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# 'Trust no one': Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture

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## Abstract

Popular conspiracy theories, like those about JFK, the attacks of 9/11, the death of Princess Diana or the swine flu vaccination, are generally depicted in the social sciences as pathological, irrational and, essentially, anti-modern. In this contribution it is instead argued that conspiracy culture is a radical and generalized manifestation of distrust that is embedded in the cultural logic of modernity and, ultimately, produced by processes of modernization. In particular, epistemological doubts about the validity of scientific knowledge claims, ontological insecurity about rationalized social systems like the state, multinationals and the media; and a relentless 'will to believe' in a disenchanting world – already acknowledged by Adorno, Durkheim, Marx and Weber – nowadays motivate a massive turn to conspiracy culture in the West.

## Keywords

conspiracy culture, distrust, modernization, new media, paranoia

## Introduction

Paranoia is in bloom,  
The PR transmissions will resume,  
They'll try to push drugs that keep us all dumbed down,  
And hope that we will never see the truth around . . .

(Muse, 'Uprising', 2009)

In 2009 the spread of the swine flu in various part of Europe was accompanied by wild speculations about its causes in the media. H1N1 was supposedly designed by the US government to reduce the world's population and instigate a New World Order; vaccines

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were held to be poisoned or to contain invisible ‘nano-chips’ that, once injected, could provide the ultimate means for the state to control citizens’ bodies and minds.<sup>1</sup> The example doesn’t stand alone: conspiracy theories about the ‘real truth’ behind AIDS, the death of Princess Diana, the murder of JFK, Osama Bin Laden, the 9/11 attacks and countless other events have become part of mainstream culture in western countries and nowadays constitute a veritable ‘culture of conspiracy’ (Knight, 2000) or ‘culture of paranoia’ (Melley, 2000).

Traditionally, the social sciences have tended to either neglect or morally condemn conspiracy culture. Informed by the classical Freudian reading of the ‘paranoid personality’ as pathological, Hofstadter (1965) and Pipes (1997) unambiguously dismiss the ‘paranoid style’ in American politics as distorted and utterly dangerous. It is, Pipes contends ‘a poisoned discourse’ that ‘encourages a vortex of illusion and superstition’ (1997: 173). A conspiracy theory, Jameson argues, ‘is the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age’ and a ‘desperate attempt to represent the . . . system’ (1991: 356). Such accounts indicate ‘moral panic’ (Knight, 2000: 8) and it is tempting to say that they are, in fact, conspiracy theories about conspiracy theorists. Be that as it may, due to their moral flavour they obstruct a disinterested empirical study of conspiracy culture as a culture in its own right. Determining what is ‘rational’ and what is not; what is sane and insane; good and bad, after all, *cannot* and *should not* play a role in the study of cultural meaning (e.g. Weber, 1948 [1919]). In this particular case, such condemnations of conspiracy theories in academia can be explained from an essentialized conception of modernity. Under the banner of objective science, yet actually informed by the ideology of modern Enlightenment (e.g. Toulmin, 1992 [1990]), these scholars debunk conspiracy theories as an exotic anomaly and portray it as a threat to modern rationality, scientific objectivity and reason. This drawing of rigid distinctions between bad ‘irrational’ paranoia and good ‘rational’ science is an excellent example of ‘professional boundary work’ (Locke, 2009: 568) in the modern sciences and exemplifies, what Bruno Latour (1993 [1991]) calls a modern ‘practice of purification’: it reinforces the ‘modern divide’ between ‘rational’ science and its alleged ‘irrational’ counterparts by actively downplaying the similarities and blowing up the differences between both discourses.

In this article I argue instead that conspiracy culture is not the antidote to modernity. Quite the contrary: it is a radical and generalized manifestation of distrust that is deeply embedded in the cultural logic of modernity and is, ultimately, produced by ongoing processes of modernization in contemporary society. In particular, I demonstrate that modern media play a crucial role in its proliferation in the West.

