



POPULISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORY

Conspiracy Theories and Leftwing Populism

Academic Conference, 10–12 March 2022

KEYNOTE – Thursday, March 10

Kirk Hawkins (Brigham Young University): “The Irrationality of Populism”

Conspiracy theories and populist discourse are similar; indeed, in modern democracy, the two are almost the same thing. It is not surprising, then, that the study of each of these phenomena encounters a similar problem: how to measure their fundamental irrationality. Drawing from the science around each of these two bundles of ideas, I discuss how attempts to capture this irrationality have so far failed and how this undermines our efforts to accurately study them. I then suggest that the qualitative analysis of these two phenomena may offer clues to a solution.

Kirk A. Hawkins is Professor in the Department of Political Science at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, United States and the coordinator of Team Populism, a cross-regional scholarly network dedicated to the scientific study of populism. He is a key contributor to the Global Populism Database, a global measure of populist discourse of chief executives and party leaders. His research areas include political parties, social movements, religion and politics, public opinion, textual analysis, and the psychology of prejudice. He currently studies communication techniques for reducing polarization.

KEYNOTE – Friday, March 11

Clare Birchall (King’s College London): “Haute Baroque Bling: Style, Taste and Distinction in the Study of Conspiracist Populism”

In Hofstadter’s essay on the paranoid style, he writes, “A distorted style is ... a possible signal that may alert us to a distorted judgment, just as in art an ugly style is a cue to fundamental defects of taste” (Hofstadter 1964, 6). While Hofstadter’s brief reference to art is merely illustrative here, my talk will connect Trump’s aesthetic style—what I’m calling “haute baroque bling”—with his rhetorical style to explore how taste might operate as an under-examined factor in why right-wing populist conspiracists garner more ire and airtime than those on the left.

Clare Birchall is Reader in Contemporary Culture at King’s College London. She is the author of Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America, Shareveillance: The Dangers of Openly Sharing and Covertly Collecting Data, and Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theories to Gossip. She is currently writing a book, with Peter Knight, on Covid-19 conspiracy theories and is the co-investigator on a UKRI funded project on what difference the internet makes to conspiracism.



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Panel 1: Further Theorizing the Relationship between Leftwing Populism and Conspiracy Theory

Grigoris Markou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki): “Populism and Conspiracy Theories: Two Distinct Phenomena”

In recent years, it has been developed a debate about the possible connection between populism and conspirational logic. There are many scholars who believe that populism is linked to conspiracy theories in most cases, while there is a part of them who argue that populism is equated with the populist phenomenon. It is true that populism is often associated with conspirational thinking. But are conspiracy theories an exclusive prerogative of populists? In this presentation, I highlight the discussion that takes place in academia and public sphere on the connection between conspiracy theories and populism, aiming to highlight their distinct character.

Grigoris Markou is a postdoctoral researcher in the School of Political Sciences at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He currently examines populism, anti-populism and political discourse on minorities. He holds a PhD in Political Sciences from the same university. His PhD thesis focuses on left-wing populism in power in Europe and Latin America. His research interests include: Argentinian politics, Greek politics, discourse analysis, populism, anti-populism, radicalism, nationalism and democracy.

Helge Petersen (University of Glasgow) and **Hannah Hecker** (Fritz Bauer Institute): “On the Elective Affinity between Post-Marxism, Left-Wing Populism and Conspiratorial World Views”

This paper examines the role of conspiratorial thought in the post-Marxist model of left-wing populism developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. While both authors themselves do not openly promote conspiracy theories, it is argued that their theoretical model shares structural similarities with these, such as the personalization of capitalist social relations and the fixation on financial elites as the “enemy of the people”, and that their underlying ontological reasoning contributes to the rationalization of their ideological conditions of existence.

Helge Petersen is a Sociology PhD student at the University of Glasgow, with a project on the history of political conflicts over racist violence in the British post-war period.

Hannah Hecker studied social sciences at Goethe-University Frankfurt and works as a research secretary at the Fritz Bauer Institute for the Study of the History and Impact of the Holocaust.



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Panel 2: Conspiracy Theories and Leftwing Populism in Europe I: Germany

Nina Pilz (University of Greifswald): “The Invention of a Pandemic” – Conspiracy Theory Reasoning in the German Left-Wing Newspaper Demokratischer Widerstand”

In the current pandemic, people of different political ideologies are protesting against virus-control restrictions, often resorting to conspiracy theories. As the newspaper Demokratischer Widerstand (Democratic Resistance) demonstrates, virus-related conspiracy theories do not only emerge from the right-wing spectrum. The editors describe themselves as committed to democracy, antifascism, solidarity and social justice; values they consider threatened by the government. Based on the newspaper’s first issues, this case study provides a discourse-linguistic insight into typical patterns of argumentation used by left-wing conspiracy theorists to legitimize and establish their beliefs in the pandemic discourse. They do not only reinterpret established topoi of argumentation, but also develop new specific ones.

