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THE NARRATIVE PARADIGM IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Abstract

Our article proposes to set a general frame for interpreting the conspiracy theories which it includes in the category of mythological narratives with social function. These counterfactual narratives capture in narratives, most often stereotypical, the ideology of a community and have the function of building a group conscience and generating social reality. We are also trying to define the complexity of socio-political, anthropological, intellectual or technological factors that contribute to the development of this phenomenon which has often been treated in a simplified manner.

Key words: conspiracy theories, post-truth, myth-related narratives, social media

Introduction

This paper proposes a framework for coming to terms with conspiracy theories as socially-meaningful, myth-related narratives. They are instances of counterfactual thinking that convey shared values by (often stereotypical) narrative patterns; in doing so, they build self-awareness and social reality. Moreover, this is an attempt to gain a better understanding of the socio-political, anthropological or technological dynamics that undergird the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing, which, time and again, has been caricatured in mainstream culture.

Insofar as the coronavirus pandemic was doubled by a true infodemic, by the proliferation of a vast online disinformation with potentially harmful effects, the European Union and UNESCO have reacted by publishing a guide with advice and infographics to counter conspiracy theories. From this European Union official guide we can find out that a conspiracy theory is "the belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent." Conspiracy theories are born especially during periods of crisis and uncertainty similar to the one we have been going through, being the expression of some collective anxieties, and provide people with a soothing but misleading feeling that there is a logical explanation for the events. They start from identifying a suspicion, carry on with disclosing the beneficiaries and with setting up the alleged proofs on a narrative structure with argumentative function. The same guide helps us find out what the common pattern is for such theories: „1. An alleged, secret plot. 2. A group of conspirators. 3. 'Evidence' that seems to support the conspiracy theory. 4. They falsely suggest that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is as it appears and everything is connected. 5. They divide the world into good or bad. 6. They scapegoat people and groups." (https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en)

Despite concerns, we hold the opinion that conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon, nothing more serious than in the past, and have always accompanied us. These theories are not even catastrophic existential threats to society. The danger represented by the existence of these narratives is greatly exaggerated, and the counter-cultures which generate them constitute a voice amongst many others which can be heard in the public space having as much right to existence as the predominant culture. The only difference from the past is represented by a group of technological, social and intellectual factors that facilitate the extremely fast spread of these narratives.

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Conspiracy theories as mythological narratives with social function

Conspiracy theories are, above all, stories with social functions. They are ways of organizing and understanding a cultural and social reality, the narrative being the main path through which the human community understands to systematize reality and give it meaning even when reality makes no sense: "Conspiracy theories have all the elements of a good story – terrifying villains, creative plots, and moral lessons. Because of this, a well-constructed conspiracy can have a powerful hold on the public imagination, in a way that a narrative about a "virus emerged entirely unpredictably and killed thousands for no reason." (https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200522-what-we-can-learn-from-conspiracy-theories)

In simple terms, the narrative can be defined as the particularly human manner of looking at existence as a chain of events. This manner of taking into account the daily experience is so widespread that it appears to be a natural consequence of reality itself. However, things are not as simple as that because, as Umberto Eco points out, "life is certainly more similar to Ulysses than to The Three Musketeers and, despite these, we are prone to read it as if it is a story by Dumas (…) Our tendency is to understand what precisely happens in what Barthes meant by a "texte lisible" (readerly text)." (Umberto Eco, 1997: 155)

Scholars in the field of social and human sciences have explored many times the role of storytelling in human speech. John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit believe that the narrative represents a universal instrument of human conscience, a metacode, which allows the trans-cultural transmission of messages about social reality. (Lucaites, Condit, 1985)

Walter Fisher establishes the existence of two competing paradigms in the human thought: one is rationalist, the other narrative, each of them interpreting the world in terms of truth and, respectively, narrative. (Fisher, 1985: 74) Reviewing the origins of the schism between mythos and logos, Walter Fisher names Plato and Aristotle as the initiators of the rationalizing process generating the original meanings related to these concepts. They are just the first in a long line of philosophers who venerated the intellect and looked down on any other human expression form.

According to the author, Plato's contribution to the transformation of the logos consists of its turning into technology and bureaucracy, in its transformation into a term adequate for philosophical speech alone. The demotion of mythos and its relegation to the fiction level, to pure fantasy, establishes the rational superiority of the philosophical and technical discourse over rhetoric and poetry. The immediate effect was the birth of a noble breed of experts in truth and reality.

