

# Conspiracy theories and Geography: Who gets to say where is power?

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## Abstract

Conspiracism has become a powerful explanatory category for major political events (Brexit vote, January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol attack) and the subject of a diverse body of research. Yet geography has largely ignored such debates and has, on some occasions, adopted this term with little critical examination. I call on geographers to think through the implications of this silence. I especially highlight how conspiracism presents an opportunity to think through the questions of epistemic authority, the hegemonic control of knowledge production, and the limits of the regulation of dissent. I argue that further work is needed to understand the historical and spatial conditions that make it possible for practices, attitudes, and speeches to become available to be invested and discerned as a distinctive mode of thought called ‘conspiracy theories’. To that end, and drawing on Foucault’s method of problematisation, I make two propositions. First, conspiracism is the performance of a critical attitude that is activated in a field conditioned by the felt pressures and limits of a collective commitment to the liberatory promise of critique. Second, conspiracism, as a collective geo-historical experience, is born from the pressures of knowing, locating, and naming power. These propositions seek to destabilise the certainties that allow conspiracism to function as a category of individualised ‘bad thinking’ by inscribing it as a collective experience held together by an ensemble of affective conditions. Having established conspiracism within this affective field, I provoke geography to think through its position, as an institutional science within this field.

## Keywords

Conspiracism, critique, liberalism, power, problematisation, public dissent

## Introduction

Conspiracy theories, fake news, post-truth<sup>1</sup> are phenomena that have become the subject of much mediatic, academic and political attention in the global north over the last two decades. They have become capacious and available terms to address the crisis of democracy that western liberal democracies are seemingly facing. As phenomena they

raise concerns over the possible triumph of emotion over reason in politics, and the desecration of expertise. These concerns have ramified into

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multiple reactions noticeable through the flourishing of debunking units in media groups (e.g. Jackson, 2017), anti-disinformation legislations (e.g. Oltermann, 2018) and official state commissions (e.g. Le Monde, 2021).<sup>2</sup> Since the COVID-19 pandemic especially, the intensity of the issue of conspiracism has been further inscribed in the rhythm of everyday life through journalistic scrutiny, mockery, exasperation, celebrity gossip, Facebook rumours shared over now tense Christmas dinners, collective surveillance of good thinking that warrant the pre-emptive: 'I am not a conspiracy theorist but...', and so on. As geographers, such phenomena prompt concern over the viability of our commitments to sustain open dialogue with participants and members of the public 'in an age of intense and often vitriolic political polarization' (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018a: 116, 2018b). At the same time, these concerns remain intertwined with abstract attachments to free speech and tolerance which bind up the issue of conspiracism with epistemic authority, the hegemonic control of knowledge production, and the limits of the regulation of dissent.

While these concerns already operate in the background of a variety of geographical research,<sup>3</sup> they have rarely been straightforwardly addressed in the discipline. Geography has indeed been strikingly absent from debates that have otherwise conjured up many research efforts across many other disciplines.<sup>4</sup> This is especially surprising considering that conspiracy theories make a claim over the contemporary spatiality of power. Indeed, if these theories posit the existence of a small colluding group as the main operators of global events, they map a geography of power located in closed intimate spaces, intentional network relations, obfuscation, and traceable causality. As such, conspiracy theories pose a number of questions for the discipline.

First, as theories that propose to systematise power as conspiracy, they provoke geographers to take inventory of the conceptual vocabularies that inform our geographies of power. Where might we situate geography's expertise in relation to conspiracy theories? What might be repudiated, reclaimed, or reconciled from this moment of epistemic uncertainty? Some might see my invitation to open such

dialogue with suspicion, arguing that geography should not take the risk of corrupting itself by putting its expertise on an equal level with such ambiguous 'alternative' claims to knowledge. But my call to foster such dialogue is not made under the auspices of the dream to smooth over antagonism and irreconcilable differences. I make this call in the hope of bettering our knowledge of the libidinal, mystical, and ideological imaginaries that inform political imaginations in general (Muniesa, 2022). As I will further demonstrate in this paper, the questions of intention and personification might be at their most dramatised in the imaginary of conspiracism, but this imaginary is still telling of the magical thinking that imbues our collective imaginary geographies of power today, and the 'distinctive hopes, anxieties, and hostilities they inspire' (Muniesa, 2022: 732).

Second, as troubling popular knowledge claims, conspiracy theories disenchant geography's now routine promise to make space for modes of thinking that emerge outside of traditional and hegemonic institutions of knowledge production. Can geography approach conspiracy theories without betraying an ethos of openness to ideas that might unsettle hegemonic processes of knowledge production? Or, on the contrary, might conspiracy theories present an opportunity to rethink abstract commitments to enact generosity towards new modes of thinking? These questions come at a time when geography is rightfully coming to terms with calls to renew the voices that make up its scholarship (Jazeel, 2019; Oswin, 2020; Rose-Redwood, 2021). As the 'conspiracy theorist' now regularly stands in the place of one of liberal democracy's contemporary irrational Other, opening a dialogue on the functioning of such a category in western societies plays an important part in understanding the current logics of de/valuation of vernacular knowledges. As discussions of the hegemonic control of knowledge production become more pressing, it becomes equally urgent to understand the functioning of an economy that adjusts the values of speech according to the embodied, cultural, and linguistic capital of speakers (Bourdieu, 1991).

Third, as a manifestation of political dissent commonly associated with the contemporary far right,

conspiracism challenges geographers to develop modes of investigation of activism and resistance that stay with the trouble of unsettling expressions of dissent. This does not mean that I am advocating to withhold judgement in the face of explicitly far-right conspiratorial narratives (QAnon, antisemitic 'global elite' conspiracies). What I am suggesting is that this common association – between the abstract and unspecified category of conspiracism and the Right – should be evaluated as a component of the problematisation of conspiracy theories. Indeed, recent movements such as anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests call for a closer engagement with the everyday political thought and practices that preface the formation of movements that sit outside of already known political formations and action groups. By rushing to politicise such movements from already known political formations there is a risk of missing how Right forces are effectively recomposing and travelling in the social field. Only from a position which stays with the trouble of the problematisation of the conspiracism might we be able to ask: what precise work are the motif and fantasy of 'the conspiracy' doing in the re-composition of the Right? Why is 'the conspiracy' so dramatised in this precise geo-historical moment? Why is the narrative structure (the conspiracy) superseding the content (racism, transphobia, antisemitism) in our attempts to name contemporary fascism? What is at stake here is to avoid that the category of conspiracism becomes an all-encompassing, depoliticised, and unspecified category which diminishes our capacity to characterise and call out precisely the fantasies and discourses which prop up contemporary fascism. This is therefore not a call to affirm or reclaim conspiracism as a set of counter-conducts but to examine the political and libidinal work they are doing – as narratives but also as their critique plunges more and more into an unspecified condemnation of the irrational. The aim of such a critical analysis is to situate these contemporary counter-conducts within the affective, spatial, and historical conditions that make it possible for them to emerge and to be apprehended as a singular object.

