**Conspiracy theories and social critique in the 21st century**

**Introduction to the problem**

The historical crises of the first two decades of the 21st century, from 9/11 to the current coronavirus pandemic, have generated much discussion about conspiracy theories and their detrimental impact on the public sphere, public reason, democratic institutions, and, indeed, democratic political regimes. This renewed interest has been kindled in particular by the ever-growing presence of different, so-called “alternative” news outlets that refute or reject mainstream news media coverage and framing. The event commonly referred to as 9/11 was a sort of catalyst for a new wave of conspiratorial thinking, the beginning of a period which has seen an exponential growth in conspiracy theories (at first based on 9/11 itself), closely related to the expansion of social media, the spread of anonymous unfiltered information and the faded role of professional journalistic gatekeeping (Goldman 2008).

It should be noted that “conspiracy” does not stand for a small, secret plot, as its common-sense meaning would suggest. More often than not “it refers to the workings of a large organization, technology, or system – a powerful and obscure entity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of the traditional conspiracy” (Moore 2016, 8). Furthermore, conspiracy theories no longer seem to have an exclusively fringe or “alternative” status, as they have made several inroads into mainstream political opinion, often professed from a position of power (for example, the recent QAnon movement in the US, the “deep state” theory, the allegations against George Soros in the US and Eastern Europe, or the “Jewish lobby” in the US). The mainstreaming of conspiracy theories, which fabricate “alternative realities” and expand to assume the form of “world views”, has degraded the conditions of free and rational discussion (Bronner 2015; Hardin 2002) and fragmented the public sphere (Einstein and Glick 2013). Another repercussion has been the extreme polarization of political opinions (Sunstein 2009), instigating protest and contestation based on fictitious allegations, which has resulted in the stigmatization of certain groups.

Some authors even argue that where “collective anxieties become focused on a single fantasmatic enemy, such as ‘the Jews’”, conspiracy theories “may become a vehicle for the rise of totalitarian forms of rule” and “a threat to the survival of liberal democracy” (Heins 2007, 789). It is true that extreme right-wing perpetrators of recent acts of violent terrorism (notably in Halle and Christchurch) were individuals who held a deeply conspiratorial world view, and this also applies to Islamist terrorists.

However, conspiracy theories per se are often viewed in a much different light. In contrast to their potential role in the production of fake news, fallacious framing, political irrationality, panic, and even terrorism, they are often considered as a voice of protest against the obscure workings of state administrations, bureaucracies and business dealings (Dean 2000). For conspiracy theories also have a very strong connection to the idea of social critique, which is evidenced by those debates in which they are talked about in connection with free speech and the proper functioning of democracy, as opposed to secrecy and the rule of an anti-democratic elite (Fenster 1999; Giry 2018; Coady 2012; Dentith 2014). Defenders of conspiracy theories argue that they are part and parcel of a democratically functioning public sphere, notwithstanding their potential cognitive shortcomings, anti-hegemonic discourse, and mistrust in official and authoritative interpretations, whether governmental or scientific (Harambam and Aupers 2014). This view, of course, is diametrically opposed to that of the detractors of conspiracy theories, and this contrast is often perceived as a debate between liberals (who cherish open and moderate discussion in the public sphere) and leftists (who emphasize the utmost importance of social critique, which, they say, tends to be suppressed).

The leftist view somehow leans on the fact that the interpretive structure of conspiracy theories is present in critical social science as well. Indeed, some of the basic theoretical assumptions of certain currents of critical sociology (sometimes referred to as the “sociology of suspicion”) are often compared to conspiracy theories: the supposedly veiled nature of social phenomena, the critique of the power relations of a few dominant actors and the hypothesis of intentionality. In fact, there is serious debate about the commonalities between critical social science and a conspiratorial type of thinking (Melley 2000; Latour 2005; Heinich 2009). However, these presumed features of critical social science are not always refuted, rejected or treated in a critical mode; on the contrary, they are often espoused by social scientists as necessary conditions (Boltanski 2014).

