ANDREAS ÖNNERFORS, ANDRÉ KROUWEL (Eds.):
Europe: Continent of Conspiracies. Conspiracy Theories
in and about Europe
London, Routledge 2021, 282 p.

The book presented is a collection of thirteen studies by various authors based on quantitative and qualitative research and analysis of conspiracy theories in and about Europe. Although each study is based on its own data analysis, we can observe how the recurring principles of the conspiracy faith intersect in many places in the book. The publication allows the reader to understand how conspiracy theories work, how they form and spread, and how influential they are. It could be said that the European continent, even under the pressure of various crises, is heavily soaked and marked by the influence of conspiracy. Susceptibility to acquiring these ideas and beliefs may vary. Nevertheless, their constant and repeated action contributes to escalating negative emotions and fear and can lead to extreme actions.

One of the cornerstones of conspiracy theories is the dualistic perception of "us" vs "other". The introductory chapter provides a brief historical insight into how the mythology of Europe was shaped through the dualistic perception and setting of ideologies. The dualistic creation of European identity has been transformed into various narratives about the (in)consistency of Europe and its demarcation from "others". The distinction between truth and lies, good and evil, them and us, or "Manichean antagonism between the 'people' and 'the elite' is a constitutive feature of the narrative conspiracy" (Chapter 1, p. 14). In *A Culture of Conspiracy*, Michael Barkun states that the focus of conspiracy theories is to target and describe the enemy and establish apocalyptic ideas through dualist optics (Barkun, 2013).

As Eirikur Bergmann describes in Chapter 3, Renaud Camus's Great Replacement theory is one of the most influential, well-rooted conspiracy theories around today. This extremist theory warns that "Muslims, or other groups of migrants are actively plotting in secret to conquer the West in a hostile, albeit incremental, takeover" (Chapter 3, p. 37) and is based on the apocalyptic notion that European cultural, Christian or democratic values will be pushed out, replaced and destroyed by Muslim domination. This theory has fuelled the ideologies of various radical and extremist movements, such as the neo-Nazis, who have warned against Muslims and Islamization as a threat to Europe's heritage and soul. Anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim rhetoric gained momentum during the refugee crisis in 2015, when it significantly penetrated the discourse of certain national leaders. Muslims have also come to be seen as a security or health risk, with many theories asserting their responsibility for the spread of new and dangerous diseases, the rape of white women and terrorism. As Estrella Gualda describes in Chapter 4, a stereotypical image of a "Muslim" as a deviant, a rapist or a terrorist has been developed (Chapter 4, p. 58).

The creation and dissemination of a stereotypical image of Muslim Arabs was confirmed, for example, in a study by Iris Wigger (2019) focused on the textual analysis of German magazines. Her analysis highlights that the researched publications spread a stereotypical image of Muslim migrants and Arabs as sexual aggressors and violators who pose a threat to women because male dominance is "a characteristic feature of Muslim migrants and is portrayed as a basic dimension of their religious beliefs" (Wigger, 2019).

It is not surprising that Islamophobia began to grow in Western societies. It can be defined as "the negative positioning of Islam and Muslim as the 'Other' posing a threat to 'Us'" (Bergmann, Chapter 3, p. 49). Although statistics indicate a relatively low percentage of Muslim immigrants in the EU, Islamophobia spread through political discourses and influenced voter preferences. The book deals with this concept to quite substantially and shows, as an example, how influential conspiracies that spread the fear of Islamization were in the Brexit elections.

Fear, or what is scientifically termed "a culture of fear", is one of the functional tools of the conspiracy narrative, and is often transformed into metaphors or stereotypical phrases. Metaphors (Chapters 4, 5) represent a relatively flexible linguistic tool for spreading negative ideas. They manipulate stereotypical and imaginary images whose meanings do not coincide with the reality of the people they represent. There are also many well-known visual forms such as GIFs or memes in the digital environment, which makes these negative images more visible (Gualda, Chapter 4). The reach of conspiracy is thus expanding relatively rapidly and across geographical boundaries.

