < 0,001$, $d = 0.343$). The effect size is moderate but the correlation between this item and the CA_IND factor significantly increased from 2018 to 2022 ($r_{2018} = 0.232$, $r_{2022} = 0.613$), suggesting that those who still highly believe in conspiracies against Croatian independence from the 1990s are today even more concerned for country's independence from the EU and vice versa. On the other hand, we should not forget that, besides other reasons, Croatian support for the accession to the EU was also motivated by another fear of "remaining at the Balkans" (Blanuša 2014).
- 18 The name is a direct reference to the science fiction series Star Trek. According to Wikipedia, the "Borg have become a symbol in popular culture for any juggernaut against which 'resistance is futile,' a common phrase uttered by the Borg." For more about the scandal see Zubovic (2019).
- 19 Significant mean differences (at the level of $p < 0.05$) to other groups are the following: $L_{2018} = 0.243$, $L_{2022} = 0.164$, $CL_{2018} = 0.189$, $CL_{2022} = 0.158$, $R_{2022} = 0.190$. See Table 4.12 in the Appendix.
- 20 On the first sight this may seem contrary to our findings at the structural level, but we should not forget that the last results are about the whole right-wing groups, no matter their level of populist attitudes.

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Appendix

Results of the post-hoc tests between left-right groups in 2018 and 2022 on populism and conspiracism.

TABLE 4.12 Populism

		<i>Games-Howell Post-Hoc Test – POPULISM</i>							
		<i>18 L</i>	<i>22 L</i>	<i>18 CL</i>	<i>22 CL</i>	<i>18 CR</i>	<i>22 CR</i>	<i>18 R</i>	<i>22 R</i>
18 L	Mean difference	—	0.0787	0.0540	0.08443	0.243 **	0.1680	0.0951	0.05253
	p-value	—	0.867	0.991	0.771	0.009	0.068	0.899	0.990
22 L	Mean difference		—	-0.0248	0.00569	0.164 *	0.0893	0.0163	-0.02621
	p-value		—	1.000	1.000	0.031	0.207	1.000	0.999
18 CL	Mean difference			—	0.03044	0.189 *	0.1140	0.0411	-0.00146
	p-value			—	0.997	0.033	0.229	0.999	1.000
22 CL	Mean difference				—	0.158 *	0.0836	0.0106	-0.03190
	p-value				—	0.021	0.114	1.000	0.992
18 CR	Mean difference					—	-0.0749	-0.1478	-0.19038
	p-value					—	0.810	0.380	0.017
22 CR	Mean difference						—	-0.0730	-0.11550
	p-value						—	0.914	0.125
18 R	Mean difference							—	-0.04254
	p-value							—	0.998
22 R	Mean difference								—
	p-value								—

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 4.13 Global conspiracy theories

Games-Howell Post-Hoc Test – G_CT_s

		18 L	22 L	18 CL	22 CL	18 CR	22 CR	18 R	22 R
18 L	Mean difference	—	0.555 ***	0.0463	0.331 ***	0.0111	0.2537 **	0.01440	-0.0232
	p-value	—	<.001	0.999	<.001	1.000	0.002	1.000	1.000
22 L	Mean difference	—	—	-0.5088 ***	-0.224 **	-0.5440 ***	-0.3014 ***	-0.54066 ***	-0.5783 ***
	p-value	—	—	<.001	0.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
18 CL	Mean difference	—	—	—	0.285 ***	-0.0352	0.2074 *	-0.03190	-0.0695
	p-value	—	—	—	<.001	1.000	0.040	1.000	0.986
22 CL	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	-0.3203 ***	-0.0777	-0.31702 **	-0.3546 ***
	p-value	—	—	—	—	<.001	0.761	0.004	<.001
18 CR	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	0.2426 *	0.00330	-0.0343
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	0.017	1.000	1.000
22 CR	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	-0.23931	-0.2769 **
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.099	0.001
18 R	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-0.0376
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1.000
22 R	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Source: Created by the author

Note: * p <.05, ** p <.01, *** p <.001

TABLE 4.14 Taking my country away*Games-Howell Post-Hoc Test – TMCAW*

		18 L	22 L	18 CL	22 CL	18 CR	22 CR	18 R	22 R
18 L	Mean difference	—	0.471 ***	0.0584	0.327 ***	0.201	0.3486 ***	0.0850	0.06515
	p-value	—	<.001	0.990	<.001	0.076	<.001	0.965	0.989
22 L	Mean difference	—	—	-0.4123 ***	-0.143	-0.270 **	-0.1221	-0.3857 ***	-0.40554 ***
	p-value	—	—	<.001	0.165	0.002	0.445	<.001	<.001
18 CL	Mean difference	—	—	—	0.269 ***	0.143	0.2901 ***	0.0266	0.00673
	p-value	—	—	—	<.001	0.436	<.001	1.000	1.000
22 CL	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	-0.126	0.0212	-0.2423 *	-0.26217 **
	p-value	—	—	—	—	0.359	1.000	0.018	0.002
18 CR	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	0.1475	-0.1161	-0.13590
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	0.242	0.840	0.618
22 CR	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	-0.2636 *	-0.28340 **
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.011	0.001
18 R	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-0.01983
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1.000
22 R	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Source: Created by the author

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 4.15 Conspiracies against Croatian independence

Games-Howell Post-Hoc Test – CA_IND

		18 L	22 L	18 CL	22 CL	18 CR	22 CR	18 R	22 R
18 L	Mean difference	—	0.303 ***	0.0290	0.2068 ***	0.0290	0.1704 ***	-0.0155	0.03330
	p-value	—	<.001	0.982	<.001	0.981	<.001	1.000	0.967
22 L	Mean difference		—	-0.2738 ***	-0.0960 ***	-0.2738 ***	-0.1324 ***	-0.3183 ***	-0.26949 ***
	p-value		—	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
18 CL	Mean difference			—	0.1778 ***	-1.53e-5	0.1414 ***	-0.0445	0.00428
	p-value			—	<.001	1.000	<.001	0.875	1.000
22 CL	Mean difference				—	-0.1778 ***	-0.0364	-0.2223 ***	-0.17352 ***
	p-value				—	<.001	0.530	<.001	<.001
18 CR	Mean difference					—	0.1414 ***	-0.0445	0.00430
	p-value					—	<.001	0.870	1.000
22 CR	Mean difference						—	-0.1859 ***	-0.13713 ***
	p-value						—	<.001	<.001
18 R	Mean difference							—	0.04880
	p-value							—	0.833
22 R	Mean difference								—
	p-value								—

Source: Created by the author

Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

TABLE 4.16 Government conspiracies in the early 1990s

Games-Howell Post-Hoc Test – GOV_C

		18 L	22 L	18 CL	22 CL	18 CR	22 CR	18 R	22 R
18 L	Mean difference	—	0.145	-0.0877	0.2030 **	0.0230	0.2982 ***	-0.00615	0.2414 **
	p-value	—	0.219	0.858	0.004	1.000	<.001	1.000	0.006
22 L	Mean difference	—	—	-0.2323 ***	0.0585	-0.1216	0.1537 *	-0.15068	0.0968
	p-value	—	—	<.001	0.837	0.321	0.018	0.337	0.659
18 CL	Mean difference	—	—	—	0.2908 ***	0.1107	0.3859 ***	0.08158	0.3291 ***
	p-value	—	—	—	<.001	0.553	<.001	0.945	<.001
22 CL	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	-0.1801 **	0.0952	-0.20918 *	0.0383
	p-value	—	—	—	—	0.004	0.167	0.021	0.994
18 CR	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	0.2753 ***	-0.02911	0.2184 **
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	<.001	1.000	0.008
22 CR	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	-0.30436 ***	-0.0568
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	<.001	0.962
18 R	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.2475 *
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.018
22 R	Mean difference	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	p-value	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Source: Created by the author

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

5

“WE ARE THE OLIVE TREES”— CONSPIRACISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN SOUTHERN ITALY

The Case of *Xylella Fastidiosa*

Giovanna Parmigiani

The following is the opening scene of the third episode of the documentary “Xylella Report,” by the journalist Marilù Mastrogiovanni.

An old man is walking in an olive tree orchard. White shirt, blue pants: he is dressed for the occasion. His gait is uncertain, as he proceeds with the help of a cane. “I always had a big passion. As I had it for my children, so I had it for the plants. As I raised my children, the same I wanted to do with my plants.” While with an emotional voice the man explains his story, with his hands he caresses the bark of an olive tree and carefully cleans a stone sign at the foot of the plant. The sign reads, “Praxilla Sec. XVI” (Praxilla XVI century): the name and age of the tree.

The old man then continues: “In 1899: the first oil mill. I am 85 years old, and I always had this passion. And now that I can’t do anything, my passion is still there.” He then slowly approaches another olive tree with another stone sign: Ambra, XIII century. Possibly, I would say, one of the oldest, among his children.¹

In this documentary, as well as a book (2015) and online (Mastrogiovanni 2015), the Italian journalist retraces the results of her documental research on the emergence of the olive tree epidemic that has been affecting Salento’s olive trees since 2013. In her prolific work, Mastrogiovanni also addresses the national and international handling of this olive tree pandemic, officially caused by *Xylella Fastidiosa*. This is the name of the bacterium that is believed by many to be at the root of the Olive Quick Decline Syndrome. More often referred to as *Complesso del Disseccamento Rapido dell’Olivo* (CoDiRO), it is a disease that has been killing Salento’s olive trees

since 2013.² Apparently, *Xylella Fastidiosa* arrived in Salento from Costa Rica.³ As Schneider et al. describe:

This species is considered one of the most dangerous plant-pathogenic bacteria worldwide. The bacterium is naturally transmitted by insect vectors, which feed on the xylem of host plants. If expressed in susceptible plant hosts, symptoms of Xf include, among others, leaf marginal necrosis, leaf abscission, dieback, delayed growth, and death of plants through the obstruction of the xylem and a lack of sufficient water flow through the host. The multiplication of the bacteria with the associated clogging of the xylem will first result in declining yields and reduced fruit quality due to a decrease in water and nutrient flow. Eventually, this shortage will result in the host's death.

(2020, 9250)

The number of olive trees impacted by this pandemic is considerable, and this is evident to anyone who visited Salento before and after 2013. Entire orchards now look like “graveyards”—this is the term that many locals currently use to refer to the lands that host olive trees affected by CoDiRO. This is also how the epidemic is sometimes narrated as it happens, for example, in the 2014 short film “*Xylella: the ‘cancer’ of olive trees*” (in Italian: “*Xylella: il ‘cancro’ degli ulivi*”) (Ciardo 2015). Directed by Antonio Scarcella and Michele Rizzo with the help of Laura Campanile and promoted by the Catholic diocese of Ugento-Santa Maria di Leuca, this video, constructed around the celebration of a Catholic funeral by a priest accompanied by a grieving community, is meant to sensitize its audience around the olive tree epidemic. The film puts at the forefront the grief of the elders only to reveal, at the very last, the identity of the deceased. The viewer realizes only in the final few seconds of the film that the funeral performed by the priest is not for a human person, but for the dead olive tree(s).

I have been doing ethnographic fieldwork in Salento, the south-eastern fringe of the Italian peninsula, since 2011 first with Italian feminists and then with contemporary Pagan, “New Age,” and “alternative spiritualities” communities.” In the last eleven years, I spent almost five years on the field, nearly three of these doing participant observation among practitioners, groups, and communities that can be associated with what is commonly referred to as “alternative spiritualities.” It is from the data that I have been gathering on the field that my research stems. The boundaries between these types of spiritualities are not neat, and affiliations could overlap and change in time, positionally, and situationally. Generally speaking, my interlocutors “. . . share a notion of divinity within nature, typically celebrate both a male and female element to the divine, and in most instances practice forms of divination and magic” (Berger 2010, 1539).

Moreover, many of them, regardless of their explicit or implicit spiritual engagements, could be considered followers of what Bron Taylor calls Dark Green Religion (Taylor 2010, see below). In most instances, my interlocutors tend to situate their alternative worldviews, including their political activism, within parameters that are often in open contrast with those of the (mainstream) modern West. Their formal relationships with both the *Popolo degli Ulivi* movement and with the *Italian Movimento 5 Stelle*, both addressed in more detail below, vary. Largely, they are sympathizers of both movements, and mention both of them, explicitly or implicitly, as positive reference points in conversations around Xylella, the environment, and politics. Much of what I will be discussing in this chapter, while originated from in-person conversations that oriented me, so to speak, toward specific online profiles, *personae*, groups, communities, and events, comes from data I found online. Consequently, in this chapter I will dovetail data stemming from in-person ethnography with data emerging from online research. Therefore, I am not able to confirm the details of the spiritual practices of many of the participants in the type of activism I researched online. Nonetheless, a bit counter-intuitively, maybe, for those who are not similarly versed in religious studies, I believe that this does not undercut the points I want to make in this paper, which are dependent on a particular way of understanding the spiritual traits that I observed and that I read through the filter of “Dark Green Religion” (Taylor 2010). In spite of the use of the term “religion,” the latter expression neither implies nor requires any formal or informal affiliation with spiritual or religious communities. Rather, it refers to particular ways to personally, effectively, and intellectually engage with nature and the environment. In this chapter, I propose to address the emergence of conspiracy theories around *Xylella Fastidiosa* through the frame of a particular form of conspiratoriness, informed by the notion of Dark Green Religion. Following the work of social scientists Charlotte Ward and David Voas (who first introduced this term) and many other scholars, conspiratoriness refers to special configurations of interactions between conspiracy theories and New Age and “alternative” spiritualities. In this chapter, I propose to look at a particular and so far underexplored aspect of conspiratoriness; namely, the one that emerges specifically in conversation with religious studies scholar Bron Taylor’s work on “Dark Green Religion.” I claim that some of the non-mainstream discourses brought forward today by environmental activism around the olive tree pandemic and the role of *Xylella* in Salento cannot be fully understood and addressed without considering the peculiar, albeit indirect, spiritual and ontological dimensions that permeate the discourses of the activists. Consequently, I argue that any analysis of the social and political implications of the adoption of conspiracy theories by the *Popolo degli Ulivi* (The Olive Trees People, or PdU) activists, in this context, should acknowledge

the aforementioned dimensions. While not the only ones at play in the conspiracist environmental activism around *Xylella Fastidiosa*, these are, nonetheless, meaningful aspects—and, so far, overlooked; both in the study of left-wing populism and of conspiracy theories. In order to support my claims, I start by contextualizing the activism by “The Olive Trees People” around the *Xylella* affair and their conspiracist theses. Second, I address why I consider this a form of left-wing populism. Third, I present the notion of “Dark Green Religion” and show how it can be a meaningful aspect in the study of contemporary conspiracism. In doing so, I illustrate how this framework is present in the PdU’s activism and how it can explain some of their conspiracy thinking.

II Popolo degli Ulivi, *Xylella Fastidiosa*, and Conspiracy Theories

Since 2013, when *Xylella* emerged as a possible cause of desiccation and death of a growing number of olive trees, the responses by local, regional, national, and international political authorities, the scientific community, and the Salentinians to this issue have been quite variegated and, sometimes, controversial. In 2013, right after the discovery of a then-isolated population of olive trees impacted by the disease, and in order to curb the diffusion of the bacterium considered responsible, the regional government, the national government, and the European Union recommended drastic policies, including the eradication and felling of hundreds of healthy olive trees, in addition to the infected ones, in the name of precaution. They established “buffer zones” within a 100-meter radius from infected trees and supported the felling of olive trees, sick or otherwise, within this radius. These radical measures have been strongly opposed by some inhabitants of Salento, especially by those who go by the name of “*Il Popolo degli Ulivi*” (The Olive Trees People). A similar opposition, for only partially overlapping reasons, was enacted by the Prosecutor’s office of the city of Lecce (Salento’s provincial administrative center). In 2015, the latter, openly questioning the opinion of the scientific community, halted the felling of the trees on the basis of controversial accusations and undisclosed (and, later, disproved) scientific data, claiming that the data available at the time did not show any direct correlation between the Olive Quick Decline Syndrome and *Xylella Fastidiosa*. This intervention from the Lecce prosecutor’s office produced, de facto, a halt in action, during which many more olive trees got sick and died, multiplying the areas of Salento infected and, with this, the “buffer areas” involved. In 2019, the European Union fined the Italian Government for failing to sufficiently address the *Xylella Fastidiosa* epidemics. Since then, the regional and national governments have started to enact policies targeted at the containment of the spread of the disease, rather than at the eradication of the bacterium (at this time, an impossible pursuit)—working, for example, on the insect population

of *Philaenus spumarius*, considered co-responsible of the spread of the disease, and implementing the cultivation of a local variety of olive trees, *lecina*, that seems to be resistant to *Xylella Fastidiosa*.⁴

The *Popolo degli Ulivi* emerged spontaneously as a grassroots movement that involved activists from different political contexts and personal affiliations. *Popolo degli Ulivi* defines itself as a:

. . . community of citizens of good will who want to save the Apulian centuries-old olive trees. Anyone can contribute and is welcome: associations, committees, political parties, researchers, entrepreneurs.

(*Il Popolo degli Ulivi* 2017)⁵

Moreover, according to its Facebook page,

. . . “*Il Popolo degli Ulivi*” community is based on knowledge and networks: the sharing of information helps the whole territory grow. May the centuries-old and millennia-old olive trees of Apulia be the occasion to re-think new forms of economy and horizontal organizational models, and to rediscover, in a modern way, what our Messapic, Greek, and Roman ancestors already know: we are the olive trees.

(*Il Popolo degli Ulivi* 2017)

From environmental concerns to those of an involvement of organized crime, from anti-scientism to conspiracism, the emergence of *Xylella* and its developments fostered several different reactions, in Salento and beyond. According to some, the arrival of the bacterium in Salento was not accidental but the result of experimentation. According to others, it was the beginning of a “chemical war” against Italy and its renowned oil production.^{6,7} As a matter of fact, there is still no agreement on how to address CoDiRO, nor a common understanding of its causes and on the status and agency of its main protagonists: the olive trees. While the official narrative considers *Xylella* as the main culprit for the sickness and death of the olive trees, a number of counter-narratives have been emerging. Among the latter, the main ones that have been flourishing within and around the PdU activism can be summarized as it follows:

- 1 There is no such a thing as the *Xylella* epidemics: This bacterium is responsible only of a small percentage of the dying olive trees;
- 2 There is no scientific evidence that *Xylella* is really the cause of CoDiRO;
- 3 The real reason underlying the eradication of the olive trees is the will to kill the centuries-old olive trees and the organic agriculture in order to replace them with intensive (and exploitative) agriculture and with varieties and cultivars of olive trees that are genetically modified to be resistant to *Xylella*.⁸

This last point is the one that appears to be more directly connected with PdU's conspiracist thinking. According to some of the most common conspiracy theories around *Xylella Fastidiosa* that populate counter-narratives around CoDiRO in Salento, the international company Monsanto has a special place.⁹ Monsanto, as a matter of fact, is considered one of the “behind the scenes” actors of a malignant project of destruction of the local organic agriculture—a project that Monsanto is believed to want to bring forward with the complicity of the scientific community and the corruption of the political elites (local, regional, national, and European). Acquired in 2018 by Bayer, Monsanto was an American corporation and a leading producer of chemical, agricultural, and biochemical products. In particular, Monsanto was the producer of a specific product called Roundup,¹⁰ a glyphosate-based herbicide very popular in Salento and often employed as a *medicina* (medicine) by local farmers. It is worth noting that, differently from elsewhere in Italy, the ways in which professional and amateur farmers informally refer to glyphosate (or its commercial name, Roundup) is “*medicina*” (medicine/medication) and not “herbicide.” *Medicina* is the word that, in Italian, specifically refers to medicinal products targeted to humans (and sometimes pets). This might be an important remark in light of the main point of my chapter which stresses the importance of relational ontologies in thinking and relating with olive trees in Salento.¹¹ The promotion and use of Roundup, according to some Salentine environmentalists, was implemented and recommended by local experts at a 2010 conference in Bari and advertised as a good practice for the care and maintenance of olive groves.¹² What is the connection, according to these speculations, between glyphosate and *Xylella*? As Pietro Perrino, a former director of the *Istituto del Germoplasma* of the *Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche* (National Research Council) of Bari, puts it, “*Xylella* is not the cause of the withering of the olive tree, but, if present, it is only a consequence” (Perrino 2018). Perrino claims that

If the plants are in good health, they live in fertile, healthy soil, in a balanced environment or ecosystem, where there is . . . a certain degree of biodiversity, the plant is unlikely to become prey to one or more pathogens. In general, the plant that lives in a balanced ecosystem is able to activate the defense mechanisms capable of controlling the pathogens, old or new, avoiding the development of epidemics.

(2018)

On the contrary, it is believed that when the soil is poisoned, biodiversity is threatened, and the ecosystem is altered by the introduction of herbicides and pesticides, the situation might develop differently. Many within *Il Popolo degli Ulivi* agree with Perrino and claim that the problem of the olive tree epidemic is systemic and impacts the human and non-human populations of

the area in similar ways. The pollution of the soil and groundwater caused by the extensive and indiscriminate use of the herbicide glyphosate is believed to be at the basis, according to *Il Popolo degli Ulivi* activists, of CoDiRO.

The consequences of this pollution, though, go beyond the olive trees: The toxic chemical products put into the soil are considered an “environmental plague” that affects human and non-human persons alike. In the words of Ada Martella (2020), for example, on the website “Xylella Reports,” the olive trees are the “anodes of Salento,” a land that “has been sick for some time.” According to Martella, Salento has

the highest rate of mortality due to cancers of environmental origin in Italy, even without an industrial tradition, as in the North. The ‘plague of olive trees’ and the increasingly crowded oncology wards are the obvious symptoms of the same disease, caused by a wicked way of mistreating the environment.

Xyella, in her perspective, is therefore the “most ‘spectacular’ manifestation—just like the skin eruption of malefic blisters on a sick body—of a poisoned land.”

Glyphosate, though, is not the only element that points toward the responsibility of Monsanto, according to the conspiracist thinking of the PdU. Many noticed that in 2008 Monsanto bought the Brazilian company ALLELYX. The name of this company, if read backward, reads as XYLELLA. This is no coincidence, according to many, and testifies the premeditation and involvement of Monsanto with the *Xylella* bacterium.¹³ This element caught the attention and triggered the speculation of many, feeding conspiracy theories around *Xylella Fastidiosa*. In particular, it fed the perceived link between the *Xylella* affair and the possible actions of “*agromafie*.” This latter theory made its way even to the Italian parliament, with the former M5S member of the parliament Sara Cunial, who, in a press release that resulted in her official expulsion from the party, claimed that:

With the excuse of the Xylella management, a dangerous precedent is thus being created, which will make it possible to make a clean slate of our agricultural heritage and which can be re-proposed throughout the country out of necessity and economic and lobbying interests. The time has come to call things with their name. This is a mafia project, endorsed by a part of politics and by various subjects in the area who can’t wait to get their hands on that wonderful land.

(Di Santo 2019)

In addition to all this, according to the most common conspiracy theories around the olive tree epidemic in Salento supported by many PdU

sympathizers, Monsanto is believed to have economic interests in the death and felling of the olive trees, since the eradication of thousands of olive trees would open up a market for selling varieties of trees that are resistant to the *Xylella Fastidiosa* bacterium. These varieties are believed to be sold by Monsanto, whose interests in Apulia, someone points out, go beyond those linked to Roundup or olive trees. Often the “*cui bono*” questions around Monsanto are connected, in these conspiracy theories, to the fact that the company which is now part of Bayer is selling the seeds of Apulian tomatoes for industrial purposes in all of Europe.¹⁴

Il Popolo degli Ulivi as Left-Wing Populism

Populism has been a catchword in the last 20 years in order to describe a “disease of democracy,” something caused by a “deficit of representation,” by “the feeling of not being represented” (Revelli 2017). As a consequence, “[P]opulism is recognized as having at least two identifiable core characteristics: it emphasizes the central role of ‘the people’ in politics, and is heavily critical of ‘the élite’” (Silva et al. 2017, 424). As these same scholars point out, using a musical metaphor, “if populism is the theme, then many conspiracy theories are variations on the theme” (Silva et al. 2017, 425). Among these “variations on the theme,” I believe that conspiratoriality, in its different forms and, possibly, spiritual inspirations, plays a key role. As I will claim in more detail below, I am convinced that adopting “spirituality” and, in particular, “Dark Green Religion” as an analytical framework helps emphasize some important ways in which both right-wing and left-wing populisms and conspiracy theories interact today.¹⁵

Is PdU activism an expression of left-wing populism? Politically, the version of Italian populism prevalent in the Salento context I observed is that of the Italian *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Stars Movement or M5S).¹⁶ M5S has been playing an important role in the context of adoption of conspiracy-believing that I observed in Salento, both in the imagination of what a “people” is (the meaning of this term, in fact, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière—among others—points out, it is not a “given”) (see Rancière 2017) and in the contestation of the elites also around the *Xylella* main narrative.¹⁷ In my 2021 article “Magic and Politics,” I distinguished between “believing in conspiracies” and “conspiracy-believing.” While the first expression refers to the intellectual sphere of beliefs, the second pertains to sensory and performative aspects linked to the adoption of conspiracy theories. In the same article, inspired by the work of Jacques Rancière on *dissensus* (sensing differently), I argued that, in the Salento context I directly observed, I could see a “community of sense” emerging around the adoption of conspiratoriality. This general argument could possibly be a valid framework to better understand some aspects of PdU’s activism around the

Xylella affair, too. Emically, the M5S movement adamantly refused, for years, the left/right distinction, presenting itself as a post-ideological party (see also Dominijanni 2014). As a result of the 2022 elections, the internal separations of the movement further complicated the Italian political panorama. Nonetheless, these rifts within the party possibly made more explicit the connections between (at least some of) the M5S movement and the left. As a matter of fact, under the leadership of former Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, the M5S started explicitly framing itself as a progressive movement within the political left. This makes it somewhat more straightforward considering activism close to the M5S as a form of left-wing populism or, at least, as a “non-right-wing” form of populism, in the Italian context. This is especially evident if one analyzes the M5S vis-à-vis, for example, the type of populism that has been characterizing the *Legha Nord* (Northern League) with Mr. Matteo Salvini’s leadership and followers and the one of the right-wing party *Fratelli d’Italia* (Brothers of Italy, the party that won the 2022 elections).¹⁸

To better situate the environmental activism of the PdU vis-à-vis CoDiRO and the issues around *Xylella Fastidiosa*, I hereby propose to follow political scientist Oscar García Agustín’s understanding of left-wing populism. García Agustín defines left-wing populism as “the combination of the populist impetus of expanding representation (through the appeal to ‘the people’ against the elites) . . . and higher participation and of the left tradition to promote equality and social justice” (2020, 10). In the case of *Il Popolo degli Ulivi*, as their webpage shows, there are clear references to an “inclusionary” (Damiani 2020, 38) understanding of “the people,” especially in its symbolic dimension. The PdU is defined as a “community of citizens of good will” in which “Anyone can contribute and is welcome”—Italians and foreigners, rich and poor, and more or less educated and politically engaged individuals and groups. Moreover, the “them/us cleavage” (Damiani 2020, 35) is indeed inflected as a “top/bottom” one, where the open and diverse elements of the PdU are contraposed to powerful local, national, and international elites (such as Monsanto). In addition to these elements, which indicate a distance between PdU activism and right-wing populisms, I would also like to stress the PdU’s attention toward the promotion of equality and social justice. The latter elements seem to be present and dovetailed, directly or indirectly, with a critique to neoliberalism and, in particular, of neoliberalist personhood.¹⁹ For example, the possible introduction of new, *Xylella*-resistant, varieties of olive trees and the intensive agriculture is not criticized by the PdU activists *qua* a way to economically exploit the territory by “outside” elites (e.g., Monsanto) vis-à-vis local or national ones. Rather, it is explicitly addressed as a direct threat to the survival of small landowners and of organic and sometimes bio-centric agriculture.

Importantly, for the point I want to make in this chapter, part of these discourses is strictly economic and ecological, and part of them is spiritual and ontological. The “subaltern status” and the “existential insecurity” (Damiani 2020, 35) that characterizes and gives unity to the PdU “people” as a political subject, in fact, go beyond human persons as to include non-human ones. In other words, both in my ethnographic fieldwork and in strands of activism close to the PdU positions, a peculiar trait emerges when talking about the land of Salento and the *Xylella* epidemic: The olive trees are often considered family members and sometimes ancestors whose presences foster inter- and multi-generational relationships.

Salento’s economy was linked for centuries, until fairly recently, to agriculture and, in particular, to the presence of *latifundia*: large land estates owned by a landlord, often worked by a large number of (often underpaid and exploited) peasants. Traces of this economic history can still be found in the local language and social structure. It is not uncommon to meet people who refer to the parcel of land they own and cultivate—mostly as a leisure activity—as *fundu* (a term in the Salentino dialect clearly linked to the term *latifondo*). The cultivation and handling of tobacco, in particular, played an important economic and political role in this area until the past century: as Santoro and Torsello point out, in fact, “an endemic class conflict between the rich owners . . . and the masses of peasants and female workers (*operaie tabacchine*) also developed around the tobacco economy” (2005, 28). This economic and historical past of Salento is part of the collective memory—and a relevant one in shaping the relationship with olive trees in Salento. I often heard, on the field, variations of the following narrative in reference to the land owned by the families of my interlocutors, olive trees and, more recently, to *Xylella*. “This is the land that my grandparents or great grandparents earned with their work.” They often use the dialectal word for work, here, that is *fatica*. *Fatica* shares its root with that of “struggle,” “fatigue.”

They worked in the fields for the landlord, and they could not directly benefit from the products of the land they cultivated—often better-suited for agriculture. They bought our family-land with their sweat and blood and *fatica*. The value of this land goes beyond its material and economic one. Killing the trees is like killing the memory of our grandparents and great-grandparents, as the one of the olive trees who are our kin, our ancestors.

I have so far shown that, within PdU activism, discourses around subalternity and unfair economic conditions are intermingled with those around family and ancestors. The latter cannot be treated *only* as metaphors. At least in some cases, they are expressions of particular forms of “relational ontologies” linked to “Dark Green Religion.”

Dark Green Religion: Conspirituality beyond New Age

In order to better understand the genesis and implications of the conspiracist tendencies and arguments by the left-wing populist discourses brought forward by the PdU, I propose to focus—differently from current understandings of these phenomena—on the key role that relational ontologies—i.e., the “Dark Green Religion” elements of the *Xylella querrelle*—have in shaping, feeding, and organizing their activism.

The type of “religion” or, better, “spirituality” I am referring to in this chapter is in line with that observed and described by Bron Taylor in his book *Dark Green Religion* (2010), with one caveat: given the colonial legacy of the term “animism,” I always prefer to refer to this type of spiritualities and phenomena as “relational ontologies.”²⁰ In *Dark Green Religion*, Taylor distinguishes “between green religion (which posits that environmentally friendly behavior is a religious obligation) and dark green religion (in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care)” (2010, 10).

Dark green religion is generally deep ecological, biocentric, or ecocentric, considering all species to be intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable apart from their usefulness to human beings. This value system is generally (1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority, often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveals how tiny human beings are in the universe; and (3) reinforced by metaphysics of interconnection and the idea of interdependence (mutual influence and reciprocal dependence) found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics.

(2010, 13)

Drawing from what he calls the “environmentalist milieu,” Taylor claims that there are four main types of dark green religion: a supernaturalistic (Spiritual Animism) and a naturalistic version of Animism, and a supernaturalistic (Gaian Spirituality) and a naturalistic version (Gaian Naturalism) of what he calls “Gaian Earth Religion” (2010, 14–15). With Animism, or, as I would call it, “relational ontologies,” he refers

to perceptions that natural entities, forces, and nonhuman life-forms have one or more of the following: a soul or vital life-force or spirit, personhood (an affective life and personal intentions), and consciousness, often but not always including special spiritual intelligence or powers.

(2010, 15)

Nature is believed to be animated by spiritual intelligence (for spiritual animists) or by life-force (for naturalistic animists).

Animism postulates that people can, at least *by conjecture and imagination*, and sometimes through ritualized action and other practices, come to some understanding of these living forces and intelligences in nature and develop mutually respectful and beneficial relationships with them.

(2010, 15. *Emphasis in the original*)

The followers of Gaian Earth Spirituality, instead, understand “the biosphere (universe or cosmos) to be alive or conscious, or at least by metaphor and analogy to resemble organisms with their many interdependent parts” (2010, 16). For followers of Gaian spirituality, the biosphere or the universe is the fundamental thing to understand and venerate. “Gaian Spirituality is more likely to draw on nonmainstream or nonconsensus science for data” as, I would add, happens in the case of *Xylella Fastidiosa*, “that reinforces its generally pantheistic (or panentheistic) and holistic metaphysics. It is more open to interpretations commonly found in subcultures typically labeled New Age” (2010, 16). Finally, followers of Gaian naturalism are skeptical of supernaturalistic metaphysics.

They are more likely to restrict its claims to the scientific mainstream as a basis for understanding and promoting a holistic metaphysics . . . [while often] relying on religious language and metaphors of the sacred (sometimes only implicitly and not self-consciously) when confessing their feelings of belonging and connection to the energy and life systems that they inhabit and study.

(2010, 16)

Obviously, Taylor warns us, “The blurred lines between the four types indicate permeable boundaries; the types represent tendencies rather than uncomplicated, static, and rigid clusters of individuals and movements” (2010, 15).

In the light of Taylor’s multifaceted understanding of “Dark Green Religion,” it should be clear, at this point, that, in order to be considered a follower of Dark Green Religion, one does not have to belong to a particular spiritual group or engage in specific esoteric practices.²¹ Regardless of the individual religious affiliations or spiritual inclinations, one can adopt, consciously or not, one or more of the different expressions of Dark Green Religion described by Taylor. Moreover, this conscious or unconscious adoption can be juxtaposed or dovetailed with other, mainstream or marginal, spiritual and religious orientations. For example, one could be an atheist *and* a follower of Dark Green Religion.²²

What are the relationships, then, between Dark Green Religion and conspiracy? According to Ward and Voas, conspиритuality refers to:

A politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age:

(1) A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order . . . (2) Humanity is undergoing a ‘paradigm shift’ in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened ‘new paradigm’ worldview.

(Ward and Voas 2011, 104)

Their understanding of conspirituality is very specific and understood in connection with particular New Age beliefs. While still very present in the conspiritual environments I have been researching, I argue that New Age beliefs are, on the one hand, not homogeneous within New Age groups, and, on the other hand, not the only ones active in contemporary conspirituality, within the “alternative spiritualities” milieu. Therefore, on the basis of my work among contemporary Pagans, New Agers, and followers of “alternative spiritualities” in Salento, I propose not to limit the notion of conspirituality to specific New Age beliefs, but to extend it as to include the adoption of conspiracy theories by those who believe that nature is “sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care” (Taylor 2010, 10).²³ I think that such an extension of the original meaning could better describe the current situation within the “alternative spirituality” contexts and practices and their porosity. This porosity, I believe, is both the result of the adoption of more eclectic beliefs and practices within “alternative spirituality” groups (vis-à-vis the early 2000s) and of new, perhaps populist-inspired, ways to understand community.

***Xylella* and Dark Green Religion**

Il Popolo degli Ulivi’s positions on the *Xylella* affair show that the adoption of conspiracy theories in conversation with non-mainstream spiritualities and ontologies might transcend both formal spiritual affiliation and New Age-specific beliefs in the “alternative spirituality” milieu.

From my analysis of *Il Popolo degli Ulivi*’s activism, it is evident that the activists use images, rhetoric, and ideas that can be referred to Dark Green Religion. First of all, *Il Popolo degli Ulivi* often relies on the claim of the interconnectedness of human and non-human beings. The Salentinian environmental activists that I have considered in this chapter argue that the problem of the olive trees is systemic and impacts the human and non-human population of the area in similar ways. In line with Dark Green Religions’ beliefs, according to many among the PdU the individual’s wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of others: nature, humans, and, sometimes, spirits. Since we are all one, we are connected, co-dependent, and related. Therefore, one’s flourishing and justice are not only personal enterprises, but a responsibility toward others and all that is. In other words, sometimes literally and sometimes metaphorically, Salentine activists follow the Medieval and Renaissance

alchemist principle stated in the hermetic text *Tabula Smaragdina* (Emerald Tablet): “It is true, without lying, sure and certain: what is below is like what is above. And what is above is like what is below, to do the miracles of one only thing.”²⁴ Moreover, there are plenty of instances in which olive trees are explicitly or implicitly, with words or actions, considered and treated as persons—beyond the personal and ancestral narratives that I mentioned above. The opening scene of this article, where the old man named his olive trees and explicitly talked about them as his offspring, is an example of this, as well as the aforementioned short video featuring the funeral for the olive tree(s). Likewise, the PdU Facebook page, as I indicated above, describes the ethos of the movement with the words “we are the olive trees.”

Additionally, recently, the Salento startup “*Olivami*” started promoting the “adoption” of olive trees (Olivami 2021). According to their website, the adoption process is very easy. After choosing the adoption plan (one can adopt one olive tree for a year for less than 32 euros), the foster parent can name the olive tree, and then they will receive an adoption certificate. Every year, they will also receive some organic extra virgin olive oil (the quantity depends on the number of trees adopted and on the continuity of one’s yearly adoptions). Transposing the ubiquitous child sponsorship programs (called, in Italian, “*adozioni a distanza*,” meaning “long-distance adoptions”) to olive trees. An additional and particularly significant example of this is the documentary *Legno Vivo* (translated in English with the title *Breathing Wood*), whose subtitle is *Xylella, Oltre il Batterio* (*Xylella, beyond the bacterium*), directed by Filippo Bellantoni (Bellantoni et al. 2019). This documentary, particularly in line with the PdU claims, endorses and publicizes some of the themes and theories that I addressed in this paper.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this chapter I argued that, whether the result of supernaturalistic or naturalistic stances, whether “animist” or “Gaian,” the “Dark Green Religion” elements are ubiquitous in counter-discourses around *Xylella* and CoDiRO—within and without the PdU activism. In particular, neo-animist, relational ontologies, in which olive trees are considered as non-human persons, seem to be prevalent—pointing toward an understanding of nature as sacred, with intrinsic value, due reverent care. This, I showed, is a key element to consider when trying to better understand conspiracy theories and anti-scientist stances in this particular context. When scholars, journalists, and scientists try to understand the terms of this *querrelle* around *Xylella Fastidiosa* and *Il Popolo degli Ulivi* activism, they often remain, overall, puzzled. In line with common reactions to anti-scientism and conspiracism, they often invoke the irrationality, ignorance, paranoia, and faulty thinking of the activists. My chapter complicates current analyses of the activism around

Xylella in Salento, offering a new, additional dimension, to grapple with some of the most challenging configurations of contemporary populisms in Salento and beyond.

Notes

- 1 “*Ieu ho tenuta una passione grande. Come l’ho tenuta per i miei figli, l’aggiu tenuta pe’ le piante. Comu aggiu crisciutu i miei figli cosi aggiu vulutu cu crescu le mie piante.*” Xylella Report (2015). All translations from Italian and the Salento dialect are mine.
- 2 See, e.g., Bleve et al. (2016); Schneider et al. (2020).
- 3 See, e.g., Simpson (2015). See also Gorini (2022).
- 4 See, e.g., La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno Redazione Online (2021); Cristini (2017); Burdeau (2019); Bucci and Sandroni (2019); Rinnovabili.it (2015); Camera dei Deputati Servizio Studi XVIII Legislatura (2022). As of 2021, the disease has started to impact the olive trees in the province of Bari, a city 150 kilometers north of Lecce. It is important to mention that series of wildfires, especially in the summers of 2020 and 2021, added to the already critical situation of the olive tree population. The reference to the “people,” in the *Popolo degli Ulivi*, has clearly populist overtones.
- 5 Unfortunately, I do not have access to who, if any, financially supports the movement and to what extent.
- 6 See, e.g., Rinnovabili.it (2015). Some of these theses were supported by *Osservatorio sulla criminalità nell’Agricoltura e sul Sistema Agroalimentare*, authored by Coldiretti, the main Italian organization of farmers in 2015. In the same year, Gian Carlo Caselli, the former chief prosecutor of Turin and president of the scientific committee of the Italian Watchdog on *agromafie*, said that, “the presence of *Xylella* presents aspect that could go beyond ‘fatalità,’” which I would translate here as “natural calamity” or “act of God.” See Eurispes and Coldiretti (2015); De Filippis (2019, 19).
- 7 On conspiracy theories and New-Age and Pagan spirituality in Salento see Parmigiani (2021, 2023).
- 8 See, e.g., Magistroni (2018); Rosenberg Colorni (2015); Ansa and Max Frigione (2015); Ballero (2018). There are other branches of conspiracy theories regarding the CoDiRO active in Salento, such as those linked with real estate speculation and the local mafia, that I do not address in this chapter. The main conspiracy theories, though, among those I do not directly address in this chapter, link *Xylella* to different forms of environmental pollution. For a reference, see, e.g., Rinnovabili.it (2015).
- 9 See, e.g., Foschini (2015); Ballero (2018).
- 10 It is worth mentioning that there is an ongoing international lawsuit against Monsanto for the use of glyphosate in Roundup. See, e.g., Gaines (2022).
- 11 It might be useful to read the *Popolo degli Ulivi*’s populism in conversation with what Mede, Schäfer, and Metag call “science-related populism” (2023). “Science-related populism has been conceptualized as a set of ideas suggesting a fundamental conflict between ‘ordinary people’ and ‘academic elites’, that is, scientists or scientific institutions” (2023, 3). This is particularly relevant, since, according to Roccatò et al. (2019), “negative conceptions of the academic elite were found among Italians, 14 % of whom agree that ‘people with advanced degrees do not understand the problems of ordinary people’” (Mede et al. 2023, 4).
- 12 Some believe that, during the same conference, specimens of *Xylella Fastidiosa* were first introduced into the region.

- 13 Michael Butter writes that “According to the American political scientist Michael Barkun, conspiracy theories are characterized—in addition to the premise of a group of conspirators—by three basic assumptions: (1) Nothing happens by accident; (2) Nothing is as it seems; (3) Everything is connected” (2020, 10) and that “Conspiracy theorists always tell their stories backwards. They ask who stands to gain from an event or development in order to identify the agents responsible. They believe in a mechanistic world where there is no room for coincidence, unintended consequences or systemic effects. To them, observable events are the consequences of intentional actions, making it possible and indeed necessary to establish the motives of the actors concerned. ‘*Cui bono?*’ (‘Who benefits?’)” (2020, 33). All these elements play a role in the conspiracy theories around *Xylella Fastidiosa* and help better clarifying some of the elements I describe in this chapter. See also Barkun (2003).
- 14 See Rinnovabili.it (2015). See also Goitre (2019) and Lannes (2015).
- 15 While the relationship between populism and religion in Europe has been highlighted in recent scholarship, the focus has been primarily on Christianity and Abrahamic religions. As a result, other important spiritual orientations, widespread and growing in Europe, have been under-researched. One such orientation is magic, “New Age,” and Pagan spiritualities. The latter are one of the expressions of what is also referred to as “Western Esotericism.” The practitioners of forms of magic are rapidly growing in number in Europe and the USA, and magic is ever more part of the “lived spiritual experience” of an increasing number of individuals. On religion and populism see, e.g., Molle (2019); Courau et al. (2019); Schwörer and Romero-Vidal (2020); Arato and Cohen (2017).
- 16 To put this claim in perspective, according to the *Ministero degli Interni* (Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs), in the 2018 elections the M5S, in the Lecce province, got almost 45 percent of votes for the *Camera dei Deputati*. Ministero degli Interni (2018).
- 17 Most of my Pagan interlocutors, within and without the PdU, while not politically active in the movement, could be considered close to the Movimento5Stelle (M5S). Many members of M5S have been adopting conspiracy thinking. On M5S, see, for example, Dominijanni (2014); Miconi (2015); Ventura (2018).
- 18 On Mr. Matteo Salvini and the Lega Nord populism see, e.g., Hamadaoui (2022); Maccaferri and Newth (2022); Berti (2021). On *Fratelli d’Italia*, see, e.g., Puleo and Piccolino (2022); Donà (2022). It is worth noting that both these parties shape the idea of “people” in ways that differ from M5S’s ones. In the case of Lega Nord and Fratelli d’Italia, who are both in the winning coalition after the 2022 elections, the construction of “people” is associated with xenophobic, ultra-Catholic, and anti-EU rhetorics, for example. In the case of M5S, instead, it is linked to battle such as universal basic income and civil rights, as it is inferred from the M5S’s commitment to “reddito di cittadinanza” (citizen’s income).
- 19 See, e.g., Wendy Brown (2016) on responsabilization and Parmigiani (2022).
- 20 On neo-animism see, e.g., Abram (1996); Bird-David (1999); Harvey (2006, 2013, 2019). For a critique of neo-animism, see, e.g., Wilkinson (2017).
- 21 This point is further stressed by Taylor (2023).
- 22 This is the reason why I considered my lack of information on individual spiritual and religious affiliation of individual PdU activists not hindering the main point of this chapter.
- 23 Halafoff et al. (2021) have chosen to problematize the “con” in conspirituality to be able “to encompass a wider spectrum of spiritual beliefs and practices, including those that are non-controversial, those that may be deceptive cons, and/or those that draw on conspiracy theories.” See Conspirituality in Australia Project (2022).

- 24 “Verum, sine mendacio, certum et verissimum: quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius. Et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius, ad perpetranda miracula rei unius” (My translation). For a thorough description of similar attitudes toward the world, see, e.g., Hanegraaff (1996). What is known today with the term “contemporary Paganism” and/or “New Age Spirituality” could be considered as part of a wider and multifaceted phenomenon called (Western) Esotericism. This body of knowledge and of practices is deemed to be the representative of a corpus of theories and systems that, with the unfolding of Modernity, were (and were considered as) “rejected.” “Rejected,” here, is not a synonym of “disappeared.” In fact, the dialectic between mainstream modernities and what was referred to as the “occult” has always been central to Modernist discourses, albeit within a framework that wanted to delegitimize, marginalize, stigmatize, and ridicule both the “hidden knowledge” itself and its followers. On (Western) Esotericism see, e.g., Faivre (1994); Campbell (1972); von Stuckrad (2005a, 2005b); Hammer (2001); Partridge (2004, 2005); Hanegraaff (1996, 2012); Asprem and Granholm (2014); Hale (2021).

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6

POPULISM AND CONSPIRACY THINKING IN THE *AUFSTEHEN*-MOVEMENT

Leo Roepert

The *Aufstehen* (Stand up) movement was initiated in 2018 by Sahra Wagenknecht, back then still a prominent politician of the party *Die Linke* (Left Party), and some other well-known politicians and intellectuals such as Oskar Lafontaine,¹ Bernd Stegemann, and Wolfgang Streeck. *Aufstehen* described itself as a left-wing unification movement. Its aim was to bring together people who want to work for more social justice from left-wing parties, trade unions, civil society, academia, and the cultural sector (Rucht 2018). The need for such a left-wing unification movement was justified by the argument that the established left-wing parties, such as the *SPD* (The Social Democratic Party), *Die Grünen* (The Green Party), but also *Die Linke* (The Left Party), had abandoned most basic left-wing positions and turned economically toward neoliberalism and culturally toward cosmopolitan values. According to *Aufstehen*'s foundational manifesto, this had made large sections of their former voters feel betrayed and no longer represented. Out of frustration and protest, the manifesto, they had increasingly turned to right-wing populist parties, because they were the only ones willing to oppose neoliberalism and globalization. *Aufstehen* therefore wanted to bring back into the public debate positions that it considered traditionally left-wing: the reduction of social inequality, the regulation of the globalized economy, the return to a strong national welfare state, and peace policy (*Aufstehen* n.d.a). However, people with conservative convictions were also explicitly addressed, which is why *Aufstehen* also included positions such as the restriction of migration, a critique of identity politics, and an idealization of the homeland. The movement also wanted to recruit supporters of the right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany). Wagenknecht repeatedly emphasized that the people who

sympathize with the AfD were “not racists, but people who feel left out. Of course we can win them back”² (Niejahr and Herwartz 2016). Because of such statements, *Aufstehen* has been classified by many scholars and journalists as a populist movement that combines left-wing and right-wing positions (Agustín 2020, 62; Wolf 2018).

This chapter examines whether and to what extent *Aufstehen* can be characterized as a left-wing populist movement. Furthermore, I will examine what role conspiracy theories played within the movement. First, I will explain my understanding of left-wing populism and conspiracy theories. Then I will give a brief overview of the founding and further development of the *Aufstehen* movement. Finally, I will examine which populist narratives and conspiracy theory elements can be found in the discourse of *Aufstehen*. To this end, I analyze documents available on the official website, the demands for the 2021 federal election discussed and voted on by members of the movement,³ and publications and statements by Sahra Wagenknecht⁴ and other prominent representatives. The analysis will show that while there are strong populist tendencies in the discourse of *Aufstehen*, conspiracy theories do not play a central role. Nevertheless, there are numerous formulations with a conspiracist undertone. This shows that the populist narratives of *Aufstehen* are open to a conspiracy-theoretical interpretation.

Left-Wing Populism and Conspiracy Theories

The term populism has a long tradition in historiography, political science, and political sociology. In recent years, it has often been used to describe new political parties and movements that do not fit into the familiar coordinates of the political system. Since the political actors that are labeled “populist” have very different political programs and goals, organizational forms, and social contexts, it has proven difficult to find general definitional characteristics (Priester 2012, 32–50). Definitions that attempt to determine populism through more formal elements such as simplification, emotionalization, and personalization encounter the problem that such elements can be found in almost all major political parties and also in many social movements. Therefore, these definitions make it difficult to distinguish populist from non-populist phenomena. More appropriate for grasping populism is the ideational approach (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016; Stanley 2008). According to it, populism is a

thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

(Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6; see also Mudde 2004)

In addition, as Jan-Werner Müller (2016, 20) points out, populists claim to be the only ones to represent the will of the people. This exclusive claim to representation makes populism anti-pluralistic and thus anti-liberal.

The dichotomy of good people and bad elite is the foundational opposition of populism, but it is interpreted and concretized differently in the different variants of populism. What are the specifics of left-wing populism and how does it differ from right-wing populism? Agustín (2020) argues that the left-wing conception of the people—as opposed to the right-wing conception—is intended to expand representation and participation. The goal is to represent as many people as possible by making broadly shared political demands that can also cut across the traditional left-right divide. In contrast to Müller’s assessment, he claims that the construction of the people in left-wing populism does not imply homogenization. Rather, the understanding of “the people” in left-wing populism is intrinsically pluralistic (Agustín 2020, 10-12). Chantal Mouffe (2018, 62) also argues that the construction of the people does not have to homogenize them but can also take place in an anti-essentialist fashion.

However, these claims are not very convincing. If we look at the discourse of *Aufstehen* and other left-wing populist movements, it becomes clear that there, too, the people are portrayed as more or less homogeneous. From a sociological perspective, this can be easily explained: Dichotomizing identity constructions always tend to homogenize the characteristics attributed to one’s own and the opposing group. The antagonism between the people and the elite can only be asserted if opposing collective characteristics that are associated with valuations are ascribed to the two groups. For the people to appear good and virtuous, the elite must represent all that is bad. Moreover, the elite must be cast as wielding relatively great power and ill intentions in order to be made responsible for all of society’s ills.

The last aspect already indicates a potential affinity of the populist worldview to conspiracy thinking. Conspiracy theories explain social events or developments by tracing them back to a conspiracy (Barkun 2013; Butter 2020a). Great power is ascribed to the conspiring group, which enables it to control social processes and at the same time to hide its actions from the public. Conspiracy theorists therefore see it as their task to uncover the conspiracy and to save the people. As Butter (2020a, 18–23) argues, the conspiracies imagined in conspiracy theories can be distinguished from possibly real conspiracies by certain characteristics: The temporal duration of the conspiracy, the number of people involved, the assumed convergence of interests, and the assumptions about intentionality and the controllability of complex social processes make it extremely unlikely a priori that the claimed conspiracies exist in reality. In summary, every conspiracy theory is populist, but not all populism is necessarily conspiracist (Butter 2020a, 91–120). However, all populism is susceptible to conspiracy theories. This is because the populist

construct of a vicious elite responsible for societal ills is easily transformed into the imagination of a full-blown conspiracy.

In addition to this general affinity of populism and conspiracy theories, however, there is also a potential connecting element between leftist worldviews and conspiracy thinking. A basic component of leftist discourse is the critique of domination, inequality, and injustice. This critique can be articulated very differently depending on the political and theoretical background. The “classic” critique of bourgeois society formulated by Karl Marx is directed against the basic structures of the capitalist economy. Other variants of social criticism have focused on the state or certain repressive institutions, or on the symbolic domination of ideologies, norms, and discourses. The left-wing critique of domination, however, is mostly also directed against relations of domination between groups (the domination of the bourgeoisie over the working class, of men over women, of whites over non-whites). If this form of criticism ignores the complexity of social institutions and processes, reduces the various relations of domination to a single one, and ascribes an inner homogeneity and unrealistically great power to the ruling group, the step to conspiracy theory is not far away. In fact, there is a long tradition of conspiracist thinking in the history of leftist theories of class domination and imperialism, which often has antisemitic tendencies as well (Haury 2002). We can summarize, then, that in left-wing populism there is a possible connection to conspiracy theories both via the populist element and via the left-wing element. However, whether and to what extent conspiracy theories can actually be found in a specific left-wing populist movement is ultimately an empirical question that must be answered separately for each case.

Formation and Development of the *Aufstehen* Movement

In 2017, the first rumors emerged that Sahra Wagenknecht and her allies were thinking about starting a left-wing movement. At the beginning of July 2018, Wagenknecht announced the founding of *Aufstehen* (Balcerowiak 2018; Rucht 2018). In early August, a website went online where people could enter their name and address under the button “Become part of the movement.” The founding of *Aufstehen* received a certain amount of media attention due to Wagenknecht’s prominence and skillful staging. A few days after the launch of the homepage, it was announced that the movement already had 50,000 members. Shortly thereafter, however, some observers criticized the fact that everyone who had entered their mail address on the *Aufstehen* website in order to receive further information was counted as a member (Rucht 2018, 2–4). A representative survey conducted in early August found that about one-third of Germans welcomed the founding of

the movement (Fokus 2018). The official launch of the movement followed on September 4, with more than 100,000 people registered at that time. The launch was tied to an appearance at the Bundespressekonferenz (“Federal Press Conference”), where Wagenknecht and a number of other well-known founding members presented the basic issues of the movement and answered questions from the media.

In contrast to the large media attention, many representatives of the parties left of the center reacted critically or at least reservedly to the new movement. Even in Wagenknecht’s own party, *Die Linke*, leading politicians such as Katja Kipping and Bernd Riexinger distanced themselves. Wagenknecht’s positions on refugees and migration, in particular, were controversial within the party and in some cases sharply criticized. There was also no broad support from civil society. Social movements and civil society actors were not involved in the founding process of the movement in advance. In contrast to the grassroots democratic claim of a collection movement, the founding was a largely non-transparent process organized by a small circle of prominent figures (Rucht 2018, 13–18). In the following years, activists from *Aufstehen* repeatedly tried to join other protest movements, such as the climate activists in the Hambach Forest, who tried to stop the continuation of lignite mining. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, members of *Aufstehen* have become increasingly involved in the so-called peace movement, which calls for an immediate halt to arms deliveries to Ukraine and for negotiations with Russia. The allegedly aggressive behavior of NATO is seen as the main cause of the war, while Russia’s imperialist rhetoric tends to be ignored. The movement’s high point to date was the “Uprising for Peace” rally in Berlin in February 2023, organized by Wagenknecht together with the feminist publicist Alice Schwarzer.

However, despite Wagenknecht’s high popularity among the German population (Welt 2019), the movement has not been able to achieve major independent mobilization successes or generate greater media attention for its issues. In terms of content, the movement’s profile remained vague for a long time. It was not until the 2021 federal election that an open online platform was set up, through which anyone who was interested could participate in developing and voting on the demands that *Aufstehen* should represent. As a result of this collective discussion process, 21 demands were presented. Looking at the overall development and impact, many observers conclude that *Aufstehen* is a failure (see, for example, Balcerowiak 2019; Dörre 2021). At the beginning of 2021, the movement had only about 600 regularly active members and about 1,000–2,000 supporters (Weber 2022, 8).

Rumors that the movement could represent a first step toward a new party were initially rejected by Wagenknecht. Due to intensified disputes within the Left Party over Wagenknecht’s positions on the Ukraine war, speculation

about the foundation of a party grew louder again (Decker 2022). At the beginning of 2023, Wagenknecht announced she no longer wanted to run for *Die Linke*; in October of the same year, she finally announced that she was founding a new party that would run in elections for the first time in 2024 under the name *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht* (Tagesschau 2023).

Aufstehen and Populism

The discourse of *Aufstehen* identifies social injustices in today's Germany and describes them as the result of wrong policies and long-lasting societal maldevelopments. The founding appeal begins with the statement that things are not "fair" in Germany, in Europe, and in the world. It claims that the central promise of the social market economy that everyone can improve their living situation is no longer valid. The welfare state, the appeal holds, will be dismantled, and no longer offer any security. Accordingly, the middle class is projected to shrink more and more, while income and wealth inequality are expected to increase (Aufstehen n.d.a). To paint a critical picture of contemporary society, positive and negative principles, and values are sharply contrasted. "Profits triumph over the common good, violence over international law, money over democracy, waste over sustainable production. Where nothing but stock market values count, humanity falls by the wayside" (Aufstehen n.d.a). *Aufstehen* wants to fight "for justice and social cohesion, for peace and disarmament, for the preservation of the natural foundation of our lives" (Aufstehen n.d.a). More "direct democracy" is demanded to counteract the allegedly increasing impact of lobbyism and "market-conforming democracy." The EU in its current form should be replaced by a Europe of "sovereign democracies." In international relations, the law of the strongest is said to dominate over diplomacy and negotiations, which is seen as the reason why states wage "murderous wars for natural resources and power." Germany's bad relationship with Russia is lamented, and it is criticized "that the German government subordinates itself to an unpredictable, increasingly conflict-oriented US foreign policy. . ." (Aufstehen n.d.a). Against this, *Aufstehen* wants to advocate a "peace policy" and a "peaceful balancing of interests" (Aufstehen n.d.a).

The writings and statements of Sahra Wagenknecht are also characterized by a strong dichotomy of positive and negative values and principles. In her book *The Self-Righteous*, published in 2021, she describes a general decline of values. In the past, she argues, there existed a stable community, but today there is division, polarization, and disintegration everywhere. In the past, the public was supposedly characterized by the rational exchange of arguments; today, moralization, constant indignation and intolerance of dissenting opinions prevail. The fair market economy of the past has been replaced by an unjust global capitalism, she claims (Wagenknecht 2021, 9–18).

