

SEPARATING THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF: DISENTANGLING CRITIQUES OF INEQUALITY AND CONSPIRATORIAL BELIEFS

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This article builds on recent agnostic and ethnographic approaches to conspiracy theories in an attempt, first, to think through their relation not only to mis-, dis-, and malinformation but also to social inequality, and, second, to establish conspiracy theories as a potentially valuable form of social critique in pluralist democracies. I outline three ways in which conspiracy theorising can be of value to the production of knowledge, to participation in society, and to research in the social sciences and humanities. These can aid in understanding and addressing inequalities, because they unpack conspiracy theories as not only a cause but also a symptom of power inequality, and can even be seen as a form of resistance to inequality.

Conspiracy theories, generally understood as explanations of events that rely on improbable or circumstantial evidence, are a hallmark of the contemporary political and cultural landscape in the Global North. They are constantly in evidence in television series and films, on social media platforms and mainstream media outlets, in the outpourings of celebrities and government officials. Even so, it is questionable whether the current era can be called a “golden age of conspi-

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racy theory” (Hanley *et al.*, 2023). Not only have such claims been made in every decade since the 1950s, but the occurrence of conspiracy theories has been relatively stable since the beginning of the 20th century (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, pp. 105-129). Going back to the 17th century, moreover, there have been several periods in which conspiracy theorising was not just more common and intense but also considered more legitimate and even normal (Butter, 2014). Yet it is fair to say that concurrent with their apparent normalisation, conspiracy theories have become increasingly delegitimised, stigmatised and censured, particularly in the second half of the 20th century (Thalmann, 2019). When “conspiracy theorists” challenge official accounts of events, therefore, they meet with a forceful moral condemnation from experts, commentators and regulators.

Conspiracy theories of all sorts are generally described negatively as irrational, misguided, destructive and dangerous. Early commentators and researchers typically assumed that conspiracy theories were based on a flawed or extremist perception of reality and of science. They considered such theories to be, at best, naïve oversimplifications, or, at worst, irrational beliefs or overcomplicated and unfalsifiable claims resulting from misguided reactions to secularisation, flawed reasoning and bad intentions (Popper, 1945; Pipes, 1997; Barkun, 2003). Conspiracy theories are also commonly attributed to a “paranoid style” of thought and interaction that emerges from extremist beliefs and disturbed minds (Hofstadter, 1964; Showalter, 1997; Byford, 2011). From this perspective, conspiracy theories arise from cognitive failures or mental disturbances, on both the individual and the collective level, and they ultimately erode trust in science and public institutions. Considered as a combination of shoddy science and paranoid politics, conspiracy theories are dangerous, destructive and harmful not just to individuals but also to larger groups and even entire societies.

Recent research, however, has developed a more nuanced approach to conspiracy theories in an attempt to understand the people and communities who hold such controversial beliefs. Rather than pathologising conspiracy theories or dismissing them outright, scholars have sought to understand why such theories arise, what they respond to, and what their functions and meanings are for those who hold such beliefs (Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000; Bratich, 2008; Fenster, 2008). More recently, sociological and anthropological studies have examined conspiracy theories, and particularly conspiracy theorists and believers, from a less normative perspective in an attempt to understand

the emergence of such alternative belief systems (Aupers, 2012), how they are constructed, and why they become persuasive (Harambam & Aupers, 2019). Rather than asserting that conspiracy theories are false or harmful, these scholars have begun to examine them ethnographically—seeking to fathom how and why people, in certain periods, places and cultures, have come to hold and espouse such seemingly untrue beliefs (Harambam, 2020; Hill *et al.*, 2025).