Conspiracy theories spread fear and stereotypes, demonization, warnings, warn of existential threats, dualism, communicate in dualisms (us vs them, good vs bad, true vs lie), or advocate for the superiority of Christian culture and values. As part of the conspiracy discourse, this contributes to increasing anger and violence. The book highlights specific cases where conspiracy theories were behind attacks and incitement of violence. In well-known incidents such as Anders Breivik's 2011 attack Norwegian teenagers, Stephan Balliet's attack on a synagogue in Halle in 2019, or the 2016 attack on police officers in Bavaria by a member of the Reichsbürger (Reich citizen) group, we can see the catastrophic consequences of the influence of conspiratorial thinking. Great Replacement theory proclaims the irreplaceability of a unique culture and history, and its incompatibility with another different one. According to this logic, accepting another culture means the demise of the original, therefore Europe faces a severe threat of being destroyed by incoming refugees. It is threatened by people who have the essence of the "other", the invariably encoded socio-cultural and religious nature. That is why, such conspiracy theorists argue, the refugee situation must be reversed, social benefits for refugees must be abolished, and the nation must be protected by law. They argue that politicians should build and preserve the nation's own national identity, stating "The
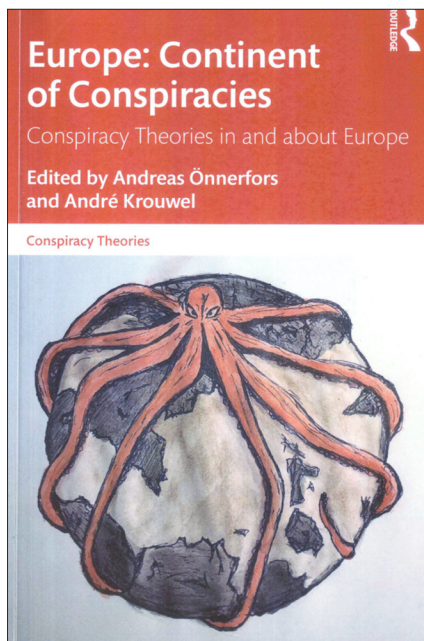
nation must be reborn" (p. 86). Many attacks have been carried out in the spirit of these beliefs, and the book also investigates the relationship between conspiracy and violence (e.g., Andreas Önnerfors in Chapter 5).

In addition to the often-repeated anti-Muslim motives, we also find the United States in the position of a European enemy. An example is the Reichsbürger movement, discussed by Florian Buchmayr in Chapter 6, established in response to official authority and the consequence of deep mistrust in the government. The philosophy of this collection of far-right groups and individuals lies in the conspiracy theory that the Third Reich never disappeared and Germany is not a legitimately valid state institution. They argue that Germany is not an independent state because it is under US domination. The movement's ideology is interwoven with various conspiracy theories and applied through active resistance to the state. The issuance of Third Reich identity documents, refusal to pay taxes, and recurring confrontations with official authorities are further examples of the effects of the conspiracy. The example of this movement to highlights the internal heterogeneity of members of conspiracy groups. The Reichsbürger movement is not only an example of how conspiracy theories can be transformed into real-world activity but also a reminder that their followers do not represent a fundamentally homogeneous group that can be easily defined. Harambam and Aupers (2017) also addressed this topic in a study focusing on the self-identification of conspiracy theorists. They pointed to the common stereotypical notion of paranoid minds, according to which conspiracy theorists are judged by default. They found that conspiracy theorists represent a heterogeneous group of individuals who do not fit a uniform, broad-ranging definition. This holds true for the Reichsbürger movement, as a movement that brings together a wide variety of members under a single banner. While some hark back to the old roots and try to revive the image of the past, others focus on the struggle for the freedom and autonomy of the individual.

Barkun defines conspiracy theories as stigmatized notions that have been torn from the mainstream and pushed to the margins of society, making them marginalized beliefs (Barkun, 2016). Likewise, other scholars have provided evidence that faith in conspiracies is perceived as a source of social stigma (Lantian et al., 2018; Husting, Orr, 2007). *Europe: Continent of Conspiracies* provides insight in the opposite direction: how these stigmatized beliefs can become part of official discourse. As Irina Diana Madroane describes, "Conspiracy theories have gradually become integrated into mainstream political and media discourses, public argumentation, and rhetoric" (Chapter 8, p. 142). It is interesting to see how these stigmatized and marginalized beliefs find application in mainstream rhetoric. Madroane goes on to describe how conspiratorial notions of immigration gradually spilled over into mainstream discourse during the Brexit referendum. The highlighting of the negative effects of immigration in the Leave campaign took the form of conspiratorial attitudes inspired by populist rhetoric. The campaign was influenced by Euroscepticism and anti-immigration attitudes which spoke to the concerns of a certain portion of British society about security, the consequences of illegal migration, and worsening labour market conditions. Fear of Islamic terrorism also came into the discussion. However, anti-Islamic references did not refer directly to conspiracy sources but were mediated by inconspicuous forms of symbolic references, such as exposing liars or raising apocalyptic prospects. Non-violent, indirect, and repeated communication leaves it to the reader how to interpret the information, but indirectly flirts with the conspiratorial mind. It is precisely this type of mainstream communication and the use of linguistic tools such as symbols, metaphors, stereotypes that can transform conspiratorial thinking from the rhetoric of extremist and radical movements to official discourse.

