

THEODOROS RAKOPOULOS

Of Fascists and Dreamers

Conspiracy Theory and Anthropology

Abstract: Examining conspiracy theory authors has not been seen as worthy of ethnographic inquiry in anthropology as of yet. This is intriguing, as encountering conspiracy theorists inspires a process of reassessing the critical nature of our own discipline, with its doubting mechanisms and thrill for alternative realities, and the essay offers analogies between such theories and the discipline. This article tackles conspiracy theory through ethnographically encountering the people largely responsible for the creation and dissemination of such theories. I argue that ethnography of conspiracy theory is ethnography on and with conspiracy theorists. The essay responds to recent calls to address uncomfortable ideas 'at eye level'. Such calls to take seriously people who adhere to challenging ideas comes from work among far-right thinkers, an area sometimes converging with conspiracy theory. Reviewing material from fieldwork in Greece among authors in the conspiracy genre illuminates a wide array of concerns, from the idea that their work is science-worthy to statements both associated and dissociated from fascist ideas. The essay shows how professionals of the conspiracy theory field craft such theories and (re)work their own social standing, while I take conspiracy theory arbiters' claims to the epistemic seriously and explore their relations to the far-right.

Keywords: anthropology, conspiracy theory, fascism, Greece, knowledge production

This article brings conspiracy theory to an immediate level of encounter. It situates in the ethnographic an array of 'theories' branded conventionally and anthropologically as 'conspiracy theories'. This task is needed for two reasons.

The first reason is because most of the discussion on conspiracy theories in anthropology is done on a level of meta-theory, where conspiratorial debate is tackled as 'theory'. This has been a significant achievement for the discipline, as it has raised the importance (though not a synonym for 'validity') of such discourses on precisely the level of *theory*. Considering their inner logic and workings has brought anthropologists to think of these theories on a par with other ways of reasoning (Marcus 2003), including transparency and suspicion (Sanders and West 2003). Studying the truth-value of such accounts reveals much about hard truths we are uncomfortable with (Pelkmans and Machold 2011), currently a general tendency in the discipline (Ortner 2016). Anthropological attention on the matter can also 'put aside the truth-value of conspiracy theories to study their content as constitutive of critical social commentary' (Mathur 2015: 80).



In effect, anthropologists take conspiracy theories as ‘social facts’ that work in specific cognitive and social contexts (Fassin 2021: 130, 134). Studying them mobilises some of anthropology’s foundational sensibilities concerning cultural relativism and our – sometimes clumsy – propensity to appreciate voices of critique to power (Latour 2004).

This debate might benefit from more attention to the main ethnographic pillar of conspiracism: the people creating the main conspiracy theories that develop in the places we study, who in effect become conspiracy theories’ arbiters and gatekeepers. Ethnographically engaging such professional theorists, the people composing and articulating conspiracy theories, has oddly not taken place in an extensive way thus far. Usually, anthropological encounters with conspiracy theories are situational and focus on interlocutors embracing or propagating them, but not producing them in the first place (e.g. Aupers 2012; Davis 2017; Fassin 2021). The production of such theories thus lurks in the ethnographic background. While there are many ways to appreciate conspiracy theories, clearly talking and working with authors who professionally produce them is a main one – and it has received very little attention. We therefore lack ethnographies that engage with the grassroots ‘arbiter’ voices of conspiracism – that is with the people who construct conspiracy theories, often for a living. This gap is especially noteworthy given that anthropology shares with them the cognitive impulse to articulate a critical take on reality (see Wagner 2000). Analysing conspiracists’ thinking can help explore the overlap of interests between anthropology and conspiracism – their search for ‘evidence’ and formation of communities towards that pursuit. Indeed, a ‘cabal anthropology’ of conspiratorial thinking and practice needs to discuss how the ‘conspiracist “rabbit hole” is not a place of isolation but of community’, while showing how the strange is actually familiar (Sampson 2021: np).

The second reason for which we need this ethnographic work is to assess the uncomfortable points where conspiracism dovetails with far-right thinking. This is because while in public discourse there is strong association of the two, ethnographic work is yet to explore their specific relationship. What is more, much like conspiracy theorists, the fascists of our time utilise certain concepts that lie at the heart of our discipline. Douglas Holmes (2019), summarising the existent ethnography on fascism, highlights an attraction, even a trope, towards ‘anthropological’ terms (‘culture’ and ‘alterity’) among many a fascist. The sociologist Pierre-Andre Taguieff, who has also studied conspiracy theory, first pointed out how, inverting Levi-Strauss, contemporary racists’ rhetoric is largely founded on an assumed incommensurable difference between cultures (Taguieff 2001, 2010). Advancing a post-racial and culture-centred belief on ontological alterity, contemporary fascists therefore utilise tools and terms from both conspiracism and ‘anthropology’.

Working on the ethnographic level has allowed an array of anthropologists (e.g. Heywood 2019; Holmes 2019; Shoshan 2016) to appreciate how notions that are the basic trade of our discipline are also discursive tropes in several xeno-

phobic European discourses. Holmes argues that ‘what I imagined initially as an anthropological account of or about fascism revealed an anthropology operating within fascism’ (2019: 83). The doctrine of cultural incommensurability (Taguieff 2001) arises alongside the vitalism inherent in these culturalistic discourses (Holmes 2019: 77). This is particularly pressurised when the researcher is the life matter of hate, as with the ethnography among German neo-Nazis by the Jewish anthropologist Nitzan Shoshan (2016). The tensions between alterity and similitude in the mobilisation of the terms ‘culture’ and ‘difference’ are an open epistemological arena for exploration. When confronted with the anthropological bias of ‘liking’ interlocutors when they are ‘unlikeable’ (Pasieka 2019), these tensions become more tangible. As it accentuates how culture and difference are mobilised in uncomfortable circumstances, the anthropology of fascism rests precisely in and among these tensions.

