

PACT Conference
“Populism and Conspiracy Theories in the Americas”
Shortened Abstracts and Bios

Keynote #1, Thursday

Letícia Cesarino: “A Cybernetic Theory of Anti-Structural Publics”

This keynote presents research results from a comparison between different ‘refracted publics’ in Brazil during the past four years: pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp groups during the 2018 elections; alt-science (‘early treatment’) networks during the COVID-19 pandemic; and a mixed-methods, computational and qualitative approach to far-right Telegram. Drawing on Gregory Bateson’s ‘ecology of mind’, I look at such populist and conspiratorial publics in terms of their common cybernetic dynamics, asking how and why they come to ‘resonate’ together. I suggest that they can be structurally described by combining Victor Turner’s theory of antistructure and a topological model from chaos science, the Rössler attractor.

Keynote #2, Thursday

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser: “Populism and Conspiratorial Thinking: Suggesting Some Avenues of Research”

Populism has become an enduring political feature of the 21st century. Consequently, political science has been at the forefront of the study of populist forces of different kind and their impact on the democratic system. However, there is little systematic research on the relationship between populism and conspiratorial thinking. In this lecture, I would like to address this lacuna by suggesting some avenues of research. Special attention will be given to three topics. First, I will reflect on the relationship between populism and conspiratorial thinking – a relationship that is marked by “elective affinities” between the two. Second, I will discuss how populist radical right actors have responded to the COVID19 pandemic and show that not all of them have relied on conspiratorial thinking. Third, I will argue that the link between populism and conspiratorial thinking is heavily influenced by positive and negative partisanship.

Keynote #3, Friday

Mark Fenster: “Studying Conspiracy Theory after the (Current) Rise of Right-Wing Populism”

The American historian Richard Hofstadter intended his still-influential essay on the “Paranoid Style in American Politics,” which initiated the modern study of conspiracy theories, as a response to the mid-1950s rise of right-wing populism in the U.S. Reflecting on the lessons we can learn from the insights and weaknesses of Hofstadter’s timely intervention into contemporary politics, as well as my own three decades studying conspiracy theories, I ask how current academic work, which takes place within and responds to another rise in right-wing populism, should understand and intervene in the present and prepare for the future.

Panel 1, Friday

"Historical Perspectives on Populism and Conspiracy Theory"

Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta (Federal University of Minas Gerais): "Anti-communism and Conspiracy Myths in Brazil: From the Cohen Plan (1937) to the Bolsonarist Manipulation of the 'Red Menace'"

Denunciations of communist conspiracies linked to foreign powers have circulated among right-wing groups in Brazil since the 1930s. The culminating point was the disclosure of the 'Cohen Plan' in October 1937, an apocryphal text that revealed an imminent (and false) communist coup. This was followed by the consolidation of an anti-communist imaginary and the implantation of a dictatorship (the Estado Novo or New State) whose justification was to protect Brazilians from the 'red menace.' More recently, in the context of the Workers' Party's rise to power (2002-2016), far-right groups reappropriated the issue of a communist conspiracy linked to foreign forces to mobilize it during campaigns for the removal of the Workers' Party from government (culminating in Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016) and for Bolsonaro's election in 2018. The purpose of this presentation is to analyze the connections and lines of continuity between these two historical contexts but also their differences – for example, how the figure of the foreign enemy has changed (Russians and Jews in the 1930s, Chinese and 'Bolivarians' today). Attention will focus on the central role played by conspiracy theories in right-wing discourses to understand the reasons for this recurrent use of the theme of a foreign-backed communist menace and explain why such a strategy remains effective at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Adam Koper (University of York): "Populism and Anti-Semitism in Henry Ford's *The International Jew*"

In 1919, the industrialist Henry Ford bought *The Dearborn Independent*, a newspaper based in the same town as his motor car factory. The *Independent* was subsequently used as a mouthpiece for Ford's anti-Semitic conspiracy theorizing, also gaining infamy for its support for the forged text *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. A collection of Ford's anti-Semitic articles was later published as *The International Jew*. The aims of this paper are twofold: firstly, to analyze from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis the use of populist rhetoric in Ford's text and its interconnection with his anti-Semitism; secondly, to critique Ford's account of modern society from the perspective of Moishe Postone's heterodox Marxism. I argue that Ford's populism tries to paper over the cracks of a capitalist society, by seeking to replace the division between the working class and capitalists with a false division between the productive economy and the fabricated figure of the parasitic Jew. This has implications for how we view populism today, as I show that a divide between the 'people' and the 'elite' will always result in a search for individuals to blame for social problems while hampering efforts to achieve systemic change.