For all these reasons, any attempt to make sense of and criticize the conspiratorial phenomenon will encounter a difficult paradox, which needs to be resolved: there can hardly be a democratic, open and free public debate when conspiracy theories tend to adopt a preponderant role in their framing; however, there can be no democracy, and no critical social science, without a certain amount of conspiratorial thinking. Our task is to come to terms with this paradox by conducting an investigation on three levels: historical-political, epistemological and normative. In historical-political terms, conspiratorial thinking should be carefully mapped on the basis of case studies, alongside an analysis of theoretical controversies. Theoretical controversies are equally important on the epistemological level, which must question critical social science and its connections to conspiratorial explanations. As a result of this analysis on two levels, we should be able to demonstrate the ambiguities of conspiratorial thought, the way it is situated between critique and provocation, critical stance and disinformation/manipulation, anti-hegemonic discourse and anti-semitic scapegoating.

All this will be complemented by a normative conception of the public sphere and the social sciences, since responses are required to tackle the ambiguities identified. The highly significant question of the relationship between critique and truth should be addressed, as it seems that without reference to truth, “critique” cannot remain critical, and will only serve the ideological interests of various political groupings (for example when conducting critiques of policies on immigration and climate change or of the discourse of the dominant class). This does not mean that it would be possible (either epistemologically or pragmatically) to return to firm, positivistically-minded truth criteria; however, truth and the will to truth need to regain respectability both in the public sphere (see Moore 2017) and critical social science (see Latour 2004). This requirement already characterizes a normative-conceptual program guided by the hypothesis that the question of truth should not be divorced from politics and critique, otherwise it will be bracketed off and submitted to ideology, or at least instrumentalized by it.

**Scientific background**

The political debate

* “Paranoid style” versus anti-hegemonic stance

The classical statement encapsulating the dangers that conspiracy theories pose to politics was formulated by Richard Hofstadter (1964, 1996) in a seminal essay in 1964. The author coined the term “paranoid style” which, he said, characterizes “movements of discontent” that promulgate a unitary world view by accusing specific individuals or groups of secretly exerting power and influence on all spheres of political and social life. Hofstadter views this tendency as a style of reasoning, contesting and thinking, which spans several periods of US history, and which can give rise to various kinds of accusations with regard to the political and economic system, on both sides of the left-right divide (although Hofstadter mainly analyzes right-wing movements). What is common to these movements is a radical but factually completely unfounded and totalizing form of critique, offering a complete, though rather simple, world view.

Critics of Hofstadter have pointed out that his thesis has generated much anxious and exaggerated discussion (Knight 2000), as well as the undeserved delegitimization of conspiracy theories, on the basis of their psycho-pathologization (Berlet 1996). Recently, theoreticians engaged in salvaging the critical-political idiom (Coady 2012; Giry 2018) have observed that the eminent feature of conspiracy theories seems to be that they are critical of existing political arrangements and systems. These defenders accuse critics, whom they situate in the liberal mainstream, of striving apologetically to preserve the status quo. From this perspective, calling an opinion a “conspiracy theory” would essentially amount to the suppression and stigmatization of dissent, anti-hegemonic struggle, or simply any oppositional stance deviating from the (neo)liberal consensus.

At other times, interpretations that are aimed at casting doubt on official sources of information are merely dismissed and classified under the label of “conspiracy theories”, because the supposedly anti-hegemonic nature of these views is accentuated (Coady 2012). In fact, conspiracy theories have also been linked to a general crisis of trust in government (Bartlett and Miller 2010; Critchlow et al. 2008; Goldberg 2001). This is the reason why critics of the notion of “conspiracy theory” often think that it is just an accusatory label used to discredit criticism (Coady 2012; Barkun 2015; Champagne and Maler 2012) akin to the role in the classical work of Hofstadter, and in this sense, it greatly resembles the term “populism”. Others highlight that class conflict and dissent emanating from dominated groups is often downplayed by partisans of the liberal consensus (Giry 2018).

Within this framework, talk about “conspiracy theories” is often presented as a liberal/critical left opposition, although the latter wants to do away with the notion as such. (Therefore, saying that someone has a “conspiratorial” turn of mind would echo a well-known practice from the “political psychiatry” of totalitarian states: a political opponent can be disqualified by the supposedly scientific tag of mental illness).

