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A Critical Overview of Basic Theoretical Perspectives on Some Historical Examples of Conspiracy Theories*

Abstract: The paper is an attempt to summarize and critically assess the main threads of research on conspiracy theories. The first part of the paper offers an analysis of theoretical frameworks developed within philosophy, political theory, sociology, the theory of history, anthropology and cultural studies. The main approaches to conspiracy theories are discussed through the lens of the anthropology of knowledge. The second part of the paper presents some historical examples of conspiracy theories in European context. The historical scope encompasses examples from the Middle Ages to the present. The authors sought to combine two commonly separated approaches to conspiracy theories – the particularistic and the universalistic. Having in mind that cross-disciplinary cooperation in the field of conspiracy theory research is usually an exception to the rule, and that the dialogue on contradictory findings and different methodologies is quite rare, the authors attempted to show that an interdisciplinary analytical prism – one relativistic (anthropological, particularistic) and one universalistic (historical) could be theoretically and methodologically beneficial to both disciplines.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, anthropology, history, the anthropology of knowledge

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Introduction

At the peak of COVID-19 pandemic, Slavoj Žižek lamented that the ongoing spread of corona virus led to an enormous epidemic of ideological viruses hitherto dormant in our societies: viruses of fake news, viruses of paranoid conspiracy theories and viruses of racist outbursts (Žižek 2020, 39). Various researchers point out the fact that one half of the contemporary American population believes in at least one conspiracy theory (D'Ancona 2017, 36). The situation on the other side of the Atlantic is no different. While empirical evidence shows that 30 per cent of Americans believe that wars, economic recessions and election outcomes are controlled by small groups of people working against all the rest, 30 per cent of the German, French, Swedish and British populations believe their governments are hiding the truth about immigration (Harambam 2020, 2). One does not have to be a professional researcher on the subject or a member of conspiring circles to have heard about Illuminati, Reptilian, alien or BigPharma conspiracies. One particularly entertaining conspiracy theory placed in the context of the academic discourse and liberal media says that scholars from the Frankfurt School have infiltrated universities with their successors since the 1960s in order to indoctrinate people with harmful ideas and to change society.

Some authors have linked the rise of conspiracy theories to risk society, high or fluid modernity, some to the post-truth era, fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic that was followed by infodemic.[1] It seems that nowadays we are left with a devastated landscape of shaken epistemic authorities and gatekeepers (science, politics and the media) less and less trusted by large segments of populations. In these epistemic landscapes, trust – the "lifeblood of modernity" – is always the currency that seems to be missing. Conspiracy theories are consumed not only by what is perceived to be the (lunatic) fringe of society, the powerless and tinfoil hats. Quite the opposite – nowadays, they have been highly institutionalized mainly within right-wing political mainstream.[2] Thus, others have linked conspiracy theories to the rise of populism which is based upon the strict opposition between the good (the people) and the bad (the elite) with conspiracy theories as its necessary component. Conspiracy theories have turned out not to be discourses that mushroom only on the margins of a society; they have found their way in every pore of popular culture. If we look a bit further into the recent past, the usual suspect for strengthening the belief in conspiracy theories is, of course, postmodernism.[3] Metanarratives are dead, foundations are cracking. We are left with spirals of epistemological infinite regress heading deep into the

[1] Writings on conspiracy theories have exploded since 2020.

[2] Left-wing populism is also alive and kicking.

[3] It is curious that Paul Feyerabend, often called "the worst enemy of science", is not recognized in the literature as a precursor of conspiracy theories in the contemporary

abyss which dissolves foundations of any hitherto trusted epistemic authority. In this scenario, some might find themselves gloating after the Sokal affair or after Latour (Latour 2004) flogged himself for having created a monster. Looking farther back into the past for sources of conspiracy theories, some have blamed WWII, the rise of totalitarianism and the Cold War. Some speak more broadly of crises in which they thrive or of legitimacy crises.

It should be noted that a vast majority of people love to hate crises and insecurities they bring about. Anthropologists, as professional researches, love to love crises. They enthusiastically speak of their liminal character or their antistructure that can reveal a lot about the building blocks upon which our societies or cultures operate, whether we speak of e.g. epistemological frameworks, tacit knowledge or power relations. Thus, we follow Bratich (Bratich 2008, 6) in asserting that conspiracy theories are a “portal concept”: they are like doorways into the major social and political issues defining political culture since at least the Cold War. But this presentistic periodization that traces the origin of conspiracy theories back to the mid-20th century loses from sight much older conspiracy discourses which will be traced in the second part of this paper. There is no time in recorded history without conspiracy theories (Uscinski 2018, 1). If conspiracy theories are broadly defined as sets of arguments, narrative themes and rhetorical tropes which are passed from one generation of conspiracy theorists to the next, and which link accounts from earlier periods to those of today, then an awareness of the historical development and evolution of conspiracy theories is a necessary prerequisite for any further inquiry into their nature and appeal (Byford 2011, 40). By following their historical course, a historian can contribute to the perspective of an anthropologist, shedding light on its presentistic limitations and broadening its scope. On the other hand, an anthropologist can help a historian restrain from possible tendency to “discover” conspiracy theory behind every crisis, political turmoil or major historical event, a tendency that itself can produce a misguided or limited theory of conspiracy theories.

Some Methodological Remarks on *Theories* about Conspiracy Theories

But what exactly are conspiracy theories? It seems convenient to start with what they are not. They are not natural kinds. On the other hand, popular wisdom has it that one will recognize a conspiracy theory when one sees it. Articles and books on conspiracy theories usually begin by emphasizing that they

period, nor is his highly influential and notorious epistemological anarchism/dadaism recognized as contributing to them.

are thriving, that they are everywhere, that they have reached its golden age and became mainstream. Some studies end up in moral panic comparable to Satanic panic. It should be highlighted that the idea of conspiracy theory or the concept of conspiracy theory is mainly created from the outside: it is quite rare that a person declares himself a conspiracy theorist (except with irony or cynicism or with a rhetorical trope "I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but..."). Labelling something a conspiracy theory or someone a conspiracy theorist usually means putting an end to any conversation by attributing conspiracy theories to paranoids, explaining away their claims or by labelling them irrational, unreasonable, untrue, unfalsifiable, accusing them of invoking to ad hoc hypotheses or to predetermined conclusions built into explanations[4] or even accusing them to be morally suspect according to some predefined standard taken to be positive, welcome or normative, not to say true. Thus, they have been denounced as a bad science or non-science, as a superstition, as an irrational way of thinking or societal danger that is usually seen as a threat to the established, welcome or desirable social, political, moral or even medical order. The usual positive mirror-image candidates are (liberal) democracy, the Open Society, the rational order of things, truth or public health.

But we are still left wondering what exactly has been denounced. As Hacking have wittingly framed it – social construction of what? So, denouncement of what? Taking the trouble to list definitions seems boring and mind-numbing but it turns out to be necessary if we are to frame the subject of our study firmly, to avoid conceptual vagueness or incommensurability, to avoid comparing apples and oranges. When it comes to the term itself, the state of affairs in both the national and the international literature is quite vague, i.e. the theoretical meaning of the term is highly polysemic, not to say slippery. Since the end of the 20th century in particular, the bibliography on conspiracy theories has become quite large and historically, politically, disciplinary and regionally wide.[5] Still, there is no consensus when it comes to the fundamentals – whether conspiracy theories exist in the first place, what they are, whether they form a homogenous category, whether they are empirically discovered or imposed on the material, whether they have universally stable form and structure across time and space, where to trace their origin, how to pinpoint their dynamics and functions, whether they are (ir)rational, plainly wrong, harmful, deviant, or whether they are to be

[4] The most efficient way to explain away anomalies at the heart of a conspiracy theory (especially accusations that it is a conspiracy theory) is to introduce an ad hoc hypothesis (conventionalist strategy or epicyclic mechanisms) that these accusations themselves are part of the conspiracy.