There is therefore much that geography can say about the problematisation of conspiracism. But

what I am suggesting throughout here as well, is that this task also presents an opportunity for geography to think through its position as an institutional science and its relation to vernacular knowledges. In fact, central to this paper, is the claim that debates over discourses and practices recognised as 'conspiracy theories' should include reflections on how disciplinary boundaries are being drawn through this act of recognition. While calls to open geography to knowledge produced outside of institutions can run freely in the discipline, this openness is most often entrusted to inherently work towards a progressive and emancipatory political project. In this story, openness and generosity only becomes extended to what is already decided to be working towards the politics of the Left, while alternative claims to knowledge can be, partly through the category of conspiracism, easily dismissed. What is therefore disavowed by geography's avoidance of conspiracism, as a question of knowledge production, is an openness to the possibility of what cannot be welcomed (Derrida, 1998). To think about conspiracy theories therefore always entails staying with question of how we might stay within a field of indeterminacy necessary to the emergence of radical difference (Deleuze, 1994). Relatedly, a second aporia arises when we consider what happens when the knowledge produced by geography itself (the spatialisation of power) encounters vernacular ways to make sense of power which unsettle its authority. The authority upon which geography perches itself to call forth new epistemic paradigms necessarily becomes unsettled by the coming of new epistemic paradigms. This paper therefore suggests that staying with the trouble of this aporetic terrain is temporarily necessary to understand how conspiracism can function as a category of exclusion.

If conspiracy theories can offer geographers a provocation to think through geography's ability to stay with the trouble of the aporias brought by contemporary dissent, it is because conspiracism is a category that has been resistant to any fixed meaning. Indeed, the indefinability of the category 'conspiracy theories' has been a central challenge for the investigation of this phenomenon. Nobody claims to be a conspiracy theorist, and identifying

core characteristics of conspiracy theories has proven to be a challenging problem. This definitional problem typically follows the now exhausted observation that conspiracies do, in fact, happen. The word ‘conspiracy theory’, then, functions on a different register of meaning than what would simply be a way to designate a theory that explains events as resulting from the intended action of a small colluding group. Instead, the expression holds the implicit connotations that the theory is false and unworthy of serious considerations (Bjerg and Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017). This is in large part because the question of what is ‘conspiracism’ goes beyond the simple designation of a theory that posits the existence of a conspiracy and is used to gesture at a wide range of attitudes, beliefs and practices which relate to the irrational, the spiritual, and the occult.<sup>5</sup> The use of this category then, can act as a stigmatising label that excludes the supporter of the theory from the realm of reasonable dialogue (Husting and Orr, 2007; Lantian et al., 2018). The troubling matter of fixing a definition has been further reinforced by the recognition that definitional evaluations of conspiracy theories enact boundary-work, where the strict limits of conspiratorial thinking are given by the consecration of sophisticated and expert understandings of social relations (Gieryn, 1983; McKenzie-McHarg, 2020). Two of the core issues raised by conspiracy theories are thus the questions of epistemic authority, and of the boundaries that academic disciplines draw around them.

These concerns gain specific meaning and significance against the particular conditions of life in western European and North American liberal democracies. While *theories of conspiracy* can and have happened in different places and time, I will show that *the category of conspiracy theories* corresponds to a set of specific practices, attitudes and performance of speech that operate under a distinctive mode of investment, discernability and problematisation. Centrally, by positing a nefarious collusion standing behind world events and state governance, they engage the response of institutional powers to secure their legitimacy and the social cohesion of the body politic. But since any defensive move from the suspected target of the theory can always

be interpreted as an admittance of guilt by conspirators trying to cover their tracks, conspiracy theories seem to trap liberal democracies in a double bind. Conspiracy theories therefore emerge as an object of intense concern in the midst of untenable paradoxes that operate within liberal democracies (Harjuniemi, 2022). They put a magnifying glass over the problems posed by the promise of freedom in a political system that has to restrict collective and individual liberties to secure freedom (Agamben, 2005; Foucault, 2008). Collective attachments to abstract promises of free speech and tolerance are troubled by the necessity to regulate dissent. This is not to say that such empty promises are not already regularly broken. On the contrary, this paper proposes to understand how the problematisation of conspiracism partly takes root upon attempts to secure such empty promises. Thus, this paper proposes that geography’s distinctive perspective can unearth the geo-historical roots that make up conspiracism as a phenomenon that exists as problem for contemporary western liberal democracies.

In this paper I therefore propose an understanding of conspiracism as an object which was able to gain prominence and intensity against the particular backdrop of life in western liberal democracies. This understanding of conspiracism foregrounds the material, discursive and affective conjuncture which conditions conspiracism’s emergence and possibility of discernability. To arrive at this proposed understanding of conspiracy theories, Part II gives an overview of the debates that have structured research on conspiracy theories. My aim in providing a rather detailed overview of this literature is to alert geographers to the risk of replicating assumptions that exist within the opposing and sometimes unspoken theoretical orientations that have structured this literature. I show that this scholarship has been structured around a concern to move away from accounts that pathologise conspiracism, while remaining attached to the securitisation and affirmation of the proper modalities of dissent in liberal democracies. Part III further develops work on conspiracy theories that has sought to recalibrate their analysis to a mode that integrates the discursive and relational fields that condition the emergence of

the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Through the Foucauldian lens of problematisation, I bring into focus the processes by which a set of practices, attitudes, and speeches more or less connected to the idea of a conspiracy, have become available to be invested and discerned as a distinctive mode of thought called 'conspiracy theories'. Part IV uses problematisation to propose an account of conspiracism as a phenomenon that arises from and makes present the problem of critique and power for western liberal democracies. In relation to critique, I show that conspiracism can be understood as a particular performance of critique which gains its singularity in the midst of an intense concern for the good practice of dissent. In relation to power, I show that conspiracism as a phenomenon arises from the pressures of naming, knowing, and locating power. These accounts demonstrate how geography can play a role in the identification of the spatial and historical grounds which delimit a specific field from which conspiracism - and by extension similar counter-conducts - becomes problematised. My conclusion discusses the larger implications for geographical work concerned with understanding dissent and resistance in the contemporary moment. With this understanding I offer a space for geographers to engage in a dialogue on conspiracism and other unsettling forms of dissent (e.g. populist movements or the use of violence in protests) as no longer needing to rest on pre-established categories deserving of condemnation or demanding of tolerance, but as geo-historical phenomena requiring careful examination and contextualisation.