Panel 2, Friday

"Conspiracy Theories in Populist Political Communication"

Thomas Stelzl (University of Passau): "Anti-Americanism as a Left-Wing Conspiracy Theory in German-American Relations"

The 21st century has seen ups and downs in German-American relations: "full solidarity" after 9/11, dissent about Iraq, arguments about TTIP, North Stream, and vaccine patents, sympathy during the Obama years, and estrangement during the Trump. Unique historical experiences on both sides of the Atlantic and the culture, values, and political possibilities they produce have played a significant role some of the misunderstandings and disagreements German-American relations have seen over the years. Interestingly, it seems like Anti-Americanism (along with a certain friendliness towards Russia) and a depiction of the U.S. as an ignorant turbo-capitalist big brother which only acts for its own benefit persists in the political communication of at least some political actors, for example Die Linke, Germany's populist left party. At a time at which conspiracy theories—however almost exclusively right-wing conspiracy theories and their dangers—are increasingly debated in public, it is essential to also investigate the connection between some of Germany's left parties and the potentially conspiracist Anti-American discourse they promote. To do so, the paper will offer a quantitative discourse analysis of speeches by populist politicians of left parties (Die Linke, Grüne, SPD) in the German Bundestag concerning controversial topics in transatlantic relations between 2001 and 2021.

Andrew Woods (University of Western Ontario): "Marxismo Cultural/Cultural Marxism: Transnational Conspiracy Theories and the Brazilian New Right"

"Cultural Marxism" is commonly known as a right-wing conspiracy theory that accuses the German-Jewish thinkers of the Frankfurt School (and their devotees) of infiltrating universities to spread the 'ideologies' of feminism, multiculturalism and environmentalism. Although this theory originated in the United States, it has become a potent ideological tool for right-wing individuals and organizations around the world. In this paper, I contend that previous scholarly efforts to categorize "Cultural Marxism" as a "transnational conspiracy theory" (John E. Richardson, Jérôme Jamin, Rachel Busbridge et al.) rely on simplistic notions of transnationality. I use the Brazilian New Right's discourse of "Marxismo Cultural" as an example to demonstrate that the concept of hybridization, rather than importation or adaptation, is key to understanding both the nature of transnational conspiracy theories and of the transnational Right. Building on the work of Benjamin Cowan, Camila Rocha, and Gabriela Segura, I argue that "Marxismo Cultural" reflects the dense and complex interweaving of the American and Brazilian Right (ideas, narratives, ideologies, practices etc.). Furthermore, I examine how the narrative of "Marxismo Cultural" functions to legitimate the Bolsonaro administration's populist agenda of attacking higher education, indigenous communities, and LGBTQ+ groups.

Christina Wurst (University of Tübingen): "Leftwing Populist Influencers Online and the Contentious Appeal of Conspiracy Theories"

Recent years have seen among other phenomena the rise of de-centralized (and to some degree transnational) political online communities and movements. While right-wing movements on social media, particularly the alt-right in the US, have received much scholarly attention, far less is known about the new left-wing movements which seem to enjoy rising popularity (e.g., "Bernie Bros" "cult following" of Bernie Sanders in 2015). Such new left-wing communities or rather their central "influencers" can particularly be found on podcast and video streaming platforms, such as YouTube. Two predominant movements have been colloquially described as "Breadtube" and the "Dirtbag Left" respectively—out of which the latter is commonly considered populist for its content and style and more prone to lean into conspiracist rhetoric. By which standards do we define such political social media influencers as populist? When do they employ or reject conspiracy theories (or allusions to such) and are these indeed more likely to play a role for populist-leaning left-wing actors? This paper aims to answer these questions with case studies of popular left-wing YouTube channels and proposes possible reasons for the lack of outright conspiracy theorizing in such online communities.

Panel 3, Friday

"Conspiracy Theories as a Weapon in Politics"

Holger Mölder (Tallinn University of Technology): "War of Narratives – Trumpist Wave in the United States and Russian Federation in the Global Information Warfare"

Conspiracy theories bind together various alternative movements interested in destroying liberal democratic order and effectively handled ideological polarizations in the Western societies. There are similar patterns that characterize the US alternative right and anti-establishment movements (including QAnon), but also Russian political warfare in their status conflict with the West by promoting conspiracy theories (e.g., the Kalergi plan, the Grand Replacement theory), or by demonizing certain public characters (e.g., George Soros, Bill Gates). Both have similar strategic goals to increase the role of instability and anxiety in social discourses and relationships supported by strong images, which are built according to best strategies of Hollywoodian movie industry and transferred to international politics. In the post-truth environment, conspiracy theories can be effectively used in promoting cultures of fear and uncertainty which are easy to sell in the global security market by actors interested in challenging the valid international system. Therefore, conspiracy theories perfectly fit with the strategic ambitions of revisionist powers that are interested in changing status quo and the Russian interference in US elections on behalf of the Trumpist movement has been widely discussed. This study focuses on strategic narratives and political discourse analysis of US pro-Trump organizations and the Russian Federation.