Curiously, however, social anthropology is yet to traverse the connection between conspiracy theory and fascism. This omission is odd, as anthropological analyses of radical left wing or anarchist movements and conspiratorial thinking do exist (Lagalisse 2019). The far right and conspiracism are often coupled in critical journalism (Kay 2009) and sociological analysis, where the connections between the Right and conspiracy theory are considered foundational for both (see Taguieff 2006, 2015). However, neither the expanding ethnographic corpus on the fascisms currently on the rise in Europe (Pasieka 2017) nor the anthropological consideration of conspiracy theories have examined each other’s overlappings. This is largely because of anthropologists’ early-established consensus that Hofstadter’s argument (2008 [1952]), connecting the ‘animus’ of the radical Right with conspiracy theory was flawed. Anthropologists seem to agree that the Hofstadterian thesis that conspiracists deviate from reason and feed the far-right, albeit very popular generally (see Aaronovitch 2011; Jacoby 2009), is problematic and, at best, Eurocentric.

In what follows, I tackle the above two theoretical issues and their interconnection. First, I suggest how we should account for conspiracy theories as an active cosmology that enlivens the political outlook of many on the far-right. In tandem, I also draw attention to the fact that most conspiracy theorists may well have little to do with fascism. Indeed, some contemporary conspiracy ‘arbiters’ actively distance themselves from classic bigoted politics like anti-Semitism (see Rakopoulos 2018) and most use the term ‘far-right’ derogatorily in factional discords within their field. Second, the ethnographic eye-level brings me to a similar path as colleagues working on the far-right: affirming the odd relations between conspiracy theories and aspects of our own discipline, by underscoring their epistemic anxieties and truth-activism (Kay 2011), as well as our fascination with exotic thinking. To that avail, I refer to thoughts shared with me by ‘arbiters’ in the field of conspiracy theory in Greece – namely, authors of books and articles that they (and their readership) call ‘conspiratorial’, ‘alternative’, ‘marginal’, ‘unconventional’, ‘revelatory’, ‘anti-establishment’ and ‘truth-seeking’.

Before I embark on this pursuit, I should stress the meaning of this material I call ‘conspiracy theory’. Pelkmans and Machold are concerned principally with how truth and untruth are produced in asymmetrical fields of power: for them, while some conspiracy theories are nonsense, others correctly identify secretly colluding powers (2011: 73). Indeed, they urge us (as many among my interlocutors do, too) to interrogate systematically the links between power and truth (2011: 68) in this process, as the classificatory mechanisms of valid knowledge are certainly products of asymmetrical power plays. The power of labelling has specific normative effects that can render a valid theory obsolete by the classificatory mark of ‘conspiracy’ (Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 74–75). In effect, conspiracy theories are distinguished from ‘valid’ or scholarly theories by mechanisms of epistemic power.

However, reducing them to conspiratorial ‘narratives’, as is of vogue (see Saglam 2020), is not doing justice to their arbiters and creators, who think of themselves and what they do as more than ‘narrative’. They think of it as theory, and some would add the term conspiracy ahead of the word. Rather than accepting an ontological stability for conspiracy theories, I acknowledge that what matters is not to pin down some conspiracy essence – which does not exist – but to consider who gets to label something a conspiracy theory (or theorist) within a wider field of power. In conspiracy milieus, the term ‘conspiracy theorist’ is sometimes used as a derogatory term among participants (Harambam and Aupers 2017: 118). While I do not refrain from using the term ‘conspiracy theory’ to describe what my interlocutors do, I distinguish this practice from assigning them the identity label ‘conspiracy theorist’, and engage in how they use it to characterise each other (as they use the term ‘fascist’). Exactly like the term ‘fascist’ among far-right activists, which can be flattering (Holmes 2019: 66) or can be seen as a way to ‘silence’ someone (2019: 73), the ascription of ‘conspiracy theorist’ in the conspiracist milieu is dynamic. As much as conspiracists are discursive objects suspended in particular fields of power/knowledge, they are also active subjects in shaping a field. With their books, articles and social influence they have shaped a niche known in Greece as ‘conspiracy theory publishing’.

Ethnography Among the ‘Truthers’

The ethnographic ‘eye-level’ can be pinned down to three kinds of empirics. Specifically, the first and main source of inspiration in encountering conspiracy theory in person was the outcome of a cognitive derivative of ethnographic fieldwork with research participants who have dedicated a good deal of their lives working towards producing and proliferating what they see as ‘alternative’, or indeed ‘conspiratorial’, knowledge. These were authors of books (and, in some cases, magazine editors) who have sold tens or even hundreds of thousands of copies in Greece. Choosing Thessaloniki as the main site of my ethnography

was largely based on being in contact with these people, Greece's more established conspiracists, who overwhelmingly were men raised and residing in this city. Their education was varied but all thought of themselves as intellectuals and were recognised as such by their readers and/or followers. These authors, aged between their mid-40s to mid-70s, have largely created and circulated theories since the early 1990s. They include Panagis Arinakis, Giannis Michelos, Kyriakos Velopoulos and Harilaos Monkakis¹ – four people this essay will largely draw from as experts in the field of conspiracy theories who created and circulated theories since at least the early 1990s.

Their conspiratorial narratives vary, spanning global conspiracies popular across the world (chem-trails, anti-vax, alien species' visits and similar) to stories more ingrained in what some see as the national contingency. These latter accounts include an adherence to a neo-pagan millennialism that argues for the prehistorical roots of Hellenism and/or international plots to subvert the Greek nation and especially the Greek economy, exposing hidden connections between diabolical actors such as the 'West' or 'Europe'. While Michelos and Arinakis had a tendency towards the former, Monkakis and Velopoulos stressed the latter. It was then no surprise that Michelos and Arinakis, independently of each other, would call Monkakis and Velopoulos 'fascists' to me. The milieu² is therefore characterised by different worldviews and internal strife but does not confirm the adage 'I am not a conspiracy theorist' identified among lay conspiracists (Harambam and Aupers 2017).

