1.5

PSYCHOANALYSIS, CRITICAL THEORY AND CONSPIRACY THEORY

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Introduction: Beyond realist and symbolist approaches

Conspiracism is not a set of rational political positions that can be easily explained by examining their ideological content. Nor can it be entirely accounted for by analysing the vested interests it serves, or the countercultural energies it sometimes channels. Conspiracy theorists are driven not only by beliefs but also by desire. Conventional approaches to the phenomenon of conspiracism rarely take desire into account, and in effect they often inadvertently pathologise conspiracy theories as merely the products of delusional thinking. But psychoanalysis and critical theory provide concepts that can help explain why conspiracist narratives came to be so popular.

Although narratives about conspiracies have a long history, the concept of conspiracy theory emerged in large part out of the conceptualisation of conspiracist ideas as a pathology (see Chapter 1.1). The pathologisation of conspiracy theories invites intervention by administrative, medical and security authorities, which are ill-equipped to distinguish conspiratorial thinking from criticism and distrust. They can thus easily end up targeting legitimate distrust of authorities as abnormal or dysfunctional behaviour.

Psychoanalysis and critical theory provide concepts that can explain how conspiracy theories provoke desire, and at the same time allow critical analysis of their pathologisation. The chapter summarises the psychoanalytic accounts of conspiracist desire. The first section sets out the historical origins of the concept of paranoia, and the political consequences of this conceptualisation. The second section focuses in particular on the authors who applied the psycho-pathological idea of conspiracy to social theory. The next two sections discuss writers who try to dissociate conspiracy delusions from common conspiracy theories. Finally, the chapter maps out another aspect of psychoanalytic concepts relevant to the study of conspiratorial desire, namely the theory of fantasy developed by Jacques Lacan, which, along with its reinterpretation by Slavoj Žižek, aimed at explaining the unconventional idea of reality (‘the real’) entertained by conspiracy theorists.

We can get a sense of what is at stake in psychoanalytic approaches to conspiracy theory by considering the example of the American political scientist Michael Rogin. In the 1960s and 1970s, Rogin established his reputation as a historian of McCarthyism. In contrast to earlier interpretations that had viewed either the anti-communist senator or his followers as delusional, Rogin instead focused attention on the political and material vested interests of elite factions in
the Republican party. Rogin’s ‘realist’ account of the rise of anti-communism formed part of a wider challenge to the ‘symbolist’ approach of historians such as Richard Hofstadter, who had focused on McCarthyism as another episode in a long tradition of American countersubversive demonology, marked out by anxieties, unconscious frustrations, intolerance and anti-democratic potential. In contrast to the symbolist focus on the cultural and psychological dimensions of politics, the realist approach aimed to shed light on the cynical manipulation of popular fears for all-too-real political gain. Symbolists tended to focus on oppositional, fringe and mass movements, whereas realists argued that countersubversive demonology had long been at the heart of U.S. politics.

However, later in his career, Rogin (1987) revisited the realist versus symbolist debate. He was now willing to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of each position, but he also insisted that there still remained something that neither theory could explain: The unconscious fantasies that motivated even the most exploitative forms of political thought. Rogin turned to the psychoanalytic thought of Melanie Klein to try to develop a theory of conspiracist demonology that bridged the gap between realist and symbolist approaches. Rogin observes that conspiratorial demonisation often works by imitating the imagined subversions it attacks (Rogin 1987: 284). He claims that fantasies about the pre-Oedipal mother are a source of leaders’ demonology (Rogin 1987: 293). In a liberal society, which insists ‘on the independence of men, each from the other and from cultural, traditional, and communal attachments’ (Rogin 1987: 135), as well as from ‘fantasized feminine engulfment’ from early childhood (Rogin 1987: 293), conspiracist politicians express anxiety about boundary breakdown and invasive, devouring exterminatory enemies. Their answer to such threats is to hang onto patriarchal order and satisfy their desires for merging by identifying themselves with the imagined unified nation as the replacement of mother, as well as to express violence against those who are considered outside the liberal realm (Rogin 1987: 293). In short, for Rogin, psychoanalytical theory came to provide an explanatory framework for the powerful unconscious appeal of conspiracist rhetoric in American politics.

The pathologisation of conspiracy theory

We can trace the origins of the pathologisation of conspiracy theories in the discipline of psychiatry as it emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are three key steps:

1. Although psychiatrists still conceived of madness as the opposite of reason, they discovered a series of intermediary phenomena (Foucault 2006: 339–41, 136–9).
2. These intermediary phenomena formed a distinct field, the abnormal, covering irrational or dysfunctional behaviours that were not mad or criminal in themselves, but in which one could discern the seed of a coming madness or a future crime (Foucault 2003a: 42).
3. The abnormal behaviours that posed risks to society were articulated as targets of interventions by the state, the police, the court and, most importantly, by the clinic functioning as a relay that linked governmentality with knowledge, and psychiatric knowledge with power (Foucault 2003a: 55–6).

