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

**Introduction of the problem**

For the first two decades of the 21st century, from 9/11 until today`s corona crisis, there has been a lot of talk about conspiracy theories and their detrimental impact on the public sphere, public reason, democratic institutions, that is, on democratic political regimes as such. This renewed interest has especially been due to their ever-growing presence on different, so-called “alternative” news outlets having the vocation of refuting or rejecting mainstream news media coverage and framing. The event, commonly referred to as 9/11, supposedly constitutes a new beginning for conspiratorial thinking. It signifies the opening of the period when an exponential growth of conspiracy theories can be observed (at first based on 9/11 itself), closely related to the expansion of social media, and the spread of unfiltered information as a result of anonymity and the fading away 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. Much more often “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 don`t seem to have an exclusively fringe or “alternative” status any more, as they have made several inroads into mainstream political opinion, while often being professed from a position of power (for example, recently with the QAnon movement in the US, the “deep state” theory or the allegations against George Soros in the US and in Eastern-Europe, or the “Jewish lobby” in the US, etc.). Therefore, the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories fabricating “alternative realities”, and expanding to the degree of taking on the form of “world views”, has resulted in the degradation of the conditions of free and rational discussion (Bronner 2015, Hardin 2002), along with the fragmentation of the public sphere (Einstein and Glick 2013), and the extreme polarization of political opinions (Sunstein 2009), while often instigating protest and contestation based on fictitious allegations, resulting 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 also true that extreme right-wing perpetrators of recent acts of violent terrorism (in Halle, Christchurch, etc.) were all committed by individuals who held a deeply conspiratorial world view, and this is also true of Islamist terrorists.

However, conspiracy theories 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 it should be noted that conspiracy theories also have a very strong connection to the idea of social critique as such, which is attested by those debates in which they are talked about in relationship with free speech and the proper functioning of democracy, as opposed to secrecy, the rule of an antidemocratic elite (Fenster 1999, Giry 2018, Coady 2012, Dentith 2014). Defenders of conspiracy theories affirm that those are part and parcel of a democratically functioning public sphere, notwithstanding their possible cognitive shortcomings, epitomizing anti-hegemonic discourse, and the mistrust in official and authoritative interpretations, let them be governmental or scientific (Harambam and Aupers 2014). This view is diametrically opposed to that of the detractors of conspiracy theories, and this contrast is often described as a debate between liberals (cherishing open and moderate discussion in the public sphere) and leftists (emphasizing the utmost importance of social critique, which, according to them, tends to be suppressed).

The leftist view is certainly not independent of the fact that the interpretive structure of conspiracy theories is found to be present in critical social science as well. It is the case that some of the basic theoretical assumptions of certain currents of critical sociology (sometimes referred to as the “sociology of suspicion”) – the supposedly veiled nature of social phenomena, the critique of a few dominant actors having a determining role in maintaining power relations along with the hypothesis of intentionality – are often compared to conspiracy theories, and there is serious debate about the commonalities between critical social science and a conspiratorial type of thinking (for example: 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 being espoused by social scientists as its necessary conditions (Boltanski 2014).

For all these reasons, making sense of and criticizing the conspiratorial phenomenon encounter a difficult paradox, which is in need of resolution: there can hardly be a democratic, open and free public debate when conspiracy theories tend to take 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: a historical-political, an epistemological and a normative level. Concerning the historical-political level, conspiratorial thinking should be carefully mapped on the basis of case studies along with the analysis of theoretical controversies. Theoretical controversies are equally important on the epistemological level, while interrogating 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 antisemitic scape-goating.

All this will be complemented by a normative conception of the public sphere and the social sciences, as we have to give responses to how to tackle the ambiguities mentioned. The highly significant question of the relationship between critique and truth should be addressed, as it seems that without reference to truth, “critique” cannot stay critical any more, and will only serve the ideological interests of various political groupings (be it the critique of policies towards refugees, climate change or that of the dominant classes, etc.). This does not mean that it would be possible (either epistemologically or pragmatically) to return to firm, positivistically minded truth criteria; however, the truth and the will to truth need to regain respectability both in the public sphere (in this respect see the initiatives by Moore 2017) and critical social science (see the insights on critique by 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 and submitted to ideology, or at least instrumentalized by it.

