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CONSPIRACY THEORIES – AN INTRODUCTORY REVIEW TO CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORY

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Abstract: The paper is an attempt to summarize contemporary research results on theoretical concepts of conspiracy theories. Author has analyzed theoretical aspects from the viewpoints of political theory and theory of history, sociology, anthropology and philosophy. One of the goals of the paper is to connect the determinism that is at the heart of Western Christian European civilization with the emergence of conspiracy theories. Two parallel phenomena at the center of today Western cultural logic may be observed: the need for an explanation derived from the world view brought about by theological determinism and, on the other hand, in the spirit of the “post-truth” era, the need to liberalize science and free it from the "dogmas" that, according to some, are imposed by scientific institutions.

Key words: conspiracy theories, theoretical frameworks, social sciences

Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the concepts of conspiracy theories from the perspective of social sciences. This perspective concentrates on defining the term itself, which is very demanding and layered, then, on the mechanisms of emergence of conspiracy theories and the principles of their manifestation, action in a modern society, on their effects and possible consequences. Also, researchers from social science fields look at conspiracy theories from an epistemological point of view, that is, whether in their essence is a need for an explanation and whether conspiracy theories should be rejected or carefully analyzed and in certain, specific cases, trusted. Or, on the other hand, theoretical conspiracies are strategic narratives, which are created in order to achieve political, marketing and other goals of certain interest groups, and, finally, it should be stated that in the essence of belief in conspiracy theories lies a deep distrust in official institutions and their attitudes, including scientific ones, brought about by a post-truth society. This paper will consider the views of various authors on the nature of conspiracy theories, how they can be defined, what are the principles of their origin and how they manifest in a society, why

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people believe in conspiracy theories, the problems of the post-truth era and populism, which are key to understanding the concept of conspiracy theories in today's society. Conspiracy theories understood as strategic narratives will be considered, i.e. when political and other actors construct an understanding of the past, present and future in order to achieve their political, marketing and other interests. In this sense, the case of Nazi Germany, which based its entire social system on the nurturing of conspiracy theories, with catastrophic consequences, will be cited, and some of the concepts of conspiracy theories in the historical past will be briefly presented, and they can be followed to this day. Likewise, the ideas of contemporary authors will be presented on whether and in which cases conspiracy theories can be trusted, should they be completely rejected or only given some kind of legitimacy; how to react to conspiracy theories and whether to react at all. The author will also very briefly look at the interpretation of conspiracy theories within the framework of the folklore genre. At the end of the paper, the ideas of theological determinism, which can be considered the basis of the cultural logic of European man, and the views of Karl Popper, who sees determinism as the enemy of the rationality and objectivity of science, and of rational behavior in general, will be linked. Also, within the post-truth era, the need of European societies to liberalize science and free it from determinants, which, according to some, are dictated by scientific institutions, will be emphasized. European civilizational and cultural influences have been transferred to other parts of the world throughout history, primarily the USA, also in terms of conspiracy theory concepts, which are quite dominant in that area.

Theoretical concepts of conspiracy theories: contemporary research results

In the *General Introduction* that Michael Butter and Peter Knight wrote as co-editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, authors paraphrase modern definitions of conspiracy theories made by Geoffrey Cubitt and Michael Barkun in historical and political context: „According to historian Geoffrey Cubitt, conspiracy theories are a way of making sense of current events and the grand sweep of history that is characterised by intentionalism, dualism and occultism. They assume that everything has been planned and nothing happens by coincidence; they divide the world strictly into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot; and they claim that the conspiracy works in secret and does not reveal itself even after it has reached its goals. Political scientist Michael Barkun highlights similar characteristics in his influential definition of conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected“ (Butter, Knight 2020, 1). Katharina Thalmann emphasizes Barkun's three concepts of conspiracy theories. By *intentionality* Barkun means that conspiracy theories are a product of human design, will and intention. 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 dissable people not in the conspiratory circle to see the obvious. 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).