Despite their differences, these authors' books attract a multi-generational readership, from teenagers to those of pension age. There is overlap between this audience and the second sort of ethnographic data I draw from: material I have come across after spending time in internet forums, websites, blogs and social media pages that propagate and disseminate 'conspiratorial narratives'. I have, therefore, defined this field in the ways the internet interlocutors define it themselves. Though the actors in this field are ambivalent about their identity as conspiracy theorists, they embrace their branding as such by the 'powers that be'. They would primarily identify their craft as an unconventional and radical way to talk about 'the political'. 'Conspiracy theory is a form of political rumour that power denies, that people discuss and that some believe', as the administrator of one such page told me. Interlocutors would clearly claim their capacity to arbitrate their milieu by frowning on the amateurism of these internet '*pitsirikaria*' (bunch of kids), thus prioritising printed material over the transient nature of web rumours, marking the generational distance they felt from a younger and (thus) more volatile scene. While the circulation of conspiracies on the internet is manned (it is an overtly masculine world) by younger people, they are however largely influenced by the 'arbiters', who are often cited there. A recurrent trope in this internet conspiracism is 'geopolitics', a term promoted by Velopoulos, an author, publisher and radio station-owner, who turned politician. Unlike their web-era conspiracy counterparts, my interlocutors had been 'in the game', as

Arinakis would put it, since the early 1990s – almost two decades before the web became the main source of information among Greeks.

The third sort of ethnographic data is the sheer exposure I enjoyed, evoked and even provoked in everyday contacts, buttressing more informal flows of information regarding conspiracies while in the field. These eye-level encounters concerned a series of small inputs in my field-notes as the outcome of meetings and conversations with the ordinary people I rubbed shoulders with in central Thessaloniki. Like many contemporary Greeks (see e.g. Sutton 2003), some held strong views on political conspiracies and most were happy to share them with me – especially in reference to a vast range of ideas and theories as to how the Greek crisis came about.³ These included everything from a theory of an alleged façade-default (the idea that a default had already taken place in 2010 and austerity policy is a charade to cover it) to an ‘everything was set-up’ narrative (*‘ola itan stimena’*, the idea that the powers-that-be had a pre-arranged plan to bring Greece to its knees) (see Rabo 2014).

This part of the ethnography followed Arinakis’ own suggestion to take my research ‘outside of the lab’, that is beyond the small circle of arbiter vanguards. I have expanded on this elsewhere (see Rakopoulos 2018). Throughout this paper, instead, I mainly draw from the works (and, especially, the words) of prominent and influential Greek conspiracy theorists, as I interviewed many of those inspiring figures who authored work published as monographs or articles in magazines. In order to protect their identities, I deemed it reasonable and ethical to not refer directly to this body of literature. Inspirational as it might be, and with merit in the forging of their episteme, salvaging the authors’ respectability and anonymity had to be prioritised.⁴

There is one more reason why the ‘eye-level’ immediate encounter matters. Doing ethnography on conspiracism entailed first of all an audacious curving of the first-hand material and the matter itself, which drew on informants’ suggestions. ‘You should dissociate it [conspiracy theory] from its “larvae”’, Giannis Michelos, the editor of the influential (among conspiracists) journal *Diatypon* told me. ‘Our magazine does the same’, he added, as his periodical is self-styled as ‘an esoteric publication printing forbidden, strange, and banned truths’. The ‘larvae’, according to Michelos, were ‘rumours in general, small conspiracies, urban legends with no political importance’, including ideas like the following: crocodiles live in our sewage system; the image of the same scary dog appears in random photographs of people who do not know each other; the story of a haunted house on a main Thessaloniki avenue. These are all inspiring stories but ‘just urban legends’, as Panagis Arinakis (an author who used to collaborate with *Diatypon*) also explained, agreeing with his old friend Michelos, in a different interview.

By contrast, conspiracies are ‘grand’, argues Arinakis: rather than ‘just’ imaginative stories, they are events that re-constitute the political sphere and influence society as a whole. Interestingly, this emic approach is not found in the

political science literature that attempts typologies of conspiracy theories and brands them with negative characteristics (e.g. Butter and Knight 2016). Chem-trail theory (the idea that we are sprayed by airplanes to become docile) and the idea that 9/11 was fabricated by US neo-conservative politicians were acceptable conspiracy theories – worthy of their name – among these experts. A domestic, particularly popular conspiracy was that of ‘the Epsilon phenomenon’, which suggested that an ancient creed of Hellenes from another planet have been fighting a secret war for millennia against the evil Nephilim. Conspiracy theories are therefore ‘inspirational narratives with ecumenical appeal, rather than parochial fanciful stories’, in Arinakis’ words.

I must underline that many, indeed most, of my interlocutors, even when sometimes denying the term ‘conspiracy theory’, did promote the notions of ‘conspiracy’ and ‘conspiracism’ to discuss their ideas about the world. The ambivalence in the usage of the term varied. Interlocutors would routinely reiterate Michelos’ idea of ‘small’ and ‘big’ conspiracies, attributing the term ‘theory’ only to the latter. For instance, the chem-trail phenomenon was a ‘big’ issue, a ‘real’ conspiracy. Indeed, the chem trail story was seen as the ‘great conspiracy of our times’ (in 2015). The idea that we are sprayed over by airplanes, probably by the military (‘no one knows’, noted Michelos), with a toxic substance that pacifies people was something all my interlocutors believed in, wrote about and discussed with me as ‘a conspiracy’. In the case of Greece, the specifics of this international conspiracy were to mollify the population to accept austerity measures, in order to refrain from revolt (Bakalaki 2016), a story taken seriously by the country’s political establishment, too.⁵ Michelos was adamant that the culprits of classic conspiracism (Jews, Masons and combinations thereof) were not the actors behind this phenomenon, but he was also positive that it indeed existed as a designed policy.