**Scientific background**

The political debate

* “Paranoid style” vs. anti-hegemonical stance

The classical statement of the danger conspiracy theories represent for politics (or as he calls it, the “paranoid style”), was formulated by Richard Hofstadter (1996) in the late fifties and early sixties. According to him, the “paranoid style” characterizes some “movements of discontent” promulgating a unitary world view, by accusing some 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 espouse various kinds of accusations with regard to the political and economic system, and contain both left and right leaning views (although Hofstadter mainly analyzes right-wing movements). What is common to these movements is the radical but factually completely unfounded and totalizing critique, offering a complete, although rather simple world view.

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

Other times, these interpretations accentuate the supposedly anti-hegemonic nature of these views, having the vocation of casting doubt on official sources of information, whereas they are often simply dismissed and classified under the label of “conspiracy theories” (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 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 much resembles the term “populism”. Others accentuate that class conflict and dissent emanating from dominated groups is often downplayed by partisans of the liberal consensus (Giry 2018).

In this frame, talk about “conspiracy theories” is often presented as linked to a liberal view, versus a critical “left view”, which is striving to do away with the notion as such. (Therefore, labeling someone as having a “conspiratorial” turn of mind would amount to a practice well-known from the “political psychiatry” of totalitarian states: a political opponent can be disqualified by a supposedly scientific tag of mental illness).

The debate between critics of conspiracies situated at the liberal and/or conservative pole (or labeled as such) and its defenders on the left, progressive pole, in their view, concerns the substance of democracy. 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 second thinks that it is the “liberal” (world) order which is detrimental to it, as it suppresses genuine critique (since much of radical criticism is labeled as conspiratorial due to biased judgement 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 targeting Jews. At least for the last two hundred years, talk about conspiracies has been foremost (although not exclusively) foundational for antisemitic discourses. “[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 antisemitic criticism is reinterpreted as just another anti-hegemonic form of critique, in which the antisemitic element is insignificant or even imagined or “constructed” (as in Giry 2018, Lordon 2017, etc.), or again, just 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 these contradictory elements contained in the concept of “conspiracy theory” have to be dealt with at the same time, without previously deciding about which elements are more or less significant, or which political stance is more appropriate than the other. We will closely examine various cases of notable conspiracy theories that hypothetically encompass all these ambiguous features, while trying to determine their interpretive and critical profile: how and where can critique emerge in these interpretations? Are conspiracy theories necessarily antisemitic? Are they necessarily anti-hegemonic? And: what does anti-hegemonic exactly mean with respect to conspiracy theories?

* ­Conspiracy theories conveyed from a power position

As much as there can be a good amount of apologetic intention in the “liberal” critics’ stance, it is also true that there seems to be 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) conquering various media channels, of which a growing number is supposed to be mainstream or even state-owned. This phenomenon can be observed also in Western democracies, but to a larger degree in ex-communist EU member countries like Hungary and Poland (Holmes and Krastev 2020), where much of governmental politics seem to run on conspiracy theories (Berkovits 2014). The conspiratorial phenomenon in these countries can hardly be considered anti-hegemonic in the sense established above and represented by left-wing defenders. These latter do not really take into account the activity of conspiratorial ideologues, who are, furthermore, many times working for the government. Also, if there is a strong conceptual and also historical connection between conspiracy theories and antisemitism, 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, but that each case needs to be examined in this respect, especially when Jews are not explicitly mentioned, and the blanks are supposed to be filled in by the beholder 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 from their critical stance and social scientific credentials, for right-wing conspiracy theories only the critical stance remains (often mimicking anti-hegemonical left-wing discourse). But if these latter are professed from power positions, even this critical stance becomes questionable.

We will need to elaborate an interpretive framework, in which, besides anti-hegemonic stance, conspiratorial propaganda coming from the state and often coupled with antisemitic overtones equally makes sense. This propaganda can hardly be considered critical of state ideology or existing power relations, although it affirms that it has to combat the “real powers” like the EU, certain financial capitalists, liberals, “the great replacement” etc. 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 targeting 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 for their supposed psychologism, but also for their holism, as well as for their explanations in terms of intended consequences. Whereas for Popper, social science should strive to explain in individualistic terms and by unintended consequences. “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 outcome 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 were pertinent to sociological analysis, and the question of what role was 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 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 the outcomes and the intentions of the actors (Keeley 1999). However, this cannot be the case, even just by 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 critical of conspiracy theories, instead of ontology, puts the emphasis on methodology: 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 they commit a “fundamental attribution error” (Clarke 2003). They equally have 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), or are stuck in a “crippled epistemology” (Hardin 2002).