During the 19th century, to “develop” a “conspiracy theory” became synonymous with a line of argumentation that presented a hypothesis which could either be validated or refuted. Conspiracy theories also entered the terminology of forensics since journalists, police officers, and detectives investigating crimes showcased a readiness to build compounds linking a specific kind of crime to the term theory. As an explanation in criminal justice and forensics the phrase “conspiracy theory” continued to be used until well into the 20th century. „It was in the early Cold War period that the term developed another semantic strand which carried a distinctly pejorative connotation and intellectuals began to question whether the term ‘theory’ was adequate. Since then, the term has come to connote an antiquated worldview, a pathological belief system, or, as one journalist phrased it in the 1970s, ‘an ideology, a haphazard theoretical system structured around a network of conspiracies’“ (Thalmann 2019, 26-27). Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1952) describes and criticizes what he refers to as the “conspiracy theory of society”. In *The Age of Reform* (1955), Richard Hofstadter intermittently makes use of the term which is, quite tellingly, listed under “conspiratorial manias”. A 1956 article on conspiracy theorizing in *Harper’s Magazine* (Rovere, “Easy”) and the various dissertations which dealt with conspiracy theories in the 1960s are also indicative of the term’s mainstreaming. In 1983 the term appeared for the first time in the title of a scholarly publication, in *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics* by George Johnson (Thalmann 2019, 27). As the first phase or the beginnings of conspiracy theory as a research subject may be considered research published between the 1930s and the early 1950s and can be seen as a reaction to the rise in totalitarian regimes in Europe. As the second phase may be regarded research and texts at the height of anti-communism during the Red Scare in the mid-1950s. The third phase starts in the early 1960s and can be followed to the mid-1970s when, above all, consensus historians and pluralists denounced conspiracy theorists as the members of a paranoid, extremist fringe of society and politics (Thalmann 2019, 28).

According to David Coady, a conspiracy theory, on the one hand, is simply a conspiratorial explanation, and presumes that group of agents work together in secret, often, but not always, with inauspicious purpose. On the other hand, „a conspiracy theory is an explanation that is contrary to an explanation that has official status at the time and place in question“, and it will always compete with non-conspiratorial version of events. The author argues that both definitions overlap in a great extent (Coady 2006, 2-3). Coady states that „the bad reputation of conspiracy theories is particularly pronounced amongst conservatives, who tend to think of conspiracy theorizing as an activity of the

extreme Left“, and, on the other hand, „conspiracy theorizing is indisputably an activity of the extreme Right“ (Coady 2006, 3-4).

Karl Popper, writing in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, defined the aims of the conspiracy theory of society and of the social sciences as opposite. 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”. According to Popper, conspiracy theories are based on the claims that misfortunate events in a society are designed directly by the powerful (Popper 1977, 94-95). Rethinking Popper's definition and going further, Didier Fassin says: „this definition surely contains some of the core elements of conspiracy theories: the causal reasoning (‘explanation’), the systematic quest (‘whatever happens’), the intentional process (‘planned and conspired’), the secret dimension (‘discovery’), the unpleasant consequences (‘dislike’), and finally, the ‘design’ by ‘interested’ and ‘powerful’ people. In addition to these six analytical characteristics comes a crucial normative one, which is the falsehood of the theory (‘mistaken’), which Popper insistently denigrates“ (Fassin 2021, 129).

Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule consider two challenges in connection to the conspiracy theories. First, understanding mechanisms that provide success of these theories, and the second is to understand how to debunk such theories. Self-sealing quality of conspiracy theories can be seen in the fact that it is very hard to persuade conspiracy theorists by attempting to dispel theories they stand for and that very attempt may be considered as a proof of the conspiracy. Authors urge that the best way to respond to such theories, that suffer from a „crippled epistemology,“ is to make cognitive infiltration of extremist groups (Sunstein, Vermeule 2008, 1).

