

ABSTRACTS

Michael Butter and Peter Knight

**BRIDGING THE GREAT DIVIDE: CONSPIRACY THEORY
RESEARCH FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

This article starts from the observation that research on conspiracy theories is currently thriving, but that it is also fragmented. In particular there is an increasing divide between disciplines with culturalist and qualitative approaches, such as history, cultural studies and ethnology, and disciplines with quantitative and empirical approaches, such as psychology and political science. The article argues that this ‘great divide’ has to be bridged for research to arrive at a genuine understanding of conspiracy theories. As a first step in such a bridge-building process, the article engages, from the vantage point of (American) cultural studies, with research done on the other side of the divide, namely in psychology and political science. It summarizes the work done in these fields and evaluates it critically, concentrating on methodology; the assumptions about the dysfunctionality of conspiracy beliefs; the circularity of some arguments; the focus on individual rather than social and collective aspects; the lack of engagement with the definition of the phenomenon; and the neglect of cultural and historical difference. The article ends with recommendations for future collaborative research projects.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, paranoid style, cultural studies.

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Alejandro Romero Reche

THE CONSPIRACY THEORY OF IGNORANCE IN THE CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Before Mannheim's sociology of knowledge and Marx's theory of ideology, there was an Enlightened proto-sociology of error and prejudice which, in its emphasis on deliberate priestly deception, provides one of the main examples of "the conspiracy theory of ignorance" as conceptualized by Popper. This paper follows the development of the sociology of knowledge from that starting point, in order to examine how authors like Marx, Lukács, Mannheim and others have theorized an almost perfect, self-working machinery of ideological reproduction which can be used in conspiracy theories simply by reinstating intentionality in the creation and management of such device.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, sociology of knowledge, ideology, false consciousness, social theory.

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Dimitar Vatsov

LOGICS OF PROPAGANDA SECOND PART. THE CONSPIRACY GRAMMAR OF POPULIST PROPAGANDA

In the lines of the more general logics of propaganda outlined in the First Part, the Second Part of this study aims to shed light on the recently growing populist-propaganda front. In contrast to many researchers who speak about a “populist wave” recently spreading nearly all over the world (from Putin to Trump and back), on the level of the discourses we prefer to call the same phenomenon “a populist-propaganda front”. The last newly coined term presupposes that the dispersed popular discontents today are to great extent already captured and packed in a new propaganda regime. First, gradually after 2000, the new populist-propaganda package (basic grammar and vocabulary) was set by Russian media but Russia does not determine all of its uses; they can be and are used in anti-Russian talk too. This package – national-sovereignist and conservative in its own terms – serves not the local people but it is utilized by different local political-economic actors (oligarchs): it is a circulating resource for a state capture. The particular practical logic of this populist propaganda is outlined here on the basis of the empirical study “Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. News Websites and Printed Media: 2013 – 2016”.

First, the populist-propaganda logics is based entirely on conspiracy grammar. The narrative figure of the conspiracy, after a morphological analysis following Vladimir Propp, can be logically represented as a multiple relation with

three logical positions: 1. Conspirator (Puppet-master, Villain) – 2. Helpers (Puppets) – 3. Victim (potential Hero). The populist propaganda totalizes this elementary conspiracy grammar: everything in the (political and economic) world is a conspiracy. The scene of the conspiracy is the globe. Hence the position of the “Conspirator” is translated into a geopolitical position: the usual suspected - the global Villain - is “the West” (or USA, NATO, Brussels, Soros, capitalism, liberalism, multiculturalism, etc., all of them metonymically substituted on demand).

Second, by totalizing conspiracy the populist propaganda totalizes cynicism: its first message is that everyone pursues its own ego-interest. Every other normative and political standard (presumably evoked to limit the ego-interests – the human rights, the authority of law, the separation of powers, etc.) is discredited in advance as an ideological smokescreen hiding the conspiracy.