Aristotle, although acknowledges the validity of the various types of human communication, rehabilitates the arts as ways of knowledge strengthening the idea that some forms of discourse are superior to others inasmuch as they can lead to truth in different proportions and by various means.

The solution to which Water Fischer adheres is the recovery of the old concept of logos as a communication model which brings together history and rhetoric, reason and imagination. The author is convinced that, in a territorial way, "people are storytellers" and their rationality has nothing to lose from their consideration as narrative beings because people have got the constant habit of testing the narrative trueness of stories and the world is for them nothing but a "a set of stories that need to be selected." (Fisher, 1985: 75)

In the same vein, Gurevitch and Barkin think narratives are a means to understand the social world, while Davis and Robinson are convinced that people are storytellers and a direct relationship can be established between their ability to interpret the world and the mastery of the different narratives about the world and the self. (Vincent et al, 1997: 35)

Ernest G. Borman holds the opinion that the fantasies contained in most public narratives provide to the members of a group a foundation for communication and group consciousness. His theory of symbolic convergence attempts to explain the causal relationship that exists between a symbolic basis and the feeling of belonging to a group and provides hypothesis to explain the stereotypical narrative formulae and the group's predisposition toward specific types of scenarios and dramatic forms. (Borman, 1985).

The narrative paradigm competes with the factual paradigm of the rational world, disputing the same terminology repertoire from conceptually different positions: "Those writing about the narrative

paradigm and rational world paradigm may often use the same terms with different meanings, particularly pivotal concepts from the narrative paradigm such as «myth», «story» and «fantasy». From the perspective of the rational world paradigm, myths are untrue and to tell stories ist o recount falsehoods. (...) The symbolic convergence theory assumes that human beings are social storytellers who share fantasies and thus build group consciousness and create social realities." (Borman, 1985: 136)

Although they do not share a common theory, the above-mentioned authors start from the same hypothesis, namely the narrative is not only essential to communication through its materialization and localization in tangible speech formulae, but also inevitable. They also share the belief that stories have the power to take part in the social construction of reality.

Conspiracy theories illustrate the functioning of the narrative paradigm. The conspiracy narratives are mythological stories through which a culture explains certain aspects of reality or nature, stories through which different groups legitimize their social organization. Nothing is without meaning in a community's conventions and discourse, there being no meaning degree zero (Cf. Writing Degree Zero) as Roland Barthes was once asserting; to him, the myth was a form of significance through which "any object of the world goes from a closed, mute status, to an oral one, unlocked to society." (Barthes, 1997: 235).

Being a modality of understanding some problems and a form of naturalizing a group's conventions, mythological narratives set in motion the association of a string of concepts. In conspiracy theories, however, this association is many times aberrant, these narratives undergoing an interpretation delirium. Irrespective of this, the stories that come to dominate and circulate are representative for the group's value grid. They sublimate the group's priorities and carry social significance in the second degree: „Stories are used to convey causal information and teachings to people, but also to share an experience, to organize a community's collective memory or to illustrate and popularize an attitude. When a community accepts to believe a particular story, its members accept the attitude which the story involves." (Fernbach and Sloman, 2017: 84)

Essential to the process of generating a culture's meaning are, according to French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1995), the structural operations which he terms binary oppositions. These oppositions are profound cultural categories through which people set reality in order, assigning it meaning and logic, making possible the transition from chaos to order, from shapelessness to shape, from nature to culture. Familiar natural oppositions of the type raw-cooked, dry-wet, up-down organize the reality metaphorically being used through extrapolation and generalization to clarify, based on some relations of analogy, the unfamiliar or a range of abstract concepts: tamed-wild, life-death, sacred-profane, masculine-feminine, good-bad. These categories must be understood as expressions of the social world which allow the interpretation of general social forms. Based on a transfer of meaning from concrete to abstract which Lévi-Strauss terms the logic of concrete, elements of the second category, belonging to culture in which the principle of the arbitrary and of the human conventions operate, are made to seem natural and inevitable. Nevertheless, a series of ambivalent categories escape the rationalizing human effort, proving characteristics that belong to both opposing binary categories. Overcharged by meaning, these ambiguous categories will have to be civilized somehow by means of establishing a control, an interdiction or taboos.