Eiríkur Bergmann (Bifröst University): "Weaponizing Conspiracy Theories in Populist Politics"

Via widespread disinformation campaigns populist politicians have weaponized a range of conspiracy theories for their own gain in recent years, leading to disruption in contemporary

politics. Few examples: In the US Donald Trump promoted the Deep State conspiracy theory for appealing to his supporters to act in his defence. In Russia Vladimir Putin applied anti-Western conspiracy theories as a pretext for the invasion into Ukraine. In several Western European countries, the Eurabia conspiracy theory, has been activated for stoking actions against those that are deemed being dangerous others. Studies have found conspiracy theories to be a catalyst for extremism. Rapid rise of right-wing populist political parties coincided with simultaneous increased spread of conspiracy theories. Populism has as now well gone mainstream. It can thus be argued that we have entered into the era of the populist – the conspiratorial populist. Both conspiracy theories and populism are now deeply integrated into contemporary democratic politics. Studies have shown that being exposed to conspiracy theories decreases trust in government institutions. Thus, increased spread of CTs can undermine democracy and social trust. It is thus timely to explore how populists can weaponize contemporary conspiracy theories for their own political gain.

Franciszek Czech (Jagiellonian University): "The United States of Poland and Filipino Queen of Canada. Globalization of American Conspiracy Theories and Self-declared Social Media States"

More than fifty years ago, Leszek Kołakowski noticed that studying social macro-trends on specific and even parodic examples from the fringes of society allows us to see the omnipresence of basic structures. Taking this into account, my aim is to analyze the impact of originally American conspiracy theories on international audiences in order to show that, as Richard Hofstadter puts it, "Americans have no monopoly of the gift for paranoid improvisation". In my presentation I will focus on conspiratorial rhetoric of two special social media activists: 1. Romana Didulo, Filipino migrant, self-declared Queen of Canada, who gained some attention with her QAnon inspired views in the middle of anti-Covid policy Freedom Convoy protests. 2. Mariusz Max Kolonko, the former correspondent of Polish public TV station in the United States, who for 10 years on his YouTube channel MAX TV "Tell It Like It Is" has commented on contemporary American and Polish politics and finally declared establishing of the United States of Poland. Those examples will allow to reach more general conclusions on international impact of American conspiracy theories in the age of globalization and social media.

Panel 4, Saturday

"Populism, Conspiracy Theory and the COVID-19 Pandemic"

Maren Schäfer (University of Heidelberg): "Blaming the 'Others' – Trump's Populist Framing During the Covid-19 Pandemic"

Throughout the pandemic, President Trump has been the most prominent voice in American political discourse. Since his 2015 presidential campaign, he has used populist messages to frame an antagonism between "us" and "them", frequently blaming "Others" for a variety of problems. During the pandemic, rather than actively managing the crisis, the Trump administration attributed blame for the state of the country to "Others". In doing so, Trump pre-adjusted his framing of who these "Others" were and how they were to blame throughout the first year of the pandemic, often relying on conspiracy theories and lacking proof of his

accusations. I conducted a case study combining quantitative and qualitative analyses of Trump and White House communication during 2020, which traced the adaptation of the President's positions and showed how populist framing served as a malleable strategy to attribute blame to "Others". Trump re-aligned his framing of the out-group multiple times, blaming for example "the left", foreign governments, subordinate political entities, public health experts, and news media for failing "the people" during the pandemic. Trump blamed political opponents for the country's situation, often relying on conspiracy theories, thereby trying to minimize the crisis's political costs for himself during an election year.

Péter Kréko (Political Capital Institute, Budapest): "COVID Is Fake, Therefore the War is Fake, Too: COVID-related Conspiracy Theories in Hungary and Their Overlap with Belief in the Kremlin's Conspiracy Theories on the Invasion of Ukraine"

The presentation will shortly introduce the results of a representative survey in Hungary (N=1200), in which the researchers wanted to reveal the overlaps between the conspiracy theories about COVID (e.g. biolab) and vaccines on the one hand, and the conspiracy theories around the war on the other. In line with the previous literature (e.g. Douglas and Sutton, 2014) we found that the two conspiracy belief dimensions strongly overlap. But an interesting finding was that the association between two factors, that found to be robust ($R=0,6$) is stronger than the association of any of the two dimensions with Conspiracy Mentality. It suggests that the relationship is not solely to the underlying propensity of the individuals to interpret world events with conspiracies. The Possible reasons for this finding are discussed.