Third, the only legitimate interest is the people’s interest. But here a set of propaganda operations with the meaning of “the people” takes place. 1. Using the left repertoire of discrediting the Western liberal capitalism, propaganda forgets the inclusive left meanings of “the people” (the economically oppressed, the culturally excluded) and substitutes them with exclusive “right meanings” (usually it is strategically targeted to the local majority represented in an ethnically-nationalist holistic mode); 2. The people’s interest and the people’s sovereignty are also strategically substituted by state sovereignty (in geopolitical etatist terms); 3. But the state sovereignty understood as the existence of strong and mutually independent institutions is also strategically replaced by the “personal sovereignty” of one strong and charismatic political leader. On the Bulgarian media scene Putin and Orban usually take the part of real sovereign leaders countering the conspiracy of the West.

In conclusion the contemporary populist propaganda is **racist** (excludes on racial criteria), **isolationist** (excludes international normative regulations and control) and **authoritarian** (on internal level it excludes the institutional separation of powers and blocks the civic resistances). It is not only a Russian weapon but an effective local device for a state capture for every oligarch fighting against the forms of public control (internal and external) and utilizing the state as a tool for achieving economic advantages.

Keywords: Logics, grammar, populist propaganda, conspiracy, state capture.

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Nebojša Blanuša

**THE DEEP STATE BETWEEN THE (UN)WARRANTED
CONSPIRACY THEORY AND STRUCTURAL ELEMENT
OF POLITICAL REGIMES?**

This paper tries to address a more general issue of conspiracy theories as knowledge, its (mis)treatments, selective and biased use, as well as specific features and outcomes of different epistemic approaches to conspiracy theories important for further clarification of this field of research. Following that, the author tries to explain why the “deep state” is a good candidate for such a research of conspiratorial knowledge as a field of contesting interpretations. Conceptually speaking, the “deep state” is considered as a sort of systemic, political arch-conspiracy, or the parapolitical structure organized for permanent conspiratorial enterprises. In that sense, it functions as a metaphorical umbrella for state conspiracies and includes many contested singular conspiracy theories. Furthermore, it will be shown, through the analysis of the current scholarly literature on the “deep state”, how the knowledge produced by those scholars who believe in its existence can be contested and compared with (non)conspiratorial public interpretations, and other experts’ arguments who are not “enchanted” by this concept. The purpose of such research would be to explore differences in argumentation, provided basis for evidence-building and alternative explanations between these various groups of social agents. Based on this information, further more rigorous social science research should enable us to build the criteria for differentiation between warranted and unwarranted conspiratorial skepticism.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, deep state, knowledge.

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the network of international scholars, dealing with various aspects of populism, especially anti-elitist conspiracy theories. He is the author of *Conspiracy Theories and Croatian Political Reality 1980-2007*. (2011; in Croatian) and co-editor of EU, *Europe Unfinished: Mediating Europe and the Balkans in a Time of Crisis* (2016). Moreover, Nebojša Blanuša has published several articles on the role of conspiracy theories as political vehicles for othering, as well as vernacular epistemology with various political consequences.

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TOWARDS A THEORY OF CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES

This article is a call for the academic debate on conspiracy theories to advance beyond general cultural analyses. To achieve that, we must make our conceptual tools more precise. I discuss the fundamental component of power difference to conspiracy theories and suggest an analytical typology based on their 'gradient of power'. Beyond that, I argue that we should work towards a theory for the structure of circulation of conspiratorial forms and logics. To this end, I introduce the notion of 'conspiracy narrative' as the basic element in such dynamics. I sketch out a model for the mechanics of interaction and exchange in webs of conspiracy narratives.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, conspiracy narratives, power, cultural studies.

Nikola Venkov has a PhD in Sociology from the University of Sofia. His interests are in the field of urban anthropology, power and marginalisation in the urban space and discourse theory. He studied the micro-mechanics of urban development projects as political action. His work is on the transformation of Women's Market in Sofia. He holds a PhD in Mathematics and MA in Ethnology.