[5] It is worth noting that both national and international anthropological bibliographies are surprisingly thin (counter-examples include works by e.g. Fassin, Diković and Lukić).

understood contextually and neutrally, etc.[6] It could be argued that precisely the floating nature of this slippery signifier enables it to function as an empty screen to be filled by its critics or as a moving target to be hit.[7] Furthermore, the debate surrounding it is quite often, implicitly if not openly, charged with moral and ideological impulses, premises, conclusions, implications and recommendations.

Seen through a value-loaded component often built in the discourse on conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories are treated as a kind of deviation from some norm – the norm of scientific explanation, the norm of rationality, correspondence to truth, as a non-refutable non-science or malicious ideology. What we are only left here is to search for the reasons for these devitations or to construct a policy in an effort to produce some desirable outcome. We take the stance that labelling conspiracy theories as irrational, paranoid, harmful, untrue, epistemologically crippled, poor man's epistemological mapping in the post-modern age or morally suspicious is quite an easy step if they are to be judged in comparison with some desirable standard set out in advance to be defended or corrected with their help. But it is questionable whether this type of conclusion has any analytical merit. We hold that this stance as an analytical dead-end. In fact, we take it not a be analysis at all, but a presupposed goal masked as an outcome.[8] Even worse, it can be a manifestation of an ideology disguised as science. When it comes to studying conspiracy theories, we take the standpoint of methodological agnosticism. Taking famous examples from the history of theory and methods in the social sciences: just as it is analytically quite irrelevant whether Hopi rituals "really" bring about the rain (Merton) or whether the Azande are "really" rational in comparison with some gold standard of rationality (Evans-Pritchard), so it is analytically quite unproductive to wrap up the analysis with the conclusion that they are wrong or irrational.[9] We find it analytically

[6] These debates are usually framed as a debate between generalists and particularists in the CT literature. As it will be shown in a forthcoming article, the debate is actually a manifestation of wider debate between rationalists and relativists.

[7] It would be interesting to write an article on how those who investigate CT invent them or how they are to be studied themselves as conspiracy theorists. We can even go so far as to draw a parallel and argue that, just like the anthropology in crisis claims that it has no object of study, so conspiracy theories research does not have it either except the one that it invented itself. Of course, it is questionable what the worth would be of those assertions except playing with references, mocking and having fun.

[8] That is precisely what conspiracy theories are often accused of.

[9] Had Evans-Pritchard returned from his African fieldtrip only to conclude that Zande were simply irrational, it is quite probable that Peter Winch and Michael Polanyi would have framed their research differently and that the debate on rationality in the social sciences would not have been born the way it was.

more fruitful to look at conspiracy theories not as a form of social pathology, but as a form of social phenomena worth of neutral, contextual investigation. This type of analytic strategy came to be the dominant trend in so-called culturalist turn to conspiracy theories developed during the last decade of the 20th century. The general remark on this situation is a very broad conclusion that conspiracy theories highlight the aporia of legitimacy, knowledge and interpretation (Birchall 2006, 79). Furthermore, what we also find fruitful as a subject of inquiry are the *theories* on conspiracy theories themselves (cf. Dentith, 2018; Dentith 2014). We follow the lead of Dentith (2014, 5), arguing that problems with the belief in conspiracy theories are in fact problems common to all the explanations of complex social phenomena. Conspiracy theories can be treated both as a form of explanation and the subject of explanation. If viewed from the standpoint of the anthropology of knowledge, studying those who study conspiracy theories can shed light on the norms, standards, mechanisms and symbols of a research community, discipline, subdiscipline, historical period, belief system, ideological system etc. This type of study would reveal basic (metaphysical, theoretical, methodological, epistemological, ethical, ideological, political) assumptions upon which problem situations, research programmes, paradigms or schools of thought on conspiracy theories are based. This kind of analysis thus can demonstrate how the negative Other (conspiracy theories) is constituted within a framework of positive Us (theories about conspiracy theories) who are self-constituted in contradistinction to them.[10] As is usually the case, the Other is Our copy, mirror-image with a negative sign. As Bratich has put it, the history of political demonology is the history of enemy construction and therefore over time (Bratich 2008, 11).

In the first article in this series, an anthropologist and a historian took an interdisciplinary analytical approach in order to examine conspiracy theories from two perspectives: contextual and historical. Although this approach may seem to attempt to reconcile particularists and universalists or to square the circle, we hope this co-operation may turn out to be fruitful for both disciplines in that each would be able to recognize the advantages and limits of the other (cf. Butter and Knight 2020). The two approaches may be seen not as Kuhn's different worlds or Wittgenstein's language games, but as complementary. In order to avoid incommensurability, all we have to do is to make sure that the definition of the research problem, the questions we ask and the general theoretical orientation of both sides are in agreement. Continuity or discontinuity of conspiracy theories through histories and cultures depend on the definition of

[10] If we want to complicate the issue further – we can study theories on conspiracy theories with the help of our anthropological theories. Of course, this –(-(– formula always leads to infinite regress and can be subjected to a critical debate or resolved by consensus.

things to be compared and traced in this endeavour as well as on connections we seek to address or explain. If we define conspiracy theories in one way, we will not be able to find them in the material that defined them in another way. As a result, that can lead us to misguided conclusion that they did not exist in the empirical material or that they existed whey they actually have not. Apples cannot be found by oranges.

The consensus among historians traces the origin of conspiracy theories to the Early Modern Period. By contrast, conspiracy theories as a research topic emerged only in the second half of the 20th century. Both parts of this paper are united in a very broad notion that conspiracy theories are one among many cultural coping mechanisms to deal with a complex and uncertain world that include science, religion, mythology etc. (Harambam 2020, 21). The first part of the paper obviously inclines to be relativistic, the latter universalistic. In the second part of the paper, some cases perceived by historians as conspiracy theories will be presented. In this section, the "crisis hypothesis" will be confirmed. It is observed that conspiracy theories often crop up in times of social crises, when insecurity, fear and the need to find the "culprit" for unpleasant events arise. Fear, which is often at the heart of conspiracy theories, is primarily the fear of the Other. The Other can be found within European society itself (e.g. Jews, marginal groups) or outside the European world (Islam). Thus, some conspiracy theories, especially those based on the fear of the Other (such as conspiracy theories related to Jews and Islam), can be described as a phenomenon of *longue durée* originating in the Middle Ages.

The following section will deal with *theories* about conspiracy theories, assuming that academic work on conspiracy theories is worth of academic study in the same way those holding conspiracy theories are.[11] If cultural studies on conspiracy theories take the position that it is important to study meanings of conspiracy theories to those who "prosume" them, we take the position that it is important to study meanings which the researchers attach to them, thus defining them, imposing identities on them, and implicitly evaluating them. What is also important is to study how those meanings are adopted, challenged and negotiated.

[11] Contextual part of the argument will be developed further in a forthcoming paper. It will argue that polemics about what conspiracy theory are, what is their structural mechanism and whether they're irrational, are polemics on the issue of rationality (including the debate on rationality in German sociology and interdisciplinary debate that lasted from the 1960s up to 1980s), the debate about unobservable entities (their existence and causal powers), the debate between methodological individualists and holists, and the debate on the nature of scientistic explanation in disguise. Furthermore, taken to be a debate about scientific explanation, it will be considered as a form of social epistemology.