Nina Pilz is a PhD student and research associate in the International Research Training Group “Baltic Peripeties. Narratives of Reformations, Revolutions and Catastrophes” at the University of Greifswald, where she is currently exploring the pandemic’s impact on public narration. Nina completed her Master’s degree in German philology at the University of Rostock and the University of Georgia with a thesis on conspiracy theory reasoning in the pandemic.

Leo Roepert (University of Hamburg): “Conspiracy Myths in the Aufstehen-Movement”

The left-wing populist "Aufstehen" movement addresses all those who are disappointed by the increasingly "neoliberal" course of the established left-wing parties. The contribution examines whether and to what extent „Aufstehen“ draws on conspiracy myths in its description of social problems. For this purpose, official documents of the movement and publications and public statements of prominent protagonists such as Sahra Wagenknecht, Bernd Stegemann and Wolfgang Streeck will be analyzed. It will be shown that although no closed conspiracy theories can be detected in the discourse of "Aufstehen," elements of conspiracyist thinking can. They include, in particular, highly dichotomizing group constructions and the tendency to identify culprits to whom significant agency and malign motives are attributed.

Dr. Leo Roepert, born in 1986, studied sociology and theater and media studies at the Friedrich Alexander University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. Since 2016, research assistant at the Department of Sociology, Department of Social Economics at the University of Hamburg. 2020 PhD with a thesis on the Critical Theory of Right-Wing Populism with a special focus on racism and (structural) anti-Semitism. Research interests: Right-wing populism and the New Right, anti-Semitism, racism, conspiracy myths.



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Panel 3: Conspiracy Theories and Leftwing Populism in Europe II: France and Italy

Pierre France (Orient-Institut Beirut): “From Ordinary Leftists to Conspiracy Militancy, and Back Again – The Case of 9/11 ‘Alternative Theories’ in France”

A rare case of self-identified militant organization among the conspiracy theory milieu, the French association ReOpen911 - dedicated to the promotion of alternative theories on 9/11 - is an early comer, created in 2006, neatly leaning towards the left of the political spectrum at the time of its creation. Based on extensive fieldwork (interviews, observations, virtual and historical ethnography), this communication will address the interplay between the political and sociological careers of its (mostly neophyte) members, their everyday militancy, and the evolving position of the association among other militant groups - leading to a process of sidelining ReOpen911 from the left.

Pierre France is a Political Sociologist. A Research Associate at the Orient-Institut Beirut (Max Weber Stiftung) and Ph.D candidate in Political Science at Paris 1 Sorbonne University, he recently co-authored a book with Antoine Vauchez (The Neoliberal Republic, Cornell, 2021), and worked extensively on the sociology and history of top civil servants in France and in Lebanon. He has been working on the subject of conspiracy theories in France from 2013 onwards and is preparing a book on the matter.

Giovanna Parmigiani (Harvard Divinity School): “As Above, So Below’ – Conspiracism and Environmentalism in Southern Italy: The Case of Xylella Fastidiosa”

Xylella Fastidiosa is a bacterium, believed to be at the root of CoDiRO: a disease that has been affecting the olive trees of Southern Apulia, since 2013. To curb the spread of the disease, the political and scientific communities recommended the felling of hundreds of trees. These measures have been strongly opposed by those who go by the name of “Il Popolo degli Ulivi” (PdO): a variegated environmentalist group, with clear populist orientations. In this paper, I analyze some of the conspiracist and anti-scientific themes, practices, and claims of PdO activists, offering a reading that highlights the role of neo-animist ontologies and relationalities.

Giovanna Parmigiani is an anthropologist, and currently a Lecturer at Harvard Divinity School. She works at the intersection of Religion, Women’s Studies, and Politics. She is researching contemporary Paganism and New Age practices in Southern Europe and has published on the topic of spirituality. She is about to start her new research on Magic and Populism in Southern Europe, partially funded by the Transcendence and Transformation initiative at the CSWR (Harvard University).



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Panel 4: Conspiracy Theories and Leftwing Populism in Europe III: Romania, Croatia, and Greece

Onoriu Colăcel (Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava): “Left-Wing Populism in Romanian-Language News and Opinion: Exposing Right-Wing Conspiracy Theories”

The populist rhetoric in the commercial media of Romania and the Republic of Moldova has gained new popularity at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The clash between the quarantined people and the establishment gives insight into the conspiratorial underpinnings of both right and left-wing populism in Romanian-language contexts. The former variants of populism are being pushed mostly by political actors; conversely, some blame the political/economic elites for social violence against the people in ways that can be construed as left-wing populism. News and opinion samples that entail a debate on the relation between populist politics and conspiracy thinking are considered in order to highlight calls to embrace populism on the left as opposed to right-wing populism.

