1.7

SOCIOMETRY, SOCIAL THEORY AND CONSPIRACY THEORY

Türkay Salim Nefes and Alejandro Romero-Reche

Introduction

Social thought, concerned with the workings of community, society and the body politic, is, arguably, as old as philosophy. Sociology, on the other hand, is much younger: Traditionally regarded as an offspring of modernity, in its first formulations it was designed to produce scientific knowledge about social reality in general, and the great social transformations of its time in particular, essentially by applying the same methods as the natural sciences. Scientific sociology, as conceived by founding fathers such as Comte or Durkheim, was not expected to speculate about social reality, it was supposed to ascertain how it worked: Empirical research, guided by theory, would unveil the hidden laws of society just as Newton had discovered the laws of physics.

Conspiracy theories are probably as old as social theory, even if the label under which we file them is relatively new. However, several authors (e.g. Bronner 2013; Byford 2015) argue that today’s conspiracy theories are distinguished by a prevalence of ‘beliefs in fantastic conspiracies with a planetary reach’, which feed ‘the confusion and uncertainty that seem to characterize contemporary society’ (Campion-Vincent 2005: 7–8).

It is only to be expected that sociology, as a modern science, should be interested in modern (and postmodern) conspiracy theories, even more so when conspiracy theories often are ‘social theories’ (that is, theories about society) that provide rival explanations of social reality. Furthermore, sociology and conspiracy theories are, according to Boltanski (2012), deeply intertwined with one another and with the social and political processes that shape modern society. From its most empirically oriented approaches, as a science of public opinion, to the most abstract theorising, sociology needs to understand and, if possible, explain how conspiracy theories are spread, how people use them to make sense of the world and what social effects might be derived from belief in them.

This chapter examines how sociology and social theory have addressed conspiracy theories. The first sections consider how conspiracy theories have been understood as either alternative sociological theories or misguided social science, and show how sociology tends to conceptualise conspiracy theory, summarising a number of strategies deployed by sociologists and some critiques of their problematic nature. The next section addresses some of the essential methodological questions that any research strategy must respond to, briefly discussing the limitations and
advantages of possible answers to such questions and providing a few examples. The chapter
details the main theoretical perspectives that have been proposed when trying to understand the
popularity and global appeal of conspiracy theories; unsurprisingly, modernity and its processes
loom prominently over the field. The last sections outline some of the most relevant approaches
for empirical research in the sociology of conspiracy theories and offer a few thoughts on where
its future developments may be headed.

Social reality as a conspiracy

Conspiracy theories are relevant to sociology and social theory, not only because they are
socially and politically relevant, but also because they raise questions about sociology itself and
how we should proceed in the quest for knowledge on social reality. Popper’s notion of ‘the
conspiracy theory of society’ was explicitly formulated as a model of what the social sciences
should not do: Explain social reality as the successful outcome of intentional (secret) actions by
powerful groups (2002 [1963]). Instead, he argued, social sciences should focus on the uninten-
tional consequences of intentional actions: Conspiracy theorists ‘assume that we can explain
practically everything in society by asking who wanted it, whereas the real task of the social sci-
ences is to explain those things that nobody wants’ (Popper 2002: 167). In his defence of meth-
dological individualism, Popper questions the scientific soundness in invoking collective
‘entities’ in explanations of social reality. Boltanski (2012) has called this challenge ‘Popper’s
curse’ and reads many of the methodological turns in contemporary social theory as attempts to
defeat it.

Other social theorists have subscribed to this vision of conspiracy theories as misguided soci-
ology, often distorted by ‘radical’ or ‘critical’ ideologies. Boudon, echoing Popper, states that
‘Marxism has given a learned appearance and, therefore, legitimacy, to an eternal explicative
Bourdieu entertained the notion of an ‘invisible world government’ in one of his latter books
(Contre-faux 2, 2001), and offers it as an example of a ‘sociology of unveiling’, institutionalised
in France by Bourdieu himself, which he regards as an updated version of Marxist ‘unmasking’
and, therefore, sharing its conspiracist undertones. Ho and Jin (2011), who examined in further
detail the Taguieff-Bourdieu controversy, believe that methodological individualism is not an
effective antidote to conspiracy theorising in sociology, since in their view it postulates a trans-
parent and rationalised society that does not exist either.