This more nuanced approach has resulted in a number of important takeaways that move beyond the simple rejection of conspiracy theories and enable us to examine their diverse origins, uses and specific meanings in a variety of contexts. This allows us to recognise the less outlandish or even sensible or rational aspects of some conspiracy theories, and to acknowledge and perhaps appreciate some of their more valid critiques. First, conspiracy theorising is not a monolithic but a multifaceted practice (Harambam, 2020). Conspiracy theories are many and various, pertaining to heterogeneous historical events or people, specific scientific fields, technologies, public institutions, government policies, and distinct social groups. It is difficult, in other words, to treat them in any unified or generalised manner (Huneman & Vorms, 2018). Consequently, their diverse goals, elements, and orientations can involve different levels of potential harm, and a single category of conspiracy theorising might involve different and potentially conflicting arguments, even when a conspiracy theory focuses on a single topic or institution such as science. Second, to take the example of science-centric conspiracy theories further, these theories are not directed only at science—and are not, therefore, *only* irrational or unscientific. They are also directed at society and its failures, at the hierarchies that structure our social institutions in an unequal way, at the capitalist or neoliberal frameworks that exacerbate economic inequality (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Many conspiracy theories can therefore be understood as responses to social issues that are complex and persistent, and over which individuals have little control (Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000; Fenster, 2008). This phenomenon is illustrated by the numerous conspiracy theories that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic, an extremely complex event with a global impact that gave rise to a multitude of alternative interpretations and conspiratorial explanations. Third, not all crises are sudden and striking. Some have been simmering for so long that they have become all but invisible. Unrelenting and ever-worsening social inequality is one such crisis (Jetten *et al.*, 2022). Conspiracy theories are more than mere reactions to crises; they can also be seen

as attempts to address and combat the underlying causes of such crises. Accordingly, some conspiracy theories, or at least some of their core aspects, can be singled out as constituting rational and even useful critiques, not just of forms of (scientific) knowledge production but also of persistent injustices and inequalities. Indeed, conspiracy theories, far from being merely nonsensical or dangerous, can at times function as useful and important critiques of society and its institutions (Uscinski, 2018; Hesselbein, 2023). As such, they can play a valuable role in both identifying and addressing social inequalities, and should therefore be part of discussions in, and about, pluralist democracies (Räikkä, 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2024).

This article builds upon the agnostic and ethnographic approaches taken in recent research by means of a conceptual analysis that connects conspiracy theories to the problem of inequality. I will therefore continue to use the term “conspiracy theory”, but not pejoratively and with no attempt to determine truth or falsehood. Instead, I seek to employ the term as agnostically as possible (see also Harambam, 2020) in my endeavour to shed a more positive light on conspiracy theories, not only by determining which of their elements should be acknowledged and perhaps accepted (see also Uscinski, 2018), but also by highlighting how doing so can address the problem of inequality. I will focus on a specific yet nonetheless still rather loose category of conspiracy theories, namely those that are broadly connected to developments in science, technology, and medicine. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to these simply as “conspiracy theories” throughout this article, but will occasionally seek to make a distinction between science-centric conspiracy theories and the wider category of general conspiracy theories when I believe a point applies more broadly.

There are three main reasons for concentrating on this specific and important category. First, it allows me to focus on a relatively distinct subcategory of conspiracy theories, helpfully distinguishing these from other subcategories of conspiracy theories that pertain to specific events (*e.g.*, World Trade Center attacks) and people (*e.g.*, Elvis Presley), that take up a distinct political position (*e.g.*, Great Replacement), or that can be designated as “superconspiracy theories” (Barkun, 2003), which tie multiple events, actors, and theories together (*e.g.*, QAnon). That said, however, I do not believe that science-centric and so-called political conspiracy theories can be very meaningfully distinguished (*e.g.*, Huneman & Vorms, 2018; Räikkä, 2018). It is true that some conspiracy theories focus specifically on certain social groups

(*e.g.*, migrants) or serve to support specific political positions (*e.g.*, anti-immigration), and some conspiracy theories do not directly target scientific knowledge (*e.g.*, fake moon landing). Nevertheless, the central role of scientific knowledge production in society, the public resources required for this endeavour, and the ways in which science is used to buttress public policies, all make a hard distinction between science, politics, and social order untenable (Shapin & Schaffer, 2011). Science is an undeniably political phenomenon in that it both embodies power and grants this to other actors and institutions. Second, and related to the first point, science is the predominant social institution for the adjudication of truth in most societies (Harambam & Aupers, 2014). Scientific developments and institutions (including those in and of medicine and engineering) are hence the target of a great deal of conspiracy theorising. Moreover, not only are scientific research and expertise deemed central to the process of policymaking, but scientific experts are often involved in the increasingly common phenomenon of technocratic governance. The involvement of scientific experts in policymaking, and particularly in technocratic forms of governance, as well as their status as educational elites, have all been recognised as key and sometimes negative aspects of broader discussions about inequality, public participation, and the decay of democracy (Scicluna & Auer, 2019; Farkas & Schou, 2024). Third, by placing knowledge production in the sciences as well as the social sciences and humanities next to the oft-maligned practice of conspiracy theorising, important questions about the boundaries between social critiques that arise from either supposedly healthy or undue scepticism (*i.e.*, paranoia) can be re-examined (Huneman & Vorms, 2018).