The long history of the pathologisation of conspiracy thinking begins with the identification of intellectual monomania by one of the founding figures of modern French psychiatry, Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol (1838), defined as reasoning formally indistinguishable from normal thinking, but dislodged from the social role or the rational self-interest of the subject which brought forth a partial delirium or delusion (Esquirol 1945 [1838]: 320). In the middle of
the nineteenth century, the influential German psychiatrist Wilhelm Griesinger redefined delusions as the principal mechanism of the perversions of thought, and explained them as attempts to develop causal explanations of counterfactual ideas that deviate from reality not in their contents but in their intensity, characterised by uncommon or untypical exaggeration, exuberance or affect (Griesinger 1854: 70, 305–6). Building on that, Griesinger extended the concept of delusion beyond hallucinations to ideas that we now associate with conspiracy thinking, such as the sense of living among spies posing as ordinary members of society, being surrounded by plots, feeling persecuted by the Freemasons, etc. (Griesinger 1854: 71, 213). In consequence, conspiracist thinking was firmly located in the field of abnormal behaviours. Such pathologisation was a multi-layered practice that could not be reduced to stigmatisation or exclusion because it involved the problematisation of individual or social behaviours as risks that any responsible government should control in order to defend society (Foucault 2003b: 256–7).

The pathologisation of conspiratorial ideas triggered further institutional and conceptual developments in the second half of the nineteenth century, that later came together in the new diagnosis of ‘paranoia’. Conspiratorial ideas were dissociated from the general concept of insanity still used by Griesinger and redefined as a symptom of a separate type of abnormal behaviour, ‘delirium of persecution’ (Lasègue, Falret 2008). It came to be associated with further symptoms, most importantly ‘delirium of protest’, which consisted in attempts to evade guilt by shifting the responsibility for one’s situation onto others (Mendel 1884; Kraepelin 1907: 425–6, 432–3), and ‘delirium of interpretation’, which consisted in reasoning that started from general facts and distorted them so as to give them a personal, usually idiosyncratic meaning (Sérieux, Capgrass 2008: 448). The subjects whose behaviour could be described as delirium of persecution, protest or interpretation came to be increasingly dissociated from the mad, as the clinical experience invited the conclusion that their condition rarely deteriorated into complete insanity, and they could live normal, even successful, lives. The subjects susceptible to conspiracism were associated with a particular type of risk, the risk of sudden crises: Since delirium of interpretation, persecution or protest were indistinguishable from normal reasoning, they were socially invisible until they blew up into moral perversity, irrational acts of violence or until they violently disrupted the life of the normal families of the afflicted (Kahlbaum 1863).

At the turn of the century, the abnormal behaviours demarcated by such deliriums and characterised by the risk of social disruption were integrated in the concept of paranoia developed by the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin (1907: 425–6). The concept functioned as a relay that associated delusions with causes, grades of intensity and probable developments. Kraepelin distinguished between general paranoia and paranoid dementia, with the first being a stable system of delusions that did not afflict fully the behaviour of the subject, depended on hereditary predispositions and promised an only relatively unfavourable future. In contrast with general paranoia, paranoid dementia (integrated in the concept of dementia praecox, that later came to be identified as schizophrenia) lacked a stable system of delusions, afflicted completely the behaviour of the subject, indicated a metabolic rather than hereditary causality and promised a bleak future of rapid deterioration into insanity (Kraepelin 1907: 425–6).

Kraepelin’s concept of paranoia operated differently from the older psychiatric concepts. Nineteenth-century psychiatrists still conceived of conspiratorial thinking as a symptom of disease whose cause was hidden in the depth of the subject as a lesion in the brain (Esquirol 1945 [1838]), as uncured melancholia (Griesinger 1854) or as neurological or psychological trauma (Mendel 1884). In contrast, Kraepelin’s concept was flat. It promised to the psychiatrists that, instead of delving in the depths of abnormal subjectivity, instead of deciphering the difficult hieroglyphics of individual symptoms, they could diagnose abnormal behaviours by inscribing them in a table of differential features. Because of that, Kraepelin’s concept outlived the specific
context of nineteenth-century psychiatry in which it emerged. In the second half of the twentieth century, under the influence of the canonical Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of the American Psychological Association, it was adjusted to the analytical techniques that shape knowledge production in the present-day social sciences, and it became a cornerstone in the type of psychiatry that achieved dominance in the second half of the twentieth century and that treats the abnormal subjects by medication rather than by interpretation (Foucault 2006: 342–4).