The debate between conspiracy theory critics situated at the liberal and/or conservative pole (or labeled as such) and defenders at the left, progressive pole, concerns the very substance of democracy, in the latter’s view. According to the first group, conspiracies are detrimental to (liberal) democracy, as they hinder the fact-based decision-making process, and vitiate judgment, whereas the defenders argue that it is the “liberal” (world) order which is detrimental, as it suppresses genuine critique (since much radical criticism is labeled as conspiratorial due to biased judgment and/or being conspiratorial does not necessarily qualify the entire group of critical statements at issue).

Conspiratorial thought as a sort of anti-hegemonic attitude becomes harder to defend when we consider that conspiracy theories have also had an important pre-social media past, mainly targeted at Jews. For the last two hundred years, at least, talk about conspiracies has been mostly (though not exclusively) foundational to anti-semitic discourse. “[T]he modern anti-Semitic worldview understands the abstract domination of capital — which subjects people to the compulsion of mysterious forces they cannot perceive — as the domination of International Jewry. Anti-Semitism, consequently, can appear to be antihegemonic” (Postone 2006, 99). If anti-semitic criticism is reinterpreted as just another anti-hegemonic form of critique, in which the anti-semitic element is insignificant or even imagined or “constructed” (as in Giry 2018; Lordon 2017), or again, if it is given a purely empiricist explanation, then something essential will be missed out: “While American and Israeli policies have doubtlessly contributed to the rise of this new wave of anti-Semitism, the United States and Israel occupy subject positions in the ideology that go far beyond their actual empirical roles” (Postone 2006, 100).

In our research, all of the contradictory elements contained in the concept of “conspiracy theory” have to be dealt with at the same time, without previously deciding which elements are more or less significant, or which political stance is more appropriate than another. We will closely examine various cases of conspiracy theories that hypothetically encompass all these ambiguities, with the aim of determining their interpretive and critical profile: How and where can critique emerge in these interpretations? Are conspiracy theories necessarily anti-semitic? Are they necessarily anti-hegemonic? And what does anti-hegemonic mean, exactly, with respect to conspiracy theories?

* ­Conspiracy theories conveyed from a position of power

While there can be a good amount of apologetic intention in the “liberal” critic’s stance, a wide pool of professional conspiracy theorists (reminiscent of post-war radio “agitators” studied by members of the Frankfurt School, see Lowenthal and Guterman 1949) seem to have conquered various media channels, a growing number of which are supposed to be mainstream or even state-owned. This phenomenon can be observed in Western democracies, but to a larger degree in ex-communist European Union (EU) member countries like Hungary and Poland (Holmes and Krastev 2020), where governmental politics seem to run to a great extent on conspiracy theories (Berkovits 2014). In these countries, this tendency can hardly be considered anti-hegemonic in the sense established above. Furthermore, left-wing defenders do not really take into account the activity of conspiratorial ideologues, who often work for the government. Also, if there is a strong conceptual and historical connection between conspiracy theories and anti-semitism, this cannot be downplayed even in contemporary forms of anti-hegemonic discourses, which espouse some kind of conspiracy talk. This does not mean that there should be an automatic relationship between the two, but that each case needs to be examined in this respect, especially when Jews are not explicitly mentioned and blanks are left to be filled in by the recipient of the message, like in the Hungarian anti-Soros campaigns, or in certain critical framings of Israel, for example when it is called a “white colonial settler state” (Berkovits 2021). Whereas left-wing approaches tend to gain legitimacy based on their critical stance and social scientific credentials, for right-wing conspiracy theories only the critical stance remains (often mimicking anti-hegemonic left-wing discourse). But if these are professed from positions of power, even this critical stance becomes questionable.

We will need to elaborate an interpretive framework, in which, besides the anti-hegemonic stance, conspiratorial propaganda coming from the state (which is often coupled with anti-semitic overtones) can be made sense of. This propaganda can hardly be considered critical of state ideology or existing power relations, even if it claims that it has to combat the “real powers” such as the EU, certain financial capitalists, liberals, and “the great replacement”. Therefore, our cases should be variegated enough in order to reflect the conspiratorial phenomenon in all its complexity.