I am well aware that seeking to highlight the potential benefits of conspiracy theorising is a delicate matter, and that my approach might be considered overly provocative. As mentioned above, science-centric conspiracy theories are not unproblematic—potentially leading to, among other things, an erosion of trust in public institutions and policies—and some are indeed dangerous and harmful, particularly for disadvantaged groups in society (Jolley *et al.*, 2022). Even so, labelling a belief a “conspiracy theory” has become a normative means of pathologising and stigmatising rather than engaging with its supporters, contents and underlying concerns. There is a real risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, as well as of falling into elitist or anti-democratic pitfalls. I thus argue for a more cautious approach in countering the potentially dangerous aspects of conspiracy theories, as well

as a more generous attitude towards their sensible, even valuable elements. Equally deserving of our attention are the specific conditions under which such theories emerge and the goals towards which they are mobilised. I therefore call for a less moralising approach to conspiracy theories, and criticise the failure of academic and democratic institutions to acknowledge their sometimes valid critiques.

Section 1 begins with an analysis of the conceptual relationship between conspiracy theorising and various kinds of ‘untrue’ information (*i.e.*, mis-, dis-, malinformation and fake news) and reframes conspiracy theories as a distinct epistemological and political form of critique. In passing, I also situate the emergence of contemporary conspiracy theorising in its broader historical context, which is characterised by structural inequality, economic crisis, populism, technocratic governance and democratic deficit. Section 2 highlights three points which, taken together, propose ways to separate the wheat from the chaff in terms of “conspiracy theory thought”, and underscores the implications for researching and addressing inequalities. In the conclusion, I briefly reiterate my arguments and end with a reflexive note on the relationship between academic research and inequality.

1. Conspiracy, Information and Inequality

1.1. Conspiracies and (Un)truths

It is notoriously difficult to define a conspiracy theory. Researchers usually try to differentiate between conspiracies, conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorising, sometimes including such distinctions as conspiracy theorists, conspiracy believers and conspiratorial thinking (Uscinski, 2018, 2019; Thalmann, 2019). Some scholars have focused not only on the contents of conspiracy theories but also on their narrative characteristics (Barkun, 2003) and their interpretive and open-ended nature (Fenster, 2008). One of the main obstacles to defining a conspiracy theory is the difficulty in distinguishing between theoretical proposition and actual event, and this distinction is therefore hotly debated (see Keeley, 1999, 2003; Coady, 2003, 2006). There is disagreement on “which theories constitute ‘could-be-true’ conspiracy theories and which constitute ‘are-true’ conspiracies” (Uscinski, 2018, p. 235). Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement that conspiracies—in which already powerful groups seek to usurp power, manipulate collective outcomes and government institutions for their own benefit, engage in unlawful

activity, violate human rights, and make some knowledge invisible (or maintain its invisibility)—do in fact exist and have done so throughout history. Indeed, there is no shortage of historical evidence that powerful groups concoct schemes, hatch plots, foment insurrections, instigate coups, manipulate evidence, distort (scientific) knowledge, falsify data, shape (media) narratives, and silence, imprison or simply assassinate their opponents.

A conspiracy theorist can be defined as anyone who believes in at least one conspiracy theory (Uscinski, 2019). Research shows, however, that almost all citizens of countries in which polls are conducted believe in at least one conspiracy theory, and frequently more than one (Oliver & Wood, 2014). This rather general observation about the ubiquity of conspiracy theories among all social strata strongly suggests that such theories mirror a common feature of our societies, namely the feeling that certain phenomena can be sensed or surmised but not necessarily proven or known in a way that can be collectively agreed upon. In other words, there are truths that are unknown to us, either because we have not yet discovered them or because they are being wilfully hidden from us. It is therefore unsurprising that science, as one of the predominant adjudicators of ‘truth’ in most societies, is so often the target of conspiracy theories. This is especially the case because one can always claim that science has not yet discovered all truths and that more research needs to be done. Anyone who thus acknowledges that conspiracies are an undeniable fact of human history and can be expected to exist at any given moment is, to some extent, a conspiracy theorist.