Psychoanalytic accounts of paranoia in social theory

In contrast to the psychiatric definition, the psychoanalytic concept of paranoia had a more ambiguous relationship to the pathologisation of conspiratorial thinking. Freud generally accepted Kraepelin’s classification of mental disorders, but criticised his aetiology (Dalzell 2011: 115–29). Freud’s theory of paranoia was developed in his analysis of Daniel Paul Schreber’s memoirs (Freud, Strachey 1976: 1974), where he tried to differentiate paranoia from dementia praecox. For Freud, both disorders are the consequences of psychological regression to the early stages of ego-development. Paranoia is less severe because it regresses from choosing another as an object of love only to the intermediary stage of narcissism, expressing itself in delusions, while dementia praecox is a complete abandonment of object-love and a return to infantile auto-eroticism (Freud, Strachey 1976: 2442). Furthermore, the main defence mechanism of paranoia is projection, while dementia praecox employs a hallucinatory (hysterical) mechanism (Freud, Strachey 1976). Freud’s understanding of paranoia emphasised three constitutive elements: Suppressed homosexuality, projection and displacement of aggression onto the other.

With its focus on the mechanism of projection (i.e. external forces are blamed for internal problems), Freud’s theory has been influential in the analysis of conspiracy thinking, most obviously in the work of Hofstadter. A curious detail is that Freud considered paranoia as the most rational mental illness with an uncomfortable similarity to science and philosophy (Melley 2000: 6; Parker 2001: 191). Yet, many authors continue to use this psychiatric concept for socio-political explanations (Boltanski 2014: 175), making it a powerful weapon for denigration, stigmatisation and social exclusion of those who are using and/or producing conspiracy theories.

Several prominent authors in the social sciences have made this association even stronger. The first was the American political scientist Harold Lasswell (1930), who directly relied on psychoanalysis to explore political phenomena and developed the general theory of the political personality. This is expressed in his famous formula of political man (Lasswell 1930: 75): $p \rightarrow d \rightarrow r = P$, where the ‘private motives (p) are displaced (d) onto public objects, and then rationalised (r) in terms of the public interest, producing “political man” (P)’. This rationalisation is more thorough for those persons who are highly involved in politics; especially for the leadership type he calls agitators, marked by narcissistic and strong power-centred personalities who are prone to exaggerated mistrust of opponents, are contentious, hostile, hateful and exhibit anti-democratic behaviour. This psychological make-up, which expresses itself in specific identity symbols, rituals, styles of politics and ‘pseudo-rational’ propaganda, was adopted by later scholars, who added to Lasswell’s depictions a rather pessimistic and derogatory tone to conspiracism and agitation (Thalmann 2019: 33–4).

Lasswell’s model of political man considers politics as a compensatory activity and political actors as subjects whose original motives mostly remain repressed in the unconscious. Moreover, psychological displacement implies that private motives, goals and emotions are too problematic to be directly exposed in a society. Finally, it focuses on personal frustrations and defence mechanisms as the main instigators of political action (Šiber 1998: 22) expressing itself through
projection, repressed libido and latent homosexuality, already mentioned as the main mechanisms of paranoia. As such, Lasswell’s approach was predisposed to consider conspiracy theories a psychopathological phenomenon.

In a similar vein, the Frankfurt School, the birthplace of critical theory, tried to rework psychoanalytic concepts to make them applicable to seemingly irrational social phenomena characteristic of late capitalism (Hristov 2019: 27–8). Perhaps the most influential reconfiguration of paranoia is the concept of the paranoid personality developed by one of the leading thinkers of the school, Theodor Adorno. He believed that the mechanism of conspiracy theories is comparable to the mechanism of advertising. From a capitalist perspective, selling fascism is not substantially different from selling soft drinks (Adorno 1975: 45). In order to capture the abstract dimension of such mechanisms that is indifferent to their particular contents, Adorno conceptualised them as rhetorical devices. However, to make sense of the power of such devices, Adorno had to explain how they tapped into the desire of the public. Perhaps conspiracy entrepreneurs rationally exploit the unconscious desires of the audience, but if the audience unconsciously desires conspiracies, does that mean that its members suffer from a delusion of persecution; and why do others seem to be immune to such mass delusions, even though they are part of the same mass society? Adorno tried to answer such questions by positing a psychological type vulnerable to conspiracy theories. It is modelled after Lasswell’s concept of political subjectivity as a projection onto public objects of private, often unconscious, motives rationalised as public interests whose intensity depends on the extent of the involvement in politics (Lasswell 1930: 75; Šiber 1998: 22).