Recently, the French sociologist Luc Boltanski took up seriously Popper’s challenge to critical social science (what he termed as “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. Therefore, 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). This is to say that Boltanski, on the basis of certain epistemological and methodological arguments, asserts that either on epistemological or other normative grounds there cannot be a clear-cut distinction between conspiracy theories and social critique (in fact, he introduces a certain principle of indistinguishability).

A similar interpretation is proposed by Timothy Melley (although more on cultural-historical grounds and rather in a descriptive than a normative vein), when he examines 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, Lewis Mumford, etc. These authors were striving 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”

Social science can also be found to be linked to conspiracy thinking not only because of explanations in terms of intended consequences and an individualist kind of interpretation of collective action. A different argument than Popper`s can highlight explanations having recourse to “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 also that of 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).

It should be added to this characterization according to which within conspiracy theories unintended beneficial consequences for a given group are transfigured into intentionally and collectively willed consequences, that in order for the conspiracy theory to become “anti-hegemonic”, it also needs to espouse an objectivistic conception of interests – as motives are supposed to originate in these latter. In fact, this objectivist conception, according to which 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), signals a potential commonality between conspiracy theories and critical social science. According to this conception, happenings benefiting 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 empirical reality is often subordinated to the critical intention, often resulting in a “crippled epistemology”? In order to provide an answer, 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”), and compare them to the conspiratorial interpretations appearing in our case studies.

Post-truth or the legitimation crisis of science and expertise

Recently, with the process of multiplication and stabilization of conspiracy theories and their gaining of a much wider audience, while going through an effect of stabilization over the web (Bronner 2015), the question of a potential causal effect of critical social theories has been posed. Is it the case that enhanced scepticism concerning matters of (scientific) facts resulted in the belief of fiction, “alternative facts”, and feeding of conspiracy theories, when everything is said to be a matter of perspective, interest and power? An early formulation of this effect is due 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 would amount to saying that explanations stemming from critical social science not only have a similar structure to conspiratorial explanations, but by exerting a causal effect, are even responsible for their emergence. 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 in terms of the “social”, comprising talk of “multiple perspectives”, and reducing 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, emphasizing 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). In fact, this difference is often interpreted as simple “boundary work”, struggle for power and authority, by reference to previous works of sociology of science or science studies (like those of Gieryn 1983, 1999). Therefore, conspiracy theories are often conceived of as constituting a further challenge to the “epistemic authority” vindicated by science and expertise, which are being questioned more and 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 is expanding the freedom of the individuals, therefore it is something beneficial for democracy.

The motivation for constructing conspiracy theories is supposed to be the expression of power inequalities in society 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 as just 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 what could be those historical and social conditions under which the category of “conspiracy theory” emerged, some theoreticians raise the issue of uncertain demarcation between legitimate forms of social and political critique and conspiracy theories (Dean 2001, Parker 2000).

Other authors, taking act of the problems posed by the legitimation crisis of scientific knowledge and expertise, the major symptom of which is the flourishing of conspiracy theories, take up the issue in the modified framework of deliberative democracy. According to their diagnosis, so far, theoreticians have not given 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, the exclusiveness and the authority of expertise with the idea that matters of public concern should be open to public discussion by all affected by them (Moore 2017, 10).

In fact, the problematic 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 way 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 on conspiracy theories, its usages and its relationship to democratic speech and social criticism / anti-hegemonic discourse. This will be obtained by the analysis of very diverse individual cases, of “conspiracy theories”, and an 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 concerning their role for criticism (Fenster 1999) as well as in disrupting the public sphere (Bronner 2015); however, the 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 either with regard to 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. Will be examined:
2. The platforms on which they were popularized: offline media articles and especially online forums; these latter will be monitored during an extended period of time. The articles and the comments, will be analyzed by a mixed method discourse analytical approach.
3. The political debates and theoretical reflections 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 both a bottom-up and an East-West and apolitical-political axis:

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

B) Those, which have grassroots origins, but which are also adopted and professed by “legitimate” political actors (activists, politicians, journalists), and often from a power position Our examples will be QAnon in the US, utilized by some in the Republican party, and the theory of the “great replacement”, 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, but which equally spread in a large segment of the population: the campaign against George Soros in Eastern Europe, especially in Hungary.