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Julia Rone

**TECHNO-CONSPIRACIES: THE ALARMING
SIDE OF THE DIGITAL SUBLIME**

The current paper situates the scare around the “Russian hacking of the US elections” in a historical line of utopias and dystopias of the digital age. By tracing the genealogy of beliefs about the Internet and democratization, I show how the initial euphoric embracement of cyber-space as revolutionizing politics has been inverted in more recent narratives about the Internet and the death of democracy. In the shadow of figures such as hackers, bots, and trolls spreading disinformation, both Democrats and Republicans have created their own conspiracy theories around the leaking of DNC emails. By analysing a Reddit thread that attempts to be “neutral” amidst an increasingly polarized political debate, I show how difficult it is to avoid relapsing in conspiracy theories considering the absence of publicly available decisive evidence, the diminished trust in institutions, and the amenability of technological trails to falsification and multiple interpretations. Thus, apart from laying a claim on the right to know and tell political truths, conspiracy theories point also to the impossibility of attaining, in a rational and categorical way, a truth that is passionately sought. Ultimately, I argue that interpreting the outcome of the US elections as the result of a secret technological intervention is a form of techno-fetishism that overlooks much more complex political and economic factors.

Keywords: Techno-conspiracy, techno-fetishism, digital utopias, digital sublime, American elections 2016, hacking, Trump, Clinton.

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Joseph E. Uscinski

**THE ELECTION WAS RIGGED, THE NEWS IS FAKE,
AND THE DEEP STATE IS OUT TO GET US: OR, HOW
CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE (STILL) FOR LOSERS!**

Conspiracy theories are all about power – who has it and what they are doing with it, particularly when no one is looking. The losing side will inevitably accuse the winners of conspiring. Democrats would be convinced that Trump is involved in a grand conspiracy, no matter what evidence was available.

Keywords: American politics, elections, Trump, media, conspiracy theories.

Joseph E. Uscinski received his bachelor's degree from Plymouth State University, his Master's from University of New Hampshire, and his Doctorate from University of Arizona. His research has appeared in *Journal of Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Critical Review* among other scholarly outlets. His first book, *The People's News: Media, Politics, and the Demands of Capitalism* (2014) addresses how audience demands drive news content. His second book, *American Conspiracy Theories* (2014) co-authored with Joseph Parent, examines why people believe in conspiracy theories.

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Georgi Medarov

**THE FREEMASONS ARE IN PARLIAMENT! -
POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONSPIRACIES IN THE
JUDICIAL REFORM DISCOURSES IN BULGARIA**

The article proposes an explanation of the *social conditions of* and the *political effects from* widespread conspiratorial discourses in Bulgaria today. The approach is based on a generalization of Moishe Postone's use of Marx's critique of political economy to articulate a critical theory of modern antisemitism. My main argument is that it is possible to deploy Postone's thesis, regarding the personalization of abstract domination in modern capitalism, more generally, that is without limiting it to the analysis of *strictly antisemitic* conspiratorial discourses. What interests me in particular is how to *adapt* Postone's theory of antisemitism to explain narratives about "the Backstage of the Transition" in Bulgaria today, understood as the secretive force, derailing the nation from its "natural" historical course. The concrete empirical focus of the article is

the parliamentary debates around the adoption of amendments to the Judicial System Act from 2016. The amendments' stated goal was to limit influences of "secret societies" in the judicial system; during the debates the imagined "Backstage of Transition" was personalized in the figure of "the freemasons".

Keywords: conspiracy, Postone, Marx, judicial reform, Transition, political economy, sociology of secrecy.

Georgi Medarov holds PhD in Sociology, the topic of his dissertation, which he defended in Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski” in 2017, is "From Liberalism to Authoritarianism: The Bulgarian Case after 1989". He is lecturer at University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski". His interests are in the fields of the discursive theory of populism, historical sociology of liberalism and the critique of political economy.