Precisely from a Marxist perspective, Fredric Jameson, who famously deemed conspiracy ‘the
poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age’ (1988: 356), located the seedbed of
conspiracy theorising in the shift from the discourse of social science (‘a discourse without
subject’) to ideology (‘how you map your relation as an individual subject to the social and eco-
nomic organization of global capitalism’). Conspiracy is ‘a narrative structure capable of reuniting
the minimal basic components’ when ‘fantasizing an economic system on the scale of the globe
itself’: ‘a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility’
(Jameson 1992: 9).

Conspiracy theorising has been sometimes regarded as a sort of popular or ‘lay’ sociology
(Waters 1997; Boltanski 2012), which seems to provide the satisfactory, comprehensive expla-
nations that scientific sociology cannot, even less when notions of contingency and indetermi-
nacy make its findings tentative at best. If we can regard sociology (or specific sociologies) as
conspiracy theorising, and conspiracy theorising as (a sort of) sociology, it is likely that they
influence or even feed each other (Romero-Reche 2018). Sociology hones ideas for conspiracy
theories: ‘radical claims about social control, developed in the social sciences, are nowadays
popularized by conspiracy theorists’ (Aupers 2012: 29). Sociologists are conspiracy entrepren-
eurs themselves, for they help disseminate the conspiracy theories that they criticise (Campion-
Vincent 2015). Social scientists create and popularise critical thinking tools that are later used
against them by conspiracy theorists (Latour 2004).

As Ho and Jin put it:

[It] is impossible to totally dissociate sociological theory from conspiracy theory. Would it not be conceivable that sociology feeds the imaginary of conspiracy and is fed back by it? Such is, in fact, the question that conspiracy theory raises: any condem-
nation of it leads to its acknowledgment.

(2011: 148)

Sociologists respond to these accusations by arguing that empirical social science is far removed
from conspiracy theorising, at the very least to the extent that its claims are methodically tested,
rather than assumed as confirmed by cherry-picking or downright fabricating the most conven-
ient proofs.

**Sociological definitions of conspiracy theory**

Conspiracy theories can be regarded as sets of ideas and beliefs. However private and deeply
personal these may be, ideas and beliefs have a social dimension that is essential to any sociologi-
cal conception of conspiracy theories. Sociology’s own theoretical and methodological tradi-
tions, and the discipline’s focus on contemporary societies, which does not exclude historical
approaches, shape how it conceptualises the notion of conspiracy theory and the way it is opera-
tionalised in sociological research.

As other chapters in this section attest, defining the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is not an easy
undertaking. Any definition must be precise enough to distinguish conspiracy theories from
other kinds of beliefs and ideas, but not so specific as to exclude important aspects of the phe-

omenon. Many of the problems in a definition of ‘conspiracy theory’ stem from the very
notion of ‘conspiracy’: A detailed discussion of such problems, from a social theory standpoint,
can be found in Boltanski (2012: 282–7), who points out that all the defining features that are
normally used – secrecy, coordination, intention or illegality among others – can be easily
challenged.

Given the normative connotations of the term ‘conspiracy theory’, sociology faces an addi-
tional problem when it comes to its usage, let alone its definition: For a discipline that histor-
ically prided itself in being value-free, taking a notion as value-charged as ‘conspiracy theory’
(‘the intellectual equivalent of four-letter words’, as Chomsky stated in an oft-quoted interview;
Chomsky 2004) should imply certain theoretical challenges.

Faced with these challenges, sociologists have adopted four main strategies. One of the most
frequent has been to simply avoid the formulation of any definition and to take it for granted,
with or without its normative connotations. Even if the category is not clearly outlined, an
author who adopts this approach assumes a sort of implicit consensus: Much like Supreme Court
Justice Potter Stewart knew pornography when he saw it, readers are expected to recognise

conspiracy theories without recourse to a specific profile already sketched by the author. Examp-
les of this can be found in Bronner (2015) or Renard (2015), among others.

A second strategy is ostensive definition: The author does not explicitly define what is meant
by conspiracy theory, but points to popular examples that most readers are supposed to agree
upon. This is a common opener for papers and books on conspiracy theories: A list of well-known
cases that provide a general idea of the kind of beliefs that the text will be analysing. For instance, in his early work on the relationship between conspiracy theories and fundamentalist ideologies, Nefes (2011) does not formulate a working definition of conspiracy theory, but instead uses *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as a representative case.