Doing ethnography with conspiracy theorist authors implies a discursive fieldwork, in a logo-centric research environment operating on interviews and the printed textuality of conspiracy, in the form of *Diatypon* and similar magazines. The activity in fieldwork involved minor acts of ‘waking people up’, as my research participants would claim, to ‘big issues’ and ‘real’ conspiracies. Such activity was often directed to me personally, as I also needed to ‘wake up’. To stay with the chem-trail example: Arinakis repeatedly invited me to ‘do the experiment’ and find out ‘the truth’ for myself. In one instance, while taking a walk at the Thessaloniki sea promenade, we noticed the trails of a passing plane and chatted about it for a moment. He then pulled out his mobile, turned to me and winked; I could already guess what he would do: he called the ‘Makedonia’ passenger airport of the city. He inquired as to what was the number of the flight that exuded the trail and established that the operators knew nothing about it. He then called the military airport and went through the same process to receive the same answer again. He patted me on the shoulder with a triumphant smirk: ‘Now you know the truth . . . or at least you know that they are hiding the truth from us’, he told me.

The Theorists Behind the Theory

In few places is conspiracism, as a *pas-se-partout* lens to read politics in Greece, more felt than in Thessaloniki, the country's second largest city. Also known as Salonica, the site is a youthful, dynamic city scattered with remnants of urban settlement spanning two millennia. It is also a unique case in European history in as much as for almost 500 years it was the only city in the continent whose majority population were Jews. Conservative by most accounts, Thessaloniki routinely elects people from right-wing nationalist milieus for its local and regional governance, with the recent exception of an eight-year run by a centrist mayor. The politician embraced the city's Ottoman and Jewish history and promoted peace with its Balkan neighbours, but faced fierce opposition in doing so, not least in a violent attack. The fascist Right as personified in Golden Dawn never really set root in the city electorally. In Thessaloniki, the site where Greece's main conspiracy theory figures pursue their careers and antagonise each other, the conspiratorial occasionally meets the Right.

I dived into conspiracy theory as a field of expertise from the beginning of fieldwork, as I approached one of the main two publishers of Antiquity's Classics in Greece, Yannis Kodros (of 'Kodros' publishing house), a person who often uploaded nativist articles on his social media pages. An owner of a half-defunct bookstore in central Thessaloniki, he made a constant income through the local university's subscribed book list from his store. The university bought the books with state subsidies and distributed them to Philosophy and Classics students for free – a sign of conspiracy and reason converging in taught scholarship (see Marcus 2003).

I was stunned and sometimes distressed by the anti-Semitic tone of his Facebook page. I was long aware of the conspiratorial narratives about 'the Epsilon' (a pen-name for the continuation of an ancient tribe of Hellenes) who were fighting to save the world from 'The Nephilim' (a thinly veiled mythology connoting Jews), in time immemorial. It disturbed me that a publisher of his credentials would circulate such stories – and I told him. He urged me to give an answer, 'as an anthropologist, if I dared', to the following question: 'In what terms is conspiracy a political event, and why has it been linked to the Right and paranoia?' Echoing Arinakis and Michelos, for Kodros conspiracy theory is 'a marginalised way to read reality that has *something to do with politics*'. Conspiracism is thus again 'not an urban legend or an odd story . . . it speaks truth to power, by definition . . . as an anthropologist you should know'.

The idea of 'truth activism' that I first heard from Kodros is central in this pursuit. It refers to bridging that assumed gap that separates reality and truth. Seeking out the difference between truth and reality for truthers, I followed the advice of Kodros and sought out the well-known Kyriakos Velopoulos, a then 48-year-old man with a rich biography, which included four years in Parliament with a far-right party. When I met him, Velopoulos was away from parliamen-

tary politics and ‘dedicated to authoring new books’ while also ‘reflecting on how [his] past work was vindicated in the light of events’. Recently, in the summer of 2019, he managed to enter the Hellenic Parliament again, this time as a leader of a new party he had founded, a populist, nativist and Orthodox-fundamentalist group that currently (as of 2022) occupies the furthest to the right in Parliament. When interviewed by a journalist on whether he was replacing the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, he infamously said ‘I don’t agree with excessively Nazi things’ (*ta poly nazistika me vriskoun antitheto*). The phrase caused havoc in the Greek public sphere. It was followed by the admission that ‘I *want* the voters of the Golden Dawn; I want them to think sanely and Hellenically’ [emphasis mine]. That TV interview took place four years after my interview with him and only two months ahead of his major success in the national elections in July 2019. Velopoulos is close to the Church, whose priests are often prone to conspiracy theory, and is a fervent admirer of Putin, whom he has publicly referred to as an Orthodox who can save his kindred, the crisis-ridden smaller nation of the Hellenes.

I am here taking Douglas Holmes’ point seriously on revisiting material from our own recent ethnographic past (Holmes 2010), in the light of a current predicament – the overwhelming, global turn to the far-right, a ‘Fascism 2’ (Holmes 2016). While I personally considered Velopoulos on the far-right, and reflected on it (Rakopoulos 2018), I avoided this characterisation in order to focus on his conspiratorial flair. However, as our interlocutors’ social standing develops through time, the context of their words changes too. Here is an excerpt from my earlier 2015 interview with Velopoulos:

An author mainly writes from his soul, while a researcher mainly from the mind. I write mainly from the soul, from the heart, but with facts. I am doing the research and expose the facts in order to demonstrate and prove that those things I believe in are indeed how things are. And the other, the reader, has the burden of proof. When I have a sense of the truth, I go out in books to find it, until I’ve found it.