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Momchil Metodiev

CONSPIRACIES OF THE TRANSITION OR TRANSITIONAL CONSPIRACIES

The post-communist transitional period in Bulgaria became fertile soil for proliferation of conspiracy theories. The most popular among them claimed that the communist State Security masterminded the whole transitional process. The article is trying to analyze the relevance of that theory based on the history of the communist State Security. It also seeks to explore whether it influenced public and political decisions and whether the State Security officers themselves were interested in the spread of that theory.

Keywords: post-communism, Transition, State Security.

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Julien Giry

**BECOME A FULL-TIME CONSPIRACY THEORIST:
RADICALIZATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION
TRAJECTORIES OF TWO CITIZEN SLEUTHS GROUPS**

Starting from an empirical and interactionist approach of both individual and collective trajectories of radicalization and professionalization of two citizen sleuth groups, the JFK's assassination “warrenologists” and the 9/11 “truthers”, this paper aims to study grassroots conspiracism. Faced with such a violent and unexpected event, windows of opportunity open and conspiracy theories flourish. From a weberian perspective, we are gradually assisting to the transition from amateur conspiracy theorists who investigate the tragic event they underwent as a kind of “hobby” to professional ones who live *for* and *from* conspiracism. Yet, from individual awareness to micromobilizations, a collective action dynamic takes shape. Step by step, carriers of radicalization develop with the emergence of a collective politically determined cause which contributes to the institutionalization of a relatively autonomous social field with its specific capitals and resources. Since then, professional citizen sleuths engage in a competitive process and a social division of conspiracist labor arises. Each of them specialize and self-proclaimed experts, without any legitimate competence or skills, emerge in various fields such like legal medicine, structural engineering or ballistic analysis. And, with the contemporary rise of the Internet, this cyber echo-chamber gives an opportunity for some social actors to acquire a genuine prestige, a social and political recognition and a dominating position in the conspiracist field and even beyond. Finally, professional conspiracy theorists become “rival-associates”; each one trying to improve his/her own position in the field but also, through heteronomy effects, in the economy field, and many other fields, where conspiracy theories and conspiracy merchandising generate highly lucrative incomes.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theories – Citizen Sleuths – Radicalization and Professionalization Carriers – Institutionalization of a Social Field – Rival-Associates – Heteronomy Effects.

Since 2009, **Julien Giry** has been working on conspiracy theories mainly in the United States. After a monograph of the *LaRouche Movement (2009-2010)*, he defended a dissertation in political science entitled “Conspiracism in American

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Todor Hristov

**CONSPIRACY AND VULNERABILITY: #OCCUPY, ZEITGEIST,
AND THE LEGITIMATION OF REBELLIOUS KNOWLEDGE**

In the fall of 2011, one of the working groups of #Occupy Wall Street discussed the idea to endorse the concepts of the *Zeitgeist* films as an official ideology of the movement. The idea was ultimately dismissed, but since the *Zeitgeist* films were heavily influenced by Alex Jones, in order to do that, the working group needed to draw a dividing line between conspiracy theories and the rebellious knowledge about the injustice of the 1%, which had inspired #Occupy. As the dividing line was to be drawn in discussion, which foreclosed any argument founded on authority, in fact, any argument that implied asymmetrical distribution of knowledge, the theories of conspiracy theories turned out to be useless. Therefore the working group developed a concept of conspiracy theory suitable for its practical purposes, and shaped by what the participants perceived as strategic vulnerabilities. The concept claimed that conspiracy theory was any theory that could be accused of being one, and as this concept could be extended to any theory of injustice, the working group ultimately decided to recommend that #Occupy should not have any ideology. Later, the lack of ideology was widely criticized as a crucial vulnerability of the movement. Of course, the paper does not attribute this vulnerability to the rejection of the *Zeitgeist* films. Yet I will claim that the discussion of the films exemplifies a risk brought about by the concept of conspiracy theory, the risk of making any dissent vulnerable to accusations of irrationality.