D) Those, which are seemingly apolitical in their nature, such as conspiracies surrounding COVID-19 both in Europe and the US, but which may turn out to be just as political as the previous, or associated to more common conspiratorial presumptions / antisemitic 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 traditions, one French, the other American.

The first tradition is that of French critical sociology and a somewhat opposing current, the pragmatic sociology of critique. The critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu has often been compared to a kind of conspiracy theory by arguments somewhat similar to that of Popper. The reasons are its spirit vested in unveiling 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”, “neoliberalism” are attributed the intentions and the capacity for action of a person (Heinich 2009, etc.).

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

The second tradition to be examined is very different both in its subject matter and its methods. It has evolved more recently, during the last 20-25 years, and is especially present in the United States. It is composed of fields that have close links to postcolonial studies, but have adopted more specific objects of study: “critical racism studies”, “critical whiteness studies”, “settler colonial studies”. The common contention of these disciplines is that white people (or the 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 point is to construct the epistemological profiles of the types of explanations mentioned, based on these specific and characteristic examples, and compare them to notable empirical case studies of conspiracy theories analyzed in 1. Where can the anti-hegemonical stance be located? What is exactly the nature of the relationship between critique, anti-hegemonic stance and conspiracies? Where is the point (and when is it reached) when critique subordinates the research for truth to a critical-ideological overdetermination, and brackets 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 those traps, in 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 of critique. Therefore, first, we should point to alternative, already existing modes of criticism, like 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 Jurgen Habermas (1989) on the democratic public sphere, which all have a strong relationship with the reflection on social sciences as well; and second, come up with new theoretical solutions on the model of Latour 2004, 2005, Moore 2017 and Postone 2006, with the help of these previously mentioned authors.

**Methodology**

So far, no comprehensive studies have been written on the conspiratorial phenomenon in all of its aspects, as its interpretations remained within well-defined disciplinary (and also ideological) boundaries. In contrast, we propose to analyze the conspiratorial phenomenon along with all of its ambiguities 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, critique as well as the disruption of the 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 that of the conspiratorial and supposedly anti-hegemonical 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 propose 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 unfolding disputes surrounding them, and participate in the political debate with opinion pieces in various newspapers in different countries.
2. The main theoretical outcome of the research should be a monography 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 the complexity, but also the dangers of the phenomenon, and will prepare students for an in-depth debate. The case studies will appear on the site in a teachable form, such as the core texts and polemics.

As much as students should be taught critical thinking, it is equally important that we talk about the dangers of criticism in an era when all truth criteria have been put into doubt. The relationships between critique, truth and democratic speech in the public sphere have to be rethought, and our research will provide the tools for this renewed reflection in the political, epistemological and pedagogical realms.

References

Arendt, Hannah (1969) “Truth and Politics”, in: *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Viking Press

Barkun, Michael (2015) “Les théories du complot comme connaissance stigmatisée”, *Diogène,*/1 (n° 249-250), p. 168-176

Bartlett, Jamie, and Carl Miller (2010) *The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories,*

*Extremism, and Counter-Terrorism*. London: Demos

Berkovits, Balázs (2008) “Boltanski ’pragmatikus szociológiája’: kritika és cselekvéselmélet”, [Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology: critique and theory of action], *Replika*, No. 62.

Berkovits, Balázs (2018) “Critical Whiteness Studies and the ‘Jewish Problem’”, *Zeitschrift für* kritische *Sozialtheorie und Philosophie*, Vol. 5, Issue 1, Apr.

Berkovits, Balázs (2021) “Israel as a White Colonial Settler State in Activist Social Science”, in: Alvin Rosenfeld (ed.): *Contending with Antisemitism*, Indiana University Press (forthcoming)

Berlet, Chip (1996) “Three Models for Analyzing Conspiracist Mass Movements of the Right”, in: E. Ward (ed.), *Conspiracies: Real Grievances, Paranoia, and Mass Movements*, Seattle, Peanut Butter Pub, pp. 47–50.

Birchall, Clare (2006) *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*, New York, NY, Berg

Boltanski, Luc (2014) Mysteries and Conspiracies

Bronner, Gérald (2015) ”Pourquoi les théories du complot se portent-elles si bien? L’exemple de Charlie Hebdo”, *Diogène* (n° 249-250), p. 9-20.

Champagne, Patrick and Henri Maler (2012) “Usages médiatiques d’une critique `savante` de `la théorie du complot`, *Agone*, n°47, 2012, p. 167-178.