The dazzling point on finding truth here is unwittingly referring to a classic quote from *Mein Kampf*, where truth-finding reality is established on a reversed burden of proof, which lies with the reader, rather than with the author. That is, ‘it is not I who need to explain and prove; the plain fact that power is afraid of what I am saying and tries to disapprove it, implies I am right’. However, in the same interview, an hour later, he pointed out that:

I do not see why I should hate the Jews. Last time my nation fought against the Jewry was at 1000 BC. My enemies are others; if anything, we should pursue collaboration with Israel. All those out there with anti-Semitic feelings, I would suggest a dose of psychiatric medicine.

Steering clear of anti-Semitism while committing to extreme nationalism is not unique to Velopoulos, and in fact pro-Israel sentiment is a common feature among

many contemporary fascists. Anti-anti-Semitic discourse is nevertheless an interesting trend among conspiracists and so is a tendency to embrace Freemasonry.

The 75-year-old ex-military man Harilaos Monkakis, who cuts a serious, polite figure, is the author of many neopagan ultra-Hellenic books, including some suggesting the existence of the Epsilon. During an interview, we sat at a café, very close to his publisher's bookstore; the store is located opposite the main Masonic Lodge of the city, in a bloc that also hosts *Voreion*, one of the most majestic and high-cultured cinemas in Thessaloniki. While the theories that Monkakis shared with me included constant references to fanciful stories like the Epsilon and ancient gods (for hours), he dissociated from anti-masonic bias:

[other authors] claim that the Freemasons are the root of all evil. There is nothing sillier than that. See this [building], opposite us? My collaboration with them [Masons] has been ideal and I have come to know them from inside. My own publisher is a 33rd degree Mason. There is nothing bad about this at all. (Monkakis, 75, June 2015)

Alongside distancing from classic fascist tropes, the epistemic domain is claimed for one's work to embolden it with the validity of actual truth. Monkakis repeatedly told me that what he does is 'science', that he is 'cited in Harvard' and that his books are widely circulated among Physics and Maths students at the University of Thessaloniki (the latter is factually true, as I have come to know through meeting such students). Velopoulos also claims he is a scholarly historian. Through the 2000s, his books could be found in the library of the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki's second largest, in quite a prominent position.

Indeed, instead of far-right clichés on Jews and Masons, the real trope in conspiratorial narratives here is 'truth', a term often associated with 'science'. Take Arinakis, for example: while claiming that science is as open to interpretation as fiction is, and that we live in an era of epistemic dictatorship (what he calls 'the fundamentalism of the lab'), he would, however, occasionally in our conversations utilise an epistemic reductionism. According to his own admittance, his references to 'dreaming of alternative scenarios' were founded on Freudian and Deep Ecology scholarship. He would routinely remind me that conspiracies are 'not that crazy, really. They are truths that wait to be broadly recognised, much like Galileo's idea that the Earth is moving'. The associations with paradigm shifts in science are startling – underlining that conspiracism is both a discipline based on work and an art based on inspiration. Importantly, Arinakis seems aware of a major epistemological premise for positivist science, 'limitations', while he bemoans what he calls the 'republican fanaticism' of scientists that debunk conspiracy theories:

a revolutionary committee is in power, the doubtful mechanisms instilled by modernity. The kings are dead. The French Revolution has taken over the world. The 'reasoned' are in power. But where is sense? Where are the solutions that they, the 'reasoned', the science-centred, had promised us? No king to blame, so why would no one blame their own limitations?

It is central to underscore that most conspiracist views about the cosmological ramifications of this ‘reality’ are not only different, but also richly diverse, and indeed contrarian to each other. In this internal strife, interlocutors were routinely associating fellow conspiracists with the two tropes of the Hofstadterian thesis (paranoia and the far-right). Therefore, ‘paranoid’ is used as a pejorative to describe a competitor theorist and the term ‘fascist’ as a way to debunk the validity of one’s claims. In discussion with me, Arinakis used the terms, ‘paranoid’ and ‘far-right’ to describe Monkakis, while both called Velopoulos ‘a fascist’. All three had bad things to say about Dakopoulos, another major Thessalonikian conspiracy theorist and by 2015 standards arguably the most appealing in all Greece. All the above called Varkidis, another author, ‘a crook’, while Arinakis pointed out that Varkidis is also ‘a crazy fascist’.

It is common among conspiracists and other fringe groups to have conflicts and accusations of being traitors, agents or of being plainly irrelevant; Freud called this the narcissism of minor differences (Blok 1998). Paying attention to the diversified cosmos of conspiracism helps to demystify and de-essentiale this milieu, and links it to a sociological characteristic of political groups: factionalism. This way we also take these discourses seriously (see Pasieka 2019), as matters of inquiry stemming from conscious agents. Conspiracists themselves often prioritise their radical break from other conspiracies, which they find more important than any break from a ‘rational’ reality.

‘The Truth Is Out There’: Conspiracy and Anthropology

Conspiracy theory, in the way my interlocutors conceive it, is a desperate search for a hidden reality – a sense that the truth is ‘out there’ (Bakalaki 2016). Crucially though, given the fact that prominent conspiracists promote their theories as ‘science’, it does not constitute a non-intelligible ontology situated in a cosmos other than our conventional critical pursuits. Even in the dream-ridden cosmos that Arinakis defends, all conspiracy theory does is to offer an alternative to ‘mainstream’ science. In that way, conspiracy theories provide an *altera pars* of the existing regime of knowledge, as they attempt to bring into close proximity a kind of thinking that is often radically different from the conventional one. Since at least Evans-Pritchard’s inquiry among Zande magic (1976 [1937]), this has been anthropology’s quest, too.