Todor Hristov is an associate professor of literary theory at the University of Sofia. He holds PhD degrees in sociology and literary theory. His last book offers a discussion of the 1876 April uprising as an experiment at inventing a regime of sovereignty without a sovereign symptomatic of the advantages

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Clare Birchall

AESTHETICS OF THE SECRET

In re-igniting a familiar debate about the balance between state security and individual privacy, the revelations of former NSA contractor Edward Snowden have stalled on matters of regulation and reform, which treat secrecy, securitization and surveillance largely in procedural terms. This article seeks to interrupt the containment strategies of communicative capitalism/democracy evident in these debates by configuring secrets as subject to and the subject of radical politics rather than regulation. Its premise is that we might be better able to form a radical political response to the ‘Snowden event’ by situating the secret within a distributive regime and imagining what collectivities and subjectivities the secret makes available. Through a consideration of artworks by Trevor Paglen and Jill Magid - which help us to stay with the secret as secret, rather than foregrounding the more individualistic notion of privacy or moving too quickly towards revelation and reform - the article turns from a hermeneutics of the secret towards aesthetics of the secret. Considered as a Rancièrian ‘distribution of the sensible’, a delimitation of space, time, the visible, the sayable, the audible, and political experience, this aesthetics can help us to imagine a politics of the secret not bound to policy and legalities.

Keywords: secret, aesthetics, Snowden, Rancièrè, Glissant, data, subjectivity.

Clare Birchall joined King's College London in 2012. Before arriving at King's, she taught Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Kent and Middlesex University. With a first degree in English from Exeter University, Dr Birchall went on to study Critical Theory at Sussex University. Dr Birchall is the author of *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (2006) and co-editor of *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (2007). She has also edited special issues of the journals *Theory, Culture and Society* (Dec 2011) and *Cultural Studies* (Jan 2007). Her most recent research is concerned with the relationship between secrecy and transparency in the digital age and has given

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**JUDICIAL POWER OR CONSPIRACY?
THE EMERGENCE OF THE CITIZEN-INVESTIGATOR
IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICS CENTERED AROUND
THE RULE OF LAW AND FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION**

The thesis of the current article is that it is difficult to distinguish conspiracy in some of its manifestations from the logic of the judiciary. I will attempt to show that the difference between conspiracy and judiciary is a consequence of the positioning of that logic in locations, discursively gifted with the right to value something as truth. Undoubtedly, the judiciary power discourse is one of the leading political perspectives in Bulgaria since politics are centered around the rule of law and the fight against corruption. In order to unfold my main thesis, I attempt a reconstruction of the anticorruption discourse based on the works of Ivan Krastev and Nadège Ragaru. I demonstrate its development on a global scale and its entry in post-communist Bulgaria. What I find particularly interesting in Ragaru's observation is that the anticorruption fight relies on civil society and in that sense, constructs a "civil society", which in the frame of the juridical discourse begins to duplicate the practices of the investigator.

Keywords: Transition, post-communist Bulgaria, judicial power, rule of law, anticorruption discourse, subjectivity, civil society, conspiracy, Boltanski, sociology of secrecy.

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THE DETECTIVE NOVEL OR IN THE SEARCH OF THE IMPLAUSIBLE: KRACAUER AND BOLTANSKI

In this text I aim to make a comparative reading of the Kracauer's and Boltanski's books about the detective story, through the problems concerning the representation of the reality, the instrumental rationality and the image of the detective. Through these problems we will find the social conditions of possibility of this genre and we will try to answer the question why it is in the origin of conspiracy theories.

Keywords: detective novel, social construction of reality, rationality and modernity, Kracauer, Boltanski.

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