Research on Conspiracy Theories: Between the Descriptive and the Normative

When dealing with conspiracy theories, Fassin argues that anthropologists are to take a broad interpretative framework encompassing witchcraft, gossip, rumours, urban legends etc. (Fassin 2021, 128). Conspiracy theories may be further viewed as a folklore genre, as a type of mental reasoning in relation to the dominant discourse, the "official" or "verified" knowledge in a particular context (Bratich 2008, 6). Bratich believes that conspiracy theories are a symptom of the discourse that positions them. From his analytical standpoint, it is not so important whether they are true or false. What is important is that they are portals into the context that problematizes them (Bratich 2008, 6). In the same manner, Harambam sees conspiracy theories as a battlefield for claiming epistemic authority and the place of important boundary-work (Harambam, 2014). Considering the genre of conspiracy theories from the perspective of cultural studies, as a part of the oral tradition or popular knowledge of a community, the prime aim should not be questioning their truthfulness or factuality. They should be viewed as ways of remembering and representing ideas and historical events which, although subordinated to so-called official knowledge, co-exist and rub shoulders with dominant stories and mostly arise in relation to them in the everyday lives of individuals (Birchall 2006, XII-XIII). We have seen so far that conspiracy theories are defined in terms of their opposition to what is perceived as dominant or official knowledge in relevant context. But it must be acknowledged that what is dominant or official knowledge varies through time and space. We agree with Harambam that problematizaton of official knowledge is one of the most defining contemporary cultural and political issues (Harambam 2020, 6). The implied notion in the abovementioned statements is power that can be translated into Foulcauldian terms – into regimes of truth, which have the resources to make the distinction between the official and the unofficial, the dominate and the subordinate. Their epistemic status is thus defined contextually. But we are still left with too vague a definition of conspiracy theories.

One more question remains as well: how to talk about the talk on conspiracy theories? Let us start with the term "theory". On what assumptions is the knowledge on "knowledge" of conspiracy theories based? After an introductory course to the philosophy or methodology of science, one realizes that the term "theory" is quite ambiguous. We can broadly define theory as a stipulated explanation, and conspiracy theory as a position that some conspiracy explains the occurrence of an event (Dentith 2014, 23). Let us first sketch some descriptive characterizations of conspiracy theories. We will start minimalistically. A million times recycled characterization of conspiracy theories is that they reduce complex phenomena to simple causes. But one may be left wondering how

that characterization differs from scientific explanation? Let us start again with broadening the scope of this minimalist definition. Political scientist Michael Barkun has put it quite simply. He lists the following characteristics of conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; everything is connected (Butter, Knight 2020, 1). This characterization of conspiracy theories emphasizes their metaphysical and epistemological aspect – they speak about causality, determinism, about how the world really is and how it is to be known. So, they speak of invariance of nature which, even though a metaphysical notion, is at the root of the western notion of causality. Furthermore, the notion of causality is built in the assumptions about most forms of scientific explanation in western scientific methodology.[12] Epistemological-cum-methodological approach that traces the hidden connections beneath the surface of empirical reality built into this definition is in no way different from the basic position of Kant or Nietzsche, from the strategy of unmasking in the sociology of knowledge, from anthropological structuralism or psychoanalysis[13] or metaphysical worldviews built into most forms of western esotericism or Hindu notion of maya. It can be referred to as "occult cosmologies" (West and Sanders 2003). The notion that everything is connected is at the root of most scientific forms of poststructuralism,[14] epidemiology, theories of globalization (or, earlier, diffusionism). Furthermore, this definition fails to address proper and improper, rational and irrational, true or false, good or bad, moral or immoral or the Manichean division of the world or groups of people usually built in the conception of conspiracy theories. We may also wonder whether this definition is too broad to be operative.

So let us turn to more specific definitions of conspiracy theories. It turns out that the more a researcher tries to specify them, the more he evaluates them. As already noted, conspiracy theories exist as a category not only of description but also of disqualification (Birchall 2006, XII-XIII). It was in the Cold War period that the term developed its recognizable strand which carried a distinctly

[12] We will not go further into relation of causality with deductive-nomological, inductive and inductive-statistical forms of explanation in this paper.

[13] We will deliberately omit Marxism from this typology due to the ideologically charged character of the debate about its scientific status. Explanations invoking unobservable forces, be they economic, cultural, political or ideological, are usually postulated by left-wing theorists. Their goal is usually emancipation, liberation or consciousness. Apart from its political-cum-ideological aspect, this is actually a debate about unobservable entities. The main question is whether power, culture, structures etc. exist and whether they have causal power.

[14] It may be fruitful to analyze whether Foucault's ideas can be categorized as a conspiracy theory. This also goes for contemporary left-wing populism elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe.

pejorative connotation. Ever since, the term has come to connote an antiquated worldview or a pathological belief system (Thalmann 2019, 26–27). The term usually came to mean epistemological, methodological, explanatory and moral pathology to be revealed, denounced, debunked or corrected. This connotation resonates with popular usage of the term – the term theory is used to dismiss a claim on ground that it is "just a theory", i.e. a speculation as opposed to the brute fact defined in terms of correspondence theory of truth.[15] But what about the very term "conspiracy"? If these conceptualizations tell us something about the status of a theory (scientific jargon), they say nothing about the alleged conspiracy (jargon of political theory) in the heart of the phenomenon to be studied. Conspiracies are usually introduced through psychological explanatory reductionism or the pathologizations of epistemology.

As the first phase or the beginnings of conspiracy theory as a research subject may be taken the work published between the 1930s and early 1950s. That is where the roots of the syntagm, its substantive content and moral orientations should be looked for. As we shall see, it is often the case that, in defining and evaluating conspiracy theories, the theoretical, methodological and moral components are intertwined. Early scholarly literature should be seen as a reaction to historical, political and socio-cultural events and transformations which were perceived as attacks on intellectualism, the autonomy of sciences and democratic principles (Thalmann 2019, 31). This type of research (and demonization of conspiracy theories as a flip-coin) started during the WWII and had its peak in the Cold War. It accounted for the rise of totalitarianism in Europe and the instrumentalization of conspiracy theories in national-socialist propaganda. At that time, experts provided governments with new subjects and objects of governance; they also legitimated political programmes in the name of scientific authority (Bratich 2008, 28). This discourse was the implicit defence of liberal democracy by epistemological and methodological (i.e. scientific) means which were supposed to guide moral, cognitive and psychological means for overcoming the perceived danger or pathology embodied in conspiracy theories.[16] Harambam rightfully summarizes its basic structure – the pathological Other: bad science + paranoid politics = societal danger (Harambam 2020, 12).

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[15] It may be assumed this popular reading of the term theory comes from not embracing Popper's original conception of the term theory. Popper questioned the legitimacy of "conspiracy theory of society", as it will be discussed further in this paper. The confusion comes from two different uses of the term theory: Popper used the term very widely to include all kinds of conjectures coming from various sources – myths, metaphysics etc. to be refuted, while the lay use of the term theory as a negative marker comes from positivistic assumption that theory, to be confirmed, corresponds to facts or reality independent from the observer.

[16] The term was previously used neutrally in forensics since the late 19th century to address a hypothesis to account for a crime. It continued its life through economics.

Let us shed light on the most influential theorists of the time. In the face of aftermath of the Holocaust, the persecution of Jews and anti-Jewish tendencies, Institute for Social Research (relocated from Frankfurt to the U.S.) and AJC (American Jewish Committee) decided in 1944 to fund a project aiming to yield methods for the protection of democracy "against the inroads of bigotry and the onslaughts of totalitarianisms" (Thalmann 2019, 36). The project contributed to the realization of Theodor Adorno's famous *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Combining psychoanalytic analytical foundations with empirical data, the authors concluded that the notorious "authoritarian type" was based on irrational or antirational beliefs and was the projection of paranoid beliefs onto what was perceived as the enemy, thus resulting in creating a social pseudo-reality. The Freudian explanatory pool reduced anti-Semitism to clinical jargon of paranoia and psychosis. It should be noted that the social field in this image was reduced to psychoanalytic explanation and made the fertile ground upon which Hofstadter would base his elaborations in the years to come.