In fact, anthropology’s claim to empirical knowledge shares a cognitive impulse with conspiracy theory: anthropologists and conspiracy theorists search for truths, for modes of thinking ‘out there’, among the Others. In the process (like anthropologists), they are conditioned by this alterity in building up knowledge. Reflecting on the reduction to the epistemic, as well as the political accusations among conspiracy theorists, calls for reviewing our own anthropological meta-theory of conspiracy theory. Anthropologists have noted that occult prac-

tices of witchcraft and magic form a modality of suspicion and doubt very similar to ‘Western’ conspiratorial thinking. Sanders and West suggest the term ‘occult cosmologies’ to review conspiracism in societies other than ‘Western’⁶ (2003: 6). Despite ontological dimensions of belief that distinguish the occult from conspiratorial thinking, some anthropologists agree on seeing conspiracy as a different form of magical thinking, akin to Evans-Pritchard’s witchcraft (Sanders and West 2003: 12, 16; Marcus and Powell 2003: 327; cf. Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]).

Looking into the Thessaloniki milieu, however, shows that conspiracists make claims – if not appeals – to degrees of hegemonic epistemic validity for their theories rather than magic-like processes. Because of this audacity, they face mechanisms of epistemic power that distinguish conspiracy theories from scholarly theories. The recognition of this epistemic power is the source of Pelkmans and Machold’s (2011) critique to Sanders and West’s (2003) relativist position that levels the epistemic and the conspiratorial worlds. Pelkmans and Machold are principally concerned with how truth and untruth are produced in asymmetrical fields of power/knowledge: for them, while some conspiracy theories are nonsense, others correctly identify secretly colluding powers (2011: 73). While I am indifferent to whether what my Thessalonikian interlocutors write and say is ‘nonsense’, I agree that we need to interrogate systematically the links between power and truth (2011: 68), as the classificatory mechanisms of ‘valid’ and ‘veridical’ knowledge are certainly products of asymmetrical power plays. The power of labelling has specific normative effects that can render a critical theory obsolete by classifying it as a ‘conspiracy theory’ (Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 74–75; cf. Harambam and Aupers 2017; Fassin 2021).

The subversiveness of conspiracy theory has been pointed out by Roy Wagner (Carlos Castaneda’s disciple) as ‘our very own cargo cult’ (Wagner 2000). In the eponymous essay, he notes how UFOlogy⁷ is a twofold subversive process, both regarding what we know and what we can learn:

If UFOs are entirely bogus, artefacts of ingenious forms of trickery or self-trickery, then the question of who is responsible for them is the only issue that matters. But if at least some of the UFOs are really what they seem to be, craft or objects that defy our whole understanding of how things work, then the question of *who is responsible for them* becomes even more important. And our whole understanding of culture, history, and physics might have to be revised. (Wagner 2000: 266; emphasis mine)

Remote truths are therefore paradoxical matters for scholarly inquiry: it is not events that concern us here but who spreads the rumours on them. This is the crucial difference between conspiracy and conspiracy *theory*.

This is why I ethnographically suggest to pay attention to who crafts theories on UFOs, chem-trails and Epsilons alike, while being aware of the powers that label them conspiracy theories. As noted already, there are many ways to study conspiracy theories, but certainly a major one is to talk to arbiters, those

who work on them professionally – people who pursue this task within a regime of knowledge extraditing this material to the domain of ‘conspiracy theory’. My approach traces that theory to its roots and situates it in the lives of the minds behind it. The approach suggests that the empirical data for a study of conspiracy theory can have its ethnographic encounter point at the lives of the theorists.

This has been the theoretical aim and ethnographic scope of this article. In this ethnographic context, this implies paying attention to what Thessaloniki-based conspiracy ‘arbiters’ Velopoulos, Monkakis and Arinakis have to say.⁸ In that sense, it is irrelevant if the empirical material claimed by truth-seeking theory has ever happened or whether it is nonsensical or not. Instead, the empirical material for research here is their theoretical construction of knowledge. Assuming that ethnographic position brings anthropology ‘at eye level’ with conspiracy theory.

Reclaiming Theory

The ethnography on conspiracy theories brings us to an immediate level of encounter not with the theories but with the *theorists* behind conspiracies. Instead of magical or outright fascist thinking, we witness a field of living theory that is amenable to change and is internally differentiated. Variations can include one theorist approaching fascism (Velopoulos), another theorist marrying aspects of fantasy with claims to science (Monkakis) or yet another retaining the place of dreaming for the creation of such theories (Arinakis). The field becomes an area of conflict where fascism and paranoia become discursive tropes of career choices (like Velopoulos’ political career), or of accusing antagonists (like the claims that another theorist is a fascist or a paranoid person).

The ethnographic encounter among the truthers (Kay 2011) brings the anthropology of conspiracy theory amidst the social basis of these alternative political theories to witness the knowledge production of conspiracism. However, shedding light on a conspiracy of secret connections to fabricate ‘alternative’ scenarios of causation is of course not unique to this type of theory. While many theories claim to be ‘alternative’, in the sense of original or radical, in their take on social reality (anthropological theory might be one example), their defining characteristic is not that they are ‘alternative’. This condition is, rather, an outcome of their marginality within the system of hegemony in the public sphere. That system of hegemony might often ascribe to ‘truthful’ knowledge a primary position in the hierarchy of cognition (see for instance Fritze 2009). However, many people recognise alternative forms of knowledge when they demand transparency from their government (Davis 2017: 154).

Conspiracy theory reshapes the linear causation lines in exegesis (Ingold 2007). Much conspiracy theorising creates, reproduces and disseminates a plethora of ideas that border on what we call reactionary populist politics: anti-

Semitism, anti-Freemasonry, old-school racism, nativism, cultural purism and xenophobia (Taguieff 2006, cf Kalb 2009). However, as shown, many authors of the genre steer clear of these tropes and in fact speak against them; for them, conspiracy discourse is ‘a matter of dreaming, not of hating’, as Arinakis told me.