Wagenknecht's narrative of decay is based on a harmonistic image of Fordist capitalism. In the era of the 1950s to the 1970s,

values such as achievement, diligence, discipline, order, security, stability, and normality, which were shared by the working class as well as by the traditional bourgeois and petty-bourgeois strata, were still valid. Society was seen as a common affair in which social cohesion, public spirit, and responsibility not only for oneself but also for others counted. Moreover, a certain restraint was imposed on the upper ten thousand. It was the time of measure and middle. . .

(*Wagenknecht 2021, 63*)

In Wagenknecht's narrative, Germany's golden age of the "economic miracle" and the welfare state has given way to a steady "decline" that began in the mid-1970s (Wagenknecht 2021, 66–78). Deindustrialization, job losses, and the expansion of a precarious low-wage sector have led to more and more people being affected or threatened by descent. This development, she argues, has partly been caused by technological change. According to Wagenknecht, the main cause, however, is neoliberal globalization brought about by political decisions.

Although Wagenknecht fashions herself as a radical critic of capitalism, her critique is not directed against the structures of capitalism as such, but against the monopolizing tendencies of big business, globalization, and the financial sphere. The latter are treated in Wagenknecht's analysis as harmful pathologies and separated from the basic structures of capitalism, which are presented as unproblematic (Wagenknecht 2021, 247–316). Throughout, she constructs morally charged dichotomies such as that between a productive "real economy" and an unproductive financial economy or the distinction between a good national middle class and harmful global big business. The diligence, discipline, and effort of the working and middle classes are contrasted with the greed and the "meritless" incomes of the "money aristocracy" (Wagenknecht 2016, 15; see also 71–80). Her attempt to terminologically isolate and separate the good and bad sides of capitalism culminates in the distinction between market economy and capitalism and the call for the market economy to be protected from capitalism (Wagenknecht 2016, 41). This separation is historically, empirically, and theoretically absurd (Bierl 2022; Wendl 2022): The modern market economy has been capitalist from the beginning. It has always been based on the profit-oriented production of goods. Capitalism has always included centralization and concentration of capital, large corporations, and banks, oligopolies, and monopolies. The tendency toward globalization is also inherent in capitalism from the very beginning (Bierl 2022, 191–97).

Both Wagenknecht and *Aufstehen* tend to tie the diametrically opposed good and bad values and principles with social groups that are presented as largely homogeneous. This reflects the populist principle of personalization. Through personalization, social developments appear as the expression of a consistent will and action rather than the result of the complex interaction of institutional logic and actors with contradictory motives, which always leads to unintended effects.

In the founding appeal of *Aufstehen*, large corporations and their owners are portrayed as the winners and, at the same time, the main culprits of “globalized financial capitalism.” Through their lobbies, they are said to influence politics and spread the lie that there is no alternative to these policies. On the other side are the “many” who are the losers of globalization, and the majority of them, the appeal claims, would support more pronounced social policies. However, these alleged majority concerns are not being articulated by the established parties. The goal of *Aufstehen* is to mobilize new majorities for social policies: “When the many join together and refuse to stay individualized they have more power than the privileged few” (Aufstehen. n.d.a). The first version of the *Aufstehen* homepage featured 18 people with their first names and short descriptions (pastor, cameraman, pensioner, etc.), who talked about their problems in short video clips and formulated political demands. The intended message was clear: *Aufstehen* claimed to represent the mass of “ordinary people” and bundle their interests.

The social analysis in Wagenknecht’s *The Self-Righteous* begins with a three-layer model, which is strongly inspired by the three-thirds model of the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2020), and then derives two homogeneous and antagonistic camps from it (Wolowicz 2022). According to Wagenknecht, the ruling group consists of the upper class—the richest 1 percent, who assert their interests primarily through their economic resources and a network of lobbyists—and the new academic middle class, which occupies the central positions in politics and the media. The latter is said to comprise around 25–30 percent of the population, to live predominantly in urban centers, and, on average, to enjoy a high degree of social security. The new middle class is therefore presented as a winner of globalization (Wagenknecht 2021, 79–97).

This ruling group is contrasted with two other groups, each of which accounts for another third: the classic middle class (the self-employed, craftsmen, farmers, skilled workers), which is increasingly threatened by relegation, and the underclass of the population, which works predominantly in the low-wage sector of unskilled service jobs. Both groups are portrayed as the losers of globalization. In the course of the argument, these two groups are rhetorically homogenized into a “majority.” To this end, both opposing interests, for example, between medium-sized or small entrepreneurs and workers, and differences in living and income situations (for example, within the working class or within the group of service employees) are ignored or

downplayed. Moreover, without empirical evidence, Wagenknecht claims that both the traditional middle class and working class as well as those employed in the service professions have a strong need for community, stability, order, national belonging, home, and strong family ties.

Looked at closely, the values and ideas of justice that the majority of the population has internalized, especially workers, ordinary service employees, and the classic middle class, are not only conservative but also originally left-wing: They want stability, security, and cohesion and, precisely for that reason, more social equalization and less distributive injustice.

(Wagenknecht 2021, 225)

For Wagenknecht, these values are not derived from rational considerations, but arise from grand narratives and the “wisdom in traditions” (Wagenknecht 2021, 219). Identification with the nation, which sets boundaries externally and creates homogeneity and cohesion internally, is presented as a universal and progressive principle: “[J]ust about any real community is based on ties, and the closer they are, the greater the solidarity” (Wagenknecht 2021, 37–38). The very concept of family shows that people are more willing to help relatives than those who do not belong, she writes. The fact that this principle has been transferred to larger political units is seen as an advance in civilization: “The fact that members of a community, however defined, are more likely to be trusted than those who do not belong to it is not an irrational curiosity, but a behavior that has been validated over centuries” (Wagenknecht 2021, 206). The “acceptance of a community of fate [Schicksalsgemeinschaft] of all citizens of a country. . . was the decisive prerequisite for the emergence of modern democracies and welfare states,” Wagenknecht argues (2021, 218). Since every community is necessarily based on the distinction between members and non-members, the rejection of excessive migration is understandable and has nothing to do with xenophobia or racism. The majority of the population “does not want to compete with more and more immigrants for jobs and housing, nor does it agree when its own living space [Lebensraum] changes beyond recognition” (Wagenknecht 2021, 197).

Wagenknecht’s praise of intuition, tradition, and the national community corresponds quite closely to the premises of Chantal Mouffe’s normative theory of populism (Mouffe 2005, 2018). In her approach, populism is nothing less than a form of articulation of “the political.” According to Mouffe, in order to act politically, people must identify with a collective that offers them a valorizing image of themselves. Political unity is not established through the development of political consciousness or the rational mediation of divergent interests. Rather, in the idea of “the people,” different political demands should be fused by chains of equivalence into a unity with which one can identify intuitively and instinctively.⁵

While national attitudes prevail among the majority of the people, the upper class and the academic middle class, according to Wagenknecht, hold values and views that she calls left-wing liberalism. They include cosmopolitanism and an “individualism without commitment” (Wagenknecht 2021, 223). For the “lifestyle left,” as Wagenknecht also calls this group, autonomy, and self-fulfillment are more important than tradition and community. They have little attachment to their homeland and reject middle-class virtues such as hard work, diligence, and effort (Wagenknecht 2021, 26). The term “left-wing” is misleading, she contends because this group has nothing to do with traditional left-wing positions. They are no longer interested in social concerns and economic inequality, but only in symbolic politics and identity issues, she alleges. They are said to look with contempt and arrogance at the concerns and needs of the less advantaged. The majority of opinions on belonging, migration, and family, which until recently were considered normal, have been branded with moral arrogance as nationalistic, racist, and sexist (Wagenknecht 2021, 29–31).

According to Wagenknecht, this left-wing liberalism is compatible with economic neoliberalism and therefore essentially responsible for neoliberal globalization and the social disruptions it has generated. Left-liberalism is thus also held responsible for the rise of right-wing populism because it has allegedly made it economically and culturally possible (Wagenknecht 2021, 171–201). Wagenknecht argues that it is a “fairy tale” that there exists a right-wing zeitgeist in broad sections of the population (Wagenknecht 2021, 171). In her view, most people vote for right-wing parties not out of conviction but as a protest because their social concerns are not addressed by the established parties. Moreover, some right-wing parties successfully address the social issue and propose solutions, she thinks. For example, Wagenknecht praises Trump and right-wing populist parties such as the PiS and Rassemblement National for good social policies (Wagenknecht 2021, 173–85).

Is Wagenknecht’s distinction between a left-liberal minority and a nationally oriented majority a populist move as defined above? Despite some differentiations and relativizations in some parts of the book, on the whole, Wagenknecht paints a picture of two antagonistic and relatively homogeneous groups. She associates the majority with community, family, and national virtues such as diligence and discipline, while she blames the “lifestyle left” for neoliberal globalization and the political shift to the right. It would go too far to claim that Wagenknecht characterizes the lifestyle left as a powerful elite. The term hardly fits a group that, according to her, comprises 25–30 percent of the population. But even if she does not count all left-liberals among the elite, she claims that the elite is entirely influenced by left-liberalism. The parts of the academic middle class that cannot be counted among the elite due to a lack of power and economic resources support the elite’s course because they share the same views. Apart from her criticism of the

lifestyle left, which takes up a large part of her book, Wagenknecht has many points where she criticizes the elite in a narrower sense. The entire section deals with how the oligarchy influences politics through donations and lobby organizations, how it imposes its opinion on the media, and buys scientific experts (Wagenknecht 2021, 247–66). These phenomena are presented correctly in detail, but in the context of the book’s overall Manichean view of society, the focus on the misbehavior of elites supports the populist narrative. In summary, we can state then that the discourse of Wagenknecht and *Aufstehen*, with its dichotomous and moralizing distinction of homogeneous groups, with its idealization of ordinary people and the claim to represent the majority, and with its tendency to explain social injustices primarily through the motives and actions of the powerful, are clearly populist.

Conspiracist Elements and Undertones

As argued above, the thin-centered ideology of populism is in principle open to conspiracy theories (Butter 2020a, 91–120). In the case of the *Aufstehen* movement, however, conspiracy theories do not play a central role. Neither in the official statements on the homepage, in the written or oral statements of leading representatives, nor in the online discussion forum for the 2021 federal election could I find a “complete” conspiracy-theory argumentation. What can be found in various places, however, are certain elements of conspiracist thinking and formulations with a conspiracist undertone.

Wagenknecht, for example, in her critique of capitalism obsessed with finance, attributes enormous agency and malign motives to certain actors. The problem of capitalism is the “financial sharks,” the “grasshoppers,” and the “international money capital orchestrated by a few economic and financial giants” (Wagenknecht 2009, 9, 24, 171). The financial world, she argues, can generate unlimited amounts of money and make huge profits with it, without regard for the “real economy” or existing laws. Following the slogan of the Occupy movement, Wagenknecht claims that “99 percent of the population work a large part of their lives. . . for the wealth of this new money aristocracy” (Wagenknecht 2016, 15). To illustrate the power and moral depravity of financial actors, she cites Mayer Amschel Rothschild (Wagenknecht 2016, 215). The Jewish banking family Rothschild has been a central object of antisemitic conspiracy theories since the nineteenth century. In particular, the Rothschilds stand for the antisemitic notion of rapacious Jewish finance capital exploiting good national capital and national labor. Since the Holocaust, antisemitism cannot be articulated openly anymore in most Western societies, and therefore its proponents use certain terms and names such as “Rothschild” as code words. In this way, antisemitic ideas can be transported without having to speak openly of “the Jews” (Roepert 2022). The insiders nevertheless understand what is meant.

Wagenknecht deliberately feeds antisemitic resentment here, since with an educated woman like her one must assume that she is aware of the antisemitic myths surrounding the Rothschilds.

Wagenknecht also comes close to conspiracy theorizing at other points—not because she presents a conspiracist argumentation herself, but because she chooses formulations that can be easily integrated into established conspiracist discourses. In one passage of her book, for example, she suggests that Klaus Schwab, director of the World Economic Forum and central protagonist of many recent conspiracy theories,⁶ is working toward an abolition of nation-states (Wagenknecht 2021, 227). Elsewhere, she writes that WHO programs “have become less oriented toward local medical needs than toward the wishes of the Gates Foundation, which provides considerable funding to WHO” (Wagenknecht 2021, 256). Such a statement can easily be inserted into the conspiracy theory that Bill Gates invented the Corona pandemic to achieve his sinister goals.

A similar point can be made about Wolfgang Streeck, founding member of *Aufstehen* and prominent intellectual spokesman for left-wing nationalism. In recent years, a tendency toward an increasingly dichotomized view can be observed in the analyses of this internationally renowned sociologist. In his most recent book, the main social ills of the present are deduced from the contradiction between “globalism and democracy” (Streeck 2021). Neoliberalism, he argues, is attempting to overcome the crisis of capitalism by increasingly globalizing capitalism. According to Streeck, globalized capitalism cannot be governed democratically. Therefore, it must be limited by a strong nation-state. Streeck’s argument is predominantly sociological, examining the functioning of institutions and their historical emergence. However, there are also passages in which he explains social developments in an extremely schematic and exaggerated manner through the actions of actors to whom he attributes extraordinary power. For example, he writes, that the “ungovernable complexity” of today’s globalized world is the result of a “liberal-anarchist structural coup d’etat against postwar state-administered capitalism. . . .” (Streeck 2021, 14). This expression suggests that the former state-administered capitalism was swept away by a single, forceful, and democratically illegitimate act of will. In reality, neoliberal institutional restructuring has been a decades-long, complex, and conflicted process, carried out—at least in Western democracies—by democratically elected governments together with numerous other actors. In another publication Streeck (2017, 271) writes that the “leading personnel of the neoliberal age” is responsible not only for the disruptions and crises of capitalism but also, as in Wagenknecht’s view, for the rise of right-wing populism: “Whoever puts a society under economic or moral pressure of dissolution reaps traditionalist resistance. . . .” He, too, does not see any right-wing motives in the supporters of right-wing populism but describes them as defenders of democracy and the welfare state.

Apart from such schematic and one-sided attributions of guilt, Streeck also makes statements that are clearly tinged with conspiracy theories. At a panel discussion on the *Aufstehen* movement in September 2018 at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB⁷), which Wagenknecht also attended, he said of Emanuel Macron: “In France, . . . following the Bonapartist model, a figure has been installed. . . from the very top whose relationship to the grassroots of this society is completely questionable and to a very large extent artificial. . . ” (WZB 2018, 35:36). He thus suggests that Macron did not come to power through democratic elections and implies that real politicians should not have an artificial but a genuine—and organic?—connection to the people. Streeck does not say who installed Macron “from the very top” and how it was supposedly done. However, his formulation fits the conspiracy theory according to which Macron’s rapid rise can be explained by the fact that he is a puppet of the Rothschilds, as he worked for that bank before he became a politician (Butter 2020b).

There are no fully elaborated conspiracy theories on *Aufstehen*’s homepage, but some statements contain conspiracist elements. An announcement for a podcast on the topic of poverty states that “a minority in the palaces believes they are not getting enough.” Their goal is said to be to take away what little the poor have left: “This is planned and executed by politics, which has been the extended arm of the oligarchs for decades.” On the same page, there is an illustration with the slogan “poverty is part of the plan” (*Aufstehen* n.d.b). Conspiracist motives are most frequently found in connection to the media and the Ukraine War. In various places, there is a more or less explicit notion that the media are politically controlled and manipulate public opinion or sanction dissent. Wagenknecht speaks of “censorship” (NTV 2021) and asserts that people who speak critically about migration are “almost executed in public” (Wagenknecht 2021, 38).

Similar opinions can be found in the discussion forum. One user writes: “During the pandemic, serious, scientists who criticized the measures were largely suppressed in the . . . media and even defamed behind their backs” (User Comment 2021a). Another user complains about censorship and sanctions by the “opinion monopolists” on YouTube, Twitter, Google, and Facebook:

[M]any comments, reports or videos are censored, and their authors blocked, just because they represent ‘wrong’ opinions. This no longer has anything to do with free speech but leads to a dictatorship of opinion that should have no place in a democracy.

(User Comment 2021b)

“Dictatorship of opinion” is a buzzword that is especially common among the German populist and extreme right. Such statements do not necessarily

imply a conspiracy but they interpret the existence of majority and minority opinions and public criticism and sanctioning of certain opinions as an expression of centralized control of the media by politicians or by powerful opinion leaders and interest groups.

Regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *Aufstehen* positions itself against arms deliveries to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, because these would harm Germany's economy and would not contribute to ending the war. Instead, it is proposed to start diplomatic negotiations with Russia. This position is motivated by the conviction that the USA and NATO bear a share or even the main responsibility for the war. In general, a critical attitude toward the USA—mixed with anti-American resentment—and sympathy for Russia is widespread in *Aufstehen*'s discourse. This becomes clear, for example, in political slogans such as “Politicians of Europe!—Get out of the US butt!” and “Moscow belongs to Europe—Washington doesn't!,” which are included on the *Aufstehen* page (Aufstehen n.d.c).

In the slogans, images, and flyers on the war in Ukraine, conspiracist elements can be found frequently. A post on the *Aufstehen* homepage demands that the “struggle for peace” must have top priority and that the causes of war must be eliminated. Underneath it says: “And again and again the question: who benefits?” (Aufstehen n.d.d.). In other statements, this “cui bono” question is answered more or less clearly. In a flyer entitled “Stand up for peace,” it is stated that an end to the war is not in sight and “very probably not wanted by the USA or NATO. Yet it would be so simple: Ukraine declares itself neutral and NATO, as well as the EU, declare that they will not include Ukraine” (Aufstehen n.d.e. 1). Another post claims that the war in Europe benefits only “the economic competitor USA!” (Aufstehen n.d.c). Oskar Lafontaine, a former politician of the Left Party and supporter of *Aufstehen*, writes in his book *Ami, It's Time to Go*, published in 2022, that it is “the declared aim of the USA to prevent a merging of German technology with Russian resources.” The USA “constantly provokes. . . , stirs up conflicts and does everything to weaken. . . supposed opponents and competitors” (Lafontaine 2022, 13).

Again, this is not a fully-fledged conspiracy theory, but it echoes notions of a hidden agenda. The prevailing idea here is that the USA provoked the Russian attack because it benefited the country economically or in terms of power strategy. This is in line with an anti-imperialist worldview that sees the USA as an omnipotent and expansionist actor and as the incarnation of capitalism and imperialism. What is completely ignored in this view are the ideological and political motives of the Russian rulers, but also the enormous costs of the war for the USA and the Western allies, which make the argument that the West benefits from the war rather implausible. The majority opinion on the Ukraine war in the German public is once again explained by media manipulation. One slogan says, “Freedom of information instead of

primitive anti-Putin agitation” (*Aufstehen* n.d.c.), implying that public opinion on the war in Ukraine is influenced by the suppression of information and hostile propaganda.

Conclusion

The investigation has shown that strong morally charged dichotomies can be found in the discourse of *Aufstehen* and especially in the writings and political statements of Sahra Wagenknecht, the most important representative of the movement. Good and bad social phenomena and values are identified in a Manichean way with homogeneous groups. The responsibility for the criticized social developments and events (neoliberalism, globalization, social inequality, war in Ukraine) is assigned to a handful of powerful actors (multinational corporations and banks, the political elite, NATO, and the American government). However, the idea that these developments follow a comprehensive and secret plan of a conspiratorial group is suggested but never explicitly articulated. It can thus be concluded that the discourse of *Aufstehen*, while clearly populist, does not articulate fully-fledged conspiracy theories.

Nevertheless, there are numerous statements that contain elements of conspiracy theories and conspiracist undertones. The discourse of *Aufstehen* is thus in principle open to conspiracist interpretations, as can be observed in the more explicit forum posts and slogans from the *Aufstehen* homepage. It is also not surprising, therefore, that the founding of the movement and Wagenknecht’s political positions are often positively received in the conspiracist milieu. “Alternative” media platforms such as *Nachdenkseiten* and *Rubikon* contain numerous positive references to Wagenknecht. A recent article in the far-right, conspiracist, and antisemitic magazine *Compact* celebrates Wagenknecht as a “left-wing conservative” and calls her book *The Self-Righteous* “a must-read for the resistance!” (Reuth 2022). Editor-in-chief Jürgen Elsässer notes that there are many differences between him and Wagenknecht,

but at the core we agree: (1) The working classes in this country can only be defended if we fight back the globalist elites with the possibilities of the nation-state. (2) Peace with Russia is in the interest of all nations, especially of Germany.

(Elsässer 2022)

At the “Uprising for Peace” rally initiated by Wagenknecht and Schwarzer, Elsässer was joined by numerous others from the far-right and right-wing populist milieu. This illustrates that Wagenknecht’s positions have the potential for a “transverse front”⁸ that unites left-wing authoritarian and right-wing forces.

Even if *Aufstehen* as a social movement can be considered a failure, this does not necessarily hold true for left-wing populist positions in Germany. Wagenknecht is one of the most controversial, but also one of the most popular politicians in the country and receives support from various milieus. Polls in fall 2023 show up to 20 percent support for Wagenknecht's new party (RND 2023). The appeal of her left-wing populism seems to lie in the fact that, on the one hand, it actually addresses fundamental social problems and crisis phenomena, and on the other hand, it provides strong identification and highly personalizing explanations for social developments that are open to conspiracy theories and also to right-wing positions. Blaming powerful actors replaces critical reflection on society and on the systemic causes of misery and crisis. What is more, the dichotomous view of society and the affirmation of "ordinary people," the homeland, and traditional values deproblematizes the social order and reinforces unreflected identification. In the end, left-wing populism suggests that one can overcome the fundamental problems of society without having to change the structures of society or one's own identity and life. All that is needed is for the right people to come to power to put the corrupt establishment in its place and replace neoliberal policies with social ones. Then everything can be as it was in the "good old days" of the welfare state.

Notes

- 1 Lafontaine was formerly a member of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and served for a short period as finance minister in the Schröder government. He later became a harsh critic of the SPD government's social policies. In 2005, he left the party and helped build the new party *Die Linke*. He has been married to Wagenknecht since 2014.
- 2 All quotations from German-language publications were translated by me.
- 3 The online forum "My Politics" was set up in the run-up to the 2021 federal election and offered supporters of the movement the opportunity to formulate political demands and discuss them with others. This approach gives only a very limited insight into the discourses that are taking place at the grassroots of the movement.
- 4 Wagenknecht withdrew from the official leadership of the movement just half a year after its founding. Her explanation was that she wanted to take a step back as a party politician in order to give more space to the grassroots and that she was also overworked. Nevertheless, she remains the movement's most prominent representative and identification figure, so it seems justified to identify her positions with those of *Aufstehen*.
- 5 For a critique of Mouffe, see Elbe (2022); Petersen and Hecker (2022).
- 6 Compare, for example, the book by C. E. Nyder *Young Global Leaders. Der Staat des Klaus Schwab*, published by Kopp Verlag, which is specialized in conspiracy theories.
- 7 Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung.
- 8 "Querfront" is originally a term for a strategy of far-right "revolutionary conservatism" in the Weimar Republic to enter into alliances with the radical left.

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7

“THE INVENTION OF A PANDEMIC”— CONSPIRACIST ARGUMENTATION IN THE GERMAN ALTERNATIVE NEWSPAPER *DEMOKRATISCHER WIDERSTAND*

Nina Pilz

Introduction: Outbreaks of Conspiracy Theories, Conspiracy Theories about Outbreaks

As soon as the first restrictions to contain the virus were announced in Germany in March 2020, people of different political ideologies gathered to protest against them.¹ These protests have attracted great attention, not least because several supporters resorted to conspiracy theories, explaining the Covid-19 pandemic as an invention of governments and other powerful players around the world. Long before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, the spread of novel viruses such as HIV, the Ebola, or Zika virus had already given rise to various conspiracy theories. The outbreak and rapid spread of a threatening virus create an ideal environment for the outbreak and spread of conspiracy theories as events like natural disasters, epidemics or pandemics are to a large extent beyond human control. They can usually—when fate and divine powers are left aside—only be traced back to coincidences or non-intentional, purposeless natural processes. In such situations, interpretive schemes that allow for orientation and meaning-making are often missing and have yet to be found. Conspiracy theorists, however, do not leave anything to chance. They provide meaningful and seemingly clear explanations that deviate from official accounts, create connections that others did not see and find reasons for occurrences that leave most people clueless (Butter 2018, 78). Conspiracy narratives are always based on the fundamental assumption that a group of powerful people and institutions secretly directs and manipulates the course of events for its own good (Heffer 2015, 24). Behind the Covid-19 pandemic, many protesters see more than the outbreak and spread of a virus, behind containment measures, they

suspect an intention other than to protect people: making them controllable. The dualism of powerful, knowing players versus the vulnerable people inherent in this narrative also underlies all populist discourse. Covid-related conspiracist argumentation builds on, as I will show, populist communication practices such as the critique of elites or the claim to represent the interests of a seemingly homogeneous group of people.

While German debates about virus-related conspiracy theories have been dominated by a public image of the right-wing protester, conspiracy theories do not only emerge from the political right (Butter 2023). One counterexample is the alternative newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand* (*Democratic Resistance*), founded in April 2020 in the wake of the pandemic and corresponding containment measures in Germany. Based on the first 25 issues published between April and October 2020, the following case study analyzes the newspaper's typical patterns of argumentation—so-called topoi—in the first months of the health crisis. My topos analysis of texts written and published by discourse actors who can be considered left-wing populist adds to both previous linguistic studies of Covid-19-related conspiracy theories (e.g., Klosa-Kückelhaus 2020; Römer and Stumpf 2020; Niehr 2021; Römer 2021) and existing topos analyses of other conspiracy theories (e.g., Breil et al. 2018; Filatkina 2018; Schäfer 2018; Römer and Stumpf 2019; Karbach and Thome 2020). As the appeal of populism and conspiracy theories lies not least in their rhetorical and argumentative power, the investigation of their linguistic and communicative textures is a significant contribution to the study of these frequently overlapping phenomena.

I will begin with a brief introduction of the alternative newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand*, followed by a reflection on the concept of the topos in argumentation theory and some important general topoi. After subsequently introducing my corpus and my method in more detail, I will present specific topoi repeatedly deployed by the authors of the alternative newspaper. I pursue the hypothesis that they resort to but also crucially reinterpret established topoi of argumentation in order to question widely accepted official explanations and legitimize one's own beliefs.

The German Alternative Newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand*

In the first issue from April 2020, the newly founded alternative newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand* published a German translation of the essay *L'invenzione di un'epidemia* by renowned Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 2020a; 2020b, 6). Agamben considers the measures taken by many governments to contain the novel coronavirus inappropriate, given low infection figures and usually mild symptoms of the lung disease Covid-19. He understands the restrictions as an attempt to expand governmental power. At this time, the virus SARS-CoV-2 had already spread to numerous countries

and the World Health Organization spoke of a pandemic, a term that, as the organization states, should not be used thoughtlessly: “It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear” (WHO 2020). Agamben and the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand*, however, recognized and repeatedly described such as misuse of the word and accused governments of deliberately creating the kind of irrational fear the WHO warns about. The newspaper was founded to alleviate this fear and promote alternative points of view in the discourse on the pandemic that deviate from widely accepted interpretations of the traditional media:

(1) Against fear! There are at least two strongly divergent opinions on the virus. But parliaments and parties have submitted to the government’s course. The major media have been brought into line. All liberties have been suspended while we are locked up at home in mortal fear by the government.

(*Demokratischer Widerstand* 2020a, 1)²

The weekly newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand* is the central organ of the registered association *Kommunikationsstelle Demokratischer Widerstand e.V. Berlin* and has been distributed at demonstrations against the pandemic containment measures since April 2020. According to the editorial team around Anselm Lenz and Hendrik Sodenkamp, the first issues had a circulation of “at least 100,000 print copies (and far beyond)”³ (*Demokratischer Widerstand* 2020g, 2). The newspaper can also be read online and, as of November 2023, is still published weekly.⁴ While the editors and authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* continue to address the negative effects of vaccinations and other Covid-19 measures on many people, they have increasingly turned their attention to the war in Ukraine, taking a NATO-critical and pro-Russian stance (e.g., Lenz and Erbası 2022, 4; Lenz 2022, 14).

The editors understand themselves as the “voice of the party-independent liberal opposition and critical intelligentsia in the Federal Republic of Germany based on the Constitution”⁵ (*Demokratischer Widerstand* 2020c, 8). In 2021, Agamben described them as a “radical leftist movement,” which “has recently been attacked by the media while rightly protesting against the violation of constitutional freedoms, because it shares those concerns with the extreme Right” (Agamben 2021, 70). The Corona protests brought together a broad political spectrum and the arguments used by left- to right-wing protesters overlapped during this all-encompassing health crisis. Their criticism pointed in the same direction: to the political and economic elites.

Despite these links to right-wing protesters, the editors and most authors who write for *Demokratischer Widerstand* in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered leftists. They describe themselves as committed to democracy, antifascism, solidarity, and social justice: “We are liberals of

all kinds in democratic and antifascist resistance in the Federal Republic of Germany of the present. We publish and fight to defend our liberal constitution, the basic law” (Demokratischer Widerstand 2020d, 2, English original). According to the authors, democratic and antifascist values are threatened by the German government, which has “taken a pre-fascist turn. . . getting worse by every week” and is “not what it may seem abroad” (Demokratischer Widerstand 2020d, 2, English original). While the authors of the newspaper usually do not deny the existence of the coronavirus, they deny its threatening nature and, thus, the reality of a dangerous pandemic: “This is not about protection against a virus, whose dangerousness is very much questioned by many physicians, virologists and other independently thinking people, but about gaining more power and control over the population in order to prevent possible uprisings. . . ”⁶ (Hernandes 2020, 4). Behind the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures taken to contain it, they suspect secret plans and agreements that are meant to give even more influence to powerful players: “By undermining basic laws, we run the risk of being subjected to massive global and dictatorial control under the guise of supposed health”⁷ (Richter 2020, 3). The authors claim that leading politicians, experts, and scientists close to the government, the established media, but also large companies or influential investors act against the worldwide population.

(2) In summary, I assume that a global elite, under the guise of the coronavirus pandemic and in collaboration with the media, corporations, the pharmaceutical lobby and governments acting against the interests of their citizens, is imposing its dictatorial set of rules on us. For the sake of our children and our fellow human beings, we must prevent this with all available peaceful means.⁸

(Rohrer 2020, 3)

Anti-elitism and people-centrism, which are key features of populist and conspiratorial communication (Bergmann 2018, 101–2; Eberl et al. 2021, 273–74), play an essential role in *Demokratischer Widerstand*. Many of the newspaper’s authors construct a strong opposition between powerful conspiring elites on one side and the harmed unknowing democratic people on the other. In their argumentation, they establish and consolidate a binary scheme of good and bad, morally pure and immoral actors. By strongly emphasizing democratic values, not least through the newspaper’s name, the authors place the people and their will at the center of attention.

(3) Corona vs. democracy. Coronists say: ‘There’s a crazy dangerous virus and that’s why the government should break the Basic Law, operate in a lawless space, lock up the population, stop free debate, equalize the media and unions, impose occupational bans, alienate children and the elderly

from life, affect trust in science, ruin the middle class, business and workers, use the police to have peaceful demonstrators purposefully beaten up, monitor and lock up everything and everyone - and force surgical masks on everyone over the age of six. . . Human rights? Maybe still as toilet paper for the masses! It is our crisis, because fear is a business!⁹

(Lenz and Sodenkamp 2020b, 1)

Unlike right-wing populists, the newspaper's editors and authors emphasize an inclusive understanding of who is part of "the good ones" (Hameleers 2021, 41), who they want to defend, and who can be part of their resistance against the German government: they are doctors, lawyers and intellectuals, workers, unemployed, and refugees (Sandjaja 2020, 2). Even "the unknown, the silent, the forgotten, the old and the sick are not nameless" to the authors: "they all belong to us"¹⁰ (Demokratischer Widerstand 2020b, 2). They explicitly emphasize that they also include the less privileged—another typical feature of populist discourse (Priester 2022 [2012], 202). Moreover, their activism is not limited to a national in-group; rather, the authors intend to "cooperate internationally" (Demokratischer Widerstand 2020d, 2, English original).

Even though they project an open and inclusive understanding of the people, the newspaper's authors construct a homogeneous group of oppressed people severely affected by government measures. They claim that, as democratic, peaceful and courageous liberals, they are capable of representing the interests of this community (Demokratischer Widerstand 2020a, 1). In their texts, the authors frequently use the pronouns "we" or "us" and thus construct a unified and common goal for all protesters: "We are the opposition!," "For our Constitution!," "We were not asked, none of us"¹¹ (Demokratischer Widerstand 2020a, 1). According to *Demokratischer Widerstand*, there are only two possible options: One can either support the newspaper's democratic movement or the immoral, terrifying elite. The authors hardly differentiate between varying opinions within these two groups but express a rather polarized worldview. Despite the newspaper's pluralist principles, anti-pluralist tendencies are thus evident, which Jan-Werner Müller describes as another essential element of populism: "In addition to being antielitist, populists are always *antipluralist*. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people. . . The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly moral" (Müller 2016, 3). The group of protesters—or rather: the people—repeatedly appear as a homogeneous community of interests, all of them being consistently moral.

As has been demonstrated, the alternative newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand* displays various features typical of populist as well as conspiracist communication strategies and can thus be regarded as a left-wing populist newspaper that spreads conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic.

From a discourse linguistic perspective, populism can be conceptualized as a discursive strategy (Mouffe 2022 [2018], 287), and conspiracy theories as a significant but non-necessary element within populist discourse (Fenster 2008 [1999]). The alternative newspaper provides a promising data basis for exploring what has been called “pandemic populism” (Boberg et al. 2020) and its conspiracist strategies of argumentation.

Topoi of Argumentation

The analysis of argumentation strategies, on which my chapter focuses, is particularly revealing for studying conspiracy theories in populist discourse. Argumentation can be considered the central linguistic procedure for the legitimation of knowledge, on which conspiracy theorists are particularly dependent (Breil et al. 2018, 241). Their knowledge is usually considered heterodox and thus challenged and doubted by other discourse actors, especially epistemic authorities.

As recurring patterns of reasoning, I identified and examined so-called topoi of argumentation in the first issues of *Demokratischer Widerstand*. A topos is an established, highly conventionalized figure of thought in the argumentative knowledge of a society or social group (Ziem 2005, 322). It can be defined as an argumentative standard that is based on shared beliefs (Bornscheuer 1976, 96). Since antiquity, topoi (from Greek *tópos*: place) have been described as places where established figures of thought and common ideas are stored from which specific arguments for certain situations can be developed. Because a topos is widely accepted and familiar to other members of the communication and discourse community, it forms the basis of any plausible and convincing reasoning.

A topos usually corresponds to what philosopher Stephen Toulmin refers to as the *warrant* in his famous model of argumentation. The warrant—or topos—justifies the transition from *data* to *claim*, from the supporting evidence and facts to the debatable assertion that forms the starting point of any argumentation and must be proven if a speaker or writer wants to convince their listener(s) or reader(s):

Our task is no longer to strengthen the ground on which our argument is constructed, but is rather to show that, taking these data as a starting point, the step to the original claim or conclusion is an appropriate and legitimate one.

(Toulmin 2003, 91)

In early pandemic discourse, a common concrete claim was that *extraordinary measures must be taken to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2*. This claim was mainly supported by the observation (data) that *the coronavirus is*

a virus dangerous to human health and life. The warrant connects data and claim: *Because SARS-CoV-2 has proven to be a virus dangerous to human health and life, extraordinary measures must be taken to contain its spread.* In most cases, such a warrant or topos, which could in this case be called a topos of virus threat, is not explicitly stated but remains under the linguistic surface. It is up to the investigator to make it visible.

However, such an underlying warrant does not have to be accepted but can be challenged. In this case, additional support becomes necessary: “Standing behind our warrants, . . . there will normally be other assurances, without which the warrants themselves would possess neither authority nor currency – these other things we may refer to as the backing (B) of the warrants” (Toulmin 2003, 96). Topoi can also be found performing the function of “the backing,” providing additional evidence for the warrant. In a pandemic, referring to epidemiological and medical experts as well as to scientific data appears to be inevitable for strengthening one’s arguments. The above-mentioned warrant was repeatedly backed up by a topos of epidemiological expertise: *Because experts from prestigious institutions believe that strict measures are necessary to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2, they must be taken.* The observation that these two topoi often occurred together demonstrates that topoi are rarely used alone but are usually closely and inextricably linked to other topoi (Römer 2012).

The warrant and backing just outlined illustrate two specific topoi, which evolved from a concrete context and thus only allow insight into argumentative structures of the pandemic discourse. However, such specific topoi can usually be traced back to more general ones that also underlie the argumentation of numerous other discourses (Wengeler 2003, 182). Those that have proved to be essential for the specific topoi of argumentation used by *Demokratischer Widerstand* are briefly described in the following.

The General Topos of Threat

The before-mentioned topos of virus threat is based on a general topos of threat that has been described by, among others, Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak (2001, 77). It is a fundamental component in the argumentation of any discourse of crisis and always follows the same argumentative logic: *Because something is dangerous or threatening, something must be done about it.* Depending on the discourse, this threat could be human-made pollution, capitalism, racism or, as in this case, a virus.

The General Topos of Principles

Views and opinions are often sought to be legitimized and established on the basis of shared values, norms, and principles. Topoi of principles (Spieß

2011, 499; Römer 2017, 175) occur in numerous context-specific forms that go back to the same causal pattern: *Because an action does (not) correspond to the beliefs, values, and principles of a society, it should (not) be performed.*

The General Topos of Authority

The briefly described topos of epidemiological expertise is based on a general topos already described in antiquity and widely used to this day: the topos of authority (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 79; Wengeler 2003, 322). With this topos it is claimed that *because an authority suggests doing something, it should be done.* Such an authority can be characterized by outstanding and renowned knowledge or skills in a particular field or by a certain political, economic, or social power.

The General Topos of Analogy

Specific topoi based on the general topos of analogy (Wengeler 2003, 321) transfer certain properties from a familiar example or situation to a novel and controversial phenomenon or condition. A frequently described sub-topos is the general topos of history (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 80; Wengeler 2003, 308), which refers to historical examples and situations to support an argument: *Because history teaches that certain actions have certain consequences, an action that resemble those from the past should (not) be performed.*

The General Topos of Benefit

The general topos of benefit or of advantage is used to justify why something should or should not be done with regard to an action's usefulness (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 75; Wengeler 2003, 314–16): *because an action will (not) be useful for someone, they should (not) perform it.* However, this topos can also be used to give reasons for events and actions that have already taken place—something happened because someone benefited from it. It is then based on the assumption that *because an action will (not) be useful for someone, they will (not) perform it.*

Topoi only develop their full argumentative power in their specific adaptation to a concrete context by a particular discourse actor with a certain intention. The identification and analysis of frequently used specific topoi reveal important argumentation strategies and allow to draw conclusions about underlying ways of thinking and typical beliefs of a particular group of people in a certain discourse at a certain time. Nevertheless, when analyzing specific topoi, the underlying general topoi need to be kept in mind as they help to systematically categorize recurring arguments and to focus on dominant strategies of argumentation.

Corpus and Method

My case study is based on the first 25 issues of the alternative German newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand*, which were published between April 17 and October 31, 2020, and thus cover the first seven months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Later key events of the pandemic like the various mutations of the coronavirus, the second lockdown in Germany or vaccine campaigns are not part of the analysis. For an exhaustive investigation of populist and conspiracist argumentation in the discourse of health crisis, further studies need to be conducted that take these developments into account.

In order to identify the characteristic features of left-wing populist conspiracist argumentation, a non-conspiracist corpus must be included to allow meaningful comparisons. In addition to the issues of *Demokratischer Widerstand*, *Der Spiegel*, one of the leading German news magazines, was examined. *Der Spiegel* is also published weekly and can be considered an influential discourse actor in shaping society's view of the crisis through its reporting on the pandemic. Moreover, due to a cooperation with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Der Spiegel 2020), *Der Spiegel* played a central role among the established media criticized in *Demokratischer Widerstand*:

(4) We are particularly proud of the quality media's work. For its Corona reporting, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* even received over 2.3 million euros in advance. We thank computer professional and corporate magnate Bill Gates for helping the ailing press in Germany with his Gates Foundation - it delivers as ordered!¹²

(Lenz et al. 2020a, 5)

The non-conspiracist corpus consists of 99 articles published in *Der Spiegel* between April 14 and November 11, 2020. Only articles dealing with the pandemic as their central topic were included in the corpus. With the help of the qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis software MAXQDA (VERBI Software 2020), all text paragraphs of both corpora that contain the lexeme "Corona" were coded and analyzed. It occurs with comparable frequency in both newspapers and can be considered one of the key terms of the pandemic discourse in Germany. A total of 216 text paragraphs were examined for *Demokratischer Widerstand* and 187 paragraphs for *Der Spiegel*.

In the following section, some of the specific topoi most frequently used by the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* are presented. Some topoi identified in *Der Spiegel* are cited in order to highlight differences and similarities between conspiracist and non-conspiracist strategies of argumentation. The different topoi were clustered and assigned to three different moments of argumentation in the discourse of crisis: (1) establishing the crisis, (2) providing

reasons for the crisis, and (3) mentioning possible ways to overcome the crisis. The percentage of text passages in which the respective topos could be identified is given in parentheses.

Specific Topoi of Argumentation in the Alternative Newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand*

Establishing an Alternative Crisis

The starting point of argumentation in any discourse of crisis is the establishment of the crisis, the diagnosis of occurrences and processes as critical. Topoi that can be assigned to this phase aim at raising awareness for its existence (Römer 2017, 158). While in *Der Spiegel*, a health crisis is constituted through the already mentioned topos of virus threat (42.1 percent), the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* establish another crisis through another topos of threat: the topos of dictatorship (Szulc-Brzozowska 2018, 147).

The Topos of Dictatorship (29.8 percent): Because the government's measures to contain the spread of the virus are dictatorial and therefore a threat to democracy, they should be stopped.

This topos was identified in almost 30 percent of the analyzed text passages and is thus among the most frequent topoi in the alternative newspaper. As a threat often, also in this case, results from the violation of shared principles, the topos of dictatorship does not only follow the argumentative logic of a general topos of threat but is also based on a general topos of principles.

(5) For our Constitution! Our state institutions are being instrumentalized against the people. A dystopian digital and pharmaceutical cartel is striving for power. Our constitution, the Basic Law, is being broken by the government. We were not asked, none of us.¹³

(Demokratischer Widerstand 2020a, 1)

With this topos, the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* accuse the government of violating democratic values and breaking democratic laws, with a special emphasis on the German Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The topos draws attention to a political crisis—a crisis of democracy caused by the German government: “Let’s assume one last time that the government and its affiliated media outlets are not deeply malicious and want to lead us into dictatorship under the heading of ‘Corona’. . . ”¹⁴ (Ganjalyan and Lenz 2020, 1).

Topos of Humanity (32.3 percent): Because principles of humanity are of the highest value, actions and measures must be taken in accordance with these principles.

In addition to democratic principles, further values—especially those of freedom, love, and solidarity—play an essential role in the argumentation of *Demokratischer Widerstand*. They appear in another topos of principles closely connected to the topos of dictatorship: What could be called a topos of humanity (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 78; Wengeler 2003, 310) is used both to delegitimize the government's behavior and to legitimize the author's actions: *Because the measures taken by the government contradict principles of humanity, they should be stopped. / Because one's own actions against the measures taken by the government are in accordance with principles of humanity, they should be performed.* With this topos of humanity, the authors contrast their own peaceful behavior with the allegedly inhuman actions of the government and other state institutions, directed at protesters and critics as well as all people living in Germany—especially vulnerable groups like children, the sick, the elderly, or the disabled. In this way, the authors construct an image of moral superiority while at the same time taking on a victim role that supports a heroic self-image and appeals to the compassion and approval of those still undecided about which side to take. With this second topos of principles, *Demokratischer Widerstand* does not only establish a political but also a moral crisis.

(6) That before our eyes the weak and handicapped are subjected to an exclusionary selection; that old people are brought to an early death by isolation torture; that children are trained and traumatized like animals with mask constraint; that forests are ruined with the improper treatment by large machines called harvesters; that farm animals are degraded to production units - all this is now possible thanks to the distraction by the Corona regime.¹⁵

(Ploppa 2020b, 7)

Such a topos of humanity can also be identified in *Der Spiegel*, where it occurs with comparable frequency (33.6 percent). The authors of *Der Spiegel* also refer to principles of humanity like love or solidarity but also, and especially, to the importance of protecting people's health and lives against the virus—at the expense of freedoms. They repeatedly emphasize the necessity to always weigh different values against each other, to always make decisions depending on the concrete circumstances, and to always find compromises in order to endure the health crisis.

(7) The period of isolation has left deep scars in the homes, among seniors and caregivers, among those in charge and relatives. In many places, the decision has now been made to change strategy. [...] The plans are risky, and not all experts think they are right. But the homes are facing a delicate

balancing act: they have to protect residents' health and at the same time want them to experience human proximity.¹⁶

(Bohr 2020, 39)

Such a moment of weighing up, balancing, and negotiation cannot be found in the alternative newspaper. For the authors, democratic principles and personal freedom are non-negotiable.

Topos of German History (12.1 percent): Because German history teaches that fascist and dictatorial actions have fatal consequences, the government's measures that resemble those taken in Nazi Germany and/or the German Democratic Republic must be stopped.

With the topos of German history, the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* emphasize how devastating the violation of democratic principles and values of humanity will be. They compare the current government's measures to those taken in former German dictatorships and thus stress that the German people and their democracy are once again in great danger. This specific version of the general topos of history appeals to German collective memory and a shared understanding of the country's history as something that must not be repeated ever again.

(8) For about two years, the one-sided reporting by the public broadcasters has bugged us. It reminds us very much of the reporting of the Aktuelle Kamera from the GDR shortly before its end. The only alternative to get information today is the Internet. For us, the lies, the one-sidedness, and the deliberate defamation of other opinions by the mainstream media have reached their peak before and during the Corona crisis. A flawed and corrupt information policy that exclusively conveys preconceived opinions prevails. Corona was the straw that broke the camel's back.¹⁷

(Brand 2020, 7)

Topos of Burden (19.4 percent): Because the people, the economy, the healthcare and educational system are heavily burdened/overburdened with extraordinary virus containment measures, these measures must be stopped.

To prove that the country and its people already are in the middle of a severe political and moral crisis, the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* also mention the first visible effects by way of a topos of burden (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 78; Wengeler 2003, 303), which again can be understood as a special form of the topos of threat. The topos of burden is closely connected to the topos of humanity: It is the burden on vulnerable groups such as children and young people, the sick and elderly, or people with a low income that is especially emphasized. In contrast, there are certain groups that are

said to have benefited from the crisis: the powerful, the rich, and big companies. The authors argue that the measures taken by the government promote social inequalities and thus pose a threat that clearly exceeds the threat posed by SARS-CoV-2 to the health and lives of many.

(9) Under the current circumstances, a recovery of the public sector and the commercial middle class is not to be thought of at all. The Federal Government and the state governments devoted to it are using political means to promote extreme capital concentration in the hands of a few super-rich. We have been through this before in Germany. The seizure of power by the Nazis in 1933 not only put an end to civil liberties. The concentration of capital was also enormously forced by the Hitler regime. ‘Unprofitable’ small and medium-sized businesses were simply ‘shut down’ by decree.¹⁸

(Ploppa 2020a, 12)

This connection between the two topoi can also be found in *Der Spiegel* (topos of burden: 22.1 percent). There it is, however, not used to completely reject the measures taken, but to emphasize the importance of always re-evaluating which restrictions are really appropriate (see example 7). Again, there is a moment of balancing and negotiating that cannot be found in *Demokratischer Widerstand*.

Topos of Expertise (29 percent) and Data Topos (24.2 percent): Because numerous renowned experts who refer to scientifically sound knowledge from conventional medicine and who provide reliable data disagree with government experts, measures should be adapted to their assessment.

Because numbers and data prove a certain correlation, certain actions should (not) be taken.

To back up their arguments for an alternative political and moral crisis, the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* use a topos of expertise as well as a data topos, which frequently occur together and which are two very common topoi also used in *Der Spiegel* (topos of expertise: 22.1 percent; data topos: 39.3 percent). While the data topos, occurring in almost 40 percent of the examined text passages, is one of the most frequent topoi in *Der Spiegel*, it plays a less prominent role in *Demokratischer Widerstand* with approximately 24 percent.

In contrast, the topos of expertise is used more frequently in *Demokratischer Widerstand*. Compared to *Der Spiegel*, the writers of the alternative newspaper usually refer to scientists other than those advising the government who take opposing perspectives often not heard in public discourse. Besides, their specific use of the already mentioned general topos of authority

does not only serve to support their own experts but also to delegitimize scientists close to the government by questioning their intentions and honesty, their skills, reputation, and the data they use.

(10) No one out of no less than 120 mostly medical experts in the world who have all said Corona is hype, if not a hoax, no one has been listened to. Instead, our chancellor ignored the entire state of science, and consulted two scientists who had already attracted attention in Germany in 2009. You can still look up today how Mr. Drosten and Mr. Kekulé warned in 2009 that swine flu would be horrendous. Mr. Kekulé even called for schools to be closed in 2009. In retrospect, swine flu turned out to be a completely insane hype, but with major financial consequences.¹⁹
(*Homburgs* 2020, 9)

Topos of Free and Logical Thinking (17.7 percent): Because democrats think freely and logically, they understand how the government controls and manipulates the people.

Another topos that sometimes occurs together with the data topos and the topos of expertise is a topos of free and logical thinking, which has been described for conspiratorial argumentation before (Schäfer 2018, 230). According to the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand*, it is not only experts who are capable of interpreting numbers and data correctly: Actually, everyone can see that SARS-CoV-2 and Covid-19 are rather harmless, and that the government is lying and manipulating the population. The authors and, as they claim, many other people in Germany committed to democratic values already understand that this is not a health crisis but a political one.

(11) Almost everyone knows it: Corona is not a ‘pandemic’. . . but a flu infection that deliberately covers up the collapse of financial market capitalism - i.e. a manufactured world crisis that is directed against the majority of the world’s population and has already established totalitarian conditions. The corporate and state media lie.²⁰
(*Demokratischer Widerstand* 2020f, 3)

The topos is also reflected in frequently used modal adverbs and adjectives such as “bekanntermaßen” (as is known), “bekannt” (known), “evident,” “klar” (clear, clearly), “natürlich” (certainly), or “offensichtlich” (obvious, obviously), which emphasize a common awareness of the alternative crisis and thus legitimizes the newspaper’s argumentation. Following Karin Priester, referring to common sense can be considered an essential feature of populist argumentation (Priester 2022 [2012], 205).

Topos of the Flu (12.9 percent): Because Covid-19 is a disease comparable to influenza and no extraordinary measures are taken to contain influenza, extraordinary measures are not necessary to contain Covid-19 either.

The author's assumption that there is no health crisis and that Covid-19 is not an exceptionally severe disease is also expressed in a topos of the flu which is based on the topos of analogy. They compare Covid-19 to the more common influenza that does not require extraordinary measures and thus deny the threat posed by the coronavirus. The topos demonstrates that the authors do not only try to establish an alternative political and moral crisis but also to deconstruct the widely accepted pandemic crisis.

(12) The numbers simply do not support such drastic measures. It is absolutely right and necessary to provide special protection for patients with pre-existing conditions and the elderly in hospitals and nursing homes. Flu and coronaviruses, it is well known, put the elderly at particular risk. However, from a medical point of view, there is no reason for the shut-down of many businesses, the closure of schools and kindergartens, and even curfews. . . This is not a pandemic. A pandemic is responsible for a particularly large number of deaths. I don't see that. Thus, the terminology is not appropriate. Then we would also have to take such drastic measures every year for the flu.²¹

(Bigl 2020, 4)

Giving Reasons for the Alternative Crisis

The establishment of a crisis is closely linked to identifying its causes (Römer 2017, 160). *Demokratischer Widerstand's* claim that the government behaves in a dictatorial and inhuman manner only becomes plausible if reasons can be given for this behavior: When the government performs certain actions, it has a specific reason or motive for doing so (Kienpointner 1992, 339). In order to establish an alternative crisis, the authors have to give reasons why this crisis emerged.

However, according to the newspaper's authors, the crisis did not simply emerge, but was deliberately created in order to take advantage of it: The government implements strict measures because politicians, the media, experts, and corporations benefit from them. This one reason given by the authors follows the reasoning of the general topos of benefit. I identified three specific topoi of benefit: a frequently used topos of opinion control, a topos of cui bono—both have also been described by Breil, Römer, and Stumpf for the chemtrail conspiracy theory (2018, 252)—and a topos of scaremongering.

Topos of Opinion Control (46 percent): Because the government wants to establish a false view of SARS-CoV-2 in order to implement hard measures, it controls public opinion.

The topos of opinion control (Breil et al. 2018, 251) was identified in almost half of the text passages analyzed and is thus the most frequently employed topos among the presented topoi of argumentation. With the topos, which is often used together with the topos of dictatorship, the authors specify the government's dictatorial behavior and provide a reason for it: Leading politicians control public opinion because they want to implement hard measures. In order to legitimize such rigid restrictions, the government needs to establish a false view of the virus within public discourse. They do so by lying, suppressing criticism and, with the help of experts and the established media, manipulating data.

(13) The crucial question remains whether Covid-19 is such a catastrophic event that a permanent state of emergency is justified, or whether a fundamental restructuring of social systems is being carried out in the slipstream of a wave of influenza. . . One can have different opinions about this. But one must not, under penalty of public humiliation and destruction of existence by the mainstream. In the media, the political response to Covid-19 is presented as having no alternative. That different citizens have different views on political issues is a truism of democracy. On Corona and the measures taken, however, there are supposedly no opinions, but only one possible answer, which charmingly coincides with the government's views.²²

(Pohlmann 2020, 7)

However, the topos of opinion control does not explain how elites actually benefit from strict measures. This is outlined in more detail through a topos of *cui bono*.

Topos of Cui Bono (24.2 percent): Because powerful individuals and institutions benefit politically and economically from extraordinary measures said to contain the spread of the coronavirus, such measures are taken.

According to the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand*, the reason for the dictatorial measures taken is not, as communicated by the government, the need to contain a dangerous virus. Rather, various actors can derive great benefit from the Covid-19 measures. Because powerful players cannot openly admit their intentions, they construct a dangerous pandemic to legitimize the desired restrictions. With the topos of *cui bono* (who benefits? [Breil et al. 2018, 252]), political and economic benefits are cited as the central reason for the behavior of influential actors.

The authors emphasize that it is not only the government that takes advantage of the measures, but a powerful network that consists of politicians, the established media, large companies, and investors. All of them instrumentalize the coronavirus to get more power, and gain more influence and

financial profit. Political and economic, public and private, scientific and media actors are frequently subsumed under terms such as “ruling elites,” “rulers of this world,” or “power seekers” and thus often remain rather abstract. Who benefits in which way from which actions is not always specified in detail (Filatkina 2018, 208). This way, the authors construct a broad and opaque notion of the opposing elite. Between the topos of *cui bono* and the topos of burden, a strong people-elite dichotomy emerges: While the people suffer from the measures taken, powerful players benefit from them.

(14) Gates and his foundation also play a leading role in the global vaccine plan, which does not inspire much confidence given his investments. Mr. Gates has also invested money in the German company CureVac AG. The company, which is developing an RNA vaccine against SARS-CoV-2, is 80 percent owned by SAP founder Dietmar Hopp. . . If CureVac succeeds in getting its vaccine ready for the market, global vaccine programs should ensure that Hopp and Gates’ investments finally pay off with compound interest.²³

(Hörrlein 2020, 6–7)

Topos of Scaremongering (21 percent): Because the pandemic has been deliberately overstated by the government, a climate of fear and obedience has been created that allows for dictatorial actions and measures.

With a topos of scaremongering (Wengeler 2003, 326), the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* claim that leading politicians, as well as scientists and media close to the government, deliberately portray the pandemic as more dramatic than it actually is in order to create panic and fear among the population. It is this climate of fear that has made the implementation of extraordinary restrictions possible and thus led to the political and moral crisis in the first place. To prove that powerful discourse actors intentionally exaggerate the danger of the coronavirus and its impact on people’s health, the topos of scaremongering is often supported by the topos of expertise and the data topos.

(15) Still afraid of Corona? You want to believe the people from TV? You love the mask, the government and pharmaceutical companies - here you go, do as you’re told. Here you can read the expertise of the most recognized scientists worldwide.²⁴

(*Demokratischer Widerstand 2020e, 4–5*)

It needs to be emphasized that it is not only the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* who blame the government and its experts, but that *Der Spiegel*, through a topos of failure (22.1 percent; Römer 2017, 171), also accuses

politicians and scientists of having contributed to a worsening of the health crisis: *Because politicians and scientists have made wrong decisions and underestimated the threat posed by the coronavirus, the health crisis has worsened.*

The debate on the right Corona policy is picking up again. After the Federal Government and state governments were ill-prepared for the vacation season with its risks, they must do better in fall. The test strategy for people coming home from vacation was implemented too late and led to chaos, especially in Bavaria. When temperatures drop soon, indoor celebrations carry a big risk.²⁵

(Bartsch 2020a, 26)

However, the criticism of *Der Spiegel* clearly differs from the accusations brought forward by *Demokratischer Widerstand*. According to the authors of *Der Spiegel*, the measures taken to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2 were not too strict but often not strict enough. Above all, they do not accuse powerful players of deliberately causing the crisis or acting for their own benefit. They often rather defend the government through a topos of uncertainty (14.3 percent; Römer 2017, 167), which claims that leading politicians cannot always make the right decisions under these exceptional circumstances: *Because the pandemic creates a situation of uncertainty and little is still known about the coronavirus, reliable measures can only be taken to a limited extent.* This moment of uncertainty is a central feature of *Der Spiegel's* argumentation. The authors repeatedly stress that it is not only human error that has led to the crisis, but also reality with its uncertainties and uncontrollability.

(16) The question now is whether 14 days is the right period of quarantine. . . . For days, virologist Christian Drosten and SPD health expert Karl Lauterbach have been calling on the RKI to shorten the period from 14 to 7 days. According to new scientific findings, a longer quarantine does not make sense. . . . Hamburg's First Mayor, Peter Tschentscher, a Social Democrat like Lauterbach, is a trained medical doctor, like Lauterbach, but strongly disagrees with him: 'I don't believe in relaxing the quarantine regulations. They are medically justified and we are thus on the safe side.' But what's safe about Corona? The old problem.²⁶

(Bartsch 2020b, 28)

Such uncertainties cannot be found in the argumentation of *Demokratischer Widerstand*. The authors rather present the human-made political crisis they seek to establish as perfectly comprehensible and explicable, by arguing with a topos of free and logical thinking, for instance.