When discussing theories about conspiracy theories, one cannot overestimate the influence of Karl Popper (an Austrian in exile). In his masterpiece, written as a "war effort" and openly political book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1952; written in the 1930s), Popper established the term conspiracy theories in the academic use and he placed it as a legitimate object of scientific study. He described and criticized what he referred to as "conspiracy theory of society", seeing it as untrue remnant of a religious past and a by-product of the Enlightenment,[17] but more primitive than most forms of theism. Secularization has outdated religious superstitions: gods have been abandoned, says Popper. Nevertheless, even though we realized that God is not in control of all the fortunes and misfortunes in the world, the conspiracy theory of society filled his place with powerful individuals and groups believed to be in control of all events, including those unfortunates. Thus, the line of argument goes: this type of quasi-religious belief links social and political events to human activity. The result is a flawed conception of how reality "really" works. Popper believed that nobody is in control. Reality, according to

[17] Belief in indecipherable powers constitutes modernity's dark Other – an Other condemned as "superstition" which will fade under the light of historical progress (West and Sanders 2003, 8). As discussed by Cubitt (1989), the Enlightenment sought to base social sciences on the same paradigm of mechanical causality that the scientific revolution had established in the physical sciences. That paradigm excluded divine intervention and chance, and posited an unbreakable connection between cause and effect. However, the paradigm began to crumble under the magnitude and complexity of events of the French Revolution. It is also worth mentioning that the Enlightenment saw a shift from the view that God is behind all human affairs to the view that humans are those in charge of both their fortunes and misfortunes. In this light, it is not illogical to see at least some political misfortune as being the result of conspiring behind the scenes (Dentith 2014, 11).

him, is to be grasped with a little help of modern (social) science friends, regulated methodologically properly and demarcated from pseudoscience through its scientific method. Guided by rationality (openness to criticism, refutability through conjectures and refutations), critical rationalism should support, and be supported by, the Open Society that Popper posits as an ideal. It is no secret that he had political goals in mind and that his ethic of cognition was an ethic of social conduct. Nor did he try to hide that he proposed a metaphysics about how the "world really is" (although he discussed it as a regulating principle or a convention), or that epistemology and methodology he proposed as regulating principles were intertwined with political and moral ethics.

His theory is also a theory about the proper aim of the social science. He defined the aims of the conspiracy theory of society and of the social sciences as polar opposites. Conspiracy theories present "the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon, and who have planned and conspired to bring it about" (Popper 1977, 94–95). But Popper thought that social life is too complex for that type of social action and reductionist explanation to work because it attributes too much causal power to conspirators. Following his antitotalitarian, antiauthoritarian and antiholistic sentiment, Popper posited methodological individualism as the only aim of social sciences – which should address the unintended, unforeseen, unwanted or even unforeseeable consequences of social action (cf. Kulenović 2014). Thus, conspiracy theories are denounced as irrational, non-scientific form of knowledge-claims which produce wrong understandings of how the world really works that additionally threatens contemporary democracy which is supposed to be based on the scientific worldview. Trying throughout his academic career to draw a line of demarcation between science and pseudoscience, this time he placed "vulgar" Marxism on the other side of the demarcation criterion (famous examples of pseudoscience, in his view, are Marxism, Adler's psychology and psychoanalysis). Popper thus claimed that vulgar Marxism relies on conspiracist explanation, that is, on the wrong belief that the economic and class interests of those in possession of the means of productions (not the logic of capitalism) are the conclusive factors in history and that they therefore should be classified as pseudoscience and denied legitimacy. Thus, the first serious scientific critique of conspiracy theories was a critique of its left-wing version.

But, when philosophers revisited Popper's ideas, it turned out that his arguments are not to be taken at their face value. As claimed later on by Pidgen, Coady and Basham (see e.g. Coady, ed., 2006), conspiracy theories are to be taken case by case, having in mind that they are not apriori irrational or untrue.[18]

[18] Most of philosophical debate on conspiracy theories, which revolves mainly around the issue of rationality and the question of epistemology, has been sparked by two papers

Furthermore, Popper's views are revisited by contemporary philosophers who claim that conspiracy theories are explanations that refer to conspiracies or plots and which are not supported by appropriate epistemic authorities (e.g. scientific community, state authorities, etc.). In this sense, we can speak of conspiracy theories as lay sociology, popular epistemology or even as a form of discourse present in most forms of poststructuralism, the sociology of knowledge or the social studies of science. One can wonder whether this is one version of the demarcation criterion problem where boundary-work is quite active. One may also wonder what if precisely those epistemic authorities are those who are involved in conspiracy? The age of post-truth showed, and the pandemic of COVID-19 fuelled, the fact that precisely this happens to be the case. Large segments of populations across the globe do not believe scientist and experts. This epistemic landscape turned to be fertile ground for populist leaders who, with the help of an arsenal of conspiracist rhetoric, reduce the world's complexity to evildoings of corrupted elites.

The second phase of the research on conspiracy theories took place at the height of the Red Scare in the mid-1950s and was driven by anti-communist conspiracy theories promoted by McCarthy.[19] This phase continued what Adorno had started and further medicalized conspiracy theories, placing them in the heads of delusional minds. The famous linking of conspiracy theories to paranoia should be traced back to Richard Hofstadter's work.[20] As Bratich (2008, 4) has put it, Hofstadter not only pathologized conspiracy theories, he gave them coherence, historical persistence and intelligibility of political knowledge. It should be noted that the wide acceptance of Hofstadter's theories can be partly attributed to the fact he was an established historian and that he was twice awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In *Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1964 – a year after the assassination of JFK), Hofstadter intermittently makes use of the term which is, quite tellingly, listed under "conspiratorial manias" or, more famously "the paranoid style", manifested in a series of conspiracy theories ranging from the 18th-century fear of the Illuminati to the fear of communism in the 1950s. Rejecting conspiracy theories also meant defending the autonomy of sciences at a time when the hunt for communist subversives affected universities.[21] Conspiracy theories were seen as unscientific by

published in the late 20th century and written mostly in reply to Popper – Pidgen's "Popper Revisited" (1995) and Keely's "What's Wrong with Conspiracy Theories" (1999). The most comprehensive volume on the topics is the one edited by Coady (2006).

[19] Red Scares of the 1920s and 1930s were fueled by the narratives that Italian anarchists are plotting to overthrow the government.

[20] It is worth noting that both Hofstadter and Popper were former Marxists.

[21] It was also the decade which started the widespread questioning of rationality of science, the status of scientific method as an universal algorithm and the issue of

both Popper and Hofstadter. Moreover, their proponents were denounced by Hofstadter as a paranoid, extremist fringe of society and politics (Thalamann 2019, 14). Ever since, as Byford has put it, the link between paranoia and conspiracy theories became so strong that the two terms are treated as almost synonymous (Byford 2011, 121) and conspiracism began to be used as a negative label for Marxism, fascism, racism and anti-Semitism. If we follow this line, the only option we are left with is medicalization or debunking. From the standpoint of the anthropology of knowledge, reducing conspiracy theories to paranoia can be seen as a pseudo-psychological explanation, which is actually a political statement disguised as value-free science. Furthermore, it remained an open question as to what the term paranoia actually denotes, except that it is used as a negative label. It seems that it is an empty circular description with a touch of scientific rigour: paranoid is a person who believes in conspiracy theories, and the reason why people believe in conspiracy theories is because they are paranoid (Knight 2000, 15).