Robbie M. Sutton and Karen M. Douglas point out the powerful role of conspiracy theories in processes considering ideological context. Connection of conspiracy theories with ideological extremism, distrust in the ideology of the opponent side, following the populist distrust of mainstream politics, is evident. Ideological significance of conspiracy belief is a feature of a „conspiracy mindset“. This „mindset“ is in connection with „measuring conspiracy belief by means of abstract propositions associated with aversion and distrust of powerful groups“, but, there is also, as an important factor, the nonrational character of specific conspiracy beliefs. This factor may increase the risk of mischaracterising conspiracy beliefs and, consequently, their ideological implications (Sutton, Douglas 2020, 118).

Describing strategic conspiracy narratives, Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel define concepts of semiotic conflict, information conflict, strategic narrative, semiotic logic of conspiracy theories and many others, considering conspiracy theories as strategic narratives, and this notion implies “a means by

which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (Madisson, Ventsel 2021, 4). Authors point out strategic use of conspiracy narratives in the discourses of politics, marketing and alternative knowledge, asserting the strategic core of conspiracy theories. Audience and the targeted readers are being shaped by a certain mode that is based on the characteristics of the conflicts. The construction of these conflicts as the conflicts between „the own“ and „the alien“ may be observed. Conspiracy theories often attract attention and outbreak reactions in the targeted audience, causing „cascades of sharing on social media against the background of contemporary information overload“. The aim of strategic disseminators of conspiracy theories is to construct a message that is considered urgent by the audience and seems to need its immediate reaction (Madisson, Ventsel 2021, 4-5).

It should be pointed out that social psychologists try to use quantitative methods to solve the problems such as why some people believe in conspiracy theories and others don't. In this way, social psychology is also interested in effects this believing or not believing in conspiracy theories might have on contemporary societies. The relation between environmental factors, for example, social status and education, and the belief in specific conspiracy theories is also being considered by social psychologists, the same way as the consequences of the such belief, so they highlight its dangers and try to find ways of debunking these theories (Butter, Knight 2020, 5-6).² Researchers try to explain various functions that conspiracy theories had in different historical moments and multifarious regional contexts; also, the political role of conspiracy theories in the history of certain countries and regimes. These theories took different cultural forms (Butter, Knight 2020, 6-7).

Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, and Egil Asprem stand for a point of view that „conspiracy theories have had a long presence in Western culture, often responding to anxieties caused by rapid social, political, or religious transformations. In the modern period, moments of extraordinary change such as the French and Russian Revolutions have inspired the creation of a plethora of conspiracy theories, attributing agency to mysterious and powerful secret societies“ (Piraino, Pasi, Asprem 2023, 1). On the other hand, „the concept of ‘post-truth’, selected as word of the year in 2016 by Oxford Dictionaries, pairs with conspiracy theories, describing a fragmented public sphere where competing narratives and political discourses cannot even find common ground about the most elementary social and political facts. A post-truth narrative focuses on belief and emotion, challenging factual analysis. While the notion of post-truth may be new, the idea that truth is fluid, and fact and fiction are

² These aspects are also a research field of Serbian psychologists, as the work Petrović 2019.

intertwined³, will be familiar to anyone who has been researching conspiracy theories“ (Piraino, Pasi, Aspren 2023, 1). Authors point out that conspiracy theories are entertaining and being spread by books, movies and media in wider sense. Also, there is a deep connection between the arts and conspiracy theories. In that sense, Titus Livy’s account of the Bacchanalian conspiracy follows a number of conventions seen in ancient Roman comedies. Elements of conspiracy theories, that have transhistorical and transcultural character, are the fear of mind control, the fear of harming children, then, following, the fear of undermining moral norms considered as fundamental in certain societies and the fear of social and political change (Piraino, Pasi, Aspren 2023, 3, 5). One can see these common places, including sexual deviations and abuses, ritual killings of innocent children, in examples such as the Bacchanalian affair in ancient Rome 186 BC, in England in the 12th century with William of Norwich, in Italy in the 15th century, when the case of Simon of Trent is considered. There is also a fruitful soil for conspiracy theories, as a reflection of the fear of social and political change, around the French Revolution or the famous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, that were published in Russia in 1903 and considered an alleged Jewish conspiracy against traditional society. Though it was quickly proven that the text is a forgery, the „imagination, a desire to believe, and political drive were essential“ (Piraino, Pasi, Aspren 2023, 1, 5).