## **Transforming paranoia: From exotic other to modern institutions**

‘Paranoia’ is no longer simply a diagnostic label applied by psychologists and psychiatrists but has become a veritable sociological phenomenon. More than half of US citizens, for instance, believe that there was an official cover-up or conspiracy involved in the cases of JFK and 9/11, and about 80% believe that the government knows more about extraterrestrials than it admits (Knight, 2000: 78, 27). In addition, narratives of conspiracies permeate popular culture – thereby instigating a constant feedback

between reality and fiction (Barkun, 2003): real political scandals in the US, like Watergate or black-budget operations of the CIA, motivated a genre of 'paranoia thrillers' in the 1970s, like *The Parallax View* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1974) or *All the President's Men* (1967), which, in turn, motivated a sensibility for conspiracy theories among the population. Bestsellers and blockbusters like the *Da Vinci Code* and *The Matrix* and popular series like *24*, *Profiler* and the *X-Files* play with the paranoid assumption that social reality is an illusion, a hall of mirrors and smokescreens constructed to conceal the secret powers that *de facto* determine history (e.g. Bell and Bennion-Nixon, 2001; Kellner, 2002).

This proliferation of conspiracy thinking in the West is both cause and consequence of its normalization: in contemporary culture, trusting authorities and believing 'official' stories formulated by the state, politicians or the media are easily dismissed as a sign of naivety. Conspiracies do after all exist and the exposure of *real conspiracies* since the 1970s has strengthened the plausibility and credibility of even the most far-fetched theory. Particularly Watergate, in 1972, established a generalized distrust *vis-a-vis* the government and planted the seeds of an emergent paranoid worldview in the West (e.g. Schudson, 1992). From a cultural perspective, then, conspiracy theorizing cannot simply be dismissed as 'irrational' or 'delusional' since it is supported by real historical events and embodies a radical form of reflexivity, criticism and scepticism about every truth claim (Knight, 2000; Parker, 2001). The *X-Files*, leading the way in this defence of the rationality of conspiracy theorizing, argues: 'No matter how paranoid you are, you can never be paranoid enough.'

Conspiracy culture thus evolved over the last decades from a deviant, exotic phenomenon to a mainstream narrative that has spread through the media and is increasingly normalized, institutionalized and commercialized (e.g. Birchall, 2002; Goldberg, 2001). From a historical perspective, however, conspiracy theories have been part of western culture for ages and can minimally be traced back to the Christian crusades in the Early Middle Ages and theories about Jews and secret societies of Templars, Rosicrucians, Illuminati and Freemasons (Pipes, 1997). Most important for this article, however, is the claim made by different scholars that the discourse of conspiracy has been transformed over the last decades – it has shifted from paranoia about an exotic 'Other' standing 'outside' society to paranoia about modern society itself (e.g. Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000). Traditional conspiracy theories, produced before and around the 1950s, typically demonized Jews, Muslims and communists as the conspirators – groups that were assumed to threaten society or disturb the boundaries between 'Us' and 'Them'. This form of paranoia about an exotic 'Other', paradoxically, bolstered personal and national identity and provided some form of cultural catharsis. Contemporary conspiracy culture is different: it is less about scapegoating a real or imagined 'Other' but can be characterized as paranoia about the human-made institutions of modern society itself. Idealtypically, then, this modern type is diametrically opposed to the traditional type since its theories are about 'the enemy within' (Goldberg, 2001) – the unknown and malicious forces that operate within the machineries of scientific laboratories, modern corporations, politics and the state. Knight (2000) writes in this respect about a remarkable transition from 'secure paranoia' to 'insecure paranoia': 'For the post-1960s generation, [paranoia has] become more an expression of inexhaustible suspicion and uncertainty

than a dogmatic form of scaremongering' (2000: 75) and 'popular conspiracism has mutated from an obsession with a fixed enemy to a generalized suspicion about conspiring forces . . . to a far more insecure version of conspiracy-infused anxiety which plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion' (2000: 4). Since the truth is persistently evasive in modern conspiracy culture, it is not surprising that theorists relentlessly weave new, ever expanding grand narratives about possible connections to reveal this truth. As Jackson's *Conspiranoia* (2000), for example, offers: 'Find out the real story behind the IRS, Nazis, JFK, Freemasons, Bill Gates, LSD, the KKK, the military-industrial complex, the FBI . . . , Teletubbies, NASA, Mad Cow disease, Jerry Garcia, and how they are all connected.'