A third strategy is explicit definition, either accepting its normative connotations, or trying to exclude them from a neutral perspective. For instance, according to Campion-Vincent (2005: 9), conspiracy theories ‘either refer to fantasy conspiracies, which do not exist, or deform the presentation of real conspiracies, usually enlarging them beyond reason. Conspiracies have to do with actions, conspiracy theories with perceptions’. Following Barkun (2003), she reiterates the three ‘rules’ of the conspiracy theorist: ‘EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED’ (in capitals), ‘nothing happens by chance’ and ‘things are not what they seem to be’ (Campion-Vincent 2005: 11–12), a set of axioms that has been later used by other sociologists, such as Bronner (2013: 12), in their own conceptualisation.

An example of the value- free position can be found in Harambam, who defines conspiracy theories as ‘explanations of social phenomena involving the secret actions of some people trying to bring about a certain desired outcome’ (2017: 4), and deliberately states that ‘we should write about conspiracy theories in ways that leave normative judgments to the reader and not weave them into our texts’ (Harambam 2017: 25).

A fourth strategy is the creation of a new term, including some or most of the phenomena covered by the previous label, but excluding the implicit value judgments that it carried. Hence ‘conspiracism’, ‘conspiracy narratives’ or ‘conspiratorial distrust’, which

contrary to the colloquial understanding of conspiracy theory, is not necessarily false and in many cases, we are not in position to tell whether it is true or not. Therefore, no one can say that, by definition, it is an unwarranted accusation without merit.  

*(Czech 2018: 667)*

Each strategy has its strengths and weaknesses. Relying at least on a working definition of conspiracy theory (third strategy) seems to be a necessity in order to validate theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches as well as empirical findings. It is probably an essential step towards universal conclusions and international comparisons. Using a different term to dodge the pejorative connotations of conspiracy theory (fourth strategy) may prove useful, but it also might create conceptual confusion. Indeed, one reason to study conspiracy theory is to directly examine the value of negative views and possibly to challenge them.

The first and second strategies provide a de facto definition which, if explicitly stated, would echo Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) approach to knowledge: If the sociology of knowledge should study anything that is deemed ‘knowledge’ in a given society, regardless of its validity or the criteria used to establish it, the sociology of conspiracy theory seems to study anything that is deemed a conspiracy theory in a given society.

However elusive such an approach may be, it points to another crucial problem, both for theoretical and empirical perspectives: How the value-charged notion of conspiracy theory is socially constructed, and how specific theories fall on the inner or outer side of its border (or somewhere in the fuzzy in-between zone where ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ forms of knowledge overlap). As Harambam warns: ‘A good sociological understanding of conspiracy culture can […] not stay insensitive to the definitional practices construing conspiracy theories as deviant forms of knowledge’ (2017: 21).

One of the most influential sociological examinations of the usage of the labels ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ as tools for the exclusion of deviant ideas is Husting and Orr’s
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2007 article ‘Dangerous Machinery’. Analysing discourses from print news and academic texts, the authors show how the terms are used to avoid discussing specific statements or claims, or evaluating them on their merits, by questioning those who propose them. This, in their view, is a predictable development in a public arena dominated by anxiety and fear, where ‘new interactional mechanisms’ emerge ‘to shield authority and legitimacy from challenge or accountability in a society characterised by political, economic and cultural inequalities’ (Husting, Orr 2017: 130). Hence, critics are discredited and excluded from public discussion, and uncomfortable and relevant questions about motive, corruption and power are circumvented. In addition to classic approaches (Hofstadter 1964; Pipes 1997) that pathologised conspiracy theories, Hustung and Orr also examine how more nuanced analyses (Fenster 1999; Melley 2002, 2008; Knight 2002) contribute to a ‘reification’ of the label rather than to a reconsideration: ‘suggestions of individual delusion sneak in sideways, and the power of the phrase to go meta remains unchallenged by those who seek to trouble facile uses of the label’ (Husting, Orr 2007: 143). In response to such discursive attacks, those excluded develop defensive strategies, like the preemptive use of disclaimers: ‘I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but …’.

Methodological questions

Our understanding of the nature of conspiracy theories as social phenomena, and certainly our definition, will necessarily influence our epistemological assumptions. Depending on our understanding of what is meant by conspiracy theories, we will have different ideas regarding what we could know about them, and how we could acquire such knowledge.