Jovan Byford opens up a series of questions, aiming to explain conspiracy theories: „What are the defining characteristics of conspiracy theories and their rhetorical style? How does one differentiate conspiracy theories from legitimate inquiries into real conspiracies in politics? How long have conspiracy theories been around and to what extent are contemporary versions similar to those of yesteryear? Why do conspiracy theories sound alike and what ensures their persistence in modern society? Why do some people believe in conspiracy theories while others do not? Are conspiracy theories necessarily bad, or does

³ Considering mixing facts and fiction in anthropology and ethnography and questions of objectivity and subjectivity, „Clifford Geertz once contrasted the art of fiction with the craft of 'faction', a type of writing that wrapped social scientific truth claims in polished and accessible prose. Ethnographic monographs once enjoyed popular audiences because earlier generations of scholars were committed to writing ethnographic texts that were as beautifully written as they were analytically incisive“ (Ghodsee, Kristen, 2013, „Writing Ethnographies that Ordinary People can Read“, *Anthropology news*, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/kristenghodsee/files/writing_ethnographies.pdf).

Revisiting concepts such as Clifford Geertz 'thick descriptions' and 'faction' some authors „suggest that ethnographic fiction is part of a tradition in ethnographic work that problematize the division between fact and fiction, reason and affect, as well as objectivity and subjectivity. Scholars that work in the ethnographic tradition has long since acknowledged researchers' interpretations and subjectivity as a part of our knowledge production. Qualitative research in general, and ethnographic research in particular, would be impossible without an active research subject that thinks, feels and engages in the field of research“ (Ingridsdotter, Silow Kallenberg 2017, 2-10).

the distrust in government and mainstream institutions which they invariably perpetuate harbour a progressive potential?“ (Byford 2011, 6).

The same author argues that: „Defining conspiracy theories is not as straightforward as it seems. In everyday conversation, ‘conspiracy theory’ is not a neutral term. To refer to an explanation as a ‘conspiracy theory’ or its exponent as a ‘conspiracy theorist’ implies criticism and alludes to a tendency towards faulty reasoning, irrationality or political bias. At the same, plots, collusion and cover-ups are a regular feature of contemporary politics, which means that a theory about a conspiracy might be a perfectly reasonable view to hold“ (Byford 2011, 17-18) Byford also discusses „how legitimate analyses of secrecy and collusion in politics might be differentiated from conspiracy theories“. Tracing the origins and the history of conspiracy theories, Byford finds its roots in the aftermath of the French Revolution, analyzing the social, political and cultural factors. In the 19th century European conspiracy theories were incorporated into the American political culture, and the antisemitic motifs occurred, because antisemitism and conspiracy theories have been transferred from Europe to the USA. The fear of the „enemy within“, together with the fear of external threat, marked conspiracy theories in the early 20th century, following the changes in the conspiracy culture after World War II. In this way, Byford treats and identifies continuities and discontinuities of the development of conspiracy theories and points out that they are remarkably similar, with „a distinct narrative structure, an internal logic and a set of recurring motifs“ (Byford 2011, 18). The author also „calls for the distinction to be preserved between, on the one hand, conspiracy theories as a tradition of explanation and, on the other hand, the more general discourses of suspicion, cynicism and irony which permeate modern society. It argues that the failure to preserve such a distinction not only leads to conceptual confusion, but also implies that conspiracy thinking might be acceptable or inevitable, thereby instilling it with legitimacy“ (Byford 2011, 19).