The question remains how the prominence of this unstable type of conspiracy theorizing can be explained. In general, I argue that such seemingly anti-modern ideas and sentiments are in fact embedded in and motivated by processes of modernization. They are particularly sparked by cultural discontents of modernity that have been discussed by social scientists from the very beginning of the discipline and that have become widespread during the last half century.

### **'What is true?' Epistemological insecurity and conspiracy culture**

In the 19th and 20th century, most of the founders of the social sciences predicted a future where the authority of religion was undermined by science and the latter attained a monopoly on truth. Auguste Comte, leading the way here, envisioned a society where science could discover the universal laws of nature and society and, as such, provide social and existential stability. Nowadays, such claims are generally considered naive: traditional religious truth claims lost their plausibility in most parts of Europe since the 1960s (e.g. Bruce, 2002; Wilson, 1976), but this is not accompanied by a massive trust in science, the scientific method and the truth claims of scientific experts. Quite the contrary. Paradoxically, this may be due to the fact that science has two faces since 'science depends not [only] on the inductive accumulation of proofs but [also] on the methodological principle of doubt' (Giddens, 1992: 21). Radical scepticism about epistemological foundations and methodological rules has always been an intrinsic part of the modern scientific enterprise since the 16th century and has haunted its legitimation ever since. It formed the 'hidden agenda of modernity' (Toulmin, 1992 [1990]). Particularly through the philosophy of knowledge of Kant, Nietzsche and others, scepticism found a radical expression in postmodernism about a century ago. Postmodernists prophesized the end of the 'grand narrative' of science (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]) and its ambition to be a 'mirror of nature' (Rorty, 1980) since truth claims were social constructs that were ultimately the product of ideological interests, conflict and power (Bauman, 1987; Foucault, 1970 [1966]). Scientific knowledge was thus no longer considered superior to other forms of knowledge and was deconstructed as one discourse among many other 'language games' or 'vocabularies' – as a self-referential 'hyperreality' even, with no relation to authentic reality whatsoever (Baudrillard, 2000 [1981]).

This radical delegitimization of objective scientific knowledge has not only penetrated the ivory towers of the academic world – through philosophy of science, constructivist accounts of knowledge and postmodern theory – it has increasingly permeated

everyday life (e.g. Giddens, 1992: 21; Van Zoonen, in this issue). Empirical studies demonstrate that there is growing scepticism among western citizens *vis-a-vis* scientific authorities, the knowledge they produce and the (technical) solutions they propose. Ronald Inglehart, for instance, concludes that 'a diminishing confidence that science and technology will help solve humanity's problems . . . has advanced farthest in the economically and technologically most advanced societies' (1997: 79). This was quite different half a century ago. A salient example of the trust in science and obedience towards scientists back then is the famous Milgram experiment (1963). Under the guidance of scientific experts, it demonstrated, people gave high (sometimes lethal) electric shocks to other (fictitious) persons. And yet there was hope. One variation in the experiment showed that subjects regained their moral autonomy and critical awareness once a conflict was simulated between two leading scientists. In most cases, subjects would then refuse to give electric shocks and stop participating in the experiment.

This variation in Milgram's experiment has broad sociological implications: distrust *vis-a-vis* scientific knowledge is very much informed by the disputes between scientific specialists, the inconsistency of their truth claims and the overall overload of information (e.g. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992). Methodological doubt and debate have, as argued, been part of the sciences for centuries but the mass media have made such disputes transparent and available for a larger, less educated public: newspapers, magazines, radio and television confront citizens everyday with incompatible theories and inconsistent study results in the fields of natural science, sociology, psychology, pedagogics and others: fish oil is healthy for the heart, fish oil causes cancer; one should raise children with love and empathy, one should raise children with rigid rules and discipline; violence is increasing in most western countries, violence is decreasing in most western countries; we are heading for an ecological disaster, warnings about climate change are exaggerated; vaccinations against the swine flu are necessary, such vaccinations are ineffective or dangerous. The media not only make such inconsistencies in science transparent: they actively focus on disagreement and conflict rather than on consensus. Undisputed facts don't have the X-factor. And vice versa: nothing is as good for the ratings of a television show than, say, two climate specialists who totally disagree on the 'green house effect' and, consequently, the future of life on earth.