### **Between the normal and the pathological: Situating the good measure of suspicion**

Research that addresses conspiracy theories is pre-occupied with the issue of finding a neutral and value free definition of such theories - but one that would nonetheless set conspiracy theories apart from legitimate forms of political dissent. This part of the paper presents an overview of how this problem has been taken up in specialised

scholarship and in geographical work. This overview will show that discussions of what conspiracism is, circulate around an implicit claim over what constitutes deviant thought. Posed in this way discussions of conspiracism stay confined by the false choice of either condemning or tolerating incorrect beliefs.

This issue of knowing conspiracism has translated into a first trend, which is to define conspiracy theories based on the identification of key individual psychological factors that can explain a predisposition to adhere to the conspiracy explanation. This trend has mainly taken shape around work in social psychology which describes conspiratorial beliefs or ideation as faulty modes of reasoning that satisfy, amongst other things, a disposition towards intuitive thinking, mono-causal explanations and an exaggerated belief in intention and agency (Douglas et al., 2016; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018; van Prooijen and van Lange, 2014). Following the path set forth by Hofstadter's (1996) oft-cited essay 'The Paranoid Style in North American Politics', some work in political theory and philosophy takes on the diagnosis of individual psychological biases as the root issue of conspiratorial beliefs (Barkun, 2003; Clarke, 2002; Keeley, 1999). The issue for scholarship such as this, that remains very much attached to the democratic ideals of pluralism and freedom of speech, becomes how to find metrics by which to objectively assess the point at which healthy levels of suspicion fall into irrationality. This conundrum is indebted to the widely shared diagnosis that, yes, *of course*, conspiracies do happen, but we really shouldn't believe that they happen *that much*. Keeley (1999: 126) is one of the first to pose a definition that strives to make a distinction between good and bad levels of suspicion and finds that time will reveal the inadequate theories that entail 'more scepticism than we can stomach'. This definition, which provides the basis for much of the future work that will follow in this direction (see for example Coady, 2006; Dentith, 2016, 2018; Pigden, 1995), is a profoundly affective definition which opposes theories that posit that 'something is not right' in official narratives, with the claim that 'something is not right' with their scepticism.

The implicit political claim stated here is that conspiratorial thinking is a deviant mode of thought and perception, that exists in an otherwise well-functioning system of knowledge production and political governance. It is expected that time will be enough for our usual institutional safeguards to expose conspiracies and come to a consensus on the ones that are worthy of being subject to debate (Douglas et al., 2019). If anything, it would be advisable that these systems face the threat of conspiracy theories by reinforcing their authority. This leads some to voice policy recommendation that, ironically enough, align state action with the shadowy machinations speculated by the conspiracy theorists. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009: 224), for instance, suggest that government agencies should lead interventions of ‘cognitive infiltration’ within conspiracists milieus as a way to rectify their incorrect beliefs.

In geography, conspiracy theories have, for the most part, been apprehended as a pre-established category that remains unquestioned. As such, these works take on many assumptions posited by pathologising narratives that frame conspiracy theories as deficient modes of reasoning posing a threat to the body politic. Conspiracy theories can therefore figure as a useful device to set the scene of the contemporary moment. They can thus appear in the background of other inquiries implicitly associated with other preoccupying circumstances like the growth of the far right (Ho and Maddrell, 2021: 4; Luger, 2022). Conspiracy theories are framed through the unevicenced claim that conspiracy theories are ‘dangerous’ (Maddrell, 2020: 109), associated with the threat of violence (Stephens, 2020: 279), or of public health breakdown (Sturm et al., 2021).

Some recent geographical works however present a willingness to sustain a more direct engagement with conspiracism. This is the case of Lizotte’s (2021) recent editorial on ‘the geographies of truth and lies’ or Warf’s (2023) *Post-Truth Geographies*. In both of these conspiracism is re-anchored within the complex philosophical history of truth. In doing so, these authors are able to engage straightforwardly with the main issues raised by conspiracism. For them, conspiracism

can be situated within a post-structural relativist moment that, in its wish to level the epistemological playing field, broke down the capacity to distinguish truth from lies. Beyond this, they sustain that neo-liberalism can be blamed for weakening democracies and increasing the spatial and social inequalities that led to mass resentment of ‘the elites’. While I can see the value of both of these arguments individually, I am more sceptical of the stories they tell and the eventual solutions they invite. Ultimately, both Lizotte (2021) and Warf (2023) leave us with an impossible choice to make in the face of this story; we either need to offer our sympathetic tolerance to the misguided disenfranchised and marginalised people who have lost their ability to recognise truth, or to condemn the desecration of truth altogether as the only possible way to safeguard democracy. While both of these authors offer nuanced accounts of the politics of truth, they go on to negate these accounts by settling the issue of conspiracism with an appeal to reaffirm the commonsensical distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘lies’. With this proposition I worry that the questions of legitimacy, authority, and the long, ongoing, and brutal history of the devaluation of knowledges that sit outside of a prominently white, bourgeois, male, and European academy, is too easily settled. Specifically, I believe that a definition of truth based on the good faith willingness to ‘acknowledge when voices from the margins are reproducing long-standing false geographic imaginations’ (Lizotte, 2021: 2) negates the material, embodied and libidinal grounds on which a statement comes to be recognised as true.

The issue with this set of studies, then, is that they run the risk of pathologising legitimate distrust of authority, as well as demands for accountability in a democratic system based on representation. By relying on a commonsensical mode of recognition of the theories of conspiracy that ‘go too far’, they legitimise institutional systems of knowledge production and political governance as possible censors of the correct mode of expression of political dissensus. This scholarship also demonstrates a non-reflexive and uncritical stance towards its own participation in the game of hegemonic knowledge production, wherein the very action of

dismissing these truth-claims reinforces institutional legitimacy. This tendency to view conspiracy theories as cognitive deficiencies is now widely known as a moment of pathologisation of conspiracy theories (see Butter and Knight, 2015, 2019) from which much of the later scholarship on conspiracy theories has sought to extricate itself.

The response to this first set of pathologising studies has been carried through a series of interventions that contextualise conspiracy theories within their social, historical, and cultural circumstances. This scholarship delinks from the pathologisation of conspiracy theories that took root in Hofstadter, by turning to Jameson's (1988: 356) conceptualisation of paranoia as the 'poor man's cognitive mapping'. Jameson's analysis of postmodern subjectivities anchors paranoia as a distinctive feature of our times which works to give order and remythicise the real in a reaction to the fragmentating and disenchanting effects of capitalism (Paradis, 2007). This movement from Hofstadter to Jameson, has initiated a normalisation of conspiracy theories that recast them as warranted ways by which people come to apprehend an increasingly complex and crisis shaken world.