Ela Drażkiewicz (Slovak Academy of Sciences): "Masters of Illusion: Mimesis, Mimicry, Conspiracy Theories and Civil Society in Ireland and Poland"

In recent years conspiracy theories have been increasingly defined as a new social enemy, a threat to democracy (Lewandowsky 2021; Basit 2021). But scholars of conspiracy theories also point out that we have very little research that examines a direct link between conspiracy theories and political practice (Butter and Knight 2020). We still know very little about the ways in which conspiratorial beliefs influence different forms of civic engagement and democratic participation (Thórisdóttir, Mari, and Krouwel 2020). By examining the anti-Covid-19 movements in Ireland and Poland this paper will examine what relation do they have with civil society. I argue, that in order to shed the negative label of conspiracy theories, such movements engage in the practice of mimesis and mimicry. According to Hoehne (2009) mimesis is a form of a positive appraisal, an art of imitating well-established models of social and political organization. Mimicry on the other hand involves the deceptive imitation of such models in order to reach own political agenda. So who are the Covid-19 era protests? Masters of mimicry or mimesis? Or maybe simply a masters of illusion?

Panel 5, Saturday

"Theoretical Perspectives"

Massimo Leone (University of Turin): "Global Unicorns, Ecuadorian Piglets, and Ancient Lions: Zoosemiotics of Conspiracy"

The paper will investigate the popular definition of conspiracy theories as resulting from the tendency to arbitrarily seeing order into chaos and patterns into randomness. Through reference to the enormous success of the mythology of the unicorn in present-day popular culture, merchandising, and even how-to publications, the paper will explore the hypothesis that this success might be parallel to the proliferation of conspiracy theories, since, just as unicorn believers, conspiracy theorists too tend to irrationally construct a position of existential singularity, surrounded by an aura of exclusivity and distinction. This hypothesis will be further investigated with reference to a South-American case-study, this time involving not unicorns but piglets, precisely those that a young Ecuadorian visual designer painted on the walls of Guayaquil in 2004, unintentionally igniting rumors, public panic, and conspiracy theories about their threatening meaning. The paper will continue with a semiotic articulation of how signs are generally interpreted in conspiracy theories, either in their quality of para-signs or pseudo-signs. The third animal evoked in the paper, the lion, is a reference to the long tradition of inventing mythical animals and firmly believing in their existence, often placing them at the periphery of the known world. Perhaps, the paper will argue, the aesthetic pleasure of this invention, and the existential thrill that it begets, are also to be considered in explaining the modern appeal of conspiracy theories.

Gustavo Lamounier (University of Brasilia): "Building a loop of apocalyptic world perception: exploring the communicative link between Conspiracy Theories and the Far-Right Populist Communication Style"

Within the last five years, far-right populist leaders have risen to power in various regions of the world. In the Americas, personalities like Trump and Bolsonaro have become notable in their campaigns and presidential exercise for their political use of conspiracy theories. However, the exact nature of the relationship between populism and conspiracy theories still needs clarification. Populism, understood as a political communication style, has negativity as its central characteristic. Far-right populists speak of a world in crisis, a degenerated society, and the "Other" as an existential threat. We believe that this communicative aspect produces a feedback loop with conspiracy theories. Understanding conspiracy theories in the realm of individual psychology, a cognitive issue of actors who possess a defective epistemology, erases its political significance. Instead, they are a social phenomenon that has historically become accentuated in times of crisis and social anomy. Apocalyptic narratives permeate almost all of today's major conspiracy theories. Thus, negativity in far-right populist discourse and conspiracy theories build a loop of apocalyptic world perception. Understanding conspiracy theory by this framework contributes to the improvement of debunking and deradicalization techniques and tools.

Sebastian M. Herrmann (University of Leipzig): "Post-Narrative Politics? Theorizing Incoherence in Contemporary Conspiracism and Right-Wing Populism"

My presentation will argue that one important affinity between contemporary (right-wing) populism and contemporary conspiracism lies in the realm of 'form.' Specifically, I will argue that both are marked by a recent and so far under-theorized formal shift: both have discarded 'narrative' as their core operative form and both increasingly turn to other symbolic logics in its stead. Traditional accounts attribute the political salience of populism and conspiracism to both of them offering 'simple narratives' to explain an increasingly complex world. In this view, the narrative form is politically salient because it accentuates causality and makes an incoherent world seem more coherent. This, however, has changed recently, as explanation and cohesion become less important for political success. As Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russel Muirhead note, "[t]he new conspiracism dispenses with the burden of explanation" and instead offers "conspiracy without the theory." Seeking to theorize the intersection between populism and conspiracism by way of this formal shift, my talk will use examples from the US and Germany to explore other symbolic logics and to ask if, for example, 'play' and 'database' are better formal frameworks to understand these contemporary movements' inner working and their current, shared political success.