Finally, a broad and relatively neutral definition of a conspiracy theory is an explanation for an event—whether past, present or future—that is attributed to a generally small group of powerful individuals who act in secret for their own benefit, often to the detriment of the common good (or that of a specific subset of the population) (Uscinski, 2018, 2019; Salvador Casara *et al.*, 2022). A crucial aspect of a conspiracy theory is that it can be both true and untrue. We know that actual conspiracies occur; we know that not all conspiracy theories are true; we also know that some conspiracies will probably never be exposed (meaning they are true but remain unproven). This is, in essence, the distinction Uscinski makes between “could-be-true” conspiracy theories and “are-true” conspiracies (2018, p. 235). Two additional and crucial characteristics of conspiracy theories, namely their inherent critique of power relationships and their origin under conditions of uncertainty and inequality, will be discussed below.

1.2. Conspiracy Theories and Dis-, Mis-, or Malinformation

An important and related set of terms that overlaps significantly with the topic of conspiracy theories is that of dis-, mis-, and malinformation, particularly because these terms are used in similar fashion to dismiss and condemn non-mainstream knowledge claims. They denote statements that are deliberately and consciously untrue (disinformation), statements that are false or misleading though not necessarily aimed at achieving a specific outcome (misinformation) (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2024), and factual statements that are taken out of context in order to intentionally mislead, harm or manipulate a certain person or group (malinformation) (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). A related but somewhat messier category is that of fake news, which can cover all three of these categories, as well as propaganda, hoaxes, scams, rumours and defamation (Farkas & Schou, 2024).

Fake news, however, is increasingly used by various actors as a catchall phrase to undermine the credibility of their perceived adversaries. A pertinent example, which underscores the relationship of fake news to political power, is the way in which fake news is frequently employed by populist and/or authoritarian leaders (*e.g.*, Bolsonaro, Farage, Orban, Trump) to undermine all manner of claims about themselves and their administrations. Indeed, these populist actors hurl accusations of conspiratorial activities—arising from within rather than outside—to engender a sense of uncertainty and threat among the general population (see also Aupers, 2012; Harambam, 2020; Thalmann, 2019). Although not within the scope of this article, this suggests that such populist arguments frequently contain ulterior motives and disingenuous aspects that are employed for purposes of obfuscation and distraction, thus making them more akin to dis-, or malinformation.

The deployment of disputable or untrue claims by authoritarian actors presents an important intersection between conspiracy theories and populist assertions about the oppositional relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘elites’. In short, both conspiracy theorists and populists make claims about the problematic nature of elites and their disproportionate power. Another important overlap is historical and contextual: the rise of populism and potentially problematic forms of information are both commonly explained as resulting from developments that have occurred or worsened over the past five decades, such as the rise in social inequality, democratic disenfranchisement, the advent of digital platforms and the changes they have wrought in the media ecosystem,

as well as large-scale transformations such as globalisation and the rise of technocratic governance (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Nilges, 2020; Farkas & Schou, 2024).

Finally, what sets conspiracy theories apart from the above-mentioned problematic forms of communication (and the capitalist or platform logics that shape them) is their tendency to contain or elaborate upon an interpretive framework in which statements (whether facts or conjectures) are related to each other through methods and analytical processes that allow for their further development. In other words, we must take into account not only the content and structure of conspiracy theories but also their relationship to “official knowledge” and to society in general (Urbano, 2023). Mis-, dis-, and malinformation are largely shaped, or at least certainly exacerbated, by the logic of platform capitalism, even if their articulation and intent can sometimes also be understood as a symbol of dissent and resistance to socio-political conditions, and as such also as part of interpretive frameworks of critique (Harsin, 2024). Conspiracy theories can certainly be also shaped, amplified, and exacerbated by the dynamics of digital platforms and exploited by “conspiracy entrepreneurs”. Nevertheless, many conspiracy theories can be understood as the “best possible explanation” (Huneman & Vorms, 2018, p. 15) under conditions of uncertainty regarding complex and perhaps relatively unknowable phenomena that are shaped by various social, cultural and economic issues that include not just (platform) capitalism but also broader and more encompassing developments. There is good reason why we label one as information and another as theory even if in both cases their epistemological status is contested. That is to say, conspiracy theories are not analogous to information (whether true or false) but more akin to interpretive frameworks—that is, theories—developed to understand and critique society (whether or not justifiable).