In our opinion, conspiracy theories ensure the rationalizing process of these ambiguous categories. The binary categories characterize narrative, mythological thinking. Complex reality and natural order elude most times clear delimitations and create a state of tension, of ontological anxiety which the social corpus can reabsorb only through transcribing these contradictions along the lines of alternative narratives. The role of these narratives is to tame reality and to retrieve the wrecked ontological calmness.

Scientific subject matters, precisely through their complexity, are those that fit best to such approaches. Science has always been looked at skeptically as an ambivalent category, so the anti-scientific attitude of the conspiracy theories proponents should not take us by surprise. Biotechnologies (genetically modified organisms), medical discoveries (the mapping of new maladies, vaccines), communication technologies (5G technologies), sanitary protection measures (quarantine, wearing a facial mask) are complex, ambiguous categories that conspiracy theories feed on.

A society's dominant myths are competed by counter-myths which are specific to subcultures. Science is such an example. If in the dominant myths science is seen as a source of continuous

improvement of human life, in counter-myths science is a problem-generator, de-humanizes and thrusts us away from nature. Idolized science offers man the instruments of understanding and dominating nature, being the accomplished way to solve all future and present dilemmas. The sense of history seen as personification of this positive myth cannot be but ameliorating. It is not the case of conspiracy theories which are examples of the dominant counter-myth. Science ceases to be a miraculous recipe capable of making us nobler and generates as many problems as it finds solutions.

Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, cognitive science experts, maintain that something in the way human thinking works predisposes us to identify everywhere significant patterns which, more often than not, we structure as a story: "The narrative is our way of giving a causal meaning to a succession of events. (…) People see stories everywhere." (Fernbach and Sloman, 2017: 81). One of the explanations for the regular occurrence of the conspiracy theories is our predisposition to identify structures in reality. It seems there is a correlation between an individual's ability to recognize patterns and the tendency to believe in a conspiracy theory. The hyperactivity of this pattern-identifying function is the reason why people tend to uncover causal relations between events with nothing in common such as the associations between the coronavirus pandemic and the 5G technology or between vaccines and autism.

Observing, based on countless substantial proofs, the fallibility of individual human knowledge, Sloman and Fernbach ascertain that, despite its obvious limitations, mankind prospers because their thinking is the product of a community. Collaborative thinking is the foundation of the human being's success, but the same community nature of the human reasoning explains why individuals greatly overestimate their capacity of understanding the complex world in which we live and why we all suffer from "an illusion of understanding" (Fernbach and Sloman, 2017: 19). Belonging to a cognitive community can easily turn into a form of dependency, making us vulnerable in relation to the group, which implies o series of negative consequences: the prevalence of some conservative attitudes, the inaction of morality, of opinions, the proliferation of stereotypes, prejudices and unsubstantiated convictions.

In view of these observations, conspiracy theories can be considered alternative scenarios born out of ignoring the infinitesimal complexity of reality and overestimating our capacity of expertise. Conspiracy theories spring into existence out of speculating on high complexity topics difficult to understand by the large mass of people, which would presuppose a very specialized approach. Individual knowledge is superficial. Being significantly limited by a deficit of operating causal systems, individual knowledge is unable to represent the complexity of the real life in all its nuances. This is one of the reasons for which conspiracy narratives tend to simplify reality.

The illusion of explicative profundity, which is the basis of the supra-interpretation of reality, is also consolidated by a range of technological factors, including the information and communication technologies. Marshall McLuhan coined the theory of media determinism (McLuhan, 1964), speaking about a subtle influence of communication technologies on human life at social level. The evolution of communication technologies can be linked to the alteration process of social configuration and social life relations. Having become a common presence in today's world landscape, the new communication technologies leave their mark upon our social life influencing pervasively the way in which we perceive reality as well as the nature of inter-human relationships. We are witnessing a substantial changing process of society under the influence of new technologies with effects at the level of social structures and mentalities as well as dominant thinking paradigms.

As it happens, conspiracy theories proliferate by means of new communication media. As a space of coagulation for some virtual communities which offer validation and support to its members, the Internet has become an ideal medium for the hatching of a very wide spectrum of counterfactual constructions.