In order to design a methodological approach, any sociological research on conspiracy theories is usually forced to address, whether implicitly or explicitly, the following questions:

1. **Normative or value-free approach?** Some sociologists open their reports on conspiracy theories by revealing their misgivings about or even their active opposition to the phenomenon they are studying, pointing to the damages it can inflict on democracy or public health (e.g. Bronner 2013: 16–8). Others, as has already been mentioned, defend a neutral position. Harambam insists that sociologists ‘should not need to take sides, we should not say what is true or just, but we ought to make sure that the best available truth – whatever we define as best – will prevail’ (2017: 273).

2. **How should the micro and macro dimensions be balanced?** Since both approaches are not mutually exclusive but, rather, enrich and complement each other, researchers need to consider to what extent they will focus on individual believers, on large-scale processes and/ or on the wide variety of social institutions that lie between both extremes. Close examinations of the personal Erlebnis of conspiracy theorists, collecting data on their feelings of anxiety and insecurity, usually need to connect such experiences with the wider social context and the processes that shape it.

While most of the academic studies on conspiracy theories have focused on the micro-level of the communication of individuals (e.g. Uscinski, Parent 2014; Uscinski et al. 2016), a minority in the field shed light on the macro-level significance of these accounts. For example, Nefes (2013, 2018) analyse the communication of these accounts among political parties in Turkey; McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim (2017) explore conspiracy accounts in the British parliamentary debates between 1916 and 2015.

3. **Should the points of view of conspiracy theorists be taken account of?** And, specifically, what role does rationality play in conspiracy theories? Even some authors who eloquently take a stand against conspiracy theories, characterising them as incorrect, harmful ideas, assume that their adherents have reasons to believe in them, and that such reasons are essential to a sociological explanation (Boudon 2004; Bronner 2013, 2015; Renard 2015). Either conspiracy theories make sense, or
believers make sense of them: In their circumstances, it is reasonable to create, propagate and/or believe in conspiracy theories (Billig 1988; Bratich 2008). This basic assumption can lead to explicit Weberian verstehende approaches (Aupers 2012; Harambam 2017; Cicchelli, Octobre 2018) or to rational and social choice theory (Nefes 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Atkinson, Dewitt 2018). A structuralist view might under-examine reasons and meanings at an individual level, maybe endorsing the hypodermic needle theory of media influence, but at the risk of considering individuals as, in the celebrated term of ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel, ‘cultural dopes’.

4. Is culture enough to explain the prevalence of conspiracy theories or do we need independent variables?

Conspiracy theories are a cultural phenomenon. Sociology, often betraying a Marxian heritage, usually treats cultural products and processes as epiphenomena for other ‘prime movers’ in social life: Economic, political or social structure variables that explain the history of ideas. Alternatively, cultural sociology acknowledges the relative autonomy of culture, and examines the interplay of conspiracy theories with other cultural phenomena; unsurprisingly, this approach shares methodological strategies and theoretical tenets with social anthropology and cultural studies (see Chapters 1.2 and 1.6), and is influenced by the latter’s recent prominence. For instance, Harambam and Aupers (2017) explore conspiracy culture in the Netherlands via an ethnographic fieldwork and note that conspiracy theories do not constitute a monolithic culture, but a network of groups of people coming from different worldviews, beliefs and practices.

5. Are all conspiracy theories basically similar or are they diverse, beyond a handful of essential defining features?

Even admitting that all conspiracy theories are not re-iterations of a single basic theory, the diversity of variations acknowledged range from extremely narrow to extremely wide. If variations are minimal, researchers hardly need to bother with the contents and dynamics of specific theories; acknowledging a greater diversity calls for a more in-depth approach both to the specificity of each theory and that of the cultural, social and political circumstances in which it is created and diffused.

Nefes (2014) presented the similarities and variations of conspiratorial accounts while analysing online communication about the attempted assassination of Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian in 2004 before a general election. The findings showed that people proposed different versions of conspiracy theories strictly in line with their political interests. Until he won the election, the president’s supporters accused the opposing party of plotting his assassination; his opponents denied the claims of a conspiracy until losing the election, and then argued that the president had plotted a fake assassination attempt. This shows that, while defining principles of conspiratorial accounts, such as seeing secret plots behind important events, remain the same, conspiracy rhetoric is flexible enough to include opposing arguments.