As an example, let us take M1229, a student enrolled in the study of authoritarian psychological dispositions that Adorno joined in the late 1940s. M1229 listened to mildly conspiracist radio shows, and she believed that ‘the Jews would be running the country before long’ (Adorno 1975: 292). Was she unconsciously longing for violence? Certainly not: She knew that Jews differed among themselves and she believed in education that brought people from different origins or ethnicities together by helping them know each other and learn from each other that they were essentially the same, essentially human. Then why did she project her hatred on Jews and communists, and why did she extend it to African Americans? The interviewer noticed that M1229 was ‘tight all over’ (Adorno 1975: 293), and the very signifiers of the imaginary enemies produced in her unbearable tension. If we build on Adorno’s discussions of similar cases, we can hypothesise that the tension was caused by the feeling that she was an alien in her social milieu. Because of that, M1229 experienced her social life as a series of frustrations caused by the tyrannical social order, and in trying to repair the loneliness of her insular experience she resorted to stereotypes that articulated her fantasy of a social group bound by love, despite the uneasiness that undermined her sense of belonging, and caused her to project aggression on other groups (Adorno et al. 1967 [1950]: 765; Adorno 1975: 325).

The concept of paranoid personality was introduced in DSM-I (1952: 34) and retained in the next editions of the canonical manual. It was also developed in a broader sense in the writings of a number of political scientists, sociologists and historians who began to tackle the topic of conspiracism from the late 1940s to the 1970s. According to Thalmann (2019: 28), such conceptualisations of conspiracy theories influenced by psychoanalysis were developed in three phases: As a reaction to the rise of totalitarian regimes (1930s–1950s), during the Red Scare (1950s) and, later, as a way to delegitimise political extremism (1960s–1970s), including by authors such as Lowenthal and Guterman (1949), Neumann (1957), Shils (1956), Rovere (1956), Bell (1955; 1963), Hošťalář (1955; 1965), Bunzel (1967), Lipset and Raab (1970), etc. (see Chapter 5.10 in this volume). While Freud explains delusions of persecution as defence mechanisms against destructive desires, for Adorno and his followers conspiracy theories...
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function as defence mechanisms against frustration caused by the social order. Adorno explains the appeal of conspiracy theories by the fact that they promise a relief from the frustrations of economic calamities such as the Great Depression. Conspiracy theorists seduce their audience because they relieve its frustrations and assuage its feeling of powerlessness. They do so by allowing their audience to make sense of a crisis of the social order that seems incomprehensible as natural disaster and irreversible as fate. But, at the same time, conspiracists foreclose any understanding of the causes of the crisis, any critique of the social order, any claim to power or any attempt to repair the situation and relieve the suffering. Conspiracism, by this line of thinking, is an opium that makes exploitation bearable.

Adorno’s analysis of conspiracy thinking as a symptom of the general sense of powerlessness in the face of the complexities of a highly organised and institutionalised society, which frustrates the individual and triggers projective fantasies (Heins 2011: 69–70), was developed by several other critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, who tried to combine Marx and Freud in order to explain the underlying mechanisms of late capitalist societies. Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman (1949) and Franz Neumann (1957) considered conspiracy theories an expression of modern mass society’s problems. In his seminal work ‘Anxiety and Politics’, Neumann claims that the social order is competitive, and if a social group starts to lose its status and is unable to understand the causes of its decline, the anxiety characteristic of any competition can intensify into persecutory anxiety (Neumann 1957: 290–3). The cause of persecutory anxiety, however, cannot be reduced to pathological or dysfunctional beliefs because it is grounded in psychological alienation on the one hand, and in social and political alienation on the other. Psychological alienation is a consequence of the social repression of libidinous drives (an idea known as the ‘repressive hypothesis’), manifested as an alienation of the ego from the libido. Social and political alienation is produced by monotonous, stultifying jobs and by the values of bourgeois society, which makes the middle class particularly prone to identification with authoritarian political leaders, regression to a horde mentality and behaviour, and loss of the ego. Life under ruthlessly competitive capitalism increases the fear of status degradation and the susceptibility to paranoid ideas exemplified by the conspiracy theories that authoritarian leaders tend to promote. These affective tendencies gradually disable citizens from independent thinking and active civic participation and foster political alienation or a rejection of the whole political system, leading to political apathy. This paves the way for authoritarian movements that despise rules and institutionalise fear (Blanuša 2011a: 96–7).

Symptomatic readings

A great deal of the persuasive power of conspiracy theories lies in their capacity to present themselves as narratives that reveal some important truth. They engage in a ‘symptomatic’ reading of reality (i.e. a reading of reality on the look-out for symptoms) in which it is assumed that, under the influence of the undeclared (hidden) interest, there is a gap between the ‘official’, public meaning of some interpretation and its ‘actual’ intention (Žižek 1995: 10). This kind of storytelling exploits human curiosity and the desire for mystery in our disenchanted (post)modern lives.