Europe: Continent of Conspiracies presents examples from specific countries in its final studies. For example, a huge government campaign was launched in Hungary against George Soros, who represented an ideal enemy to the country's right-wing political establishment, as a liberal and a Jew. Strong anti-Soros propaganda used the tool of fear and, in its fight against the so-called "Soros Plan" (infestation of nations with refugees, Islamization and "de-Christianization" of the EU), going as far as the public display of accusations on billboards, in TV and radio broadcasts, and in newspapers. Again, however, we can see that although the anti-Soros campaign became a source of anti-Semitic views, its messages were transmitted through covert forms such as cartoons or the use of indirect language associations. These forms of communication managed to send out clear anti-Semitic signals which the government could nevertheless easily deny. By penetrating mainstream discourse, stigmatized conspiracy theories can become normative, as has happened in Russia, where pro-Kremlin propaganda has been forcefully pushed through pro-Kremlin media to destabilize Western liberal states, as described by Holger Mölder in Chapter 12.

In the examples I have selected from the book, we can again see the tactics used by conspiracy theories to create stereotypical images of powerful Jews and criminal Muslims or to spread a culture of fear through recurring motifs such as the Great Replacement theory. However, what needs to be pointed out, and what we find throughout the book, is that Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are not just harmless criticisms but a form of hate speech that leads to violence, hatred and crime. This danger increases as conspiracy theories penetrate mainstream discourse and become instruments of political strategies and campaigns.

Europe: Continent of Conspiracies not only provides expert knowledge for the enrichment of the scientific scene but also offers a new perception of conspiracy and points out the obvious reasons it is necessary to pay attention to it. It presents a thorough analysis of the construction of conspiracy theories, describing all the fundamental building principles such as dualism, victimization, scapegoating, and the use of metaphors or stereotypes. It also raises the issue of how conspiracy narratives are spread through mainstream media or political authorities. Finally, it draws attention to the negative consequences of increasing fear, hatred, discrimination, intolerance and violence, which I consider to be the added value of the publication.

NATÁLIA SLIVKOVÁ,
Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of SAS in Bratislava

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KARL HEPFER:
Verschwörungstheorien. Eine philosophische Kritik der Unvernunft [Conspiracy Theories: A Philosophical Criticism of Irrationality]
Bielefeld, transcript Verlag 2021, 220 p. Third updated and revised edition.

Conspiracy theories, rumours, speculations, or simple explanations of unclear phenomena and events have accompanied humanity since its birth. As Zuzana Panczová notes (2017: 36 ff.), there is evidence already from ancient times about narratives that explained social catastrophes as a consequence of the activities of some conspiracy groups. For instance, in ancient Rome, it was Christians, Jews, etc. Conspiracy theories do particularly well during periods of crises, and the coronavirus pandemic, which is currently plaguing all mankind, creates particularly fertile ground for disseminating "simple explanations". Present-day communication media offer extraordinary opportunities for an accelerated spreading of any type of news. Indeed, in the case of electronic media, such spread is as fast as lightning and reaches out to an unlimited number of recipients. Conspiracy theories may directly affect people's behaviour and actions, and their existence should therefore be taken seriously. Hence, it is no surprise that they have become the subject of research of several scientific disciplines since the middle of the last century.

The new book by Karl Hepfer approaches conspiracy theories from the philosophical perspective. It is a remarkable book whose success among its readers is proven by the fact that it has seen three repeated editions in a short time (1st edition in 2015, 2nd edition in 2017, 3rd edition in 2021). The last one appeared in the middle of the pandemic, which the author reflected on in his revised version. What can a philosopher's perspective offer regarding this topic? Hepfer explains that he wishes to find out how conspiracy theories influence our understanding of reality. He deals with essentially ontological questions of what our knowledge of what in the world exists and what does not, aiming to provide the readers with appropriate methodological tools for analysing conspiracy theories.'

The first part of the book provides an analysis of the conspiracy theory as a "theory". According to the author, "theories are simplified models of reality" (p. 29). They aim to bring clear and logical answers to the asked questions which (usually) concern certain selected