6. How must quantitative and qualitative methods be combined?

Qualitative methods allow for exploratory, nuanced approaches and produce more detailed descriptions of social milieus and dynamics in conspiracy theorising (Kay 2011). Group discussion, for instance, enables a recreation of reasoning processes in face-to-face interactions. Quantitative methods tend to be more practical when it comes to establishing comparisons between populations and social groups (Simmons, Parsons 2005) and estimating numbers of believers. Nevertheless, such methods might oversimplify the complexity of the phenomenon and underestimate the number of believers in stigmatised theories (since such believers may not be as willing to admit their belief to a pollster as they would to a friend or someone they had identified as sharing the same belief).

Nefes (2017) juxtaposes qualitative and quantitative content analysis in his paper on the impacts of the Turkish government’s conspiratorial framing of the Gezi Park protests in 2013. While the quantitative analysis helps to test the main argument about whether there is a statistically significant relationship between political orientations of the users and their perceptions of
conspiracy theories, the qualitative analysis affords an in-depth view of how the online users reject or accept these accounts. Thus, the quantitative approach could be used to understand overall trends, while qualitative methods could help to test the validity of the quantitative findings as well as provide in-depth analysis.

**Modernity as a conspiracy: Theorising conspiracy theories**

This section examines how social theory has understood conspiracy theory within the framework of modernity and its variations, and the wide social processes that are associated with them. These are, first, the processes of rationalisation, secularisation and disenchantment of the world, which erode traditional worldviews and beliefs and replace them with the tentative methods of science and the abstract formality of bureaucracy, and obviously cannot provide ultimate answers or meaning to social reality. Second, there is the development of information technology and, with it, the spread of a growing consciousness of the contingency of social institutions and ideas, and also, in postmodern terms, the end of grand narratives and the prevalence of representations over reality. Third, there is the emergence of the nation-state as the political embodiment of a unified society, and its dilution in the globalisation process.

Assuming that conspiracy theories, in line with a broad definition, have a long history, sociologists have looked for shifts and transformations in particular aspects in order to analyse their development and to characterise the specificity of conspiracy theorising in (post/late/reflexive/liquid) modernity. These features include (Campion-Vincent 2005) the nature and the social standing of the conspirators (from foreign ‘others’ – see Donskis 1998 – to internal enemies and our own social institutions – see Aupers 2012); the scope of the conspiracy (ranging from specific goals pursued by a small group to world domination through a global plot); or the presence of conspiracy theories in public discourse. This last includes the standing of conspiracy theories within society, either in separate groups or in society as a whole, and their ‘resonance’, as Uscinski and Parent (2014: 131) define it, that is to say ‘how natural, useful or acceptable an idea appears to society’.

The credibility of conspiracy theories increases when trust in official epistemic authorities decreases (Renard 2015). In other words, a lack of trust in official explanations creates a cultural environment in which alternate takes on reality, including conspiracy theories, can flourish. This happens when we suspect that the official version promotes the particular interests of those propagating it (Uscinski et al. 2016), or when partisan distrust, intrinsic to the democratic system, develops into conspiracy politics that validate the beliefs in conspiracy theories held by some voters (Moore 2018).

While not always explicitly addressing conspiracy theories, social theorists have long discussed the processes in modernity that produced a culture of suspicion (Remmling 1969; Carroll 1977). In their analysis of modernity and its ailments, many of the usual suspects identified by later theorists were lined up: Fear, anxiety, insecurity, individualism and loneliness. In this perspective, modern society was fragmenting into distrusting factions, each developing its own cultural products and questioning those of the others:

The emergence of separate thought-styles with their corresponding universes of discourse has two consequences: each of these universes develops a paranoidal response to all the others [...] the process of meaningful communication between these mutually distrustful universes comes to a virtual standstill. Eventually all objective and factually grounded inquiry into the content of out-group utterances is replaced by the suspicious query: What are the ulterior motives behind the outside point of view?

*(Remmling 1969: 7–8; emphasis added)*
The default response, when we are faced with any proposition put forth by the other side, ranges from passive suspicion to active debunking. The academic expression of this ‘modern mentality’ is represented by disciplines such as the sociology of knowledge or the critique of ideologies (Remmling 1969; Latour 2004). The popular expression is found among cultural products such as detective or spy fiction, as well as in conspiracy theories.