Onoriu Colăcel is Senior Lecturer in English at Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania. He has written on the contemporary English novel and on Romanian and Moldovan literary cultures and visual media. He has authored four books (e.g. Postcolonial Readings of Romanian Identity Narratives, 2015, and The Romanian Cinema of Nationalism. Historical Films as Propaganda and Spectacle, 2018) and has co-edited (with Anastasiya Astapova, Corneliu Pintilescu and Tamás Scheibner) Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe: Tropes and Trends (2020).

Nebojša Blanuša (University of Zagreb): “People-Centrism, Anti-Elitism, and Manicheism: Their Left-Wing and Right-Wing Articulations in Conspiracism in Croatia”

Two nationally representative surveys show significant increase of Anti-Elitism, People-Centrism and Manicheism from 2018 to 2020 in Croatia. We explain these changes due to contextual dynamics and appearance of the new populist parties in Croatia. Conspiracism of citizens who express high People-Centrism, Anti-Elitism and Manicheism is generally higher in comparison to their non-populist counterparts. The left-wing people-centrists and anti-elitists oppose more than others to shadow government, and express the highest anti-elitist conspiracism, while the right-wing people-centrists and anti-elitists have the strongest sense of endangered nation by shadowy forces and believe more in global conspiracy theories. Left-wing people-centrists and anti-elitists believe in local conspiracies of Croatian government from the 1990s period of war and transition, while the right-wing people-centrists and anti-elitists believe in conspiracies of internal and external enemies of Croatia. The right-wing manicheists are more inclined toward beliefs in internal and external enemies of the nation-state in 2020.

Nebojša Blanuša is associate professor of political psychology and director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Citizenship and Migration (CEDIM) at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb. His research interest is focused on conspiratorial thinking, cultural trauma, populism, nationalism, historical and political cleavages, political cynicism, and politics of memory.



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Vera Tika (Panteion University): “Between Conspirational and Populist Thinking in Left-Wing Parties: SYRIZA Political Discourse in and out of the Government (2015-2019)”

Conspiracy theories of either left-wing or right-wing parties have been present in contemporary European Democracies with a particular strength. During the Great Recession, the Greek case could be perceived as a specific case-study for the prominence of conspiracy theories and populism of the left-wing party of SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left – Social Unionist Front) that came to power from 2015 till 2019. The primary goal of the presentation is to explore the different facets of populism and conspiracy theories by focusing on a range of public speeches and different time settings: before and during the economic crisis.

Pranvera (Vera) Tika is a Political Scientist. Her main academic and research interests include the broad spectrum of the processes of democratization in the Balkans, right-wing extremism in Europe and in the Balkans, Populism, Comparative Politics, Euroscepticism, Conspiracy theories, social movements, political parties, human rights and globalization. She is completing her PhD thesis at Panteion University in Athens (Greece) with emphasis on the political systems of three Balkan countries after the fall of Communism: Albania, Bulgaria and Romania.

Panel 5: Conspiracy Theories and Leftwing Populism in Islamic Countries

Turkay Salim Nefes (Spanish National Research Council / University of Oxford): “A Weberian Perspective on the Curious Leap: Conspiracy Theory Beliefs from the Left to the Right Populism in Turkish Politics”

Building on Max Weber’s sociological theory, this study proposes that value-laden and instrumentally rational predispositions can explain beliefs in conspiracy theories. Accordingly, it argues that changing political contexts influencing people’s values and partisan preferences lead to fluctuations between left- and right-wing tendencies in conspiracy theorizing. The presentation discusses two studies. The first explores the significance of the Turkish government’s conspiracy theories about the Gezi Park Protests in a popular forum website, *Eksisozluk*. The second study (with Ozan Aksoy [UCL]) examines two nationwide surveys. Both research confirm that people interpret the conspiracy theories in line with their values and interests.

Turkay Salim Nefes is a Ramón y Cajal Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Goods and Policies of the Spanish National Research Council. He is also a research associate at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) and Sociology Department of the University of Oxford. Previously, he was a William Golding Junior Research Fellow at the Brasenose College of the University of Oxford. His main research interest is on the diffusion and impacts of ethno-religious hostility, particularly conspiracy theories. He has published his work on conspiracy theories in academic journals including The British Journal of Sociology, Rationality and Society, Journal of Historical Sociology and The Sociological Review.



Helen Murphey (University of St Andrews): “Conspiracy Theory and the Muslim Brotherhood – a Left-Right Convergence?”