But this erosion of trust in scientific knowledge does not extinguish the 'will to truth' (Foucault, 1970 [1966]) and cannot easily be read as a symptom of cultural cynicism, disillusion or disempowerment. Established science may have lost its monopoly on truth but this has opened up a market for experts producing knowledge that is often labelled as unscientific, irrational or dangerous by regular scientists, but is nevertheless massively embraced by late-modern citizens. A good example is complementary and alternative medicine: homeopathy, acupuncture, reiki, shiatsu and countless other holistic healing practices have won legitimacy over the last decades and compete nowadays with medical techniques typically based on a dualistic-*cum*-materialistic worldview (Campbell, 2007; Hammer, 2001).

Another prominent example is conspiracy theories, and the Internet plays a crucial role in their proliferation. Mass media and traditional journalism are increasingly distrusted as a manipulative 'power-block' (Fiske, 2006 [1998]) but the Internet is, as

Quandt rightly comments in this issue of *EJC*, perceived as more democratic – as giving ‘direct access to information and revealing “truth”’. Notwithstanding the question of whether or not this invested trust in new media is fully grounded, the Internet does provide citizens with a platform to (inter)actively deconstruct official versions of the ‘truth’, to consume alternative accounts and to produce their own theories on forums, websites and YouTube. Conspiracy theorists are typically ‘prosumers’ (Ritzer and Jergenson, 2010): they read, negotiate and rewrite history and, in doing so, they often produce an ever expanding patchwork theory of what ‘really’ happened. After all, Dean argues, ‘conspiracy theory . . . relies on the notion that everything is or can be connected’ (2002: 97). Paradoxically, in a climate of doubt ‘anything is possible’ and this gives rise to a ‘vertigo of interpretations’ (Baudrillard, 2000 [1981]: 1). *Were the Gods astronauts?* as Erich Von Däniken imagined? Did Jesus have a son with Mary Magdalene, as Dan Brown suggests in *The Da Vinci Code*? Or, is the world controlled by a global, originally extraterrestrial, elite of humanoid reptilians that includes George W Bush, Hillary Clinton and Queen Elizabeth II, as the British conspiracy theorist David Icke postulates? The classical sceptic would ask: why should such propositions be true? In today’s climate of doubt that question is often reversed: why should they not be true?

Ironically, all such furious attempts to capture the *real* truth in countless conspiracy theories can only further contribute to the epistemological insecurity that motivated the rise of conspiracy culture in the first place. The blooming of mutually competing, contradictory and (partly) overlapping conspiracy theories aspiring to reveal the truth increases the difficulty for citizens to distinguish fact from fiction; real evidence from false evidence and, ultimately, to discover the real truth underneath the pile of interpretations and Babylonian language games. Epistemological insecurity in contemporary society, it can be concluded, is both the cause and consequence of a proliferating conspiracy culture.

### ‘What is real?’ Ontological insecurity and conspiracy culture

The Matrix is everywhere, its all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth. . . .

What truth?

That you are a slave Neo.

(*The Matrix*, directed by Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999)

‘Nothing is what it seems’ is a common expression in conspiracy culture. Reality is always a *staged* reality that conceals the truth that unacknowledged, evil agents are *de facto* controlling our lives. In the movie *The Matrix* a hacker named Neo finds out that reality as we experience it is an illusion – quite literally a virtual reality implanted in our brains by malicious Artificial Intelligent computers. Having revealed this awful truth, Neo sets out to liberate humanity from its state of virtual alienating.

The example suggests that ontological insecurity is at the heart of conspiracy culture. It features digital technology, but might as well be a paranoid story about the state, capitalist enterprises, multinationals, bureaucracies or mass media staging a fake reality.