Since Popper’s seminal definition of the ‘conspiracy theory of society’, conspiracy theorising has been understood by social theorists as an undesired (and undesirable) by-product of one or another processes that constitute modernity. The first of these, identified by Popper himself, is secularisation. While it is ‘held by very many rationalists’ (Popper 2002: 165), the conspiracy theory of society ‘in its modern form […] is the typical result of the secularization of religious superstitions’ (Popper 2002: 459). Such a mode of thinking ‘comes from abandoning God and then asking: ‘Who is in his place?’” (Popper 2002: 166). If our ancestors believed that events in their social reality were caused by the will, or the actions, of the gods, conspiracy theorists believe that events in ours are caused by the will and subsequent actions of powerful, secret cabals that pull the strings behind the scenes: Someone, whether human or divine, must be responsible.

In Popper’s conception, conspiracy theorising is a survival of earlier times, a mode of inference that has changed its external shape while maintaining the same basic structure. But, as he noted, holding a supernatural entity responsible has not the same social consequences as blaming a real group of people: The scapegoating of specific minorities, then, would be in such instances a consequence of the secularisation of this traditional model of causal explanation.

Popper’s influential contribution to the analysis of modern conspiracy culture is complemented by the lesser-known concept of the ‘conspiracy theory of ignorance’: The notion that our ignorance is deliberately caused by some conspiring power that not only obscures the truth but infuses us with reluctance to its knowledge (Popper 2002: 4). While the conspiracy theory of society explains why things happen, the conspiracy theory of ignorance explains why we do not know why things happen: Someone (journalists working for the capitalist press, the clergy, etc.) does not want us to know, and is actively conspiring to keep the truth from us. This theory, Popper argues, is ‘the almost inevitable consequence of the optimistic belief that truth, and therefore goodness, must prevail if only truth is given a fair chance’ (Popper 2002: 10). But, this ‘false epistemology’ was also ‘the major inspiration of an intellectual and moral revolution without parallel in history’ (Popper 2002: 10). If the conspiracy theory of ignorance is a mistake, it is, Popper admits, a fruitful mistake. Conspiracy theories are not just side-effects of modernity but may have played a part in bringing modernity forth. If the accusation of ‘priestly deception’ is, in Popper’s view, a prime example of the conspiracy theory of ignorance, its prominent role in the Enlightenment, and hence in the coming of modernity, must be conceded (see Lancaster, McKenzie-McHarg 2018).

The process of secularisation is closely related to the processes of disenchantment of the world (i.e. the gradual extinction of ‘magic’ in the social world) and of rationalisation. The two latter processes are also invoked by social theorists in their explanation of conspiracy theories (Ho, Jin 2011; Josset 2015). Aupers insists that ‘notwithstanding its scientific ambitions and (often) atheist pretentions, conspiracy culture, too, is a response to existential insecurity in a disenchanted world’ (2012: 30). Sense is made of a meaningless world by means of theories that re-establish meaning, even if it is a terrifying meaning: Things do happen for a reason, and life is not just a disorderly succession of random events. There is more to existence than the clockwork functioning of the social machinery, of impersonal systems and rational-legal iron cages, indifferent to human needs.

In Niklas Luhmann’s terms, it is a matter of reducing complexity (Renard 2015). Once we have lost our trust in experts, scholars, teachers, media, politicians and politics, we need something else in its place, since ‘distrust is not the opposite of trust: Individuals cannot psychologically exist
in a permanent situation of unrest and anxiety. Distrusting individuals must also resort to complexity-reducing strategies’ (Renard 2015: 108).

In a sense, the survival of conspiracy theories disprove trust in the rationalisation process itself: Modernity has not brought with it the demise of unfounded belief and the victory of (scientific) knowledge (Bronner 2013). They both exist side by side in an uneasy imbalance, which explains why some sociologists analyse conspiracy theories as a specific case within their broader theories on knowledge, belief and ideology (Boudon 1986, 1990).

More information, in the absence of traditional schemata of interpretation, means more noise (Cicchelli, Octobre 2018) or, potentially, more fear (Husting, Orr 2007). The development of information technology and free-speech principles in liberal democracies begat the liberalisation of the cognitive market (being ‘the fictitious space where products informing our worldview are diffused’ [Bronner 2013: 23]): faced with an overabundance of data, individuals ‘can easily be tempted into constructing a representation of the world which is comfortable rather than true’ (Bronner 2013: 33). Adopting a rational strategy, we pick the theories that entail an affordable cognitive cost.

The end of grand narratives and the prevalence of representations over reality, two of the recurring themes in postmodern social theory, call for new, ‘outsider’ meta-narratives displacing the teleological myth of progress (scientific or otherwise), the re-signification of symbols (Josset 2015) and the fictionalisation of social reality, which we fashion using familiar, exciting templates from popular fiction (Cicchelli, Octobre 2018). Those who reject the postmodern diagnosis may still have embraced the notion of contingency, ever-present in the writings of the main social theorists of the late twentieth century (from Luhmann to Bauman), and therefore understand conspiracy theorising as a return to necessity and destiny in history.