In contrast to the psychopathologising approach to the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, other writers have tried to read the conspiracy theories themselves as distorted symptoms – not of individual psychology, but of society as a whole. The Marxist literary and cultural critic Frederic Jameson has provided the most influential interpretation of the fascination with conspiracy in contemporary entertainment culture. He argues that conspiracy theories in postmodern culture function as ‘cognitive mapping’ of the unrepresentable totality of the volatile and
complex social order of late capitalism, albeit misleading and counterproductive (Jameson 1988: 356). Heavily leaning on the work of Jacques Lacan, Jameson claims that the desire for cognitive mapping in conspiracist texts, ‘whatever other messages it emits or imply, may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us’ (Jameson 1995: 3). Conspiracy novels and films represent the totality of the social order, either in the mode of a melancholic fantasy that everything is lost because everyone is controlled by the secret machine of power, or in the mode of a fervent fantasy that an event – a crisis or a revolution – could make anything possible. Conspiracist narratives tend to oscillate between the two modes (Jameson 2009: 593–603). Following the rhythm of that oscillation, Hollywood thrillers often represent a crisis unleashing the labyrinthine structures of shadowy power and omnipotent surveillance technologies as a distorted allegory of the sublime complexity of multinational neoliberal capitalism.

Lacanian accounts of conspiracist desire

Symptomatic readings of conspiracy theories focus on their function as representations of social reality, but their social function does not explain the particular objects the conspiracist desire latches onto. Let us take for example the best-selling novel *When It Was Dark* (1903) by Guy Thorne, an obscure but prolific British writer from the first half of the twentieth century. It tells the story of a conspiracy to kill God. A Jewish communist millionaire, out of jealousy of the progress of Christian civilisation, bribes a brilliant and corrupt archaeologist to plant evidence that Joseph of Arimathea staged the resurrection. A symptomatic reading, perhaps, would see in this the banal spectre of antisemitism. If so, why did Thorne’s Antichrist story captivate such a large readership? From a psychoanalytic perspective, the discursive figure of the Jewish millionaire is overdetermined by a particular form of knowledge that Jacques Lacan called paranoid (Lacan 2002: 90). One of the founding figures of post-structuralism, famous for his idea that the unconscious is structured as a language and for his opposition against biological interpretations of psychoanalysis, Lacan claims that one learns to choose the objects of one’s desire by identifying with others. The object of one’s desire is originally what is desired by the other; it is a reflection of the other’s desire, and in that sense, desire is originally a form of jealousy. At this early point of the development of the ego, the knowledge about the other’s desire is imaginary in its form. Yet, without it, the subject would be unable to develop beyond the identification with the mother and form a social ego capable of counterbalancing the enchantment and rivalry with others (Lacan 2002: 79). Furthermore, without the imaginary misrecognition of absolute knowledge and mastery ascribed to the other by primordial jealousy, the subject would be unable to rework paranoid knowledge into symbolic knowledge of the truth about her unconscious desire (Evans 1996: 95).

Thorne’s Jewish communist millionaire, who is trying to steal from Christians the object of their enjoyment, can be interpreted as an inverted and overvalued projection of this paranoid knowledge. However, as God is debunked, the social order starts to crumble, Muslims stop recognising the hegemony of Christianity, the Balkans are engulfed in a religious war, losers start to rebel against the successful, market activity grinds to a halt, women suffer sexual abuse on a daily basis and, worst of all, Britain loses India. True believers pray for salvation, and it is given to them by a suspicious priest, who discloses the conspiracy with the help of the archaeologist’s mistress and another Jewish millionaire who has converted to Christianity. In the end, God is resurrected, together with the social order.

The conspiracy-minded priest is driven by a desire to know the truth (Fenster 2008: 100). But the truth about the conspiracy hides a deeper truth about religion, and an even deeper truth
about the priest himself – that he should be the one who has saved the Saviour. Yet, that private truth is unthinkable in any conventional sense, because claiming to be the saviour of the Saviour would amount to sacrilege: It can be represented only as a latent thought condensed in the manifest content of a story, only as far as it is substituted by a plot. So the object of the priest’s desire, the truth, has been contaminated with the impossibility of its explicit representation (Lacan, 1988: 221; Fenster 2008: 103). Nevertheless, this conspiracist fantasy circulated beyond the realm of literature. The Bishop of London, for example, claimed in a sermon that the novel revealed the truth that the social order would disintegrate without religion (Cockburn 2002). The sermon became news that attracted the attention of Freud, who in turn discussed the novel as a counterfactual truth about how the social order underwritten by religion could disintegrate (Freud, Strachey 1976: 3792).