As time went by, the claim that conspiracy theories belong to the marginal fringe of American society was further empirically refuted by evidence suggesting that they are a quite widespread phenomenon. Furthermore, invoking paranoia as a pseudo-psychological or pseudo-clinical explanatory reductionism has been put to severe criticism because that type of pathologization would end up claiming that large segments of populations are mentally disturbed. In addition, just think of the conspiracy theories that turned out to be true (e.g. Watergate, project MK-Ultra, Volkswagen emission scandal, the case of WikiLeaks or Edward Snowden, etc.). Finally, just include some Frankfurt school, post-colonialist and feminist literature in the reading list and spice it up with a bit of Michel Foucault and you will end up questioning the claim that rational scientific endeavour is at the heart of healthy liberal democratic society or that it really produces one. Yet, the dubious connection between psychosocial pathology and conspiracy theories has survived severe criticism, remaining well and alive as a pseudo-explanatory rhetoric ever since. For example, psychologists linked conspiracy thinking in the damaged psyche box which includes paranoia, narcissism, schizotypy, distrust, obsession with hidden motives, anxiety, etc. The same Hofstadterian argument can also be found in more recent work, such as Barkun's *A Culture of Conspiracy*, or in Pipe's *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From*.

content of scientific theories and the dynamics of their change. The beginning of this widespread questioning is usually traced to the realize of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Thus, Popper's defence of scientific rationality, the scientific method and his methodological individualism, all denouncing conspiracy theories, are in fact part of the demarcation criteria debate which was especially hot topic back in the 1960s.

Let us examine a widely cited contemporary book on the subject. Thalamann takes Barkun's characterization a little further. (1) Intentionality means that conspiracies are a product of human design, will and intention. (2) The second concept, the one of secrecy and deception, is based on the activity of the conspirators that are organized to *deceive* others with the aim to disable people out of conspiratory circle to see the "obvious". (3) Finally, causality and correlation in the terms of conspiracy theories are concepts that deny the possibility of coincidence and form connections between seemingly unconnected events in the past and present (Thalmann 2019, 2). As we have seen, point (1) does not open any problem, and neither does the point (3). All that we can claim is that (3) overestimates the power of intentionality, human agency or connectedness. But we must bear in mind that it is a question of metaphysic, not of empirical evidence. What seems to trouble both academic and public discourse when seeing conspiracy theories as dangerous, irrational or as an individual or social pathology is the point (2). What explains (in Popper's terms) the conspiracy theory of ignorance, i.e. why do we not know why things happen? Why is there a gap between ontology and epistemology, i.e. what really is and how we come to know it? The idea that "real reality" (noumenal) is somewhat occult or hidden or behind the observable surface (phenomenal) is the starting point of many scientific ontologies/metaphysics/epistemologies and research programmes and methodologies. Speaking of conspiracy theories, this hidden dimension is usually associated with a group of people acting clandestinely in order to achieve a certain goal. One may be tempted to ask if there is any problem up to this point. Many credible historical examples show situations where groups of people conspired to reach a desirable outcome.

What was Hofstadter concerned about was political polarization that produces the Manichean worldview which divides Us and Them, Good and Evil. This mechanism of identification and counter-identification is of course no newcomer to anthropologists who claim it can be found throughout many various cultures. What is subject to change are the enemy, which serves as a base for self-constitution, and the group, which has a monopoly on classifying system. What troubles academic and public discourse is the evil, bad, malevolent, sinister etc. component built into this worldview, which is constituted upon the Manichean alignment of forces (evil Others, powers, elites, groups etc. and innocent Us, victims of their sinister occult activity). The problem, one that is usually built into the most evaluative components of conspiracy theories, begins with the notion of evil or the intention to do harm to some people in order to reach a sinister end. Those characterizations usually presuppose the Manichean division, placing various groups in the category of evil (Reptilians, the Illuminati, etc.), characterizing products or behaviours of some group of people as bad (e.g. vaccines) or a hoax (e.g. Moon landing). This characterization includes a

sub-species of fake consciousness which is seen as being promoted in order for the evil to work upon innocent victims. Precisely this line of thought is usually encountered in morally charged conceptualizations of conspiracy theories in both academic and popular discourse. It has also found its way into the populist rhetoric that offers and antagonized view of the world dividing it into pure, innocent people (who are unaware of the secret plot) and the corrupt elite (see Butter 2025). The empirical, culturally conditioned, question remains by what means the "victims and the powerless" might be "saved".

In the part of the paper that follows, we want to point briefly to the fact that conspiracy theories are not simply the product of populism, post-truth, postmodernism, the Second World War, the Cold War or the dawn of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, they have played a significant role in history that can be traced up to the present.[22]

Some Examples of Conspiracy Theories in European History: From the Middle Ages to the Present

It may be argued that conspiracy theories are not novel phenomena – they can be found in earlier periods of history. Furthermore, they may be found in non-Western contexts as well. Conspiracy theories can become historical narratives that may spread through cultural transmission (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017, 323). Historical examples of conspiracy theories can be traced deep into the past and are considered as phenomena *longue durée.* By tracking the existence of conspiracy theories through the course of human history, historians link some contemporary conspiracy theories to the narratives from the past: those that include conspiracies theories about the Jews, Islam, Masonic associations, the Illuminati, etc. It should be noted that this presentistic strategy must be adopted with caution in order not to project modernity into the past unconsciously. We should draw clear conclusions, but while keeping in mind that things are not unequivocal or simple. A fine historicistic interpretation of the nuances of what it looks as if the same phenomenon is necessary. Such an approach would require a separate analytical contextualization to be devoted to each phenomenon. A methodological article on how to combine presentistic and historicistic approaches in the field would be thus welcomed. In dealing with their interpretation of past, historians are, among all, trying to grasp the the common roots of conspiracy theories which are to be looked upon contextually. Conspiracy theories have

[22] It should be noted that conspiracy theories a quite are a global phenomenon but the scope of this paper only allows us to focus on Europe.

widely been associated with misfortunes, power and the occult. Fassin concludes that there are obviously the common denominators of conspiracy theories from different epochs (Fassin 2021, 130). The emergence and spread of conspiracy theories within the context of social crises is indisputable. In a situation of crisis, when rapid changes in a society occur and power structures, norms of conduct and the existence of specific groups of people are endangered, people experience aversive feelings, such as fear, uncertainty, feeling of being out of control. This creates a fruitful soil for perceiving conspiracies in social surroundings. The main tropes traced back into history are fear and suspicion towards the of Other which is usually guided by ignorance and boosted by the feelings of insecurity. Still, one has to bear in mind that crisis can give birth to many other social and cultural phenomena which are sometimes difficult to distinguish from conspiracy theories. This is precisely the reason why we should pay attention to definitions of conspiracy theories, why we should always keep in mind two-way street between our theories and the empirical material, and why we should adjust our definitions in accordance new research agendas and results.