Matthew R. X. Dentith delivers an important question: „When, if ever, is it rational to believe a conspiracy theory?“ Author presents following arguments, defending such beliefs: „A defence of belief in conspiracy theories as long as you can tell a good story about why particular conspiracy theories are likely to be warranted“ and „A defence of the view that the fact that some theories are conspiracy theories is not itself a reason for rejecting them“. As Dentith puts it: „A proper understanding of how we answer such a question shows that it is sometimes rational to believe *particular* conspiracy theories“. Also, „sometimes the evidence used against particular conspiracy theories ends up being what is called ‘disinformation’: fabricated information put forward to either discredit some explanatory hypothesis or to make some other explanatory hypothesis look plausible. Occasionally the evidence used for or against some conspiracy theory is selective in character: the evidence has been manipulated in order to make it support some explanatory hypothesis. Some evidence, for or against a

conspiracy theory, might even be fortuitous, in that the evidence turns out to be too good to be true“ (Dentith 2014, 3-6). Dentith also explains that when one looks at the field of views about the rationality of belief in conspiracy theories there are two opposing camps, the generalists and the particularists. The generalist view assumes the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories, regarding conspiratorial thinking as itself irrational. The particularist view about conspiratorial thinking denies that the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed without considering particular conspiracy theories. Dentith believes that generalist view offers pejorative definition of conspiracy theory and that that we should be particularists (Dentith 2014, 32). Lee Basham gives the following opinion considering how should we respond to conspiracy theories: „I suspect we should respond, ironically, by not responding at all. [...] In the present civilizational system decisive epistemic rejection of many prominent conspiracies cannot succeed. [...] *There is nothing you can do.* [...] The futile pursuit of malevolent conspiracy theory sours or at least distract us from what is good and valuable in life. Squinting at the increasingly imperial edifice of global civilization and wandering *what’s really behind all this?* gets us nowhere“ (Basham 2006, 74). Charles Pidgen argues that it is sometimes permissible both to investigate and to believe conspiracy theories. He continues: „hence this is a dispute in the ethics of belief. I defend epistemic ‘oughts’ which apply in the first instance to belief-forming strategies which are partly under our control. But the belief-forming strategy of not believing conspiracy theories would be a political disaster and the epistemic equivalent of self-mutilation. I discuss several variations of this strategy, interpreting ‘conspiracy theory’ in different ways but conclude that on all these readings, the conventional wisdom is deeply unwise“ (Pidgen 2007, 219). Didier Fassin argues that anthropologists, taking in consideration philosophical discussions that define and delimitate conspiracy theories, must take a broad interpretative frame while acknowledging the existence and analyzing these theories. This broader frame would include witchcraft, gossip, rumors, urban legends etc., and the author implements this methodology to the conspiracy theories around AIDS in South Africa, showing a „fine line between paranoid fantasies and actual plots“ and increasing tendency in the social sciences „to assimilate social critique and conspiratorial thinking, using the latter to delegitimize the former“ (Fassin 2021, 128).

Ronald H. Fritze takes the following point: „When people start believing things and ideas that are not true, it can become a problem for any society. Nazi Germany is a good example of a nation where too many citizens came to believe pseudoscientific claims about the racial superiority of Germans and the degeneracy and malevolence of Jews, Slavs and Gypsies. [...] When faced with so many myths, pseudo-historical narratives, pseudoscientific theories and conspiracy theories, there is a need to re-assert common sense and intellectual integrity“ (Fritze 2022, 16). This statement and example is important for understanding the potential danger of believing in conspiracy theories *en masse*.

Quoting Jovana Diković, analyzing conspiracy theories, „their power and influence on the public is a characteristic not only of those societies which are going through major socio-political crises and transformations but also of stable economic-political systems. Also, in terms of the range of topics and goals they are inspired by, conspiracy theories are equally compatible with populist reactions that come both from the positions of the left and from the positions of the right, as well as from conservative socio-political programs. It is their universal adaptability and drinkable simplicity that makes the most interesting aspect of their popularity“ (Diković 2011, 346). Diković emphasizes the populist character of conspiracy theories, concluding that one of their most important features is inclusive character. Through these theories the public gets acquainted with contents which are believed to be indisclosable to ordinary people. In that way, they, even shortly, step away from the cathogory of average cognition and presented truth. Arguing this, Diković sees potential in conspiracy theories, through possibilities of various instrumentalizations and epistemological and cognitive dimensions of these theories (Diković 2011, 346). Substantial relationship between populism and conspiracy theories was explained by Fenster (2008). He argues that dismissing conspiracy theories as pathological or marginal flattens contemporary politics and culture because they are—contrary to popular portrayal—an intense articulation of populism and, at their essence, are strident calls for a better, more transparent government. Also some recent theoretical and empirical studies about this relationship have been published in the edited volume *Populism and Conspiracy Theory* (2025), edited by Michael Butter, Katerina Hatzikidi, Constanze Jeitler, Giacomo Loperfido, and Lili Turza. Populism and conspiracy theory, are, according to the editors of this volume, clearly connected, but the relationship between the two has so far been hardly systematically explored. Contributions in this collection of papers provide in-depth analyses of specific configurations of populism and conspiracy theory and considerations of more theoretical issues. 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. Authors in the theoretical chapters consider in their research the aesthetics and forms of populist conspiracism or its dependence on new media, all this analyzed through disciplines from political science and sociology via anthropology and history to linguistics and cultural studies (Butter et al. 2025, 1-2).