If the object of conspiracist desire is an impossible truth, conspiracy theorists can sustain their desire only by displacing it onto endless further details (Fenster 2008: 105). The suspicious priest in the novel, for example, tormented by his impossible desire to resurrect God after science supposedly confirmed His death, begins by noting an odd remark made by the Antichrist millionaire as almost a slip of the tongue, then another odd phrase by the archaeologist, then an odd story by a woman repenting her sinful life, then an envelope, a ticket, a hotel address, a repaid debt. This chain of insignificant details, however, only becomes meaningful if it is read as a symptom of his desire for revelation that can never be fulfilled. No matter how long this metonymic chain of details is, it never comes close to the impossible object of the priest’s desire. It sustains the conspiracist desire only by deferring the realisation of its impossibility (Lacan 1981: 228–9; Fenster 2008: 105).

Fenster (2008: 95) argues that this excessive interpretive practice in an age of postmodernist scepticism ‘manifests a popular desire to reconstruct the master narrative’ of modern history and politics, or the final order of power behind all discovered conspiracies that always lies elsewhere. Although opposed to the pathologisation of conspiracy theories, Fenster claims that such a form of interpretive practice negatively influences civic participation by displacing citizens’ desire for an active role in politics with a self-paralysing signifying regime which exhausts itself in ‘an obsessive desire for information’ (Fenster 2008: 96). The interpretive practice is paradoxical because it requires incessant creative digging of information and making connections between them, variable motives, actions, meanings, plots and references to the past, but the insights and conclusions are invariably the same – a grand conspiracy, whose discovery is a potentially endless task.

In this sense, conspiracy theorists are motivated by

a kind of manic will to seek rather than to know … akin to the Lacanian notion of desire which requires that its ultimate fulfilment be continually deferred … and demand of this desire is not simply to expose the secret.

(Fenster 2008: 103)

On the surface, such demand is orientated toward public recognition and resolution of the crisis provoked by conspiracy. If that happens, the day is saved, the enemy defeated, social order restored. However, such a possible resolution leads ironically to dissatisfaction of desire because the case is closed and the object of desire, the search for the hidden truth, is lost. According to Fenster, here lies the trap for conspiracy theorists. As they fetishise the continual search for evidence, they continue to apply the same framework to heterogeneous events and processes:

There is always another conspiracy to track, and the new political and social order that replaces conspiracy would by definition constitute a new relation of power, which
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would by definition require the deepest of suspicions. The ‘Clinton Death List’ grows, or changes name, or changes shape to include new, different events and figures. There is always another Clinton, just as, both before and after Bill, there is always another Bush.

(Fenster 2008: 105)

Moreover, in searching the truth that is constantly sliding away, conspiracism as an interpretative practice produces enormous chains of signifiers, each accompanied by affects and respective behaviours. In that process, it ‘digests’, transforms and recombines non-conspiratorial elements around the master signifier of ‘conspiracy’ (Fenster 2008: 111).

Conspiracy theory and fantasy

If the object of conspiracist desire is impossible, if it cannot be satisfied, how can it produce the powerful affect that Marc Fenster calls ‘conspiracy rush’ (Fenster 2008: 110–11)? We can explain that if we take into account the function of fantasy in conspiracist desire.

In order to do that, however, we need to take into account the difference between desire, need and demand (Lacan 2002: 689–72). According to Lacan, desire emerges out of need, but the satisfaction of many human needs depends on others. So, to be satisfied, the need has to be communicated to the others, and therefore it has to be articulated by signifiers.

Signifiers make sense, however, only because they are inscribed in a symbolic order, just like words have meaning because they belong to a language. Yet, the symbolic order is not the subject of need, or, in other words, it is other to the subject of the need. Of course, the symbolic order is not a particular other, it is an abstract other like the language or the law, hence Lacanians call it the (big) Other. Now, since the articulation of need as demand depends on the Other, any demand is characterised by otherness that differentiates it from the need experienced by the subject, and it is precisely that difference between demand and need that opens up the proper dimension of desire (Lacan 2002: 689).

As we have said, the symbolic order is abstract, just like language is abstract in comparison with particular phrases. So, when the subject tries to communicate her or his demand to others, the symbolic order adds an abstract dimension, detached from particular objects. In that abstract dimension, any demand is essentially a demand for love that can be articulated as a question addressed to the Other: ‘What do you want?’ (Lacan 2002: 690).

That question is impossible to answer, however, for at least two reasons. First, the question ‘What do you want?’ can be answered only by the Other. But the Other is not an individual, it is the symbolic order in general, and the symbolic order is silent in itself, just like language cannot speak itself. Therefore, the question about the Other’s desire is irredeemably open. It leads to a void, no matter how the particular others would respond to the demand, and since that question is the very ground of desire, desire is grounded on a void.