This second wave of scholarship characteristically moves away from the analysis of the internal structure of conspiratorial narratives and the psychological factors that stand behind them. They look instead at the cultural context that explains the mainstream appeal of the motif of the conspiracy - and the social function it fulfils. Central to their claim, is the identification of a large cultural movement that plays with the motif of paranoia, as an available and desirable tool to understand relations between individuals and collectives (Knight, 2000, 2002). Thus, as the expression of popular understandings of power relations, conspiracy theories might be wrong 'but they are one of the few popular attempts to address problems of power and secrecy in modern society' (Butter and Knight, 2020: 33). This is why they shouldn't be dismissed for this group of scholars. Indeed, conspiracy theories here are heard as the expression of a reaction to a political order, and thus contain the belief that another world is possible (Dean, 1998; Fenster, 2008). The implicit claim that distinguishes

this scholarship from the trend of pathologisation of conspiracy theories, is that here conspiracy theorising is a phenomenon that is deeply attached to the failures of our system of knowledge production and political governance. They happen in a political system that has been emptied out of the promise of political participation by the 'kind of anti-democracy and anti-politics demanded by the capitalist system and its market-premised conception of political participation' (Farkas and Schou, 2020: 154).

Less prominent in the field of research on conspiracy theories, but still important for the alternative they pose to pathologising accounts, another strand of research normalises conspiracism by portraying it as a libidinal and affective fantasy that fulfils incomplete wishes. In short, it becomes quite evident that very few actually believe that a shadowy elite meets every five years to decide with precise accuracy the future of the world. But acting as if we might believe, fulfils a subject's inchoate and ambivalent attachments to a power it fantasises as both an idealised omnipotent and omniscient figure, and a repressive and dangerous force (Marasco, 2016). This fantastical version of power soothes the need to know and brings order to an ever-present threatening power, while also offering a vessel to project resentment onto this vengeful force. This psychoanalytical perspective deals a blow to the hoped-for resurrection of the will of the people posited by some tenants of the Jamesonian tradition described above, by reminding us that this fantasy of Big Power only betrays and reaffirms collective attachments to totalising forms of power (Nebojša and Todor, 2020).

In geography, efforts to normalise conspiracy theories have been taken up to explain mainstream understandings of complex events (Cairns, 2016; Cayli, 2018), popular geopolitical speeches (Jones, 2010, 2012), or as a strategy for marginalised communities to make sense of large-scale web of power relations within which they are captured (Johnson-Schlee, 2019). It has also been foregrounded, by work that sits at the intersection of affect theory studies and psychoanalytic geographies, by explaining conspiracy theories as powerful fantasies that orient and satisfy the circulation of a

surplus of desire in society (Laketa, 2019; Young, 2021). Yet, in all of these works the category of conspiracy theories is taken on as a legitimate category of inquiry. Where these works fall short then is in their unquestioned adoption of a category that has emerged from mainstream political and journalistic accounts. I contend, however, that what we must ask of geographers to conjure their *specifically geographical perspective to help us move away from conspiracism as a category of condemnation to an understanding of conspiracism as a geo-historical phenomenon*. This would mean questioning how and why conspiracy theories became an object of inquiry. Because of the pervasive under theorisation of conspiracism, these geographical works have taken on many of the limitations of the normalisation paradigm sustained by conspiracy theories scholarship, which I will further detail next.

As described, the normalisation of conspiracy theories has been enacted by creating distance from accounts that define conspiracism as a faulty mode of reasoning that can be recognised with common sense. They have done so by situating conspiracy theories along the lines of mainstream forms of dissent warranted by specific cultural and historical contexts. In doing so they usefully draw attention to the function that conspiracy theories can fill in a given social context. Where the normalisation paradigm never truly escapes the pathologising narrative, however, is in their belief that conspiracy theories represent flawed understandings of a totality that can be effectively captured given the correct vocabulary and research practices. Furthermore, these scholars fear that conspiracy theories, by offering a mainstream understanding of global events, offer a 'distorted critique of neoliberalism, while at the same time also distracting and diverting their believers from more concerted forms of political opposition' (Knight, 2021: 198). For these scholars, conspiracy theories, as a manifestation of political dissent, thus need to be tolerated because they can potentially be remodelled into healthier expressions of dissent. Efforts to normalise conspiracy theories therefore never truly escape their inscription as a deviant mode of thought. Through a process that sought to think about conspiracy theories amongst normal forms

of dissent, they leave conspiracism dwelling in the space of ab/normal. This normalisation effort can therefore be understood alongside Canguilhem's (1989) conceptualisation of error and deviance as constitutive of the norm. It is because I know that I can be ill that I know that I am healthy. And it is via Foucault (1976) that we further understand how practices of constant measure and regulation of deviance against the norm play into power's hand. It is because the threat of unreason looms within practices of the (self)regulation of reason that reason is reaffirmed. By staying within the pre-occupation of the norm, the normalisation paradigm therefore implicitly secures the harness that tames political dissent.

What transpires from this effort of normalisation is an increasing call for the tolerance of deviant thought. Tolerance is made possible here by conspiracy theories' recalibration from pathological to incorrect beliefs that can be explained by a set of circumstances. But in doing so this scholarship implicitly sanctions and affirms the proper modalities of dissent in liberal democracies. It remains attached to the traditional processes of knowledge production and governance and overly confident in the efficiency of established forms of dissent. One risk here is to further secure the boundaries that delineate legitimate and illegitimate ways of knowing along the lines of the institutional and the mainstream. Another risk is posed if researchers become unreflective of their own participation in the politics of knowledge production and normative regulation.

Whether the research presented in this section conceptualised conspiracy theories as a threat to a well-functioning body politic, an issue of flawed understandings, or the consequence of inescapable existential dispositions, it always presents conspiracy theories as a problem. This calls for further reflections on the processes which render possible the emergence of conspiracy theories as a problem. I invite geographers to consider a geo-historical mode of critical analysis that asks: how and why did practices, attitudes, and speeches more or less connected to the idea of a conspiracy, become available to be invested and discerned as a distinctive mode of thought called 'conspiracism'? What is at stake in the regulation of this new



object of concern for western liberal democracies? My aim in proposing this understanding of conspiracism to geographers is to offer space for a discussion of this matter to take place.

### **Towards the problematisation of conspiracy theories: Understanding conspiracism as a geo-historical phenomenon**

The problematisation of conspiracy theories has been advanced by a set of scholars who have pivoted research on the conspiracy theories to the investigation of the discourses which construct ‘conspiracy theories’ as an object of concern. These investigations interrogate the processes by which some speeches that relate more or less to the motif of the conspiracy come to be recognised as conspiracy theories and problematised as an object of concern.