1.3. Conspiracy Theories and Inequalities

As noted in the introduction, conspiracy theory scholarship has, after an initial period in which such theories were roundly rejected by philosophers and political scientists, recently inclined towards more agnostic approaches in research, often conducted from a more qualitative and ethnographic perspective (*e.g.*, Harambam, 2020). There are a number of interrelated reasons for this. The first is the recognition that

all conspiracy theories are ultimately about power: who has it, what is done with it, and how its exertion remains hidden (Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Uscinski, 2018). Conspiracy theories almost always target someone or something in particular: a government, organisation, institution, professional association or any social group that is perceived as both powerful and nefarious. Conspiracy theories, at least in the Global North, commonly tend to implicate the higher and more powerful social strata—the elites or “establishment”—rarely those with little power (Uscinski, 2019).² Attempts by right-wing activists and populist leaders notwithstanding, conspiracy theories are generally espoused by the relatively powerless and aimed at the relatively powerful. The emergence and persistence of conspiracy theories are thus a constant reminder of power imbalances in society.

Another argument for dismissing the pathologising approach in favour of a more agnostic approach is the realisation that conspiracy theories do not come out of nowhere: they are closely tied to the contexts and conditions in which they emerge (Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000; Bratich, 2008; Fenster, 2008). In other words, there are important contextual reasons for the emergence of conspiracy theories that cannot be attributed solely to the minds or actions of individuals. Major catastrophes, crises and natural disasters, for example, swiftly give rise to conspiratorial thinking. Examples include the financial crisis of 2008–2009 and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic, whose complexity led to the uncertainty and instability that stymied our collective ability to make the incisive decisions needed to tackle a seemingly intractable set of problems. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, the expertise of specific scientific disciplines was prioritised over that of other scientific disciplines as well as arguably equally valid perspectives coming from disciplines such as economics, psychology, and sociology. Events of such historical import tend to cause rifts in the consensus—among various experts, policymakers and the public—thus revealing deep divisions in society. Crises, in other words, make the maintenance of consensus more difficult, opening up possibilities for

2 However, it is important to acknowledge that the perception of a lack or loss of power can also lead to the creation of conspiracy theories, as exemplified in right-wing claims about a “Great Replacement” of “Western” civilization by migrants or the “indoctrination” of children through the teaching of Critical Race Theory. This gives rise to important and complicated questions, which cannot be addressed in this article but do require further research, about how such perceptions of a relative lack or loss of power can or should enable the justification of such claims.

counternarratives and conflicting world views (Jetten *et al.*, 2022; Salvador Casara *et al.*, 2022). For example, Fassin (2011, p. 41) observes, in the context of the AIDS crisis in South Africa, that “conspiracy theories express social imaginaries and political anxieties that remain unspeakable or unheard”, especially about the application of scientific knowledge that is largely produced in foreign and historically inimical countries and applied by a local government that is perceived as callous and corrupt. As the mirror of an unequal society, such theories thus “deserve more than the indignation and mockery that frequently surround them” and “should arouse more than condescending smiles or exasperated reactions” (pp. 41-42). Unsurprisingly, conspiracy theories resonate strongly with groups that have been subjected to longstanding discrimination and injustice.

A final reason for a more positive interpretation of conspiracy theories is the recognition of the relationship between conspiracy theorising and inequality, particularly economic and identity-based inequalities. For example, Scheper-Hughes (1996) notes—once again with regard to a biomedical topic, namely organ donation and rumours of organ stealing in Brazil and South Africa—that dismissing such rumours and conspiracy theories as “literary inventions of semi-literate people lacking the skills to sort out the credible and realistic from the incredible and fantastic”, or qualifying them as “groundless, pernicious, harmful” (p. 4) is to miss the point entirely. Disadvantaged groups in Brazil and South Africa who not only live under conditions of inequality, but are also subjected to extreme injustice and even acute danger, have few resources either to protect themselves or to challenge those whom they perceive as the perpetrators of this injustice, namely biomedical experts and government officials. Conspiracy theories thus serve an important function in that they communicate to disadvantaged groups that their lives are in constant danger of exploitation or harm. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that their perceptions are “grounded in a social and biomedical reality, that their bodies and those of their children might be worth more dead than alive to the rich and powerful” (p. 7). One of the few means of resistance available to such groups is the ability to create symbolically powerful narratives that convey the reality of their experience.³ Moreover, with regard to identity-based ine-

3 As already noted above, even a perception or suspicion of power imbalances, threats, or oppression matters. Great Replacement theory, for example, very much emphasises the perceived danger that migrants from the Global South pose to “Western” civilisation.

quality and discrimination, as experienced by people of colour in the United States, scholars have noted that conspiracy theories can serve as a form of “counterknowledge” that allows people to theorise about, explain and even fight racism and injustice (Gosa, 2011). Although components of such theories may be inaccurate, they are nonetheless rooted in attempts to articulate and address processes of racial discrimination and inequality that continue to be downplayed or ignored in the mainstream public discourse. Thus conspiracy theories can play an important role not only in fostering group identity and solidarity but also in furthering political resistance.⁴