The social scientific debate

* The classical comparison and its aftermath

The first methodological critique to target certain approaches in the social sciences by calling them “conspiracy theories” originates in the works of Karl Popper. “It is the view that whatever happens in society – including things which people as a rule dislike, such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages – are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups” (Popper 1962, 341).

Popper denounced these social sciences not only for their supposed psychologism, but also for their holism and the explanations they offer in terms of intended consequences. For Popper, social science should strive to explain *unintended* consequences in individualistic terms. “The conspiracy theorist will believe that institutions can be understood completely as the result of conscious design; and as to collectives, he usually ascribes to them a kind of group personality, treating them as conspiring agents, just as if they were individual men” (Popper 1962, 125). According to Popper, social wholes cannot be treated as subjects of action, and individuals cannot control the outcomes of their actions. Popper pointed out that these methodological fallacies introduce a certain parallelism between social science and conspiracy theories. In fact, he established a link between two questions from different horizons: the question of what entities are pertinent to sociological analysis, and the question of what role is played by conspiracies in political and social history. Critics of Popper have pointed out that conspiracies do exist, and have even been very important in shaping human history; also, there is no a priori way to distinguish between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories (Pigden 2006).

According to authors inspired by Popper, conspiracy theorists believe that the universe is ordered, which is why they postulate a strong relationship between outcomes and the intentions of actors (Keeley 1999). However, this cannot be the case, owing to the sheer number of interacting agents. “Conspiracy theorists avoid confronting a world in which there is typically not a strong correspondence between outcomes and the intentions of any of the people whose interaction produced them” (Moore 2016, 4).

Another line of thought adopted by critics of conspiracy theories puts the emphasis on methodology instead of ontology: in this view, conspiracy theorists tend to make use of “dispositional explanations” (focusing on the character of the supposed actors) instead of analyzing the context of the action, thereby committing a “fundamental attribution error” (Clarke 2003). They also rely on a weak epistemology, selectively seeking evidence to confirm their theories (Pipes 1997), while also resisting contrary evidence and pursuing against all odds a “degenerating research program in the Lakatosian sense” (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009, 223). In this way, they are stuck in a “crippled epistemology” (Hardin 2002).

The French sociologist Luc Boltanski has recently taken up Popper’s challenge to critical social science (what he terms “Popper’s curse”). According to Boltanski, critical social science is by nature “conspiratorial” and “paranoid”, as suspicion lies at its essence; this means that the presupposition of conspiracies cannot and need not be avoided. He goes further by deepening the relationship between the conspiratorial turn of mind and social criticism, by asserting that they are *methodologically* tied, and necessarily so (Boltanski 2014). That is to say that Boltanski, on the basis of certain epistemological and methodological arguments, asserts that there cannot be a clear-cut distinction between conspiracy theories and social critique, neither on epistemological nor other normative grounds (in fact, he introduces a certain principle of indistinguishability).

A similar interpretation is proposed by Timothy Melley (based more on cultural-historical grounds and in a descriptive rather than normative vein), in his study of the relationship between the conspiratorial turn of mind in the US and the works of some early American cultural and social critics in the fifties, such as Vance Packard, David Riesman, and Lewis Mumford. These authors strove to preserve “a structural form of causality while simultaneously retaining the idea of a malevolent, centralized, and intentional program of mass control” (Melley 2000, 5).

* A theory of action perspective: the role of “interests”

The link between social science and conspiracy thinking is not only found in explanations built around intended consequences and an individualist kind of interpretation of collective action. A different kind of reasoning, which represents a departure from Popper, leans on the idea of “motives” and underlying “objective interests”. Explanations given in terms of motives determined by “objective interests” is a very general feature of social science, especially in its critical mode, but it is also common to conspiracy theories: “[…] one of the problems with reasoning from motives: every good conspiracy theory employs the same mode of reasoning. We observe that certain people, or groups of people, benefit from a development. From this we infer that they had a motive. From this, it follows that they brought about the observed result through conspiring with each other. This is the most basic pattern of conspiracy theories. A convincing theory of reasoning with motives should also establish robust criteria to distinguish problematic conspiracy theories from appropriate reasoning about collective motives and benefits” (Walton-Schafer 2006, 4).