This is done, for example, by Birchall (2006) who examines how the paranoia that works within conspiracy theories and other popular knowledges closely aligns with a tradition of suspicion that sometimes operate in the social sciences. As illegitimate and uncertain knowledges they also sit closely to cultural studies within a landscape of disciplines dominated by so-called hard sciences. With these claims Birchall makes present the unwritten stakes activated by the denigration of conspiracy theories for disciplines that seek to legitimise their claims to knowledge. Coming from the field of media studies, Bratich (2008, 2020) examines the mediatic construction of conspiracy theories as problems that threaten the body politic through discursively arranged moral panics. Through what he calls ‘conspiracy panics’ he shows that ‘conspiracy theories are taken to be enemies, [and] a pervasive and non-specific threat against democracy’ (Bratich, 2008: 22–23). Bratich takes the impossibility of defining conspiracy theories as a clue which signals a mode of relation to these speeches as precisely one of a panic, directed against an undefinable mood or style of dissent. The strong aversion signalled by panicked reactions delineates the contour of the acceptable and hearable modes of dissent in

contemporary liberal democracies. A turning point in this history of this problematisation is situated in the 1960’s with the emergence of a counter-discourse produced by journalists following the multiplication of theories of conspiracy relating to the Kennedy assassination, in an effort to disenfranchise these claims (Thalmann, 2019). From then on ‘journalists identified as part of the very establishment that had come under suspicion in these conspiracy theories, and construed conspiracy theory as an illegitimate attack on hegemonic constructions of authority and traditional processes of knowledge production and regulation’ (Thalmann, 2019: 123). Thus, within journalistic discourses conspiracy theories become an available term whose meaning can adapt to different project of hegemonic control of knowledge production (Farkas, 2023).

What is regrettable about these accounts of how conspiracy theories come to be problematised is that they never stray far away from the story of a phenomenon with a linear causality posited by prior understandings of conspiracy theories. If the pathological account of conspiracy theories situated the origin of the problem in the defective psychological resources of the conspiracy theorist, then the tenants of the normalisation perspective situated it within the opaque and troubling conditions that structure people’s (flawed) understanding of power. Here problematisation is posited as operating through the superimposition and ensnarement of institutional discourses onto emerging and cohesive dissenting speeches. In doing so they pass by a version of Foucault (1996) method of problematisation that tells a more transient and looser story – and thereby also a more geo-historical one – of how things come together.

To give an example, Foucault’s (1965) history of the problematisation of madness theorised an experience of unreason situated within precise historical, institutional, and social fields. He asks: what are the characteristics of each of these fields and what role do they play in the emergence of a collective experience of madness? What allows an ensemble of varying practices to be recognised as the experience of madness, and to constitute practices that will further co-construct this experience? How does the interaction of these different fields

shape a specific subjective experience of reason and unreason? The causality implied here is closer to one of immanence, where the originating moment of the phenomenon of ‘conspiracy theories’ would be the untraceable articulation of a historical shift of a regime of truth and the everyday lived relations that delineate a social field (Foucault, 1979, 1996). Further, this version of problematisation hinges on an understanding of power that circulates through different modalities that can be at times repressive and positive (Foucault, 1978). The often-downplayed positive effects of power are graspable through the advent of new areas of concerns and their vocabularies, as well as new interactions with power which enable new opportunities for alluring acts of obedience and transgression. So while previous attempts to disturb the problematisation of conspiracism have mostly presented this process as the discursive creation of an object which didn’t exist, I take problematisation to name more precisely ‘a set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether under the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)’ (Foucault, 1996: 456–457).

This turn towards conspiracism as a geo-historical phenomenon that is at the same time filled by the objective delineation of an object of concern, and subjective experience of a specific mode of relation to power, signals the importance of building investigations of conspiracism that consider the practices of so-called conspiracy theorists. This is something that has been strikingly absent from research on conspiracy theories. Indeed, most of the research presented so far base their research on an imagined stereotypical enunciator of conspiracy theories, but very few seek to verify her existence through the gathering of primary empirical data. Doing this immediately puts research on conspiracy theories in front of its internal paradoxes: where does conspiracism happen? How do I find participants if no one claims to be a conspiracy theorist? How can I produce this data without participating in a regulatory game of good/bad thinking assignments? Harambam (2020: 36) chooses to resolve these paradoxes with the

adoption of a strictly relational framework within his methodology where he follows what ‘is seen and labelled’ as conspiracy theories. This allows Harambam to bring attention to the ways in which the phenomenon of conspiracism is constructed relationally. This is the case in the way the conspiracy theorist label is used by individuals in milieus that would commonly be seen as conspiracist to distinguish themselves from ‘the real conspiracy theorists’ and present themselves as critical thinkers (Harambam and Aupers, 2017). This shakes the ground onto which the stereotypical enunciator of conspiracy theories used to be displayed and reveals that the label irrevocably functions as ‘a collectively shared adage to emphasize one’s own superiority/rationality’ (Harambam and Aupers, 2017: 118). Additionally, the critical mount onto which the researcher usually perches herself to designate conspiracy theorists is destabilised by the fact that these milieus centre a critique of scientific dogmatism within their practice of researching and producing alternative knowledges (Harambam and Aupers, 2015).

In this section, I have built upon work which has interrogated the phenomenon of conspiracism as a discursively constructed object of concern. By operating a return to Foucault’s articulation of problematisation I have sought to reorient this mode of analysis from the strictly discursive to open it up to the exploration of the manifold categories of experience which compose conditions of emergence. In the next part,, I propose an understanding of conspiracism that seeks to make present the complex, relational and contingent ground that has allowed conspiracism to become an object of knowledge for western liberal democracies. I seek to make present what Bratich (2008: 8) has been able to helpfully underline, which is that the problem of conspiracy theory is felt and understood through the identification of a ‘mood, a tone, and an indeterminate quality’. The mode of analysis I am setting forward is one that seeks to pay equal attention to the conditions that made it possible for conspiracy to be available as a way to represent power, and to the conditions that made it possible for conspiracism to become an object of concern. The vocabulary of the ‘problem’ or of ‘concern’ is

maybe unhelpful in setting this forward here, as it would be more appropriate to say that I wish to bring attention to the conditions that made it possible for *something* to even be recognised. In doing so I am aiming to render legible a causality close to immanence, where practices of doing conspiracism and discourses naming conspiracism co-emerge and give shape to a mutable object. In what follows I therefore present an understanding of conspiracism that makes present the different forces, pressures and contradictions that compose its conditions of possibility.