Far from contributing a facet of empirical work on how conspiracists converge with fascism, I suggest that the relationship between conspiracy theory and the far-Right is neither causal nor interactive. Rather, it is shaped as part of personal circumstance and community development. In that respect, conspiracy theory offers a milieu, an ambience within which historically specific discourses mobilise. Classic radical right tropes might not hold water with conspiracy theorists today (as per the anti-anti-Semitism of Velopoulos or anti-anti-Freemasonry of Monkakis). At the same time, the current conspiratorial ambience includes far-right populism such as QAnon, but also intensely political views on anti-vaxxing, which however refuse political taxonomies. The conspiracy mindset is not about facts but about social engagement, and conspiracy theories cannot be contested on facts but should be seen as political projects (Sampson 2021). The intention matters: to stay with a current example, Pizzagate is an alt-right malevolent lie, resulting in a fake news story – and in that way we need to distinguish it from conspiracy theories for both analytical and political reasons (Fassin 2021: 132). Conversely, within the conspiracist ambience, people like Velopoulos can fluctuate between overlapping domains of far-right thinking and a conspiracism that rejects classic far-right tropes (see also Rakopoulos 2017, 2018).

Problematising the disciplinary construction of human knowledge according to social science therefore becomes a research priority. We are not here to challenge the ‘truth’ of the empirical material that truth-seeking activists claim they have access to, but to understand how they construct their reality. I have suggested that a main way to achieve this is to attend to the main ethnographic pillar of conspiracism: the people producing the key conspiracy theories in our ethnographic sites.

THEODOROS RAKOPOULOS is associate professor at the Social Anthropology Department of the University of Oslo. He is the author of *From clans to co-ops: Confiscated mafia land in Sicily* (Berghahn, 2017) and editor of *The global life of austerity* (Berghahn, 2018). He has done research in rural Sicily and urban Greece, and most recently in Cyprus. His research interests include mafia and antimafia, talk and silence, solidarity, cooperatives, conspiracy theory, citizenship and commodification. His latest monograph *Citizenship for sale: The global market for passports in Cyprus* is under contract with Manchester University Press, due for publication in 2023. Email: Theodoros.rakopoulos@sai.uio.no; ORCID: 0000-0003-1902-0274.

Notes

1. All names of people as well as journals, bookstores and other identifying sites and outlets are pseudonyms. The only exception is Velopoulos, who is a public figure known to the majority of Greeks.
2. I describe the mechanisms through which they distance themselves from each other, as they are many more than the – very rare – mechanisms of community belonging and producing among my interlocutors.
3. I have discussed at length the sociocultural politics of the crisis and the various resistance discourses to it elsewhere (see Rakopoulos 2014, 2015; see also Kalantzis 2015).
4. I have to deeply thank the authors who either urged me to buy or indeed gifted me their books and magazines and stay true to my promise to respect their privacy, when critically conveying the content of their message. The limitation concerns precisely prioritising this confidentiality over ‘data’. Taking seriously the point that conspiracy is sidelined or glossed as such in regimes of power/knowledge, in a play of power over what is worthy as theory or not (Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 67), I had to choose protecting informants’ moral worlds. This ethical choice, ironically, marginalises their own ‘voice’. In that respect, citing from esteemed scholarship but not from the sources we study, we end up compromising our claims and strive to take them seriously. It is my conviction that this paradox haunts every ethnography of conspiracy theory.
5. For instance, five MPs from five different parties, in the last five years, have brought to the Parliament, in question time, a query on chem-trails. They included sober, uber-rational seasoned politicians. One therefore wonders about the limits of rationality as an analytical tool.
6. The authors critically ask if there is a distribution of labour between the West and the rest, in a power-informed epistemic taxonomy. The Greek context, routinely positioned between the West and the Other in such taxonomy in power discourses, clearly lends itself to debunking this kind of facile thinking (Herzfeld 2015).
7. Carlos Castaneda, an advocate of this decentred knowledge, is probably the most famous anthropologist ever after Levi-Strauss outside the discipline. Roy Wagner was his disciple and the interest in UFOs might have something to do with his involvement in Castaneda’s dreamworld.
8. It can, equally, mean how the textuality of the anti-Semitic book *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (published by, among others, my interlocutor Kodros) is imprinted in Thessaloniki, a city with its own Jewish and millennial history (Rakopoulos 2018: 377).

References

- Aaronovitch, D. 2011. *Voodoo histories: the role of the conspiracy theory in shaping modern history*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Aupers S. 2012. “‘Trust no one’: modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture’, *European Journal of Communication* 27: 22–34.
- Bakalaki, A. 2016. ‘Chemtrails, crisis and loss in an interconnected world’, *Visual Anthropology* 32: 12–23.
- Blok, A. 1998. ‘The narcissism of minor differences’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 1: 33–56.
- Butter, M. and P. Knight 2016. ‘Bridging the great divide: conspiracy theory research for the 21st century’, *Diogenes* 62: 17–29.