Tradition, Anthony Giddens argues, provided a stable sense of reality since it communicated that ‘the world is as it is because it is as it should be’ (1992: 48). In modern societies, this ontological security is threatened by the rise and proliferation of abstract, rationalized social systems. Karl Marx (1988 [1932]) already pointed out that modern capitalism alienated workers from the products, the production process, their labour and their fellow workers. Emile Durkheim (2002 [1897]), in turn, lamented the increased power of a distant nation-state that undermined social cohesion and motivated feelings of anomie. Max Weber (1996 [1930]) developed a broad, historical-sociological perspective: the erosion of tradition and increased dominance of functional- or goal-oriented rationality in different institutional domains since the 16th century, he argued, is a Faustian bargain. It provides modern humankind with probably the most effective way of governance in history but, from a humanistic perspective, its proliferation in bureaucracy, science, the economy and technology becomes irrational. Once institutionalized, Weber points out, these subsystems obey their own rational laws and have their own internal dynamic. Because of this, modern individuals experience these systems more and more as autonomous external forces on which they have no influence. Basically, this autonomization of rationalized social systems is the reason why Weber wrote about western society as an alienating ‘*stahlhartes Gehäuse*’ or suffocating ‘iron cage’ (1996 [1930]). Karl Mannheim goes as far as to compare the anxieties of modern humankind with those of premodern people:

Just as nature was unintelligible to primitive man, and his deepest feelings of anxiety arose from the incalculability of the forces of nature, so for modern industrialized man the incalculability of the forces at work in the social system under which he lives . . . has become a source of equally pervading fears. (Mannheim, 1946 [1935]: 59)

Conspiracy theories are cultural responses to these developments – they are strategies to rationalize anxieties by developing explicable accounts for seemingly inexplicable forces. The development of social systems becoming more opaque and autonomous has, if anything, only radicalized during the past half century. Under the influence of globalization, social systems are disembedded from time and space and present themselves as increasingly evasive (Giddens, 1992). Ever expanding bureaucracies, to give one example, are now sometimes even portrayed as ‘rationalization-gone-mad’ (Melley, 2000: 49) and beg the question ‘who is really in charge?’ (e.g. Bauman, 1987). The workings of the global economy, to give another example, cannot simply be analysed in terms of cause and effect – let alone be predicted – since local events have worldwide consequences. Digital technology, to give a final example, is considered by many as ‘out of control’ (Kelly, 1994), ‘disturbingly lively’ (Haraway, 2001 [1985]), ‘nontransparent’ and ‘*stricto sensu* unrepresentable’ (Žižek, 2001 [1996]: 19), and is at times experienced as a powerful ‘magical force’ (Aupers, 2002).

The omnipresence of these opaque systems in the life world of modern individuals does not merely raise insecurities about ‘what is real’ and ‘what is not’ in the external world, but even about the authenticity of one’s own subjective awareness. The mass media play a prominent role in this: television, film and advertising are no longer understood in terms of representation, but increasingly in terms of simulation and manipulation



of the individual life world (e.g. Baudrillard, 2000 [1981]). The ‘culture industry’, Horkheimer and Adorno argued over half a century ago, ‘can do as it chooses with the needs of consumers – producing, controlling, disciplining them’ (2002 [1944]: 115). Ironically, then, such radical claims about social control, developed in the social sciences, are nowadays popularized by conspiracy theorists. Melley refers to this ontological insecurity about self-identity as ‘agency panic’ (2000: 12) since it boasts questions like ‘am I really myself? Or am I brainwashed, indoctrinated or programmed by the system?’ Even the senses are not to be trusted since, as David Icke comments on his website: ‘You think your eyes are seeing what you think they’re seeing? Think again!’<sup>2</sup>

Cyberpunk novels like William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), science fiction movies like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Total Recall* (1990), *Strange Days* (1995) or *eXistenZ* (1999), feature similar anxieties about the self and the senses. As manifestations of ‘technoparanoia’ (Jameson, 1991), these texts deal with totalitarian states exerting mind control; multinationals implanting ‘digital chips’ in consumers’ minds and ‘false memories’ in human consciousness. Other stories involving robots, androids and cyborgs depict life as a total ‘simulacrum’ or ‘hyperreality’ (Baudrillard, 2000 [1981]) and discuss the turn towards a trans-human, post-biological or post-evolutionary future (e.g. Dinello, 2005). In the movie *The Truman Show* (directed by Peter Weir, 1999), finally, the protagonist discovers that his whole life – including his wife, kids, house, neighbours and the suburban village he lives in – is staged in a gigantic studio and that he is part of a popular ‘reality show’ and has been since he was born. Interestingly, the film inspired psychiatrists to label a new disorder in the real world as the ‘Truman-complex’ – a paranoid perception that everything you think, see, hear, feel or smell is actually staged by the media.