With the refinement of social communication networks and the advent of interactive platforms which offer space for the expression of public opinion, we are noticing the opening up and democratization of the public sphere. As a consequence of the current orientation of the communication media toward interactivity, the present-day public sphere seems more displaced and freer than ever. Dynamic virtual communities through which information circulates and propagates rapidly can react as an important agent of social and political change. Both aberrant discourses and resistance forms to the authorities' legitimizing pressures can be articulated through the means of expression and socialization. The communication channels specific to cultural and political elites can be neutralized and overcome

with ease by the adaptability, the reaction capacity and the social contamination of these new communication structures.

One of the consequences of these technological mutations which affect the public sphere and social organization is the calling into question of the scientific authority. The breaking down of the knowledge monopoly and the power monopoly as well as the democratization of the access to information alter the truth into a weak concept from a gnosiological point of view, which has entered a rapid process of dissolution.

In her ample analysis of the phenomenon of on-line disinformation, Alina Bârgăoanu characterizes the contemporary period as being one of the post-truth, in which "the truth is set upon by novelty, reaction speed, spectacle" At the same time, she puts forth a definition of this concept that denotes "the situations in which objective facts have got a smaller role in shaping public opinion than emotions and personal beliefs." (Bârgăoanu, 2018: 82)

Among the multitude of interpretations on this subject matter, the above-mentioned author identifies two big theoretical tendencies, one that considers post-truth a constant of mankind history and the other that speaks of a plurality of technological, demographic, economic and intellectual factors which make this phenomenon a particular trait of the contemporary time. She gives credit to the second wave of interpretation, making reference to the global anxiety generated by profound and rapid changes of geopolitical, economical, socio-demographic and cultural nature and which create the optimal conditions for developing conspiracies. According to the author, "the philosophical discourse of modernity" and "intellectual relativism" contribute to this climate of anxiety, these trends having impregnated the public debate with the idea that "there is no objective truth, there is no truth but truths." The obstinate fascination with identity represents another generating cause of "post-truth", "facts don't matter except for the ones that acknowledge my identity." The alteration of the mass-media landscape, in which traditional mass-media are surpassed by on-line platforms, represents another factor of truth degradation. To this list of causes one can add "economic, socio-demographic and political polarization" which generates "hostile camps, each with its own narratives, with its own outlook on the world, with its own facts. Each of this camps isolate themselves on the judgement and communication level, creating a tight medium in which disinformation thrives." (Bârgăoanu, 2018: 84)

The consequences of these changes are, amongst others, the wearing away of the rational discourse, the dilution of the distinction between facts and opinions and, consequently, the fulminant proliferation of conspiracy theories. The seeking of truth and the objective evaluation of facts are no longer positive attributes. Distrust of the authority and anti-scientific attitude are constant for the majority of the conspiracy theory proponents, whether it is the anti-vaccination advocates, proponents of the flat earth theory, opponents to 5G technology or coronavirus sceptical (that is, contesters of the Coronavirus existence). It is no accident that some of them switch sides easily between these narratives which are related structurally. Conspiracy theories suffer from an ongoing process of Creolization. Given that conspiracy theories share the same morphological structure, they end up intermingling.

The Internet, the manifestation locus and the newest expression of the cognitive community, becomes an essential factor of this tumultuous offensive against established authorities and the truth. Easy access to the vast amount of information available on the online information highways provides facts that can consolidate any partisanship and fuels the illusion of people's explicative profundity, who tend to overestimate their abilities: "Knowledge existing on the Internet is so accessible and vast that it can fashion a society in which any individual with Internet access becomes a self-proclaimed expert in numerous domains." (Fernbach and Sloman, 2017: 167) This illusion is worsened by the phenomenon of users' tribalization, which get together in virtual communities united by the same interests, values, beliefs, coming to develop a pernicious group thinking. The users' digital behaviour is characterised by radicalism. The fanaticism displayed by members of such digital tribes can often be explained by the fact that the group members' attitudes end up corroborating each other: "members of a group offer each other intellectual support but nothing else sustains the group per se." (Fernbach and Sloman, 2017: 209)

Another reason for which conspiracy theories enjoy success is related to the social nature of human life and by the way in which social influence acts upon individuals. It is beyond dispute that there is normative pressure coming from the group we belong to and individuals are tempted to constantly check the dominant opinion climate existing within the group membership, comparing and synchronizing their opinions with the others'. Because of this process, group members tend to adopt those ideas that are validated by social proofs.