If conspiracy theories transform unintended beneficial consequences for a given group into intentionally and collectively willed consequences, then in order for the conspiracy theory to become “anti-hegemonic”, it also needs to espouse an objectivistic conception of interests, since motives are supposed to originate from these. According to this objectivist conception, the “interests of a group or category are determined by its position in that structure, with the result that the contents of interests may change with the relative positions of the contending groups” (Hindess 1984, 114). This signals a potential commonality between conspiracy theories and critical social science. Thus, happenings which benefit those occupying dominant positions will be perceived as intentionally and secretly willed by the persons occupying these positions. Interests “define some of the objectives that actors set themselves, or would set themselves if only they were in a position to do so. Interests belong to that broad class of entities that have been supposed, by social scientists and others, to provide actors with ends, and therefore with reasons for action” (Hindess 1984, 115).

Our research has to answer the question: Which elements of a “conspiratorial” explanatory model prove to be useful for critical social science? Why is critique, even in its most methodical forms, associated with modes of interpretation familiar in everyday conspiracy theories? How and why is empirical reality often subordinated to the critical intention, often resulting in a “crippled epistemology”? In order to provide answers, we will need to examine two very different critical traditions: one anchored in French critical sociology, more specifically in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, and the other in recent developments in American academia in the wake of “critical race studies”. These will be compared to the conspiratorial interpretations that emerge in our case studies.

Post-truth or the legitimation crisis of science and expertise

Recently, conspiracy theories have multiplied and gained a much wider audience, while the internet has had an effect of stabilization (Bronner 2015). Therefore, the question has been posed whether critical social theories may exert a potential causal effect. Could it be argued that enhanced scepticism concerning matters of (scientific) fact has resulted in the belief of fiction, or “alternative facts”, and has fed into conspiracy theories? After all, everything is said to be a matter of perspective, interest and power. An early formulation of this causal effect argument can be credited to Bruno Latour: “While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the illusion of prejudices?” (Latour 2004, 227). This amounts to saying that explanations stemming from critical social science not only have a similar structure to conspiratorial explanations, but are even responsible for their emergence, owing to their supposed causal effect. On the one hand, the relativizing critique of “naturalized facts” has become vulgarized and popularized; on the other, this tendency has always been inherent in critical explanations that deal with all that is “social”, including recourse to “multiple perspectives” and the tendency to reduce truth claims to interests determined by social positions. “I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique?” (Latour 2004, 229-230).

In fact, the difference between conspiratorial and rational explanations is often reduced to an opposition between privileged and oppressed knowledge, where “reason” simply signifies power and authority (Birchall 2006), or stands for an arbitrarily traced demarcation between scientific and conspiratorial explanations (Locke 2009). This delineation is often interpreted as simple “boundary work”, a struggle for power and authority, by reference to previous works in the fields of sociology of science or science studies (including Gieryn 1983, 1999). Therefore, conspiracy theories are often perceived as constituting a further challenge to the “epistemic authority” vindicated by science and expertise, which is being questioned increasingly more forcefully; therefore, on the part of science, boundary work is also being intensified (Harambam and Aupers 2014). According to the same authors, this enhanced scepticism expands the freedom of individuals, therefore it is beneficial to democracy.

The motivation for constructing conspiracy theories is supposed to be a reaction against power inequalities in society expressed by those who are in an underprivileged position; this is also what accounts for their cognitive failures (Fenster 1999). Therefore, conspiracy theories should not be addressed merely as some kind of an error, but rather as a symptom of real anxieties concerning causality, moral attribution, and the location of power in complex societies. Inquiring into the historical and social conditions under which the category of “conspiracy theory” emerged, some theoreticians have raised the issue of uncertain demarcation between legitimate forms of social and political critique and conspiracy theories (Dean 2001, Parker 2000).

The flourishing of conspiracy theories is a major symptom of the legitimation crisis of scientific knowledge and expertise. Certain authors take up these problems within the modified framework of deliberative democracy. According to their diagnosis, so far theoreticians have not given adequate answers to “how to incorporate the need for expertise and technical administration in a deliberative democracy” (Thompson, 2008, 515). This is precisely the issue tackled by “critical elitism”, which “aims to address the problem of how to reconcile the asymmetries of knowledge and power, and the exclusiveness and authority of expertise, with the idea that matters of public concern should be open to public discussion by all who are affected by them (Moore 2017, 10).