### **The feeling of conspiracism: Negotiating dissent and agency in liberal democracies**

In this section, I trace the contours of conspiracism as a phenomenon that arises from and makes present the problems of critique and power. Having stressed that attempts to confine the phenomenon of conspiracism within strict definitions fail to capture how this phenomenon operates from a particular problematisation, it might appear contradictory to fixate conspiracism within only two distinct fields of experience. In doing so I am not suggesting, however, that conspiracism is reducible to only these two fields. In proposing the following stories, I borrow from Anderson and Secor (2022) propositional style to propose that conspiracism is, amongst other things, a performance of critique and an experience of power. Rather than foreclosing this phenomenon these propositions ‘are ways of acknowledging that we write from our imbrication in that present, whilst also amplifying for attention and discussion specific tendencies which give the present its character and feel’ (Anderson and Secor, 2022: 3).

#### ***‘Be critical...but not like that’: striking the right tone of dissent as a free thinker***

Conspiracy theories and critique are entangled in a complicated relationship that circulates around the question of striking the correct modalities of dissent in liberal democracies. How to negotiate

the liberal ideals of free speech and pluralism with the regulation of incorrect and potentially harmful ideas? Could conspiracy theories simply be a form of critical dissensus that has become devalued through a mixture of class disdain and stigmatisation? In that case do they signal the return of class consciousness and class antagonism? Or could conspiracy theories reveal that critique has run its course and no longer holds any revelatory and emancipatory force in the citric-saturated era of cynical reason?

Within this complicated terrain, conspiracy theories have become an available and apt category from which to voice discontent over the contemporary status of critique. For Parker (2000: 198), for example, conspiracy theories exist in a direct line with classical Marxist analysis and its conceptual catalogue that ranges from ‘false consciousness’ to ‘alienation’ which ‘has functioned as a pervasive conspiracy theory for most of this century’. And for many, conspiracy theories act the ultimate proof of the degeneration of critique into a self-indulgent show of mastery that does little more than to debunk and reveal what is already known (Felski, 2015; Latour, 2004; Sedgwick, 2002). In all of these ‘critiques of critique’, it is a particular attitude, mood or tone of critique that is gestured at. Accusatory, self-indulgent, totalising, swollen with self-importance, and absorbed in the career-making game of being the most critical of all, critique seems to have become trapped in a habitus that has lost its capacity to voice dissensus and enact change. The availability of the category of conspiracism to name incorrect modes of criticality, functions in tandem with the equally open enactment of critique through an attitude that lends itself to being performed. It is because critique operates under the guise of the performance of an attitude, more than a set of strict guidelines, that conspiratorial thinking can become recognised as an improper modality of dissent. In this section, I propose to seize the phenomenon of conspiracism through its manifestation as a critical attitude that is performed, enjoyed, and negotiated within its encounter with differential critical attitudes.

Foucault’s (1994, 2024) discussion of critique and its inscription within the formation of modern

subjectivities already proposes a definition of critique as an ‘attitude’ (Foucault, 2024: 24) which arises from the self-declared right to question ‘truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth’ (Foucault, 2024: 39). It is undetachable from a moment of consolidation of the modern project of emancipation from any authority other than one’s own reason (Massonet, 2016). Critique as the practice of modernity is an attitude that signals one’s belonging and attachment to the modern task of reaching emancipation through reason. Foucault’s genealogy of critique illustrates how the field of critique became filled with the promise of emancipation and autonomy. The critical attitude that is discursively and affectively constituted and made available to post-Kantian subjects is one that funnels attachments to self-emancipation, self-perfection, self-fulfilment obtained through the faculties of individual experience. Here, I am not arguing that the project of critique is necessarily effective in attaining its aim, nor that conspiracy theories can be mapped directly under this general practice. Rather, I am proposing to understand how the practice of critique has become an object of intense concern, enjoyment, and regulation for subjects of liberal democracies. This can be further unravelled by placing this collective relation to critique under the modality of attachment proposed by Anderson (2023) as a way to account for a specific type of relation that is distinctive in its ability to hold endurance, ambivalence, and optimism. Our collective and enduring relation with (self)critique has gained an intense and promissory value as that which guarantees our co-existence, by ensuring that we remain free from each other’s influence. In this sense, this precise attachment can act as a precious tool that holds together the existential dread of living apart from one another, and the panic that comes with loosing ourselves in otherness (Freud, 2003).

Such an understanding of critique can, in turn, explain how a concern with conspiracy theories fits within an overall concern for the good practice of critique. This understanding doesn’t remove conspiracy theories from the relation that tightly links liberal subjectivities to critique, nor does it reclaim

it as the purest expression of a lost art of dissent, as some problematisations of conspiracy theories sometimes do. I wish to bring us closer to an understanding of *conspiracism as the performance of a critical attitude that is activated in a field conditioned by the felt pressures and limits of a collective commitment to the liberatory promise of critique*. In other words, the relentless stretch towards an ideal critical attitude that does not exist creates the conditions that makes conspiracism an experience of dissent that can be desired but also stand as a repulsive fiction about an unreasoned Other. This understanding can hold together the distinctive mood of conspiracism, and its destabilising proximity to other critical attitudes that have been operating under a tradition of suspicion in the social sciences, or political activism.

The aim of holding conspiracism in this ambivalence is not to reconcile these different attitudes - especially because they mark different orientations to distinct political ideals - but to give an account of conspiracism as a set of practices and attitudes. This is, for example, perceptible in the way conspiracy theories are not only recognised by virtue of their meaning (a speech that explains events as resulting from the intended action of a small colluding group), but also from a set of practices and attitudes that comes to constitute clues by which adherence to conspiracism can be assessed. Belonging to this set of practices and attitudes we might consider: specific interests (international affairs, the occult, the nebulous promise of freedom), practices (alternative medicines, meditation), rhetorical devices (‘I’m just asking questions’), emotions (anger towards the elite, disdain for the ‘sheeple’), postures (superiority over the ‘sheeple’), social determinants (low income, low status, limited education), cliché phrases (‘they don’t want you to know’, ‘the truth is about to come out’), etc. I am not prescribing here a set of characteristics that would be the correct or incorrect ways to identify a ‘conspiracy theorist’. I am descriptive of a set of practices and attitudes which already offer clues to the everyday circulation and apprehension of conspiracism. In sum, they make up the uncertain frontiers of the territory of conspiracism.

What stories of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories lose, by anchoring their analysis neatly to one of these speeches, practices, or attitudes, are the ways in which they overlap with each other to constitute an atmosphere which conditions how conspiracism is sensed, recognised, and negotiated in the everyday. Additionally, they also miss how this performance can be felt through other modalities of dissent, unsettling the neat borders we assign to different modes of thought and, in turn, giving conspiracism its distinctive flavour as something untraceable, yet so precisely fathomable. We can think of, for instance, the ways in which the attachment to and felt pressures to enact dissensus as a means to elaborate oneself as an emancipated subject, is just as much present in practices of debunking and fact-checking as in the conspiracy theories they expose as erroneous.