Overcoming the Crisis

Topos of Democratic Responsibility (18.5 percent): Because the authors and other democrats have recognized the wrongful, dictatorial behavior of the government, they are responsible for doing something about it.

The topos of democratic responsibility can be assigned to the last stage of argumentation in which possible ways out of the crisis are discussed. During the first months of the pandemic, the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* focus on establishing the alternative crisis and on giving reasons for it. At this point, argumentation patterns that point to certain actions needed to overcome the crisis (still) play a minor role.

Like other topoi mentioned before, the topos of democratic responsibility is based on the general topos of principles. It does not only claim that a certain action is reasonable because it corresponds to shared values, but that it is necessary in order to protect such values. The topos appeals to the readers' sense of responsibility and points to the moral obligation that anyone who values democratic principles and who has realized the elite's plan must heed in order to defeat the crisis (Wengeler 2003, 318).

(17) Obviously, the increase of capital concentration and the abolition of civil rights are inseparably intertwined. That is why workers, employees, civil servants, and entrepreneurs must rise up in solidarity against the Corona regime. Our quality of life is at stake. And nothing less than being human as well.²⁷

(Ploppa 2020a, 12)

The authors especially emphasize their own responsibility in this dictatorial crisis. Because they have recognized the real crisis, they have to do something about it. By referring to themselves as the "voice of the . . . critical intelligentsia" (*Demokratischer Widerstand* 2020c, 8), the authors fashion themselves as an important authority responsible for the country's and society's future development and thus for the people's safety, freedom, and well-being: "If ever a critical intelligentsia was needed, it is now"²⁸ (Lenz 2020, 10). They criticize other leftists and left-wing intellectuals as they fail to take a stand in this crisis and thus behave irresponsibly:

(18) The most critical and the smartest must speak up!. . . The Corona crisis has been affecting the lives of billions of people around the world for months. Massive restrictions on civil liberties and the push toward authoritarian statehood are among the side effects. . . Actually, one would expect an outcry of protest from a left-wing movement that is certainly weak in Germany, but can still articulate itself when state organs close institutions or ban protests.²⁹

(Nowak 2020, 4)

In addition to arranging large-scale demonstrations or founding democratic organizations, the authors repeatedly mention the importance of sticking to certain values such as solidarity, rationality, and a sense of responsibility for combating the moral and political crisis together:

(19) What are you waiting for? If a miracle does not want to happen without assistance, then let us create the miracle with our union of solidarity and bring it on the road to success, dear comrades-in-arms! Everyone is needed, everyone is important and everyone can make a personal contribution.³⁰

(Wolff 2020, 8)

Conclusion

As I have shown, the authors of the alternative German newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand* build their populist and conspiracist argumentation on established, commonly accepted general topoi. Topoi such as the topos of threat, the topos of principles, or the topos of authority are widely used in various discourses and have been described by numerous scholars. They are not only used by conspiracy theorists or in the context of populist discourse but can also be found in the crisis communication of, for instance, conventional and broadly consumed media outlets like *Der Spiegel*. Although the authors of *Demokratischer Widerstand* argue against generally acknowledged beliefs about the Covid-19 pandemic—or maybe: *because* they argue against generally acknowledged beliefs—they use similar patterns of argumentation as many other discourse actors. Drawing on the argumentative knowledge of a communication community can be understood as a strategy to successfully establish own perspectives in the discourse of crisis, especially when it is usually doubted, non-accepted viewpoints that have to be defended.

However, the alternative newspaper's authors reinterpret these general topoi of argumentation, fill them with specific information that deviate from official interpretations of the pandemic, and thus construct an entirely different crisis. Instead of accepting the widely recognized health crisis caused by the novel coronavirus, they argue for a human-made political and moral one. Most of the topoi used by the authors aim at establishing such an alternative crisis.

When it comes to giving reasons for this crisis, the question of *Who benefits from this?* is constantly raised, and also answered: powerful players from politics, economy, science, and the media. The general topos of benefit and its context-specific adaptations (topos of opinion control, topos of cui bono, topos of scaremongering), which cannot be found in *Der Spiegel*, play a crucial role in the argumentation of *Demokratischer Widerstand*. Together with the three frequently used topoi of principles (topos of dictatorship, topos of humanity, topos of democratic responsibility), they are used to portray influential players

as acting only for their own benefit, as being undemocratic, immoral, and inhuman. Delegitimizing elites and their behavior on the basis of non-negotiable values and principles is one of the newspaper's central argumentation strategies. The same values and principles—democracy, freedom, solidarity, love—also serve to legitimize its authors' views and activities. The argumentation of *Demokratischer Widerstand* is built on a clear dualism of right and wrong, of moral and immoral, of the positive *us* and the negative *them*.

This dualism also helps to construct a crisis that seems easy to understand. While *Der Spiegel* writes about a dynamic, complex, and often uncontrollable health crisis, there is no room for unfortunate coincidence, contradictions, uncontrollability or uncertainty in the context of the planned and deliberately created crisis described in *Demokratischer Widerstand*.

Although my case study only covers the first seven months of the pandemic and concentrates on alternative print journalism, its findings can contribute to a better understanding and awareness of left-wing populist conspiracist argumentation strategies in the German Covid-19 discourse. However, it still needs to be examined in which ways and to what extent the presented argumentation topoi differ from those used by right-wing populist conspiracy theorists in times of the pandemic. Because right-wing and left-wing opponents of the virus containment measures share, as Agamben highlights, certain concerns, it can be assumed that significant similarities can also be found in their strategies of argumentation.

Notes

- 1 The quote in the chapter title is from Agamben (2020b). If not stated otherwise, all English translations of the texts cited are mine; all German original quotations appear in the endnotes. If I could not clearly assign an author to a text from *Demokratischer Widerstand*, I reference the newspaper title and year (e.g., *Demokratischer Widerstand* 2020a). Otherwise, I quote all texts with the name of the corresponding author(s) (e.g., Ganjalyan and Lenz 2020) or people cited (e.g., Bigl 2020). I developed the results presented here in my master's thesis, which I submitted to the University of Rostock on February 19, 2021 under the title "Die Erfindung einer Epidemie.' 'Verschwörungstheoretische' Argumentation im Krisendiskurs".
- 2 "Gegen die Angst! Zum Virus gibt es mindestens zwei stark voneinander abweichende Meinungen. Doch Parlamente und Parteien haben sich dem Regierungskurs unterworfen. Die großen Medienhäuser sind gleichgeschaltet. Sämtliche Freiheitsrechte wurden außer Kraft gesetzt, während wir von der Regierung in Todesangst versetzt zuhause eingesperrt werden."
- 3 "Und warum in einer gedruckten Auflage von mindestens 100.000 Print-Exemplaren (und weit darüber) sowie als E-Paper und Online-Ausgabe unter demokratischerwiderstand.de?"
- 4 <https://demokratischerwiderstand.de/>
- 5 "Stimme der parteiunabhängigen liberalen Opposition und der kritischen Intelligenz in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland auf Basis des Grundgesetzes."
- 6 "Es geht hierbei nicht um den Schutz vor einem Virus, dessen Gefährlichkeit von vielen Ärzten, Virologen und sonstigen selbständig denkenden Menschen sehr in

- Frage gestellt wird, sondern darum, mehr Macht und Kontrolle über die Bevölkerung zu erlangen, um sich . . . vor möglichen Aufständen zu schützen. . . ”
- 7 “Wir laufen unter Aushebelung der Grundgesetze Gefahr, uns einer massiven globalen und diktatorischen Kontrolle unter dem Deckmantel einer vermeintlichen Gesundheit unterwerfen zu müssen.”
 - 8 “Zusammenfassend gehe ich davon aus, dass uns eine globale Elite im Schulterchluss mit Medien, Konzernen, der Pharmedia und der gegen die Interessen ihrer Bürger handelnden Regierungen ihr diktatorisches Regelwerk unter dem Mantel der Coronavirus-Pandemie aufzwingt. Wir müssen dies im Sinne unserer Kinder und unserer Mitmenschen mit allen zur Verfügung stehenden friedlichen Mitteln verhindern.”
 - 9 “Corona vs. Demokratie. Das sagen Coronisten: ‘Es gibt einen irre gefährlichen Virus und deshalb soll die Regierung das Grundgesetz brechen, im rechtsfreien Raum agieren, die Bevölkerung einsperren, freie Debatte unterbinden, Medien und Gewerkschaften gleichschalten, Berufsverbote verhängen, Kinder und Alte vom Leben entfremden, das Vertrauen in die Wissenschaft in Mitleidenschaft ziehen, Mittelstand, Gewerbe und Arbeiterschaft in den Ruin treiben, die Polizei benutzen, um friedliche Demonstrantinnen gezielt verprügeln zu lassen, alles und jeden überwachen und einsperren – und allen Menschen ab sechs Jahren OP-Lappen aufnötigen. . . Menschenrecht? Vielleicht noch als Klopapier für die Massen! Es ist unsere Krise, denn Angst ist ein Business!’”
 - 10 “Die Unbekannten, Stillen, Vergessenen, Alten und Kranken sind für uns keine Namenlosen — sie gehören alle zu uns.”
 - 11 “Wir sind die Opposition!”; “Für unser Grundgesetz!”; “Wir wurden nicht gefragt, niemand von uns.”
 - 12 “Besonders stolz sind wir auf die Arbeit der Qualitätsmedien. Die Nachrichtenilustrierte Der Spiegel hat für ihre Corona-Berichterstattung sogar über 2,3 Millionen Euro vorab überwiesen bekommen. Wir danken dem Computerprofi und Konzernmagnaten Bill Gates, dass er der notleidenden Presse in Deutschland mit seiner Gates-Stiftung geholfen hat – sie liefert wie bestellt!”
 - 13 “Für unser Grundgesetz! Unsere staatlichen Institutionen werden gegen die Menschen instrumentalisiert. Ein dystopisches Digital- und Pharmakonzern-Kartell drängt zur Macht. Unsere Verfassung, das Grundgesetz, wird von der Regierung gebrochen. Wir wurden nicht gefragt, niemand von uns.”
 - 14 “Gehen wir noch ein letztes Mal davon aus, dass die Regierung und ihre angeschlossenen Medienbetriebe nicht zutiefst boshaft sind und uns unter dem Stichwort ‘Corona’ in die Diktatur führen wollen . . . ”
 - 15 “Dass vor unseren Augen die Schwachen und Behinderten einer ausgrenzenden Selektion unterworfen werden; dass alte Menschen durch Isolationsfolter einem vorgezogenen Tod zugeführt werden; dass Kinder mit Maskenzwang abgerichtet und traumatisiert werden wie Tiere; dass Wälder ruiniert werden mit der unsachgemäßen Behandlung durch Großmaschinen mit Namen Harvester; dass Nutztiere zu Produktionseinheiten degradiert werden – all das wird jetzt möglich dank der Ablenkung durch das Corona-Regime.”
 - 16 “Die Zeit der Isolation hat in den Heimen tiefe Spuren hinterlassen, unter Senioren und Pflegern, unter Verantwortlichen und Angehörigen. Vielerorts hat man sich nun für einen Strategiewechsel entschieden. . . Die Pläne sind riskant, und nicht alle Experten halten sie für richtig. Aber die Heime stehen vor einem heiklen Balanceakt: Sie müssen die Gesundheit der Bewohner schützen und wollen sie gleichzeitig menschliche Nähe erfahren lassen.”
 - 17 “Seit ungefähr zwei Jahren fällt uns die einseitige Berichterstattung der Öffentlich-Unrechtlichen übel auf. Es erinnert sehr stark an die Hofberichterstattung der Aktuellen Kamera aus der DDR kurz vor Schluss. Einzige Alternative, um uns zu

informieren, ist heute das Internet. Für uns erreichten die Lügen, die Einseitigkeit und die bewusste Diffamierung anderer Meinungen durch die Mainstream-Medien ihren Höhepunkt vor und während der Coronakrise. Hier herrscht eine fehlerhafte und korrupte Informationspolitik, die ausschließlich vorgefasste Meinungen vermittelt. Corona war der Tropfen, der das Faß zum Überlaufen gebracht hat.”

- 18 “An eine Erholung des öffentlichen Sektors und des gewerblichen Mittelstands ist unter den gegebenen Umständen überhaupt nicht zu denken. Die Bundesregierung und die ihr ergebenden Landesregierungen forcieren mit politischen Mitteln die Tendenz zur extremen Kapitalkonzentration in den Händen einiger weniger Superreicher. Das hatten wir in Deutschland schon einmal. Die Machtergreifung durch die Nazis im Jahre 1933 machte nicht nur Schluss mit den bürgerlichen Freiheitsrechten. Auch die Kapitalkonzentration wurde vom Hitler-Regime politisch enorm forciert. ‘Unrentable’ Klein- und Mittelbetriebe wurden durch Verordnungen einfach ‘abgeschaltet’.”
- 19 “Niemanden von nicht weniger als 120 überwiegend medizinischen Experten auf der Welt, die alle gesagt haben, Corona ist ein Hype, wenn nicht sogar ein Hoax, niemanden hat man gehört. Stattdessen hat unsere Bundeskanzlerin den gesamten Stand der Wissenschaft ignoriert, und zwei Wissenschaftler herangezogen, die schon 2009 verhaltensauffällig geworden waren in Deutschland. Sie können heute noch nachlesen, wie Herr Drostens und Herr Kekulé im Jahre 2009 davor warnen, die Schweinegrippe wäre ganz schlimm. Herr Kekulé forderte sogar im Jahre 2009, die Schulen zu schließen. Im Nachhinein hat sich die Schweinegrippe als völlig irrer Hype erwiesen, aber mit großen finanziellen Folgen.”
- 20 “Fast jeder weiss es: Corona ist keine ‘Pandemie’. . . sondern ein Grippeinfekt, der den Zusammenbruch des Finanzmarktkapitalismus geplant überdeckt – also eine gemachte Weltkrise, die sich gegen das Gros der Weltbevölkerung richtet und bereits totalitäre Verhältnisse hergestellt hat. Die Konzern- und Staatsmedien lügen.”
- 21 “Für so drastische Maßnahmen fehlen schlichtweg die Zahlen. Dass man Patienten mit Vorerkrankungen und ältere Menschen in Kranken- und Pflegeeinrichtungen besonders schützt, ist völlig in Ordnung und erforderlich. Grippe und Coronaviren, das ist bekannt, gefährden Ältere besonders. Das Herunterfahren vieler Betriebe, die Schließung von Schulen und Kindergärten und sogar Ausgangsbeschränkungen – für all das gibt es aber aus medizinischer Sicht keinen Grund. . . Das ist keine Pandemie. Eine Pandemie ist für besonders viele Todesfälle verantwortlich. Die sehe ich nicht. Die Begrifflichkeit ist also nicht angebracht. Dann müssten wir auch bei der Grippe jedes Jahr so drastische Maßnahmen ergreifen.”
- 22 “Die entscheidende Frage ist weiterhin, ob Covid-19 ein so katastrophales Ereignis ist, dass ein dauerhafter Notstand gerechtfertigt ist, oder ob im Windschatten einer Grippewelle ein fundamentaler Umbau der Gesellschaftssysteme durchgeführt wird. . . Dazu kann man verschiedener Meinung sein. Aber man darf es nicht, bei Strafe der öffentlichen Erniedrigung und Existenzvernichtung durch den Mainstream. Die politische Antwort auf Covid-19 wird uns medial als alternativlos präsentiert. Dass verschiedene Bürger zu politischen Fragen unterschiedliche Ansichten haben, ist in der Demokratie eine Binsenweisheit. Zu Corona aber und den Maßnahmen gibt es angeblich keine Meinungen, sondern nur eine einzige mögliche Antwort, die sich bezaubernderweise mit den Ansichten der Regierung deckt.”
- 23 “Auch beim globalen Impfstofffahrplan spielt Gates mit seiner Stiftung eine tragende Rolle, was angesichts seiner Investments nicht besonders vertrauenswürdig ist. Eine Firma, in die auch Mr. Gates Geld investiert hat, ist die deutsche CureVac AG. Die Firma, die einen RNA-Impfstoffes gegen SARS-CoV-2 entwickelt, ist zu 80 Prozent im Besitz des SAP-Gründers Dietmar Hopp. . . Sollte es

- der CureVac gelingen, ihren Impfstoff marktreif zu machen, dürften die globalen Impfstoffprogramme dafür sorgen, dass sich die Investitionen von Hopp und Gates endlich mit Zins und Zinseszins auszahlen.“
- 24 “Immer noch Angst vor Corona? Sie möchten den Leuten vom Fernsehen Ihren Glauben schenken? Sie lieben die Maske, die Regierung und Pharmakonzerne – bitteschön, machen sie, was sie sollen. Hier lesen Sie die Expertise der anerkanntesten Menschen aus der Wissenschaft weltweit.”
- 25 “Die Diskussion um die richtige Corona-Politik schwillt nun wieder an. Nachdem Bund und Länder auf die Urlaubssaison mit ihren Risiken schlecht vorbereitet waren, müssen sie es im Herbst besser machen. Die Teststrategie für die Urlaubsheimkehrer kam zu spät und führte vor allem in Bayern zu Chaos. Wenn bald die Temperaturen sinken, bergen Feiern in geschlossenen Räumen ein großes Risiko.”
- 26 “Die Frage ist nun, ob 14 Tage die richtige Frist für die Quarantäne sind. . . Der Virologe Christian Drosten und SPD-Gesundheitsexperte Karl Lauterbach fordern das RKI seit Tagen auf, die Frist von 14 auf 7 Tage zu verkürzen. Eine längere Quarantäne habe nach neuen Erkenntnissen der Wissenschaft keinen Sinn. . . Der Erste Bürgermeister von Hamburg, Peter Tschentscher ist Sozialdemokrat wie Lauterbach, ist ausgebildeter Mediziner, wie Lauterbach, widerspricht ihm aber entschieden: ‘Ich halte nichts davon, die Quarantäneregelungen zu lockern. Sie sind medizinisch begründet, damit sind wir auf der sicheren Seite.’ Was ist schon sicher bei Corona? Das alte Problem.”
- 27 “Offenkundig gehören die Verschärfung der Kapitalkonzentration und die Abschaffung der Bürgerrechte untrennbar zusammen. Deswegen müssen sich Arbeiter, Angestellte, Beamte und Unternehmer solidarisch gegen das Corona-Regime erheben. Es geht um unsere Lebensqualität. Und um nichts weniger als unser Mensch-Sein.”
- 28 “Wenn jemals eine kritische Intelligenzi gefragt war, dann jetzt.”
- 29 “Die Kritischsten und Klügsten müssen sich äußern! . . . Die Corona-Krise beeinflusst seit Monaten das Leben von Milliarden Menschen auf aller Welt. Massive Einschränkungen der Freiheitsrechte und der Drang zu einer autoritären Staatlichkeit gehören zu den Begleiterscheinungen. . . Eigentlich würde man sich einen Aufschrei des Protestes von einer linken Bewegung erwarten, die in Deutschland sicher schwach ist, aber sich noch artikulieren kann, wenn Staatsorgane Einrichtungen schließen oder Proteste verbieten.”
- 30 “Worauf wartet Ihr? Wenn ein Wunder nicht ohne Mithilfe geschehen will, dann lasst uns das Wunder mit unserem solidarischen Zusammenschluss auf einen guten Erfolgskurs bringen und erschaffen, liebe Mitstreiter und Mitstreiterinnen! Jeder wird gebraucht, jeder ist wichtig und jeder kann seinen persönlichen Beitrag leisten.”

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8

LEFT-WING POPULIST CONSPIRACISM

The Case of Tunisia

Tarek Kahlaoui

Introduction

The 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections in Tunisia turned into a surprising surge of populist forces, both leftist and rightist. However, the success of the populists should not be seen as unexpected, let alone surprising. The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia, was not only an attempt to bring about a normative democratic transition, successful partly—at some point a political success but also an economic failure—only in Tunisia, but also opened the gates for a variety of radical, sometimes violent, antagonistic, and anti-elitist discourses and movements. In this context, the pace at which conspiracy theories were offered and demanded increased considerably, after conspiracism had already had a solid cultural base in authoritarian times. Tunisia’s peaceful transitional process to democracy initially concealed a populist wave in which competing conspiracy theories function as the cornerstones of different political platforms. This concerns both left-wing and right-wing leaders and parties. We are probably moving toward a “democratic populist” system in which populism is the leading feature of political discourse and conspiracism the common denominator of the public debate.

In this chapter, I will focus on how left-wing populist leaders and groups who embrace the post-revolutionary social agenda have been using conspiracism in a fierce propaganda war with right-wing parties and leaders in an attempt to galvanize their base. I will discuss how this post-revolutionary left-wing conspiracism evolved within a new democratic environment but needs to be understood against the background of a “deep Arab history” as well. My argument unfolds as follows: I will first identify the relevant left-wing groups in the Arab and Tunisian context and outline the traditions

of Arab left-wing conspiracism. Subsequently, I will focus on how and why post-revolutionary Tunisian populism needed conspiracism as an ingredient. Finally, I will focus on Kais Saied, the current president of the country, as a primary example of currently dominant form of Tunisian conspiracism.

Left-Wing Populist Players in Tunisia

Determining what constitutes “left” on the political spectrum in the Arab context in general and in Tunisia in particular requires special attention. This is not to say, however, that universalist definitions of the “left” are impossible. Rather, it is a matter of nuance. The specific cultural and political conditions need to be taken into account.

Drawing the lines of demarcation between left and right in the MENA region, which comprises the Middle East and North Africa and thus also Tunisia, requires awareness of exactly such cultural and political nuances. There are strong indications suggesting these nuances.¹ For instance, a party like *Nidaa Tounes*, the leading party in Tunisia following the elections of 2014, may be liberal on cultural issues such as the separation between politics and religion or distant from religious conservative positions but can nevertheless still be more focused on issues such as “sovereignty” and a “patriotic” identity than the main Islamist party *Ennahdha*. *Nidaa Tounes* should thus be classified as more to the right than *Ennahdha* (Aydogan 2020, 822–23). Ideological polarization with regard to identity politics—especially as it concerns the question of what role religion should play in politics—is clearly an important factor but cannot determine the placement on the left/right spectrum on its own. Other factors that need to be considered include an inclination for “personalist” appeals that often defy ideological clarity (Cimini 2020), but also programmatic issues such as the party’s stance on economic problems. In fact, the voters of left-wing parties appear to care much more about such economic questions than the voters of Islamist parties, who seem to be more focused on the role of religion in politics (Wegner and Cavatorta 2019, 6–7).

Placing the Tunisian and for that matter the Arab left in its various political and cultural contexts is all important for understanding its complexity, most notably its strong attachment to issues of first colonization and later decolonization. That emerged first as an anti-colonial movement, promoting largely pan-Arabist ideas, if not combining nationalist and socialist thought shapes many of its positions until today. In Tunisia, the two main wings of the *Neo-Destour* party are a case in point. However, the pan-Arab and nationalist left-wing positions lost ground after Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war. This threw the door open for the New Left, mainly in its radical Maoist version, which then dominated Arab politics until the end of the 1970s.

By the end of the 1970s another interesting formation emerged, a mixture of Islamism and leftism, which is especially difficult to describe with

traditional models of the left-right divide that are modeled on European case studies.² It came in two different shapes: The first one emerged in the context of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. It was heavily influenced by the leftist decolonization movement as well as the “Islamist-Marxist” notions and ideas of the Iranian philosopher Ali Shariati³ whose impact on the Tunisian Islamist movement was particularly palpable among its student activists at the time (see for instance Avon 2019). The second variation was the “Islamist-Left” movement initiated by the Egyptian Hassan Hanafi. It was less influential politically but not less important intellectually, and it also had adherents in Tunisia, for example, the co-founder of the Islamist movement Hamida En-nifar (see notably Makni 2018).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was of utmost importance in the formation of these different movements. Issues such as pan-Arabism, colonization/ decolonization, and the veneration of the principle of “sovereignty” often crystallized around this conflict, especially in the discourse of left-wing parties. Thus, the conflict has been essential in the ideological formation but also in the political practice of radical Marxist groups in the MENA region and particularly in Tunisia from 1948 onwards.

From a certain theoretical perspective, the Arab Left could therefore be seen as ideologically “inconsistent” (Jebari 2021, 27). But the concrete challenges that characterized its historical formation created conditions rather hostile to theoretical “harmony.” Advocating left-wing policies in the Arab context does not require a “harmonious” agenda that consists, on the one hand, of left-wing identity politics and, on the other, of socially oriented economic policies that lead to the demand that the state should occupy primarily shape the economy. Of course, there are more “harmonious” examples such as the neo-Marxists (Ettajdid party), the radical Marxists, and the social democrats (Attayyar and Ettakattol). But there are also more “complicated” examples such as Watad and POCT (now Workers Party/*Hizb al-Ummal*), which are inconsistent when it comes to the issue of democratization because of their strong attachment to Stalinist positions and radical left-wing economic policies. There are also the pan-Arab Nasserites of the Achhaab Movement (*Harakat al-Shaab*) who hold less progressive views on identity issues, are very agnostic on the issue of democratization, and take left-wing positions on economic issues. It also has to be noted that it is this branch of the Arab Left that has historically enjoyed more popular appeal in the eastern part of the MENA region.⁴ It is against the background of such diverse and, from a Western vantage point, contradictory movements that we have to understand political phenomena such as the success of someone like Kais Saied who not only represents a populist model of politics but also embodies a hybrid populism in that he is conservative on identity issues, and socially oriented on economic ones. In fact, ideological hybridity and unstable lines of demarcation between left and right as well as the importance of the

colonization/decolonization contexts must be considered cultural *longue durée* factors that decisively shape the left-wing political spectrum in the MENA region in general and in Tunisia in particular. Exactly this context is also key to understanding the variations of Arab conspiracism over time.

Arab Left-Wing Conspiracism

While Western political discourse has frequently referred to Arab conspiracism for quite some time, scholars have only recently begun to study conspiracism in the MENA region and the Arab world more intensively, thus enabling us to compare the manifestations and functions of conspiracism there to better-studied regions such as the United States (Gray 2020; Butter and Reinkowski 2014). By now, scholarship has also moved beyond the pathologizing paradigm that characterized the early and rather isolated work of Daniel Pipes (Pipes 1996). But Pipes also made a couple of points that have been reiterated by the far more sober study of Matthew Gray. Both Pipes and Gray highlight the importance of “political structures,” authoritarianism, the “distance between the state and society” and the process of delegitimization of states and rulers as important reasons behind Arab conspiracism (Pipes 1996, 358–61; Gray 2010, 102–05). In addition, Gray has also stressed the importance of actual historical conspiracies as well as the role of foreign aggression and interventionism in shaping a “political culture” favorable to conspiracism (Gray 2010, 49–87).

One of the earliest indicators of the Arab modern awareness of conspiracy theories and an example of the use of the word “*mu’amara*” with the meaning “conspiracy” can be found in the writings of an Egyptian writer and left-wing political activist in the 1920s. Muhammad Abdallah Anane (1896–1986) who was one of the founders of the Egyptian “Socialist Party” in 1921,⁵ published a universal history of “political conspiracies” from ancient Egypt and Greece to the modern times in 1928. The book also included a chapter on the Islamic history of political conspiracies (Anane 1928). On the opening page, Anane compiled quotes attributed to Western European authors such as Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Proudhon, which shows the influence of Western European sources and debates about conspiracies on Anane’s understanding of the subject. In the introduction, Anane articulates an idea that recurs throughout the book: Political conspiracies happen especially under absolutist powers. He defines political conspiracy as follows: “a secret agreement against public people or goods” (29). As he traces the definition of conspiracy through Western European modern legal systems (such as the British and the French), he stresses that its definition in the Egyptian legal system has been specifically inspired by the French model. Anane emphasizes a special section about “crimes hindering the security of the government” in

which the word conspiracy is not mentioned but contains a detailed definition of the crime that can be described as a political conspiracy.

Arab left-wing conspiracism flourished notably in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict (Gray 2010, 58–66). Nasser and the pan-Arabists of the 1960s stand as a major example of “a league of their own” as Pipes would put it (1996, 35–48). Yet, such conspiracism must be understood against the background of military confrontations during which Israeli conspiracies actually existed (Pipes 1996, 330–31; Gray 2010, 58–66).⁶ The legacy of a particularly strong connection between conspiracism and the Palestinian issue is still palpable today. Significantly, a key moment in Saïed’s ascension to political power was his statement, during one of the presidential debates, that “normalization with Israel is high treason” (Times of Israel 2019). In fact, especially in the current post-revolutionary context, conspiracism appears to be a factor that both left-wing and right-wing parties share.

Post-Revolutionary Populism and Conspiracism in Tunisia

The Arab Spring was not only a revolt against despotism, but it was also the revolt of anti-despotic conspiracism against despotic conspiracism. The conflict over democracy, between those who are for democracy and those who are against it, finds a common ground in a worldview shared widely by political activists on both sides of the conflict: conspiracism. As has been argued, conspiracism does not have to be in contradiction with an official version of events; in many parts of the world, conspiracy theories are considered orthodox knowledge and are part of official discourses (Butter 2020, 27).

In fact, the conflict over the revolt, which began in the little town of Sidi Bouzid, was very much about diametrically opposed beliefs in conspiracy. For instance, in Tunisia, one conspiracy theory held that Ben Ali’s regime and his family were conspiring against the people especially its unemployed youth. Supporters of the regime, by contrast, believed that foreign conspirators were trying to topple the sovereign power of Ben Ali. Each camp built its narrative over time not necessarily on verified facts but on the *need* to show an organized and well-planned plot.

Tunisia’s 2011 revolution with its main slogan of “Work, Freedom, Dignity” imposed a left-wing twist on political discourse in general. Most political groups including right-wing parties adapted at least their discourse to a leftist language, emphasizing the “social role” of the state even though their actions in government would follow the traditional (IMF-driven) solutions. The Islamist Ennahdha party would be just one example. More importantly, the post-revolutionary era imposed a populist general twist on politics, as it was characterized by a discourse that centered on the primacy of the slogan

of “the people want” (الشعب يريد) and “the people want to overthrow the system” (الشعب يريد اسقاط النظام). This meant that in order to have any popular appeal it was tactically necessary to adhere to such populist language and behavior. This was not only the case in Tunisia but in the Arab world in general, for example, in Egypt.

However, Tunisia quickly proved to be the only country where a peaceful democratization occurred and was sustained in the wave of the “Arab Spring.” Yet, the implementation of liberal democracy assisted by Western backing led in practice to an elitist democracy in which political factions came to tactical agreements in order to share power. Very little attention was paid to reforms that would meet the social and economic expectations of most of the electorate (see Parks and Kahlaoui 2021). This kind of democracy achieved only the alternation of power between parties and created the perception that democratization was an elitist project focused on writing constitutions and legislation in relation to identity politics and a game of party politics happening mostly behind closed doors. The impression that parties would viciously fight each other before the elections and then quickly turn into allies afterward to “share the cake” of power, thus eliminating the distinction between power and opposition, alienated many voters. This led to the growing appeal of anti-party and elitist political positions. Their proponents pointed to partyism as a game of “dark rooms” in which elite politicians were conspiring against the public to achieve personal gains. The words “*muhassasa hizbiyya*” (party-based power share) “*ghanima*” (booty) became widespread to describe party-politics behavior. Consequently, the popularity of parties, the parliament, and politicians decreased over the decade of democratic transition.

Accordingly, populism as the key feature of the political language of the post-revolutionary era was paradoxically coupled with an increasing perception of democratization as an elitist “anti-people” form of party politics. This led not to the erosion of populism but to its subsequent fully fledged blossoming. The “yellow card” was the rise of independent lists in the municipal elections in 2018; the “red card” then was the presidential elections in 2019 when two populist candidates with no party machines in the background faced each other, leading to a further polarization of all parties. In this mega-populist context, conspiracism grew exponentially. The close relationship between populism, defined as anti-elitism as argued by the ideational approach has it (Mudde 2017, 27–47), and conspiracism has been already investigated by scholars. Butter argues that some common major characteristics unite both concepts, among them being the clear dichotomy between two groups whose interests and morality appear completely opposed (2020, 114–20). Moreover, populism and conspiracy theory share a nostalgia for a past in which things were allegedly still better. This goes for left-wing as well as right-wing populism.

Tunisia's Left-Wing Conspiracism

Tunisia's left-wing spectrum has been dominated for decades (until the revolution in 2011) mainly by two schools of thinking: On the one hand, there were various radical groups, notably Marxist groups (especially the "New Left" Maoists originating since the end of the 1960s) and pan-Arab groups (Nasserists or Baathists), aiming at a "revolutionary" change in power relations; on the other, there were less radical groups that aimed at social changes from within power or democratic reformist changes. Among them were the Social Democratic groups whose origins go back to the time of the one-party system that dominated the first years after Tunisia gained independence in 1956 and the National Union won all seats in the first parliamentary election. The oldest and most popular trade union in Tunisia, UGTT, operated as a backdoor institution for these different leftist groups, thus playing a de-facto leading political role before and after the revolution. As we will see, conspiracism was more visible in the first group.

As already mentioned above, the geopolitical context of Western interventionism must be taken into account as it created suspicions among these groups that, for instance, conspiracies are created by "imperialism" and that cultural changes are not happening in an "organic" manner but as an "imposed agenda" for which Western cultural hegemony is to blame. This explains the paradox of being economically progressive and culturally conservative at the same time which is characteristic of much of the Tunisian left.

An exemplary case of Tunisian left-wing post-revolutionary conspiracism can be found in the discourse of the "Committee of the Defense of the Martyrs Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi," which was founded by lawyers with radical left-wing affiliations, mainly to the movements of Watad and POCT.⁷ Since its foundation in 2013, they have been alarmed about a "political crime," pointing the finger to "political Islam" as a whole and not merely the organization of Ansar al-Shari'a that was responsible, as a later investigation showed. Instead, they accused the Ennahdha Islamist party, which was in power in 2012–13, of being behind the assassination of two leaders of the "Popular Front," the radical Marxist-Leninist leader Chokri Belaid (killed on February 6, 2013) and the pan-Arab MP Mohamed Brahmi (killed on July 25, 2013). In the beginning, they based their accusation mainly on the claim that Ali Larayedh, back then leader of the Ennahdha and also minister of interior, and later the prime minister, knew of the assassination plot and decided to ignore warnings coming from external intelligence services. Later, they presented "evidence" that focused on a "secret organization" branch of the Ennahdha party and a "black room" in the ministry of interior during Ennahdha's rule from which the conspiracy had allegedly been orchestrated in collaboration with the Salafi Jihadist movement. The assassination of the left-wing leaders of the "Popular Front" was allegedly meant to

deter any attempt of opposition. Finally, the conspiracy theory included several judges, notably the main anti-terrorist prosecutor in the court of Tunis, Bechir Akremi, who would be portrayed as providing cover and misleading the investigation.

The judicial investigation, however, showed only the involvement of a military branch of the Salafi Jihadi group of Ansar al-Shari'a. The leaders of the organization confessed that they performed the assassinations to provoke a crisis in the democratic transition. Ennahda's was not involved in the plot, but may have indirectly enabled it by trying to contain rather than combat the Jihadis (see Zelin 2020, 96–113). As of this writing, there is no indication of any direct criminal involvement by Ennahda, even though a “secret organization,” providing intelligence for Ennahda, might have existed.⁸

Kais Saied's Populist Conspiracism

Kais Saied was elected as Tunisia's president in 2019. He is a retired university professor, who specialized in constitutional law, and became known as a political activist. The death of the former president Beji Qaid Essebsi on July 25, 2019 made early presidential elections necessary, meaning that they would precede the parliamentary elections already planned for the fall of 2019. The competition for the presidency pushed the political parties, which had already been weakened by a decade of a stalling democratic transition unable to deliver economic and social reforms, further to the margins. Saied and other populist candidates attracted the majority of votes, and he won the second round in October 2019 by a landslide. Over the following months he intentionally sought the confrontation with the elite of the political parties represented in parliament especially the leading Islamist Party Ennahdha. He also took advantage of a fragile and weak government that faced mounting social pressure during the early stages of the Covid-19 crisis. This allowed him to expand his popularity, which he then in turn used to garner support for expanding his powers.

After grabbing all powers on July 25, 2021 Saied received representatives of the families of the left-wing martyrs and publicly appropriated the conspiracy theory that blamed Ennahdha for their murders. Akremi, the anti-terrorist prosecutor the conspiracist narrative focused on in its latter stages, was among the 57 judges Saied fired by a decree on June 22, 2022. Saied alluded to him in a public statement by accusing the judiciary of “covering up terrorism.” It has to be mentioned, though, that the administrative court ruled on August 10, 2022 against this presidential decision arguing that it was based on insufficient evidence. Saied's conspiracy theory about terrorism is not new. He allegedly said once that “terrorism is either from the state or bigger than the state”; though it is difficult to pinpoint when exactly he said that. But his Facebook page, which frequently propagates conspiracy theories as

“al-haqaiq al-khafiyya” (hidden truths) was among the first to incorporate this claim as early as 2014 (Al-haqa’iq Al-khafiyya 2014).

But other similar conspiracist statements about the origins of terrorism can be traced better. For instance, in his interview with the *al-Joumhouria* newspaper on July 9, 2014 he repeated many times that the most dangerous source of terrorism was the “internal enemy” who wants to “explode the state from within,” thus pointing the finger to the West and its local agents (Saied 2014). In his answer to a question about the reasons for the spreading of terrorism in Tunisia at that time he said:

There is a threat and no one doubts it. There is an explosive regional situation and there is above all that a conspiracy targeting states in their existence. Outside, it is an extension of the inside, and those inside accept to be involved in this project. This is a *fait accompli*. Look at Iraq, the state has been absent. In Libya, the same thing, in Tunisia, the situation is different, but they seek to do so.

When asked about which forces (“parties”) were responsible for the spread of terrorism in the MENA region he responded:

They are the parties that see the Arab Islamic nation as a threat to their existence, instead of sending hundreds of thousands of soldiers, as it happened in Iraq, in order to destroy it; it is better for them to be destroyed from the inside and blown up from the inside, and as a result this is what is happening today, meaning governments without states whose primary mission is to preserve the major interests of the West.

(Tarek Kahlaoui’s translation)

It is notable that he repeated the same very sentence about “exploding the state from within” numerous times after ascending to the presidency and always connected it to his main adversary, the Islamist party Ennahdha.

Saied’s focus on the judiciary is apparent not only from the conspiracy theory about the assassinations of the two leftist leaders, but it informs his whole vision of the “independence” of the judiciary and the formation of the constitutional court. In fact, he implemented what one could call “judicial populism” by rhetorically aligning the judiciary with the “bad elite” and accusing it of not carrying out the “will of the people.” Ascribing to the judiciary an elitist identity and casting it as conspiring against the people is a key ingredient of Saied’s populist conspiracism.

Even before he came into power, Saied articulated doubts with regard to the process of parliament establishing a constitutional court, for example, in an interview with the website *Legal Agenda* in 2018. He saw it as simply politicizing the judiciary, as a “game of cards” run by the politicians:

The country's political landscape will make it more like a game of cards. . . What makes the Constitutional Court tribunal is apparently judicial, but whoever sits on the judges' couches will be controlled by the man of politics and the political game.

Thus, Saied cast the whole judiciary apparatus as just an instrument of party-political elitism and the process of setting up the constitutional court as just a "game" of the political elite. Accordingly, he dryly concluded: "And when politics enters the palaces of justice, justice leaves these palaces" (Saied 2018).

Back then, he did not outline a solution to the alleged problem. But his 2022 constitution provided exactly such a solution. It turns out to be entirely the "game" of one single politician that is the president himself as the sole author of the 2022 constitution, even though it appears in principle the result of seniority among the judiciary as it requires selecting

the first third of whom are the most senior circuit heads in the Court of Cassation, the second third are the most senior heads of the cassational or advisory departments of the Administrative Court, and the third and last third are the most senior members of the Court of Accounts.⁹

There are numerous examples of Saied's insistence on this conspiracy theory about the judiciary after he became president. On September 23, 2020 he received the head of government to scold him publicly about his intention to appoint ministers who had pending case trials (Présidence Tunisie 2020). In this public video statement we see a clear link between the "enemies" and their conspiracies; for Saied the principle is that one is guilty until proven otherwise. In his "judicial populism" it is the people who judge, not the judiciary. The judiciary in this case has to declare them guilty or the judiciary itself is complicit in their conspiracy:

They have to be held accountable before the judiciary. No judgments were issued as a result of the plots they carried out in the past years. Judgments should have been issued years ago. Today they are trying to return to the state. These people will not escape punishment, the people who removed them from power will not allow them to return to it.

Thus, the judiciary's integrity was fundamentally questioned by the president. The judiciary is guilty of conspiring with the political elite if they do not issue rulings that Saied approves of.

On April 15, 2021, when receiving Youssef Bouzakher, the head of the high council of the judiciary, Saied identified a type of judge that was allegedly conspiring against the implementation of the law (Présidence Tunisie

2021). He said: “There are two types of judiciary. Cases continue for years without punishment. What is the value of the law if it is not implemented?” When Bouzakher responded: “Sometimes the cases are complex, Mr. President,” Saied said:

There are capable judges who know how to shorten deadlines. . . The state’s policy in (judiciary) appointments must be changed. . . Indeed, a state whose affairs will not be straightened except through a fair judiciary.

Then he turned to the issue of the Constitutional Court because some members of parliament had threatened to remove him from office after its establishment:

The debate in the House of Representatives about the Constitutional Court shows they do not want it to be a court [of law] as much as a court of settling scores. Despite not being convinced of a number of its clauses, I will apply it and prevail over the Tunisian constitution. The Constitutional Court is not in a game. . . But the reckoning is going to be in the day of reckoning.

Once again, Saied used here the word “game” to characterize the forms of politics by the party-elite he saw himself up against.

Yet one of the most controversial conspiracist articulations by Kais Saied would be his presidential statement about Sub-Saharan African immigrants in Tunisia on February 21, 2023. It needs to be fully quoted:

The President of the Republic stressed that this situation is abnormal, noting that since the beginning of this century there has been a criminal arrangement designed to change Tunisia’s demographic composition and that after 2011, there were considerable funds received to settle irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Tunisia. He pointed out that these successive waves of irregular migration are the undeclared aim of which Tunisia is regarded only as an African State and does not belong to the Arab and Islamic nations.

The statement added:

The President of the Republic stressed the need to bring this phenomenon to a speedy end, especially since the legions of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa continued to persist with violence, crimes and unacceptable practices, as well as being legally criminalized.

(Présidence Tunisie 2023)

The African Union, the World Bank, and the IMF as well as, among others, numerous NGOs condemned this statement and expressed concern about its racism and its manifold allusions, at times implicit, at other times explicit, to the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory (The Economist 2023).

Kais Saied’s conspiracist populism is a tool to ensure his political survival. His 2019 campaign slogan “the people want” is textbook populism: the elite is wrong/bad by default and the people are innately right/good. What is more, his rhetoric usually emphasizes the connection between the elite and its conspiracies against the people. The basic link in his approach between the elite and conspiracism is the elite’s opposition to the will of the people, which propels it to conspire against it. It goes without saying that he sees himself as the main target of the elitist conspiracies as he sees himself as representing the will of the people.

Even though he is culturally conservative, his main positions on economic and social issues are left-wing. He regularly reproduces the left-wing leaning slogans of the 2011 revolution and sees the “rich elite” as the major problem of Tunisia. In February 2022 he even said that if he saw that any of his associates was becoming rich, he would fire them (Shems FM 2022). He also often talks about conspiracies manipulating the world economy, and specifically targets credit rating agencies, naming them *ommok sannafa*; the Arabic name of cooking books.¹⁰ For him there is always a hidden enemy behind all problems: “I am aware of those who are conspiring in dark rooms” (*ghuraf muzlima*) (Nadhif 2023). He also constantly refers to a mysterious “they” (*hum*), the hidden elite, that he sees as conspiring against a “we” (*nahnu*), that is, the people represented by him as president. Any adversary or political rival is for him the agent of “foreigners” (*umelaa*). He has recently started to use the anti-terrorist law to prosecute political opponents suggesting that political opposition is a potential indicator of terrorist crimes (Human Rights Watch 2023). The endpoint of such a mindset is the assumption that any citizen is conspiring until proven otherwise. The “decree 54,” which was promulgated by Saied in September 2022, has been used to silence any form of criticism especially on social media, threatening harsh prison sentences, under the pretext of fighting “fake news and rumors” (Amnesty International 2022). Saied’s focus on the judiciary as an essential element in a large conspiracy by the “corrupt elite” has been recently valuable in pushing for the arrest of political opponents under the pretext of a “conspiracy against the internal and external security of the state.” Many Western governments and NGOs have expressed their concerns about these arrests as they showed a blatant disregard for basic judiciary procedures.

Conspiracism, then, has been an essential element in the discourse of various Tunisian ideological movements: the pan-Arabists socialists (rising in the 1950s–60s), the New Left (1970s), and the Islamists (1980s–present). Two of these three major schools at least can be categorized as left-wing. All of them

see the world through the lens of conspiracism. For them the problems they face either in opposition or in power are not structural or conjunctural but the results of orchestrated efforts by a hidden group of people.

Saied's Use of Conspiracism as a Way to Rule and Power Survival

Saied's conspiracism is not only a product of post-revolutionary populism in the midst of a unique democratized context. Its insistence on a secret collusion between internal forces such as right-wing Islamism and foreign actors ties it to a long tradition of conspiracism that goes beyond Tunisia and connects him in fact to the Arab conspiracist context. As we tried to trace the roots of this left-wing conspiracism we saw that it is a hybrid conspiracism with roots in Western European modern conspiracism and older Arab forms.

The paradox of Saied's an anti-elitist discourse is of course that as president he grabbed all powers and monopolized the state by promulgating a constitution alone. Thus, he is by far the most elitist political actor in the equation. Yet, he constantly employs a conspiracist discourse suggesting that all major problems he is facing, whether a dreadful economy or other things, are caused by hidden enemies. This is a double-edged sword approach, as it might galvanize his in-group supporters but could also alienate other sectors of the population who can see him as impotent. As long as he uses conspiracism to justify any failure he will prosecute all opponents, actual or potential, as conspirators against state security. Conspiracism for him thus is not simply a form of political rhetoric but, more importantly, a specific tool for re-shaping the political structure, for transforming a frail democracy into an authoritarian regime.

His conspiracism is inextricably linked to his populism. As long as he emphasizes his unique position as the sole representative of the people against a malign elite, he will need as many conspiracies as he can imagine to prove this special bond. Yet, as I have shown, such populist conspiracism is not unusual for the region. Arab populism, notably left-wing populism, has long been affected not only by a local historical background but it is also influenced by international relations, by real conspiracies, and actual foreign interventions in the past. Left-wing populism in this case is by nature sovereigntist and anti-Western. It is therefore advisable to view Saied not as an alien accident but as just one representation of foreseeable waves of populist-conspiracists.

Notes

- 1 For recent works trying to define left-wing and right-wing parties in the MENA region see notably Jebari (2021); Cimini (2020); Aydogan (2020); Wegner and Cavatorta (2019).
- 2 Some argue that this shift happening in the 1970s happened solely to challenge the dominant Marxist-leftist appeal then and that it was brief, noticing parties'

- tendency to go with the flow of neo-liberal economics later (see for example Amghar 2020). Yet the vagueness of the economic programs of many Islamist parties with a formal focus on a “social” identity including Ennahda and also their social base, which tends to be present strongly in impoverished neighborhoods question the firmness of such assessment.
- 3 On the neo-Marxist ideas and the impact of thinkers such as Franz Fanon on Shariati and the latter’s influence on the Iranian Revolution see Zahiri (2020).
 - 4 Jebari categorizes pan-Arab leftism as “party-states,” emphasizing their birth from within power structures or simply because they were able to remain in power for a long time (see Jebari 2021, 20–23). This does not mean, however, that they are less grassroots than the Marxist left. Actually, probably the opposite is the case as the example of the Baath Party in Syria and Iraq in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s show.
 - 5 Anane details in his memoirs the circumstances of the foundation of the party and later the conflict between Egyptian nationalist socialist like himself and others with communist tendencies that led to his resignation from party politics (see Anane 1988, 55–60). Anane was also a translator of French and English literature; of note also is his translation (published in an Egyptian newspaper) of Alexandre Dumas’ *Le Chevalier d’Harmental*, which he chose to translate as “the conspirators” (*al-muta’imroun*), see (1988, 42).
 - 6 On the readiness of Egyptians to believe many conspiracy theories about the Mossad more western audiences because of prior Mossad operations see, for example Gray (2014, 286).
 - 7 The documents and statements of the committee can be found in their Facebook page. Last accessed May 2023: <https://www.facebook.com/comite.defense.belaid.brahmi/>.
 - 8 There is an ongoing investigation of this supposed “jihaz sirri” (secret service); left-wing critics of Ennahdha point to prior secret organization of the Tunisian Islamists that are proven to have tried to infiltrate the security services (notably in the 1980s) and the famous “al-nidham al-khass” of the Muslim Brotherhood that existed in the first half of the twentieth century, in order to argue for a “sustained” strategy of secrecy and infiltration among Islamists.
 - 9 Article 125 in the 2022 constitution reads as follows: “The Constitutional Court is an independent judicial body composed of nine members who are named by order, the first third of whom are the most senior circuit heads in the Court of Cassation, the second third are the most senior heads of the cassational or advisory departments of the Administrative Court, and the third and last third are the most senior members of the Court of Accounts. The members of the Constitutional Court elect from among themselves a president and a deputy in accordance with the provisions of the law. If a member reaches the age of retirement, he is automatically replaced by the next in seniority, provided that the term of membership in all cases is not less than one year.”
 - 10 The word “rating” in Arabic is “sannafa,” which is also used as the title for famous cooking books. See on his criticism of rating agencies North Africa Post (2021).

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9

CONSPIRACY THEORY AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY EGYPT

A Left-Right Convergence?

Helen Murphey

Introduction

By June of 2013, Egypt witnessed actors across the ideological spectrum engaging in mass mobilization against the Muslim Brotherhood. Discontent with the governing Muslim Brotherhood-linked Freedom and Justice Party ideologically aligned left-wing populist actors like Nasserist Hamdeen Sabahi with former officials from the deposed Mubarak regime and revolutionary youth groups. During this period, conspiracy theories circulated widely surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood, accusing the group of collaborating with foreign powers, employing foreigners to mobilize in its favor to give the appearance of mass support, or of being a Masonic group (e.g., El-Din 2015; Mada Masr 2015). Such theories had long legs. Years after the coup, the Muslim Brotherhood continues to be blamed for natural disasters and historical events (e.g., El-Din 2015). Why were these theories so prevalent?

Answering this question requires a deeper analysis of the history of conspiracy theories within Egypt, as well as how the Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth MB) has been securitized and presented as duplicitous by the post-independence state. Founded in the early twentieth century as an organization with a social and political program to Islamize society, the Brotherhood had played a role in the independence movement but ran afoul of the Nasser regime (1956–70) and consequently faced significant repression. The Sadat regime (1970–81) offered the MB a chance to proselytize in the 1970s in a relative political opening, allowing it to become influential in civil society; it developed networks that provided charitable services, which became particularly important as Sadat liberalized Egypt's economic system. The Mubarak regime (1981–2011) which succeeded Sadat was less tolerant; it framed the Brotherhood as a

minority group grasping for power through illegitimate means, collaborating in secret with violent internal Islamist groups and malicious international actors (Ranko 2015, 121–27). At the same time as its political activities were constrained, however, its charitable services, compensating for a lack of state capacity, enabled it to continue to organize and proselytize.

Due to a number of factors—including the disorganization of the revolutionary and leftist currents in comparison to the Brotherhood’s established networks—the Brotherhood’s political party, the Freedom and Justice Party, gained power through democratic elections after the revolution and assumed control of Parliament in 2011. Its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won the presidency in 2012, though soon thereafter he encountered strong opposition and a succession of anti-MB protests and political crises. The convergence of this legacy of prior mistrust of the Brotherhood among some segments of the population with its failure in governance post-revolution resulted in a perfect storm for conspiracy theories about the organization to flourish.

Did these anti-MB conspiracy theories spread equally throughout the different ideological wings of the anti-Morsi opposition? Research on predictive factors for belief in conspiracy theories suggests that a favorable prior political disposition can be significant in determining whether a conspiracy belief will be adopted (Smallpage, Enders, and Uscinski 2017; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016). In other words, whether or not the agent has an interest in believing a particular conspiracy theory can incentivize an individual to subscribe to that belief. This could imply that the entire anti-MB opposition would be predisposed to believe conspiracy theories that vilify it: Due to the prevalence and historical rootedness of these rumors, the opposition spectrum would certainly have been exposed to such suspicions. Yet most journalistic reporting has focused on the use of anti-MB conspiracy theories by the right-wing populist SCAF-led government (e.g., Hamzawy 2018). Did the left-wing populist and revolutionary wings of the opposition share these beliefs?

This research engages with broader questions of how conspiracy theories relate to populism and whether ideological orientation may play a role in determining which populist politicians adopt conspiratorial rhetoric. Even while left-wing populists have been evidenced to embrace conspiracy theories (e.g., Filer 2018), an elective affinity between right-wing populism and conspiracy theory is often cited. The problem, however, is that frequently the left and right compete for different bases and consequently hold different incentives vis-à-vis the adoption of any particular conspiracy theory. Egypt circa 2012–13 provides an opportunity to examine the distribution of conspiracy theories in an environment where right-wing and left-wing actors cooperated against a common opponent outside the left-right spectrum. Assessing the ways in which conspiracy theories traveled within this environment provides an indication of the extent to which left or right-wing ideologies are primed toward the embrace of conspiratorial rhetoric.

Conspiracy Theories and the MENA Region

What role do conspiracy theories play in Middle Eastern and North African politics? Early studies of this topic emphasized the prevalence of conspiracy theories within the region's political milieu. Daniel Pipes acknowledges that while conspiracy theories exist worldwide, he ascribes them a particularly prominent role in structuring Middle Eastern political discourses (Pipes 1992). Building upon Hofstadter's famous idea of a "paranoid style" (Hofstadter 1964), Pipes characterizes the region with a "readiness to misread completely innocuous acts" (Pipes 1992). This tendency has been linked to broader political attitudes: Zonis and Joseph speculated that conspiracy discourses acted to "rationalize, or even valorize, passivity" (Zonis and Joseph 1994, 458). The pathologizing tendency to view the Middle East as *uniquely* prone to conspiracy theories continues to influence public perception: as one journalist put it, "Egypt is a great country for conspiracy theories – the nuttier, the better" (Keddie 2013).

However, Pipes' assumptions have been questioned, in keeping with the emergence of a broader academic trend against treating conspiracy theories as pathological. As Anita Waters expresses, conspiracy theories may be no less reasonable than other narratives (Waters 1997, 114–15). Conspiracy rhetoric may also be deployed almost metaphorically to challenge official narratives treating unequal outcomes as natural (Waters 1997, 122). Within the MENA region, Matthew Gray contests Pipes' argument that a conspiracy theory is inherently untrue, claiming that past actual conspiracies in the MENA region form a collective historical memory that continues to inform interpretations of contemporary events (Gray 2010, 5, 50, 79). Conspiracy theories in the post-colonial period often draw upon real political factors obscured in official discourse, such as the importance of oil to Western economies (Gray 2010, 67–74). Equally, conspiracy talk can reveal a great deal about the relationship between the state and citizens. In the contemporary Middle East, as Gray notes, there has been a growing divide between isolated and repressive regimes and the broader population (Gray 2010, 100–02). Such power structures which deliberately mystify the decision-making process, he argues, are essential for understanding the spread of conspiracy theories within the region.

A holistic approach considering political and historical factors as important—though not predeterminant—in understanding conspiracy discourse has become more widespread, leading to a de-exceptionalization of Middle Eastern conspiracy narratives (Butter and Reinkowski 2014). Conspiracy theories in the Middle East can be used intentionally by non-state actors to express shifts in political positioning (Schmid 2014), and particular conspiracy theories may vary in their thematic associations (Nefes 2018b) as well as their internal coherence (Rabo 2014, 222). As Rabo argues in

her exploration of conspiracy theories in Syria, conspiracy theories can be “prosaic” as well as grand (Rabo 2014, 222). She points to the creativity involved in formulating a narrative that conceivably ties together a particular event with one of the “usual suspects” or culprits within common conspiracy discourses. There is, she argues, an inherent agentic element in the conspiracizing of ordinary citizens vocalizing their personhood and making sense of their situations (Rabo 2014, 223–25).

The idea that conspiracy discourses may be piecemeal and speculative, bearing more similarities to storytelling than to a “theory” in the scientific sense, provides a conceptual starting point for the assessment of how conspiracy narratives travel. While conspiracy theories often contain “a misdeed, a perpetrator, a victim, and usually a motive” (Radnitz 2018, 348), these could conceivably differ in both content and application across political lines. I now turn to a consideration of how conspiracy thinking can intersect with the left-right political spectrum, and what role populism plays in propelling thematic components of conspiracy discourses.

Conspiracy Theories, Populism, and the Left-Right Spectrum

How do populism and conspiracy theories fit together? In its basic definition, populism bears elective affinities to the themes underlying conspiracy theory discourses, suggesting that the two may have mutually reinforcing effects. Mudde defines populism as an ideology pitting an authentic and virtuous “people” against an inauthentic and predatory “elite” (Mudde 2004, 543). This can graft onto more substantive ideologies, such as nationalism or communism (Mudde 2004, 544), resulting in a strengthening of identity-based boundaries between self and other by characterizing political opponents as existentially threatening. This fits neatly with the tendency of conspiracy theories to be voiced by those who are—or position themselves to be (Sapountzis and Condor 2013, 742)—part of a disenfranchised group relying on a worldview characterized by fundamental inequality (Filer 2018, 397). The language used by conspiracy theory believers frequently evokes negative emotional states like anger and hatred (Fong et al. 2021, 616); these affects—particularly anger and injustice—also spur populist worldviews, building upon a sense of alienation from the political establishment (Demertzis 2006, 112–14).