Once the scientific truth is getting outdated, the true experts are replaced by influencers and digital tribes fight over supremacy seeking in their own sphere the acknowledgement of their own opinions. The Internet, through its particular manner of functioning which is based on search algorithms and users' personalised profiling, offers acknowledgement rather than information. The social media are true rooms of informational resonance with conservative effect on the level of users' beliefs and attitudes. This type of socialisation tends to increase sectarianism and intolerance towards any idea that comes from outside. In virtual communities, which function similar to a congregation, the members are surrounded by individuals with similar opinions. Considering that in the midst of these digital tribes the emphasis slides from information and facts to identity, the difficulty to convince with reasonable arguments a follower of conspiracy theories comes from the fact that his/her attitudes do not rely on a rational assessment but "are determined by contextual and cultural factors. (…) To give up on one's faith often means to do away with a multitude of other beliefs, to give up on our communities, to defy our identity." (Fernbach and Sloman, 2017: 193)

Rational facts and arguments are not really suitable to modify people's beliefs. The difficulty to change the beliefs of a conspiracy theory champion can be ascribed to the psychological phenomenon called "confirmation bias". As a result of the effects pertaining to this particular type of cognitive prejudice, people seem to develop an inexplicable immunity to facts. The confirmation bias represents the tendency to select only those arguments which sustain the pre-existing opinions and values. This type of fallacy affects especially the process of interpreting events. Ambiguous events, complex explanations are simplified to fit in a pre-existing grid.

These narratives are not established on their own ontological laws, they have got a powerful moral and political dimension being the expression, intensely motivated ideologically, of a disagreement with the political and social reality. Setting in motion a more profound message than the one denoted by their literal meaning, conspiracy theories act as a symbolic mechanism for interpreting and classifying the social world. These fictions circulate a set of latent messages with social validity. Their stereotypical structure operates a cultural reduction of reality, generating an ideological shutdown. We are convinced that these fantasies can be important resources for a diagnosis of the contemporary society, keeping alive causal relationships with elements of the social context.

Conspiracy theories somatise some maladies of the social corpus. There is a subtle relationship between social anxieties and their thickened, nearly caricature-like, speech. Expressing many of the world's problems in which we live, these narratives operate with cultural and social references. They reflect visions about world and existence, being the product of the epoch that created them. The uneven distribution of access to resources, opportunities or technologies generate a persistent feeling of frustration amongst some categories of people who see themselves left behind, abandoned by the too quick advance of history: "Protectionism, populism, nationalism, nativism, illiberalism, authoritarianism are perceived as anchors in an interconnected and fluid world invaded by technology and shaken by tectonic changes." (Bârgăoanu, 2018: 73)

We conceive culture as a region where serious conflicts between meanings occur, where the dominant vision about the world intersects constantly with resistance and interests which it has to meditate, a ground on which groups confront one another with symbolic means of discourse, of stories, trying to impose their own definition about reality. Extrapolating this vision, we can state that the plurality of social experiences generate a discursive plurality. According to the Australian professor John Fiske, popular culture, whose expression is conspiracy theories, offers means of escape from the social control, being produced in relation to the structures of domination. This relation can assume two shapes: resistance and evasion. (Fiske, 2005: 2)

Conspiracy theories illustrate the first type of response. They are political statements which question the natural character of the classification system for the present-day society. It ensues an alternative identity discourse by means of which marginal groups build their own meanings of the social reality, proving how difficult is the effacement of differences and the wining of hegemonic consensus in a world in which the individuals' life experience contradicts the official version of the truth. These narratives can be read as carriers of some reactionary meaning, because they evoke nostalgically the society's conservative values, or as expressions of the society's restructuring will, because they claim to identify the existence of some monopoly areas in various domains: political, social, technological, cultural.

Conspiracy theories have often been treated simplistically by the intellectual elite, going from the exaggeration of their disruptive potential to minimization and ridicule. We believe that value judgements regarding the cultural significance of these expression forms have to be cast aside. These narratives specific to popular culture have got as much legitimacy as high culture forms or as scientific discourses, to the extent that they offer to some category of people a satisfying explanation about their own social identity and about the way in which inter-human relations and reality function.

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