Modern sociological theories have come a long way in adequately mapping and explaining such developments but they neither acknowledge nor predict that reified social systems spark the collective imagination and motivate new, emergent cultures. Alienation from economic, bureaucratic and technological systems, accelerating under the influence of rationalization-*cum*-globalization, evidently sparks ontological insecurity (‘Nothing is what it seems’), which contributes to the plausibility of conspiracy theories about what is ‘really’ going on behind the screens. Such theories hence operate as ‘cognitive maps’ to represent systems that have become way too complex to represent, or even to ‘think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system’ (Jameson, 1991: 38). In the words of Craig Calhoun: ‘The omnipresence of “system” felt in our lives shapes . . . a paranoid world view in which understandability is won only by belief in omnipresent conspiracy’ (1995: 112).

### **‘I want to believe’: Existential insecurity and conspiracy culture**

In the *X-Files* agents Mulder and Scully develop theories about possible relations between phenomena, test hypotheses and try to rationally explain seemingly inexplicable and mysterious events. While encountering various supernatural and mysterious agents in a network of conspiracies, they remain true to the scientific method of enquiry. And yet, Mulder’s motto ‘I want to believe’ expressed in the *X-Files* movie 2008 exemplifies a modern tension between belief and non-belief; the secular and the religious; rationality and enchantment, that is at the heart of contemporary conspiracy culture.

It is a truism that belief has become utterly problematic in modern societies (Bruce, 2002; Wilson, 1976). Max Weber famously wrote about a 'disenchantment of the world' – a long-standing process in the West that eroded mysterious accounts of nature, magic and, ultimately, the belief in every metaphysical '*Hinterwelt*' that once provided the western world with solid meaning. This is the tragic dimension of modernity: science describes the world 'as it is' but can, by its very nature, say nothing about what the world's processes really mean and what the meaning of life actually is. The intellectual imperative to pursue the truth contributes to a world devoid of existential meaning – a world in which 'processes . . . simply "are" and "happen" but no longer signify anything', as Weber (1978 [1921]: 506) writes. Peter Berger et al. (1973: 82) commented on the existential implications of this development: 'Modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of "homelessness" – a metaphysical loss of "home".' Weber and contemporary advocates of secularization, however, prove to have a serious blind spot for the fact that exactly these problems of meaning invoke the rise of new forms of religion, spirituality and re-enchantment (Aupers and Houtman, 2010). Already in Weber's time, many of his fellow intellectuals took refuge in alternative religions – like Steiner's anthroposophy, Blavatsky's new theosophy or spiritism – and this trend only increased over the last century: in most countries in Western Europe the Christian churches are in decline, but affinity with esotericism, occultism, paganism and New Age spirituality is rapidly growing (e.g. Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Heelas et al., 2005; Houtman and Aupers, 2007).

Notwithstanding its scientific ambitions and (often) atheist pretensions, conspiracy culture, too, is a response to existential insecurity in a disenchanted world. Those engaged in it 'want to believe' and, just like contemporary spiritual seekers, their 'grand narratives' about the nature of reality serve to construct ultimate meaning. But there is a crucial difference: premodern people and contemporary New Age participants locate mysterious forces in the natural world – in human bodies, the earth and the universe as a whole. Nature is considered sacred: it is an overpowering force that invokes religious feelings of 'awe' – a typical combination of fear and fascination (Marett, 1914 [1909]). Conspiracy theorists relocate such mysterious forces from nature to modern society: invisible, yet immensely powerful forces are operative *behind* the cultural screens, *underneath* and *beyond* the empirical surface of modern life. Such a worldview generates meaning: it reverses the Weberian 'disenchantment of the world' since the (cultural) world is *not* 'as it is' – 'processes' do *not* 'simply happen' but *do* 'signify' *something*. The conspiracy theorist suspects there is intention where others find coincidence and contingency; they detect structure where others see chaos; they find meaning where others do not. Conspiracy theories 'require a form of quasi-religious conviction, a sense that the conspiracy in question is an entity with almost supernatural powers' (Melley, 2000: 8). It is considered a calling to unravel such mysteries through rational enquiry, by critically looking into every detail that may lead one to the ultimate truth 'out there' where 'everything is connected'. Based on these considerations we can understand conspiracy theorizing as a hybrid of scepticism and belief – as a 'religion for atheists' or a form of 'rational enchantment'. The scientific discourse in conspiracy culture may even function as an indispensable alibi for atheists who 'want to believe' to immerse themselves freely in mysterious matters without retreating into 'irrational' belief. Like spiritual seekers – often anchoring their esoteric claims in natural sciences to support the

authority of their arguments – conspiracy theorists use ‘scientism as a language of faith’ (Hammer, 2001: 201–321).