However, there exist differences between left-wing and right-wing populists. While right-wing populists often emphasize in-group boundaries and cultural identity, left-wing populists tend to favor greater inclusivity, framing contemporary elitism in economic terms (Rooduijn 2021). Do these differences mean that either side is more inclined toward conspiracy theories? Some preliminary research on the American right-wing implies this may be the case (Enders and Smallpage 2019). However, research also suggests

that certain conspiracy theories appeal to those with particular political or partisan tendencies when they have received elite messaging in that vein (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016, 65, 68). Following this, the broad strokes of both left-wing and right-wing populism theoretically could align with conspiracy theory rhetoric, albeit with qualitative differences. Indeed, as Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson argue, the partisan nature of conspiracy belief might make it more unlikely for the *same* conspiracy theory to be shared across the political spectrum (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016, 68). Conspiracy theories may not remain static when crossing ideological lines: Nefes' exploration of the roots and spread of the "deep state" conspiracy in Turkey discusses how the deep state functions as a shared trope that politicians can reuse in various circumstances, leading to mutually exclusive articulations of the concept depending on the belief holder's political position (Nefes 2018a). In essence, the same basic conspiracy theory can be shared across the political spectrum by implicating different actors as the antagonist. This would suggest that while right-wing and left-wing populists in Egypt might both have an affinity for, and an incentivization toward, employing conspiracy rhetoric, their particular narratives may vary along partisan lines.

A final point concerns whether the categories of right-wing or left-wing populism are useful when the left-right political spectrum is not the predominant form of political division in a country's politics. Indeed, in post-revolutionary Egypt, Islamist and anti-Islamist tensions escalated to the point that both sides feared legitimately anti-democratic aspirations on the part of the other, rendering issues like drafting the Constitution an essentially zero-sum political game. This did not render the left-right wing distinction irrelevant, however, but rather situated it in a non-dichotomous, multifaceted political context. Left-wing ideologies have a strong precedent within Egypt: The country's charismatic second post-independence president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, employed populist tactics and language to legitimate his project of governance and scapegoat his political enemies. Indeed, Nasserism as an ideology, with its anti-colonial, pan-Arab, and social justice themes, has shaped Egypt's political history—and the MENA region's more broadly—and remains emotionally and politically salient in contemporary political discourses. Left-wing populism thus represents a distinct category in a political balance that includes not just a right-wing opposition but an Islamist political wing.

Despite the ideological diversity of political actors in post-revolutionary Egypt, however, political divisions became increasingly dominated by Muslim Brotherhood versus anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiment as the Morsi presidency progressed. As a result, the goals of anti-MB left-wing and right-wing forces began to align. Did this result in a convergence of conspiracy rhetoric across partisan lines?

Methodology and Structure

I seek to answer this question through treating a given conspiracy theory as a narrative comprised of an assemblage of components, thus allowing for an analysis of how conspiracy theories spread between right-wing and left-wing currents. Drawing upon a variety of primarily journalistic secondary sources, I first identify four central components characterizing the bulk of conspiracy theories surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood which were predominantly advanced by right-wing figures. I then qualitatively assess the extent to which these components appeared in the rhetoric of two left-wing populist actors.

The two left-wing case studies I selected are the Nasserist populist politician Hamdeen Sabahi and the grassroots group Tamarod, a popular movement founded in 2013 with numerous endorsements from left-wing figures. Both Sabahi and Tamarod advanced different arguments for why the Muslim Brotherhood was unfit to govern. Using a discourse analysis of Facebook posts by each actor from 2012–14, I traced the appearances of the identified conspiracy components. Posts were collected through Facebook’s search function from each actor’s page using relevant keywords for each conspiracy theory. I chose Facebook because of its interactive affordances: its ability to reshare content and its spaces for comments provided a chance to analyze not just official discourses, but the dialogues initiated by political actors in which wider audiences participated. To this end, I have sought to highlight trends in the sentiments of the supportive milieu.

I selected Hamdeen Sabahi due to his status as one of the most prominent left-wing figures in the post-revolutionary era with a populist style and a relatively large following. Sabahi ran as a presidential candidate in the 2012 elections where he campaigned on behalf of “the poor and the end of the class struggle in Egypt” (Mayton 2012a). Despite vote-splitting amongst the non-Islamist candidates, he obtained third place with 21.5 percent of the votes in the first round. His history of resistance to the Mubarak regime—including numerous arrests—granted him a large amount of revolutionary cache (Kirkpatrick 2012; Mayton 2012b; Bayoumi 2014). Exploring how the MB is treated within the rhetoric of an emblematic left-wing populist figure like Sabahi provides an insight into the role of conspiracy theories within the Nasserist Egyptian left-wing tradition.

I also chose to analyze the Tamarod campaign as a movement whose support base saw a convergence of different left-wing actors. Initially a project of members of the grassroots Kefaya (translated to “enough”) movement (officially the Egyptian Movement for Change), it quickly gained the support of the anti-Morsi opposition. The movement aimed to collect signatures on behalf of the popular will to pressure Morsi into an early resignation. Comparing Tamarod’s political rhetoric with Sabahi’s provides insight into how

actors with distinct political socializations and ideological inclinations *within* the left-wing may differ in adopting conspiracy narratives.

I then noted the highest extent to which each conspiracy theory was invoked within the material surveyed, using a tripartite classification system.

- 1 *Subtle* invocation: The theory's tenets are broadly referenced without providing specifics regarding actor intentionality; in a subtle invocation, the theory can be interpreted metaphorically or literally. For example, "The Muslim Brotherhood is attempting to seize political power with the help of the United States" would classify as a subtle conspiracy narrative invocation.
- 2 *Distinct* invocation: While actors' intentions are expressed, the theory is de-exceptionalized and the power behind the theme is downplayed. *The United States is investing money in the Muslim Brotherhood to safeguard its regional interests as it had under Mubarak* is an instance of a distinct invocation of conspiracy rhetoric.
- 3 *Elaborate* invocation: The theory appears in detail with full negative intent and agency attributed to the culpable actors; the scheme represents a unique and immediate danger. *The United States has been materially supporting the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent to power in order to foment chaos in the region to justify later foreign intervention* is an example of this degree of conspiracy rhetoric.

As with any descriptive case study analysis, the aim of this method is not to provide an absolute view of the statistical prevalence or lack thereof of conspiracy theories among these actors. What I rather seek to accomplish is to determine in broad strokes whether the conspiracy theories that were voiced by right-wing actors in post-revolutionary Egypt had similar traction among the populist left, and if so, which thematic components had the greatest mutual equivalence or affinity. This article's aim is thus to facilitate preliminary qualitative observations on how the relationship between populism, conspiracy theory, and left-right ideology functions in practice.

Conspiracy Theory and the Muslim Brotherhood

An examination of right-wing pro-military, anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiment reveals certain trends of conspiracy rhetoric. The four themes that I have identified are as follows: (a) the MB as secretly linked to, or propped up by, the US or Western powers; (b) the MB having internationalist loyalties to other Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran or Israel; (c) the MB as secretly undermining the Egyptian people—for example, by sowing division; and (d) the MB covertly mobilizing militias within Egypt.

The MB as American Agent

The first theme posits an illicit link between the US and the Muslim Brotherhood, considering the MB as complicit in advancing US foreign policy goals. Some variants of this theory allege that this alliance brought about the 2011 uprising for their mutual goals (ElMeshad 2016). Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton features prominently in some iterations of this theory, who was held responsible by some post-coup government figures for helping Morsi win the presidency (Trager 2016). Digitally altered images of Obama with a long beard associated with the Salafi trend were prominently displayed in public spaces (Lynch 2013; Nordland 2013). The ulterior motive behind this conspiracy was seen to be the fomentation of divisions within Egypt (Koehler-Derrick, Nielsen and Romney 2017).

The MB-US conspiracy theory is ideologically premised upon a deep suspicion of the American government and its intentions within the region. These elements recur in other conspiracy theories (such as the conspiracy theory that the United States was behind the creation of ISIS in order to give grounds for military action [Al-Jazeera 2020]) and commonly appear in political discourse as a way to tarnish one's opponent.

The MB as Linked to Regional Foreign Powers

Another related conspiracy theme considers the Muslim Brotherhood to be subordinate to the interests of other foreign entities or non-state actors within the MENA region. Tawfiq Okasha, a prominent right-wing Egyptian television host and political provocateur, for example, cautioned of a "Brotherhood-Hamas-Iranian triumvirate" targeting Egypt that would render it a vassal state (Carr and El-Dabh 2013). Freemasons also featured prominently into Okasha's anti-Brotherhood accusations, where he accused the United States, Israel and the MB of harboring a malevolent connection (ElMeshad 2016).

The constituent elements of this conspiracy theory stem from the ambiguities of Egypt's regional role. While Egypt continues to be a symbolic center for the MENA region and Arab world, its post-1967 history has been perceived to be emblematic of decline (Chatham House 2009). This unique combination of symbolic significance, juxtaposed with dependence, is an important factor in Egyptian political discourse. Similarly, those who invoke this type of conspiracy also refer to the continued significance of Egypt: Okasha considers that Egypt is "the greatest country in the world" and thus a prime target for disruption from foreign powers (Carr and El-Dabh 2013). The importance of Egypt is implicit within conspiracy theory iterations linking together actors like Iran, Qatar and Hamas with the US, given their opposed interests (Afify 2015).

The linking of the MB to foreign powers also identifies particular foreign threats. Conspiracy theories surrounding Israel and Zionism are prominent across the political spectrum; in fact, anti-MB demonstrations were accused

by some Salafis as being linked to Israeli interests (‘Abd al-‘āl and Mujāhid 2012). The rise of anti-Iranian conspiracy rhetoric coincides with the inflammation of violent sectarian sentiment in other post-Arab Spring countries with perceived Iranian involvement, like in Syria. The belief that Iran was seeking to target Egypt—and the MB’s apparent willingness to engage in rapprochement with Iran (Arabic News Digest 2012)—was a source of alarm for many in Egypt, including some of Morsi’s former Salafi allies (e.g., ‘Anā al-Salafīyy - Mawqī‘ al-Da‘wah al-Salafīyyah 2013). While the theme of foreign collusion with the United States speaks to colonial anxieties and global inequality, this iteration expresses sentiments about regional power dynamics.

The MB as National Saboteur

Very common in anti-Muslim Brotherhood Egyptian political discourse was the theme of the Brotherhood as a saboteur of the Egyptian public good for its own narrow interests. For example, one theory blamed petrol shortages rampant in the latter part of Morsi’s presidency on an MB conspiracy to prevent protesters from mobilizing (Mouterde 2013). This rhetoric was adopted by the post-coup government. Floods in Alexandria were blamed on the Muslim Brotherhood, whom the el-Sisi regime accused of obstructing drainage to cause a widespread crisis; MB leaders were also imprisoned for attempting to destabilize the Egyptian currency and therefore wreak havoc on the entire economy (Al-ṣafḥah al-rasmiyyah li-wizārah al-dākhiliyyah 2015; El-Din 2015).

The spread of this conspiracy theory after the coup can partly be attributed to the el-Sisi regime’s political interest in demonizing the regime it deposed, but its resonance among the broader public speaks to long-standing MB-specific anxieties. The MB’s growing political isolation led to fears of the “Brotherhoodization” of the state—in other words, spreading its members across all state organs to assume exclusive control (Elmasry 2015). Related accusations claimed that Morsi was governing only for the benefit of his parent organization (Elmasry 2015). For example, one conspiracy theory variant alleges that the Muslim Brotherhood purposely mishandled the Grand Ethiopian Dam project, relying on the assumption that the MB’s priority was its own preservation at the expense of state prestige (Mada Masr 2015).

The MB Mobilizing Militias

A fourth theme is the association of the MB organization with the formation of militias to obstruct the opposition. Coupled with this narrative was often the attribution of negative Muslim Brotherhood activity to residents of foreign origin, in particular Syrians and Palestinians. Supporters of Okasha, following the talk show host’s lead, voiced suspicions that the Muslim Brotherhood had Egyptians and Palestinians on its payroll to work against the country (Schwartzstein 2013). Anti-Palestinian sentiment was also stoked by references to alleged

MB-Hamas backdoor deals: A national security official accused Morsi of promising to give a portion of the Sinai to Hamas if the latter could provide military assistance against the Egyptian army (Mada Masr 2015). Various media sources circulated unsubstantiated allegations that Syrians were bribed to shoot Morsi’s opponents (Sailer 2013).

While the MB once had an armed “secret apparatus,” for decades as an organization they have espoused non-violent methods, including democratic political participation (Pioppi 2013). Nevertheless, this history provided a natural means for its post-revolutionary opponents to sow fear amidst increasingly turbulent demonstrations. The attribution of foreign influence to the existence of these militias allowed Egyptian citizens to be cast as victims, rather than perpetrators, of the ongoing conflicts in the post-revolutionary era (Sailer 2013).

The following table quantifies the subtle, distinct, and elaborate evocations of each theme:

Conspiracy Theory Iterations by Intensity	MB as American Agent	MB as Linked to Regional Foreign Powers	MB as National Saboteur	MB Mobilizing Militias
Subtle	The US and the MB are secretly cooperating to advance American goals, at the expense of Egyptian interests	The MB and regional foreign powers are collaborating to advance the foreign actor’s goals	The MB’s sole focus on its organization’s interests leads to neglect of the country, e.g. through ‘Brotherhoodizing’ the state	The MB has violent actors covertly acting on its behalf
Distinct	The US is supporting and funding the MB to encourage internal divisions in Egypt	The MB has allowed for covert malicious foreign intervention in Egypt for its own interests	The MB is deliberately subordinating national interests to the interests of the group, i.e. through inciting sectarianism	The MB, either through internal structures or foreign alliances, is mobilizing militias
Elaborate	The U.S. took exceptional, covert measures to bring the MB to power and support it during its tenure	In exchange for the power to carry out its organizational goals, the MB has sacrificed the safety of its citizens and relinquished national autonomy to malevolent foreign actors	The MB is purposefully engaging in sabotage of national interests, with plans of assuming global control	The MB has maintained its Secret Apparatus, is bribing foreigners and/or is allying with violent non-state actors to create militias

FIGURE 9.1 Conspiracy theory iterations by intensity

Source: Created by the author

Results

Sabahi

A Nasserist-influenced left-wing populist politician with a long history of anti-Mubarak activism, after the revolution Hamdeen Sabahi positioned himself as a representative of the revolutionary youth and the Egyptian street. The political system he envisioned was a social democracy, featuring both state-led capitalism and a strong social net (Al-Shurūk 2012; Cafiero and Moskowitz 2012). Consequently, he emphasized a restoration of Egypt's strong regional role and opposed US intervention within the MENA region, and criticized the Brotherhood on economic grounds for its proclivity toward free market economics (Sabahy 2013a). While this occasionally aligned with right-wing conspiratorial themes, such motifs were relatively rarely elaborated upon in detail.

MB as American Agent

The theme of the Muslim Brotherhood as covertly allied with the United States appeared in a subtle form in Sabahi's rhetoric, despite the fact that anti-US foreign policy was a consistent aspect of his political position. At times, Sabahi drew upon the constituent assumptions of this conspiracy theory in his writings and interviews, though he often qualified them by stating that the MB-US relationship was not unique to the Morsi regime. However, his Facebook account did share others' posts that more significantly alleged the conspiratorial and uniquely threatening nature of this connection.

For his part, Sabahi alleged a connection based on mutual compatibility between the US and the MB. According to Sabahi, due to Morsi's seeming submission to these interests, the United States chose to support him, allegedly spending significant amounts of money on this strategy (Sabahy 2013l). This led to Morsi, in Sabahi's view, playing a similar role to that of Mubarak in ensuring "that the Israeli occupation [of Gaza] was of low cost" (Sabahy 2013a). While these claims did not contradict the existence of a US-MB conspiratorial collusion, they downplayed the uniqueness of this tendency within Egyptian history, explicitly comparing the MB to Mubarak and arguing that US governmental priorities remained consistent (Sabahy 2013a).

When sharing articles on his page, however, Sabahi's account used others' words to elaborate in a more conspiratorial fashion upon this narrative. For example, his page reposted the opinion of Ahmed Atef, a spokesman for Sabahi's party, the Popular Current, where Atef claimed that the Brotherhood and other Islamists were "nothing but a tail for the American master" seeking to target Egypt as the largest Arab country (Sabahy 2013g). According to Atef, the MB was backed by the US for its own interests; the organization in turn was accused of betraying its country in the name of these foreign

goals, both by promoting violence in the Sinai region to force the maintenance of the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, and by pursuing Sunni-Shia sectarianism to “change [the] entire map” of the region in favor of Israel (Sabahy 2013g). A piece written by Amin Iskandar, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Popular Current, which was posted on Sabahi’s page argued that France, England, and the United States had been relying on Islamist and violent Salafi groups to safeguard their interests, both historically and more recently after the Arab Spring in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. Iskandar argued that these groups were allowed by the United States to implement sharia in exchange for access to oil and a commitment to Israeli security, in what he considered to be a deliberate agenda (Sabahy 2013c). These allegations of regional collusion lead to a consideration of the second aspect of the MB conspiracy narrative.

MB as Linked to Regional Foreign Powers

Sabahi was hesitant to implicate other regional powers. Rather than warning of Hamas-MB collusion, he sought to disassociate Hamas from his criticism of the Egyptian MB, and while he stressed his commitment to Egypt’s national security, he equivocated on allegations of Hamas’s involvement in the terrorism within the Sinai region (Sabahy 2013b; Sabahy 2013n). He did occasionally hint at MB collusion with Qatar, though this generally fell under the auspices of the US-MB theme: Sabahi considered that Qatar’s financial assistance to the Morsi government, for example, was linked to American strategic interests in support of the Brotherhood (Sabahy 2013a). Similarly, he argued that a US interest in Israeli security prompted it to fund the MB (Sabahy 2013l). These accusations were thus subsumed under the prior conspiracy component and did not prominently appear on their own.

As with the US-MB conspiracy, this theme was intensified in the content reposted on Sabahi’s page. An *El Watan News* article reposted on Sabahi’s account which warned of the Brotherhood’s plans to stir sectarianism and chaos in Egypt contained several sources describing the nature of this scheme; one source was quoted who implied that Israel and the US helped the MB to the presidency to foment internal chaos “until [Egypt] turns into another Syria, Libya or Iraq” (Sabahy 2013k). This directly aligns with the following theme: the MB as a saboteur of national interests.

MB as National Saboteur

Sabahi’s early anti-MB rhetoric acted as a mildly prescient prelude to the post-coup narrative that the MB was involved in deliberate sabotage of the country to advance its interests. His criticism of the group’s opacity—and the implication that the Brotherhood’s leader, the General Guide, was the

secret power behind the Morsi presidency—lent support to growing fears of the Brotherhoodization of the state. While he implied that the havoc this wrought on Egypt was part of its intentional strategy for the interests of the group, he hesitated to vilify the Brotherhood wholesale: his invocation of conspiracy rhetoric within this theme was subtle.

Sabahi considered the Morsi regime, like Mubarak, to be deliberately marginalizing the Egyptian people in favor of the Brotherhood, thus portraying the MB as the new elite. This explained the lack of economic improvement after the revolution, where Sabahi argued that Morsi had upheld the “alliance of wealth and power” that underpinned the previous regime (Sabahy 2013e). Accusations of conspiracy appeared, but without elaborated specificity: Sabahi accused the MB of leaving the ranks of legitimate national forces “to become a faction hostile to the homeland” (Sabahy 2013l), and alleged that it intended to “drag” Egypt into infighting (Sabahy 2013m). He raised fears that an increasing number of institutions could be subject to the “Guidance Office of the Muslim Brotherhood,” an unelected institution that could not be held accountable (Sabahy 2013a). However, issues like the petrol shortage were attributed to mismanagement rather than plotting (Sabahy 2013e).

Nevertheless, Sabahi’s page did circulate articles that attributed a higher degree of MB intentionality behind purposefully stirring sectarianism in its attempts to destabilize the country (Sabahy 2013k). Another article the account reposted alleged that the Brotherhood was appointing members of its own group in areas in which it was not well-represented as governors and that it was extending control over media institutions (Sabahy 2012b). Sabahi’s allies and supporters also claimed that the Brotherhood was colluding with the remnants (*fulul*) of the Mubarak regime to discredit him in a smear campaign (Sabahy 2012a, 2014a). Indeed, Sabahi argued that the MB engaged in unsubstantiated “daily rumors” aimed to distort his public image (Sabahy 2013d).

MB Mobilizing Militias

Sabahi’s accusations hesitated to escalate to allegations of conspiratorial violence: His use of the militia violence theme was subtle. When asked whether the Muslim Brotherhood continued to retain a paramilitary apparatus, he equivocated, arguing that the MB was not an “armed organization trained in combat” as it had been before, but that it did have “young people who have physical skills, and training camps” though not acting in a “systematic military manner” (Sabahy 2013a). His page did, however, frequently share instances of MB-led destruction or violence against their opponents (e.g., Sabahy 2012c, 2013j).

At the same time, Sabahi did not attribute foreign origin to Brotherhood supporters, and in fact seemed to be relatively sympathetic toward the Brotherhood rank and file. Rather than seeking punitive measures, he largely called for reconciliation amongst those committed to non-violence ('Abd al-Mun'im 2012; Sabahy 2013h). His Facebook page shared a Tamarod article about the MB's dissident youth, which suggested that young people were misled to sacrifice themselves, leading to bloodshed for no purpose save the narrow interests of the Brotherhood organization (Sabahy 2013i). This was in marked contrast to the rhetoric of Okasha, for example, whose antagonistic claims about Syrian MB supporters correlated with a rise in xenophobic incidents and violence (International Federation for Human Rights 2013).

However, Sabahi's narrative after the coup did escalate somewhat, positioning the MB as a fundamentally violent organization against which the military was forced to step in. He claimed that the MB's claims of a military coup against them were false, accusing them of resorting to "violence, terrorism and intimidation of the people" (Sabahy 2014c) and holding the Brotherhood "completely politically responsible for the phenomenon of violence and terrorism in Egypt" (Sabahy 2014b). There was an accusation of duplicity within this narrative: Sabahi's page published a piece written by the Egyptian writer Alaa al-Aswany claiming that despite their apparent friendliness, the MB practiced violence in demonstrations, and were the "first to betray the revolution" for the group's aims (Sabahy 2013f).

Conclusion

In summation, Sabahi's criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood was largely economic and administrative, with no true unified conspiratorial narrative. He argued that the new regime had failed to overhaul the subservient foreign policy and disastrous economic regulations of the Mubarak regime and framed his ongoing opposition to the MB-led government as a continuation of the 2011 revolution (Al-Bayān 2013). He was hesitant to invoke Islamist-anti Islamist polarized sentiments, however, instead centering economic and foreign policy critiques of the MB and insisting that the MB did not represent Islam, which he argued had a strong imperative for social justice (Bickel 2012).

Despite his criticism of US foreign policy, he did not allege the existence of a unique US-MB conspiracy, although he did voice opposition to the MB's amiability toward US interests within the region and the inclusion of other actors, like Qatar, in this strategy. More prominent in his rhetoric was a portrayal of the Brotherhood as a force disrupting national interests and sowing division, even by allegedly targeting Sabahi personally. There also was a mild association of the MB with violent mobilization, though this too largely fell

short of implying the existence of a conspiracy. Overall, Sabahi's anti-MB rhetoric rarely escalated beyond a pointed political critique or polemic in its invocation of conspiratorial themes.

Tamarod

A grassroots movement attempting to pressure Morsi to step down, Tamarod's petition against Morsi made similar complaints to Sabahi's: It accused the government of abandoning the poor, failing to deliver transitional justice and being subservient to US interests. Like Sabahi, it positioned itself as a revolutionary symbol: Its name in Arabic translates to "revolt" (BBC 2013). Tamarod attracted the support of actors across the political spectrum, including left-wing activists like Sabahi, as well as right-wing figures like journalist Tawfiq Okasha (Pratt and Rezk 2019, 250) and ultimately provided the military with a cover for its coup through insisting that Morsi had lost popular support (Gorzewski 2013). The movement appeared more willing, in comparison to Sabahi, to instrumentalize right-wing anti-MB conspiracy theories through implying centralized malice on the part of the Brotherhood, though it also shied away from some of the more xenophobic right-wing conspiratorial iterations.

MB as American Agent

Tamarod positioned its campaign against the Morsi regime as a rejection of American interference and a reclamation of Egyptian autonomy, leading to a distinct invocation of this theme. They stated that the MB's goal was to foment internal chaos to justify foreign intervention, placing the group at odds with the Egyptian army and the people. This allowed them to contest the narrative that the June 30 anti-Morsi movement which led to his deposal was a military coup, arguing that this was merely a false claim advanced by "America's agents" (Tamarrud 2013l), posited to justify foreign intervention (Tamarrud 2013m).

According to Tamarod, Egypt had been under the influence of the United States since the Sadat presidency, and it took the anti-Morsi opposition movement to threaten this long-standing arrangement (Tamarrud 2013m). The coup was portrayed as a "victory of the will of the Egyptians over America again," by ending the "rule of the pro-American Brotherhood" (Tamarrud 2013w). Tamarod claimed that the United States commanded the Brotherhood to "attack the Egyptian people and armed forces," an accusation it used to mobilize its supporters into protests (Tamarrud 2013o). The movement's page even shared news of a petition calling for Obama to step down and for early elections to be called in the United States due to Obama's purported pro-MB stance (Tamarrud 2013r). Another post claimed that "the people

will triumph over the terrorism of the American Brotherhood” (Tamarrud 2013s). The American ambassador to Egypt, Anne Patterson, was frequently implicated in this narrative that the US was propping up the Morsi regime (e.g., Tamarrud 2013w, 2013q, 2013j). Overthrowing the Brotherhood was not just an end in itself but functioned as part of a broader project to obstruct American ambitions (Tamarrud 2013t).

This narrative was frequently shared in the comment sections on Tamarod posts, with particularly noteworthy variations. One user warned that the MB was secretly planning, alongside the United States and Israel, to parcel off and sell the country (Tamarrud 2013p). Another stated that the Arab Spring had been “planned by American imperialism” (Tamarrud 2013n). The notion that America was set on attacking the Egyptian army, which was considered the “last respectable Arab army” or encouraging division among Egyptians was also a prominent theme in comments among Tamarod supporters (Tamarrud 2013o).

The MB as Linked to Regional Foreign Powers

Likewise, the Tamarod campaign invoked the distinct specter of regional interference. It alluded to an American-Qatari plot looming over Egypt and defined itself as a campaign to “overthrow the American-Zionist-Qatari regime” (Tamarrud 2013a). Tamarod member Muhammad Aziz wrote that Morsi transformed “great Egypt” into a “servant to the interests of Qatar” (Tamarrud 2013c). However, this rhetoric occasionally shifted to implicate other actors as evidence of the Brotherhood’s treachery. For example, Tamarod published a post stating that while the MB had previously colluded with the US, Israel, and Qatar, they were now pursuing an alliance with Iran, considering this proof that the MB “had no principles” other than their own group interest (Tamarrud 2013b).

In the material it reposted, the campaign also indicated that the MB was conspiring with Hamas against Egypt. It published an article that alleged Morsi had participated in a secret plot to naturalize 60 Hamas prisoners to “form militias in coordination with Hamas” in the Sinai (Tamarrud 2013v). It also reposted an accusation directed against an associate of MB second-in-command Khairat al-Shater of kidnapping Egyptian soldiers (Tamarrud 2013f). There was a further conspiratorial layer to these claims: Tamarod posed questions regarding why Hamas’s army could not “liberate its [own] country” yet could interfere in Egyptian affairs and attack the Egyptian army (Tamarrud 2013g).

MB as National Saboteur

The elaborate conspiracy narrative presented by Tamarod considered the MB to have a long history of anti-Egyptian sabotage. One post by the movement reminded that the MB had been “traitors since ancient times”

(Tamarrud 2013u); another post accused the MB of having historically conspired with the al-Saud family to target the Nasserist project in the post-independence era (Tamarrud 2013e). In the present day, the organization was accused of causing internal divisions. Tamarod wondered whether the MB had abandoned its “game” of inciting anti-Coptic sectarianism due to the Morsi government’s need to maintain US support, so had moved on to fomenting anti-Shia sentiment to attract Salafis (Tamarrud 2013k). This was also portrayed at times as part of a broader “American and Zionist” strategy of supporting Sunni powers against Shia Iran to maintain capitalism and Israeli security (Tamarrud 2013t).

The ultimate aim of this strategy was more developed in Tamarod’s rhetoric than in Sabahi’s. Tamarod referred to the organization’s grandiose and nefarious ambitions rather than solely its pragmatic group interests. For example, in a post on Tamarod’s page likening the MB to Zionism, the Islamist organization was accused of attempting to “control the world” by deluding the people, with religion merely presenting a cover to allow them to gain power (Tamarrud 2013e). In this narrative, the MB was portrayed as exerting control over economics and media “to control public opinion and spread their extremist ideas,” purposefully targeting youth (Tamarrud 2013e). Even the MB’s charitable projects were cast as suspicious: The MB’s history of medical assistance and schools was portrayed as a strategy to “raise cadres on Brotherhood ideas” and instill obedience (Tamarrud 2013e).

MB Mobilizing Militias

Tamarod’s conspiracy theory narrative also emphasized the presence of MB militias in service of the Morsi regime. Rather than merely reporting on incidents of the group’s violent tendencies, Tamarod’s rhetoric reached a distinct level through alleging a high degree of centralized organization. Tamarod posts implicated the MB in a history of “terrorism” toward those “opposing their ideas,” claiming that it had an armed military wing to conduct violent activities (Tamarrud 2013e). Indeed, MB militias were blamed for an attempted attack on Tamarod headquarters (Tamarrud 2013h). Against this threat, Tamarod emphasized its defiance as they purported to represent the Egyptian people: Despite the presence of MB militias, the populace would not be cowed as they had “recovered the spirit of revolution” (Tamarrud 2013d).

The MB was thus on one hand described as not having real sway amongst the Egyptian people, yet at the same time was considered capable of counting “legions of terrorists” among its affiliates to fight in its name (Tamarrud 2013n). This was purported to be in the service of inciting violence between its militias and the Egyptian army to allow for foreign intervention that might restore it to power (Tamarrud 2013n). While xenophobic sentiment was not directly instrumentalized by the movement, anti-Syrian sentiment existed

amongst some of its base: Several commenters alleged on one Tamarod post that the MB was bringing in Syrians to artificially swell their numbers in protests (Tamarod 2013i).

Conclusion

In comparison to Sabahi, there was a larger unified conspiracy narrative advanced by Tamarod's content and statements ascribing a stronger level of intentionality to the MB. The group advanced that the MB was attempting to start a civil war and covertly inciting political violence whilst feigning legitimacy. Tamarod considered this duplicity an inherent tendency of the Brotherhood; it portrayed the MB as having colluded with the United States in order to justify foreign intervention, and implied that it also allied with Qatar for this purpose. It criticized the purposeful fomentation of divisions within Egyptian society and the Brotherhood's intent to destabilize the country and moreover alleged that there was a centralized plan on the organization's part to mobilize violent militias. While accusations against populations of foreign origin were not prominent within official rhetoric, this conspiracy was voiced in comment sections of Tamarod posts.

Conclusion/Discussion

Tamarod thus presented a more pronounced conspiracy narrative than did Sabahi but fell short of some of the most elaborated right-wing accusations. For example, while Sabahi criticized Morsi for alleged subservience to US interests, this was not portrayed as an exceptional characteristic of modern Egyptian regimes; indeed, Sabahi was more likely to liken the MB to the Mubarak regime. In contrast, Tamarod embedded the MB in a consistent pattern of acting as a saboteur of Egyptian interests, rather than having been corrupted by governance. This was closer to right-wing conspiracy narratives surrounding the MB, but Tamarod was still less likely to implicate foreigners than the conspiracy theories advanced by right-wing supporters of the military, like Okasha. Thus, while conspiracy theories across the left-right spectrum shared commonalities, they also highlighted different themes.

Intensity of Conspiracy Theories by Actor and Theme	MB as American Agent	MB as Linked to Regional Foreign Powers	MB as National Saboteur	MB Mobilizing Militias
Sabahi	Subtle	N/A	Subtle	Subtle
Tamarod	Distinct	Distinct	Elaborate	Distinct

FIGURE 9.2 Intensity of conspiracy theories by actor and theme

Source: Created by the author

Even among left-wing populist currents, there were significant differences between Sabahi's Nasserism and Tamarod's revolutionary populism. These findings suggest that, in relation to conspiracy theory adoption, the Egyptian left exhibits a high level of variance, even among populist actors whose dichotomous, emotional core narratives might seem primed for the embrace of conspiracy rhetoric.

One explanation for these divergences is the different historical relationships that each current held with the Muslim Brotherhood. While past military-aligned governments had been involved in constructing the MB as a violent actor antithetical to national interests (Ranko 2015, 147), this was not the case with the broader Egyptian left. In fact, Sabahi emphasized that he had defended the Muslim Brotherhood under Mubarak when few others did ('Abd al-Mun'im 2012). Rather, in Sabahi's populist people-elite narrative, the MB had largely assumed the pre-existing role of the "elite" upon assuming governance, and thus its aims were relatively subdued in comparison to the theories advanced by the right-wing or even Tamarod. Similarly, as a politician working in the Nasserist tradition with its ties to Arab nationalism, Sabahi may have been unwilling to implicate other regional powers. Nor did he appear willing to give fodder to sentiments of Islamist/non-Islamist polarization.

Equally, as an organization defined primarily by opposition to Morsi, Tamarod could be more thematically fluid. Tamarod was more likely to emphasize the ambition of the MB's vision than Sabahi: Posts on its page claimed that the organization sought to create an Islamic caliphate or emirate and dominate the minds of the people over whom they ruled (Tamarrud 2013e). This played upon anti-MB propaganda from the Mubarak era, which considered the MB's interpretation of Islam alien to the Egyptian national character (Ranko 2015, 123–24). The conspiracy theories Tamarod advanced could be mutually contradictory: Despite its apparent ideological extremism, the MB was accused of allying with foreign backers with clashing ideologies. For example, while the MB was at times accused of wanting to create a caliphate, it was also characterized as conspiring with the United States and Israel to "sell and burn" the country (Tamarrud 2013a). While the vilifying effects of this conspiracy aligned with Tamarod's dichotomous populist "people-elite" framing, its goal was seemingly less a coherent ideological critique than the provocation of moral outrage.

Finally, accounting for Sabahi and Tamarod's cooperation with the military coup and the right-wing government it ushered into power, portraying the MB as a junior partner to foreign powers implicitly juxtaposed the army as a powerful national symbol representing the Egyptian "people." Indeed, despite the fact that the el-Sisi regime practically maintains an amiable relationship with American interests, it frequently capitalizes on anti-American conspiracy in its communications with the Egyptian people (Al-'Ibrāhīm 2014). For Sabahi and Tamarod, considering the MB as a partner in an American

effort to exert influence over Egypt could justify removing Morsi from power prior to the scheduled elections. Through conspiratorial allusions, left-wing populists could defend their ideological consistency by heightening the severity of the MB threat to national autonomy as they aligned themselves with right-wing, anti-democratic actors.

While certain components of anti-MB conspiracy theories appeared across partisan lines, the divergences in how conspiracies manifested in populist rhetoric *within* the Egyptian left suggest that political socialization is integral to understanding how these theories travel. While populism's dichotomous "people-elite" divide aligns with the vilification inherent to anti-MB conspiracy theories and in particular with the anti-colonial themes embedded within the populist traditions of the Egyptian left, their use by Sabahi and Tamarod varied, even when the incentives for adopting such a theory were shared. Ideology may play a conditioning role in determining which conspiracy theory components are adopted, yet it occurs in interaction with the larger political contexts—involving historical alignments and present opportunities—in which particular political actors are imbricated.

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10

CONSPIRACIST TROPES IN RODRIGO DUTERTE'S POPULISTIC RHETORIC

Franciszek Czech

Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Rodrigo Duterte are often listed as personifications of a new wave of populism, which began to grow in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Without any doubt, the ex-presidents of Brazil, the Philippines, and the United States have much in common. Bolsonaro was even dubbed “Tropical Trump” (Cesarino 2021) and Duterte “Asia’s Donald Trump” (Mendez 2018). It does not come as a surprise, then, that much has been written recently about conspiracy theories in the context of Bolsonaro’s and Trump’s populism. However, noticeably less attention has been paid to conspiracist tropes in Rodrigo Duterte’s rhetoric. The aim of this chapter is to analyze Duterte’s conspiracist rhetoric and its especially links to populism. I start by discussing the context of Philippine politics and populist traditions. Then I move on to the characteristics of Rodrigo Duterte’s hybrid populism. Subsequently, in the last part, I deal with Duterte’s conspiracist rhetoric. My aim is to show that Duterte uses well-known elements of different conspiracist discourses to support his specific and syncretic version of populism. I use the term “conspiracist tropes” to refer to the reoccurring themes and topoi of conspiracist thinking, which Duterte employed during his six years as president of the Philippines and which he customized to the unique context of that country’s political landscape.

Populist Tendencies in a Partyless Democracy

Populist tendencies have a rich tradition in the Philippines. They result from huge social inequalities, which have their origins in the nineteenth century when the Spanish colonizers established large plantations of sugar cane and tobacco. This led to the concentration of land ownership and prevented

the development of wealthy farmers and the emergence of a middle class. Another reason is the unstable situation caused by the fights with Muslim separatists in the south of the country and the communist guerrillas that grew in strength under the dictatorial rule of Ferdinand Marcos during the Cold War. At least from the 1970s on, the government has not had full control over all of the state's territories. A blind eye is turned to the corruption of local political clans as long as they support the government in fighting the separatists. Therefore, it can be said that the Philippines has the characteristics of a weak state in which it is difficult to implement any reforms. These are good conditions for the emergence of a strong charismatic leader who promises to solve the mounting problems not addressed by ineffective public administration.

Yet another source of populist traditions in the Philippines might be its presidential system, which was initially introduced in 1935 by Franklin D. Roosevelt before the United States granted independence to the archipelagic state. It contributes to a profoundly personalized political culture and relegates political parties to a minor role. Since there is no proportional voting system, political parties in the Philippines do not attract strong loyalties, and there is hardly any ideological debate between parties and their followers. Allegiances are switched quickly and parties thus serve merely as organizational platforms for particular candidates and their clans. In this "cacique democracy" (Anderson 1988), many voters support candidates from the local oligarchy or their allies from friendly clans who are able to monopolize local politics with the support of the authorities in Manila. A few years ago, as many as over 70 percent of congressmen represented one of the Philippines' many political dynasties (Mendoza et al. 2016). Consequently, this is how politics and the transfer of power work in the Philippines: The term of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, daughter of former president Diosdado Macapagal, ended in 2010 and Manuel Roxas, son of Senator Gerry Roxas and grandson of former president Manuel Roxas, withdrew from the elections in favor of his party colleague Benigno Aquino III, the son of former president Corazon Aquino and Senator Benigno Aquino II, who was the son of parliament speaker Benigno Aquino Sr. Thus, it is no coincidence that the current president is Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos and that his vice president is Sara Duterte, Rodrigo Duterte's daughter.

Such a political environment makes the Philippines prone to various types of populists who appeal to the popular will and promise radical change. The longing for a just ruler who would restore proper order was smartly used by Ferdinand Marcos in the 1960s. This skilled orator of the early mass-media era was undoubtedly aided by the charm of his wife Imelda. The beautiful former Miss Manila sang wistful songs at election rallies and transformed strictly political events into the story of a happy society ruled by a capable leader with a devoted wife. The political talents of Marcos allowed him, through deals with traditional politicians and the support of a few wealthy families, to consolidate power for over 20 years and build his own clan.

Another textbook example of populism in the Philippines is Joseph Estrada (born Joseph Ejercito), who employed his popularity as a movie star—with a specialization in roles in Philippine action films portraying a hero saving oppressed ordinary people—to gain political capital. He tried to present himself as a man of the people, a “buddy” (this is how his nickname Erap can be translated), who would defend the interests of ordinary citizens. He also used anti-elitist rhetoric constantly from the very start of the election campaign up to the moment when he resigned in connection with allegations of corruption and a pending impeachment process after only three years in power in 2001. Abinales and Amoroso note that movie stars were the face of Filipino populism in the 1990s after the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship (2005, 271). Media recognition and personal charisma allowed them to challenge the electoral machinery of the political clans. Thus, at the end of the twentieth century, various celebrities occupied seats in Congress, 5 out of 24 senatorial seats, and served as governors of several provinces and mayors of the biggest cities. All of them, to a greater or lesser extent, were elected by the frustrated poor who were seeking a sea change (David and San Pascual 2016). The lack of any real reforms fueled successive waves of populist rhetoric. Rodrigo Duterte exploited this situation incredibly effectively in 2016.

The Hybrid Populism of Rodrigo Duterte

Generally speaking, the essence of populism is the dissatisfaction of the masses with the elites believed to be responsible for the existing socio-economic or otherwise dire situation. As Torcuato S. di Tella put it in his pathbreaking study, populism is a political movement supported by those who share “an anti-status quo ideology” (1965, 14). Such general emotions can be expressed through the prism of various political ideas. This is why it is sometimes claimed that populism is a capacious rhetorical style rather than a specific ideology (Canovan 1981; Taguieff 1995, 47). Direct contact with other voters and the experience of the leader's charisma are more important than a specific program. In this context, Taguieff even points out the phenomenon of “telepopulism,” which also flourished very well in the Philippines. On the ideological level, according to Taguieff, populist movements combine various features of opposing ideologies: “Left authoritarianism, Left nationalism, Right socialism and a whole series of hybrid formulas which appear paradoxical from the viewpoint of the Left-Right dichotomy (or the continuum)” (1995, 14). Hence, no matter the ideological content, populism is a simplistic vision of antagonism between the people and the elites (Bergmann 2018, 12).

A perfect example of a hybrid populist style manifests itself in Rodrigo Duterte. In this section, I intend to characterize Duterte's political views and argue that in terms of ideology, he can be described as a hybrid populist who combines various, seemingly contradictory, political ideas. First of all, Duterte's communication style can be defined as populist. His rhetoric was

decidedly anti-elitist for a long time, even though he, the son of a minister in the Marcos government, ruled Davao, the biggest city in the south of the Philippines, for more than 20 years. When he was already president, Duterte made the following statement:

Perhaps you don't fully understand this, but the Philippines has been gravely fooled by the rich people in the Philippines. Just like Ayala and Pangilinan who own Globe and Smart. They are all thieves, those sons of b*****. That's the whole truth.

(quoted in Mendez 2020)

Rody, as the president was informally known, constantly emphasized that he was an ordinary Filipino, thus setting himself rhetorically apart from “the rich people,” that is, the economic elites. Duterte also used a local TV station to produce his own talk show called “From the Masses, For the Masses” (*Gikan sa Masa, Para sa Masa*). Just like Hugo Chávez, he commented on current events and answered questions using a mixture of vernacular languages characteristic of poorly educated and poor inhabitants of big cities (Abinales 2022). He did not hesitate to use blunt terms and numerous curses, which contributed to the creation of the image of a simple, plainspoken politician who would not compromise and who called things by their names.

During the presidential election campaign, Duterte argued: “I am not your perfect option. But I am your last card” (quoted in Calleja 2016). This way, he addressed frustrated voters who had already been promised a lot, but in the end, their situation had not improved. It was a response very well-suited to the emotions of injustice, anger, fatigue, and hopelessness that are often at the root of populist tendencies. Duterte was able to promote a simple political diagnosis of the key Philippine social problems by pointing to drugs. He suggested that poverty, corruption, and lack of personal security, which have long constituted crucial social challenges in the Philippines, had the same source. In consequence, Duterte formulated a radical program: To improve the situation in the country, it would suffice to eliminate one group from public life—people implicated in the distribution of drugs. This “solution” also had a populist twist since Duterte played on links between drug lords and political elites.

Duterte started to implement his idea immediately after becoming president. Just a few months later, Amnesty International concluded: “Statistics from the Philippine National Police indicate that police officers and unknown armed persons collectively carried out 7,025 drug-related killings between 1 July 2016 and 21 January 2017” (Amnesty International 2017). Since the vast majority of victims were not, contrary to the initial rhetoric, corrupt politicians or higher-ups in drug syndicates, but poor people in needy neighborhoods, the Amnesty International report was titled “‘If You Are Poor, You Are Killed’ Extrajudicial Executions In The Philippines’ ‘War On Drugs’.” It has been estimated by International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Karim

Khan that Duterte's crackdown on drugs cost up to as many as 30,000 lives before his term ended (Simons 2023).

Duterte's radical "zero tolerance" for crime and drugs policy must be considered as a key ingredient of his right-wing agenda. It was a particularly harsh version of a law-and-order policy implemented by many right-wing governments preoccupied with the reduction of crime rates. No wonder then, that Donald Trump, contrary to Barack Obama, was full of praise for Duterte's brutal anti-drugs policy (Sanger and Haberman 2017). In return, Duterte claimed that Trump was a realist and a deep thinker. The good relationship between the two presidents further suggests that Duterte, despite his frequent complaints about economic inequality, had an inclination for a right-wing version of populism. Both he and Trump had problems with liberal media and posed as tough guys. "The Punisher," as Duterte was nicknamed by his supporters, was called a "macho populist" or "macho-fascist" by his critics on the left. His "hyper masculine performances of toughness" (Curato and Yonaha 2021, 384) and some comments on women were as far from left-wing sensitivity as his disrespectful attitude toward human rights.

Simultaneously, Duterte himself declared just before the election that he was a socialist who would be the first left-wing president of the Philippines. Duterte's Skype conversations with Jose Maria Sison, his former university teacher and the living-in-exile founder of the illegal Communist Party of the Philippines, lent credence to his candidacy among some left-wing voters and made people believe that he would be able to sign a peace deal to end the decades-long conflict with the communist guerrillas (Manlupig 2016). Eventually, there was no breakthrough in relations with communist circles, although initially, Duterte included in his cabinet leftist politicians such as Rafael Mariano and Judy Taguiwalo, who were believed to have links with underground organizations. At the beginning of his term, Duterte also voiced approval of an ecological left-wing agenda and the closure of mines. He also had some success with the implementation of leftist programs such as a vast transfer of funds to the poorest.

Despite good relations with Trump, Duterte's nationalism, as observed by Trefor Moss from *The Wall Street Journal*, "echoes sentiments common among left-leaning Filipinos that America never atoned for invading the archipelago in 1898 and violently subduing the former Spanish colony" (2016). Moss also points out that "many left-leaning politicians such as Mr. Duterte" claim that Washington installed a corrupt elite in Manila. This standpoint on a long-term military ally, in addition to his links with communist guerrillas, made many traditionally right-wing members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines suspicious of Duterte's presidency (Czech 2022, 219). Beyond his anti-American, anti-colonial, anti-corporate, and anti-elite rhetoric, Duterte was also a fierce critic of the Catholic Church, which also situated him closer to the left-wing end of the political spectrum. Even in the case of Covid-19, Duterte took a completely different position than Bolsonaro and

many right-wing populists, when he threatened to jail those who refused to be vaccinated (Calonzo 2021).

In summary, Duterte's worldview, rhetoric, and actions might be described as inconsistent and incoherent with the left-right dichotomy. There are some elements traditionally associated with right- and, perhaps even more, left-wing thinking. On top of that, there are also some ideas not acceptable to most mainstream politicians on either side of the political spectrum. Duterte merges various ideas and picks up what he finds useful at a particular point in time. Sometimes he also changes his position substantially. For example, before the presidential election, he declared himself to be a socialist and left-wing candidate, but just a few months later he claimed to be "a socialist, but only up to my armpits" (Bello 2017, 38). Taking all this into account, Duterte indeed can be characterized as a hybrid populist who transcends traditional political divisions and, as Taguieff puts it, "appears paradoxical from the viewpoint of the Left-Right dichotomy" (1995, 14).

Conspiracy Tropes

Populist rhetoric has much in common with conspiracy thinking. Mark Fenster argues that all contemporary conspiracy theories are populist, but that not all populist movements rely on conspiracy theories. According to him, conspiracy theories are "a non-necessary element of populist ideology" (2008, 84). As Eirikur Bergman and Michael Butter put it, conspiracy theories offer a potent explanation as to why the elites act against the interests of the people (2020, 334). In a nutshell, conspiracy thinking can be defined as a deep distrust leading to defining some groups as enemies due to their alleged breach of (un)written rules and achievement of unfair benefits at the expense of the community or even "the people" more generally. It can manifest itself in different conspiracy narratives. In terms of their content, we can identify a plurality of types, topics, accusations, and supposed conspirators (Butter and Knight 2020). In this section, I analyze conspiracy theories and parts of them in Duterte's populist rhetoric. My point is to show that in Duterte's very specific populist rhetoric, we can find elements of globally well-known conspiracist motives. In other words, I plan to track reoccurring conspiratorial motifs and themes in the Philippine context and how Duterte employs them.

As already mentioned, the most important topic of Duterte's rhetoric during the presidential election and his term was the problem of drugs. In fact, it is a serious social problem in the Philippines, since according to estimations the country had 3,000,000 drug users at the beginning of Duterte's rule (Bahian and Sari 2017). Nevertheless, Duterte did not focus on helping addicted users, some of whom are extremely poor and use methamphetamine locally named *shabu* to have the energy to work long hours. Instead, he declared during the campaign: "This is a clear national security threat. This is an invasion of a new kind. Drug lords, domestic and foreign, have declared a

war against our families and children, and the government is helpless about it" (PDI 2016). As we can see, instead of a systemic approach to the problem of drugs, Duterte focused on "domestic and foreign" drug lords, who had already "declared a war." Duterte never elaborated on how the drug lords had allegedly "declared a war" but remained purposefully vague. Usually, he only suggested some details, but in the end, it was not even clear if, according to Duterte, there was just one all-encompassing drug syndicate or a number of them. Contrary to Columbia or Mexico, where the names of the most important drug lords such as Pablo Escobar, Carlos Lehder, or Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán and their syndicates are publicly known, there were no such recognized drug barons who openly fought the state in the Philippines. "Drug lord" in Duterte's rhetoric was a blurred figure. That someone powerful had to be benefiting from vast drug traffic was more conspiracist conjecture than an evidence-based statement.

After six months in office, during which his forces came down on drug dealers with extreme brutality, Duterte even admitted that he did not have any specific knowledge about drug cartels, confessing "I was not aware of the problem when I assumed office" (quoted in Romero 2017). Like many other conspiracy theorists before him, he did not provide any evidence for his claims but alleged that the conspiracy turned out to be more extensive and involved more members than originally assumed. According to Duterte, "The generals and policemen are involved. The Bureau of Customs, an agency I am relying on, son of a b****, is into drugs. How will I succeed?" (quoted in Parpan 2017). Undoubtedly, corruption in the Philippine police and bureaucracy is a real problem, yet Duterte suggested that there was more to it than just corruption among police officers or the Bureau of Customs when he said "Now, you ask, the Philippines, are we or are we not a narcotic country? Yes, we are" (quoted in Romero 2017).

This is the point where the "curious leap in imagination" (Hofstadter 1996 [1965]) characteristic of conspiracy thinking took place. According to the classic writings of Richard Hofstadter, conspiracist or paranoid claims are not invented fully out of whole cloth. They originate from a careful collection of undeniable facts and move on to an exaggerated conclusion that there is one all-encompassing clandestine network through a "big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (Hofstadter 1996 [1965]). In this context, the narco-state narrative can be read as a Philippine version of the deep-state conspiracy theory. This conspiracy theory, also supported by Trump, suggests that the state is secretly governed by a mafia-like group, which acts purely in its own interests and has almost total behind-the-scenes control of the bureaucracy as well as the police. In Duterte's version of the deep state, as in Trump's vision, the scale and nature of the deep state were not entirely clear. In the narco-state narrative, as in the deep-state conspiracy theory, serious illness or cancer is a useful metaphor for the social situation. In this manner, Duterte diagnosed that the drug issue in the Philippines was "stage 2

cancer” (quoted in Ramos 2016). Saying this, Duterte, like Trump and many other conspiracy theorists, employed an apocalyptic style of almost “hopeless pessimism” (Hofstadter 1996 [1965]) to express that there was still a small chance of overcoming the malady if he were to obtain the support of the people to fight the hidden enemy.

Another conspiracist trope grew rife after two years of President Duterte in office. In September 2018 he announced that there was a plot to oust him from his office planned by a coalition of the Liberal Party and the Communist Party of the Philippines. The alleged plot was announced after the initial good relations between the president and the communists became shaky and full of mutual reproaches. It was tagged as the Red October conspiracy, since the Communists were, according to Duterte, planning an attack on him that month. Some members of the military and several police officers supported Duterte, claiming that the accusation of conspiracy had merit. Proof of the alleged ouster plot was said to be based on computer files and information given by rebel sources. However, no evidence or specific details of the conspiracy were made public as it was claimed that all documents had to remain confidential while the investigation was ongoing. In the meantime, the narrative evolved substantially and came to include students from top universities allegedly “recruited” for the plot, religious leaders, and civil society organizations such as Movement Against Tyranny or Coalition for Justice. Duterte even claimed that some soldiers were “in cahoots” with the opposition to oust him. His son published (and quickly withdrew) a list of alleged conspirators on social media including, among others, vice-president Leni Robredo, the biggest Filipino fast-food restaurant chain Jollibee, and bishop Julio Xavier Labayen, who had died in 2016. Soon virtually everyone opposing Duterte was named a part of the alleged conspiracy and any event could be linked to the plot. Even transportation workers’ strikes were suggested to be connected to the intrigue. When the attack did not happen in October, Duterte and officers loyal to him claimed that the plan had been postponed to December to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the illegal communist party. A little later, they claimed that the supposed scheme had fallen apart after it had been unmasked by the president. Ultimately, no evidence was presented for the alleged cooperation of the democratic opposition, the media, and the Catholic Church with the communists, who themselves admitted that they were too weak to remove the president (Casiño 2018; Esmaguél 2018; Talabong 2018).

The Red October conspiracy theory has many parallels to the Red Scare of the 1950s in the United States. Beyond having a similar name, Senator Joseph McCarthy also accused a changing number of people of being part of a communist plot without providing any evidence for it. This long series of politically motivated allegations directed at opponents and critics was called a witch hunt, a label that perfectly fits the accusations by Duterte and his allies. In both countries, an illegal communist party was undoubtedly operating, but its influence was greatly exaggerated to unbelievable proportions. On top

of that, in both cases, the claims were legitimized to a certain degree by official institutions, such as the Police and Armed Forces of the Philippines or the FBI (O'Reilly 1983). The striking difference is, however, the final disgrace of McCarthy and the lack of consequences in the case of Duterte, whose popularity rates remained high until the end of his term in office (Czech 2022).

As if nothing had happened, half a year later, just a week before the mid-term elections in 2019, Duterte's spokesman, Salvador Panelo, stated:

The President has received intelligence information that shows there is a deliberate conspiracy between certain groups to discredit this administration for the purpose of the election. The groups, according to this information, seem to be the Liberal Party, the yellows, Magdalos, and media outfits as well as organizations indicated in the matrix.

(quoted in Ranada 2019)

Another six months later, the Department of Justice filed a charge against vice-president Leni Robredo and a number of senators and priests accusing them of conspiring to commit sedition by publishing a video on social media linking Duterte and people close to him to the drug trade. It was just another instance of populist accusation against members of the political and judicial elites who were critical of the president. Eventually, all the charges were dropped. In this way, Duterte's rhetoric echoed that of Hugo Chávez and other populists in power, who often cast criticism as an orchestrated conspiracy against their government. Rosanne Hooper writes that Chávez had a "complex and antagonistic relationship with the oppositional Venezuelan media. The suspicion of an ongoing conspiracy conducted against him and his government by the media was used to justify acts of authoritarianism" (2020, 668). Exactly the same is true of Duterte, who was famous for his hostile rants about the media and his attempts to curb them in different ways, such as charges of defamation, tax evasion or violation of capital legislation, and threats of rescinding broadcast licenses. As a result, Duterte was named one of the global "Press Freedom Predators" by Reporters Without Borders (Elemia 2021).

Duterte also shared with Chávez a post-colonial conspiracist rhetoric. However, in the case of the Philippine president, the suggestion of American covert actions directed against him was more of an undertone than a fully developed conspiracy theory. Duterte was harsh on the United States mainly during the time of the Obama presidency; in subsequent years, when Trump took power in Washington, the Philippine president was even able to admit that they were allies. However, he alluded several times to the continuing impact of former colonial empires and hidden pressure from the United States and other Western states on the Philippines. For example, in a speech given in Sochi, Russia, during his visit in 2019, and one year later in a speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Duterte criticized Pax Americana and the "double standards" of not-explicitly-named Western countries, which allegedly

“weaponize human rights” to apply unfair pressure on the Philippines. Just a week after the Sochi speech, the Filipino ambassador to the United States Jose Romualdez wrote in his column: “Some of our intelligence people are verifying reports about certain groups using human rights advocates as fronts at the US Congress supposedly to put undue pressure on the Philippine government regarding Senator De Lima” (2019). Leila de Lima, Duterte’s outspoken critic, senator, and former Secretary of Justice, who was accused of alleged involvement in the illegal drug trade and spent five years of Duterte’s term in jail without conviction, commented on Twitter from her prison cell:

For failing to counter this solidarity campaign in the US Congress, Ambassador Romualdez throws up his hands, telling his boss there must be a super-duper top secret conspiracy . . . They should just drop this spy and conspiracy crap. Amazingly silly!

(@AttyLeiladeLima)

Conspiracist tropes can be identified not only in what Duterte says but also in how he says it. Just like Joseph McCarthy, he had a tendency to occasionally present lists of alleged conspirators. Initially, Duterte claimed to have a “narco-list” of mayors, governors, congressmen, and police officers allegedly involved in the drug trade. Although some politicians were tagged as included on the list, the whole list was not made public and the number of “drug personalities” fluctuated, reaching about a thousand names. How the list was compiled was never explained, and, contrary to promises made, the whole list has never been made public. However, after three years in office, Duterte published another list that mentioned 46 politicians by name. Duterte’s spokesman, when asked about the list’s credibility, answered: “There is basis but what I know is charges haven’t been filed yet as case build up is still ongoing. . . [I]t is not yet enough to stand as cases before our courts” (Deiparine 2020). But the list functioned as a “hit list.” People on it were in danger of extrajudicial killings and had to hide or cooperate with the president to be taken off the list since they were not formally charged and had no chance to prove their innocence in court. On top of that, there were also unpublished local versions of this incriminatory list, which is reminiscent of lists of alleged Jews or Freemasons popular in other countries (Nefes 2013).