From a Lacanian perspective, this is the paradox of any desire: It is not causeless or objectless, but the object that causes it is the lacking answer of the question what does the Other want (Lacan 2002: 693). This inescapable paradox is precisely the second reason why the question about the desire of the Other is unanswerable. Because, if the Other were driven by desire, the object-cause of the Other’s desire would also be lacking. But the Other to which any demand for love is addressed is not a particular other, the Other is the symbolic order itself, and the symbolic order cannot have a lack, just like language cannot lack one of its words. If the Other lacked something, it would be incoherent and it could not function as symbolic order.
Yet, although the question ‘What do you want?’ is impossible to answer, it is equally impossible not to answer it. Because abandoning it as an empty question would empty out the very ground of desire, and that would lead to the most severe form of poverty that Lacan called subjective destitution – the poverty of having nothing to desire (Lacan 1967: 6).

Lacan claimed that, in order to avoid subjective destitution, to sustain one’s desire and to solve the double impossibility of the question about the desire of the Other, we develop fantasies, i.e. imaginary scenarios that stage the object-cause of our desire in order to answer what the Other wants. In that sense, conspiracy theories are fantasies, even if they turn out to be warranted, because fantasy is defined by its function as a support for desire rather than by its contents (Glynos 2001: 202).

Lacan and the normalisation of paranoia

Conspiracy theories have an even deeper root than fantasy in the constitution of the subject. For Lacan, the precondition of all human knowledge is the ‘paranoiac alienation of the ego’ (Lacan 1953: 12), which occurs during the mirror-stage, sometime between the age of six to 18 months and represents the first step of self-recognition in the infant’s life. At this stage, the nascent human subject transforms itself through the identification with an idealised picture (imago) of its own body.

For Lacan, this is one of the fundamental preconditions for the normal functioning of the human subject. An infant needs to develop an illusory image and sense of its own subjective unity, autonomy and mastery. Otherwise, it will stay in a fragmented psychological condition that leads to psychosis. The final moment of the mirror-stage is when an infant identifies itself with familiar human beings and objects and learns about the similarities and differences of the others and their desires, which will become its own desires through the process of internalisation. Those others are simultaneously like and unlike the infant, and the infant’s perception of their behaviour toward herself or himself as a singular being establishes the first ego-boundaries as well as a primordial narcissism. As that imaginary knowledge about the others functions in an absolutist, either/or way by alternating between bipolar oppositions of recognition and misrecognition, this produces an ambivalence in the infant’s identification – an oscillation between bliss/enchantment, in case of recognition, and hostile intrusions/social rivalry with others, in case of misrecognition by them. Such a relationship is constantly characterised by the libidinal tension between, on one hand, the constant pursuit of an illusory unity of the ego through identification with others who are never the same as it is, and, on the other hand, the persecutory anxiety and the aggressiveness towards the other when the identification fails. If we take that libidinal tension into account, then aggressiveness stems from the narcissism (Lacan 2002: 95) of the infant who still does not speak. Imaginary identification never attains the goal of stable identity and always lures away the infant from herself or himself to others, in other words to alienation. Through life, the subject preserves this striving toward illusory unity that is necessary for the sense of human agency and everyday functioning, but it is never fully attainable and sensed as threatened whenever someone else is perceived as desiring the opposite.

By introducing the necessary alienation of the ego, Lacan normalises paranoia as a phenomenon and makes it a part of everyday psychosocial functioning, or ‘the most general structure of human knowledge, which constitutes the ego and objects as having the attributes of permanence, identity, and substance’ (Lacan 2002: 90). However, the subject needs to enter into the world of language and social norms – or the symbolic order – to be able to articulate the perceived threats. Nevertheless, according to Lacan, the personifying logic of the imaginary knowledge, developed as a form of necessary delusion in the early dyadic relationships with other
people and objects, does not disappear after the entrance in the symbolic order. The subject continues to apply it to the more complex social world of groups, institutions and wider entities.

However, the symbolic order, for Lacan, opens up the possibility of symbolic knowledge as a way out of paranoiac thinking. While imaginary knowledge is expressing paranoiac anxiety over stable things based on identity and being, symbolic knowledge is more nuanced: It loosens one’s need to resolve the world into a set of fixed things and curtails ego’s narcissistic tendency to rigidity and projection (Paradis 2007: 185). Symbolic knowledge opens up a way out in the psychoanalytic process whose goal is to lead one to the truth about one’s unconscious paranoiac desire (Evans 1996: 95), which involves insight into and distancing from the subject’s own projections. Despite that possibility, the symbolic order cannot prevent conspiratorial interpretations. This is especially so when its power or meaning is questioned, e.g. in the case of crisis, instability, traumatic events or larger social change. One of the most influential contemporary critical theorists who used Lacanian concepts in order to explain a wide range of social or cultural phenomena, Slavoj Žižek (1997), has claimed that this is precisely what happened in the wake of postmodernism, and that one of the symptoms of the depleted power of the Other is the proliferation of conspiracy theories. From that perspective, conspiracy theories can be explained as an attempt to compensate for the impotence of the Other by positing an Other of the Other, or in other words, by imagining that behind the curtain of the apparent social order exists true reality ruled by a conspiracy of malevolent and powerful actors responsible for the societal troubles. According to Žižek, the possibility of conspiracist interpretation is triggered by a traumatic event that disrupts the symbolic order and opens up another order called ‘the Real’.