In fact, the problematics of post-truth and the way it appears in connection with a democratic public sphere are condensed in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories seem to epitomize the most burning cognitive and political issues of contemporary Western democracies, which determine the final, theoretical and normative task of our research: finding a path to the politics of truth, but preserving the critical potential of anti-hegemonical thought, without dismantling the framework of a democratic public sphere. Obviously, this kind of theoretical reflection is only possible after all the empirical work is done both in the form of case studies and the analysis of specific explanatory (“conspiratorial”) models in social science.

**Objectives of the research**

The following points outline the goals of our project:

1. The political part. Gaining an enhanced reflexivity about conspiracy theories, their usages and relationship to democratic speech and social criticism/anti-hegemonic discourse. This will be obtained by case studies of very diverse “conspiracy theories” and in-depth theoretical reflection with regard to the criticism they are supposed to express. The literature gives us a glimpse into the polemics surrounding them in order to interpret their role of criticism (Fenster 1999) and/or disruption of the public sphere (Bronner 2015). However, insights need to be deepened and further developed, beyond the usual evaluative stances formulated as dichotomies, such as populist–democratic, left-wing–liberal, critical–apologetic, paranoid–reasonable, etc. Our analysis of conspiracy theories will not adopt a preliminary evaluative stance with regard to either their veracity or their politics (however, the outcome of the analysis should contain both epistemological and political evaluations), and will methodically trace the way they have evolved in the public sphere. The following will be examined:
2. The platforms on which they were popularized: offline media articles and especially online forums. The latter will be monitored over an extended period of time. The articles and comments will be analyzed by a mixed method discourse analytical approach.
3. The political debates and theoretical reflection surrounding conspiracy theories concerning democracy, public reason and the nature of the public sphere.

Our examples of conspiracy theories will be dealt with in the form of case studies, and will include the following kinds, according to bottom-up, East-West and apolitical-political axes:

A) Those formulated by “critical”/“paranoid” individuals in reaction to the perceived misinformation coming from state authorities concerning the real political events which led to the second Iraq war and the Charlie Hebdo massacres.

B) Those with grassroots origins, but which are also adopted and professed by “legitimate” political actors (activists, politicians, and journalists), and often from a position of power. Our examples will be QAnon in the US, utilized by some in the Republican party, and the theory of the “great replacement”, both of which have widespread “popular” origins, but have been systematized by European, especially French ideologues, and then used on a state level in Eastern Europe.

C) Those which have been initiated by state actors and spread across a large segment of the population: the campaign against George Soros in Eastern Europe, especially in Hungary.

D) Those which are seemingly apolitical in nature, such as conspiracies surrounding COVID-19, both in Europe and in the US, but which may turn out to be just as political as the previous categories, or associated with more common conspiratorial presumptions/anti-semitic topics.

1. The epistemological part. Examining forms of critical theory emerging in social science, suspected to be linked to conspiratorial thinking. In this respect, I intend to analyze two important critical traditions, one French, the other American.

The first belongs to French critical sociology and can be described as a somewhat opposing current: the pragmatic sociology of critique. The critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, first theorized in the 1960s, has often been compared to a kind of conspiracy theory by using arguments somewhat similar to those of Popper. The reasons for making such a comparison are the quest in Bourdieu’s thesis to unveil allegedly given and hidden power relations (Latour 2005), its supposed “fatalism” (the immutability of these relations) and its theory of action, qualified as “conceptual anthropomorphism”, meaning that abstract entities such as “capitalism” and “neoliberalism” are attributed to the intentions and capacity of each person for action (Heinich 2009, etc.).

There is an interesting contrast with the pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski in this respect, as he challenges Bourdieu’s thinking because of these very same issues (see Berkovits 2008). However, when he talks about the role of critique in social science, he does not oppose conspiracy-like explanations; on the contrary, he declares them necessary and legitimate (Boltanski 2014). Therefore, he does not formulate his criticism of Bourdieu’s theories by reference to conspiratorial thought. We will compare these approaches in the form of several theoretical essays is order to determine the proximity between conspiratorial thought and social scientific explanations.