The same logic of conjecture manifested itself also in Duterte’s taste for diagrams that suggested links between alleged conspirators. Diagrams are associated in the popular imagination with professional investigations, as they feature in numerous detective movies that are received as realistic representations of reality. Because of this professional aura, many conspiracy theorists employ them in lieu of real evidence to make their allegations convincing. The same might be said for Duterte’s diagrams. Some were very simple, others more elaborate, but the nature of the links between different actors

oscillated between being absolutely obvious (e.g., it was publicly known that two politicians knew each other) or completely obscure. In an example of an obscure connection, Panelo, the presidential spokesman, when pressed by the media to explain why Hidilyn Diaz, the first Olympic gold medalist for the Philippines, was included in the diagram portraying an alleged plot to oust Duterte, eventually said that she was being followed on social media by a certain Rodel Jayme, who had uploaded a viral video linking Duterte's family and close allies to the illicit drug trade (Galvez 2021).

Conclusion

It seems to be clear that in the case of Duterte, conspiracy theory is something much more significant than "a non-necessary element of populist ideology," as Fenster (2008) puts it. The unique ideological blend of Duterte's hybrid populism and the specific context of the Philippine post-colonial political culture as a weak state determine the particulars of the former president's conspiracist rhetoric. Duterte's use of transnational conspiracist motives, also present in the United States or Venezuela, among others, and analyzed above, as well as the functions of his conspiracy theories, are also quite typical of populist politics.

The first function of Duterte's conspiracist rhetoric was the mobilization of disappointed voters who did not trust traditional politicians and elites as a whole. The deep/narco-state narrative explained the poverty and lack of personal security experienced by many Filipinos by portraying corrupt elites and officers as being in the pockets of drug syndicates. While there is evidence that this was true for some politicians, it was mere conjecture to claim that there was a single clandestine pattern behind it. Duterte smartly exaggerated the responsibility of elites implicated in maintaining the *narco quo* to present himself as the last chance for the men on the street to change their situation.

The second function of conspiracist tropes in Duterte's rhetoric was the securitization of the drug problem. According to the theory of securitization, some problems can be defined in public discourse as a threat, which justifies extraordinary means to get rid of them (Buzan et al. 1998). On the rhetorical level, any discovery of a conspiracy can be employed as a perfect reason for securitization. The successful promotion of the narco-state conspiracy theory allowed Duterte to legitimize such radical and normally unauthorized actions as indiscriminate extrajudicial killings. Thousands of casualties occurred because the majority of Filipinos were convinced that there was no other way to deal with the elusive drug syndicates created in the Duterte rhetoric.

Thirdly, Duterte's conspiracy theories had a defensive character and, as is often the case for populists, aimed at the dismantling of criticism. Like many other politicians in power prone to conspiracist thinking, Duterte accused the

opposition and the media of being part of an illegal plot to oust him. This big leap from undeniable criticism to an unproven illegal plot was in fact another attempt to assign blame similar to exaggerating the responsibility of the elites for the narco-state. However, in this case, the use of conspiracy theory to achieve securitization was only moderately successful. Heavy criticism of the conspiracy theory in the media forced Duterte to drop some accusations. As a result, he tried to pressure the media and critics in other ways, for example, with charges of defamation, tax evasion, or violation of capital legislation. It is symptomatic that his most widely recognized critic, Senator de Lima was accused of implication in the drug trade, not of an attempt to oust Duterte. The media were able to dismantle the ouster plot accusations but were not able to debunk the narco-state theory, which had some supporters even among mainstream journalists.

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PART II

Theoretical Perspectives



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11

MARXISMO CULTURAL/CULTURAL MARXISM

Transnational Conspiracy Theories and the Brazilian New Right

Andrew Woods

Introduction

In 2018, the then-PSL presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro outlined his plan to liberate the Brazilian people in a document entitled *The Path to Prosperity* (“O Caminho da Prosperidade”). In a section of this plan called “Our Flag is Green and Yellow,” Bolsonaro asserts that, “over the past thirty years, Cultural Marxism (*Marxismo Cultural*) and its derivatives like Gramscianism joined with the corrupt oligarchs to undermine the values of the Nation and the Brazilian family” (Bolsonaro 2018, 8). Bolsonaro’s claim insinuates that, since the end of Brazil’s military dictatorship and the enactment of the Citizen’s Constitution in 1988, an array of communist forces has been meddling with familial and national life. In their book on the Brazilian New Right, Camila Rocha et al. point out that the democratic pact of 1988 resulted in a partial widening of the public sphere to recognize the demands and interests of workers, women, Black Brazilians, indigenous populations, and LGBTQ+ people (Rocha et al. 2021). Yet, Bolsonaro’s notion of *Marxismo Cultural* treats these social movements and the process of redemocratization as symptomatic of a slow and stealthy corruption of Brazil’s “natural” order. In this respect, *Marxismo Cultural* may function as simply one more weapon of populist culture-warring that, as Katerina Hatzikidi and Eduardo Dullo observe, aims to protect the “‘true’ Brazilian. . . at the expense and exclusion of other versions of Brazilianness” (Hatzikidi and Dullo 2021, 13). So, what is the meaning of this phrase *Marxismo Cultural*? How does it operate within the ideological lexicon of Bolsonarismo? And what does it tell us about the nature of the Brazilian New Right?

Of course, the phrase *Marxismo Cultural* (or Cultural Marxism) did not originate from the pages of Bolsonaro's *The Path to Prosperity*. In fact, the term refers to a set of right-wing conspiracy theories that accuse a group of German Marxist thinkers known as the Frankfurt School (and their followers) of infiltrating universities and other cultural institutions to spread the "ideologies" of multiculturalism, political correctness, and environmentalism. Although the history of Cultural Marxism as an idea is intricate and complex, it is often reduced to a relatively straightforward timeline that starts in 1990s America (Busbridge et al. 2020; Jamin 2018; Jay 2020; Mirrlees 2018; Neiwert 2019; Paternotte and Verloo 2021; Richardson 2015; Woods 2019a; 2019b). In 1992, Michael J. Minnicino—an acolyte of the notorious cult leader Lyndon LaRouche—wrote an article that described the Frankfurt School as the "most important organizational component" of a conspiracy that was using political correctness to destroy Western Civilization (Minnicino 1992, 5). Several years later, a New Right think tank researcher named William S. Lind reworked Minnicino's argument into a series of influential op-eds, conference talks, documentaries, and pamphlets that warned conservatives that the Frankfurt School planned to dissolve the Western cultural values of the United States (Lind 2000). Lind's work inspired his friend Patrick J. Buchanan—a former advisor to Nixon and Reagan, and perennial ultranationalist presidential contender—to target the Frankfurt School in his 2001 diatribe *The Death of the West*, where he blamed Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse for the erosion of patriarchal norms and the decline of white American birth rates (Buchanan 2001).

Following the publication of Buchanan's book, the narrative of Cultural Marxism seemed to migrate South. According to Juliano Fiori and Pedro Fiori Arantes, the right-wing ideologue Olavo de Carvalho—popularly known as "Bolsonaro's guru"—adapted these American ideas and "imported" them into the Brazilian context in the early 2000s (Fiori and Fiori Arantes 2023). Carvalho suggests that Cultural Marxists in Brazil had retreated from political struggle during the military regime to build a leftist hegemony in the universities, the media, and the NGOs. During the 2000s, Carvalho's writings became increasingly popular in what Rocha describes as the fledgling "right-wing counterpublics" of the online social network Orkut (Rocha 2021, 87). As Carvalho's influence grew, this idea of *Marxismo Cultural* became a major ideological element in the New Right organizations that opposed the Workers' Party (PT) government.

Although this timeline is not necessarily incorrect, it provides a somewhat skin-deep history of *Marxismo Cultural*. It reflects a tendency to posit Cultural Marxism as an intrinsically "American conspiracy theory" that has been exported or adapted to various national contexts. Yet, understanding why *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism operates so successfully as a transnational conspiracy theory and how it became embedded in the Brazilian New

Right may require an approach to these ideas that is based on iteration rather than origination. In this chapter, I argue that *Marxismo Cultural* is neither a mere translation of “Cultural Marxism” into Portuguese nor a product of purely Brazilian forces. Instead of describing *Marxismo Cultural* as the importation or adaptation of an American idea to Brazil, I interpret it as an inherently transnational conspiracy theory that reflects the transnational histories and imaginaries of the contemporary Right. I theorize *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism as a *civilizational discourse* that serves to unify—ideologically and organizationally—the transnational Right around the task of defending “Western values.” Like Martin Durham and Margaret Power, I claim that this “shift of focus from the nation to the transnational offers a different perspective from which to study the Right. . . so that what might have been less obvious on the national level becomes more apparent when viewed transnationally” (Durham and Power 2010, 5).

Other scholars have tried to grapple with the transnational spread of the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory. The most promising example of this research is Rachel Busbridge et al.’s effort to theorize “Cultural Marxism” as one of the far-right’s “transnational conspiracy theories” (Busbridge et al. 2020). Using the case study of the Australian culture wars, the authors investigate how “local conditions” can affect the “circulation and reception” of an “American-originated conspiracy theory” within “different national settings” (Busbridge et al. 2020, 6). They trace the discursive flexibility and limits of this idea to understand how it can “easily slot into existing nationalist politics in a variety of locations” (Busbridge et al. 2020, 5). Yet, I contend that Busbridge et al. perceive Cultural Marxism as only an *incidentally* transnational conspiracy theory. They naturalize the American iterations of Cultural Marxism, as though the United States is entirely immune to transnational processes, influences, and lineages. To theorize Cultural Marxism as an *inherently* transnational conspiracy theory, however, requires an approach that, as Łukasz Szulc phrases it, “leaves the dominant culture no place to hide its context and enables the recognition of shared macro-level—indeed, transnational—processes influencing diverse cultures” (Szulc 2023, 10). As I demonstrate in this chapter, the methodological decision to treat *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism as a civilizational discourse provides a rich opportunity to reflect on the logics and legacies of coloniality that persist in shaping the projects of reactionary and authoritarian politics worldwide.

In this chapter, I review the emerging scholarly literature on the concept of *civilizationism* to decide whether it is an appropriate term for the discourse and rhetoric of contemporary right-wing populism. I engage with the work of decolonial theorists to reveal the colonial assumptions that motivate what I call the “Western Civilizationism” of the transnational Right. Furthermore, I trace the colonial and transnational practices and perspectives that unite the Right in the Americas around the task of defending “Western Civilization.”

Additionally, I demonstrate that the narrative of *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism functions to support this task. Although the discourse on *Marxismo Cultural* in Brazil is increasingly widespread, I will focus on what I consider to be the three most prominent sources of anti-*Marxismo Cultural* ideas: the books and articles of Olavo de Carvalho, the films of the New Right media company Brasil Paralelo, and the writings of Bolsonaro's former foreign minister Ernesto Araújo. I will then briefly discuss the use of this conspiracy theory in the policy decisions of the Bolsonaro administration and reflect on the wider implications of studying this *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism as a civilizational discourse.

Civilizationism and the Transnational Right

In 2017, the sociologist Rogers Brubaker introduced the concept of “civilizationism” to denote a shift in the rhetorical self-positioning of the European national-populist Right (Brubaker 2017). As Brubaker understands it, the politics of national-populism relies on a construction of a discursive antagonism between “us” and “them” in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions. Whereas the vertical axis portrays a gulf between “the People” and “the Elite,” the horizontal level asserts a division between the “insiders” and the “outsiders” (and the “internal outsiders”) or between “those who share our way of life” and “those on the outside who are said to threaten our way of life” (Brubaker 2017, 1192). Brubaker observes that several right-wing populist leaders in Europe, such as Marine Le Pen in France and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, are starting to construct the opposition between “us” and “them” in “broader civilizational terms” to contrast a “pure” European identity with the perceived threat of Islamification (Brubaker 2017, 1193). They accuse “the Elite” of failing to defend the European People and Western “Christian” civilization from the corrosive influence of Islamic outsiders. In his analysis of this discursive shift, Brubaker clarifies that “talk of ‘the nation’ is not disappearing, but, rather, ‘the nation’ is being re-characterized in civilizational terms” (Brubaker 2017, 1211). Nonetheless, he contends that this partial turn from nationalism to civilizationism represents an emergent trend in right-wing populism.

Other scholars have also noticed the increasing use of civilizational rhetoric in contemporary right-wing discourses. Blake Stewart offers the term “far-right civilizationism” (FRC) to name an array of fundamental assumptions that unite a global network of right-wing politicians, activists, and intellectuals (Stewart 2020). Some of these assumptions include

preference for authoritarian or strong-man leadership; openly chauvinistic conceptions of western civilization; mythic or revisionist historical claims; conservative Christianity or Paganism; antipathy towards mainstream

liberalism and ‘political correctness’ (especially within universities/colleges and corporate media). . . climate change denial; antifeminism and support for traditional gender norms. . . [etc.].

(Stewart 2020, 1213)

According to Stewart, FRC assumes an “ontology of civilizational blocs” that construes politics as a conflict between irreconcilable opposites, rather than an art of compromise and cooperation (Stewart 2020, 1214). He argues that this form of civilizationism constitutes an “alternative vision for a capitalist world order” that has been

articulated by far-right intellectuals from above, as well as an online vanguard. . . [who] seek to replace the veil of cultural cosmopolitanism and liberal internationalism (which they often refer to as ‘Cultural Marxism’) with a celebration of jingoism and explicit Western chauvinism.

(Stewart 2020, 1213)

The followers of FRC promote this agenda as the only effective solution to the unfolding structural crisis of neoliberalism (or what they call “globalism”). Although Stewart locates the main figures of FRC in the right-wing movements of the United States, France, and Britain, he notes that there are “similar tendencies occurring outside the West, including the social forces which brought Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, as well as Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel” (Stewart 2020, 1217).

Similarly, the academics Henry Maher et al. find instances of civilizational thinking beyond North America and Europe. In their analysis of a conservative Australian foundation called the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilization, the authors emphasize the link between “Western Civilizationism” and white supremacy (Maher et al. 2023). They critique Brubaker for neglecting the issues of race and racism, especially the “well-established implicit racializing of Islamophobia,” in his conceptualization of civilizational discourse—an example of what Aurelien Mondon calls “the invisibilisation of racism and whiteness” in far-right studies (Mather et al. 2023, 312; Mondon 2022). The white supremacist discourse of Western Civilizationism promotes “the West” as the “centre of freedom, liberty, and progress” and portrays a “periphery of non-Western peoples and cultures as inherently backward and lesser” (Maher et al. 2023, 311). Not only does this vision excuse the historical abuses and atrocities of colonialism, but it also rationalizes support for authoritarian and exclusionary political projects that seek to restore the imagined purity and glory of the (white) West.

Both Stewart and Maher et al. identify the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory as an element of right-wing civilizational discourses. And so, one might expect that civilizationism would be an appropriate guiding idea for

this chapter. Yet, I wonder whether it is possible to apply this concept to the ideas of the Brazilian New Right unproblematically. In their brief and suggestive article “Why We Need a New Framework to Study the Far Right in the Global South,” Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Tatiana Vargas-Maia contend that the nature of Bolsonarismo and Brazilian conservatism cannot be understood through “an undifferentiated theoretical framework that was originally developed through European-American-Western lenses” (Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023, 17). Although they acknowledge that events in the United States and Europe, such as Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential victory and Brexit, were key moments in the worldwide lurch to the Right, they argue that the intense academic focus on the Global North has resulted in a narrow and shallow understanding of contemporary right-wing populism. In fact, they assert that “some of the clues to the current global phenomenon arise precisely from the unfinished or hybrid modernity of the Global South” (Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023, 17). They propose a “new approach to understanding such a phenomenon, relying on a Global South perspective, in which colonialism and coloniality play a central analytical role” (Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023, 16). To phrase it somewhat differently, Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia claim that, by focusing on the Global South and emphasizing the themes of colonialism and coloniality, we may better understand the rise of right-wing populism around the world. Similarly, I contest that we may learn why *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism functions so successfully as a civilizational discourse if we adopt the approach outlined by Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia. To inform this approach, I recommend that we build on the conceptual resources of decolonial theory to investigate the colonial assumptions that drive the civilizationism of the transnational Right and its uses of *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism.

The central concept of the decolonial theory is *coloniality*. Whereas colonialism, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres specifies, “denotes a political and economic relation in which sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation,” coloniality “refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). Although coloniality emerged in the “particular socio-historical setting” of “the discovery and conquest of the Americas,” it is “maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). Coloniality, according to decolonial theorists, still impacts the problems and patterns of contemporary politics, such as the treatment of refugees and femicide.

The theorist Anibal Quijano developed the concept of “the colonial matrix of power” to define the two processes that guided the colonialization of the

Americas (Quijano 2000). The first was “the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of ‘race,’ a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others” (Quijano 2000, 533). The second was the “constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources” (Quijano 2000, 534). New historical social identities were created in the experience of European colonization: Europeans, Indians, Blacks, and mestizos. As these identities were produced in the context of colonial domination, they were seen as “natural” differences between certain groups (rather than consequences of a history of power). The social classification of races reinforced a racial division of labor that granted superior positions to Spanish and Portuguese whites (independent merchants, artisans, farmers) and reduced Indians to serfdom and blacks to slavery. During the period of Western colonial hegemony over the modern World-System, this model of power shaped the relations of domination between Europeans and the rest of the regions and peoples of the world. According to Quijano, the Europeans then developed a “new temporal perspective of history” that presented Europe as naturally superior to all other peoples of the world (Quijano 2000, 541). That perspective imagined the history of human civilization as a trajectory that “departed from a state of nature and culminated in Europe” (Quijano 2000, 541). Consequently, this Eurocentric vision portrayed colonized populations as “inferior races” that needed to follow the European path to modernity. In Latin America, this Eurocentrism was adopted to “impose the European model of nation-state formation for structures of power organized around colonial relations” (Quijano 2000, 570). Even when official colonialism ended in Latin America (Brazil gained its political independence in 1822), the colonial matrix of power continued to guide sociopolitical relations and realities.

The philosopher Enrique Dussel contends that European modernity resulted from the conquest and exploitation of the Americas. For Dussel, the origin of modernity cannot be found in the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, but, rather, in the discovery of the Americas in 1492. In his 1993 paper “Eurocentrism and Modernity,” Dussel performs incisive readings of Immanuel Kant, Georg W. F. Hegel, and Jürgen Habermas to demonstrate that Europe could only constitute itself as the “Center” of a World or Universal History in dialectical relation with non-European alterity, i.e., Latin America (Dussel 1993). The essential myth of modernity portrays Western European Civilization as a superior civilizing force that must fulfill its World-Historical mission of “developing” the primitive peoples and cultures of the periphery. The use of violence—genocide, extraction, displacement—is perceived as justified insofar as it serves to “liberate” the “barbarian” from backwardness. As Dussel points out, the allegedly “redemptive” logic of modernity presents “the sufferings and sacrifices (the costs) of modernization imposed on ‘immature’ peoples, enslaved races, the ‘weaker’ sex, etcetera” as “inevitable and

necessary” (Dussel 1993, 75). The concept of a superior Western Civilization requires this reframing of destructive and genocidal violence as a civilizing project to tame and train the Other.

The invention of the Human, as such thinkers as Sylvia Wynter have shown, produced a category that contrasted a “Universal” European Man to various “others” who were deemed less human or not quite human (Wynter 2003). Central to this notion of the Human were racialized and gendered systems of classification that presupposed a supremacist idea of race and a patriarchal code of sexual relations. Walter D. Mignolo writes that these concepts of racial and sexual superiority were “created by agents who considered *themselves* human and who were in a position to project their own image of themselves as humanity” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 168). One of the persistent features of coloniality, especially in Brazil, is this model of separating the Human (the “true Brazilian”) from those racialized and gendered Others who are deemed inferior or uncivilized. This is the basis for presuming that inequality constitutes the “natural” order of Brazilian sociality, which, as the political economist Rômula Lima points out, is an inheritance from the slavery and colonial system (Lima 2020).

Civilizationism, as reconsidered through the lens of decolonial theory, is an essential part of Brazilian New Right discourse. The medievalist Paulo Pachá regards the civilizational rhetoric of Bolsonaro and his allies as “reactionary revisionism” that “casts white Brazilians as the true heirs of Europe” (Pachá 2019). As Pachá observes, “the most common way to express this association is to proclaim a so-called Judeo-Christian tradition as the main pillar of Brazilian culture” (Pachá 2019). For example, in his 2019 inauguration speech, Bolsonaro promised to “unite the people, value the family, respect the religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, oppose gender ideology, and preserve our values” (quoted in Pachá 2019). In these comments, Bolsonaro explicitly articulates the link between the defense of Western European civilization and the colonial forms of sexual classification that rationalized and re-entrenched existing heteronormative hierarchies. The use of civilizational discourse, Pachá argues, allows the Brazilian Right to deny “the cruelty of its ongoing political practice, especially (but not only) the persistence of active racism, misogyny, homophobia, and religious intolerance” (Pachá 2019). During a campaign rally in Campina Grande, Bolsonaro declared “Let’s build a Brazil for the majorities! Minorities must bow to majorities! The law must exist to defend majorities! Minorities must adapt themselves or just disappear!” (quoted in Pachá 2019). In this respect, the Bolsonaro administration’s discriminatory and inegalitarian policies are presented less as violence against certain groups and more as part of a “civilizing” project to make the “minorities” adapt to the (white) “majorities.” Additionally, Bolsonaro claimed that unlawful mining and logging activities in protected territories represented an opportunity for indigenous people to finally exercise their

entrepreneurial freedom and participate in the free market like any other Brazilian citizen—an argument that implies that “the only indigenous persons who can exist are those who wish to be white, both in terms of identity and by integrating into market economies as cheap labour, embracing capitalism, denying their roots, practices, beliefs, livelihoods” (Terena et al. 2021, 211). Although these “minorities”—women, Black, and *pardo* (mixed-race) people—actually represent the majority of the Brazilian population, they are not recognized as equals (as political agents with their own interests and demands) within Brazil’s “natural” order. Consequently, the civilizational worldview of the Brazilian New Right fosters what Maldonado-Torres calls an *imperial attitude* that marks these so-called minorities as lesser and dispensable (Maldonado-Torres 2007).

Not only does this emphasis on colonialism and coloniality help us to understand the Brazilian New Right, but it also allows us to examine the civilizationism of reactionary political projects in the United States. Most American proponents of the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory subscribe to a notion of Western Civilization that naturalizes inequality between races and genders. In his multiple tellings of this conspiracy theory, Lind—an American conservative affiliated with the think tank Free Congress Foundation—presents pre-1960s America as a pristine and harmonious society that exemplified the true values of Western culture. When the Frankfurt School emigrated to the United States, they injected their “Marxist” ideology of “political correctness” into the American youth and produced the radical counterculture of the 1960s (Lind 2000). None of the social movements that emerged in the 1960s, according to Lind, were protesting genuine injustices, inequalities, or abuses. The scholars of Black Studies, Women’s Studies, and LGBTQ+ Studies are not studying real problems, but, rather, inventing victim groups and fabricating causes of oppression. What is so damaging about Cultural Marxism, as Lind understands it, is that it teaches women, black people, and others to overcome their oppression and demand equality. Whereas Lind regards inequality as natural, they are products of historical processes of patriarchy, white supremacy, and settler colonialism in North America. The claim that the Frankfurt School essentially “fooled” Black Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, women, and LGBTQ+ people into resisting and questioning systems of oppression invalidates the collective agency, consciousness, and lived experiences of these groups. Those who protest this inequality are not refusing to accept the “natural” superiority of Western Civilization, but, rather, attempting to transform the man-made conditions that limit their lives. Lind’s hope for a return to pre-1960s (or pre-Frankfurt School) America reveals a desire to restore the traditional hierarchies that secured these racial and gender divides. Like Bolsonaro and his supporters, Lind claims that these “minorities” must succumb to a “natural” order that sustains the power of the “majority.” Strikingly, Lind’s ideas, especially his

narratives of Cultural Marxism, stem from the same colonial modes of thinking that inform the ideological discourses of the Brazilian New Right. Their common mission of defending an idealized vision of Western Civilization—an inheritance of coloniality—reveals how Cultural Marxism could become a shared ideological tool for right-wing activists and intellectuals in the United States and Brazil.

There is a growing body of scholarship that identifies the colonial assumptions that unite the transnational Right in Brazil and the United States. In his numerous books and articles, the historian Benjamin Cowan examines Brazil's role as "one of several critical *loci* in the gestation and organization of the New Right as a transnational phenomenon" (Cowan 2018, 3). During the mid-twentieth-century, Brazilian conservatives founded and participated in organizations, such as Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP), International Policy Forum, and the World Anticommunist League, that forged connections between right-wing activists around the world to combat the "threat of global Marxism, moral dissolution, and modernism" (Cowan 2018, 3). For instance, Paul Weyrich, a prominent New Right organizer in the United States and propagator of the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory (as well as a friend and colleague of Lind), maintained close ties with Brazilian conservatives and regarded the TFP as an important ally in the fight to defend traditional Christian culture. As Cowan observes, Brazilian right-wingers "saw themselves as part of a series of global struggles for the soul not only of the country, but of the West and the world" (Cowan 2021, 9). The belief that Brazil is part of this battle to preserve Western "Christian" civilization continues to animate the ideologies and arguments of the Brazilian New Right.

In his 2021 book *Brazil, Land of the Past*, Georg Wink emphasizes the continuities between Bolsonarismo and the history of Brazilian conservative thought. Wink argues that many Brazilian right-wingers praise Brazil's "natural" order—the sole true version of Brazilianness—without acknowledging that this social hierarchy stems from "a highly artificial and purely man-made historical colonization process" (Wink 2021, 273). The Brazilian Right tends to portray any social reform or cultural change that challenges these hierarchies as a sign of moral corruption and subversion, rather than an expression of genuine political interests. As this "natural" order results from Brazil's history as a colony and slave economy, Wink theorizes that "being conservative in Brazil means in the end, inevitably, preserving [the] structures of coloniality" (Wink 2021, 29).

Similarly, Gabriela Segura-Ballar points out that a common element of the transnational Right in the Americas is the conviction that "Western Civilization" needs to be defended (Segura-Ballar 2021). Right-wing politicians in Brazil and elsewhere have deployed the notion of "Western values" to legitimate authoritarian and neoliberalizing processes that protect certain "naturalized" social relations. Damares Regina Alves, Bolsonaro's former

secretary of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights, helped to create the project “Municipality Friend of the Family” that sought to “implement actions that value the family, social protection and the strengthening of conjugal bonds” and exclude non-heterosexual families and single mothers (Torre 2022). Furthermore, Bolsonaro’s administration defunded affirmative action initiatives from 37.2 million reais per year to 2.7 million reais, as well as illegally transferred responsibility for the demarcation of territories to the Ministry of Agriculture to legalize mining on indigenous territories (Valente 2022). Bolsonaro and his supporters insist that such acts are necessary to combat the influence of globalist elites who have apparently weakened Brazilians’ ties to Western “Christian” civilization. As part of this fight against globalism, Eduardo Bolsonaro—one of Bolsonaro’s sons and a Federal deputy for the state of São Paulo—became the South American representative of “The Movement,” a transnational organization founded by Donald Trump’s former chief strategist Stephen Bannon in 2019 to combat Cultural Marxism and defend the values of Western Civilization. The younger Bolsonaro has become a major figure in the transnational Right through multiple appearances at the American Conservative Union’s Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) events in Brazil (the first CPAC in Brazil occurred in 2019), the United States, Hungary, and Mexico.

When we elucidate the colonial and transnational dimensions of the New Right, it becomes clear that *Marxismo Cultural* is not solely a response to recent events in Brazilian politics, such as redemocratization in 1988 or even the Workers’ Party victory in 2002. In fact, it belongs to a broader civilizational discourse that unites the transnational right in the Americas (as well as, arguably, Europe and Australasia) around the shared mission of defending Western culture. Although one must not treat the political Right as a homogenous force, a “Western Civilizationism” forms the common ideological ground on which *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism can function as a transnational conspiracy theory. The main features of this Western Civilizationism include a portrayal of “the West” as superior to other cultures (and, thus, justified in its history of colonialism and Eurocentrism), a tendency to see social inequalities as natural, and a demonization of any attempt to address or even acknowledge historical and ongoing injustices. In the rest of this chapter, I analyze how the Brazilian New Right’s output on *Marxismo Cultural* links conservative national politics to wider civilizational discourses.

Marxismo Cultural

Like many classic right-wing conspiracy theories, *Marxismo Cultural* follows the logic of scapegoating. In her discussion of *Bolsonarismo*, Solano argues that Bolsonaro and his allies use this narrative to transform “fear, insecurity, anger, frustration within the poor classes but also among the increasingly

impoverished among middle classes, into political hatred” (Solano 2021, 213). As she puts it, *Marxismo Cultural* rests on “the mystification of a more existentially secure past where the old social hierarchies ordered the world” (Solano 2021, 213). Instead of offering structural explanations for shrinking living standards and major cultural changes, they accuse a nefarious and nebulous enemy—Cultural Marxists—of orchestrating a project to undermine Brazilian society. According to this narrative, the forces of *Marxismo Cultural* took over cultural institutions to spread false propaganda about racial and gender inequality in Brazil. As part of this “long march through the institutions” (a strategy wrongly attributed to Antonio Gramsci, the supposed grandfather of *Marxismo Cultural*), Cultural Marxists apparently use the schools to indoctrinate young children and force them to adopt queer identities and sexualities. This component of the *Marxismo Cultural* conspiracy theory refers to the then-Education Minister Fernando Haddad’s effort in 2011 to launch an initiative to distribute educational materials in schools to combat homophobia and discrimination. Bolsonaro himself played an instrumental role in blocking this measure, which he derided as a “gay kit,” and portrayed it as a threat to traditional family values (Assis and Ogando 2018). Although LGBTQ+ people in Brazil experience an extremely high level of harassment and violence, the *Marxismo Cultural* conspiracy theory presents any attempt to acknowledge or tackle this prejudice as part of an inherently anti-Brazilian plot. Ultimately, the narrative of *Marxismo Cultural* naturalizes violence and discrimination against “minorities” who are blamed for not accepting their place in the “natural” social order of Brazil (which, in turn, allows the New Right to claim that pre-1988 Brazilian society was the expression of true Brazilianness).

Undoubtedly, Carvalho was the most prominent and influential proponent of *Marxismo Cultural* in Brazil. Although he refused to identify as either “conservative” or “right-wing,” he embraced the label “anti-communist.” In fact, as João Cezar de Castro Rocha points out, Carvalho’s anti-*Marxismo Cultural* positions often built on the existing frameworks of anti-communist scapegoating in Brazil’s military, especially the contents of the anonymous army report *Orvil* (Rocha 2021). As a mainstream journalist in the 1990s and 2000s, Carvalho penned a series of acerbic articles and books that would shape the Brazilian New Right’s narrative of *Marxismo Cultural*.

As early as his 1994 polemical article “The Collective Idiot: Bandits and Scholars,” Carvalho had positioned himself as a lone crusader who would expose the hidden communist impulses that animated Brazil’s post-dictatorship intelligentsia (Carvalho 1996). In this article, he writes that left-wing intellectuals were responsible for rising crime rates, because they romanticized banditry and vilified the police and army. He traces their apparent infatuation with criminality to a 1933 document from the Comintern to the Brazilian Communist Party that encouraged leftist intellectuals to glorify

crime as a form of class struggle. Even when a journalist or academic merely acknowledges the sociological causes of crime, they are—as far as Carvalho is concerned—furthering a communist agenda. This theme of exposing the veiled communist proclivities of Brazil’s intelligentsia would become a persistent refrain of Carvalho’s writings.

His 1994 book *The New Age and Cultural Revolution* identifies Gramscianism, which is often used as a cognate of *Marxismo Cultural*, as the subversive intellectual force that had steadily turned Brazil into a so-called communist regime. According to Carvalho, this Gramscianism does not “rely so much on rational persuasion to propagate itself as on the effectiveness of a subtle penetration into the unconscious of the masses” (Carvalho 1994). Carvalho argues that the Brazilian intelligentsia—journalists, filmmakers, musicians, psychologists—are the agents of this Gramscian cultural revolution. They convert people into communists through “millions of small alterations” to common sense—a “brainwashing on a vast scale” (Carvalho 1994). Carvalho warns that, even if people have never heard of Gramsci, they may have still absorbed mental attitudes that advance a Gramscian hegemony. They may have abandoned established truths and moral codes to embrace a more relativistic outlook that passively accepts whatever opinion currently counts as “progressive.”

Carvalho argues that this cultural revolution serves as the precondition for the PT’s communist takeover of Brazil. Although it is undebatable that some PT intellectuals, such as Carlos Nelson Coutinho, drew on Gramsci’s writings to inform the party’s reformist strategy, it is much more debatable whether the PT is properly Gramscian or whether Carvalho’s account of Gramscianism is even accurate. Yet, these issues of categorization matter little to Carvalho because he counts anything that deviates from a specific vision of Brazil as Gramscian or communist. For Carvalho, Gramscianism is *everywhere*. Indeed, what is even more insidious about this style of Marxism (from Carvalho’s perspective) is that nobody knows that the communist revolution is already happening in Brazil. Gramscianism has become a kind of conspiracy that no longer needs conspirators. These corrosive ideas have successfully sunk into the collective unconscious and eroded the moral norms that supported the cultural order of Brazil. The vagueness of this conspiracy suggest that the Brazilian people need someone like Carvalho just to tell them the difference between what is “true” and what is “Gramscian.” Consequently, Carvalho can present himself as a guru whose “anti-communist” critique rests on a deeper wisdom that remains inaccessible to most people (and resistant to external critique or “debunking”).

In 2002, Carvalho built on these earlier arguments to propose his own notion of *Marxismo Cultural*. He wrote an op-ed in *O Globo* that describes *Marxismo Cultural* as “the predominant influence in Western universities, media, and publishing” (Carvalho 2002). As he puts it, the Frankfurt School

classified Western culture as a “disease” that needed to be cured. The sole aim of Critical Theory, according to Carvalho, was the destruction of Western culture and religious faith. Carvalho estimates that nearly every novel, film, and textbook in contemporary Brazil is contributing to this assault on the West. His conception of a pervasive Cultural Marxist hegemony in Brazil led Carvalho to reflect on the need for a political force that could rescue the “natural” Brazilian order.

In the 2000s, Carvalho established alternative institutions to combat the apparent dominance of *Marxismo Cultural* in the media and the universities. He founded the blog *Media Without Mask* in 2002 to publish articles that disputed the so-called hegemonic leftism of Brazilian newspapers and television shows. He started an online seminar series called *Seminário De Filosofia*, where he claims to provide students with the knowledge that will help them to overcome the political correctness of Brazil’s mainstream intellectuals. As Wink observes, the series was intended to “form single-handedly a new generation of ‘intellectuals’” who could function as *multipliers* of “Carvalho’s truth” (Wink 2021, 193). Not only does this Olavist intelligentsia include members of Bolsonaro’s cabinet, but also the creators of the New Right media company Brasil Paralelo.

Brasil Paralelo (BP) was founded in 2016 to produce revisionist documentaries about Brazil’s history. Their 2017 series, *Brazil: The Last Crusade*, praised the Reconquista and represented Portuguese conquest and colonialism as the unchanging essence of the Brazilian nation. Under Bolsonaro’s administration, the Ministry of Education broadcast these documentaries during prime time on the state channel TV Escola. In 2018, BP expanded its operations to include a paid subscription service (referred to as a “Training Center”) that included hundreds of interviews with right-wing intellectuals, as well as a growing list of online courses that covered such subjects as philosophy, political science, and economics. As of 2022, BP had gained a following of roughly 276,100 paid subscribers (one of whom is allegedly Bolsonaro himself) and over 3,000,000 YouTube subscribers. Wink describes BP as likely the “most successful cultural agent of the New Right,” especially for its popularization of Carvalho’s ideas (Wink 2021, 249).

In 2019, BP released a documentary entitled *1964: Between Weapons and Books* (which, as of April 2023, has received over 10,000,000 views) that advanced a revisionist interpretation of Brazil’s military dictatorship. The film features interviews with an array of “experts” (which almost exclusively consisted of white males) who claim to reveal the unknown “truth” about the 1964 military coup, which has long been “suppressed” by Cultural Marxists in Brazilian universities. As Wink points out, these “conveniently selected” intellectuals share an attitude of animosity and oppositionality toward the major institutions of knowledge production (Wink 2021, 251). BP frames their interviewees as “free of any ideological bias” solely because their

insights contradict the “mainstream” view of Brazilian history, as though this oppositionality was entirely non-political (Wink 2021, 250). Whereas such prominent Brazilian historians as Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta argue that the 1964 coup was unjustified and that the threat of an imminent communist takeover was over-exaggerated, BP’s experts insist that the military was “forced” to intervene to prevent the center-left government of João Goulart from turning Brazil into a communist society (Motta 2020). From 1964 onward, the military was “compelled” to enforce repressive measures to counter anti-regime guerilla fighters. Although contemporary historians portray these dissidents as pro-democracy forces who were struggling against an authoritarian government, *1964* asserts the military was protecting the Brazilian people from an international communist plot. As the guerilla fighters could not successfully resist the military in armed combat, they resorted to a strategy of “cultural warfare” (the titular shift from weapons to books).

Building on Carvalho’s earlier arguments, the documentary identifies Georg Lukács, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School as the architects of a Cultural Marxist offensive against the foundations of Western Civilization: “Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Judeo-Christian religion” (Brasil Paralelo 2019). In Brazil, this attack on Western values took the form of resistance to the military regime and critique of traditional hierarchies. This “new way of thinking” was spread through the universities, schools, and the media to alter the mentality of the Brazilian youth (Brasil Paralelo 2019). Those who complain about “sexism, racism, and homophobia,” according to the right-wing author Flávio Morgenstein (who was interviewed in *1964* and other BP documentaries), are conscious or unwitting agents in this conspiratorial plan to sever Brazil’s deep ties to Western Civilization (Brasil Paralelo 2019). Like Lind, BP and its experts present any criticism of discrimination or oppression as part of a long-running communist conspiracy against the “natural” and “superior” Western cultural order.

1964 exhibits several of the features that Michael Butter identifies as key to the form of the conspiracy documentary. As Butter writes, these films “seek above all to overwhelm their audiences” (Butter 2020, 46). The pace of *1964* bombards the viewer with details that are often taken out of context. (For example, the notion that Lukács wanted to destroy Western Civilization derives from a decontextualized quotation from the 1962 preface to his text *The Theory of the Novel*.) Although one could always pause and rewind certain parts of *1964* on YouTube, this is not how most people normally consume films. Non-skeptical viewers may simply absorb the claims from the seemingly knowledgeable and authoritative interviewees as the documentary unfolds. Furthermore, the use of aesthetic techniques, such as a relentless soundtrack and rhythmic montage, establishes a certain degree of formal coherence, even though BP’s argument is not always logically coherent or factually correct. The strategic role of the voiceover, as Butter notes in his

analysis of conspiracy films, is “to explain what the viewer is seeing, or is intended to see; to make connections; and to integrate it all into the bigger picture” (Butter 2020, 47). These devices contribute to BP’s packaging of a conspiratorial interpretation of those who criticize the military dictatorship or Brazil’s long history of inequality.

In addition to 1964, BP offers an “educational” article on its website that outlines the history of the Frankfurt School to enhance their followers’ knowledge of *Marxismo Cultural* in Brazil. The article contains several intriguing factual inaccuracies, such as the labeling of Kant as a “Marxist” thinker. Furthermore, it suggests that the sole purpose of the Frankfurt School was “to study Western Civilization to understand how to destroy it” (Brasil Paralelo 2023). In this article, BP denies the reality of racial and gender inequality (with references to “so-called patriarchal oppression”) and praises Western Civilization as unambiguously good. The use of anti-*Marxismo Cultural* narratives in BP’s products serves to represent the Brazilian New Right as defenders of Western Civilization. They equip their viewers and subscribers with a set of terms—*Marxismo Cultural*, Gramscianism, etc.—that they can use to delegitimize social criticism or protest. Moreover, BP’s Western Civilizationism positions Brazil as a battleground in a transnational struggle against the forces of globalism.

These civilizational themes are also present in the writings of Bolsonaro’s former foreign minister Ernesto Araújo (whom Carvalho recommended for the role). Araújo is somewhat well-known for his belief that Cultural Marxists fabricated the idea of “climate change” to weaken Western economies and protect China’s interests (Watts 2018). In his 2017 text “Trump and the West,” Araújo argues that Brazil is part of Western Civilization. He defines the West as a “community of nations” that shares a deep cultural affinity (quoted in Waller 2019). As he analyzes a speech that Donald Trump delivered in Warsaw in 2017, Araújo proposes that Western countries should embrace pan-nationalistic politics to defend themselves from the forces of Cultural Marxism. Building on the thoughts of Oswald Spengler and Julius Evola, he states that cultural values can exist only within the context of the nation. There is no such thing as humanity or universal rights, only national peoples and values. For Araújo, the Brazilian State’s endeavors to protect the rights of women, LGBTQ+ people, and indigenous communities undermine the values of Brazil’s “natural” order. Like Bolsonaro, he subordinates all other versions of Brazilianness to a single and homogenous vision of the “true” Brazil. Furthermore, he theorizes that the “pan-nationalism” of the transnational Right serves to maintain the foundations of Western Civilization from which these feelings of national identity and cultural belonging spring.

Araújo contends that Cultural Marxists want to cut Brazil’s Western roots. He considers the so-called “dilution” of gender and national sentiment as stages in the Cultural Marxist plan “to weaken the human being. . . into a pliable paçoca (crumbly Brazilian candy) that is unable to resist the power of

the state” (quoted in Waller 2019). His portrayal of *Marxismo Cultural* ties together the themes of the nation, the family, and the West. The rhetorical defense of “Western values” supports the use of authoritarian and neoliberalizing practices to undermine the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people who may not conform to the New Right’s vision of Brazil.

In a 2019 article for the American paleoconservative literary magazine *The New Criterion*, Araújo declares that Bolsonaro’s electoral victory marks the downfall of PT’s Cultural Marxism. According to Araújo, the PT enforced a “globalist” agenda that caused “the promotion of gender ideology,” “the humiliation of Christians,” and “the displacement of parents by the government as the provider of ‘values’ to children” (Araújo 2019, 37). Araújo re-frames the PT’s educational and judicial efforts to end discrimination against LGBTQ+ groups—the famous 2013 “gay kit” controversy—as a deliberate assault on the traditional Christian family. The inclusion of Araújo’s article in an American conservative publication suggests this discourse on *Marxismo Cultural*/Cultural Marxism reflects what is understood as a broader civilizational mission to defend a reactionary notion of Western tradition.

In 2022, Araújo followed the example of his mentor Carvalho and launched his own online course on “globalism” (Cantanhêde 2022). For the price of 500 reais, Araújo promised to teach his students about the ideas that have led to contemporary societal and geopolitical crises, such as war and inflation. Once these students have been equipped with this knowledge, Araújo claims that they will be better able to participate in the civilizational mission of restoring the Western essence of the Brazilian nation.

Under the Bolsonaro administration, this civilizational mission often took the form of policies that aimed to tackle the alleged scourge of “Marxist” indoctrination in Brazilian schools and universities. In April 2019, the then-Education Minister Abraham Weintraub threatened to divert funding from sociology and philosophy university departments to disciplines such as engineering and medicine that would offer an “immediate return” to the taxpayer (Woods 2019b). Critics of this policy claimed that Weintraub sought to defund sociology and philosophy departments because he assumes that they are hotbeds for *Marxismo Cultural*. Several days later, Weintraub declared a 30 percent budget cut for all federal universities. Commentators pointed out that these funding cuts were part of a larger campaign to undermine and demoralize resistance to the Bolsonaro regime. Weintraub hoped that these cuts would discourage federal universities from hosting political organizations such as the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) on their campuses. Yet, Brazilian students and teachers refused to tolerate Weintraub’s assault on university education. In response to Weintraub’s proposed funding cuts, mass protests took place in over 200 cities across the country, described as “education tsunamis” (Woods 2019b). These instances of protest demonstrate that many Brazilians do not believe that progressive ideas are part of a malignant Marxist conspiracy.

Conclusion

In their essay on indigenous rights and resistance in Bolsonaro's Brazil, Taily Terena et al. observe that "from an indigenous perspective[,] there is far *less* rupture between the present and the past than many would care to admit" (Terena et al. 2021, 209). As they phrase it, the problems and struggles of indigenous populations in Brazil "began to accumulate not with elections or impeachment, but with the European invasion of our territories in April 1500" (Terena et al. 2021, 209). The Brazilian New Right's narratives of *Marxismo Cultural* are not divorced from these longer histories of colonialism and coloniality. The films of BP and the writings of Carvalho and Araújo exhibit a Western Civilizationism that naturalizes and mystifies any mistreatment or oppression of Brazil's so-called minorities. The forces of *Marxismo Cultural*, according to these figures, are simply fabricating lies to denigrate the purity and superiority of Western Civilization.

In a certain sense, *Marxismo Cultural* functions as an expression of what the theorist Rodrigo Nunes calls *denialism*. In his deft and wide-ranging dissection of Bolsonarismo, Nunes suggests that the ideology of the Brazilian New Right feeds into "the state we describe as 'being in denial'—an unconscious attempt to protect oneself from a traumatic experience or thought by refusing to recognize its reality, or what Freud called 'disavowal'" (Nunes 2020, 12). Of course, the Covid-19 denial, election denial, and climate change denial of Bolsonaro and his supporters are well-documented. Yet, the civilizational discourse of *Marxismo Cultural* fosters a much deeper mode of denialism. Not only does this discourse allow people to perceive the enormous inequality of Brazil's social structure as "natural," but it also relieves them of any responsibility for changing or even confronting it. Instead of acknowledging the need to address racial, gender, and class inequality, they can claim that these "differences" are merely ineradicable features of Brazil's "natural" order. This is the basis for the use of *Marxismo Cultural* as an ideological tool for the transnational right. This civilizational discourse promotes cooperation between the nodes of the transnational right as they regard themselves as the defenders of a besieged and faultless Western Civilization.

Why has the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory become such a persistent feature of right-wing populism in Brazil and elsewhere? Although I agree with Mark Fenster's classic thesis that conspiracy theory is a *non-necessary* element of populist politics, I propose that this specific brand of right-wing populism—civilizationism—relies heavily (if not, intrinsically) on conspiracist modes of explanation (Fenster 2008, 84). As Butter notes, populism and conspiracy theory often display an "inherent conservatism" as they express a nostalgia for an idealized past (Butter 2020, 119). The promise of defending and restoring "Western Civilization" implies a political project of reasserting the status of certain groups—predominantly white, male, and affluent—who

may feel culturally displaced by the expansion of civil rights for racial minorities, women, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ communities. The proponents of civilizationism must blame a specific set of elites—academics, NGOs, feminists, and so on—for undermining the “way of life” that “the People” once enjoyed. Conspiracy theory, especially in its postural rejection of mainstream and academic information, can function as a tool of anti-elitist critique that rejects the knowledge produced in established institutions. The Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory, in particular, allows the advocates of Western Civilizationism to ignore the research and reporting on the historic and ongoing atrocities that stemmed from the exclusionary and extractive logics of coloniality. Consequently, the narrative of Cultural Marxism works as a useful ideological tool of anti-elitist denialism in various countries where the forces of transnational right are contesting a new reckoning over the legacies of colonialism (the United States, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere).

Figuring out whether *Marxismo Cultural* is simply a Brazilian adaptation of an American idea or the expression of a wider civilizational discourse is an urgent theoretical and political question. It is possible that we may need to rethink our existing histories of the Cultural Marxism conspiracy theory. We may find that Cultural Marxism has less to do with, as initially thought, reacting to 1960s radicalism and counterculture in the United States and more to do with defending a conception of “Western Civilization” that remains tied to the legacies of coloniality and white supremacy. And we may find that combating the political forces that deploy the narrative of Cultural Marxism has less to do with defeating these specific forces and more to do with dismantling the enduring structures of heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and coloniality that produce them.

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12

ON THE ELECTIVE AFFINITY BETWEEN POST-MARXISM, LEFT-WING POPULISM, AND CONSPIRACIST WORLDVIEWS

Helge Petersen and Hannah Hecker

Introduction

It might be an exaggeration to state that we are currently living in an “era” of conspiracy theory and post-truth (see Bowler and Davis 2018; Connolly et al. 2019; d’Ancona 2017; Harambam et al. 2022; McIntyre 2018). Such an over-emphasis on the contemporary moment loses sight of the centuries-old history of conspiracist discourse and politics that has encompassed at least the entire modern epoch and was especially prevalent during the early to mid-twentieth century (see Butter 2020, 91–120). But there is no doubt that the past decade of intensifying and multiplying socio-economic, political, ecological, and health crises has provided new fertile ground for the popular belief in the existence of malevolent forces and their secret machinations to increase their wealth and power at the cost of the rest of the world. Most significantly, with the emergence of denialist protest movements in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the growing and ongoing electoral and governmental influence of far-right parties of the past years, conspiracy theories have increasingly entered the mainstream public stage (see Bar-On and Molas 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2020).

One of the main themes that has figured prominently in academic and political debates about the popularity of conspiracy theories is the impact of populism (see Bergmann 2018; Castanho Silva et al. 2017; Hamelers 2020; Schiebel 2022). However, these debates are still characterized by various limitations. Most notably, while the relationship between right-wing populism and conspiracism has been the main focus of inquiry, the specific role of left-wing populism has not received major attention yet. This is surprising if one takes into consideration that there is a distinct tradition of left-wing

antisemitism which, like any other political manifestation of antisemitism, entails in its center conspiracy theories about the secret influence and malign intentions of Jewish people (see Fine and Spencer 2017; Hirsh 2018; Postone 2006; Rensmann 2019; Voigt 2013). Another aspect that deserves more attention is the specific role of public intellectuals as a source of inspiration for populist movements and parties as well as their contribution to reproducing conspiracy theories within these (see Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022, 207–46). Such an engagement with the influence of conspiracist worldviews within intellectual and academic milieus can help to overcome the popular misinterpretation and trivialization of conspiracism as a “lunatic fringe” phenomenon that that, if anything, has an influence on discourses of the extreme right, but does not extend to the “respectable” parts of public discourse in contemporary democracies. It thus raises more complex questions about the social and political origins of conspiracism that go beyond simplistic references to “pathological behaviour” or “lack of education.” In this contribution, we will examine the relationship between populist and conspiracist worldviews, using the example of the collaborative work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

It is no exaggeration to say that Ernesto Laclau, until his untimely death in 2014, and Chantal Mouffe have established themselves as the most influential “organic intellectuals” (see Gramsci 1971, 5–23) of contemporary left-wing populist movements and parties. Ranging from first their early career (Laclau 1977) to more extensive contributions in the past two decades (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018), Laclau and Mouffe have dedicated large parts of their writings to the conceptual clarification and normative justification of populist politics, in particular in its left-wing variants. They have thus become leading intellectual voices in contemporary attempts to recover the distinction between “the people” and “the elite” as a mode of left-wing political organization and mobilization. The theoretical background against which they develop their model of populist politics is what they call post-Marxism: Seeking to leave behind the economism, class reductionism, historical determinism, and anti-humanism of the Marxist tradition, post-Marxism highlights the significance of politics and discourse as the primary terrains of social conflict and historical change. While this paradigm is still inspired by Marxist political theorists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci, it goes beyond Marxist thinking insofar as it radically rejects the assumption that economic relations have a determining impact on social and political life (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 65–75).

Laclau and Mouffe’s model of left-wing populism has already become the subject of much criticism. While Marxist authors have pointed to the lack of capitalism- and class-theoretical perspectives (see Boucher 2008, 93–108; Wood 1998; Žižek 2006, 2008, 305–33), left-liberal authors have identified anti-democratic tendencies in their notion of political mobilization

and leadership (see Arato 2013; Cohen 2019; Müller 2016). The role of conspiracist thinking in Laclau and Mouffe's work, however, has not been a major cause for concern within this critical debate. What is more, those few authors who do touch upon this problem tend to bifurcate between downplaying (e.g., Müller 2016, 122) or exaggerating it (e.g., Žižek 2006, 557).

In the following, we set out to provide a more nuanced critique of the relation between post-Marxism, left-wing populism, and conspiracist worldviews. Our main argument is that this relation is neither entirely exclusive nor entirely identical, but follows the logic of what Max Weber calls "elective affinities" (Weber 2011, 171, translation by the authors). In his seminal work on the origins of modern capitalism, Weber demonstrated that Protestant milieus became a "powerful ally" (25) in establishing capitalist social relations because their belief system was to a considerable extent compatible with the ethical demands of the emerging "spirit of capitalism." Thus, Weber demonstrated that Protestant asceticism and capitalist entrepreneurship did not have to be entirely identical in order to mutually reinforce each other. All that was necessary were certain overlaps in the structure of their respective worldviews (Weber 2001, 3–38; see also Löwy 2004; McKinnon 2010; Thomas 1985). Similarly, we set out to demonstrate that while Laclau and Mouffe are not affiliated to conspiracist milieus and do not engage in propagating conspiracy theories, there are key elements of the post-Marxist model of left-wing populism that overlap with the ideological structure of conspiracist worldviews. In this chapter, then, it is not our intention to claim that Laclau and Mouffe are conspiracy theorists. Instead, we set out to develop the thesis that their model of populism contributes to laying out the fertile ground on which conspiracy theories can flourish.

We will begin with some conceptual and theoretical reflections that delineate the outlines of a critical-materialist social psychological approach to the study of conspiracist worldviews that is inspired by the works of the early *Institute for Social Research (ISR)*. We will then move on to reconstructing Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist model of left-wing populism and evaluating the extent to which this model shows affinities to conspiracism. We will conclude with an examination of a conversation between Mouffe and Íñigo Errejón, then chief strategist of the Spanish party *Podemos*, which provides further insights into the ambivalent relationship between post-Marxism, left-wing populism, and conspiracist worldviews.

The Core Elements of Conspiracist Worldviews

A key precondition for adopting more nuanced approaches is to overcome misleading distinctions between a small minority of those who promote full-fledged conspiracism and a great majority of those who do not (see Fenster 2008, 1–2). Such an assumption is usually based on a notion

of “full-fledged ideologies” (Arendt 1973, 159), that is, monolithic belief systems that can only be accepted or rejected as a whole. However, as Arendt highlights, such full-fledged ideologies are only the last phase of a process of ideological radicalization that begins much earlier and extends “far beyond the boundaries” (159) of the social and political milieus which have already reached that last phase. Against this background, Arendt (460–73), as well as other authors such as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, 137–72) or, more recently, Martin Reisl and Ruth Wodak (2001) suggest to analyze political ideologies as configurations of different “elements” which emerge separately from each other, but show a tendency to fuse into a coherent whole.

In their analysis of the “elements of antisemitism,” for instance, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories is underpinned by a set of dispositions that are integral components of the everyday and political culture of contemporary societies, ranging from the moralization and personalization of capitalist social relations to more general attitudes such as anti-intellectualism, stereotypical thinking and the tendency to falsely project one’s own aggressive tendencies onto others (2002, 137–72; see also Adorno et al. 2017, 188–210). In the literature on the social dissemination of conspiracism, such a perspective has been taken up to provide a more nuanced analysis of the different forms and degrees of affinity to a conspiracist worldview. As various studies have shown, the problem of conspiracism cannot be reduced to those who wholeheartedly believe in conspiracy theories, but also needs to be extended to a much more complex matrix of social and political milieus in which some elements are shared (see for example Dilling et al. 2022). For the critical analysis of conspiracism, this has two consequences: First, the belief in conspiracy theories already begins with the belief in some of its core elements. Second, the belief in some of these core elements can be much more widespread than the belief in the full-fledged conspiracy theories to which they contribute. These consequences are also important for the “supply side” of conspiracism: The analysis of the political dissemination of conspiracist worldviews cannot be reduced to the tight-knit milieus of conspiracy theorists, but also needs to engage with those political actors that do not explicitly promote full-fledged conspiracy theories, but nonetheless reproduce some of their core narratives.

In the academic debate about conspiracy theories, there is widespread agreement that they consist of a distinct set of core elements. Drawing on different contributions to the conceptualization of conspiracy theories (see Barkun 2013; Butter 2020; Cubitt 1989; Eco 2021; Fenster 2008; Knight 2000), our assessment of the conspiracist tendencies within post-Marxist left-wing populism will draw on the following core elements of *conspiracist worldviews*: First, a personalized notion of society and history that dismisses the possibility of chance and the significance of structural processes; second, a notion of secretive and illegal power that beliefs in the existence

of powerful agents who operate “in the dark” and avoid the existing set of rules and norms; third, a Manichaeian worldview that reduces the complexity of modern social relations to a clear-cut antagonism between a small group of omnipotent “conspirators” and their powerless “victims”; and fourth, a pseudo-revolutionary promise of salvation that invokes fantasies about the violent abolishment of the conspiracy. Against this background, *conspiracy theories* can be defined as an assumption about “a covertly operating group of people – the conspirators – who seek, from base motives and by underhand means, to achieve a certain end” (Butter 2020, 9).

Such a multifaceted conceptual approach is an important starting point to shed light on the complex relation between conspiracism and adjacent ideological configurations such as populism. For it allows to examine reciprocal affinities that are situated in the gray zone between full identity and complete difference. At the same time, however, it remains at a descriptive level that illuminates neither why people believe in those different elements, nor why the belief in one element makes them prone to believe in other elements. Thus, what is also required is an explanatory approach that sheds light on the social attractivity of each core element of modern conspiracy theories. At this point, however, the contemporary scholarly debate is still characterized by significant limitations. While there are rich studies about the different ideological manifestations of conspiracism, there is a tendency to lose sight of the specific relation between anti-elitist conspiracism and the dynamics of capitalist modernity, especially since the global expansion of capitalist social relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For instance, Cubitt explores the changing pattern of conspiracy thinking in the transformation period from absolutism to modernity, but his characterization of that transition period as a “period of ambiguity and uncertainty” (2013, 108) is not explored in great depth. Other authors even tend to fall back onto ahistorical explanatory frameworks.¹ This includes the work of Eco who in his otherwise insightful reconstruction of the historical emergence of conspiracy theories comes to the conclusion that the underlying motivation for the belief in them is that “. . . we search our entire life for a story of our origin that tells us why we were born” (2021, 69, translated by the authors). Another example is Fenster’s study of conspiracism which works with a Lacanian notion of psychoanalysis that leads the author in the direction of ahistorical reflections about the relationship between desire and knowledge. In this sense, conspiracism is defined as an “obsessive desire for information” within “a social and political order where power seems always elsewhere” (2008, 96) but fails to reveal its true meaning. What is not discussed, however, is what motivates this desire in the first place, that is, why the social and political order appears to be opaque and intransparent.