The Real in the Lacanian sense is not what we are used to calling reality, because reality is supposedly meaningful, and since its meaning is guaranteed by the social and language norms, it belongs to the symbolic order. The Real is rather the order of jouissance – of enjoyment so intense that it is impossible to bear, let alone to articulate (Lacan associated it with the death drive, i.e. the instincts striving to reduce the tension in the organism to zero, and therefore to destroy life). Since conspiracy theories are rooted in the Real, they start as an experience of breakdown of the fantasies answering the constitutive question of any desire, ‘What does the Other want?’. In order to avoid subjective destitution, to protect her or his desire, the subject tries to answer that question by a fantasy about a threat (Žižek 1989: 128). For Lacanian psychoanalysis, such fantasies are the pre-ideological core of ideology. At the same time, the fantasy about a threat functions as a framework that coordinates desire or, in other words, as ‘the formal matrix, on which are grafted various ideological formations’ (Žižek 1995: 21).

The threat is generally represented as an image of the enemy related to the stereotypes of a given society, and it derives its meaning from a concrete historical-political process that is turned into a narrative. Thus, the core of conspiracy theory is the image of a group of enemies or some enemy of the community. What is the function of such an image? It provides the means by which people try to repair the real trauma through the imaginary and the symbolic order. Usually, the hostile others are conceived as powerful political figures and their allies – corrupt elites, shadowy organisations, institutions or other nations perceived as antagonists allegedly conspiring to achieve some immoral, unlawful or harmful goal. Here, conspiracy theories derive their impulse from the experience of the Real in the ‘other’, or in other words – from the unfathomable gap of the radical otherness of the Real. Facing this alien, traumatic core as an inert, inaccessible and enigmatic attribute of the other raises the questions: ‘Why is our society not functioning?’, ‘Why are our people suffering?’ or ‘Who is to be blamed for this?’. According to Lacanian theory, the ultimate question we unconsciously pose in that situation is ‘Who is stealing our enjoyment?’. 

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The general function of conspiracy theories is thus identificational: Defining the enemy in order to define oneself as its mirror image and therefore to anchor the signifiers that identify one’s own group, community or society. This dimension of conspiracy theories involves a number of moral distinctions or asymmetrical binaries that ultimately claim to differentiate good from evil. Finally, conspiracy theories have a wider symptomatic function. As emotionally charged explanations, they articulate deeper political cleavages running through the political field by means of interpreting previous traumatic events and processes as encounters with supposed enemies. Conspiracy theory as a symptomatic reading of political reality, a sort of ‘behindology’ (from the Italian, *dietrologia* – cf. Bratich 2008: 15) reveals the stereotypical images of the hostile others and the objects of enjoyment threatened by them. Regardless of whether the conspiracy theories are warranted or unwarranted, they can function as unconscious mechanisms for citizens’ political behaviour (Blanuša 2011b: 311).

**Conclusion**

The origins of the pathologisation of conspiratorial thinking are deeply influenced by the psychiatric and psychoanalytic concepts of paranoia. This chapter attempted to sketch their genealogy, together with the application of psychoanalytic accounts by prominent critical social scientists who used them mostly in order to explain totalitarian and extremist threats to democracy during the twentieth century. Later, the Lacanian approach made a significant turn in the psychoanalytic understanding of conspiracy theories. Instead of treating paranoia as an aberration, this approach put it at the heart of human thinking and explained the role of the incessant chains of objects of desire and fantasies in conspiracist cognitive mapping, conceived of as a way to cope with the complexity of the postmodern world shaped by increasingly impersonal regulatory mechanisms. In that way, Lacanian psychoanalysis enables a more nuanced exploration of the function of conspiratorial imagination in the social struggles over meaning, as well as of its political consequences. Although many researchers in cultural studies, sociology or anthropology claim that conspiracy theories could have emancipatory potential, from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, they are the last ruse of power trying to mask its impotence by representing itself as a mask of an omnipotent clandestine Other (Žižek 2006: 219). Therefore, the proliferation of conspiracy theories is a symptom not of a growing threat to the social order, but of its impotence, just as New Age beliefs are a symptom of the declining power of organised religion, or alternative medicine is a symptom of the declining power of science.

**References**

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