Let us sketch some examples. The rise of the Roman Empire is often seen as a moment of internal civilising integration of the European territory that created a form of unity. The fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 CE) marked the division and fragmentation of Europe. During the „Dark Ages“, when Migration Period took place (3d to 6th centuries), Roman civilization as known before almost ceased to exist. Creation of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation was an attempt to revive the past unity, but it represented a loose federation of territorial states in central Europe, existing until 1806. The other independent states were formed, e.g. the kingdoms of England, Scotland and France, and the personality of an emperor of the House of Habsburg brought a division of power with the papacy in Rome. In the European context, „fierce opposition to Islam (a perceived external enemy) and Jewry (a perceived internal enemy) was developed. The ages of the Crusades to the Holy Land (1095–1291) and of the Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula (711–1492) were ideologically legitimised by nothing less than what we would call today the hate speech against the 'Muslim infidels' [...]. Moreover, anti-Islam sentiments were accompanied by pogroms against the Jews living in Europe, who were said to frustrate the combat against Islam, the enemy of Christianity [...]. In contemporary conspiracy theories, we can also trace the combined trope of 'conspirational racialisation' of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, [...] that of alleged Jewish world domination and that of a grand Muslim takeover into a re-fashioned theory of white genocide in which Jewish and Muslim agency are interchangeable or portrayed as two plots aiming at the ultimate destruction of the West“ (Önnerfors, Krouwel 2021, 4–5). In the medieval West, there were groups that were persecuted and relegated to the space of social exclusion: heretics, lepers, Jews,

sorcerers, “sodomites, invalids“, foreigners, declassified. The new society of Western Christendom, created in the period 11–12th centuries, was merciless towards those who did not fit into the established order and those not accepted into its fold. The attitude towards these groups was a mixture of hatred and admiration, fear, keeping at distance, but still with the need for these groups to stay nearby. When it comes to Jews, during the Second Crusade, in 1146, they were accused of ritual murder, that is, of killing a Christian child, and of desecrating the host. During the Great Plague in 1348, Jews were executed in many places, accused of poisoning wells (Le Goff 1974, 362–371; Le Goff 1992, 322). One of the examples of unsubstantiated claims regarding the socially excluded groups may be seen, according to Irven M. Resnick, „in *Etsi Judeos* Pope Innocent III, who had earlier complained loudly that Jews across France are unscrupulous usurers, thieves, blasphemers, and secret murderers of Christians, added the unsubstantiated complaint that ’on the day of the Lord’s Resurrection,’ i.e., Easter, after they have received the Eucharist, ’the Jews make these women,’ that is, Christian wet nurses, ’pour their milk into the latrine for three days before they again give suck to the children’ (Resnick 2024, 465). As a result of aggressions that befelled the population of the West from 1348 to the beginning of the 17th century, a psychological shock arose in the entire social fabrics. The “kingdom of fear” was formed, threatening the survival of the social community with the possibility of causing maladjustment, throught and affective regression, numerous phobias, excessive negativity and despair. In its sermons, the Church pointed out to the dangerous enemies of man – Satan and his helpers – and actively debunked them. This is how the whole list of evils was created: Turks, Jews, heretics, women (primarily witches). The Inquisition considered it salutary to accuse and confront the enemies of God, and focused on scapegoats, heretics, witches, Turks, Jews, etc. and on any Christian, who, if he was not careful, could become Satan’s helper (Delimo 1982, 18–19). Conspiracy theories are often connected with collective fears.

In her research, Emily Pothast considers a pilgrimage cult of Simon of Trent.[23] On the Easter Sunday 1475, a corpse of the boy named Simon was found in a ditch beneath one of the Jewish households in the northern Italian city of Trent and the body was taken to the St. Peter’s church, laid out on the altar. The first miracle attributed to Simon was reported soon, so Simon’s body and the city of Trent became the central point of a pilgrimage cult. Due to the cult of Simon, Trent was transformed from a medieval principality into a modern city, with publishing houses and tourist infra-structure. Simon was stated as a martyr by local authorities which claimed that he had been a victim of religious violence, and the Jews of Trent were blamed for his death. Pothast stands out that

[23] It was abolished during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

this case of the blood libel against the Jews of Trent concealed and justified the accumulation of wealth and power by ruling elites, also giving Christian masses a religiously compelling reason to blame their personal poverty on the Jews (Pothast 2023, 31–56). Analysing antisemitic conspiracy theories in the Early Modern Iberian world, François Soyer states that the Jews were officially expelled from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497. These events did not end what might be described as the 'Jewish presence' in early modern Spain, Portugal and their overseas empires. Thousands of Jews converted to Christianity, continuing their lives in the Iberian Peninsula. The author concludes that „this was, in fact, only the latest wave of conversions as thousands of Jews had already converted following the outbreak of anti-Jewish riots in Spain at the end of the fourteenth century as well as vigorous (and forceful) missionary campaigns conducted in the early fifteenth century [...]. These neophytes were generically known as 'converts' (*conversos*) or 'New Christians' [...] and this designation continued to be commonly used to describe their descendants until the second half of the eighteenth century" (Soyer 2019, 1). So-called „Old Christians", who were a majority Christian population, were highly suspicious of motivations and sincerity of the beliefs of Jews who converted to Christianity. Soyer continues with a statement that „the survival of Jewish beliefs and practices amongst some *conversos* and the religious suspicions and social resentment of some 'Old Christians' do not completely explain the persistence of prejudice against *conversos* in early modern Spanish and Portuguese society". Soyer states that antisemitic conspiracism in the Iberian world in the period 1450–1750 had clear emotional and psychological dimensions and that those who propagated these theories aimed to gain benefits from religious, social and economic anxieties that produced fear of the supposed „Jewish peril" (Soyer 2019, 8–9).

Considering narratives that characterize premodern and modern hostilities towards Islam[24], Todd H. Green gives an opinion that „the most obvious discontinuity involves the overt theological interpretations of Islam at work in the Middle Ages, such as the common medieval conviction that Islam was a form of Christian heresy. An important continuity pertains to the political rationale behind presenting Muslims as the ultimate enemies. From the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century, the West has been afraid of Muslims because it has seen them as a significant obstacle and threat to building and preservation of Western empires and nations. Simply put, Western perceptions of Muslims as

[24] Tzvetan Todorov analyzes the problem of fear the West nourishes towards Islam. As an author, he is open to the claims of cultural difference. Drawing on history, anthropology, and politics, and bringing to bear examples, Todorov argues that the West must overcome its fear of Islam if it is to avoid betraying the values it claims to protect (see Todorov 2018).

religious and political rivals drive most of the antagonistic renderings of Islam throughout history, with political rationales increasingly dominating religious ones in the modern period (Green 2015, 35–36). Regarding contemporary demographic, political and cultural currents in Europe concerning Islam, considered as the basis of today's European conspiracy narratives about Islam and the continuity with similar narratives from the past, Marko Pišev and Miloš Milenković state: „The otherness of non-Europeans, especially Muslims, in Europe is also marked by the general notion of Muslims' inadaptability to modern social trends in the West. This is especially related to the basic values that, as leading Western politicians claim, form the connective tissue of the societies they lead. [...] Immigrants from North Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, the Caucasus and elsewhere, are thus threatening the aforementioned civilizational values of the West and are the sole culprit for creating the atmosphere of a cold (cultural) war between the immigrant and of the domestic population on the soil of Europe, a war which, according to forecasts from 1968, could end with mass bathing in 'rivers of blood.' At the basis of such [...] predictions [...] lies the fear of racial contamination, masked in public by the still far less controversial fear of cultural contamination, ostensibly aimed at the total disintegration of Western values" (Pišev, Milenković 2013, 969).