In light of these limitations, we suggest to draw on the theoretical approach developed by the early ISR, in particular the social-psychological

studies of fascism and authoritarianism which also entail reflections upon the social and political attractivity of conspiracist worldviews (Adorno 1982, 2017; Adorno et al. 2017; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; Horkheimer 2013; Löwenthal and Guterman 1949). What makes these studies valuable is their attempt to decipher conspiracy theories as specific strategies of ideologically displacing and politically exploiting vague feelings of displeasure and suffering that proliferate under the conditions of modern-capitalist societalization (see Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022, 56, 64; Gess 2021; Henkelmann et al. 2020, 14). In this sense, these works provide important insights today for understanding what is attractive to individuals about authoritarian thinking and behavior, without falling back onto ahistorical or pathologizing explanatory frameworks.

Their overarching explanatory framework entails the following four aspects (see also Petersen and Hecker 2022; Petersen and Struwe 2022): First, the early ISR researchers begin with a reflection on the social and political relations of domination and coercion constitutive of the modern epoch. Informed by the Marxian critique of political economy, they highlight that what distinguishes modernity from feudalism is the existence of competitive and bureaucratic principles of labor extraction, resource allocation, and power distribution which reproduce themselves anonymously, that is, beyond the will and influence of individual actors who are forced to operate within their parameters.² The exchange-based production, distribution, and concentration of wealth, for instance, allows a certain degree of individual autonomy and participation, but also makes it impossible to grasp, let alone control, the results of one's individual acts at the macro-level. The ironic result is that the social whole appears to acquire a "life of its own" that serves to reproduce the social whole rather than to fulfill individual needs.

Second, based on an engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis and social psychology, they analyze how these heteronomous imperatives restrain and damage the ability to fulfill one's individual needs and make autonomous decisions. This problem diagnosis entails two aspects. On the one hand, it is argued that societies mediated by the "the all-encompassing exchange-relationship" (Adorno 2002b, 173) put people under constant pressure to secure their material conditions of existence in a constant struggle with potential competitors and in accordance with institutionalized disciplinary mechanisms. This turns the life of most people who are dependent on the valorization of their labor force into a precarious endeavor that also damages their self-perception as independent, autonomous individuals. As Adorno puts it, they are confronted with "the characteristic modern conflict between a strongly developed rational, self-preserving ego agency and the continuous failure to satisfy their own ego demands" (1982, 126). On the other hand, even the successful realization of such a self-preserving ego agency does not come without experiences of suffering. For the more time one is forced to

dedicate one's life to work, the more one is forced to repress one's individual needs and desires.

Third, these studies explore the difficulties and dilemmas that people are confronted with in their attempts to make sense of their desperate living conditions. The main argument here is that it is exactly because of their heteronomous and anonymous character that modern relations of domination and coercion are difficult to grasp intellectually. However, the reason is not that people simply lack intellectual capacities, but rather that they have been socialized within a highly selective regime of knowledge production that prioritizes specialized professional knowledge³ over the ability to critically reflect on underlying processes of social reproduction and historical transformation on a global scale (see Horkheimer 2002). In other words, there is a structurally imposed discrepancy between what is experienced in everyday life and which interpretative and explanatory repertoires are available to make sense of these experiences. What is more, there is the danger of a psychological resistance to overcoming this discrepancy. For, as Adorno argues, “. . . if the *status quo* is taken for granted and petrified, a much greater effort is needed to see through it than to adjust to it and obtain at least some gratification through identification with the existent. . . ” (1982, 134–35).

However, while modern subjects cannot escape their experiences of power- and helplessness within a heteronomous social reality, they can still develop different ways of intellectually and practically responding to these experiences. As Adorno et al. observe in the introduction to the *Studies in the Authoritarian Personality*, “[e]ven when individuals are exposed during their formative years almost exclusively to a single, closely knit pattern of political, economic, social, and religious ideas, it is found that some conform while others rebel. . . ” (2017, 161). Thus, what can be found in the works of the early ISR are various attempts to distinguish between different subjective responses to those objective societal relations. It is not possible here to provide a detailed discussion of the different typological frameworks that have been developed in the context of the early ISR, such as Adorno et al.'s fascism scale (Adorno et al. 2017), Fromm's distinction between different types of escapism (1994, 135–204), or Löwenthal and Guterman's distinction between different “advocates of social change” (Löwenthal and Guterman 1949, 4–10). Instead, we will reduce our discussion to the social-psychological mechanism of “conformist revolt” (Horkheimer 1974, 168, translated by the authors) or “conformist rebellion” (Adorno 1995, 328, translated by the authors) which is especially useful to make sense of the belief in conspiracy theories (see also Adorno et al. 2017, 466–91; Horkheimer 2013, 92–127; Henkelmann et al. 2020).

Unlike genuine conformists, conformist rebels find it difficult to repress their experiences of dissatisfaction and frustration, which is why their attempts to fully identify with the status quo remain incomplete. Unlike

genuine rebels, however, they refrain from openly putting their dominant imperatives, norms, and ideals in question, which is why their detachment from the status quo remains half-hearted and superficial at best. As a result, they find themselves plagued by a state of confusion in which they strongly suspect that something is wrong about the world but fail to realize what it is and how it could be overcome. Thus, they feel a strong need to get rid of this unpleasant state, but they refrain from the difficult task of intellectually grasping and practically changing its objective conditions of existence. Trapped in such an affective-cognitive cul-de-sac, they begin searching for ways to release their pent-up feelings of power- and helplessness in hallucinatory and aggressive forms, that is, by seeking “substitute satisfaction” (Adorno 1998, 96) in the attack on imagined objects whose existence is falsely identified as the cause of their desperate situation. In practical terms, then, conformist rebellion is oriented towards a “crescendo in violence and aggressiveness” (Adorno 2017, 40).

It is only against the background of such a critical theory of “damaged life” (Adorno 2006) under the conditions of impersonal relations of domination that the ISR researchers analyze the popular belief in and political propagation of conspiracy theories. More specifically, the above-discussed core elements of a conspiracist worldview can each be deciphered as conformist-rebellious ways of responding to the heteronomy, precarity, and opacity of modern life.

First, the belief in the existence of small groups in control of world affairs is an extreme form of personalization that derives its social attractivity from the existence of impersonal relations of domination and coercion that tend to elude the grasp of everyday and specialized professional knowledge. As Adorno puts it:

[M]asses today, because they feel themselves to be objects of social processes, are anxious to learn what is going on behind the scene. At the same time, they are prone psychologically to transform the anonymous processes to which they are subject into personalistic terms of conspiracies, plots by evil powers, secret international organizations etc.

(2017, 64)

Second, the notion of secretive and illegal power allows people to feel legitimately confused and helpless insofar as their responsibility for changing the situation from which they suffer is denied:

If the latter [people] would fully admit their dependence on man-made conditions, they would somehow have to blame themselves, would have to recognize not only their impotence but also that they are the cause of this impotence and would have to take responsibilities which today are

extremely hard to take. This may be one of the reasons why they like so much to project their dependence upon something else, be it a conspiracy of Wall Street bankers or the constellation of the stars.

(Adorno 2002a, 154)

At the same time, however, this notion of being manipulated by an extremely powerful group that operates “behind closed curtains” and outside of the law allows the conspiracy theorists to feel empowered as well. For, it gives them the feeling to be part of an extraordinary and courageous group of people who have managed to break through the cloud of manipulation and corruption by which the conspirators have allegedly concealed themselves.

Third, the Manichaeic simplification of the world further substantiates this ambivalent relation between experiences of powerlessness and the desire for immediate power. The difficult task of making sense of complex social and political structures is replaced by the thrilling feeling to be part of an existential confrontation between two clearly identifiable camps. The underlying interpretative framework operates with simplistic normative terms that envision a clear path to victory which does not require practices of intellectual (self-)reflection (such as “good” vs. “evil,” “malevolent” vs. “benevolent,” or “dangerous” vs. “harmless”).

Fourth, the conspiracist promise of salvation offers those who are prone to conformist rebellion a legitimate normative justification for their attempts to act out their feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration in violent form. If human suffering is seen as the work of a group conspirators, then the struggle against them can appear as a struggle for human liberation. Given that this struggle remains futile insofar as it does not tackle the actual causes of human suffering in contemporary societies, the only “pleasure” it can offer its participants is the act of violence itself. As Adorno puts it in his analysis of fascist and antisemitic agitation: “This is the agitator’s dream, the unification of the horrible and the wonderful, the drunkenness of an annihilation that pretends to be salvation” (2017, 141).

Finally, the fixation upon finance capital needs to be understood as the epitome of a pseudo-critique of capitalism that reduces the intransparent character of capitalist social relations to the sphere of exchange and circulation and then projects this lack of transparency onto the allegedly manipulative strategies of a secret group of financial elites:

Many people distrust bankers because transactions on the stock exchange, particularly sudden booms and slumps, used to be largely incomprehensible to them. Since they often had to suffer under such moves, they tended to personify the anonymous reason for financial losses and to blame acquisitive, plotting groups.

(Adorno 2017, 120)

The sphere of capitalist production, on the other hand, is euphemized as a space of concrete work efforts invested by both employers and employees to serve the “common good.”

While the early ISR researchers primarily focus on fascist politics they highlight that the problem of conformist rebellion is a much more fundamental problem that cuts across the political spectrum. In preparation for the critical examination of Laclau and Mouffe’s account of left-wing populism, then, it is useful to provide some reflections upon the socio-psychological dynamics of left-wing milieus and movements. With the massive intensification and expansion of capitalist-bureaucratic forms of domination since the early to mid-twentieth century, left-wing political forces have found it increasingly difficult to establish and defend spaces of non-conformism. While those who sought to enter the political mainstream increasingly distanced themselves from more radical critiques of society, those who refused to do so found themselves pushed to the margins of the political space. Against this background, the issue of marginality has become a crucial aspect of (radical) left-wing socialization and politicization. In terms of the tension between powerlessness and empowerment, however, such a practice of critical (self-) reflection about the marginal role of (radical) left-wing opposition can have highly ambivalent effects. While it might be experienced as intellectually empowering to make sense of the overwhelming power of the status quo, it can also lead to intensified feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, and hopelessness. Thus, as various authors have argued, people identifying as (radical) left-wing are confronted with a two-fold difficulty: In addition to individual experiences of power- and helplessness they are also confronted with a long history of political failures that have pushed emancipatory visions to the margins of political discourse. According to Brown and Traverso, this has led to the emergence of the phenomenon of “left-wing melancholia,” that is, a vague collective feeling of loss, doubt and defeat that can become a distinct source of suffering (Brown 1999; Traverso 2016; see also Postone 2006). The danger of left-wing melancholia, they further argue, is that it can create the desire to simply repress this unpleasant feeling. While both authors primarily have the conformist identification with the neoliberal status quo in mind, our argument is that a conformist-rebellious rejection of that status quo is equally potent. This attitude is characterized by the combination of a strong need for immediate social and political change and the refusal to deal with the objective societal conditions that would need to be tackled in order to make such a change possible in the first place. However, given that they are nonetheless confronted with experiences of help- and powerlessness, they need an alternative mode of responding to them. This is where anti-elitist conspiracy theories come into play. Their imagination of powerful elite forces secretly plotting against progressive movements and parties thus makes it possible to re-imagine past failures as external problems that do not

require a process of critical self-reflection. Thus, the experience of one's own political marginality can be suppressed and replaced by the self-imagination as a heroic oppositional force that has the courage to confront the alleged group of conspirators (see Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022).

Laclau and Mouffe: The Post-Marxist Model of Left-Wing Populism and Its Relation to Conspiracist Worldviews

We will now move on to evaluate Laclau and Mouffe's model of populism by discussing its relation to the just-mentioned core elements of conspiracism. In his seminal work *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005), Laclau conceptualizes populism in terms of three core elements.⁴

First, Laclau argues that populist mobilization is based on the articulation of "social demands" which he defines as claims that express a certain dissatisfaction with something that is absent within or not provided by the established social and political order (2005, 73–74). What is remarkable about this approach is that the content of social demands is not further specified apart from this abstract relatedness to the status quo. In other words, Laclau does not consider it necessary to provide more specific reflections about the objective conditions of dissatisfaction in the contemporary world. The underlying assumption is that social demands need to be understood as discursive entities that uphold nothing more than an implicit relation to the objective world. For individual actors, this creates a fundamental problem because their ability to identify that which is absent in the established order remains limited. This is why Laclau thinks that demands always need to be social, that is, different demands need to relate to and intertwine with each other. Laclau calls this process the construction of "equivalential chains of unsatisfied demands" (2005, 74; see also Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 113–20). As a result of this process, the participating actors become aware of similarities between their unsatisfied demands which allows them to articulate these collectively vis-à-vis the established order. The main foundation of populist mobilization, then, is that individual actors identify with each other based on their shared unsatisfied demands.

Second, Laclau asserts that this formation of equivalential chains requires a common object of identification. Laclau calls this object an "empty signifier" (2005, 69–71), that is, a meta-signifier that needs to lose its particular content in order to represent what all the other signifiers have in common. This is a curious assumption because it significantly takes contingency out of the process of collective social interaction and political mobilization: Instead of being an open-ended process, Laclau claims that the construction of equivalential chains always culminates in the construction of a collective group identity. He even goes as far as to claim that it is this collective identity that has been absent in the established order in the first place. Thus, Laclau

primarily understands populism as a struggle for the realization of a feeling of “communitarian fullness” (1996, 42) which seems to be prevented by the established order. In another step of reducing contingency, Laclau claims that the most effective signifier of articulating this demand for “communitarian fullness” is “the people” (2005, 85).

Third, Laclau assumes that the only possible way of constructing any collective identity is the “radical exclusion” (2005, 82) of a common enemy who is made responsible for the disruption of the “harmonious continuity of the social” (85). In other words, he introduces further limitations to the notion of social demands and collective action: His main assumption is that the only reason why “the people” are unable to fulfill their demands is that there is a particular group of people who are hostile to “the people.” The possibility that dissatisfaction might result from structural configurations, such as the capitalist-bureaucratic division of labor, does not appear in his model. As a result, the collective struggle for the realization of unsatisfied demands becomes identical with the collective struggle against “the enemy.”

Although Laclau’s usage of concrete examples suggests that he is especially interested in left-wing populism, his general model of populism does not explicitly distinguish between different political variants. This distinction is more explicit in the work of Mouffe, who otherwise strongly draws on Laclau’s model. According to Mouffe, right-wing populism primarily mobilizes against minority groups portrayed as outsiders of “the people,” whereas left-wing populists attempt to establish political alliances against “the elite” which is strongly identified with finance capital (2018, 17–18, 24). As she puts it bluntly in a newspaper interview, “[t]he adversary is not immigrants, but it’s Wall Street and financial interests. This is left-wing populism” (Shaïd 2016).

Based on this concise reconstruction of the post-Marxist model of left-wing populism, we will continue with an evaluation of its conspiracist tendencies. Its three core elements indeed show various similarities with the core elements of conspiracist worldviews discussed in the previous section.

First, there is no doubt that their model is informed by a personalized notion of society and politics which exclusively makes elite forces responsible for the persistence of injustice and inequality, and which refrains from reflecting upon those objective societal processes that result in the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and power in the first place.

Second, Laclau and Mouffe promote a Manichaeic worldview, according to which the social and political space is shaped by an antagonistic divide between “the people” and “the elite.” Crucial for this notion of antagonism is that it is more fundamental than mere conflict over social positions and resources that can be addressed through negotiations and compromises. More specifically, Laclau and Mouffe claim that antagonisms always have an existential and irreconcilable quality because they portray “the enemy” as a

malevolent force that represents “pure threat” (Laclau 1996, 38) insofar as it pursues the agenda of “putting into question our identity and threatening our existence” (Mouffe 2013, 5). Furthermore, they characterize antagonistic friend-enemy-distinctions as essential parts of the human condition that “can never be overcome” (Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 19). This assumption is particularly useful to further substantiate their personalized worldview. For, if elite forces are not motivated by any interests or imperatives defined by the societal position that they hold, their behavior can only be explained by their own personal will. This is why Laclau characterizes “the enemy” in strongly moralistic terms as “pure anti-community, pure evil and negation” (Laclau 1996, 42).

Third, Laclau and Mouffe strongly draw on the normative distinction between finance capital and transnational corporations on the one hand, and industrial capital and national governments on the other. At the turn of the millennium, for instance, Laclau and Mouffe wrote about “the transnational corporations” attempt to impose their power over the entire planet” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xix) as well as the “the entrenched wealth and power of the new class of managers” (Mouffe 2000, 15). More recently, Mouffe has begun to integrate the concept of “oligarchy” in her model of left-wing populism (2016a, 2016b, 2018; Shaid 2016). In contrast to its more general meaning as “rule of the few,” however, Mouffe directly associates the rise of oligarchic power with what she calls the “great expansion of the financial sector” (2018, 18). This leads her to a portrayal of “the enemy” where these terms are intrinsically linked: “The enemy is Wall Street, the political establishment, the oligarchy” (Shaid 2016). In light of this strong fixation upon finance capital, it would have been more accurate to include the concept of “plutocracy” in her depiction of “the enemy.” It is difficult to say why Mouffe has avoided making use of that concept. One reason could be that, as Adorno puts, the underlying distinction between productive and financial capital “is one of the most effective stimuli of anti-Semitism” (2017, 120). Such a rhetorical avoidance, however, is far away from providing a genuine safeguard against the anti-emancipatory tradition within which the concept of “plutocracy” is situated. While there is indeed no indication whatsoever that Mouffe has participated in the reproduction of antisemitic conspiracy theories, it also needs to be highlighted that she does not consider it necessary either to critically engage with the link between anti-plutocratic and conspiracist discourse. This is also evident from Mouffe’s attempts to distinguish between left-wing and right-wing types of populism. It is indeed correct to state that what makes right-wing populism specific is its strong focus on anti-migrant and racist enemy constructions. However, if we take into account that there is a longstanding tradition of right-wing anti-plutocratic conspiracism (see Adorno 2017, 114–41; Billig 1977; Löwenthal and Guterman 1949; Rensmann 2013; Simonsen 2020), Mouffe’s claim that opposition

to “Wall Street and financial interests” (Shaid 2016) is a unique feature of left-wing populism is not convincing.

Finally, Laclau and Mouffe promote some aspects of a pseudo-revolutionary promise of salvation constitutive of conspiracism. This can be illustrated by taking a closer look at their ambivalent remarks upon the emancipatory potential of left-wing populism (see also Petersen and Hecker 2022, 88–89). Throughout their works, populism is advertised as “the ideological crystallisation of resistance to oppression in general” (Laclau 1977, 167), “the attempt to break with the status quo” (Laclau 2005, 122), or “a new form of radicalism” (Mouffe 2018, 21) that “will necessitate a far-reaching transformation of the existing relations of power and the creation of new democratic practices” (2018, 36). Mouffe even states that left-wing populism “necessarily includes an anti-capitalist dimension as many of the forms of subordination that will need to be challenged are the consequences of capitalist relations of production” (2018, 49). At the same time, however, the horizon of emancipatory thought and practice is limited to the established forms of electoral and representative politics—a tendency that is especially strong in Mouffe’s works on the relation between liberal democracy and transformative politics (Mouffe 2000, 2018; see also Laclau 1996). What is more, the precondition for any emancipatory project is that people can easily identify with it and do not have to make an effort to understand what they are suffering from. Mouffe’s appeal to an “anti-capitalist dimension,” for instance, is immediately followed by the critique of those left-wing political actors that actually operate with the concept of capitalism: “Instead of designating the adversaries in ways that people can identify, they use abstract categories like ‘capitalism’, thereby failing to mobilize the affective dimension necessary to motivate people to act politically” (Mouffe 2018, 50). Such remarks are grounded in an ontological approach that ascribes primacy to the affective dimension, whereas the practice of intellectual (self-) reflection is dismissed as a less relevant or even disturbing element. In light of this anti-intellectual tendency, it is unsurprising that Laclau and Mouffe do not consider it necessary to elaborate in great detail on the specific role of elite power in contemporary societies. For instance, it is striking that Mouffe’s concept of oligarchy is not substantiated by a more extensive and systematic analysis of the negative influence of financial elites on democratic decision-making processes (see Mouffe 2018, 16–18).

Overall, then, Laclau and Mouffe’s model of populism is based on a specifically left-wing type of conformist rebellion: While it promises its potential followers a feeling of rebelliousness that draws from the repertoire of left-wing rhetorics, it actually prevents them from becoming autonomous individuals with the capacity to make sense of and practically change the world. What is more, it allows them to repress their unacknowledged experiences of power- and helplessness by projecting them in aggressive form onto

a small group of people whose existence and behavior are falsely identified as the main cause of injustice and the main impediment to progressive change.

At the same time, there are various aspects in Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical and political writings which remain at odds with conspiracist worldviews. There is particularly one element that is crucial for such worldviews but does not figure prominently in Laclau and Mouffe's writings: the notion of hidden, secretive power. Drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, for instance, Laclau and Mouffe argue that elite forces can only establish themselves as a hegemonic force if they engage in political discourse and confrontation in the public sphere, which also includes offering limited concessions to counter-hegemonic and subaltern forces. This also leads them to propose a political agenda that deviates from conspiracist promises of salvation following moments of pseudo-revolutionary rupture. This is especially strong in Mouffe's work. While taking for granted the existence of friend-enemy antagonisms, she makes a case for pacifying these antagonisms by embedding them within liberal-democratic institutional settings. As part of this process, she argues, the elite ceases to be a life-threatening enemy and becomes a legitimate adversary. The main task of populist politics, then, is not the preparation of a violent showdown between "the people" and "the elite," but rather the never-ending participation in democratic struggles over hegemony (see Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 108–17; Mouffe 2018, 45–55).

Nevertheless, these remarks do not significantly counteract those aspects of their model of populism which show more explicit affinities to the belief in conspiracist worldviews. For, it is quite possible to assert based on their model that elite forces pursue a double agenda of public campaigning on the one hand, and of lobbying, networking and manipulation "behind the curtains" on the other. Furthermore, while Mouffe makes a case against the violent escalation of the personalized hatred of "the enemy" (that is, "the elite"), she nonetheless rationalizes such hatred as an unsurmountable aspect of the human condition (2018, 19).

Mouffe and Errejón: Moving in the Direction of Full-Fledged Conspiracism

The weakness of these countertendencies can be further illustrated by taking a closer look at the influence of Laclau and Mouffe's model of populism on contemporary left-wing populist movements and parties. In the following, we will focus on the example of an extended conversation between Chantal Mouffe and Íñigo Errejón, MP for the left-wing Spanish party Podemos from 2016 to 2019, until he founded the left-wing electoral platform Más País in 2019.

Since its emergence in 2014 from the post-crisis protest movements of the late 2000s and early 2010s, *Podemos* was able to establish itself as an important electoral force in Spain. With its strong self-portrayal as the voice of "the

people” against the power and corruption of “the elite,” it is unsurprising that it has made a considerable impression on Mouffe’s more recent writings on populism. But this is only one side of the coin. There is clear evidence that Laclau and Mouffe’s theory has influenced the political-ideological repertoire of the *Podemos* leadership. The extensive conversation between Mouffe and Errejón, which was published in the form of a book in 2019, testifies to this close relationship. On the one hand, Mouffe acknowledges “the meteoric rise of *Podemos*” (2018, 20) as an important source of inspiration for her own theoretical work. This can be illustrated by looking at Mouffe’s concept of oligarchy (2018, 10, 18–19) which is also at the center of *Podemos*’ strategy of mobilizing “the people” against “la casta,” that is, a small powerful group that is made responsible for the existence of social and political injustice in post-Francoist, neoliberal Spain. As Errejón recapitulates,

[s]omething that has been decisive in the construction of a people and its political direction is the ‘anti-people’, the adversary that marks the impossibility of what is currently perceived as legitimate. In our case, that meant pointing to the evident oligarchic evolution: the *casta*, the privileged.

(Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 154–55, emphasis in original)

On the other hand, the entire conversation demonstrates that Errejón is a longstanding student of Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism. From their eclectic reading of the works of Gramsci, Schmitt, Freud, Derrida, and others to their discourse-theoretical ontology, there is barely any aspect of Laclau and Mouffe’s work that Errejón is unfamiliar with.

Against this background, it is unsurprising that all those ideological elements that make Laclau and Mouffe’s model of left-wing populism prone to conspiracism can also be found in Errejón’s elaborations. Most notably, Errejón promotes a strictly personalized and moralized worldview that projects the existence of social and political injustice onto nothing else than the allegedly malevolent behavior of a “privileged minority” (2016, 133) of people “who’ve hijacked and privatized the institutions for their own benefit, who’ve set up all the institutional apparatuses so that it works to the benefit of the few and at the expense of the many” (133). This minority is characterized as an over-powerful force that has been able to get “the powerful media and many resources in their hands” (122) and take control of the central nodes of political power where “the majority of decisions” (65) are made. Furthermore, this personalized anti-elitism is modulated by a clear anti-plutocraticist tendency: According to Errejón, the real threat to “the rest of society” (124) are the “oligarchic financial powers” (124), “the bankers” (104) and the “international speculators” (128) that have established a regime of “financial despotism” (131). The established political elites, too, are considered “enemies of the people,” but mainly because of their allegedly

subservient relationship to financial elites: “butlers of the rich instead of messengers of the citizens” (106). “The people,” on the other hand, is imagined as a diffuse group of “ordinary citizens” (117) who appear to overcome class boundaries and political cleavages through a shared commitment to “a democratic, progressive and popular patriotism” (68) held together by anti-plutocratic hatred.

Interestingly, however, Errejón also draws on those elements of conspiracist worldviews which are much less present in Laclau and Mouffe’s model of left-wing populism. While Laclau and Mouffe uphold a rather ambivalent relation to the notion of secret, manipulative power, Errejón is much more outspoken and unequivocal in this regard, invoking the feeling “that those at the top have for too long been taking us for fools” (62). Furthermore, elite forces are denounced as “unelected powers” (65) that are “placed above the law” (73), have “hijacked democracy” (132), and “have liberated themselves from the existing mechanisms of control, citizen trust, and compromise between groups” (25). This leads Errejón to identify a gigantic web of “corruption. . . connecting the party system with the state and show-business structure in Spain” (25). The possibility that the process of elite formation emerges *from within* the legally codified system of commodity exchange, labor extraction, resource distribution, power allocation, and will formation in capitalist-democratic social formations is entirely absent in his problem diagnosis. There is a second element of conspiracist worldviews that is much stronger in Errejón’s than in Mouffe’s elaborations: its pseudo-revolutionary promise of salvation. While Errejón tends to agree with Mouffe’s notion of hegemony as an endless struggle between political adversaries (see 42–54), he nonetheless repeatedly invokes fantasies about a final showdown in which “the people” mobilizes its “spirit of ‘plebeian vengeance’” (62) to defeat “the elite” once and for all. At this point, Errejón is cautious to describe “plebeian vengeance” as a “non-violent” (62) attitude, but there are other passages where he rationalizes physical violence as an unavoidable part of populist mobilization: “Passion comes from the intensity of the clash” (63) and “violence constitutes the ultimate possibility, it is part of the clash” (63). Thus, he claims that, although violence is “undesirable” (63), it cannot be ruled out that “supporters occasionally kill each other” (63). This invocation of aggressive dispositions can also be found on a metaphorical level, such as when Errejón portrays *Podemos’* first campaign as an “‘electoral’ blitzkrieg” (150).

It is interesting to take a closer look at Mouffe’s responses to these remarks as this sheds further light on her ambivalent relation to full-fledged conspiracism. While the notion of secretive, manipulative power does not figure prominently in her own writings, she does not consider it necessary either to object to Errejón’s assumption that “everything has already been decided, behind closed doors and beyond the control of ordinary citizens” (117). Quite the contrary, she explicitly affirms that her concept of “oligarchization”

(2018, 17) is compatible with a notion of elite power that is not mediated by but reproduces itself outside of the reach of public discourse and democratic decision-making: “I completely agree that in recent years there has been an oligarchic hijack of democracy. It has happened across Europe, not just in Spain, but it has taken different forms” (Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 119). On the subject of antagonism and violence, however, she directly objects to Errejón’s classical Schmittian approach and tries to convince him that “in agonistic battles there is also passion between the adversaries” (63) and that “that agonism does not eliminate antagonism; it sublimates it” (63). Apart from a brief exchange, however, Mouffe and Errejón do not seek to resolve this controversy.

Overall, then, the conversation between Mouffe and Errejón provides further evidence of an elective affinity between the post-Marxist model of populism and conspiracist worldviews. Not only does it show that a political leader who has been inspired by Laclau and Mouffe’s work does not find it difficult to selectively draw on those elements of their model of left-wing populism that show conspiracist tendencies at the expense of those that do not. It also indicates that Mouffe’s ability to perceive and counter the problem of conspiracism is limited at best. Most notably, although Errejón makes sure that the notion of secretive, manipulative power plays a prominent role in their conversation, Mouffe does not consider it necessary to put it into question.

Conclusion

Discussing the relationship between left-wing populism and conspiracist worldviews shows that left-wing intellectual and political milieus, despite their critical and emancipatory self-understanding, are not immune to anti-emancipatory tendencies. In this chapter we sought to demonstrate that Laclau and Mouffe’s model of left-wing populism is composed of various core elements that are also constitutive of conspiracism. This includes their strongly personalized, Manichean notion of social injustice, their appeal to a left-wing type of conformist rebellion, as well as their fixation upon the demonization of financial elites. There are indeed other elements that are less compatible with conspiracist worldviews, such as their notion of hegemonic politics. And it is these counter-elements that point to the different political traditions of populism and conspiracism. However, as our examination of the intellectual exchange between Mouffe and Errejón has shown, these counter-elements remain weak and fragile. In this sense, then, the elective affinities between left-wing populism and anti-plutocratic conspiracism prevail. Given its widespread political influence, Laclau and Mouffe’s work can be considered symptomatic of left-wing populist discourse and politics more generally. Analyzed through the lens of two of its most influential public intellectuals, then, left-wing populism can be characterized as a left-wing

variant of conformist rebelliousness that upholds an elective affinity to conspiracist worldviews, in particular those with an anti-elitist, anti-plutocratic stance. In order to become full-fledged conspiracy theorists, left-wing populists do not need to make a clear break with their convictions, as they already identify with some of its core elements.

Notes

- 1 Authors such as Thalmann (2019) point out that Adorno's work, as an examination of the social formation of his time, cannot be applied to the current historical moment without adjustments. There are indeed various aspects in the work of the early ISR that remain outdated. Most notably, their theory of monopoly and state capitalism cannot explain the post-Fordist and neoliberal transformation of the capitalist world-system since the 1970s. However, what makes these works worthwhile for a contemporary analysis is that they also entail a critical theory of capitalist societalization as such, going beyond the particular historical context of the early-to-mid twentieth century. With Kirchhoff (2020, 217), we argue that the "authoritarian character and with it the readiness to identify against what one's own interests might be" is a political symptom of the modern capitalist epoch, even if the concrete formations of the historical constellation change. Adopting the basic concepts and analytical tools of critical theory therefore does not relieve us of the empirical examination of contemporary authoritarian tendencies, but rather invites us to do so (see also Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022).
- 2 For more recent studies of the impersonal character of modern social and political relations, see Bonefeld (2016); Gerstenberger (2009); Heinrich (2012); Mau (2023).
- 3 In her study on the historical emergence of (late) modern societalization, Alexandra Schauer demonstrates that this form of personalizing capitalist social relations had accompanied the emergence of the capitalist mode of production and is closely linked to the establishment of modern antisemitism: "The Jews were pushed to the margins of society because they were held responsible for the contradictions of the emerging social order. . . It is the projection in the consequence of which Jews were transformed from human beings into personifications of an abstract form of rule in the eyes of their Christian fellow human beings" (Schauer 2022, 508, translation by the authors).
- 4 For a more detailed reconstruction and critique of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist model of populism upon which this evaluation of its conspiracist tendencies draws, see Petersen and Hecker (2022).

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13

A NEW POETIC OF CONSPIRACISM? CONSPIRACY THEORY IN A TIME OF POST-NARRATIVE POLITICS

Sebastian M. Herrmann

Introduction

In 2008, in a paper about “Outrageous Conspiracy Theories: Popular and Official Responses to 9/11 in Germany and the United States,” Peter Knight identifies two pieces of conspiracy theorizing that are structurally different from both the official accounts of 9/11 and the counter-cultural conspiracy theories responding to the terrorist attacks. Discussing Mathias Bröckers’ *World Trade Center Conspiracy* blog and Paul Thompson’s *Complete 9/11 Timeline* online database, he notes that

the use of new media techniques in some of the 9/11 conspiracy speculations... creates strategies of representation that begin to push to the very limit—and even at times undermine—the traditional epistemological structures embedded in conspiracy theories that make them so attractive to believers seeking the refuge of humanist certainties in an increasingly posthumanist age: namely, nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, everything is connected.

(Knight 2008, 166)

More specifically, in Knight’s account, the medium of the conspiracy blog in one case “enables [its author] to engage in shifting ‘conspirological’ speculations that never solidify into a fixed, easily redacted conspiracy theory. (A less charitable account would see this merely as a license for woolly thinking and insinuation).” This brings with it the presumed

“danger of turning 9/11 conspiracy theory into a process, not a product, a project that leads to an infinite regress of suspicion, creating a perpetually deferred revelation that seems to undermine its overt promise of uncovering What Is Really Going On”.

(2008, 190)

In the other case, it is the medium of the collaborative online database that similarly threatens the coherence and boundedness of the conspiracist account: “Thompson’s ‘Complete 9/11 Timeline,’ . . . offers the building blocks for a conspiracy-minded interpretation” and, being a database, it “has been mined by 9/11 conspiracy theorists for their different accounts.” In consequence, it has encouraged nonlinear reading processes: “[I]t is possible to read all 3,699 entries in chronological order, [but] the Web format allows and indeed encourages readers to jump from topic to topic. . .” Thus, Knight concludes, “[i]f there is a conspiracy theory in the time line, it has to be actively constructed by the reader” (2008, 191).

In the following pages, I will assume that these two examples, outliers in 2008, were harbingers of things to come. Like Knight, I will identify a shift in style between a traditional form of “classical” conspiracy theorizing and contemporary conspiracism, which operates differently and which is formally distinct from earlier forms. However, where Knight sees these new (and, in 2008, seemingly precarious) “strategies of representation” as an effect of “the use of new media techniques,” I will instead take cues from Lev Manovich’s work on “Database as a Symbolic Form” to characterize them as indebted to a broader change in the forms operated in public discourse. This will allow me to focus my attention on an emerging poetic of contemporary political discourse that facilitates both contemporary conspiracism and contemporary right-wing populism. The following pages will thus proceed from three interrelated assumptions: that “form” (rather than medium) is a productive register to investigate the shifting styles of conspiracist discourse; that classic conspiracy theory was indebted to the formal principles of narrative in ways and to degrees that contemporary, post-narrative conspiracism is not; and that this shift away from narrative in contemporary conspiracism aligns with a larger trend in public discourse, a diminishing of the role of narrative as the primary way of making sense of and communicating about the world. Based on these assumptions, I will argue that what we are seeing in contemporary conspiracism is most productively described as a backgrounding of the formal principles of narrative in favor of other formal logics, and that this shift in conspiracy thinking coincides with a larger trend of a de-narrativization of public discourse. As ever so often when a phenomenon is prefixed “post,”

the notion of “post-narrative conspiracism” thus is not meant to suggest that these new forms of discourse have left narrative behind entirely. Rather it is meant to spotlight the rising importance of other symbolic logics, the extent to which “narrative” is complicated by this rise, and to better capture the agility of contemporary conspiracist and populist discourses in operating and exploiting such a formally fluid and dynamic discursive landscape.

Conspiracy Theory without the Narrative?

Various conspiracy theory scholars have noted that conspiracism today is markedly different from earlier, traditional versions of conspiracy theory. This observation is spelled out most programmatically perhaps in Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead’s 2019 monograph *A Lot of People Are Saying*. In it, Rosenblum and Muirhead introduce a distinction between classical “conspiracy theory,” which is “not new, of course,” and a new form of mere “conspiracism,” or “conspiracy without the theory,” which, they argue, became particularly salient during the Trump presidency but which is by no means limited to the 45th president or his time in office.

Classic conspiracy theory, in their view, is built around a familiar “hermeneutic of suspicion” (Ricoeur 1977, 32) that determines its logic and that is responsible for most of its appeals. In it, the conspiracy theorist works to identify a depth structure that is responsible for surface effects. Specifically, the conspiracist is looking for an explanation that can better explain a chain of events than the “official narrative” does. Classic conspiracism, conspiracy *with* the theory, is thus inherently narrative. They write:

[I]n insisting that the truth is not on the surface, classic conspiracism engages in a sort of detective work. Once all the facts—especially facts ominously withheld by reliable sources and omitted from official reports—are scrupulously amassed, a pattern of secret machinations emerges. *The dots are woven into a comprehensive narrative of events.* Warranted or not, classic conspiracism is conspiracy with a theory.

(Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 3; my emphasis)

The “theory” that thus marks classic conspiracism in Rosenblum and Muirhead’s account is inextricably tied to the formal principles of narrative: like narrative, “theory” here creates chains of causality that manage to explain events and that imbue any particular selection and arrangement of events with plausibility, which in turn provides a sense of structure and orientation to those subscribing to it. However flawed, short-sighted, or mistaken in its conclusions, however deficient in the stories that it tells, classic conspiracy theorizing thus orders the world by inscribing it with narrative order and narrative meaning.

The new conspiracism on the other hand, which they see on the rise in contemporary public discourse, “is conspiracy without the theory. It sheds explanation, and it sheds political theory.” It is dangerous “because conspiracist claims that shed explanation and political theory have distinctive and destructive political effects: disorientation and delegitimation” (2019, 19–20). Rather than produce a coherent chain of evidentiary events connected by causality, the new conspiracism “validates” its claims through “repetition” (2019, 3), and repetition indeed becomes one of its core formal principles: Rather than calling for political consequences, Rosenblum and Muirhead observe, contemporary conspiracists

call for repeating and spreading their claims—“liking,” tweeting, and forwarding. Repetition takes the place of organized political action. . . . For the new conspiracists, all the energy is directed at repetition and affirmation. Repetition is the new conspiracism’s oxygen and, it sometimes seems, its whole purpose.

(2019, 32)

Notably, then, what Rosenblum and Muirhead identify here is a shift not in content but in form, and it is a shift in which narrative, labeled “theory” here, gets deemphasized in favor of massive “repetition”—a point I will return to below.

This shift, then is not limited to Donald Trump or to the US. A similar shift in conspiracist styles has also been identified in Germany,¹ most poignantly during the Covid-19 pandemic, where this shift left its traces in public discourse in the form of a new vernacular term coined to describe Covid conspiracy theorists: *Schwurbler*. The term exploded in public usage in 2021. While it is much more openly pejorative than simply observing a new “conspiracism without theory,” it notes a defect in contemporary conspiracist discourse similar to the one described by Rosenblum and Muirhead above: a lack of coherence, and a failure to produce coherent, working narratives. A *Schwurbler*, the term suggests, is not someone who has a clear, comprehensible theory of the origins of the virus or of its presumed malevolent uses by powerful elites. Rather, *Schwurbler* are people who do not speak clearly, do not think straight, and who insinuate rather than spell out a convoluted, confused mess of half-baked conspiracism.² Knight’s “less charitable” description of this style as “woolly thinking and insinuation” indeed comes to mind (2008, 190). The term clearly and blatantly serves to discredit “Covid skeptics,” and it is openly polemic, but the key accusation of its polemic is nevertheless worth pointing out: It is not claiming that Covid conspiracy theorists are mistaken. Rather, it is ridiculing the lack of clarity in and the circular quality of their conspiracist discourse. Finally, and equally in line with Rosenblum and Muirhead’s observation that the new conspiracist style is not

limited to the Trump presidency, the term *Schwurbler* is also not limited to the height of the pandemic. As journalists in Germany point out these days, “COVID Schwurbler now have a new favorite topic: the war in Ukraine” (*Schwurbler-Wende*, my translation). *Schwurbeln*, it seems, is a constitutive element in the poetic of the new conspiracism.

From Narrative to Container? Exhibit A

A recent, hands-on example can help make these matters of shifting styles more tangible: In February 2021, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and briefly after Berlin’s district attorney had handed down an arrest warrant for him, the antisemitic German conspiracist Atilla Hildmann posted the following message on Telegram:

The real reason for the arrest warrant is that they want to silence me because the next six months are decisive for securing their dictatorship. Of course, they will loosen [restrictions -smh], but tied to conditions like self tests (The tests are gene tests and nano-implants), QR-codes to leave sectors, vaccination cards for travel! They establish a totalitarian surveillance system, just like in China! While they are looking to lock ME up, Mao-Merkel keeps incarcerating Germans like animals, disenfranchises and dispossesses them, destroys the economy and even the car industry (deal with China) and murders the elderly using gene scissors (they change the genome, says even Zuckerberg), tortures children with masks, injections and criminal prosecution at soccer games and ties freedom, open shops and economic strength to people’s willingness to get “vaccinated” because the pandemic is only over once “every person in the world is vaccinated!” (Merkel verbatim)! It is a BIG PHARMA-SCHEME TO ERECT THE NEW WORLD ORDER! An arrest warrant is needed for the Polish Jew Mao-Merkel (Aniela Kazmierczak, née Kasner), not for me! Germany will perish under Merkel, Spahn, Laschet, Söder und Müller. Under Hildmann Germany will be resurrected! EVERYTHING THEY SAY IS A LIE! THERE IS NO PANDEMIC AND NO VIRUS! ALL FAIRY TALES SO THEY CAN RAM A GENE INJECTION INTO YOUR BODIES. DON’T GET VACCINATED, THEY ARE NOT VACCINATIONS. IT IS A GENETIC MANIPULATION, THEY CHANGE YOUR HEREDITY WITH “GENE EDITING”! Gates funded gene editing research and had this tested with mice! They should only produce female offspring, it works by injecting RNA! The entire population died after one generation due to a lack of males. EXACTLY THE SAME they now want to do with people. This is about genocide.

(qtd. in Skudlarek 2021, 151–52)³

Despite its length, which would suggest a certain level of coherence, there notably is no conspiracy theory here explaining how “everything is connected,” no secret but presumably true, overarching backstory. To be sure, there are allusions here to a number of such backstories, most notably to some version of the “Great Replacement” and of Bill Gates pursuing evil schemes. But these allusions remain exactly that: allusions, and they never come together into any semblance of narrative coherence. It is tempting to assume that readers need to know these backstories for the post to have an effect, but there is no indication of that either in the text itself or in the reception practices it evokes. This post appeals to the reader not by revealing connections, patterns, or secret backstories but by heightening affect: exclamation marks, all-caps writing, and feelings of persecution, arranged in a vortex of topical repetition.⁴

Speaking in terms of structure, then, this Telegram post is not a narrative but a container: It brings together in one hot mess a barrage of conspiracist tropes, some very familiar and some less so, to form not a string of events but a rhizomatic collection organized around a distinct, unifying center of affects: There is the “classical” conspiracist trope in which “they” are coming for “ME”; there is a dictatorship-to-come; there are Covid tests actually being “nano-implants”; there is Angela Merkel variously being covertly Jewish and/or Mao Zedong, or like him; there are gene scissors variously killing the elderly or all males; there are children being tortured, even if only by being forced to wear masks; and so on and so forth. In more strictly formalist terms, what we have here are—partly real, partly fictitious—events and characters, core building blocks of narratives; and while some of them suggest larger backstories and while others could come together into one or the other slightly longer, sketched and incomplete mini-narrative, “narratoids” one might say, the entire arrangement never jells into an actual story. This particular arrangement can only exist precisely because it has to live up neither to empirical reality nor to any semblance of narrative coherence.

The above conspiracy rant is taken from an article by Jan Skudlarek on “The ‘Plandemic’: Conspiracy Narratives and Truth Problems in the Corona Pandemic.” Skudlarek claims that “Hildmann here collects several conspiracy narratives in a single post” (2021, 152). As outlined above, I do not concur with Skudlarek that these are narratives. They can be called narratives only if we extend the definition of narrative, as a distinct formal principle, to the point of meaninglessness. I do however agree with his characterization of Hildmann’s text as something that “collects”: this post is a container of sorts, and as such it brings together, collocates, and organizes into thematically clustered regions, as well as transports material from which narratives can but do not have to be crafted. How, then, does one make sense of conspiracist discourse that takes on the form not of a narrative but of a container? Clearly the concept of “narrative” is of only limited use here.

Travels in Symbolic Forms

In light of the above, it becomes clear that the poetic of contemporary conspiracism cannot be productively understood by loosening the definition of narrative to simply include artifacts such as Hildmann's post. Rather it has to be modeled by taking seriously the drastically attenuated narrativity of its artifacts as one of its constitutive qualities. One helpful framework to think about such non-narrative and less-narrative symbolization has been proposed by Lev Manovich in his essay on "Database as Symbolic Form." In it, Manovich proposes to think of "narrative" as just one "symbolic form" that humans use to make sense of the world, and he proposes "database" as another.⁵ He uses the Saussurean distinction between paradigm and syntagma to explain: "Narrative" orders the world by picking from the vast inventory of events, real or fictional, individual ones and by bringing them together in a syntagmatic chain. This syntagma, then, has material existence, a story written down or being told, whereas the vast number of unused elements, the "database of choices from which the narrative is constructed (the paradigm) is implicit" and only exists in virtual form (1999, 89). For narrative, selection thus is key: The goal and main cultural function of this form are to reduce complexity and to choose and cojoin from the vast and noisy masses of materials, events and characters, those items that it can bring to cohere in plausible and meaningful ways.

Similarly understood as a symbolic form, database then "reverses this relationship." Now, "[p]aradigm is privileged, syntagm is downplayed. Paradigm is real, syntagm is virtual" (1999, 89). Here the masses of paradigmatically replaceable items are materially present, and amassing ever more of potentially very similar items into an unbounded collection becomes a process that in itself is meaningful and that materially captures the world. New media objects, Manovich's example of choice for a database artifact, typically contain vast masses of material from which the users can choose to build ever new concatenations. In this sense, database is an inherently interactive, participatory form that not only invites collecting but also querying, browsing, selecting, and building possible connections. In the database, collection and massification thus are key but they are so not least because of what the material could be turned into. However, while the masses of material are made present, the stories that could be told from this material remain implicit, virtual, available but not realized into any definitive form. Understood as a particular formal logic, "database represents the world as a list of items which it refuses to order" (1999, 85), and it appeals to its audience by being thus unbounded and seemingly unordered.

In Manovich's model, these two, database and narrative, stand in Manichean opposition, they are, in his words, "natural 'enemies'" that "[compete] for the same territory of human culture" (1999, 85). This aspect of

his framework seems less useful to me, and its colorful imagery threatens to undermine its most useful impulse: to consider a plurality of formal logics. In describing how database and narrative relate, Manovich indeed mentions yet another element, play, and it seems to be his investment in a binarism of two competing, warring “symbolic forms” that keeps him from considering play as a third such form. In his model, play therefore only constitutes an “algorithm” that can turn databases into narratives:

Computer games, for instance, are experienced by their players as narratives. In a game, the player is given a well-defined task—winning the match, being first in a race, reaching the last level, or reaching the highest score. It is this task which makes the player experience the game as a narrative.
(1999, 83)

not least because it imbues the game with the kind of teleologic drive characteristic of narrative. However, it makes just as much sense to think of play as yet another symbolic form: a formal logic that regulates human expression, that can “make meaning out of the world” (1999, 85). The “ludology-narratology debate that characterized early game studies” (Schubert 2022, 114) and which similarly cast narrative and play as two formal logics “competing for the same territory of human culture” powerfully underscores this (Manovich 1999, 85). I will return to this aspect of play as a formal logic below.

Precisely because it is interested in formal logics other than narrative, Manovich’s intervention then provides three immensely useful impulses to the study of contemporary conspiracism: (1) The idea that there are symbolic forms (or: formal logics) other than narrative that are just as important to human world-making; (2) the idea that the relationship between such symbolic forms is dynamic, and that cultural artifacts implement these forms in gradations; and (3) the idea that each of these symbolic logics comes with its own affordances for meaning-making and for pleasurable engagement.⁶

Using this framework, then, to think about contemporary conspiracism, suggests two symbolic forms other-than-narrative that are worth closer attention: database and play, both of which, I will show, are front and center in contemporary conspiracist discourse. One thus needs to consider these three formal logics—narrative, database, and play—along with their respective affordances and their interplay, to begin to map the poetic of contemporary conspiracist discourse.

Conspiracy Theory and Narrative

With its roots in Formalism, narratology has no dearth of strictly formal definitions of narrative, most of which are very much in line with how Manovich understands the term: Typically, a narrative is modeled as consisting of

individual events that are connected by causality to form a syntagmatic chain in which one event leads to the other. This is how narratives create meaning: by relating events to each other in ways that make sense. Even if it is told out of order, in prolepses or analepses, the underlying, implicit story skeleton of events remains ordered in meaningful ways, and only this assumption of a linear order underneath marks these temporal distortions of the “narrative discourse” as deviations and makes them readable as such. Ultimately, then, it is this ordered, linear connectivity between individual events on the level of “story” that makes narratives compelling, and it is this form of internal interconnectivity that lends narratives their “teleologic progression” (Bennett and Royle 2004, 56), their orientation toward “closure” (Brooks). And no matter how much this closure might get delayed in the telling of the tale, the promise of closure (the moment when presumably unrelated or contradictory events cohere, at least in retrospect) is crucial for even the most minimalist definition of narrative.

Narrative has been an invaluable concept for the study of (classical) conspiracy theory, not least because it forged a connection between the fields of literary studies and cultural studies on the one hand and conspiracy theory research on the other, critically opening up conspiracy theory to scrutiny through non-empirical methodological lenses and to disciplines other than, say, psychology, history, or political science. This conceptual productivity has unfolded along at least three distinct lines. Most narrowly formal, narrative has helped to identify characteristic structural elements in conspiracy narratives, be they real or fictional, and to thus delineate and explain these narratives’ appeals as well as their cultural work. Mark Fenster’s discussion of “Conspiracy Theory as Narrative” is particularly helpful here. Fenster identifies conspiracy narrative’s “incessant integrative operations” as one of the core generic features: “The conspiracy narrative is compelling in . . . its attempt to explain a wide range of seemingly disparate past and present events and structures within a relatively coherent framework” (2008, 121). In consequence, conspiracy theory as conspiracy narrative is formally caught up in a double-bind, requiring as its *raison d’être* “disparate events that occur across vast temporal and geographic horizons,” which it works to “[integrate] into a singular plot” but which ultimately need to resist complete integration (2008, 133). An investment in “efficiency and coherence” (2008, 119) thus stands at the center of the genre’s narrative “desire,” and, like all desire, it must not be fulfilled lest it disappear. Thus, “[t]he ‘desire’ of the narrative—that is, the cultural assumptions shared by authors and audience, and developed by generic conventions—is contradictory”: a “longing for closure and resolution that its formal resources cannot satisfy” (2008, 121; 142). This contradictory desire also informs a core structural feature Fenster identifies in the conspiracy narrative, the narrative “pivot” at which

information emerges and converges as the protagonist (and, in many narratives, the audience as well) finally makes the correct interpretive conclusions necessary to integrate the overwhelming amount of relatively incomprehensible data about seemingly disparate events that has previously confounded him.

(2008, 136)

The centrality of the narrative pivot for the genre of conspiracy narrative, be it openly fictional or not, thus accentuates the importance of coherence for conspiracy theory generally, its core spectacle and core formal feature being the moment in which it becomes possible to forge a coherent narrative from “seemingly disparate events,” and its chief investment thus residing in a tension between an achieved narrative order and this order’s elusive quality.

As an analytic category, narrative has, secondly, been an immensely useful concept for modeling a key moment of ambiguity in conspiracy theory: an ambiguity around the category of the real. This ambiguity shows in how Fenster consistently seeks to apply his narrative modeling to both openly fictional and “putatively nonfiction accounts of conspiracy theorists describing ‘real’ conspiracies” (2008, 119). Even if he explicitly resists the temptation to “assert that history is the formal and epistemological equivalent to fiction, that history is simply text or discourse, or that conspiracy theory is merely one narrative interpretation of history” among many (2008, 120), the constructivist undertones of much of the Narrative Turn open up exactly this line of inquiry once one considers conspiracy theory as first and foremost narrative. After all, narratives have previously been characterized as “[versions] of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and ‘narrative necessity’ rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness” (Bruner 1991, 5), as Jerome Bruner put it in a seminal essay on the “Narrative Construction of Reality.” Tending to the narrative quality of conspiracy theories thus complicates any assumption of a simple categorical difference between their and history’s “version of reality.” Analyzing the narrative strategies of conspiracy theories has thus helped understand how they can seem plausible (or even “real” or “true”) despite being empirically wrong, but it has also allowed students of conspiracy theory to at least flirt with the idea that conspiracy theorizing might be a valuable counter-hegemonic practice able of producing and maintaining “illegitimate knowledge” (Birchall 2006, 4) in face of the homogenizing powers of mainstream culture or overpowering “ideological state apparatuses” and media conglomerates aligned with global capitalism.⁷

Over the past two or three decades—following the academic success and subsequent popularization of the Narrative Turn—“narrative” has, finally, become more broadly culturally salient as the prime register in how we model the connection between textuality, rhetoric, and politics. As countless

pundits and political scientists keep explaining, good politicians are good storytellers: able to bind nations together and to call to common action the citizens simply through the power of a good story. In this popularized version of the Narrative Turn, both populism and conspiracism then often get characterized as “bad” narration: They offer seductively simple narratives that do not do justice to the complexities and nuances of the world, not least because of their simplistic black-and-white portrayals of good and evil. In either view, humans as “storytelling animals,” as Alasdair MacIntyre famously put it, are seen as relying on narrative for world-building and meaning-making, and narrative thus constitutes the link between political speech and social reality.

This model is compelling, of course, and it has its merits. It is attractive, particularly to pundits, journalists, and academics, who often have invested cultural (and financial) capital in their ability to tell, circulate, and analyze stories. However, it is also flawed in its totalizing conception of narrative. It can only be applied to contemporary conspiracism if we expand our definition of narrative to the point of meaninglessness. Indeed, in many instances of contemporary discourse, both journalistic and academic, “narrative” thus ends up simply meaning “vaguely textual”—or even: “fictional” or “unreal” in ways that banalize postmodern constructivism beyond repair. As a result, “narrative” is frequently evoked in a throwaway fashion in sentences in which a good editor, one perhaps less attuned to the a priori presumed importance of “narrative,” might well and rightfully propose to cut it. More problematically: While the early uses of “narrative” in conspiracy theory research helped legitimize the study of conspiracy theory as structurally similar to the production of other forms of (narrative) knowledge, the current tendency, in the US but even more so in Germany, to relabel “conspiracy theory” as “conspiracy narrative” often seems driven by a desire to short-circuit the discussion and to delegitimize conspiracism as untrue, as “narrative” in the sense of “fiction”—a move that is often as lazy as it is unsuccessful.

Conspiracism and Database

As powerful and as successful as narrative is in explaining classical conspiracism, it does little to explain contemporary conspiracism’s embrace of incoherence. However, once we expand our conceptual toolkit to regard “database” as a symbolic form just like narrative, we can start to better understand the attenuated narrativity of artifacts like Hildmann’s post quoted above or of the “drops” at the heart of the QAnon movement. In this view, posts like Hildmann’s can be characterized as containers of materials: They implement a paratactic storage logic, and their readerly appeals are based on exactly that: these structures’ ability to agglomerate and offer up for consumption masses of materials, even if in nonlinear and thus seemingly disorganized form. To its audience, Hildmann’s post “makes sense” not because

it explains anything, because it is internally interconnected, “integrating” or “coherent,” or because it ties in to outside narratives. Rather, it “makes sense” because it repeats and thus corroborates other, similar accounts, fragments, narratoids, feelings, or perceptions, and because it is internally repetitive. It adds “datapoints” to its readers’ existing “database” of thoughts and feelings about the pandemic, the government, themselves, society, and the political moment they live through.

The post’s stark incoherence and its circular repetitiveness, both crippling failures by the standards of narrative, thus are necessary and defining features of its paratactic, dataesque quality. The post works precisely because it constitutes a “mere” container that collects individual building blocks of narratives without spelling them out in potentially limiting ways. Where narrative strives to select and present the one version of reality that is supercharged with meaning, and where it creates meaning and plausibility through concatenation, database creates plausibility through massification. An individual data point is valuable not because it uniquely signifies a whole, but because it is redundant with others like it. Only as a mass does data make sense. Rambling, incoherent redundancy, then, is king, because it counter-intuitively generates this data plausibility: the post’s collection of grievances “works” precisely because it is rambling—its rambling, unbounded, closure-less quality signifying its infinite expandability, which in turn marks it as “true.” What Rosenblum and Muirhead thus presume to be a characteristic flaw in contemporary conspiracism, its reliance on repetition, is not a failure per se, not a failure at meaning-making but a failure at narrative progression that is simultaneously at the heart of its database form.

The database form also comes with another important affordance: precisely because it offers an over-abundance of information that is in part interchangeable, that “it refuses to order” (Manovich 1999, 85), and that is too vast to be engaged at a glance, it invites a broad range of readerly activity. Databases want to be queried, parsed, and browsed, and they invite their “users” to put together the elements they contain into tentative, potentially incomplete narratives. While, as reader response theory has shown, users/readers of culture always make up their own meanings, often in narrative form, the vastness and nonlinearity of the database form adds an important twist: It undermines closure and instead fosters fluid, ephemeral narratives to be read off the database.

The same logic also operates on a larger level and for other contemporary conspiracist movements: For its adherents, much of the fascination of the QAnon cult indeed stems from its database quality. The Q-drops do not easily cohere into (or reveal) a specific, concrete story elaborately weaving a larger variety of events into a single, coherent, meaningful whole. Rather, the drops are disjunct, mutually corroborative items, narratoids at best, that need to be collected. Indeed, collection is a core practice of the movement’s

true believers and an important source of textual pleasure for them. Different web pages, such as *qalerts.app*, have been set up to do just that: to collect the “drops,” to curate them, and to invite a form of exegesis that does not string them together into a single, integrated or integrating, linear whole, but that invites users to repeatedly browse, query, or parse the material, composing it in their minds into potentially incoherent, ephemeral strings. Accordingly, data practices of aggregation, distribution, as well as search and retrieval are as important to QAnon as are practices of data visualization (cf. Hannah 2021). Notably, this database quality of contemporary conspiracism is not limited to the digital realm, which underscores that “form” is a better term to think about this than “medium”: Several QAnon adherents have taken to self-publishing the Q-drops in book form, leaving intact their atomistic, morselized quality and thus carrying over the database form into a medium that, by its very nature, is both linear and clearly bound(ed).