Conspiracy theories may be viewed as a folklore genre, as a type of mental reasoning and narrative formation that emerged at the intersection of the cognitive and the emotional, but also in relation to the dominant discourse, or “official” or “verified” knowledge in a particular context. Rather, they are a metaconcept that denotes struggles over the very meaning of the category (Bratich 2008, 6). Bratich believes that conspiracy theories are a symptom of the discourse that positions them. In this sense, from a scientific perspective, it is not so important whether they are true or false (which all research on

legends/conspiracy theories in folklore and other disciplines dealing with narrative genres emphasize), but rather that the genre itself is structured in such a way that it prompts us to think about the realities in which they arise because, as Bratich points out, they are portals into the context that problematizes them (Bratich 2008, 6). In this sense, when considering the genre of conspiracy theories as part of the oral tradition or popular knowledge of a community, it does not mean questioning their truthfulness or factuality, but rather they should be viewed as ways of remembering and representing ideas and historical events which, although subordinated in value from the position of so-called official knowledge, in the everyday lives of individuals equally coexist and rub shoulders with dominant, verified stories and mostly arise in relation to them. Conspiracy theories exist as a category not only of description but also of disqualification (Birchall 2006, XII-XIII).

Author of this paper argues the connection between Christian determinism and the development of conspiracy theories. Theological determinism is the view that God determines every event that occurs in the history of the world. St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Gottfried Leibniz all seemed to espouse the view of theological determinism at least at certain points in their illustrious careers. Theological determinism is often associated with Calvinist or Reformed theology.⁴ The issue of determinism versus indeterminism was a central, dominating theme of Karl Popper's thought. Criticism of the thesis of determinism was considered by Popper as crucial to his defence not only of the reality of human freedom, moral responsibility and creativity but also as equally fundamental to his account of human rationality and to his theory of the content and growth of science as an objective, rational and most importantly demonstrably rational enterprise (Clark 1995, 149). Christian determinism has led to a deeply rooted belief in Western civilization that there is a reason for everything that happens, both in the past and in the present. So, at the core of the cultural logic of the European man is the search for an explanation. When it is not possible to approach scientific ones or the mistrust in those explanations delivered by official institution are present, other forms of explaining phenomena and processes in society are resorted to, such as conspiracy theories, which sometimes seem to be more persuasive, believable or obvious than scientific or official explanations brought on stage by institutions. Based on the above, it can be assumed that determinism is one of the causes of an irrational and non-objective way of thinking and finding solutions to complicated epistemological social issues, when one resorts, among other things, to the creation of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories most often appear in times of societal crises, which are defined as crises and problems only when society itself recognizes and acknowledges them as such, as a reflection of the interests of certain groups or circles of power.