The emergence of the nation-state, with its stabilising pretensions over social reality, is another modern process that fosters, in its tensions and discontinuities, conspiracy theorising, both about conspiracies attacking the state from the outside and about the state as the façade of a conspiracy, concealing those who actually rule (Boltanski 2012). In social sciences, methodological nationalism equates society with the nation-state, but this identification is questioned by the very development of social theory, revealing that social reality is not monolithic.

Globalisation further disintegrates what Beck called ‘the container theory of society’, the myth of self-enclosed, self-sufficient and self-explaining national units. It is a fact that life-changing decisions, affecting millions of people, are made beyond the borders of the nation-state and above the political representatives directly elected by those affected; global financial earthquakes are also better understood as the result of a deliberate design than as the outcome of gross risk miscalculation and system failures in an interdependent world economy (Rosset 2012; Josset 2015).

**Empirical research**

Within the general field of the discipline, sociology of conspiracy theory has one foot planted on sociology of knowledge and the other on sociology of public opinion. These two adjacent areas were identified by Robert K. Merton (1957: 439) as the ‘European species’ (knowledge) and the ‘American species’ (public opinion and mass communication) of the same line of inquiry, since both were devoted to ‘the interplay between ideas and social structure’.

Merton examined several key differences between the two traditions, in terms of conceptualisation, research topics and methods. Regarding their object, he wrote:

> If the American version is primarily concerned with public opinion, with mass beliefs, with what has come to be called ‘popular culture’, the European version centers on...
more esoteric doctrines, on those complex systems of knowledge which become reshaped and often distorted in their subsequent passage into popular culture.

(Merton 1957: 441)

The conspiracy theory, as an object, belongs to both categories, moving back and forth between esoteric doctrines and popular culture. It is for that reason that sociologists researching conspiracy theories seem to cull methods and approaches from very diverse disciplines, ranging from the history of ideas (a close relative of the sociology of knowledge) to communication studies (a neighbouring field to the sociology of public opinion).

Thus, sociological research on conspiracy theories can be categorised in terms of existing, often overlapping, approaches to both sociological traditions, which will be summarised below as general research questions, with a few examples of specific studies in the literature:

1. **What are the social causes of false ideas?** Historically, sociology of knowledge originated from sociology of prejudice and error and has never lost interest in the topic (‘post-truth’ is another contemporary notion that brings the sociologies of knowledge and public opinion together). Sociologists researching conspiracy theories have often tried to elucidate the social factors that contribute to the emergence of wrongful beliefs about conspiracies and make them credible. A recent example would be Bronner’s (2015) study on the *Charlie Hebdo* conspiracy theories, which he argues were facilitated by the liberalisation of the cognitive market and the propagation of what he calls ‘cognitive demagoguery’.

   This approach is based upon the methodological discussion on the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge. For instance, Bale (2007) advanced a set of criteria for distinguishing true conspiratorial politics from ‘bogus conspiracy theories’, while Buenting and Taylor (2010) identified a specific type of evidence (‘fortuitous data’) that makes conspiracy theorising rationally adequate, as exemplified by the Watergate scandal.

2. **What kinds of relations exist between ideas and between different sets of ideas?** Ideological analysis is tasked with answering this question. The focus here is on the internal structure of conspiracy theories and their association with cognate ideological constructions. Billig (1988) examined how antisemitic conspiracy theories could be combined with pro-Zionist stances in the National Front. Torrens (2015) explained how theories about a world conspiracy against the Muslims worked as meta-narratives for Islamist Jihadism, in an endless feedback loop.

3. **What is the impact of conspiracy theories on social and political processes?** Ideas have consequences, intended or unintended. Propaganda and mass communication produce effects, even if not as mechanically as the propagandists would hope. Popper (2002) claimed that conspiracy theories, while invalid as explanations of social reality, were sociologically relevant when those who held them reached political power, since their political decisions were guided by such belief and tended to enact counter-conspiracies (Hitler and the Holocaust being the foremost example). This is one of the longest-running branches of scholarship on conspiracy theories, from Hofstadter’s (1966) and Lipset and Raab’s (1970) analyses of conspiracy theorising in the American right wing.