Of course, collection as a praxis has always been at the heart of (fictional imaginations of) conspiracy theory, even the classical one: If, in fictional accounts, conspiracy theorists appear as crazy to their surroundings, it is because they are overflowing with masses of unordered information. However, in classical conspiracism, practices of data collection and aggregation constitute a key precursor leading up to the successful, narrative composition of this data into an integrated whole. Collecting (oftentimes hidden) data, in these imaginations, is followed by pattern sensing and by performatively spelling out, telling, the plot—a development climaxing in what Fenster calls the “narrative pivot.” In contrast to these classical imaginations, contemporary conspiracism is situated in a media environment marked by “spreadability” (Jenkins et al. 2013), which invites (and even remunerates) the database practices of collection and aggregation regardless of whether they are followed by a successful act of narrative integration or merely lead to a wider production and wider circulation, a massification, of fragments of meaning. More importantly, in a sociopolitical discursive context that in itself is post-narrative, “mere” collection gains a distinct cultural salience of its own, thus enabling and culturally validating contemporary conspiracism as a collection without narrative integration.

Conspiracism and Play

Another formal logic central to contemporary, post-narrative conspiracism is that of “play.” Where narrative affords selection and concatenation, and where database affords collection and massification, the formal logic of “play” affords interactive experimentation and competitive iteration. Games are typically played repeatedly, with variable and uncertain outcomes. Moreover, and not least because of its investment in iteration, play offers

an alternative, nuanced register to think about the real and suspensions of disbelief, a point I will return to in detail below.

Similar to narrative, play works on a large, virtual database of paradigmatic choices. Players select elements and combine them into play-throughs that lead to either a winning or a losing outcome. This mechanism of selection from a paradigm and composition into a linear sequence is similar to how narrative works, and it is at the heart of video games, even of so-called open-world ones, where this interactive process of selecting from a vast repertoire of possible moves creates the illusion of choice. The principle, however, informs all games. Even a game of chess with its massively restricted paradigm of possible moves ends up telling one story (“of a quick, effortless win,” “of a drawn-out battle,” “of a come-back from an early near defeat”) out of many by way of interactive selection by both players involved.⁸ Play thus is indeed similar to narrative: it too strings elements together; but different from narrative it is not interested in producing meaning but in producing a winning concatenation, whatever “winning” means in the agonistic context of the game at stake; and different from narrative, play is not invested in one correct, “true,” or meaningful concatenation but in iteration: the experimental repetition of somewhat similar versions that may or may not yield different and differently successful outcomes.⁹ In effect, play thus is always non-serious in nuanced ways: aware, that its current version of events is by no means the definitive one, yet treating each playthrough as the only one that matters.

More so than database, play has previously been used to understand contemporary conspiracism, mostly in the context of QAnon and the January 6 insurrection in the US, both in the news media and in scholarship.¹⁰ Work done in new media studies and in game studies here crucially shifts perspectives on contemporary conspiracism, not least by focusing on the pleasures of playfully engaging in conspiracy fantasies. Hugh Davies’s work here is exemplary: He claims that “QAnon began as an Alternate Reality Game” and contends that “its playability accounts for some of its affective appeal” since “the phenomenon [of QAnon] both exhibits and invites numerous of modes of ludic interaction, such as Live Action Role Play, Cruel Play, and Dark Play” (2022, 60). To better understand the role that such “ludic interactions” play in contemporary conspiracism, Davies, following Tuters, maps how QAnon (like “Pizzagate”) traveled from the Imageboards 4chan and 8chan to a broader public not literate in these original textual environments’ signifying conventions. Notably, QAnon openly bears the genre markers of Alternate Reality Gaming from the beginning on: The individual postings by “Q,” which Davies characterizes as “morsels of narrative” (65), are referred to in QAnon lore as “breadcrumbs,” a term taken directly from Alternate Reality Gaming (ARG). Similarly, while the “paranoid hermeneutics”

of QAnon do tie it to more classical conspiracy theorizing, Davies insists that they also “are integral to the enigmatic quality of ARGs” (Davies and Dziekan qtd. in 65–66), again establishing QAnon, in its original context, as a game that was readable as such by an audience literate in contemporary online game cultures.¹¹ And even while QAnon was moving away from its original media context of the Imageboards into the mainstream of Facebook and YouTube, “ARG nomenclature and techniques such as ‘rabbit holes,’ ‘trail heads,’ ‘drops,’ ‘breadcrumbs,’ ‘puzzles,’ and the encouragement of apophenic hermeneutics filtered through a growing online community” (72).

Perhaps the most intriguing ludic element tying QAnon to Alternate Reality Gaming, however, is “a rhetorical disavowal known as the TINAG rhetoric, whereby, through the course of play, the game will announce ‘This Is Not a Game’ (TINAG).” As Davies explains, this “metacommunicative double-speak signals to experienced ARG players “this is actually a game” without breaking camouflage and thereby highlighting the playfully subversive tone” (2022, 66).¹² TINAG is particularly productive a concept for understanding the role of “play” for the poetic of contemporary conspiracism, not only because exhortations that “this is not a game” are indeed part of the QAnon canon. Rather, it is productive because the formal logic of play here enables an audience practice of suspending disbelief that is similar to but different from how “fiction” works in the context of narrative. As with other play-driven ARG practices, TINAG thus allows the conspiracy-players to “overlay [their] everyday life and, so-to-speak, charge it with magic” (Cramer and Ming 2023) precisely by tapping into the ambivalent realness of playing that is at once only one of many possible iterations of the same game and simultaneously the only iteration that, right here, right now, matters. Where the suspension of disbelief in narrative is thus typically marked by genre-specific paratextual signposts demarcating fiction as such, the TINAG suspension of disbelief in play excels in facilitating a pleasurable twilight of the un/real.¹³

Where classic conspiracy theory thus turns on an alternative account of reality that is presumably more true, more coherent with regard to (all) the facts than the official narrative, conspiracism-as-play is powered by a different set of affordances: Here, participants do not need to “actually” gain additional, secret knowledge about the world. Rather they are “first and foremost engaged, regardless of whether they believe in the authenticity of [for example] Q’s messages. And as ‘[p]layfulness prioritises engagement over external consequence, realness, or convention,’ it becomes clear how central play is to imageboard [. . .] culture” and to the new conspiracism resonating with it (Masek and Stenos qtd. in de Zeeuw and Gekker 2023, 4). As de Zeeuw and Gekker continue, “seen from this perspective,” QAnon is significant for how its adherents “are able to assign magical meaning to cryptic Q drops, in ways that combine new-age spiritualism, paganism and alt-right sensibilities, *all the while enjoying the plausible deniability of its ambiguous playful*

character” (2023, 4, emphasis mine).¹⁴ The political efficacy of TINAG rhetoric, then, does not lie in how it makes QAnon followers total believers in a single truth, but in how it creates a plausibly deniable, “ambiguous” perspective on the world, which resonates with recent findings about contemporary conspiracy culture more broadly: As de Wildt and Aupers put it, “an understudied majority” of participants in contemporary “conspiracy culture” do not “(straightforwardly) believ[e] its theories” (2023, 4). While the explicit invocation of TINAG rhetoric may thus be unique to QAnon, the playful engagement it demarcates seems to be a hallmark of contemporary conspiracy culture, and of conspiracy “theories” other than QAnon, more broadly.

At the same time, de Zeeuw and Gekker’s explanation points to one of the acute challenges of enlisting play to model the poetic of contemporary conspiracism: With their “alt-right sensibilities,” these movements easily turn violent or develop into forms of domestic terrorism, which sits uneasily with how “play tends to be idealized” as a fun or harmless activity (2023, 3), a problem Davies also notes when he acknowledges an “atmosphere of reticence” in response to work that seems to “reduce the seriousness of QAnon as being game-like, or as somehow playful.” After all, “play and games are frequently framed as purely childhood activities, enjoyable pastimes, and practices of social, emotional, and physical fulfillment. In uncritically focusing on these aspects alone, the darker sides of play are overlooked” (2022, 63). However, shying away from this perspective comes with its own perils, as it fails to identify key moments of attraction in contemporary conspiracist discourse.

Post-Narrative Politics?

If, as Knight (2008) writes, classic conspiracy theory is attractive to its “believers” because it offers the “refuge of humanist certainties in an increasingly posthumanist age,” the widespread, popular appeal of post-narrative conspiracism, which does not offer the certainties of a coherent narrative but instead maximizes the unboundedness of massified, fragmented experience alongside ambiguity and ludic experimentation, suggests that something has changed indeed. Contemporary conspiracism, this would suggest, does not simply operate media that are new and different from those of classical conspiracy theory: They are different not simply because they utilize blogs or online databases. Rather, they are different because they operate different formal principles, as outlined above. Accordingly, they appeal to their audiences and practitioners for very different reasons, afford very different forms of engagement, invite very different social practices, and operate very different textual and epistemic mechanisms than classical conspiracy theory used to. What has changed, in other words, is not simply the medium but the entire social and textual ecosystem these new conspiracist practices inhabit.

In his essay, which does not shy away from grand, totalizing gestures, Manovich makes a related claim. He characterizes the rise of the symbolic form of database as indicative of a new “age,” the “computer age,” which is not simply the result of the arrival of new, computer-based media. Rather than subscribing to a simplistic base-superstructure model in which media change triggers changes in discourse, he sees the new poetics of new media as resonant with, not caused by, changes in media. Manovich writes,

if, after the death of God (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard) and the arrival of the web (Tim Berners-Lee), the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database. But it is also appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database.

(1999, 81)

Manovich’s notion of a simple shift from an age of narrative to an age of database seems less convincing to me here. It is, again, informed by the Manichean vision of two warring symbolic forms. However, his characterization of the decline of narrative as a late stage in a larger development (*after* the “end of grand Narratives”), an intensification of the trends of postmodernism, so to speak, appears to be most useful indeed.

It reads our current sociopolitical and discursive moment as one in which narrative with its key affordances of closure, boundedness, and coherence clearly is no longer the single, dominant formal logic it once was; and it understands this development as part of (late) postmodernization. In this sense, the then-unexpected victory of the “incoherent demagogue” Donald Trump in 2016 is part of precisely this larger transformation of the socio-textual environments of postmodernizing societies (Klein),¹⁵ as is the rise and sudden success of a number of similarly “incoherent” populist movements in the US and Europe starting in the second decade of the twenty-first century.¹⁶

Attempts to read these successes of right-wing populism in the “era of Donald Trump and Brexit” as indicative of a new politico-discursive order have typically turned to the term “post-truth” (Flood). Exploding into public usage in 2015 and named Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016, the term is useful because it throws into relief the blatant disregard for easily verifiable factual truths in right-wing populism and contemporary conspiracist discourse. It is less beneficial, however, for how it tends to engender strategically naive empiricism: The term “post-truth” typically masks the role of gatekeepers and gate-keeping institutions (notably regardless of whether one views them as problematic or beneficial) in determining what counts as “true” in any given society. It instead redraws by fiat the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate discourse—thus hiding the social and institutional

power dynamics involved in negotiations of social truths behind an appeal to presumably simple, monolithic empirical truth.¹⁷ Most problematically, perhaps, it proposes a reductive model of political speech: As if the truth or falsehood of a political statement was the only category of its value, or as if categorizing it as either ended up heightening or diminishing any of its appeal or power for the people speaking or listening to it.

The more useful approaches to the current politico-discursive moment thus turn away from matters of “truth” and instead focalize the formal qualities of so-called post-truth politics and the kinds of engagements and pleasures these formal qualities afford. Echoing the terms by which Rosenblum and Muirhead describe the incoherence of the new conspiracism, *The Economist*, for example, claims that “post-truth politics” are made possible by changes in how discourse circulates:

Content no longer comes in fixed formats and in bundles, such as articles in a newspaper, that help establish provenance and set expectations; it can take any shape—a video, a chart, an animation. A single idea, or “meme”, can replicate shorn of all context, like DNA in a test tube. Data about the spread of a meme has become more important than whether it is based on facts.

(“Yes” 2016)

What this article describes as an effect of the internet and social media is again, formally speaking, a form of decontextualization, which I have modeled as denarrativization above. It invites forms of engagement that are different from the world- and meaning-making associated with the narrative form. Dale Beran accordingly notes that “in a post-fact world” and to those involved, “conspiracy was more fun and useful than reality” (2019, 221), thus spotlighting two registers, pleasure and usefulness, that do not depend on a statement’s truth. And Gabriele Cosentino makes a similar point about “the Post-Truth World Order”: in this new discursive regime, he writes, “game-like experiences” regarding “various contentious political issues” have “given people the ability to break down a consensual, evidence-based reality and to transform it by bending it to their desires, aspirations or fears, even the most radical or delirious” ones (2020, 73). In these analyses, the core qualities of post-truth politics—a breakdown of consensual reality and a precedence of emotion—are once more afforded by the presence and cultural resonance of formal logics other than narrative.

Conclusion

In the introduction of their article on “QAnon as Conspiracy Fictioning,” de Zeeuw and Gekker observe that “existing research on [contemporary] conspiracy movements still lacks... an adequate conceptual framework for

understanding the participatory, ambivalent, playful and fictional practices” that power contemporary conspiracism—practices that are “intrinsically rewarding” to practitioners but that “simultaneously [enable] their recruitment for extremist political causes” (2023, 5). This article is motivated by a similar concern over a conceptual blind spot in conspiracy research, but it turns to the concept of “form” to model three characteristic formal logics—narrative, database, and play—to better understand contemporary conspiracism.

Doing so I have argued that classical conspiracy theory is characterized by its reliance on the formal principles of narrative as its dominant symbolic form. Conversely, the new conspiracism that continues to energize contemporary right-wing populism tends to de-emphasize narrative and foreground other formal logics in its stead. The appeals these artifacts exert, and the practices they afford, are thus better understood by focalizing the formal logics of database and play. In making this argument, I have assumed that these three formal logics constitute gradable qualities: New conspiracist artifacts are best analyzed not by characterizing them as all database or all play, but by tending to the varying expressions of these formal registers, by tracing the dataesque or ludic qualities these artifacts exhibit. Their reliance on these non-narrative formal logics, I have finally argued, lets contemporary conspiracism thrive in a socio-textual environment that is more generally characterized by a waning importance of narrative as its single most important symbolic logic. This socio-textual environment has been previously labeled as “post-truth,” but it might more accurately be described as post-narrative instead.

Thus raising awareness for the role of database and play aims to counter a troubling myopia in many recent discussions of contemporary conspiracism, be they in journalism or in academia, which tend to over-rely on the category of narrative. Doing so, they typically try to judge contemporary conspiracism by the standards of narrative (such as coherence, or the lack thereof), to understand its appeals by way of the affordances of narrative (such as world-building or meaning-making), or to suggest measures to counter conspiracism as narrative (by debunking false conspiracist narratives, or attempting counter-narration). Over-relying on narrative in this way, and thus over-broadening the concept, however, leaves us ill-equipped to understand or confront the success of contemporary conspiracism, whether it circulates in the context of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, QAnon, or the American elections. What is needed instead is a more nuanced register of forms to capture the formal qualities of these discourses.

Notes

- 1 This paper is part of a larger research project on the post-narrative quality of right-wing populism in the US and Germany, funded by the VolkswagenStiftung. My focus on the US and Germany here is indebted to this research context, but

the same shift could easily be traced in the UK in the context of Brexit, or in other European countries. For more information on the research project, cf. www.postnarrative-politics.de.

- 2 Cf. the attempt at a definition by Reto U. Schneider in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*: “As a noun, the term *Schwurbler* has been chosen to characterize Covid skeptics who make confused claims about the disease and suspect conspiracies behind every public health measure” (my translation). Similar to the notion of the “deplorable” in the US, the term has recently been claimed by conspiracists as a term of endearment (cf. *Der Widerstand*). Schneider, like a number of other sources, identifies an etymological connection between Schwurbel and Strudel (vortex), without going into any specifics.
- 3 The translation is mine, the original reads: “Der echte Grund für den Haftbefehl ist, dass man mich ruhig stellen will, da die nächsten 6 Monate entscheidend sind für ihre Diktatur-Absicherung! Natürlich werden sie lockern, aber das alles an Bedingungen koppeln wie Selbsttests (Die Tests sind Genabstriche und NanoImplantate), QR-Code für Freiheit aus Sektor, Impf-Pass fürs Reisen! Sie etablieren ein Totalüberwachungssystem wie in China! Während sie jetzt also MICH per Haftbefehl suchen sperrt Mao-Merkel weiter Deutsche wie Tiere ein, entrechtet und enteignet sie, zerstört Mittelstand, Kleinunternehmen und sogar die Autoindustrie (Deal mit China) und ermordet die Alten mit ihren Genscheren-Spritzen (sie verändern die Genetik, sagt sogar Zuckerberg), foltert die Kinder mit Masken, Spritzen und strafrechtlicher Verfolgung beim Fussballspiel und koppelt Freiheit und offene Läden und Wirtschaftskraft daran, ob sich alle Menschen ‘impfen’ lassen, denn die Pandemie ist erst vorbei ‘wenn alle Menschen auf der Welt geimpft sind!’ (O-Ton Merkel)! Es ist eine GIGANTISCHER PHARMA-KOMPLOTT ZUR ERRICHTUNG DER NEUEN WELTORDNUNG! Für die polnische Jüdin Mao-Merkel (Aniela Kazmierczak, geborene Kasner) braucht es einen Haftbefehl und nicht für mich! Unter Merkel, Spahn, Laschet, Söder und Müller geht Deutschland unter, unter Hildmann wird Deutschland auferstehen! ALLES WAS SIE ERZÄHLEN IST EINE LÜGE! ES GIBT KEINE PANDEMIE UND KEIN VIRUS! ALLES MÄRCHEN, DAMIT SIE EUCH DIE GENSPRITZE REINRAMMEN KÖNNEN! LASST EUCH NICHT IMPFEN, ES SIND KEINE IMPFUNGEN! ES IST EIN GENETISCHER EINGRIFF, SIE VERÄNDERN EURE VERERBUNG MIT ‘GENE-EDITING’! Gates finanzierte Gene-Editing-Forschung und ließ das an Mäusen austesten! Sie sollten nur weibliche Nachkommen bekommen, es funktionierte durch Injektion von RNA! Die ganze Population starb nach einer Generation durch fehlende Männchen aus! EXAKT DAS GLEICHE wollen sie jetzt mit den Menschen machen! Es geht um Völkermord!”
- 4 In its heightened affect, Hildmann’s post can also be read as a melodramatic “tableaux.” Cf. Haltungen for a reading, in a very different context, of how “emotional tableaux” sideline “narrative coherence” (1995, 307). For a monograph-length study of affect (rather than narrative) as powering alt-right mobilization, cf. Strick (2021).
- 5 Manovich takes the term “symbolic form” from Cassirer, who in turn bases it on Erwin Panovski’s work. Manovich’s use, however, does not fully jibe with either, and he seems to use the term primarily to mean “formal principle,” which is how I will also use it in this contribution.
- 6 This particular adaptation of Manovich’s framework, of symbolic forms as plural and gradable, and its combination with the notion of “form” and “affordance” as modeled by the work of Caroline Levine, is the result of the work of a DFG-funded research network on Narrative Liminality. For more, including “Ten Theses on Narrative Liminality,” cf. Herrmann et al. 2022.

- 7 The chapter on “Blackstream Knowledge” in John Fiske’s *Media Matters* (1994) serves as a fine example of a scholar toeing the line between acknowledging the importance of and need for counter-cultural knowledge on the one hand and embracing the conspiracy theory that AIDS was a manufactured virus designed to decimate the Black population on the other.
- 8 Manovich also includes sports in his exemplary list of play-driven activity: “Games (sports, chess, cards, etc.) are a good example of a cultural form that requires algorithm-like behaviour from the players” (1999, 84), with Baseball perhaps being the most evocative example when radio commentators in the US would read raw data on an ongoing game from ticker-tape and turn it into a “live” narrative (for a particularly notorious example, cf. Rogin 1988, 11).
- 9 For a slightly different modeling of play in the context of the Trump presidency, which hones in on the role of agon in the reality TV format of the Gamedoc, cf. Kanzler and Scharlaj (2017).
- 10 For journalistic discussions of QAnon as a form of play, many of which were published in 2020, cf. Izabella Kaminska’s pieces in the *Financial Times*, “The ‘Game Theory’ in the Qanon Conspiracy Theory” and her “QAnon Lures Adherents by Acting like a Game,” as well as Kyle Daly’s article on *Axios* claiming that “QAnon Works Like a Video Game to Hook People.” Alyssa Rosenberg’s article in the *Washington Post* is notable both for being relatively early and for its insistence that “to focus merely on QAnon’s content and not the form it takes is to miss why the conspiracy theory has spread so widely—and why similar ideas may prove incredibly difficult to combat” (2019, n.p.). In many of these discussion, both journalistic and academic, one can also witness a particular “throwaway” use of the category of narrative: While these texts work to develop and employ an alternative formal vocabulary, they often nevertheless employ the term, typically with little to no analytic benefits. The sheer amount of these discussions underscores that QAnon is certainly an outlier in terms of how easily visible these “play” dynamics are, not least because of the media context, Imageboards, from which the movement emerged. However, even if QAnon is an extreme example, scholars have identified “a more ‘playful’ engagement” across the board in contemporary conspiracy culture (cf. de Wildt and Aupers 2023, 4).
- 11 Cf. also de Zeeuw and Gekker’s observation that on these Imageboards, users responding to the original Q postings openly addressed the question of whether this was “a God-tier LARP” or real (2023, 7).
- 12 In this, TINAG is similar to Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling, “a longstanding vernacular theorization of spectator knowledge and pleasure,” and, hence, of alternative models of a suspension of disbelief (Wrenn 2007, 150). Cf. Herrmann (2016) on Kayfabe as a conceptual lens for understanding contemporary US politics.
- 13 There are, of course, narrative genres that conspicuously play with their own (lack of) empirical realness. Reality TV and the Mockumentary might be the most prominent examples of those. However, one of the drawbacks of over-relying on narrative to understand conspiracism is that it adopts narrative’s investedness in the reality-fiction divide, which then makes it difficult to identify and analyze this playful twilight of the un/real.
- 14 Cf. Tuters for an account of the German Alt-Right movement of the *Identitäre* employing Live Action Role Playing (LARPing 38).
- 15 On Trump’s incoherence, cf. also Cohen (2017). For a different take on Trump’s incoherence as dataesque/algorithmic, cf. Grassegger and Krogerus’s assertion that “Trump’s striking inconsistencies, his much-criticized fickleness, and the resulting array of contradictory messages, suddenly turned out to be his great asset” (2017).

- 16 On the post-narrative qualities of the German anti-immigrant movement PEGIDA, which despite its openness to “Great Replacement” tropes I would not classify as a primarily conspiracist movement, cf. Herrmann (2019).
- 17 Cf. Jayson Harsin’s assertion that post-truth “is actually a breakdown of social trust” and that, accordingly, what “is accepted as popular truth is really a weak form of knowledge, opinion based on trust in those who supposedly know.” The post-truth discourse, notably including “fact-checking” and “the discourse of panic” around a disappearance of truth builds up this “weak form of knowledge” as hard truth (2018).

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NEW MEDIA'S CONSPIRATORIAL AFFORDANCES

An Ecology of Mind Approach

Leticia Cesarino

Introduction

Conspiracy theories are by now the subject of a thriving field of studies, increasingly interdisciplinary and applied. Yet, much like studies on populism, it continues to suffer from disciplinary fragmentation, as well as chronic definitional dilemmas. Where does conspiracy theory end and other types of revelatory explanation, including scholarly “hermeneutics of suspicion,” begin? Does the term designate a historical phenomenon specific to Western modern societies, or a trans-historical anthropological universal diversely manifested in time and space? Is it anchored in predominantly individual or social, cultural or psychological, symbolic or material, conjunctural or structural dimensions?

Recent attempts to systematize this literature, such as Butter and Knight’s (2020) impressive compilation of expert works on the topic, lay out a rich range of possibilities for tackling these questions. However, most fail—or refuse—to provide definite answers for them. This reinforces the notion that disciplinary approaches to conspiracy theory may not just be different lenses on the same, objective reality. Rather, they entertain historically situated and recursive relationships—in Hacking’s (1995) terms, looping effects—with their own empirical subject.

Thus, while conspiracy thinking has always been part of (modern) society, conspiracy *theory* is a more recent, post-war phenomenon (Butter and Knight 2015). Similarly to what happened with the notion of populism, what changed was the politics of delegitimation whereby intellectual champions of the “pluralistic consensus” in the US came to frame such explanations as pathological and irrational (Fenster 2008). This did not necessarily lead to

the waning of conspiracy theory in society. Rather, it was pushed to the margins of the liberal public sphere; into private domains of rumor, fun and entertainment, religion, or new-age spiritualities (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Harambam 2020).

In the twenty-first century, the historical pendulum seems to be swinging once more. Both populist and conspiratorial publics involved reactivating a mimetic archive (Mazzarella 2017) of authoritarian and conservative views that had remained latent in many segments of the Brazilian population since redemocratization in 1988 (Hatzikidi and Dullo 2021). More than an alternative agenda advanced within a shared political field, these are meta-political claims on how democracy itself should be repurposed in order to work on behalf of “upright citizens”—in their view, the only true Brazilians. A significant portion of this meta-political effort has been accomplished through the propagation of conspiracy theories, which aim to undermine the credibility of professional journalism, academic experts, proponents of progressive policies, and the overall politico-electoral system.

Beyond processes of detachment or disruption, such conspiratorial publics may also afford the emergence of new anti-structural identities, analogous to the “double bind” semantics of medieval *coniurationes* and *conspiratio*, as noted by Zwierlein (2020).¹ As I argued for the rise of far-right conservative identities in newly created digital spaces during Brazil's 2018 elections (Cesarino 2020), these would often take the form of what Turner (1969) calls *communitas*: undifferentiated, heteronomous socialities organized around a symbolic “culture core” standing for authentic, pre-social realities. This semantic core coupled typical populist empty signifiers (the people, the nation) with those from post-neoliberal ideologies about the supposedly spontaneous orders of tradition (God, the family) and markets (individual entrepreneurship, economic freedom) (Brown 2019; Cesarino 2020).

The Brazilian case suggests that the more or less disruptive, more or less reconstructive character of conspiracy theories will depend on the broader ecological dynamics at play. While in all cases such narratives seed among “seekers” distrust against mainstream intermediaries, they may remain harmless ideations mostly contained in private domains of rumor, entertainment, or conspирituаlity (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). Alternatively, their harmful effects may be more indirect, such as refusal to vaccinate or to engage in climate change mitigation procedures (Jolley, Mari, and Douglas 2020). In more extreme cases, conspiracy theories may warrant extra-legal action against enemies fantasized as existential threats, including by violent means (Dumont 1981). In far-right publics, there is a higher probability that distrust sowed by conspiracy theories may revert into paranoid and hate speech, and eventually into violent or insurgent offline action, such as in the 2021 Capitol riots in the US (Kapferer and Kapferer 2021).

In all cases, conspiracy theory, however defined, seems to be at once a symptom of individuals' desire to break free from central intermediaries—authorities, institutions—they no longer trust, the means through which such detachment happens, and the path toward “the redemptive healing force of agency” (Harding and Steward 2003, 259). While I agree that belief in conspiracy theory must not be reduced to a pathology of the individual psyche (Butter and Knight 2020), it may manifest pathologies of the trans-individual “mind” accruing from modern contradictions between capitalism and democracy (Guattari 2005) or the latter's own paradoxes (Mouffe 2000). What Bateson (1972) expressively called an “ecology of bad ideas” describes how systemic errors may eventually branch out and lead to system runaway, much like a parasite may end up killing its host in an “ecology of weeds” (340). Similarly, conspiracy theory's parasitic relationship toward the mainstream publics (Zwierlein 2020) may, at particular historical conjunctures such as during the Protestant Reformation or the rise of fascism, eventually lead to runaway forms of schism² such as domestic terrorism, *coups d'état*, violent outbreaks, or even open warfare.

The next section probes the role new media infrastructures have played in such ecologies by looking at conspiratorial affordances that are located neither in the non-human agency of algorithms, nor in the human agency of platform users, but co-emerge as a result of their ever-emergent, recursive interaction. It does so by showing how the basic conspiracy semiotics of Brazilian far-right publics converges closely with technical biases embedded in the algorithmic design of contemporary platform architectures, thus compounding what I call conspiratorial affordances.

New Media's Conspiratorial Affordances

Most studies on conspiracy theory and new media have oscillated between discourse and interactionist analyses of conspiratorial content on the one hand, and mapping network effects on the other (Aupers 2020; Leal 2020; Reijven, Cho, and Dori-Hacohen 2020; Mahl, Schäfer, and Jing 2022). The analytics of affordances (Gibson, 2014) may help bridge this divide, by suggesting how “first-order” features of specific platforms facilitate the formation of conspiratorial publics (Theocharis et al. 2021) and, eventually, “second-order” escalation of anti-establishment identities and violent radicalization (Abdalla Mikhaeli and Baskerville 2023).

An ecological approach searches for affordances at an even higher level, that of the cybernetic alignment between human users and non-human algorithms. In what Bateson (1972) called “mind,” technical qualities of algorithmic design become social qualities of discourses and interactions, and vice versa. This section explores this possibility by showing where and how the semiotics of conspiratorial narratives in Brazil's far-right publics conflate

with the technical properties of the medium in which they circulate, manifesting what I propose to call conspiratorial affordances.

According to Leone, Madisson, and Ventsel, the semiotics of conspiracy theory is fundamentally anchored on fear as preemptive, vague frame that “actively search[es] for potential referents” in the world (2020, 46). In practice, this takes the form of a quest for omens and warning signs of danger in one’s environment, drawing on both past experience (“historical scars”) and future projections (“horrific scenarios”) (45). This work of “research” often involves analogies whose overarching frame is an image of the enemy as a reverse mirror image of oneself. This projection of the enemy as “a symmetrical copy of one’s own structures with a minus sign” is, according to the authors, the fundamental “semiotic unit” (50) of conspiracy theory.

Indeed, atmospheres of fear and permanent threat are a basic feature of contemporary far-right publics in Brazil and elsewhere (Fielitz and Marcks 2019; Reinhardt 2022). While there is little doubt that the human agency of both influencers and common users play a major part in the creation and maintenance of such an environment, technical biases embedded in platform architectures prepare the ground by hyper-accelerating the rhythm of socio-technical systems. As algorithms nudge users’ attentional habits toward enhanced screen time, they produce what Chun (2016) aptly called a “temporality of permanent crisis.” The artificial reduction of the viscosity of social process may push it toward what Turner (1969) called a liminal state.

In liminal or crisis states, the social operates according to structural logics that differ from, and in many ways reverse, those governing linear, stable states. Rather than differentiating along paths anticipated by convention, local trajectories tend to coalesce chaotically into mimetic, crowd-like states where individual edges are smoothed out (Tarde 2011 [1890]) and order reappears at an ever-emergent level until a new path toward reorganization is found (Prigogine and Stengers 1984). This structure resonates with what Lury and Day (2019) called algorithmic paths of “a-typical” individuation: a “mode of recursive inclusion, in which both the individual and the type are repeatedly specified anew,” according to criteria that “are not pre-given but rather open to further (indefinite) specification” (9).

In the Ndembu initiation rituals Turner (1969) analyzed, an officiant controls the process of reorganization in liminal states, leading novices back to social structure in line with their new identities as adults. In our societies, liminal crowds are often steered by charismatic figures such as populist leaders or cult gurus, who may catalyze anti-structural forces into insurgent events of “dialectical collapse” (Kapferer and Kapferer 2021, 151), or, if schism is avoided, into the emergence of new anti-establishment identities (Cesarino 2020).

Contemporary populist crowds such as those assembled around Jair Bolsonaro reflect the ways in which new cybernetic media enact the social at

large (Chun 2021; Hayden 2021). Algorithms help perform the conjuring function charismatic leaders played in pre-digital environments. Indeed, typical Internet-based conspiracy theories such as QAnon do not fundamentally rely on physical co-presence around the leader's body. "Q" is, ultimately, the community of followers themselves, recursively crowdsourced by platform algorithms and nudged by influencers such as Donald Trump. The image of individual bodies such as the Q Shaman encapsulates "the character of the assemblage (and certainly the fascist potential) and an internal tension to dissolution" (Kapferer and Kapferer 2021, 155).

Far-right conspiracy theories also manifest how platforms recursively re-assemble the social into paradoxical fractal publics, as algorithms interpellate users as "dividual" entities while offering an illusory user experience of unbridled freedom and individuality (Lury and Day 2019). Moreover, algorithmic affordances of personalization, micro-targeting, or confirmation bias make sure that every network segment, and ultimately every individual user, will get the most appropriate and persuasive version of the conspiratorial plot or image of the leader (Chun 2021; Leal 2020). Multiple fragments of a narrative are added and (re)combined into ever-emergent customized versions of itself, as algorithmic "escalation loops" afford "continuous access to, and repeated recombination of, contents that accommodate new information" (Abdalla Mikhaeli and Baskerville 2023, 3).

Conspiracy semiotics therefore becomes a hybrid process where the human agency of the conspiracy "seeker" (Fenster 2008) is supplemented with the non-human agency of search and recommendation algorithms. As Internet users "do their own research" after omens of supposedly hidden truths, they find them because platform algorithms are also searching for these users. Specific dynamics such as cyber-cascades—unbroken chains of reposted and unchecked information in digital echo chambers—may nudge or entrench users into conspiracy "rabbit holes" (Stano 2020), while algorithmic clustering enhances the probability that engagement in one conspiratorial public will lead to participation in another.

Another key element of conspiracy semiotics, its mythopoetics (Leone, Madisson, and Ventsel 2020), converges closely with how platforms collapse contextual demarcations between fact and fiction, public and private domains (boyd 2010; Chun 2016). Conspiracy entrepreneurs and seekers often draw on fragments of content and styles of storytelling taken from the entertainment industry or digital genres such as memetics, fan fictions, or mockumentaries (Leal 2020). They also commonly overlap with publics hitherto associated with the private sphere, such as those forming around religion, spirituality, everyday moralities, lifestyle, or entrepreneurship (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015; Harambam 2020).

More fundamentally, the collapse between fact and fiction observed in extreme forms of conspiratorial publics echoes patterns of symbolization typical

of the holistic scale Bateson (1972) called, in his studies of schizophrenia, “Level III Learning” (see note 3). A feature Turner (1969) identified in liminal states, heteronomy, is also characteristic of this level of learning, besides being a major feature of platform design. In Learning III, the subject may lose the capacity to organize his or her own behavior, delegating it to some external authority, real or imagined—a ritual officiant, a cult leader, a recursive cybernetic public.

In extreme cases, he or she may, like the schizophrenic patient, turn to a “world in which personal identity merges into all the processes of relationship in some vast ecology or aesthetics of cosmic interaction” (Bateson 1972, 222). In the fantasy worlds therein produced, like in conspiracy semiotics, “every detail of the universe is seen as proposing a view of the whole” (223). Interestingly enough, embracing a conspiracy theory will often involve reversing the attribution of heteronomy: the “enlightened few” believe to have access to some deeper truth hidden from “ignorant ‘sheeple’” who “simply believe what the authorities tell them” (Harambam 2020, 288).

Such patterns of reverse mirroring underscore how conspiracy semiotics draws heavily on “ethnocentric” biases that are already present in human cognition and sociality at large (Lévi-Strauss 1958), and which platform affordances all but intensify. Homophilic bias in particular—the algorithmic assumption that “similarity breeds connection” (Chun 2021, 95)—seems to prompt spontaneous systemic reorganization in the opposite direction. As Leal (2020) put it, “the flip-side and logical consequence of clustering is segregation” (500). In extreme cases, segregation may lead to polarization and, ultimately, to bifurcation of the socio-technical field into two camps, where one appears as the reverse mirror image of the other (Cesarino 2022a)—precisely, the overarching semiotic unit of conspiracy theory according to Leone and colleagues (2020).

This structural unit was observed in my research materials from the very beginning, and would (re)appear at multiple scales at once. Even though the overall notion may be found in multiple disciplines and theories in the human sciences, I coined the term “reverse mimesis” in order to contemplate its mathematical, potentially computable dimension, also embedded in the technical agency of algorithms (Cesarino 2022a). I first spotted it in the 2018 elections as a recurrent design pattern in pro-Bolsonaro memes, whereby antagonistic binaries mimicked the enemy’s aesthetics but reversed its content. Thus, for instance, feminist activists were pitted against right-wing women according to visceral anthropological dualisms such as beautiful-ugly, pure-impure, order-disorder, safe-dangerous, animal-human, and so forth (Douglas 2002).

Reverse mimesis also appeared shaping user interaction, in the form of practical algorithms deployed to sort fact from fiction, friend from enemy. It was sometimes rendered explicit in rules-of-thumb advising followers, for instance, to deflect accusations from leftists by “casting the spell against the

sorcerer,” or to claim that the left “accuses its enemy of doing that which it does.” Finally, reverse mimesis appeared structuring the network itself, such as in Twitter hashtag battles whereby the far right would mimic and reverse the left’s slogans. An instance is the #YesHim hashtag created to counter the #NotHim call against Bolsonaro during women’s street demonstrations in the 2018 elections (Cesarino 2022b).

From an ecological, mixed-methods perspective, reverse mimesis manifested the very core of the Brazilian far right’s media politics of resonances. It not only held its multiple segments together, but did so by engaging in an uncanny relationship of both copy and opposition vis-à-vis their common enemy. As emic metaphors such as the *Matrix* movie’s “red pill” suggest, these reversals are not symmetrical, but imply a deep symmetry break at the level of meta-communication (Bateson 1972). Differently put, they are not about local trajectories (parts) opposing each other in a shared playing field, like political adversaries in a liberal democracy. Rather, they manifest existential struggles at a holistic level (Dumont 1981), which subjects on the far right will often experience as open theopolitical battles where, to put it in Walter Benjamin’s (1990) notorious terms, “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.”

From a systems perspective, such symmetry breaks manifest what non-equilibrium thermodynamics calls irreversibility (Prigogine and Stengers 1984). Irreversibility points at “holistic” bifurcation thresholds that decide the fate or possibilities for future pathways of the entire system: In conspiratorial terms, whether it will usher into irretrievable chaos (should the enemy win), or unlock spontaneous prosperity (should the friend camp win). The specter of degeneration therein implied compounds the preemptive quality of the atmosphere of fear and threat characteristic of conspiracy semiotics (Leone, Madisson, and Ventsel 2020). In narrative terms, this symmetry break often manifests as “slippery slope” tropes warranting apparently outlandish leaps from, say, non-binary restrooms to the end of Christian civilization.

At a cognitive level, irreversibility is manifested in how, “once people have begun to believe in a conspiracy theory, it is almost impossible to convince them otherwise” (Butter and Knight 2015, 5). Abdalla Mikhaeli and Baskerville (2023) showed how multiple low-level platform affordances may combine to produce second-order radicalization effects through “identity-driven escalation of commitment.” What Bateson (1958) called schismogenesis is not however about echo chambers per se. It is a recursive process accruing from cumulative positive feedback between two parties, as one’s pattern of behavior reinforces the other’s, and vice versa, leading to a pathway of schism.

From tribal rituals (Bateson 1958) to the Cold War nuclear arms race (Bateson 1972), schismogenesis is often associated with processes of anti-structural reversal operating at the level of Learning III. Indeed, in the

Brazilian case, conspiracy-related schismogenesis would often take the form of reverse mimesis (Cesarino 2022a). Freud's uncanny (*unheimlich*) expresses well the paradoxical nature of the bifurcation therein implied, which also occurs "inside" the subject's mind (Freud 1999 [1919]). As Bateson (2017 [1945]) suggested in his analyses of early Nazi propaganda, the specter of degeneration symbolized by the Socialist enemy was an anti-structural latency present within the German people itself, and would be the nation's inexorable destiny should the people not follow the leader's designs. As fascist meta-politics intensified, the Socialist enemy became the Jewish scapegoat (Girard 1989), ushering the entire socio-political system in a runaway suicidal drive which was World War II (Safatle 2020).

Recent new media scholarship suggests that platform infrastructures embed in their very design the potential for such uncanny network effects (Chun, 2021; Gray, Bounegru, and Venturini 2020; Katiambo and Ochoti 2021). This finds historical precedent in how the printing press afforded the eruption of anti-structural latencies in the transition from medieval to modern Europe. According to Zwierlein (2020), anonymous mass communication pushed individual senders and receivers to the background, producing a "present state of affairs" as an "anonymous unit" to which one could "connect." It was only then that conspiracy theory could emerge as a separate genre: "a parasite medium linked to and emulating the already established form of political explanation and analysis" (546).

Indeed, conspiratorial publics not only are highly parasitic of the media and political mainstream, but gain shape through a double reversal of the latter's universalistic emphasis on public facts (Cesarino 2022a). They both produce, and are produced by, a friend-enemy, fact-fiction bifurcation whereby one side (the friend camp) has all the facts, and the other (the enemy camp) is all about fiction and its corollaries: lies, cover-up, manipulation, hypocrisy.³ In new media, this bifurcation—at once cognitive, subjective, social, affective—often maps onto the production of alternative digital publics formed on more opaque layers of the Internet. Much like in Freud's uncanny, these publics unveil anti-structural processes that should have remained hidden (Katiambo and Ochoti 2021). In an uncanny way, that is precisely what they claim to be doing, albeit in the mystifying language of conspiracy theory.

What studies on conspiracy-related affordances such as Abdalla Mikhaeil and Baskerville's (2023) fail to grasp however, is that the formation of what Abidin (2021) calls "refracted publics" draws on features that differ from the ones prevalent in pre-2008 mainstream social media (boyd 2010). Going beyond ordinary user-algorithm relations, intermediaries such as conspiracy entrepreneurs (Harambam 2020) act tactically in order to make platform architectures work on their behalf. Our data indicates that, in large messaging app chats, camouflaged actors may carry out these operations covertly (Cesarino and Nardelli 2021; Nascimento et al. 2022). In fact, the ecological

approach suggests that the very co-emergent relationship between anti-structural and mainstream publics at large operates like an informational dynamics of camouflage, in Bateson's (1972) sense.⁴

The hybrid conspiracy ecologies therein formed are complex, multiscalar, and distributed. Our research data suggests, for instance, that the channel or agent who seeds conspiratorial doubt in the minds of ordinary users need not be the same who radicalizes them into more extreme rabbit holes. "Light" conspirationism (say, raising supposedly legitimate questions about the efficacy of electronic ballots) may play a role of disengaging individuals from mainstream publics, while capture by extremist discourse (for instance, openly championing military intervention) happens elsewhere, in more opaque layers of the Internet or in moments of exception such as during elections (Cesarino 2022a).

Finally, in a more formal sense, the algorithmic architecture of platforms itself mirrors closely the epistemic structure of conspiratorial publics (Cesarino 2022a). Platforms "empty out" intermediary epistemic levels, while inflating extremes: transparent user-friendly interface at a local scale, and opaque forms of algorithmic clustering at a global scale. At one extreme, what Zoonen (2012) calls "i-pistemology" assigns higher truth value to sense certainty, individual trajectory, personal opinion, and immediacy. A common example in our data is the first-hand video of an event filmed by an ordinary person on the spot, which is then relayed in real time through trusted networks on semi-private media such as messaging apps.

This supposedly unmediated, real-time access to truth "in here" is supplemented by its opposite extreme, truth "out there" (Zoonen 2012, 57): occult holistic causalities to which individuals have only partial access, but whose inscrutable designs and redemptive futures they trust and try to access by affective, oracular or other means. In our data, diverse grammars have played this role, from Christian theology to well-being spiritualities centered on energies and immunity, from supposedly scientific views on quantum physics to a plethora of straightforward conspiracy theories about New Order world domination or a "great awakening" about electoral fraud (Cesarino 2022a).

Between these two epistemic extremes, a new "expert system" is emerging based on a denunciatory business model claiming to unveil some truth that the legacy media and power structures would hide from ordinary users. In these publics, boundaries are redrawn between a threatening out-group and a trusted in-group, affording individuals a community sense of shared destiny. Both human and non-human agencies apply resonant friend-enemy, fact-fiction algorithms that re-distribute recognition and epistemology along bifurcated lines, such as "if the media is for it, then I am against it" (Cesarino 2022a). This overall triadic structure is revealingly manifested in QAnon's chief slogans: do your own research; trust the plan; and where we go one, we go all. When mapped onto Bateson's three levels of learning, it manifests

a liminal over-reliance on Levels I and III, as Level II—the group level—gradually restructures itself on new grounds.

Understood in those terms, conspiratorial structures are indeed modern epistemology turned “inside out”: “Enlightenment with a vengeance,” as Harding and Steward (2003, 282) put it. These epistemic patterns, which are also algorithmic, recur not only in extremist publics such as those on the Brazilian far right, but also in others that are not always explicitly political, such as the “alt-science” segments that formed during the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil (Cesarino and Silva 2023). They may, in fact, be regarded as a key foundation for their shared resonance, thus cutting across these publics’ entire ecology and their uncanny relationship with the mainstream.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter brought Bateson’s ecology of mind approach to bear on an analysis of how, in today’s digital publics, conspiracy semiotics and algorithmic logic may come together into what I propose to call conspiratorial affordances. From this perspective, conspiracy theory is not a bounded, pre-defined phenomenon, but rather denotes evolving patterns of varying intensities that may morph into more or less mainstream/innocuous, more or less extremist/harmful modulations depending on context, that is, on the broader ecology affording its existence as such. Drawing on the Brazilian case, I argued that conspiracy theory manifests anti-structural drives found in far-right publics at large, as they co-emerge in an uncanny relationship of reverse mimesis vis-à-vis mainstream publics.

An ecology-of-mind approach to conspiracy theory could therefore contribute with scholarship on the subject in at least four ways. First, it allows for taking non-human agency seriously, by unveiling how phenomena the human sciences traditionally assign to social, cultural or psychological domains, such as conspiracy semiotics, may turn out to be also technical patterns in algorithmic design. Such shared cybernetic dynamics co-emerge on and through socio-technical practice between agent and environment—bearing in mind that, on new media, human users operate not only agents but also as environments for the agency of non-human algorithms.

Secondly, the ecology of mind helps make sense of conspiracy theory not as a fixed discursive frame, but as part of evolving anti-structural dynamics that may morph into more or less extremist modulations depending on context. This dynamic is complex, non-linear, and must be understood in terms of different but simultaneous logical levels, from local (communication) to global (meta-communication). It involves the replication of similar patterns at multiple scales of resonance, from human/algorithmic cognition to subjective identities, from sociality to affect, from multiple social spheres to the very structure of socio-technical networks.

Thirdly, an ecological frame may help bridge some of the “great divides” in the study of conspiracy theory (Butter and Knight 2015), especially as the latter become increasingly mediated by new cybernetic technologies. Besides resonating closer to its object both historically and structurally, this approach may suggest unexplored paths toward bringing together the substantial but still somewhat fragmented corpus of multidisciplinary findings on the subject (Butter and Knight 2020). Its inherently holistic outlook, whereby epistemology, sociality, and affect are one and the same process, may also help circumvent the circularity of some of the field’s definitional and methodological dilemmas.

Finally, both Bateson’s and Gibson’s trajectories include an “applied” bias also found in much of conspiracy theory studies today. In most projects, these authors worked on practical issues involving experiments on perception, mental illness, addiction therapy, or animal behavior and communication. Their original ideas, such as the double bind and affordances, were incorporated into applied fields as diverse as information theory, psychiatry, late-century theories of hybrid war, and design and new media studies (boyd 2010; Chaney 2017; Osinga 2007). Indeed, our mixed-methods project, which also responds to applied demands coming from the Brazilian media, organized civil society, and public agents, has greatly benefited from how the ecological approach remains open to experimentation on emergent, real-world issues. It may therefore offer a much-needed point of analytical stability in our rapidly changing socio-technical environment.

Notes

- 1 According to this author, “the *coniuratio*, the Latin term for the making of reciprocal oaths, was the founding act of communities and medieval cities by which a not yet formally integrated social group was forged into a legally constituted corporation”—a “reciprocal enactment of the founding principle of cities within and against the city itself” (Zwierlein 2020, 542).
- 2 In structural-functionalist anthropology, schism is a bifurcation or fission of the social system into separate, self-referential units. Bateson (1958) called schismogenesis a sequence of progressive differentiation between opposing parties based on escalating positive feedback which may or may not reach a climax (i.e., actual schism). A common example is the nuclear arms race during the Cold War.
- 3 According to my rendition of Bateson (1972), epistemic (fact-fiction) and sociality (friend-enemy) codes are strictly related, both being part of “premises of mammalian interaction” (113) humans share with other social mammals. They relate to how redundancy produces meaning by giving pattern or form to “the universe,” that is, “message-plus-referent.” If I tell you “it is raining” and you look at the window, you do it not only to check whether it is indeed raining, but whether you can trust me the next time I say something.
- 4 Bateson defines camouflage in information theory terms, as the “opposite of communication.” In nature, camouflage is achieved: “(1) by reducing the signal/noise ratio, (2) by breaking up the patterns and regularities in the signal, or (3) by introducing similar patterns into the noise” (Bateson 1972, 296). Our claim is that far-right publics engage the full sequence, as if the animal went on to become the background, and vice versa (Nascimento et al. 2022).

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15

HAUTE BAROQUE BLING

Style, Taste, and Distinction in the Study of Populist Conspiracism

Clare Birchall

In Richard Hofstadter's seminal essay on the paranoid style in American politics, he writes, "A distorted style is . . . a possible signal that may alert us to a distorted judgment, just as in art an ugly style is a cue to fundamental defects of taste" (1964, 6). Hofstadter's reference to art is merely a brief aside intended to give color to his claim that alarmist and conspiracist sentiments must be read as a sign of impoverished thinking and unstable decision-making. Although this comment is fleeting, I focus on "ugly style" and "defects of taste" in this chapter to explore how aesthetic disposition might operate as an under-examined factor in why, at least in the limited context of British and American liberal milieus, right-wing populist conspiracists might garner more ire and airtime than left-wing counterparts.¹

At the outset, we should recognize that, broadly speaking, many academics located in the regions this chapter is concerned with already harbor a distaste for both populism and conspiracism, let alone "populist conspiracism" (Bergmann and Butter 2020). Both populism and conspiracism are critiqued for being reductive, for simplifying complex economic-political settlements into binary oppositions and, therefore, misrepresenting the nature of power. Moreover, academics are themselves often included in the category of the "cultural elites" to be vilified in the rhetoric of many versions of populist conspiracism. Think of the way in which progressive scholars are disparaged for peddling "cultural Marxism" or "critical race theory" within the culture wars (Birchall and Knight 2023). Consequently, it is difficult to feel anything but antipathy for a discourse like populist conspiracism that paints such an unforgiving picture of one's own practice.

If academics are not that keen on populist conspiracists, it is also true that even populists have a complicated relationship to the label "populist" and

that the term “conspiracy theorist” is not one that people readily apply to themselves. It is everybody *else* who is the conspiracy theorist. It seems even those espousing populism or conspiracy theories must navigate the stigma attached to the labels that others might apply to them. Of course, it is also the case that some populist conspiracists embrace the stigma because it allows them to reiterate their anti-establishment credentials, a point both Michael Butter (2020) and Katharina Thalmann (2019) make.

The academic and broadsheet journalistic dislike of, or sense of discomfort with, populism on the one hand and conspiracism on the other (to briefly separate these) has not, of course, stopped academics or journalists from writing about these subjects. Far from it. There has been an explosion of academic research and journalistic op-eds on populism and conspiracy theories (see Figure 15.1 as an illustration of the former). The interest responds to real-world occurrences of populism and conspiracism: twenty-first-century electoral turns to left-wing populism in South America and the rise of Podemos, Syriza, and support for Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US; and, during the same period, a wave of right-wing populist leaders across the globe. Writing on conspiracy theories has grown steadily to 2019 (the year up to which the search of word occurrences in Google Books extends). There is no equivalent longitudinal tool to search academic articles or newspaper articles, although *The New York Times* archive reveals that there have been 4,196 articles in the paper with the term “conspiracy theories” between the January 1, 2016 and the December 1, 2021. Since the election of Donald J. Trump and, more recently, the onset of Covid-19 and the so-called accompanying “infodemic” (World Health Organization 2020), there has been an excess of academic research into conspiracy theories from a variety of disciplines.

Academics may eagerly write about conspiracy theories today, but that certainly has not always been the case. When I was writing my PhD on conspiracy theories at the end of the 1990s, I would receive some disapproving looks from the more traditional faculty: conspiracy theories were not considered a serious research object. My approach to conspiracy theories—to analyze them as examples of knowledge and discourse that put on display the fallibility of all knowledge and discourse—did nothing to alleviate institutional anxiety about a non-institutional form of vernacular theory (Birchall 2006). My work problematized boundary-maintaining moves rather than performed boundary maintenance itself. It therefore critiqued those approaches that addressed conspiracy theories as the preserve of irrational, paranoid, crazy people that have nothing to do with the kinds of knowledges utilized within and endorsed by the academy.

I suggest that the academic discomfort with populist conspiracism in general is deflected onto a distaste for right-wing populist conspiracists in particular. Academics therefore write about a form that we may not respect

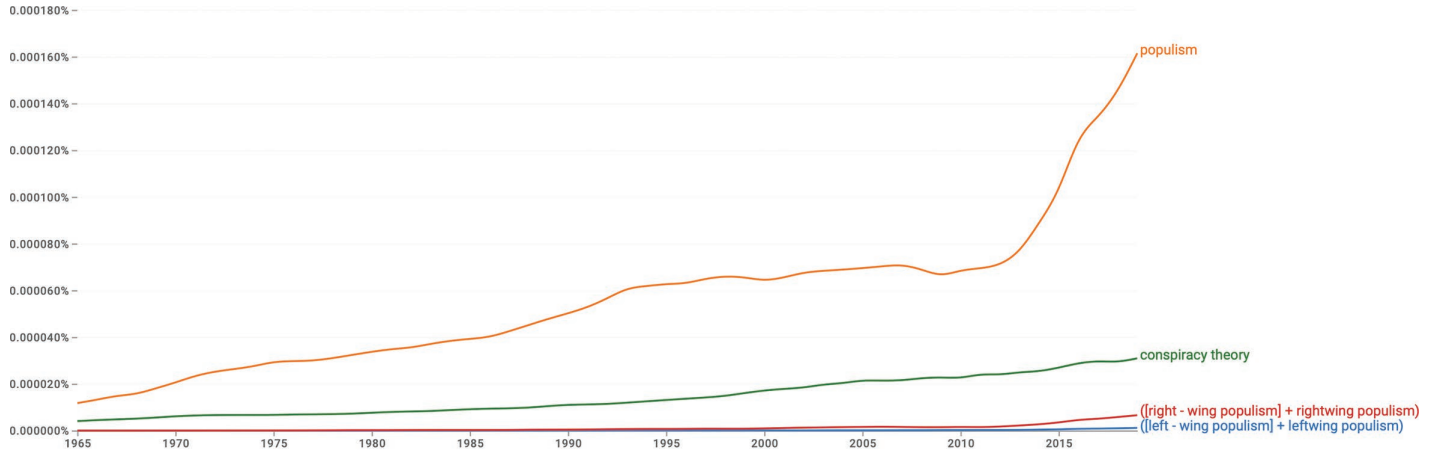


FIGURE 15.1 Ngram results from Google Books 1965–2019

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer <http://books.google.com/ngrams>

much in the first place; and we focus on right-wing populist conspiracism partly because it feels further away from the work we do ourselves than left-wing populist conspiracism. It feels easier, that is, to maintain the boundary between the left leaning social theorist and the right-wing populist conspiracist. Left-wing populist conspiracism creates more problems for cultural and social theorists such as myself—something I will address below.²

In an expanded version of the Ngram in Figure 15.1, Figure 15.2 shows more clearly the quantitative difference between writing about right-wing populism and left-wing populism. This obviously is not the same as populist conspiracism, but it at least indicates the comparative frequency of writing about the left or right with respect to a populism that may or may not lean on conspiracist rhetoric. Drawing on my personal experience of researching conspiracy theories for over 25 years, my own interest has switched from the creative paranoia that came out of the counterculture toward right-wing conspiracy theories, acknowledging that there has been a convergence of late between the two that has been variously called the “cosmic right” (Davis 2020) and “conspirituality” (Ward and Voas 2011), mirroring the process evident in populist appeals across traditional party lines.

The focus of this chapter is on how distinction and taste operate in forms of boundary maintenance. I want to consider how the very style of Trumpist right-wing populist conspiracism reinforces a tendency evident in the cultural commentary and academic literature to focus on right-wing populist conspiracism. Before making this argument, it is important to acknowledge the other, perhaps more immediately obvious, reasons why left-wing populist conspiracism is not analyzed as much as the right-wing variant, nor even recognized as such. Again, it is worth pointing out that such a statement might only pertain to the English-speaking contexts under consideration in this chapter.

Why Left-Wing Populist Conspiracism Receives Less Attention

1) The first and foremost reason that left-wing populist conspiracism garners less critical attention is that the narratives to be found in left-wing populist conspiracism can be read as a pseudo-Marxist critique of power which, as the name suggests, is a distortion of, but holds a relation to, the kind of Marxist structural analysis employed by many cultural theorists and sociologists. Rather than “pseudo-Marxist,” Karl Popper uses the term “Vulgar Marxist” as a play on Marx’s own reference to “vulgar economists.” “The average Vulgar Marxist,” according to Popper,

believes that Marxism lays bare the sinister secrets of social life by revealing the hidden motives of greed and lust for material gain which actuate the powers behind the scenes of history; powers that cunningly and

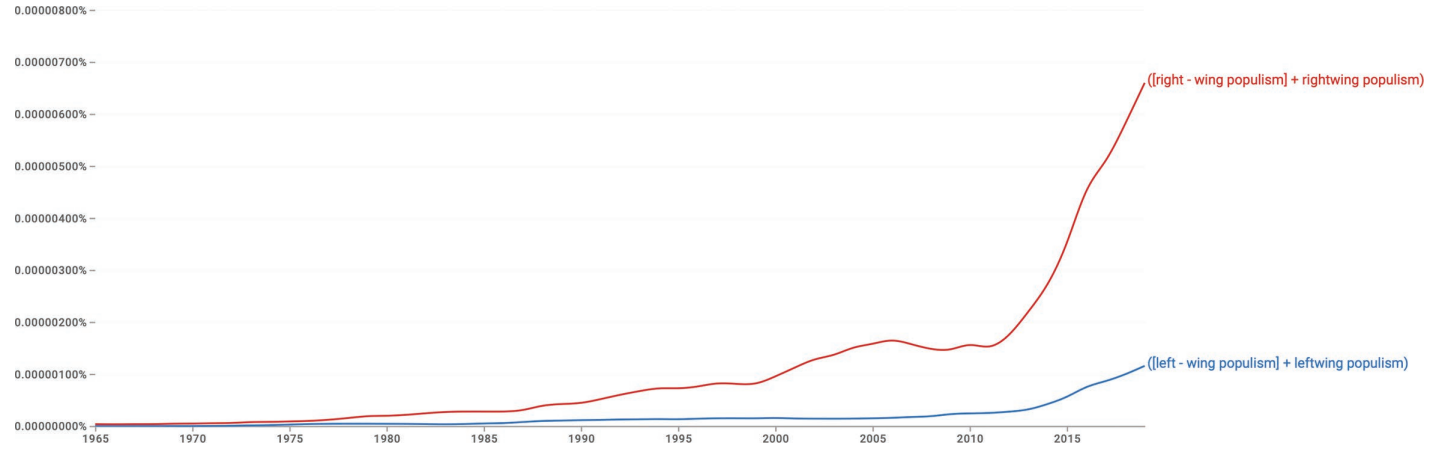


FIGURE 15.2 Expansion of Ngram showing the difference between the number of books mentioning right-wing populism and left-wing populism

Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer <http://books.google.com/ngrams>

consciously create war, depression, unemployment, hunger in the midst of plenty, and all the other forms of social misery, in order to gratify their vile desires for profit.