During the age of Enlightenment, large parts of enlighted sociability were not susceptible to conspiracism. Nevertheless, the secret societies of Freemasonry and its offsprings were connected to conspiracism in some circles. Freemasonry and similar secret societies were political only when they transcended the borders between estates regarding membership. When their meetings are concerned, moral philosophy and non-political issues were mostly discussed. One can state that Weishaupt's Illuminati may be treated as conspiratorial, because their proclaimed method was to peacefully install members of the order into all governments of the world. The emergence of myths of their continued hidden existence made Illuminati obsolete and more suspect and can be contributed to the French Revolution and revolutionary wars. The main Revolutionary fears were the fabricated narratives of pan-European conspiracy, enemies from the outside of France and about the enemies within (Zwierlein 2020, 549–550). According to Claus Oberhauser „anti-philosophe, anti-Masonic and anti-Illuminati conspiracy theories combined with antisemitism in the nineteenth century [were] to create an ideological hotbed that led to the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*" (Oberhauser 2020, 555). One may observe construction of conspiratorial narratives in connection with long-standing antisemitism in Eastern Europe. For example, one of the most influential conspiracy theories, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, originated in Eastern Europe and spread all through the West by White Russian émigrés during the late 1910s and 1920s (Astapova et al. 2021, 1). The key conspiracy theories in the Europe during

the 20th century were produced by obsessions with spies and traitors in the First World War. Stalinist conspiracy culture intertwined political and cultural practices of identifying and punishing the imagined or real conspirators mainly through purges. [...] Some of these conspiracy theories continued to frame the way party elites looked at political dissent during the 1970s and 1980s" (Astapova et al. 2021, 10). As we have seen in the first part of this paper, proliferation of conspiracy theories intensified during the WWII and they further became a weapon in the ideological conflict of the Cold War. While the Cold War was developing, „under Communist rule, clear-cut antisemitic public discourse was generally not allowed (it always had to be wrapped), which provided yet another reason for adherents of the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism to stick to their belief, and the myth remained a main component of the local underground anti-Communist narratives" (Astapova et al. 2021, 9).

Moving to Serbian conspiratorial culture, Byford finds the roots of the late 20th century Serbian conspiracy discourses in the late 19th century. The author payed special attention to the populist political culture of 1930s which played a decisive role in shaping conspiratorial reasoning in Serbia. He studies the ways in which the spread of conspiracy theory, such as the conspiracy theory of the world elite, brought to light the darker sides of the conspiratorial ideological tradition. On the example of the alleged activities of Group 69, a group of paranormal enthusiasts with unclear ties to the Yugoslav army, Byford showed that paranormal and conspiratorial frameworks of explanation were in Serbia often combined into a single argument. The paranormal explanations advocated by Group 69 were considered unreasonable, while conspiracy theory became an accepted part of a military discourse (Bajford 2006, 12–13). Considering conspiracy theories related to the wider region of the Balkans, Nebojša Blanuša states that: „with the emergence of the E.U. crisis, seen most prominently in Greece, followed by waves of migrants and refugees from the Middle East [...] the Balkanian self-colonised sense of incompleteness, threats of fragmentation and tendency to civilisational 'regressions' – in the form of xenophobia, rapid nationalism, authoritarian populism and welfare chauvinism – became the spectre haunting the whole of Europe. Something that was constantly relegated to the edges of sanity suddenly became common reality".[25] Furthermore, the author analyzes Balkans' conspiratorial discourses, on the one hand, as antisemitism and anti-imperialism, and conspiracy theories concerning the dissolution of Yugoslavia, wars and social change, on the other (Blanuša 2020, 596–609). After large historical, social and political shifts in the Western Balkans, its citizens attitudes towards the EU, depending on the international and domestic developments, range between

[25] Blanuša notes that conspiracy theories in the Balkans are not homogenous. This region had vairous historical experiences, and people in the Balkans were and are of different cultural traditions and political affiliations.

Euroscepticism (oriented against EU) and Europhili (pro-EU oriented). Citizen's narratives often become conspiratorial narratives as their way to try rationalize, justify or explain events that seem unfavourable or incomprehensible. Their content and structure are based on perplexed political, cultural and social causes. Conspiracy theories and mythologised narratives related to the EU are conventionally defined as „Eurovilification“ and „Eurofundamentalism“ (Blanuša et al. 2021, 185–186). „what was initially viewed as a source of all virtues is now seen as evil: the European Union has become the primary target of conspiratorial narratives in the region (and beyond)“ (Astapova et al. 2021, 1).

Finally, the coronavirus pandemic contributed to the emergence of hitherto marginalized or secondary actors, bringing into focus many heterogenous conspiracy theories. The claim that the virus had spread because the Chinese ate bats was among the first conspiracy theories. Another theory that emerged was that coronavirus had originated in a laboratory linked to China's biological warfare program. The theory about 5G network spreading the virus also had many supporters. The theory that the "deep state" (Beta, 2020), led by the Clintons (Bill and Hillary), Soros (George), Omidyar (Pierre), Gates and others, aims at controlling and managing the world in all ways, even by manipulating health was also widespread (Vuksanović 2020, 529–531). The result was an epistemological disorientation in which rival systems of knowledge and belief fought for emotional and cognitive authority in the public eye. Speaking of Serbia, research has showed that the post-truth condition encountered the fertile ground of general mistrust characteristic of post-socialist transformation societies which was the framework in which the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic was managed. Trust is a necessary component of social relationships that take place in an uncertain and unpredictable environment. In Serbia, even before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, mistrust in the institutions of society, especially political ones (with rare and short-lived exceptions) was so high that it raised questions about the survival of the state and society itself. After the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, trust was further shaken due to numerous contradictions and affairs that followed the state leadership and professional bodies, from which dissonant voices and unclear and inconsistent answers to the pandemic arouse. These voices and answers confused citizens in terms of their rights and obligations, which called into question the reliability and skill of political and professional institutions to manage this crisis (Kulenović 2021, 119–120).

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories could be seen very broadly as indexes of social relations, political tensions, cultural disquietude and moral uneasiness (Fassin 2021, 128). Leone, Madisson and Ventsel (Leone, Madisson and Ventsel, 2020, 45)

have mapped the context in which they assume contemporary conspiracy theories proliferate. They pinpoint the major disruptions in the labour market, massive unemployment caused by economic crises, reconfiguration of social and communicative relations through the rapid evolution of digital media and shifting of political models that cause myriads of ideological contrapositions that, for their part, feed those various conspiracy theories. As Petersen and Hacker have further noted, it goes without saying that the past decade of intensifying 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 (Petersen and Hacker 2025, 261). Some authors even claim that conspiracy theories can connect people, give meaning to their lives and force mainstream institutions and authorities to be more accountable (Harambam 2022, 785). In the post-truth era, followed by confusion and distrust characteristic of COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing influence of right-wing parties, conspiracy theories have further proliferated both in public and in popular discourse. But if we slip on this presentist framework, we risk losing sight of the centuries-long history of conspiracist worldview. We have seen that the question as to how far and how wide the research on conspiracy theories goes depends on the theoretical framework we decide to embrace. The decision to adopt either a presentist or a historicist framework, a generalist or a relativist strategy will unambiguously determine our research methodology, lay the foundations of our problem situations and determine the results we see as a solution to the hypothetical problem. What complicates this question further is that our research framework is quite often subdetermined by (usually implicit) ideological and ethical values and the ideal of good society we politically, ideologically and ethically embrace. Thus, the recommendation for further research on the topic may seem as a reinvention of the wheel: researchers are encouraged to position their theories, methodologies and research agendas as neutrally as they can, and to do self-reflexive work on why they prefer one approach over the rest. Otherwise, they will be engaged in ideological, political or moral policy disguised as a value-free science.

The most value-neutral but specific enough definition of conspiracy theories that the authors have found in the literature is Harambam's: conspiracy theories are "explanations of social phenomena involving the secret actions of some people trying to bring about a certain desired outcome (Harambam 2017, 4). This characterization of conspiracy theories is silent when it comes to the question of good vs. bad usually built into conspiracy discourses. Conspiracy theories have traditionally served as one of the foundations of collective identities founded upon the dichotomy between Us and threatened by sinister Them. This + vs. – discourse mutated to its contemporary form embodied in the populist antagonism between the common people and the elite, the former glorified, the latter

criticized. But if we scratch the surface, we will find again a small group of power elites pulling the strings behind the scenes and we will find again conspiracy theories as a way of boosting collective identities.