The relation between the conspiratorial and a religious-spiritual worldview is not just analogical but also empirical. Many theorists in the milieu explicitly combine both discourses and are involved in ‘New Age conspiracism’ (Barkun, 2003) or ‘conspirituality’ (Ward and Voas, 2011). Probably, pure types of spiritual teachers, like Eckhart Tolle, James Redfield or Louise Hay, will reproach conspiracy theorists for being too negative and pessimistic. And vice versa: conspiracy theorists will feel the former is overly positive, naive and blind to the dark underbelly of the world. The growing middle ground position of ‘conspirituality’, Ward and Voas explain, however, ‘appears to be a means by which political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism’ (2011: 108). David Icke who is ‘exposing the dreamworld we believe to be real’, is again an outstanding example.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, his theories delve into dark and paranoid issues like ‘the Death of Bin Laden and other lies’, ‘the fascist bloodline network’, ‘global conspiracies’, ‘mind programming’ and ‘mass hypnosis’ while it taps, on the other hand, into typical New Age themes like ‘astrology’, ‘healing’, ‘infinite love’ and a ‘spiritual awakening’. Ultimately, when theorists like Icke say that ‘everything is connected’ this can mean that all things in nature are essentially a holistic whole (as pure spiritual gurus would have it) or that all elites in society are actually forming dangerous secret alliances (as pure conspiracy theorists would claim). Notwithstanding these difference, both meanings tap into a mysterious realm and satisfy the relentless ‘want to believe’ in a disenchanted modern world.

## Conclusion and discussion

In the social sciences conspiratorial thinking is often portrayed as an irrational, pathological and dangerous attack on the state, politics and modern society at large – as ‘a poisoned discourse’ (Pipes, 1997: 173). Notwithstanding such critical arguments of academics and the often subversive, anti-modern rhetoric of those active in the milieu of conspiracy culture, the analysis showed that the rise of conspiracy culture is part and parcel of the project of modernity and that progressive modernization in fact motivates the appeal and popularity of paranoid narratives. Typically modern sentiments of epistemological, ontological and existential insecurity – widely discussed and lamented in the social sciences since the 19th century – have proven to be formative in the cultural production of contemporary conspiracy culture.

Setting aside essentialist questions about whether or not conspiracy theories are *really* rational – questions that are in the end informed by moral-political perspectives – we may assess that this growth and normalization of conspiracy theories are not a symptom of resignation, as critical modernists would have it, but of cultural transformation in the West – of ‘cultural rationalization’ (Weber, 1978 [1921]). It is a mainstay that many modern institutions and social structures have lost much of their plausibility for ordinary people – particularly since the 1960 and 1970s (e.g. Berger et al., 1973; Campbell, 2007). Motivated by this, conspiracy theorists actively produce and reconstruct (ultimate) cultural meaning by blending a high degree of rationalism with a strong feel for the metaphysical. From a cultural perspective it is quite impossible to classify participants of

the culture of conspiracy as either rationalistic sceptics or spiritual believers: they are evidently both and in simultaneously applying these epistemological strategies to find the 'truth out there', it is demonstrated, they defy the typical distinction between scepticism and belief; the secular and the sacred; disenchantment and re-enchantment on which a modern culture is based (Latour, 1993 [1991]). In doing so, they escape the modern problems associated with both, i.e. the disenchantment caused by rationalism and the 'irrationality' of belief, and combine the best of both worlds. Conspiracy culture, then, is above all about the construction of ultimate meaning that is resistant to the meaning-eroding forces of modernity.

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## Notes

1. See e.g. [www.swinefluconspiracy.com/](http://www.swinefluconspiracy.com/).
2. [www.davidicke.com/](http://www.davidicke.com/).
3. [www.davidicke.com/](http://www.davidicke.com/).

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