In short, critique holds a peculiar place in the history and attachments of modern liberal subjectivities. Conspiracism has become possible as a phenomenon that can be felt, recognised, and negotiated in the everyday through the struggle to enunciate and regulate the proper modalities of dissent that are essential to the realisation of the modern project of emancipation. Delinking conspiracism from precise territories that make up already known and foreclosed modes of political thought (the right/the left, populism, extremism), allows for a looser understanding of conspiracism as a performance that exists in tension with other performances of critical dissent.

### *'I'm not a conspiracy theorist but...': the tricky task of naming power as a free subject*

What unites any statement alluding to a conspiracy is a discussion of power. Theories that argue that the earth is flat, that aliens live among us, or that 9/11 was an inside job, all have in common the idea that people perceived as having power conspire to cover the truth. Similarly to other representation of power, the issue conspiracy theorists grapple with is always: how to talk about something which can't be seen, but to which we attribute the causes of mass effects? Conspiracy proposes to personify

power and make its action tangible through the course of the execution of a plan with known ends. What is at stake when we identify a statement as a conspiracy theory is thus the degree of intention that we attribute to the collective we identify as exercising power. I propose, to guide us through this section, a simple definition of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are what happen when we try to answer the question: where is power? Rather than reproducing the definitional attempts of conspiracy theories scholarship that seek to establish definitive sets of characteristics to recognise conspiracy theories, this definition is a tentative proposition to capture conspiracism as an affective experience. With this temporary definition, I delink the questions of conspiracy theories from the location of a bad subject of enunciation and reposition it within a more collective troubled relation to the representation of power.

Knight (2021) helpfully weights in on the status of intention in assessing whether we are dealing with a conspiracy theory, by turning to contingency theory and complexity theory as two alternative ways to represent power. The first theory aligns with Popper's sociology of unintended consequences, by privileging accidents as the governing principle of the social reality. Complexity on the other end discards the question of causality by promoting a theory of society as a system where actions are guided by the 'complex interaction of rules, incentives, institutions, traditions, and processes' (Knight, 2021: 203). Just like theories of conspiracy, these two competing theories are not without fault. Contingency theory seems to leave us no choice but to bury our face in sand when faced with social friction. And if theories of conspiracy fantasise omnipotent and omniscient modes of power, then complexity theory goes to the other extreme, only to 'mystify the operation of power by ascribing all agency to impersonal (albeit personified) social structures and forces' (Knight, 2021: 206). Borrowing from Moore's (2018: 11) perplexed consideration of this dilemma, I would add that 'between the pure "smoky room" ideal of a conspiracy and the pure "invisible hand" account of emergent order there is a spectrum of intermediary and interlocking forms'. The principle that

guides explanations from one end of the spectrum to the other, are the degrees of agency that are attributed to the subjects of power relations. What separates the two opposing views seems to be the extent of the awareness that individuals have of the effect of the power of their action.

The complex task of drawing imaginary geographies of power is, paradoxically, contained within the term 'conspiracy'. From the Latin 'con' meaning together and 'spirare' breathing (onto), 'to conspire' gestures at a mode of action that is well nestled into the murky waters of intention (McKenzie-McHarg, 2020). Breathing together can indicate a mode of action that starts from the identification of common goals and the implementation of a plan towards them (to breath onto together), but also the untraceable convergence of interests and affinities that arise from a common 'spirit of the time' unconscious of its own desires (to breath together) (Castoriadis, 2011).

On a spectrum of theories that represent power from the smoky room to the black box of emergence, conspiracism then begins to happen when power is represented and named as a force which acts in accordance with the actions and desires of intentional and collaborating subjects. It is in the identification of this narrative structure that scholars have diagnosed a disturbing proximity between conspiracy theories and critical theories (Latour, 2004; Parker, 2000). This is how Heins (2007: 793–794) identifies the conspiratorial tendencies of Horkheimer's theory of the society of racket as the thinker 'tends to depict trade union bosses, politicians, doctors and others as actors who do not just exploit favorable situations for their own purposes, but who are impelled by a deep-seated disposition to enter into collusive agreements to the detriment of society as a whole. We find Horkheimer succumbing to a form of conspiratorial thinking.' Conspiracism can therefore be felt in Horkheimer's attempt to trace network relation of power in a ruling class. But such tracings of power also permeate structural accounts of power as a hegemonic force which pre-exists practices and relations. We thereby encounter traces of conspiracism, as the representation of power as an intentionally wielded force, in theories which

'conceptualize an appearance of power as anything other than a form of representational practice [and therefore] represent that representation in accordance with the intentions of a particular agent or force' (Rose, 2002: 384). In trying to stabilise and explain the repetitive and coherent appearance of processes of power, such theories infuse power with a core (hegemony) and cause (to dominate) which lend themselves to conspiratorial articulations. But even beyond structuralist representational practices similar narrative structures still find their way in theories which strive to evade the certainties of representations (32). For Barnwell (2016), for example, critical work centring affect, along the lines of Stewart (2007) *Ordinary Affects*, while holding forth the promise to rid critique of its paranoid tendencies, nevertheless betrays this promise by filling affect with all-powerful agential capacities. In the midst of a ubiquitous and undeterminable force like affect this work urges us to nurture capacities of vigilant attention and attunement. As such this work introduces a sort of micropolitical activism where 'you have to catch up with what's been going on unbeknownst to you, or *sort of*' (Stewart, 2011: 449, original emphasis), that is not so estranged from the suspicious paranoid who traces the lines of intended actions in the macropolitics of class antagonism.

This brief outline of theories which take up the narrative structure of conspiracism has sought to unsettle the certainty that conspiracism can effectively be grasped as the propriety of bad theories or bad theorists. Instead, I am proposing to locate conspiracism in a spectrum amongst other representation of power relations. As we have seen, the stabilisation of power relations through representation is a perilous act which is never totally immune to the temptation to rely on a framework of intention and collusion to explain the coherence of social reality. We can then understand how conspiracism becomes part of the experience of answering the questions of where is power, as the feeling of conspiracism is produced in the encounter of a particular representation of power and a performance of a critical attitude. Within the particular conditions of life lived in liberal democracies acts of representing and performing a critique of power become

affectively charged as they hold the promise of an autonomous and self-sufficient life. As Melley (2002) has helpfully been able to show, conspiracy culture, indeed, holds strong by affirming the core fantasies of liberalism. In the more radical theories of brain washing and thought control, for instance, theories of conspiracy resort to a version of influence that can only be enacted through mysterious and magical processes. (Melley, 2008). In doing this, they rescue from theories of ideology the fantasy of a free and bounded individual who can only be penetrated by outside influence through quasi-magical processes. This is similar to the move made by representations of power which are open to the narrative structure of the conspiracy, as they systematically locate power as a stable force creeping into the subject from an outside location.