But contemporary conspiracy theories most often are not simply about Us vs. Them, whose function can be not only explanatory but also integrative (empowering collective identity and belonging through scapegoating Them). The other thread of conspiracy theories mutated from the idea of a fixed enemy which serves as "our" negative mirror-image into generalized anxiety and suspicion (see Knight 2000). Some scholars concluded that contemporary conspiracy theories do not address the Other; they address the "enemy within" to be found lurking beyond the surface of modern society and operate within its institutions of politics, the medical industry, laboratories of scientists and the financial sector (Harambam 2014, 2). Conspiracy theories are no longer simply about the foreign Other, but about the Other within: the financial system, BigPharma, the destruction of the environment, profit greed, the monitoring of citizens through surveillance systems by the government and so forth. Furthermore, contemporary conspiracy theories are seen less as a sign of mental disturbance and more as an ironic stance on knowledge and the possibility of truth (Knight 2000, 2). These conspiracy narratives demonstrate that trust, truth and rationality are at the heart of current political context (Bratich 2008, 18). They are about fundamental distrust of the truth and reality and of the "gatekeepers" which are in a position to provide knowledge about them. This type of epistemological hypochondria or epistemological instability can be rightfully called postmodern and this epistemic landscape is usually described with reference to reflexive or fluid modernity, postmodernism or the age of post-truth. Seen in this light, conspiracy theories can be thought of as an "everyday epistemological quick-fix" to complex problems (Knight 2000, 8). Dentith has put the problem very simply but not too simply: We need to be able to trust our governments and we need to trust utterances of numerous experts if we want to live in a civil society. The problem with some conspiracy theories is that they suggest that trust is misplaced, and for some this questioning of trust in various beliefs that make up our public and powerful institutions is equivalent to expressing heretical thoughts about some civil religion (Dentith 2014, 85). Once they come into conflict with officially established accounts, conspiracy theories become engaged in a battle of ideas with mainstream institutions and the process of boundary-work concerning who is going to be in epistemic charge starts to thicken. Official institutions are usually understood in terms of stability and trust, conspiracy theories are usually understood in terms of disruption and distrust. It is not only the fact that conspiracy theories' explanations are at odds with dominant explanations – the very explanations generated by conspiracy theories call into question the established knowledge-generating and knowledge-disseminating institutions (Uscin-

ski 2018, 14; Harambam 2014) in times where cultural authority of science has been eroding (usually seen through the neo-Marxist lens as deeply embedded in power structures). What is at stake epistemologically is the locus of epistemic power to be revealed behind the surface reality or alleged fake consciousness. What is at stake politically is, broadly speaking, the locus of social control and the issue of liberal democracy vs. radical democracy.

We tried to keep our goal value-neutral, our assumptions clear, our methods regulated and public. We studied conspiracy theories and *theories* about conspiracy theories as a portal to underlying norms, values, assumptions, explanatory strategies and needs generated within a relevant contextual field. The results are left open to rational critique, additional revisions and possible refutation. The epistemological and policy question remains open: where to draw the line between healthy scepticism or openness to criticism (at the root of scientific method, liberalism and democracy inherited from the Enlightenment philosophy and politics) and destructive doubts (which can lead to self-crippling nihilism, barren solipsism or unhealthy and dangerous polarizations). Another question is who is to be the master.

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*Kritički pregled osnovnih teorijskih perspektiva
o teorijama zavere i neki istorijski primeri*

Savremene akademske publikacije o teorijama zavere vrlo često počinju konstatacijom da su teorije zavere društveno i anatički relevantan fenomen koji ne treba tražiti na društvenoj margini. Naprotiv, one su svuda, čini se da bujaju i da su prodrle u jezgro društvenog života – od popularne kulture do populističke politike. Naučnici skloni kontekstualističkim objašnjenjima uzroka društvenih pojava su se, u objašnjenju rasprostiranja teorija zavere, pozivali na najsvežije „doba“ – doba postistine u kom je dodatno gorivo širenju ovih teorija doprinela pandemija korone i njeno infodemično naličje. Drugi su uzroke tražili u labavo određenim: društvu rizika, fluidnoj modernosti, visokoj modernosti, itd. Treći idu korak dalje u prošlost i krive najočiglednijeg dežurnog krivca – postmodernizam. U prethodnim slučajevima, reč je mahom o krizama epistemičkog legitimiteta. Četvrti kažu da za kontekst nastanka treba uzeti Hladni rat, peti da to treba da bude II svetski rat. Šesti izvode korelacije i prave statističke proračune koji bi nam nešto rekli o time koliko-i-koliko-kojih-i-kakvih ljudi veruje u X. Ono oko čega je u najvećoj meri uspostavljen konsenzus jeste stanovište da se proliferacija teorija zavera odvija tokom perioda kriza. Ovakva konstatacija prija antropološkom teorijsko-metodološkom aparatu koji je kalibriran tako da u krizama vidi liminalnosti i antistrukture koje ogoljuju epistemičke strukture, implicitno znanje, odnose moći itd. Međutim, da bismo znali šta je to što smeštamo u relevantan kontekst ili koja je relevantna korelacija a šta rezultat statistike znači, trebalo bi da razumemo šta je to što proučavamo i zašto ga proučavamo na jedan a ne na neki drugi način. Dakle, iako može delovati suvoparno, u ovom istraživanju smo se posvetili određenjima teorija zavere jer smatramo nužnim da adekvatno postavimo problemsku situaciju, da izbegnemo konceptualu neodređenost i nesamerljivost. Jasno određena problemska situacija onemogućava da se “porede babe i žabe” širom društava i tokom istorije. Utoliko, jedan antropolog i jedan istoričar su nastojali da pokažu da istorija može pomoći antropologiji tako što će baciti svetlo ne njena organičenja i proširiti joj pristup;

antropolog može da pomogne istoriji da se uzdrži od potencijalnog „otkrivanja“ teorija zavere iza svake krize, političkog nemira ili velikog istorijskog događaja.

Ključne reči: teorije zavere, antropologija, istorija, antropologija (sa)znanja

Aperçu critique des principales perspectives théoriques sur les théories du complot et certains exemples historiques

Ce travail est une tentative de présenter les principaux courants de recherche des théories du complot et d'en faire un examen critique. La première partie du travail est composée d'une analyse des cadres théoriques développés dans le cadre de la philosophie, de la théorie politique, de la sociologie, de la théorie de l'histoire, de l'anthropologie et des études de la culture. Les approches principales des théories du complot ont été discutées à travers le prisme de l'anthropologie de la connaissance. La seconde partie du travail présente certains exemples historiques des théories du complot en Europe. Le cadre chronologique s'étend du Moyen Age à nos jours. Les auteurs se sont efforcés à marier deux approches souvent séparées des théories du complot – particulariste et universaliste. Étant donné que la collaboration interdisciplinaire dans le champ de recherche des théories du complot est plutôt l'exception que la règle, et que le dialogue sur les résultats contradictoires des recherches et des méthodologies différentes est rare, les auteurs ont tenté de montrer que le prisme analytique interdisciplinaire – l'un relativiste (anthropologique, particulariste), et l'autre universaliste (historique) – peut être théoriquement et méthodologiquement fertile pour les deux disciplines.

Mots clés: théories du complot, anthropologie, histoire, anthropologie de la connaissance

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