- Davis, E. 2017. 'The information is out there': transparency, responsibility, and the missing in Cyprus, in S. Trnka and C. Trundle (eds.), *Competing responsibilities: the politics and ethics of contemporary life*, 136–155. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1976 [1937]. *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fritze, R. 2009. *Invented knowledge: false history, fake science and pseudo-religions*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Harambam, J and S. Aupers 2017. "I am not a conspiracy theorist": relational identifications in the Dutch conspiracy milieu', *Cultural Sociology* 11: 113–129.
- Herzfeld, M. 2015. 'Anthropology and inchoate intimacies of power', *American Ethnologist* 42: 18–32.
- Heywood, P. 2019. 'Fascism, uncensored: legalism and neo-fascist pilgrimage in Predappio, Italy', *Terrain* 72 <https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.18955>
- Hofstadter, R. 2008 [1952]. *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Holmes, D. R. 2010 [2000]. *Integral Europe: fast-capitalism, multiculturalism, neofascism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Holmes, D. R. 2016. 'Fascism 2', *Anthropology Today* 32: 1–3.
- Holmes, D. R. 2019. 'Fascism at eye level: the anthropological conundrum', *Focaal* 84: 62–90.
- Ingold, T. 2007. *Lines: a brief history*. London: Routledge.
- Jacoby, S. 2009. *The age of American unreason*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kalantzis, K. 2015. "Fak Germani": materialities of nationhood and transgression in the Greek crisis', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57: 1037–1069.
- Kalb, D. 2009. 'Conversations with a Polish populist: tracing hidden histories of globalization, class, and dispossession in postsocialism (and beyond)', *American Ethnologist* 36: 207–223.
- Kay, J. 2011. *Among the truthers: a journey through America's growing conspiracist underground*. New York: Harper.
- Lagalis, E. M. 2019. *Occult features of anarchism – with attention to the conspiracy of kings and the conspiracy of the peoples*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Latour, B. 2004. 'Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30: 225–248.
- Marcus, G. 2003. *Paranoia within reason: a casebook on conspiracy as explanation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Marcus, G. and M. Powell 2003. 'From conspiracy theories in the incipient New World Order of the 1990s to regimes of transparency now', *Anthropological Quarterly* 76: 323–334.
- Mathur, N. 2015. "It's a conspiracy theory and climate change": of beastly encounters and cervine disappearances in Himalayan India', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5: 87–111.
- Ortner, S. 2016. 'Dark anthropology and its others: theory since the eighties', *HAU, Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6: 47–73.
- Pasieka, A. 2017. 'Taking far-right claims seriously and literally: anthropology and the study of right-wing radicalism', *Slavic Review* 76: 19–29.
- Pasieka, A. 2019. 'Anthropology of the far-right: what if we like the "unlikeable" others?', *Anthropology Today* 35: 3–6.
- Pelkmans, M. and R. Machold 2011. 'Conspiracy theories and their truth trajectories', *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 59: 66–80.

- Rakopoulos, T. 2014. Resonance of solidarity: Anti-middleman food distribution in anti-austerity Greece. *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 32(2): 95–119.
- Rakopoulos, T. 2015. Solidarity's tensions: Informality and sociality in the Greek crisis. *Social Analysis* 59(3): 85-104.
- Rakopoulos, T. 2017. 'Approaching' Sorras: 'Conspiracy theories' and the social sciences.
- Rakopoulos, T. 2018. Show me the money: Conspiracy theories and distant wealth. *History and Anthropology* 29(3): 376-91.
- «Προσεγγίζοντας» τον Σώρρα: «Θεωρίες συνωμοσίας» και κοινωνικές επιστήμες. *Synchrona Themata* 136: 24-27.
- Rabo, A. 2014. 'It has all been planned'. Talking about us and powerful others in contemporary Syria, in M. Butter and M. Reinkowski (eds.), *Conspiracy theories in the United States and the Middle East. A comparative perspective*, 212–227. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Saglam, E. 2020. 'What to do with conspiracy theories? Insights from contemporary Turkey', *Anthropology Today* 36: 18–21.
- Sampson, S. 2021. 'Cabal anthropology – or whether the anthropology of belief helps us understand conspiracism', *FocaalBlog* 13 September <https://www.focaalblog.com/2021/09/13/steven-sampson-cabal-anthropology>
- Sanders, T. and H. West (eds.) 2003. *Transparency and conspiracy: ethnographies of suspicion in the New World Order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shoshan, N. 2016. *The management of hate: nation, affect, and the governance of right-wing extremism in Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sutton, D. 2003. Poked by the 'foreign finger' in Greece: conspiracy theory or the hermeneutics of suspicion? in K. Brown and Y. Hamilakis (eds.), *The usable past: Greek metahistories*, 191–210. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Taguieff, P.-A. 2001. *The force of prejudice: on racism and its doubles*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Taguieff, P.-A. 2006. *The myth of the 'Elders of Zion': from the international Jewish conspiracy to the global Zionist threat*. Athens: Polis.
- Taguieff, P.-A. 2010. *Conspiracy theories: esoterism, extremism*. Athens: Polis.
- Taguieff, P.-A. 2015. *Conspirational thinking and 'theories of conspiracy'*. Athens: Epikentro.
- Wagner, R. 2000. 'Our very own cargo cult', *Oceania* 70: 362–372.

Des fascistes et des rêveurs : anthropologie et théorie du complot

Cet article aborde la théorie du complot par le biais d'une rencontre ethnographique avec des personnes largement responsables de la création et de la diffusion de ces théories. Il soutient que l'ethnographie de la théorie du complot est une ethnographie sur et avec les théoriciens du complot. L'essai répond ainsi aux récents appels à aborder les idées inconfortables « au niveau des yeux ». Ces appels à prendre au sérieux les personnes qui adhèrent à des idées difficiles proviennent des travaux des penseurs d'extrême droite, un domaine qui converge parfois avec la théorie du complot. L'examen du matériel issu d'un travail de terrain parmi les auteurs du genre conspirationniste en Grèce met en lumière un large éventail de préoccupations, allant de l'idée que leurs travaux sont dignes de la science à des déclarations à la fois associées et dissociées des idées fascistes. Je montre comment les professionnels du domaine de la théorie du complot élaborent de telles théories et (re)travaillent leur statut social. Tandis

que je prends au sérieux les revendications épistémiques des arbitres de la théorie du complot, j'explore leurs relations avec l'extrême droite. L'examen des auteurs de théories du complot n'a pas encore été considéré comme digne d'une enquête ethnographique en anthropologie. Cela est intrigant, car la rencontre avec les théoriciens du complot inspire un processus de réévaluation de la nature critique de notre propre discipline, avec ses mécanismes de doute et sa soif de réalités alternatives. Je propose donc des analogies entre ces théories et la discipline anthropologique.

Mots-clés : anthropologie, théorie du complot, fascisme, production de connaissances, Grèce