Clarke, Steve (2003) “Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32, 131-150.

Coady, David (2006) “The pragmatic rejection of conspiracy theories”, In David Coady (ed.): *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Ashgate

Coady, David (2012) *What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*. Malden, MA: Wiley- Blackwell

Critchlow, Donald T., John Korasick, and Matthew C. Sherman (2008) *Political Conspiracies in America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Dean, Jodi (2000) “Theorizing Conspiracy Theory”, *Theory & Event*, 4 (3.)

Dentith, Matthew R. X. (2014) *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*, Palgrave Macmillan

Einstein, Katherine Levine, and David M. Glick (2013) “Scandals, Conspiracies and the Vicious Cycle of Cynicism”, Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, <http://sites.bu.edu/dmglick/files/2014/01/BLS-IRSv5.pdf>

Fenster, Mark (1999) *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Gieryn, Thomas F. (1983) “Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science: Strains and interests in professional ideologies of scientists”, *American Sociological Review* 48 (December): 781–795.

Gieryn Thomas F. (1999) *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

Giry, Julien (2018) “Archéologie et usages du ‘style paranoïaque’. Pour une épistémologie critique”, *Critica Masonica, Les amis de Critica*, 2018, 12, pp.75-92.

Goldberg, Robert Alan (2001) *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern*

*America*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Goldman, Alvin I. (2008) “The social epistemology of blogging”, in J. van den Hover and J.Weckert (ed.) *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 111–22

Habermas, Jürgen (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, Polity, Cambridge

Haramban, Jaron and Stef Aupers (2014) “Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundary of science”, *Public Understanding of Science*, 24 (4), 1 – 15.

Hardin, Russell (2002) ”[The Crippled Epistemology of Extremism](http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/politics/faculty/hardin/research/Crippled.pdf),” In Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, Pierre Salmon, and Ronald Wintrobe, eds., *Political Extremism and Rationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 3-22.

Heinich, Nathalie (2009) *Le bêtisier du sociologue,* Paris, Klincksieck

Heins, Volker (2007) “Critical Theory and the Traps of Conspiracy Thinking”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, 787-801.

Hindess, Barry (1984) “Discourse, Interests and Subjects: ‘Interests’ in Political Analysis”, *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 32, No.1\_suppl., 112-131.

Hofstadter, Richard (1996) [1965] *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press

Holmes, Stephen and Ivan Krastev (2020) *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*, Pegasus Books

Horkheimer, Max – Theodor W. Adorno (2002) [1944] *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

Keeley, Brian (1999) “Of Conspiracy Theories”, *Journal of Philosophy* 96, 109-126.

Knight, Peter (2000) *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the “X-Files”*, London, Routledge

Latour, Bruno (2004) “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, *Critical Inquiry,* 30 (Winter).

Latour, Bruno (2005) *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press

Locke S (2009) “Conspiracy culture, blame culture, and rationalization”. *The Sociological Review*, 57(4): 467–585.

Lordon, Frédéric (2017) “Le complotisme de l'anti-complotisme. Disqualifier pour mieux dominer”, *Le monde diplomatique*, Oct 3.

Löwenthal, Leo and Norbert Guterman (1949) *Prophets of Deceit*, Harper & Brothers, American Jewish Committee

Melley, Timothy (2000) *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

Moore, Alfred (2016) “Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theories in Democratic Politics,” *Critical Review*, 28:1, 1-23

Moore, Alfred (2017) *Critical Elitism: Deliberation, Democracy, and the Problem of Expertise*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Parker, Martin (2001) “Human Science as Conspiracy Theory” In: *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences*, ed. Jane Parish and Martin Parker, Oxford: Blackwell

Pigden, Charles (2006) “Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?”, in: Coady (2006)

Pipes Daniel (1997) *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*. New York, NY:The Free Press

Popper, Karl (1962) *Conjectures and Refutations*, New York – London, Basic Books

Postone, Moishe (2006) “History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism”, *Public Culture* 18:1

Sunstein, Cass R. (2009) *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, Oxford,

Oxford University Press

Sunstein, Cass R. and Adrian Vermeule (2009) “Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures”. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(2): 202–227

Thompson, D. F. (2008) “Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science”. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11, 497–520

Walton, Douglas and Burkhard Schafer (2006) “Arthur, George and the Mystery of the Missing Motive: Towards a Theory of Evidentiary Reasoning about Motives,” *International Commentary on Evidence*, Vol. 4, No. 2.