⁴ Leigh Vicens, „Theological determinism“. In: *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/theological-determinism/> (accessed 17.01.2025)

The mistrust in the official information and state institutions is connected with now present “post-truth” era, when there are no authorities whose views are generally accepted as true, which is a fertile ground for the emergence of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are at the core of "post-truth" discussions. „Official knowledge, backed by science, politics, and media, is distrusted by various people resorting to alternative (conspiratorial) explanations“, and, according to qualitative content analysis of 522 comments under a Dutch newspaper article on conspiracy theories, there are four points of controversy: "habitus of distrust"; "who to involve in public debates"; "which ways of knowing to allow"; and "what is at stake?" „The diverging opinions outline the limits of pluralism in a post-truth era, revealing tensions between technocratic and democratic ideals in society“ (Harambam, Grusaukaite, Wildt 2022, 784). Also, some new research show that „more than merely mimicking modern science in order to augment epistemic authority, conspiracy theorists wish to purify it and re-install its free spirit of inquiry. Their critique is targeted at the dogmatic nature of scientific assumptions, the authority of scientific institutions, and, indeed, the epistemic and social boundary work performed by scientists to sustain this authority. Science, we may say, is at once sacralized for its intentions but demonized for its manifestations“ (Harambam, Aupers 2014, 477). In this way, one may observe two parallel phenomena at the center of Western cultural logic: the need for an explanation derived from the world view brought about by theological determinism and, on the other hand, the need to liberalize science and free it from the "dogmas" that, according to some, are imposed by scientific institutions. Conspiracy theories in a European scope, which is somewhat unique and significant, are important, because European influences spread to the United States and other parts of the world, in civilizational and historical sense, including conspiracy theory concepts.

Ending remarks

In today's "post-truth" era, when there are no authorities whose views are generally accepted as true, due to raising distrust in the state and, in general, official institutions, conspiracy theories are intertwined with political discourses and compete with them, mixing facts and fiction. Contemporaneity brought the vaccine hesitancy as one of the important issues. The context of the coronavirus pandemic contributed to the emergence of hitherto marginalized or secondary actors, bringing into focus many heterogenous conspiracy theories. The result was an epistemological disorientation in which rival systems of knowledge and belief fought for emotional and cognitive authority in the public eye. Some researchers believe that when people begin to believe falsehoods *en masse*, it brings far-reaching consequences, such as those in Nazi Germany, and they call for the social and intellectual responsibility and integrity. Others are of the opinion that there are situations, although they require special preconditions, when only *particular* conspiracy theories can be given a certain measure of truth.

Theological determinism, at the core of European civilization, which was under Karl Popper's severe criticism, might be considered as one of the causes of an irrational and non-objective way of thinking and finding solutions to complicated epistemological societal issues, when one resorts, among other things, to the creation of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories most often appear in times of societal crises, which are defined as crises and problems only when society itself recognizes and acknowledges them as such, as a reflection of the interests of certain groups or circles of power. Two parallel phenomena at the center of today Western cultural logic may be observed: the need for an explanation derived from the world view brought about by theological determinism and, on the other hand, in the spirit of the "post-truth" era, the need to liberalize science and free it from the "dogmas" that, according to some, are imposed by scientific institutions.

Researcher, being a historian, must use critical analysis, when approaching conspiracy theories. Multitude of possible theoretical interpretations given by contemporary scientific research should enable a researcher to gain „a broader picture“ and to understand the complexity of the subject and also the far-reaching consequences conspiracy theories and their influence may have on contemporary societies and individuals, on various social and political processes, as a reflection of crisis situations, political, cultural and social changes in a society. By applying theoretical viewpoints on the examples from the past and the present, through field work or historical research, one can draw a fine line that may separate facts and fiction, but being aware that modern science is still a constant current. While taking off veils of ideology, of the irrational, fear and other psychological aspects, politics, economic and marketing interests, final conclusions may never be made, due to the impossibility of a researcher to be completely objective nor impartial, but must be pursued. Social engagement of researchers is desirable, if not necessary, when explaining and dispelling the various conspiracy concepts. Otherwise, if the larger part of society members really start to believe in certain conspiratorial narratives, based on the irrational and on collective fears and anxieties deeply rooted in a particular society, and encouraged by interests of groups or institutions of politics and economy, catastrophe scenarios may come into reality, as it was best seen in the case of Nazi Germany. An anthropologist would probably opt for a multi-layered interpretation of the various concepts of conspiracy theories, which leads more to relativism.

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