By understanding conspiracism as a way to represent power which exists on a spectrum of possible representations my aim is not to beat down bad practices of representation, but to unsettle the certainty that conspiracism can easily be cast aside as the practice of bad theorists. Conspiracism is a theoretical move that is intensely preoccupied with the idea of locating power. As a category of everyday (self)regulation of bad thinking, conspiracism therefore makes present complicated relation with questions of agency, intentions, and power. If theories of conspiracy, and the practices and attitudes that come with them, provide such a strong sense of excitement (either from their denigration or consumption) it may have more to do with the difficulties that come with representing and speaking about power under the conditions and felt pressures of life lived in liberal democracies. How can we materialise a force that hinders free will, in a system that rests upon a conception of individuals as fundamentally free to undertake whichever they desire? How do we make room to describe the coercive attributes of the constitutive force of the social, in a system that understands compliance only in the form of a contract between two willing individuals? Rather than simply dismissing it, the intensity with which the question of the spatiality of power has surfaced as a motif that troubles everyday life, could on the contrary be seen as an occasion for Geographers

to address how our vocabularies and imaginary geographies of power can respond to the challenge. Geographical work which grapples with experiences of opacity in a priori liberal states (Belcher and Martin, 2013) or on the precarious act of speaking about obfuscation within democratic systems without being viewed as paranoid (Garnett and Hughes, 2019), for example, demonstrate that the difficult task of mapping and knowing power already labours within our discipline.

## Conclusion

This paper started from the perplexing absence of geographical work on conspiracy theories precisely at a time when they seem to be everywhere. Many reasons could explain this silence; a simple lack of interest could be one of them, the absence of disciplinary formations where this work could readily be inscribed could make up another. But what if this silence also betrayed a form of resistance? Held implicitly throughout this paper is the belief that the avoidance of the core questions posed by one of the characteristic phenomena of these last two decades betrays geography's discomfort with its own legitimacy and with troubling contemporary forms of public dissent. In calling forth new modes of thinking, but systematically deferring their arrival by failing to recognise them - in the mode of 'create new epistemic paradigms... but not like that' - I detect a move made by geography to save itself from the annihilation it has itself called forth. To some such suspicion might be slipping too closely to a conspiracy theory. But even if I resist the urge to fiddle with geography's unconscious, I still maintain, as demonstrated in this paper, that the default positioning of conspiracy theories as problems betrays a desire to secure and affirm the normative modalities of dissent in liberal democracies. Equally present in work that classifies conspiracism as a deviant mode of thought, is a disavowal of its own enjoyment of intellectual distinction and of the reasonable exercise of critique. The implication for geography centrally resides in reflecting on the terms of its relationship with illegitimate knowledge and modes of dissent. While claims of openness and

generosity can run freely in geography, its avoidance and sometimes uncritical adoption of the category of conspiracism expose the emptiness of such claims. This is not to say that geographers should retreat to a posture of unconditional openness. On the contrary, this paper has sought to strike precisely at the impossibility of limitless affirmation, to provoke geographers to further reflect upon their participation in the production of the institutional production of knowledge.

This paper has thus sought to further develop work that problematises conspiracism, by putting forth an understanding of conspiracism as a geo-historical phenomenon. The specific capacity of geography to grasp the social, historical, and spatial characteristics that make up the conditions of emergence of phenomena is needed to uproot conspiracism from the terrain of the easily condemnable miscellaneous news item unworthy of further investigation. At stake more broadly for geography, is the possibility to stay with the trouble of expressions of dissent such as spontaneous populist movements or the use of violence as a mode of political action. Rather than explain these phenomena from already known causes and determinants we must ask: how did such categories come to be problematised in this way? What does this problematisation tell us of the current affective fields that orient life in contemporary western democracies? What hegemonic formations are maintained and negotiated through this process?

Centrally, this paper has located the negotiations of the proper modalities of critique and the proper characterisation of power as two sites where the issue of conspiracism takes particular prominence. In this paper I therefore made two propositions for future investigations of conspiracism. First, conspiracism is a performance of critique that exists in tension with other performances of critical dissent. Second, conspiracy theories exist in tension with other imaginary geographies of power.

Situating conspiracism as an issue of contesting performances of critique and imaginary geographies has several implications for geographers. First, as conspiracy theories make claims about the spatiality of power, they put in question the legitimacy of geography and challenge us to think about how

our available catalogue of metaphors make present networks of power. The question of conspiracism cannot be settled with a reactionary appeal to secure and affirm our disciplinary commitment to 'truth' (see Lizotte, 2021) but demands of geographers that they carefully interrogate the conditions of their expertise, in this precise moment of uncertainty. Second, as conspiracism becomes more and more present within the everyday and becomes available to name a multiplicity of speeches and practices, it can be anticipated that research on conspiracy theories is set to intensify. There is a pressing demand to question the pre-fixed category of conspiracy theories (and by extension a series of related categories such as post-truth, alternative facts, fake news, etc.) and to question its unwritten assumptions. My call here is not for a 'geography of conspiracy theories', but a geography that does not turn away from the complex questions that movements of mainstream political dissent pose.

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1. The rest of this paper will focus on the terms 'conspiracy theories' or 'conspiracism' exclusively, for the sake of clarity, however my discussion of such phenomena is intended to address a greater historical shift in the global north denoted by a breadth of new vocabularies and concerns (fake news,



- alternative facts, post-truth, hyper-suspicion, political paranoia).
2. See Farkas and Schou (2020) for a detailed survey of State responses to Fake News (specifically chapter 5).
  3. This is the case, for example, in environmental Geography where populist knowledges trouble the lines of expertise (Bosworth, 2019) and where misinformation impede environmental protection (Van Der Vet, 2024), in health geopolitics as conspiracy theories make up new popular geopolitical imaginaries that could pose a risk to public health (Sturm et al., 2021), or in electoral Geographies as misinformation presents a new threat to voter confidence (Weichelt, 2022).
  4. See for example the recent *Routledge Handbook on Conspiracy theories* (Butter and Knight, 2020) which gathers perspectives from philosophy, history, political theory, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.
  5. See for example Franks et al. (2017: 8) who propose a typology of conspiracy theories in which one of the type of conspiracy theory is linked to conceptions of reality that depart from a 'commonsense ontology' (p. 8). In this study the practice of reiki or meditation are linked to the most radical (type 5) form of conspiracism they identify in their study. See also, for example, a 2017 French survey (Ifop, 2017, p. 128) where the belief that 'God created man and the earth less than 10 000 years ago' is listed as a conspiracy theory, and the frequency by which respondents check their horoscopes is interrogated as a practice that could indicate adherence to a conspiracist worldview.
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