The second critical tradition to be examined is very different both in its subject matter and methods. It has evolved more recently, over the last 20-25 years, and is especially present in the United States. It encompasses fields that have close links to postcolonial studies, but have adopted more specific objects of study: “critical racism studies”, “critical whiteness studies”, and “settler colonial studies”. The common contention of these disciplines is that white people (or groups who became white during a socio-historical process) who can benefit from the “system of oppression” ([systemic racism](https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-racism-systemic/)) are said to have a vested interest in maintaining it and therefore remain [willfully ignorant](https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-willful-ignorance/) of the [realities](https://newdiscourses.com/tftw-realities/) of race and racism (Berkovits 2018, 2021).

The final task of this section will be to construct the epistemological profiles of the types of explanations mentioned, based on these specific and characteristic examples, and compare them to the notable empirical case studies of conspiracy theories analyzed in 1. Where can the anti-hegemonic stance be located? What, exactly, is the nature of the relationship between critique, anti-hegemonic stance and conspiracies? Where is the point (and when is it reached) at which critique subordinates research for truth to a critical-ideological overdetermination, bracketing off empirical reality?

1. The normative part. The goal is to come up with a normative theory informed by epistemology and political philosophy, salvaging critique from its potential links to conspiracy theories. We should propose an alternative to conspiracy-linked critical social science, while avoiding the traps into which many critics of critical social science have fallen, namely the repudiation of both critique and social science. For even if we acknowledge all the ambiguities contained in the argumentations categorized as conspiracy theories, it should not be the case that a conspiratorial frame, especially if it ventures into the realm of “post-truth”, is the condition of possibility for critique. Therefore, first, we should point to alternative, already existing modes of criticism, such as the work of Michel Foucault centered around the question of truth and critique, of Hannah Arendt (1969) on the relationship between truth and politics, and of Jurgen Habermas (1989) on the democratic public sphere, which all have a strong relationship with reflection on social sciences as well. Second, we shall propose new theoretical solutions inspired by the models of Latour (2004, 2005), Moore (2017) and Postone (2006), with the help of the previously mentioned authors.

**Methodology**

So far, no comprehensive studies have been written on the conspiratorial phenomenon in all of its aspects, as its interpretations have remained within well-defined disciplinary (and also ideological) boundaries. In contrast, we intend to analyze the conspiratorial phenomenon, along with all of its ambiguities, by drawing on several disciplinary approaches, each having its specific role. This will shed light on this extremely important phenomenon, which has to be understood in order to make sense of dissent and critique, as well as the disruption of democratic institutions and the public sphere. The following methods will be used in the different phases of the research.

1. Discourse analysis for the case studies, along with the sociological mapping of the field of their emergence and spread; analyses of the political debates in the public sphere instigated by conspiracy theories concerning democracy, free speech and the critique of power.

2. An epistemological investigation of the explanatory models of the social sciences concerning the relationship between cognition and critique, and the role of critique in general; comparison between the previous explanatory models and those of the conspiratorial and supposedly anti-hegemonic discourses in the public sphere.

3. A theoretical-normative reflection on the relationship between truth and critique, based on epistemology, political philosophy and ethics.

**Outcomes**

1. We aim to present the main theoretical outlines of the research in the form of academic articles; we also intend to publish multiple case studies written on specific conspiracy theories and the disputes that unfold around them, and participate in political debate with opinion pieces in various newspapers in different countries.
2. The main theoretical outcome of the research should be a monograph on the relationships between conspiracy theories, social critique and democracy.
3. The main pedagogical outcome will be a text book with important sources (both conspiratorial and analytical texts) regrouped according to the insights of our research, as well as an online pedagogical platform for students and teachers with easily accessible material about conspiracy theories. The material will reflect not only the complexity, but also the dangers of the phenomenon, and will prepare students for in-depth debate. The case studies will appear on the site in a teachable form, such as the core texts and polemics.

While students should be taught critical thinking, it is equally important that we discuss the dangers of criticism in an era when all truth criteria are questioned. The relationships between critique, truth and democratic speech in the public sphere have to be rethought, and our research will provide tools for this renewed reflection in the political, epistemological and pedagogical realms.

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