Within post-revolutionary Egypt, criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood transcended the left-right divide. Diverse actors constructed the organisation as uniquely threatening, often drawing on populist frames of a foreign-affiliated ‘elite’ against the ‘people’. Muslim Brotherhood-related conspiracy theories also circulated widely, accusing the organisation of foreign funding and anti-Egyptian plots. How did the spread of conspiracy theories affect the dynamic between right-wing and left-wing populist rhetoric? I analyse the frames and threat narratives of right-wing and left-wing populist actors surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood to assess their relationship with conspiracy theory, providing insight into how left-right populist categories function in an environment where polarisation largely falls along an alternative (Islamist-secularist) axis.

Helen Murphey is a third year PhD candidate and a Carnegie PhD Scholar within the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. Her thesis (titled ‘Representing and Contesting Authenticity: Understanding Shifts in Salafi Ideologies and Identities’) adopts a social movement approach to analyse how Salafi actors engage with political opportunity within newly democratised contexts to explore the connection between ideology, identity and praxis.

Tarek Kahlaoui (Mediterranean School of Business): “Conspiracism as Populism’s Main Argument: Tunisia’s Leftwing Populists’ Case”

The 2019 elections in Tunisia proved a surprising surge of populist forces, leftists and rightists, yet it should not be seen as unexpected. The Arab Spring, which started from Tunisia, did not bring with it only an attempt for a normative democratic transition successful partly only in Tunisia, but it also opened the gate for a whole context of radical, sometimes violent, antagonist and anti-elitist discourses and movements. Consequently, such a context increased the pace of offer and demand of conspiracism, which already has a solid cultural base in the authoritarian times. Tunisia’s peaceful transitional process concealed a populist wave with competing conspiracy theories as the cornerstone of their political platforms. The phenomenon touches on both leftwing and rightwing leaders and parties. We are probably moving towards a “democratic populist” system where populism is the leading feature and where conspiracism is the common denominator of the public debate. In this paper I will focus on how leftwing populist leaders and groups embracing the post-revolutionary social agenda have been attempting to rally forces by adopting conspiracism in a fierce propaganda war with rightwing parties and leaders.

Tarek Kahlaoui (PhD UPenn 2008), is an assistant professor of history and in Tunisia’s Mediterranean School of Business. He was a history assistant professor at Rutgers University (2008-2017). Kahlaoui served as the general director of the Tunisian Institute of Strategic Studies (2012-2014), a presidential think tank. He has been working recently on Tunisia’s populist rise.



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Panel 6: Conspiracy Theories and Leftwing Populism in the United States and the Philippines

Birte Christ (Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen): “The “Rigged Economy” and the “1 Percent”: Bernie Sanders’s Conspiracy Rhetoric in the 2016 and 2020 Presidential Primary Campaigns”

This paper understands Bernie Sanders as a left-wing populist who rhetorically creates the same divisions populists like Trump do on the right. It analyzes the role that conspiracy theories play within Sanders’ populism. Analyzing stump speeches from 2016 and 2020, I will argue that Sanders does not engage in full-blown conspiracy theorizing but employs what I call “conspiracy rhetoric.” Is Sanders’ “conspiracy rhetoric” – this paper will ask – evidence of a shift in acceptable modes of political speech with little effect on the way the social world is understood by citizens, or does it have deeper repercussions for his supporters’ ideological positioning?

PD Dr. Birte Christ is Interim Professor of English and American Literature and Culture at Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen. Birte has published and given talks about current US affairs, especially presidential elections, and has written an article on gender and conspiracy theories, “What kind of a man are you?: The Gendered Foundations of U.S. Conspiracism and Recent Conspiracy Scholarship” (2014).

Franciszek Czech (Jagiellonian University in Kraków): “Conspiratorial Tropes in Rodrigo Duterte’s Populist Rhetoric”

Rodrigo Duterte – usually portrayed as a rightwing populist leader, who wages deadly war on drugs, curbs the media, and is famous for his offensive comments on women – during the 2016 presidential campaign declared: “I will be the first Left president in this country”. The preliminary task of my paper is to discuss Dutertismo as a kind of leftwing populism by explaining the context of the left-right division in the “partyless democracy” of the Philippines. The main task is to explore conspiratorial tropes in Duterte’s rhetoric and consider their various functions in political communication in the Philippines.

dr Franciszek Czech – political scientist and sociologist at the Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland. In his research on political culture in Poland and Southeast Asia he focuses on conspiracy theories and political attitudes fueled by anxiety. He authored two books: Nightmare Scenarios. Sociological Study of Construction of Anxiety in the Globalization Discourse (2010), Conspiracy Narratives and Metanarratives (2015) and Structure of Conspiracy Theory. Anthology (2014) [all books were published in Polish].



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