   On the deliberate use of conspiracy theories to elicit an intended outcome, Taïeb (2010) examined how the conspiracy theory about the H1N1 vaccination campaign in France was used as a means of politicisation, and Billig (1988) documented the use of antisemitic conspiracy theories in the power struggle between competing factions in the National Front.

4. **Are conspiracy theories socially ‘useful’ in any way?** Or, to put it in more precise technical terms: *Are conspiracy theories fulfilling social functions?* Rather than focusing on their truth or lack of it, functional analysis explores how conspiracy theories work within specific social structures and how they contribute, if at all, to the operation of particular groups or society as a whole.
Most studies in this line of research have analysed the cognitive and sense-making functions of conspiracy theories, but such functions can be connected to others like social cohesion or identity construction. For instance, Gosa (2011) examined how conspiracy theories in hip-hop culture address race and class disadvantages, providing explanations for them while strengthening the cultural identity of the disadvantaged.

5. **What social groups believe in which conspiracy theories, and what roles are played by different agents in their diffusion?** This is the problem that Schutz (1976) denominated ‘the social distribution of knowledge’, and which in his view was the only sensible line of inquiry for sociology of knowledge. There are abundant studies on the social distribution of conspiracy theories: For example, Simmons and Parsons (2005) investigated whether African-American elites could play a role, as some commentators assumed, in dispelling beliefs in conspiracy theories among the larger African-American community, and found out that they would not, since they held essentially the same conspiracy beliefs.

6. **What social factors influence where the line separating ‘legitimate’ from ‘illegitimate’ knowledge is drawn?** As opposed to the sociology of error mentioned above, this is the sociology of ‘anything that is deemed knowledge’. This line of research is fuelled by contemporary social epistemology (see Chapter 1.4) and the work of philosophers like Pigden (1995), who criticises Popper’s pejorative conception of conspiracy theory. The best-known example in this vein is the work of Husting and Orr (2007).

**Conclusion: Future research in the sociology of conspiracy theory**

Future research in sociology could choose to fill various gaps in the scholarship. Methodologically, only a few studies make use of mixed methods in the academic literature on conspiracy theories (e.g. Nefes 2017). Future research could transcend the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative methods in the literature, which could help to generate a more thorough understanding on the sociological significance of conspiracy theories. In addition, there are new research methods, such as qualitative experiments, which call ‘on an experimental design by randomly distributing a sample into two or more conditions in which participants are exposed to different stimuli’ (Robinson, Mendelson 2012: 336). Qualitative experiments have not yet been used, and they could help us to understand the influence of partisanship on the perception of conspiracy theories. One approach might be to inquire about interpretations of conspiracy rhetoric and political views, following which the subject is given a prime, such as a newspaper quotation from a favourite or opponent political party that contradicts their opinion. Then, researchers could invite respondents to reflect on the quote and re-consider their approach on conspiracy theories.

Theoretically, conspiracy theory scholarship, while somehow replicating a variety of approaches in the sociology of knowledge, still does not contain a comprehensive and systematic perspective from that discipline. The sociology of knowledge explores the social foundations of ideas and beliefs (Merton 1957; Mannheim 1997) and could help to analyse the social origins of conspiracy thinking in different contexts. In parallel, thematically, most of the research is based on the developed world and Western societies. Sociological research might shed light into other contexts of conspiracy theorising, where different dynamics could be in play. Furthermore, new theoretical conceptions of modernity, influenced by post-colonialism (Bhambra 2007), standpoint epistemology and other developments in the philosophy of the social sciences, are likely to suggest novel approaches to the modern incarnations of the conspiracy theory.

Last but not least, the scholarship on conspiracy theories has two tendencies with regards to their socio-political significance, namely classical and modern approaches (Nefes 2012). As...
hinted in Hofstadter’s (1966) ‘paranoid style’ description, the former sees conspiracy theories as irrational accounts that fail to understand the nature of events and as a political pathology of marginal groups (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Pipes 1997). In contrast, the modern perspective views conspiracy theories as a rational attempt to understand social reality (e.g. Knight 2000; Birchall 2006). The classical and modern approaches do not provide all-round perspectives, as while the former negates these accounts as ‘political paranoia’, the cultural perspective might not adequately emphasise their harmful impacts (Fenster 1999). In that regard, future sociological work could go beyond this division by both accounting for the paranoid and rational aspects of conspiratorial accounts.

References


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