(1994 [1945], 311)

Popper's intention was to identify and expunge "*the conspiracy theory of society*" from social science (306; italics in original), but the boundary Popper attempts to erect between what he considers to be illegitimate modes of historicism, economism, and psychologism (that are guided by "*the conspiracy theory of society*") and legitimate social science, is porous and fluid.

This is one reason why, when Bernie Sanders criticizes big pharma, platform billionaires, "Wall Street vultures," "corporate media" and the "military industrial complex" it is easy for those on the intellectual left to sympathize, for Sanders is certainly naming the key industries that reproduce the contradictions of capitalism most starkly. For example, Sanders' posts on Twitter (now X) include comments that Wall Street's business model is "fraud," citing money laundering, bribery, collusion, and currency manipulation (@SenSanders, September 21, 2020) and that big pharma's "greed is literally killing Americans" (@BernieSanders, September 15, 2021). In relation to the War on Terror, Sanders asks, "Isn't it strange how even as we end the longest war in our nation's history, concerns about the deficit and national debt seem to melt away under the influence of the powerful Military Industrial Complex?" (@SenSanders, November 16, 2021).

Marx himself refers to greed and the profit motive, but for him, as for cultural theorists, they are symptoms, not causes, of corruption. For Marx, it is the system that determines the actions of agents, rather than vice versa (see Guilhot 2022). Social change is possible, but not through a conspiracy of the few, but the actions and consciousness of a broad class-based coalition. Similarly, the status quo is maintained not through a conspiratorial group but via the ideological consolidation and naturalization of class difference and exploitation across many institutions, practices, and material forms in the superstructure. However, some might agree with Bruno Latour who, in his attack on social critique writes,

Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but [there is] something troublingly similar in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below.

(2004, 229)

I will return to Latour's argument at the end of this chapter, but this close, imbricated relationship between critique and conspiracy theory makes it clear why left-wing populist conspiracism presents certain problems.

2) The second reason why left-wing populist conspiracism receives less attention than right-wing populist conspiracism is that, to many, it is not clear that the former counts *as* populist conspiracism at all. Some would argue that Sanders, for example, is not expressing conspiracy theories, but suggesting that collusion, corruption, and complicity are endemic to neoliberal late capitalism.³ In his wide-reaching rebukes, Sanders perhaps offers an analysis of systemic forces and structures rather than an account of individual plotters.

Moreover, some commentators reject approaches that find an equivalence between left and right populism, which we could extend to left and right populist conspiracism. Daniel Denvir, who hosts the left-wing podcast, *The Dig*, argues that because the more recent leftist movements often labeled populist do not claim to exclusively represent the one authentic people, the label is unjustified. In this light, Denvir continues, Sanders, Corbyn, Syriza, and Podemos might be better described as “plausible attempts to reinvent social democracy” than populism or populist conspiracism (2020). This echoes thinkers like Giorgos Katsambekis who claims Syriza is not populist because it presents the people as plural and heterogenous (2016, 400). In this vein, Thomas Frank balks at the false equivalences that commentators drew between Sanders and Trump during 2016 which allowed populism to become a dirty word even in the US where it had historically been regarded far more neutrally than in Europe. Both populism and conspiracy theory are terms that can be used to undermine the validity of certain ideas and so we might be wary of identifying left-wing populist conspiracism for fear that it delegitimizes leftist critique in general.

3) We might argue that right-wing populist conspiracism deserves more attention simply because it causes more harm than left-wing populist conspiracism. This is because the former is invested in various forms of denialism (global warming is a hoax invented by the elite to exert control; school shootings are performances staged by crisis actors to gain sympathy for gun control laws; the pandemic is an orchestrated “plandemic” to impose draconian measures). Such denialism gives rise to anti-social behaviors on a grand scale and feelings of grievance that have been mobilized by far-right agitators. In general, it is also the case that blame often falls on marginalized people in right-wing populist conspiracism (Jews, immigrants, people of color, those identifying as LGBTQ, and women, etc.), which will only lead to further marginalization and discrimination whereas the targets of left-wing populist conspiracism are the most powerful members of society. This stems from a crucial difference between populisms: using Jacques Rancière’s terminology, left-wing populism speaks to the *demos* (“the count of the uncounted”) while right-wing populism speaks to the *ethnos* (“the living body of those who have the same origin, are born on the same soil or worship the same god” [Rancière 2011, 5]).

4) It might also be the case that left and right are not helpful terms when approaching populism (or populist conspiracism). For example, think of

Marine Le Pen's comment in 2015, "Now the split isn't between the left and the right but between the globalists and the patriots." But also, as I point out above, in conspiracy circles Covid-19 has realigned some traditional political identifications, drawing together those from both the left and right who prioritize personal sovereignty. William Callison and Quinn Slobodian call this "diagonalism," taking their cue from the German context (2021). Diagonalism comes about through transformations in technology and communications, a contestation of the left/right axis, an ambivalence toward parliamentary politics, and an affinity with holism and spirituality. Stoked by conspiracy entrepreneurs and narratives, concerns about freedoms become fused with a stance that considers all power as conspiratorial, according to Callison and Slobodian. We can think of these new alliances as "coalitions of distrust" (Birchall and Knight 2022).

In light of these new vectors of political affiliation, there might be other ways of categorizing populist conspiracism that make more sense. During the pandemic, a turn to what Gideon Lasco and Nicole Curato (2019) call "medical populism" has been evident, for example. They explain this as

a political style based on performances of public health crises that pit 'the people' against 'the establishment.' While some health emergencies lead to technocratic responses that soothe anxieties of a panicked public, medical populism thrives by politicising, simplifying, and spectacularising complex public health issues.

(1)

Following this logic, we should not be focusing on either right- or left-wing populist conspiracism or worrying about an emphasis on one at the expense of the other, but rather populist conspiracism within different, pan- or even apparently post-ideological contexts.

The Taste for/of Populism

Having acknowledged that there are already considerable difficulties focusing on left-wing populist conspiracism, I want to turn toward the more under-considered role of taste because it can help us to approach the issue of boundary maintenance (and reproduction) from a different angle. Discussions of populism are usually the preserve of political scientists or historians, but as a cultural theorist, I read Trumpist populist conspiracism as an embodied and mediated signifying practice. I draw support for this endeavor from Pierre Ostiguy and Benjamin Moffitt. Moffitt approaches populism as a style and political performance. He is interested in populism as "the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life" (2016, 37–38).

This leads him to an interest in populism as “bad manners” (55). Ostiguy, too, has written about populism as a “flaunting of the low” that can be analyzed through “manners, demeanors, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, and tastes displayed in public” (Ostiguy 2017, 78).

Both Moffitt and Ostiguy frame their concerns in reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu argues that cultural taste, understood as an embodied form of knowledge about what and how to consume, determines actions and preferences that create belonging and differentiation and plays a major role in the reproduction of class stratification. Bourdieu writes,

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.

(1984, 6)

The privileged assert power through the expression of an “aesthetic disposition” or “a mode of perception” (1984) rooted in a particular “habitus,” which Bourdieu describes as “a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class” (1977, 86).

With regards to Trump, the first part of Bourdieu’s quote—“taste classifies”—means that Trump’s style choices classify him as gaudy, gauche, flashy—at least in the eyes of representatives of what Bourdieu calls “legitimate taste” or the “aesthetic disposition.” Trump’s taste and his conspicuous consumption place him in the category of someone who has excessive amounts of economic capital, but not enough cultural capital. Bourdieu also tells us that “taste classifies the classifier.” This means that in the act of classification, academic or journalistic commentators, those endorsing “legitimate taste” are also trying to distinguish themselves from Trump’s own attempts at distinction. In the act of ridicule, people seek to reinforce the boundary between themselves and someone like Trump.

In the early days of Trump’s first presidential candidacy and subsequent term in office, much attention was spent lambasting his interior decoration, food preferences, and sartorial choices. Robert Wellington wrote in 2017 that it is “easy” for him, as a historian of French decorative arts, to spot exactly how the aesthetic and architectural references in Trump’s Manhattan apartment fall flat: “The proportions are all wrong: the columns are wide and squat, the entablature above the gilt capitals too narrow, and the cornice below the painted ceiling far too wide.” He writes that the Louis XV inspired armchairs “or fauteuils to use the proper term” lack the appeal of the eighteenth-century originals. “Proportion governs elegance in the palaces

of the Bourbon kings, and such errors would have been considered extremely poor taste then, as they are now.” To the trained eye, the critiques of Wellington and others imply, Trump’s attempt to evoke the spirit of the Palace of Versailles in Manhattan is a risible failure, aligning Trump with the so-called nouveau riche rather than old money. Strictly speaking, Trump sits between these two identifications. He inherited wealth that his grandfather initially made as the proprietor of a gold-rush bar/brothel and later invested in real estate (Pearson 2016). The money is old in that it has been around for several generations, but Trump does not adhere to the implicit rules of “old money,” not least by boasting about how much money he makes (Ruche 2015).

Moreover, the decor signifies both hubris and naivety; it produces more of a vertiginous simulacrum than a respectful homage. The apartment is lit by outsized crystal chandeliers and lined with surfaces of smooth marble or gold. As such, the apartment is filled with costly raw materials that not only signify wealth but, in the case of gold, are an internationally recognized store of value—a commodity and a currency. Unsurprisingly, Trump’s apartment was finished by the interior designer Henry Conversano best known for his work in casinos. The *raison d’être* of both spaces is money.

Style guru, Peter York, updated his list of homes he described as “dictator chic” to include Trump’s New York apartment in 2017. This move places Trump’s apartment alongside the palaces of Saddam Hussein and the homes of other authoritarians. Dictator chic, according to York, is characterized by scale and the use of reproductions rather than antiques and is influenced by French interiors of the eighteenth century as well as contemporary hotel lobbies. It opts for expensive materials and ornaments. He writes, “there is no subtlety or understatement, let alone irony” (York 2017). It is intended to intimidate. Just as Trump’s populism is performative, his dictator chic gives the people what he imagines they want—it is, that is to say, the height of aspiration in a land of American dreamers—but it shows no real love of the people because it belongs to him and him alone. York points out that all this jars with the architectural tradition of the heart of US politics—Washington DC. He writes, “From the White House to the monuments, the American capital was designed to avoid Europe’s autocratic excesses, projecting a message of simplicity, democracy and egalitarianism” (York 2017). In stark contrast to Barack Obama, the epitome of cosmopolitan cool, Trump did not fit in.⁴

From the moment Trump announced his candidacy, journalists commented on his bad taste. Here, I select a few examples spanning the years 2015–19.⁵ Kevin Williamson of the conservative *National Review* called Trump “the ridiculous buffoon with the worst taste since Caligula” and described his Taj Mahal casino “an aesthetic crime against humanity that is tacky *by the standards of Atlantic City*” (2015; italics in original). As indicators of Trump’s “tackiness,” Molly Osberg, writing in 2016, points to how “the orange combover’s illogical stiffness is reminiscent of a televangelist’s

dense, hair-sprayed mess,” and writes that, “it’s a certain kind of man who buys ten thousand dollar Brioni suits and neither tailors nor irons them.” She mentions “the gilded seatbelt buckles on his private jet” and how “the cherubs in his properties are, to many, grotesque, his branded products. . . . unsubtle” (Osberg 2016).⁶ In 2017, a GQ journalist described Trump as having “the tastes of a crumpled-up Kleenex” and reads in Trump’s preference for well-done meat a desire to build “yet another wall twixt himself and the phenomenal world” (Stein 2017). A piece in *The Financial Times* about exercising modesty over ostentation is illustrated with a photograph of Trump and Melania sitting on gilded chairs beside an enormous Christmas tree (Rigby 2019). During Trump’s visit to the United Kingdom and Ireland in 2019, *Washington Post* reporter, Robin Givhan, lambasted Trump for his “too long ties” and ill-fitting tux. She wrote, “For any man to bungle white-tie dress. . . . he must be a man who doesn’t bother with the details, who doesn’t avail himself of ready expertise, who refuses to be a student of history.” Givhan takes the analogy between Trump’s poor taste and his poor judgment further: “White tie is fact-based. One cannot fudge it. One does not make white-tie decisions based on one’s gut, lest one end up with the gut overly exposed” (2019). Hofstadter is clearly not the only one to link aesthetic and discursive modes.

Such style choices and signifiers of taste contrast with those of leftist populists (some of whom we may want to describe as populist conspiracists) such as Sanders in the United States and Corbyn in the United Kingdom. Such figures are known for being understated in the way they dress and relatively modest in terms of interior design and property.⁷ Corbyn, a longstanding radical backbencher before being elected leader of the Labour Party in 2015, was able to become a beacon of leftist hopes precisely because of his refusal to adhere to fashion or attempt to present any kind of style whatsoever. He was as traditional in his politics as he was in his sartorial choices. Corbyn, therefore, was a blank canvas to appropriate. He was transformed (only semi-ironically) into radical icon by the young, hip members of the leftist grass-roots movement Momentum. This makeover by “Generation Left” (Milburn 2019) culminated in some extraordinary scenes. For example, during his 2017 headlining Glastonbury set, grime artist Stormzy prompted the crowd to chant Corbyn’s name to the tune of “Seven Nation Army” by The White Stripes for several electrifying minutes.⁸

A similar dynamic elevated Sanders to a beloved, folksy, straight-talking icon—a counterweight to Trump’s flashy crassness. His supporters ran young—60 percent of Democrats younger than 30 supported either Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren in the 2020 primaries according to an Economist/YouGov poll from 2020. Millennial supporters, facing the sober reality that they will be the first generation to have a worse standard of living than their parents including crippling levels of college debt, as well

as facing an ecological emergency, started to entertain socialist solutions. Trump's individualistic promise of gold at the end of the rainbow had less appeal: only 28 percent of 18–29-year-olds voted for him in 2016 and 35 percent in 2020 (Igielnik, Keeter and Hartig 2021). In one *New Yorker* article, Sanders is described as “authentic” and likened to vinyl, which we can contrast to the simulacrum offered by Trump's social media performances of transparency (Talbot 2015). Sanders's practical clothing signifies “the taste of necessity” as Bourdieu (1984) puts it as opposed to the “taste of luxury,” and became elevated through social media's layers of irony to a style—something akin to “cottage-core,” an aesthetic made popular by social media influencers around 2017 (see Slone 2020). When Sanders was pictured wearing a chunky pair of mittens during Joe Biden's inauguration, it became a social media meme and increased sales of Vermont mittens as a result (Yurcaba 2021).

Unstylish Style

Returning to Hofstadter, we should note that he mentions art one more time in his essay on the paranoid style in American politics. He writes, “when I speak of the paranoid style, I use the term much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or mannerist style” (Hofstadter 1964, 4). While his examples might at first seem arbitrary, they are in fact rather revealing. Mannerists of the sixteenth century tried to emulate the perfection of the Renaissance masters, but they were overly concerned with technical command and practitioners of this style produced some odd distortions—awkward appendages, contorted or elongated bodies, a lack of perspective, and highly artificial settings and compositions. Parmigianino's “Madonna with the Long Neck” (1534–40), for example, famously extends not only the Virgin Mary's neck, but also the body of baby Jesus. To take Hofstadter's second reference to aesthetic style, the baroque emphasizes surfaces and decoration, form and effect over function, making a direct appeal to emotion using drama and illusion. While many consider it the height of elegance, the baroque can veer toward excess, the overwrought, and even the gaudy. Both sets of connotations speak to the distorted excessiveness of the paranoid style, but also to Hofstadter's anxiety about taste—about the risk of diverging from a consensus on good sense, proportionality, and style. In normative taste cultures of all kinds (aesthetic, political, etc.), unstylish styles are supposed to operate as warning signs.

Despite Trump's fragmentary rendition of the paranoid style—his “conspiracy without the theory” as Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2019) put it—it is wholly fitting that Trump should be associated with it given Hofstadter's reference to the baroque and Trump's penchant for what Toby Shorin calls the “haute baroque” (2017). Just as tastemakers look down on Trump's gilded interiors for being garish, Hofstadter would surely

disapprove of his paranoid fragments for being distorted, immoderate, and emotive. The comment by Hofstadter with which this chapter begins—“A distorted style is. . . a possible signal that may alert us to a distorted judgment, just as in art an ugly style is a cue to fundamental defects of taste”—lands differently in relation to Trump. The reference to visual style is no longer just a comparison, a simile, to illustrate how rhetorical style works. Trump displays lapses in both and they have become interchangeable and mutually affirming in terms of reasons to critique Trump and keep a distance.

Like the Baroque and Mannerism, Trump’s style is certainly a style, but not stylish. Should we think of unstylish styles as bad commodities? Who wants to be out of fashion? Who wants to invest in those artifacts that mark one as “gauche”? Yet, taste is a complex phenomenon. Though uncommon in Bourdieu’s France of the 1960s and 1970s (the highly stratified taste cultures that were the focus of his study), hegemonic ideas of “good taste” are now routinely challenged by acts of appropriation, rearticulation, irony, and bricolage meaning that fashion is constantly in flux—hence the viral success of Bernie’s mittens. Among other subcultures, punks of the 1970s and second-wave hipsters from the late 1990s and early 2000s understood that the appropriation of “unstylish” artifacts offers culture a second chance in the cycle of cool. Unstylish artifacts can create value long past their official shelf life.

Admittedly, it is difficult to regard Trump’s taste for tastelessness, his unstylish style, as ironic, available to rehabilitation, or knowingly kitsch. Compare, for example, Trump’s gilded *objets d’art* with Jeff Koons’s postmodern sculpture, “Michael Jackson and Bubbles,” part of his “Banality” series, decorated in a similar hue. The former is employed to impress; the latter, brimming with irony, ridicules such desires, celebrity fetishism, and forms of excess. In fact, king of kitsch, director John Waters, declared recently that Trump “ruined” bad taste: “As soon as Trump was president, it just ended the humour of it. He was the nail in the coffin. He’s the first person that had accidental bad taste that wasn’t funny” (quoted in Bray 2022).

How does all this work with Trump’s supporters? To his base, Trump’s appeal rests on his populist claims of being outside establishment politics. His style—haute baroque bling with populist conspiracist rhetoric—is celebrated precisely because it eschews mainstream consensus on what is tasteful, permissible, and stylish in ways that resist appropriation by hipster-style magpies. It confirms his unwillingness to conform; it signifies, as Théo Aiolfi puts it, “transgression” (2022). Under this logic, any potentially unpalatable stance is subsumed into a narrative that positions Trump as a lone maverick, an inspirational figure fighting for the “ordinary” American. Despite being apparently off-limits to progressive subcultural practices of bricolage, Trump was, however, appropriated by reactionary chan cultures (what Daniel de Zeeuw and Marc Tuters [2020] name the “deep vernacular web”).

Such cultures appreciated Trump for being an affront to good taste. Hari Kunzru writes that the chans loved Trump because “he was, in effect, a human shitpost, calculated to stir up trouble among the normies” (2020). For John Walters, Trump drained bad taste of humor. But such a judgment relies on a stable reading of “bad taste” as that which arises from a particular tradition of queer kitsch. Chan culture—deeply entrenched in layer upon layer of dark irony that is difficult for any outsider to recognize or read (or find amusing)—is still resignifying and celebrating bad taste, but not for any cause the progressive left would recognize as worthy. Part of the issue here is who gets to use bad taste and to what ends. Will it be used to question and queer repressive, heterosexual norms as John Waters’ films do, or will it be weaponized to further marginalize minorities?

Beyond the chans, and with little interest in irony, many of Trump’s other supporters also clearly offered allegiance because of his “tasteless” taste. In these cases, however, Trump’s blatant disregard for all manner of cultural, social, and political protocol was not the subject of ludic re-use, but simply valued for the way it positioned Trump as an outsider who had broken in. That a property tycoon can be configured this way is a testament to the signifying power of taste. Trump prefers populist conspiracist rhetoric in an era of tightly defined political rationality; refers to cheeseburgers rather than, as his predecessor once did, arugula; and indulges in baroque bling in an era of elite minimalist chic.⁹ Trump’s taste and style set him apart from the institutions with which and in which he had to work once elected President. His preferences signaled difference via a process of inverted distinction.

There are all kinds of problems with Hofstadter’s term “the paranoid style” (see Butter 2021), but I would argue that it is still helpful because it reminds us that populist conspiracism can always be an issue of aesthetics—a glossy surface, an affectation or stance to be imitated, a marker of difference when distance is desirable, a taste rather than a core belief. It can be style over substance. As such, the paranoid style, including conspiracist populism, can be iterated to various effects, repeated in “loyal” and “disloyal” ways, invoked with hope or nihilism, distributed as misinformation (unwittingly shared falsehoods) or disinformation (knowingly shared falsehoods) in a way that helps us to recognize the various levels at which populist conspiracism works and the various forms it takes today.

From Goldfinger to Golden Showers

Remembering Trump’s penchant for gold, we might want to briefly pause on the clear cultural echoes of the 1964 Bond movie, *Goldfinger*. Certainly, the former president and titular villain share both a physical resemblance (stout, blonde, and orange-hued) and a relationship to Germany (the actor Karl

Gerhart “Gert” Fröbe was German and Trump’s grandfather emigrated to the US from Germany). How does gold figure in the movie? Goldfinger goes to great lengths to manipulate the price of gold to make enormous profits. For Goldfinger, gold is a bearer of value and even a weapon. Bond’s colleague, Jill Masterson, is killed by Goldfinger’s manservant after a night with Bond by being covered in gold paint. Gold literally suffocates her. This weaponization of gold enters into the realm of style as the image of the actress, Shirley Eaton, shimmering in gold is now iconic—an indicator of 1960s cool.

There is a further link with Trump we need to draw on, because it takes us back to conspiracy theories. In 2017, the Daily Show with Trevor Noah in the US made a spoof of the opening of Goldfinger to offer a satirical take on the rumors about an alleged scandal involving Trump, Russian prostitutes, and a bed at the Moscow Ritz Carlton once slept in by the Obamas. The bed (and by extension the Obamas’ reputation) is rumored to have been deliberately defiled by a “golden shower”—another weaponization of (in this instance, metaphorical) gold. The importance of this incident for the current chapter is twofold. First, it too falls into the camp of bad taste, involving a perversion from the norms of sexual behavior and common decency. It is another mark in the column signifying poor taste and judgment. Second, the apparently leaked US intelligence report in which the incident is alleged was taken by some critics of Trump as hard evidence that Vladimir Putin’s FSB has a “kompromat” file on Trump, making the latter a Manchurian candidate. Not only did this story about bad taste increase the attention given to Trump, but it also fed into a way of talking about Trump that itself had the makings of a conspiracy theory. It offered a conspiracy theory about Trump’s success as a populist conspiracist.

Bad Taste Blues

One of the reasons we should be suspect of the idea of good taste, or of judgments about someone else’s bad taste, is that, as Elizabeth Anker writes,

Aesthetic claims of the beautiful and the ugly frequently map onto constructed political distinctions: modern and backwards, rich and poor, white and Black, Christian and Jewish and Muslim, pure and dirty. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, aligning with systems of enslavement, industrial capitalism, and colonialism, ugliness became attached to non-Western cultural behaviors and nonwhite physical features, whereby features associated with wealthy white European Christians became the beautiful, and ugliness attached to Blacks, Jews, poverty, disability, and indigenous peoples. Designations of ugliness helped to lubricate the politics of servitude and extermination.

(2022, 7–8)

The conflation of “bad” aesthetic taste and conspiracist populist rhetoric that we see in nascent form in Hofstadter, but which reaches maturity in cultural commentary about Trump therefore carries some risks. Taste is never neutral, but always embedded and our judgments about other people’s taste are always an expression of our own habitus and disposition and an attempt to make ourselves look better (more rational or more sophisticated). Trump might deserve all the snobbish vitriol he receives—he certainly does not need defending and is not part of the minority that Anker discusses—but is this still the case when it spills over onto the less affluent end of his base?

In a restaurant review of Trump Grill in *Vanity Fair*, the writer bemoans the campy music, the “French-ish paintings that look as if they were bought at Home Goods,” and the random capitalization of fancy words in the menu (Nguyen 2016). The piece quotes Fran Lebowitz who declared that Trump is “a poor person’s idea of a rich person.” It is scathing about the tourists and Trump fans that eat there. But as Molly Osberg notes, “calling out Trump supporters for their style rather than their beliefs is misguided, a policing of the boundaries around the powerful that helped, in part, to land us in the very awful situation we’re in” (2016). It risks showing a deep misunderstanding of why Trump appealed to some white working-class voters (though he also secured the vote of wealthier demographics).

However, this misidentification of what is problematic about Trump also works the other way: might not a tendency to call out Trump and his supporters for their beliefs or ideas belie a dislike of their taste or style without naming it as such? If this is so, we need to think about what forms of boundary maintenance we are enacting when we distance ourselves from populist conspiracism from all angles. What is the reason for boundary maintenance, established in part through the process of distinction, when it comes to conspiracy theories and populist conspiracism? One answer is that populist conspiracism offers an example of what I call popular knowledge that puts on display the undecidable nature of all knowledge—something that makes knowledge producers decidedly uneasy.

In my book, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theories to Gos-sip*, I argue that knowledge can never assure us, ultimately, of its legitimacy because of an infinite regress at its inception. Jean-François Lyotard phrases it thus:

Authority is not deduced. Attempts at legitimating authority lead to vicious circles (I have authority over you because you authorize me to have it), to question begging (the authorization authorizes authority), to infinite regression (x is authorized by y, who is authorized by z), and to the paradox of idiolects (God, Life, etc., designate me to exert authority, and I am the only witness of this revelation).

(1988 [1983], 142)

I argue that this undecidability as to the status of knowledge (is it truth or speculation; trustworthy or a lie?), the arbitrariness that declares knowledge legitimate, is that which constitutes knowledge as knowledge (Birchall 2006). This means that at every step, knowledge is shadowed by its other, which here we could name populist conspiracism. What they share is a self-authorizing, mystical, arbitrary foundation. Knowledge can never shake the possibility that it is indistinguishable from, nor ignore the ineliminable trace of speculation, and retains a fundamental or co-constitutive relation with the latter.

What this irreducible undecidability means is that as well as sharing some framings and logic, the conspiracy theories that circulate in some forms of populism are closely tied to legitimized modes of knowing and interpreting, even academic modes like our own. Some of the anxiety that attends conspiracy theories, that might show up as different expressions of taste, as accusations of pathology, or as blind spots in the literature, is caused by an unacknowledged understanding that our own knowledge practices are intimately tied to conspiracy theorizing.

Where I have pointed toward the close relationship between knowledge *per se* and conspiracy theories, others have focused on reading practices rooted in specific disciplines. Paul Ricoeur points out that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (and therefore scholarship that draws on them) relied on a “hermeneutics of suspicion” because “all three begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering” (1970, 34). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, drawing on Ricoeur, described critique as “paranoid reading” (2003). Latour has shown how social critique resembles the workings of conspiracy theory (2004). Luc Boltanski argues that the project of sociology shares with conspiracy theories a belief in a hidden layer that needs a suspicious analytical mode to uncover it (2014). Playing on a formulation from Latour, Jaron Harambam asks, “Conspiracy theory as (pop) sociology, sociology as (intellectual) conspiracy theory: just *what* is the difference?” (2020, 198; italics in original). If the forms of critique we have at our disposal are closer to conspiracy theories than we would care to admit, broadsheet journalism, too, is not immune from the conspiracism that animates Trump’s thinking as the example of the reportage that positioned Trump as a Manchurian candidate illustrates. In light of these dependencies and affinities, we need to read commentaries on Trump’s taste (in terms of aesthetics as well as political rhetoric) as forms of boundary maintenance—as attempts to protect what academics and serious journalists do from what figures like Trump do.

The modest claim of this chapter, therefore, is that taste plays a part in a tendency to concentrate on the conspiracism at work in right-wing populism over left-wing populism. Moreover, it shapes the ways in which all forms of populist conspiracism are framed. Of course, this presents us with an irony: in making such a claim, this chapter, too, is guilty of paying more attention to right-wing than left-wing populist conspiracism.

Notes

- 1 Because taste and style are so contextually specific, this chapter is not making any universal claims.
- 2 I want to be clear that here I am not addressing the many attempts, most notably by Ernesto Laclau and Chantalle Mouffe, to rethink the possibilities of a left populism, which itself might be seen as an attempt to maintain a distance from actually existing left populism.
- 3 For an explanation of the differences between conspiracy, collusion, and complicity, see Knight 2021.
- 4 We have to acknowledge that Trump's style is less out of place in New York than Washington DC. The former, after all, is steeped in the legacy of the Gilded Age and its amalgamation of neoclassical styles.
- 5 It is notable that many of the examples I have found pertain to the early phase of the Trump presidency when some found it hard to take him seriously. The attacks on taste lingered but gave way to more solemn concerns with Trumpism over time. This is particularly the case when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the US and Trump's populist conspiracism proved woefully inadequate to the task of protecting citizens. I thank Michael Butter for this observation.
- 6 We should note that these comments, however, appear in a piece asking us to consider the classist implications of such judgments. I draw on Osberg's larger argument toward the end of this chapter.
- 7 In fact, Sanders owns three houses, but all of them, not to mention Corbyn's mid-century town house in Islington, London, are a far cry from Trump Towers.
- 8 For a primer on the relationship between politics and popular music see Street (2003).
- 9 When former White House Communications Director, Anthony Scaramucci, started disparaging "the elite" in a BBC interview, Emily Maitlis asked, "What about Trump is not elite?" Scaramucci replied, "There are so many things about the President. What about the Cheeseburgers? What about the pizzas we eat?" Maitlis curtly responded, "Everybody eats cheeseburgers and pizza. What are you talking about?" (BBC 2017; see also Stein 2017). However, in light of then candidate Obama's gaffe in Iowa in 2007 (where he asked, despite there not being a Whole Foods in the state, "Anybody gone into Whole Foods lately? See what they charge for arugula?"), Trump's pedestrian culinary choices speak loud and clear.

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16

STUDYING CONSPIRACY THEORY AFTER THE (CURRENT) RISE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

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Every era in recent American memory has begotten its own conspiracy theories. The 1950s featured the outsized fear of communist infiltration, for example; the 1960s and 1970s spawned theories about political assassination, foreign wars, and the Nixon presidency; and the 2000s saw the 9/11 “truth” movement. I was moved to study the topic in the 1990s, a decade that by contrast is not remembered for any specific conspiracy theories. And yet it featured a wide array of beliefs, groups, and moments, including: The “death list” of murder victims that President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary purportedly perpetrated; allegations that during the 1980s then-Governor Bill was addicted to cocaine and complicit in the drug smuggling that ran through the airport in the small town of Mena, Arkansas; the federal government’s deadly confrontations with Branch Davidian members in their complex outside Waco, Texas, and with Randy Weaver and his family in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, which were both the products of conspiratorial fears and fueled further conspiracy theories; the militia movement that inspired and organized right-wing gun enthusiasts’ efforts to defend their localities from the coming New World Order; the fatal bombing of a federal office building in Oklahoma City by militia movement sympathizers, which remains the largest domestic terrorist attack in US history; Oliver Stone’s Oscar-nominated film *JFK* (1991), which renewed interest in the decades-old theories around the Kennedy assassination; the hit television series *The X-Files* (1993–2008), which alleged among other things a government-orchestrated plot to keep secret its capture of and collaboration with aliens; and, to come full circle, Hillary Clinton’s (not unreasonable) complaint about the vast right-wing conspiracy to remove her husband from the presidency.

Charming antiquities for present audiences, to be sure, but newspaper columnists and even congressional committees at the time deemed them to be grave threats to the republic (Fenster 2008 [1999], 52–81). The dread of conspiracy theories, it seems, is begotten just as surely as the theories themselves, as the proliferation of both Donald Trump-related theories and mainstream revulsion of them demonstrate. Contemporary conspiracy theory studies have identified the call-and-response dynamic that conspiracy theories and the panic about them have established (see, e.g., Fenster 2008 [1999], 1–2; Knight 2000, 5–10).¹ Conspiracy theories offer a populist explanation about the triumph of a secret elite, while commentators fret over how present-day conspiracy theories utilize such populist rhetoric to provoke the anger of the masses and destroy democracy. Conspiracy theorists and their detractors have a similarly parallel relationship with the past: The former connect the present to history—*there has always been a conspiracy!*—while worried academics and commentators duly note conspiracy theories’ own history and continuous existence. Each side thereby proclaims both that things are the same as ever and that today we face existential and unprecedented dangers. Any attempt to persuade conspiracy theorists or those afraid of them that the sky is in fact not falling is doomed to at least short-term failure.

In this chapter I want to historicize and question the claim that the history of populism and conspiracy theory is continuous but soon coming to a frightening head. The public interest in conspiracy theories and public concerns about them wax and wane as the prophesied conspiracy and the dreaded full-on populist revolt have consistently failed to materialize and never seem to accomplish the ends feared and predicted of them. Maybe ours will be the moment about which the jeremiads have warned. After all, the sporadically violent riot in the US Capitol on January 6 seemed to be the very outcome predicted by anti-extremist prophets. But it was at once perilous *and* farcical, it ultimately proved easy to put down, and many of those who engaged in it have been successfully prosecuted and are currently incarcerated. The 1990s similarly felt uniquely weird and dangerous in the moment, with the bombing of a federal building suggesting that armed rebellion by right-wing militias was the first battle in an emerging conflict. It turns out, however, that it was just another American decade with spectacular but sporadic violence. Whether foretold in terms of the defeat of an exposed conspiracy or the authoritarian populist end of political order, the future proves resistant to catastrophic prediction.

Worried commentators and some conspiracy theory scholars presume that we can understand, project, and even control the direction that conspiracy theories will take, whether by comparing the present to the past or forgetting the past entirely. Conspiracy theories may feel like “primal myths,” as the writer Jesse Walker (2013) describes them, but the pattern of finding

present-day conspiracy theories, connecting them to the past, and then claiming that today's myths are exceptional, exceptionally threatening, and demanding of a response—something Walker notably does not do—feels as much a part of the myth of conspiracy theories as conspiracy theorizing itself. Below I use Richard Hofstadter, the US historian whose work continues to cast a long shadow on conspiracy theory studies, to reconsider the relevance and prevalence of that pattern.

Conspiracy Theory as the Historical Undead

Conspiracy theories from the 1990s survive as background figures in the conspiratorial imaginary. Trump's candidacy and presidency from the mid-2010s to the present, along with the 9/11 attacks and the attendant Truth Movement in the decade before it, may have pushed the earlier theories out of the popular imagination, but the 1990s helped establish the conspiratorial culture we now inhabit. Most prominently, the 1994 congressional elections made Newt Gingrich Speaker of the House of Representatives after he led an energized, divisive Republican campaign pitched (conspiratorially) against the Clinton presidency, which Gingrich depicted as elitist, debauched, and corrupt and which he and his fellow House members later attempted to end via impeachment. Gingrich's temporary success proved an important precursor to the "Tea Party" movement that organized right-wing and libertarian dissent against Barack Obama's presidency in the belief that the globalist and socialistic forces Obama represented were a grave threat to US sovereignty. And the Tea Party's contempt for President Obama served as a basis for Donald Trump's ideological success two decades later. The 1990s militia movement also presaged the present, as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, groups that played key roles in the January 6 riot, offer a less rural but no less threatening version of the militias' vigilantism, race politics, and odd-ball constitutionalism. Nicole Hemmer's recent history of conservatism in the 1990s (2022) identifies the decade's ongoing political relevance, even as the conspiracy theories and personalities of those who promoted them during the period seem quaint in comparison to those in the present.

New conspiracy theories refer incessantly to events that date back decades and even centuries, remixing alleged or real plots from the past to posit their current relevance. This relationship between past and present is at play not only in conspiracy theories but in the attempt to account for them. Academics inevitably explain contemporary conspiracy theories in their relationship to the past, as I did above. The extent of our effort to place a current manifestation in a historical context depends upon our disciplinary orientation and the questions we ask. In the attempt to provide a kind of structural account of conspiracy theory—identifying the underlying conditions and causes for conspiratorial belief based on culture, psychology, cognition,

or epistemology, for example—we explain how or why conspiracy theories circulate continuously across time. Alternatively, when we study a specific manifestation of a particular theory, we place it in the political, social, or cultural context within which it arose, or we evaluate its specific historical impact at the time of its popularity and in the period thereafter. Either way, we offer implicit and at times explicit accounts of the present in light of the past (or, in the case of historians, of one past in light of a further past). Like conspiracy theories, which focus on a particular event or individual with ties to the past or on a broader, structural cause for the present-day, academic accounts of conspiracy theories seek connections from the past to the present problem they aspire to explain.

Richard Hofstadter initiated this approach at the beginning of the modern study of conspiracy theories.² He explicitly connected the emergence of the insurgent mid-twentieth century conservatism represented by Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade and Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign to the American political tradition of what he called the nation's long-simmering "paranoid style": the "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" that views a "hostile and conspiratorial world . . . directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life" (Hofstadter 1965, 3–4). To explain the present, Hofstadter described a connected and continuing past in which the paranoid style had circulated throughout many of the most significant political disputes and controversies in US history. He offered an abundance of examples of this dysfunction:

In the history of the United States one finds [the "style"], for example, in the anti-Masonic movement, the nativist and anti-Catholic movement, in certain spokesmen for abolitionism who regarded the United States as being in the grip of a slaveholders' conspiracy, in many writers alarmed by Mormonism, in some Greenback and populist writers who constructed a great conspiracy of international bankers, in the exposure of a munitions makers' conspiracy of the First World War, in the popular left-wing press, in the contemporary right wing, and on both sides of the race controversy today, among White Citizens Councils and Black Muslims.

(Hofstadter 1965, 9)

"The recurrence of the paranoid style," Hofstadter explained, "suggests that a mentality disposed to see the world in the paranoid's way may always be present in some considerable minority of the population" (1965, 39). He presented a narrative in which conspiracy theories operate like *Dracula's* undead:

They cannot die but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world. For all that die from the preying of the Undead

become themselves Undead, and prey on their kind. And so the circle goes on ever widening, like as the ripples from a stone thrown in the water.

(*Stoker 1897, 200*)

Zombie-like, the paranoid style survives over the course of US history as a historiographical curiosity and a recurring problem in those moments when it rises up from the grave, bringing with it all of the past theories that have come before. Once bitten, the infected individual and group can contaminate some portion of the population. The paranoid style cannot be defeated; it can only be contained when those grounded in the ways of consensus and moderation incant necessary common sense to mitigate the power of its spell.

The People

Hofstadter's writings made another, equally important and influential linkage besides the past and present: Conspiracy theories in the US arise from and operate within the tension between populism and democracy. In his critical account of the populist and progressive movements in *Age of Reform* (1955) as well as in the collection of essays in *The Populist Style in American Politics* (1965), Hofstadter described a process by which populist surges emerge and recede to challenge democratic institutions, including political parties and constitutional governing structures. He viewed the takeover of the Republican Party by the red-baiting conservatives of the 1950s and early 1960s who opposed federal civil rights legislation as a triumph of militant right-wing populism which threatened the New Deal consensus that had formed during the Great Depression. He carried his skepticism of populism's role in American history to his concerns about the nation's direction. In so doing, he initiated two related intellectual moves that continue to affect conspiracy theory's study: viewing the rise of populism, particularly of the right-wing sort, as an existential threat, and understanding that threat as both continuous with the past—as the product of the undead “paranoid style”—and contingent upon the ideological and material threats of the moment.

The populist and paranoiac through-line that constituted a longstanding American tradition had spawned a particular danger in Hofstadter's time—at least before Lyndon Johnson's thorough thrashing of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential elections. After describing a domestic politics that had become more riven by frightening degrees of isolationism, populism, and passion, Hofstadter pessimistically ended his essay entitled “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” written in 1954 but included a decade later as one of several essays in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* collection, with this warning:

These considerations suggest that the pseudo-conservative political style, while it may already have passed the peak of its influence, is on the long

waves of twentieth-century American history and not a momentary mood . . . [I]n a populist culture like ours, which seems to lack a responsible elite with political and moral autonomy, and in which it is possible to exploit the wildest currents of public sentiment for private purposes, it is at least conceivable that a highly organized, vocal, active, and well-financed minority could create a political climate in which the rational pursuit of our well-being and safety would become impossible.

(1965, 65)

Hofstadter thus mixed his account of past and present phenomena with an existential dread about what the future would hold, offering predictive commentary unmoored from any sophisticated political or social theory. He paranoically hypothesized the possibility of highly organized, powerful conspiracy of a “well-financed minority”—a non-confirmable prediction, insofar as any future democratic backslide could not be connected to the ill-defined category of “pseudo-conservatives.” His pronouncement claimed a clairvoyance that was undeterred a decade later in the introduction to the same collection as he noted how parts of the masses continued to “respond . . . to the great drama of the ‘public scene’” (1965, x). Even after Johnson’s resounding victory, he closed his mid-1960s essay “Goldwater and Pseudo-Conservative Politics” with the warning that the movement that had backed Goldwater

moves in the uninhibited mental world of those who neither have nor expect to win responsibility. Its opponents, as men who carry the burdens of government, are always vulnerable to discontents aroused by the manifold failure of our society. But the right-wingers, who are willing to gamble with the future, enjoy the wide-ranging freedom of the agitational mind, with its paranoid suspicions, its impossible demands, and its millennial dream of total victory.

(1965, 140–41)

The relationship Hofstadter had identified between populism and “paranoia” correctly observed that populism and conspiracy theory travel together, as more recent work has also identified (Bergmann 2018; Butter 2020; Fenster 2008 [1999]). The academic study of populism studies can thus offer an additional framework for considering conspiracy theories both in historical and social contexts and as a diverse phenomenon. As with conspiracy theories, the literature on populism has expanded considerably in the past decade to study present trends, and it helps illuminate those characteristics that overlap with conspiracy theory: Populism offers a dualist, often Manichean vision of a world filled with good actors who champion the people and evil forces that represent elites (Canovan 1999, 3–8; Laclau 2005, 15); it posits a secret world under the surface that requires exposure to restore the rightful order of popular, accountable rule (Fenster 2017; Moffitt 2016, 43–47;

Taggart 2002, 76–77); and its political valence is highly contingent on a nation’s or region’s internal political dynamics—including its political system and parties—as well as on the current issues to which an individual populist movement appears to be responding (Mouffe 2018, 11; Müller 2016, 8–10). Academic interest in the subject has typically tracked the present fortunes of populist movements, and those who study it often make plain their own political commitments whether, as in Jan-Werner Müller’s case (2016), his centrist concerns about populism or, in Chantal Mouffe’s (2018) or Stuart Hall’s (2021 [1988]), their desire to articulate a left form of it.

By contrast, Hofstadter’s influential normative perspective on populism—that of the expert free of agitation, too mature to believe in millennial dreams and yet riven by (presumptively non-paranoid) suspicions of the irrepressible paranoid populists—was not necessary to his description. But, like his descriptive account, Hofstadter’s normative perspective on populism reverberated in conspiracy theory studies’ development in the decades since his work’s wide dissemination, as writers have continued to associate the nation’s “populistic” history to believers’ “agitational mind” (Thalmann 2019, 59–63).

The Undead, Today

The first edition of my book on conspiracy theories was one of three academic monographs (Fenster 2008 [1999]; Knight 2000; Melley 2000) written in the late 1990s that concerned the “conspiracy culture” (as Peter Knight called it) of the US.³ In different ways, the monographs asserted that conspiracy theories, having bloomed especially in the aftermath of the multiple legitimacy crises that followed political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and Watergate, exist at the center rather than the periphery of US cultural politics and therefore demanded close study and understanding rather than dismissal as the product of paranoid frustration by outsiders. That all three scholars worked in a set of fields broadly grouped as “cultural studies,” rather than in political science or history, speaks of a time when conspiracy theories were a marginal subject to those who studied the political past and present while proving visible to those fascinated enough by their contemporary cultural pervasiveness to see them as an object of analysis. Each of us argued that Hofstadter and those who followed in his wake had not satisfactorily explained the phenomenon (Fenster 2008 [1999], 3–21; Knight 2000, 5–6; Melley 2000, 1), even if it was difficult to find a concerned commentator in the mainstream press who did not refer to conspiracy theories as the product of paranoid minds. But like Hofstadter we deployed extant literary and social scientific methods and theoretical frameworks from our intellectual milieu to explain the right-wing populism of his time.⁴

Our convergence in applying cultural studies to conspiracy theory spoke to the concerns of a specific corner of the humanities at the time as well as to the peculiarities of our personal tastes in literature and film. But it also constituted an early instance of what has become a thoroughgoing, multi and interdisciplinary reconsideration of conspiracy theories. The academic study of conspiracy theories now includes those who view the phenomenon as the product and/ or cause of political beliefs and behavior, as evidence of psychological function and dysfunction, and as an alternative and broken form of popular epistemology (Butter and Knight 2019). The amount of published academic studies of conspiracy has increased considerably since 2007 and exploded since 2020—according to one study, by 180 percent in 2020 alone (Mahl et al. 2022, 6). Researchers now measure conspiracy theories in polls, study their development and effects in experimental research, fashion belief in them in cognitive modeling, and find and analyze the traces left by believers in massive data sets. They focus on conspiracy theories as an isolated object of study or conceptualize them as an aspect of mis- and disinformation and as a symptom or cause of creeping authoritarianism and fascism. Although scholars and commentators still cite Hofstadter’s work, the current ferment is not simply the result of his influence. Nevertheless, it replicates Hofstadter’s core strategy: deploying one or more established disciplinary perspectives and their methods to observe a contemporary phenomenon, uncover its origins and impacts, and speculate about its future.

Like Hofstadter, many of those who study conspiracy theories offer normative judgments of conspiracy theories and prescriptive proposals to address their political impacts. A recent book by two political theorists exemplifies this tendency in the authors’ association of what they identify as the “new conspiracism” that Donald Trump helped introduce with older, “classic” versions and understandings:

We agree with Hofstadter’s assessment: the urgency that disdains any ordinary approach to politics as inadequate is something classic and new conspiracism share. Yet there is this difference: the new conspiracism not only is averse to the mundane workings of democratic politics but assaults its institutions and practices wholesale.

(Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 45)

Current research asserts that conspiracy beliefs are fast-spreading and represent, as one recent article asserted, “one of the most pressing threats to . . . democracy and national security” (Walther and McCoy 2021, 115). Rosenblum and Muirhead more precisely engage Hofstadter in arguing that the rise of the “new conspiracism” is primarily caused by political and institutional failures, and they call for responsible political representatives and civil society groups

to communicate truthfully to those with more “open minds” (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 141–65). In a similar if more insidious suggestion, the law professors Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule have proposed that government “cognitively infiltrate” online venues where conspiracy theorists meet to interrupt the “informational cascades” into which new believers fall (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Their widely circulated article presaged an explosion of studies that have offered numerous psychological interventions—including informational inoculations against cognitive contagion, priming potential believers to resist conspiracy theories’ siren call, and providing narrative persuasion against such beliefs—which, a review study has recently concluded, work only occasionally and at best result in small, marginal changes in beliefs (O’Mahony et al. 2023). Unlike Rosenblum and Muirhead, recent social scientific research makes little reference to history, but contemporary scholars’ concern with the present—presuming that conspiracy theory belief is a constant across time as well as one that constitutes a significant current threat—and the confidence they tend to show in their mix of interventions reveal the extent of their similar parallels to Hofstadter’s work.

If, as I am suggesting, Hofstadter’s scholarship on and interventions in conspiracy theories and populism established a model that contemporary research has followed, what are the lessons and cautions we should take from it? Contemporary scholars who are frustrated with his work focus on how time-worn some of the methods and theories on which he relied now feel, as well as with how time-bound and anachronistic his concerns now seem. I might quibble with Michael Butter’s (2021) vehement complaint that Hofstadter’s history was bad and his prophecy useless, but Butter’s concerns are well-founded. Some critics at the time, including Hofstadter’s friend and contemporary C. Vann Woodward (1959), attacked Hofstadter and especially other so-called “revisionist” historians of populism for unfairly and inaccurately allowing their opposition to the present-day right-wing to ignore the complexity of late nineteenth and early twentieth century populist movements. The historic populist movements of that period were mainly focused on regional economic and class interests, Woodward argued; some of them may have engaged in scapegoating and paranoia, but such beliefs had a longer history in the US and were at least as pervasive among others at the time, including in the region and among the classes that midcentury critics and skeptics of populism were more likely to embrace. Hofstadter and historians who followed him accentuated those movements’ retrograde and reactionary beliefs, as well as their racism and antisemitism and “status anxiety,” and overstated their ideological connections to southern resistance to post-Civil War Reconstruction in the past as well as to right-wing activists in the then-present. And the populists neither resembled nor were direct antecedents of McCarthy, Goldwater, or their supporters, whose politics was rooted in different regions in the US and came from different economic and social classes.

The northeastern liberals of whom Hofstadter was a leading light sought the roots of such movements in the populist past, in the process simplifying and misreading history to make sense of and justify their present fears of the populist right while distinguishing themselves from historians who had embraced populism's challenge to prevailing US class and power structures (Collins 1989).⁵ Hofstadter's surveys of Joseph McCarthy and the post-World War II Red Scare and of the far-right activists of the early 1960s warned of a triumph by right-wing populists rooted in a historic political style. But he did so soon after McCarthy's death as a diminished figure and Barry Goldwater's defeat in the 1964 presidential election by historic margins. His predictions were either wrong or decades too early. To what can we attribute these failures?

Hofstadter, "Presentism," and Conspiracy Theory Studies

Hofstadter's work was a response to current events. He oriented his descriptions of the past around those current events, and he applied the present to make sense of the past and future. As such, his work seems "presentist," a frequently used term of approbation among academic historians. The eminent historian Lynn Hunt has described the twin failings of a "presentist" approach as the tendency to interpret and judge the past in terms of the historian's own period, and "the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past" (Hunt 2002). Hofstadter equated movements throughout US history, condemning some and pardoning others for using a paranoid style, in order to explain the present, and he applied very loose and poorly defined concepts from the social science of his time, including psychological concepts like anxiety and paranoia and sociological terms like "status," to understand the past. Read today, his work on conspiracy theories seems that of an impassioned, presentist pundit rather than a careful historian.⁶

As an expanding historiographic literature has demonstrated, however, presentism does not represent a simple and sinful wrong for historical scholarship. Rather, presentism constitutes an atmospheric condition through which all historians must travel. At a basic level, historians must use present-day language and concepts to describe and understand the past, making some form of presentism inevitable (Loison 2016, 31). And presentism is neither a single methodological lens, nor does it singularly produce anachronistic judgments and empirical errors. Multiple presentisms exist that vary in their value to historical study and in their danger to lead to misunderstanding the past; one historiographic survey, for example, finds three forms (Chang 2021), another finds four (Loison 2016), and a third finds five (Armitage 2023). These forms can include *motivational* presentism, where present concerns influence and even drive choices of topic, an inevitable circumstance

for every historian (Oreskes 2013, 604); *empirical* presentism, which applies currently prevailing theories to infer the occurrence of past events (Loison 2016, 31); *descriptive* presentism, which uses prevailing terminology to describe the past (Tosh 2003, 658); and *evaluative* presentism, which evaluates the past within present understandings and debates (Barseghyan 2022, 61). Presentism's latter form is unavoidable. Scholars cannot help but view the past within their own moral and ethical context. But if the past is excessively evaluated by a current metric, a historical account can become not only unfair to its subjects but distorted and even inaccurate. The problem of excess also threatens each of the other presentisms: One could, for example, be motivated to strategically seek historical evidence, incorrectly infer additional evidence when it can't be found, and then describe it inaccurately to support a current normative project. The most trenchant example of such distortion has been the US Supreme Court's selective use of history to support contested judgments about the constitution's meaning in recent cases expanding gun rights and limiting reproductive rights (Sweet 2022).

Although presentism in any form is neither inherently wrong nor unprofessional, historiographers call on historians to practice scholarly self-reflection on the dangers each type poses to understanding the past and connecting it to the historian's and reader's present (Oreskes 2013, 603–04). Historians must inevitably choose a method of inquiry to apply to the topic they have chosen from the infinite number of available topics, sift among a plethora of historical resources and facts, and then interpret and narrate what they find. In the process, the present inevitably seeps into the empirical enterprise of historical inquiry (Barseghyan 2022). The most compelling theoretical accounts of presentism concede that historians graze in their own time to find topics and perspectives before and as they research, and then frame their accounts to prove relevant to present readers. But even if some degree of presentism is inevitable, a self-reflexive account of the past that reckons with the effects of the observer's position and work in the present can protect an account of the past from serving merely as a tool of the present.

Hofstadter's use of the vague, flat concept of an historical "paranoid style" to intervene in present political debates was deeply presentist. The right-wing of his time, which only partially resembled the populisms of the past, inspired him to revisit his historical account to derive a concept through which he could describe the present. Developing an evaluative and anachronistic psychological framework to describe historical phenomena, he helped simplify popular and scholarly understanding of a current mix of populations and social movements whose beliefs and actions range more broadly than whatever psychological resemblance some of their views might have with the mentally ill. It allowed him to avoid self-reflection by ignoring his own prejudices, like that of the Cold War intellectual who engaged in his own form of paranoia, albeit in a more reasonable and justified form.

Given the terminology he used, his debt to the social theories of his time, his preeminence as a public intellectual, and the notoriety of the “Paranoid Style” essay, Hofstadter’s influence extends beyond historians. His historiographical presentism has spread to scholarship that decontextualizes the phenomena it concerns, whether by simplifying and distorting the past to support an argument about the present or by finding, measuring, and drawing conclusions from data to buttress a normative view of contemporary politics. The same framing that regarded conspiracy theory and populism as ever-present influences and viewed the present as a particularly calamitous threat affects current social scientific literature that catastrophizes extant politics, seeing the seeds of democratic ruin in the traces left by online disinformation and misinformation campaigns rather than studying the messy beliefs and social practices in which humans engage (Bernstein 2021; Birchall and Knight 2023, 43–65). And, as with Hofstadter’s form of presentism, non-historian social scientists who implicitly rely on “paranoid style” framing invite authorities to surveil and police conspiracy theory believers in a manner that would confirm their prejudices and suppositions about an enemy state. It stops rather than begins discussion, dialogue, and understanding. It can become an anti-liberal counter to populists’ skepticism about liberalism and pluralism by casting populist movements outside of a fragile center that needs protection—not only those that are violent but also those who share aspects of their beliefs. And it causes the same lack of self-reflection by commentators and scholars who fail to question centrists’ conspiracy theorizing and paranoid projection about Donald Trump’s alleged ties to Russia.

Nevertheless, I want to avoid presuming that today is the same as the past—that, as with the 1990s, our time too will seem relatively benign and merely part of a history that is receding. The threats represented by contemporary right-wing populism and conspiracy theory are not merely illusory—whereas in the 1990s militia-adjacent terrorists bombed a federal building, in 2020 Trump supporters broke into the Capitol. The approach to which I have contributed recognizes the relative normality of conspiracy theorizing in democratic politics, popular culture, and the general discourse, but it risks neglecting tonal changes in conspiracy theories’ and populisms’ political and cultural pitch. It could miss moments when their ambient sounds increase and they emerge into the foreground as a threat. Conspiracy theories and their relationship to misinformation and disinformation may not be among the most important social and political problems confronting the contemporary world, but their causes and effects are symptomatic of more significant democratic failures and the consequences of power and wealth inequities.

Hofstadter’s work on the paranoid style stands for the proposition that confident prognostication bears risks, no matter if one is predicting doom or stasis. The best way for conspiracy theory studies to proceed is by viewing the present with caution and a better understanding of the past and

models that consider historical and social context. Fears of conspiracy, like the still-percolating claim that Covid-19 was in fact a “plandemic,” revamp and reframe existing ways of understanding the past and present that are inevitably available for deployment to explain the next cultural and material crisis (Birchall and Knight 2023, 190). We should expect to see new theories emerge, rooted in the past to reconfigure the future, but we should study and describe them without hysteria and with an understanding of their history.

Notes

- 1 Jack Bratich called this “conspiracy panic” (Bratich 2008). Although I am skeptical of the vehemence and theoretical apparatus he brought to the phenomenon, he helpfully identified and emphasized this dynamic.
- 2 A separate approach to conspiracy theories in philosophy that failed for decades to attract significant academic interest was Karl Popper’s characterization of them as one of the enemies of his open society ideal (Popper 1966, 94–99). Popper shared Hofstadter’s distaste for them. It was not until the 1990s that the discipline began again to take an interest in conspiracy theories (see, e.g., Keeley 1999).
- 3 Clare Birchall and Jesse Walker similarly characterize the 1990s as a “high pop-cultural moment” (Birchall 2006, 38) and a “golden age” (Walker 2013, 15), and Birchall’s and Bratich’s (2008) books are part of the same wave.
- 4 On the interdisciplinary sources for Hofstadter’s work, see Dunst (2017, 23–39); McKenzie-McHarg (2022).
- 5 Hofstadter lamented his having come to symbolize the overstated, ahistorical revisionist critique of the populists, but his own sloppy language and his prideful ability to craft a well-turned phrase gave his critics sufficient ammunition to do so (Brown 2006, 112–19).
- 6 The historian David Greenberg (2006) has derisively referred to Hofstadter as “the pundit’s historian.” But to be clear, I am only applying the term “pundit” to Hofstadter’s use of history in his interventions into contemporary politics, not his entire corpus.

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