Such ethnographic approaches to conspiracy theorising have shown that conspiracy theories are embedded in specific socio-historical contexts. Once understood as situated knowledges—even if partial and flawed—that are a reaction to specific conditions of inequality, they can no longer be rejected as the result merely of epistemic or moral failures and paranoia. This also suggests that research into the relationship between “deviant”, “uncertain”, or “stigmatised” knowledges (Fine, 2016; Boullier *et al.*, 2021; Neresini *et al.*, 2024) and inequality cannot explain the so-called “epistemic crisis” or “information disorder” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) simply by criticising the ostensibly misguided actions of conspiracy theorists, the problematic content of their theories, and the digital platforms on which such theories circulate. In short, this situation involves much more than epistemics. Without the inclusion of broader structural factors and their role in creating or maintaining the conditions under which such alternative knowledges emerge, our picture remains muddled and incomplete.

A further advantage of this ethnographic approach, which situates conspiracy theories as knowledge, is the stress it places on the role of knowledge as an identity resource, both individually and collectively. This is particularly true in the case of marginalised communities, since it underlines their broader cultural embedding in social dynamics and institutions (Gosa, 2011; Trauthig *et al.*, 2025). Perhaps more importantly, if we consider conspiracy theorising as a form of knowledge production, it enables us to examine the agonistic dynamics involved

4 Here, too, it is important to acknowledge counter-examples in which conspiracy theories are used to sow division and create instability or otherwise neutralise the capacity for political resistance by one’s perceived opponents. For example, claims about “foreign interference” are regularly made by governments about stolen elections or against large protests, such as the 2020 US Election and the Black Lives Matters movement (Koo & Chen, 2025), in order to undermine their legitimacy.

in the creation of consensus or dissensus, and the rejection of competing knowledge claims, based on accusations of hidden motivations and underlying (problematic) ideologies (Boullier *et al.*, 2021). In short, the ethnographic approach can show us how knowledge is produced in the public domain by multiple actors drawing on diverse epistemologies. As will be argued below, such agonistic dynamics between competing epistemologies can be understood as an enrichment rather than a threat to democratic participation.

1.4. Conspiracy Theories and Crises

Crises, of course, provide fertile ground for conspiratorial narratives (Jetten *et al.*, 2022; Salvador Casara *et al.*, 2022). A less acute process or condition that is generally not referred to as a crisis—a noteworthy observation in itself—is that of economic inequality (Piketty, 2013; 2015). Despite its slow-moving character and diffuse adverse consequences, economic inequality causes such serious harm to societies—even to the wealthiest (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Economic inequality looms large in the emergence and proliferation of science-centric conspiracy theories, particularly when it overlaps and intersects with such identity-based inequalities as structural racism, sexism and ableism. Research in the fields of economics and social psychology has shown that one of the main ways in which economic inequality gives rise to conspiracy theories is the emergence of *anomie*, which is characterised by a breakdown in social norms, standards and moral values, and the loss of autonomy, trust and collective identity (Durkheim, 1964; Jetten *et al.*, 2022; Salvador Casara *et al.*, 2022). The result, in short, is social dysfunction. Once again, this stream of research does not simply reject or condemn conspiracy theorising as the result of irrationality or a lack of education and cognitive abilities; instead, it reframes such thinking as a collective response to broader social challenges—economic inequality, uncertainty, political instability—and as an attempt to regain a sense of order and control. What is more, while inequality gives rise to conspiracy theories, increasing both their number and intensity, conspiratorial beliefs can in turn prompt collective action against economic inequality by challenging hierarchies of

expertise and urging governmental transparency (Douglas *et al.*, 2019; Salvador Casara *et al.*, 2022).⁵

There is a certain reciprocity at play here: social inequalities give rise to conspiracy theories, many of which contain critiques of inequality. Conspiracy theories, therefore, involve more than just struggles over knowledge and truth in an age of “epistemic instability” (Harambam, 2020) or “information disorder” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017); they also involve struggles over political power (Uscinski, 2018; Hesselbein, 2023). It has often been noted that conspiracy theories are frequently at odds with scientific truth and knowledge. This is certainly an important part of the story and reminds us that such theories must be regarded with some degree of scepticism. But it omits a crucial aspect, namely that conspiracy theories are also critiques of society more broadly (not just the institution of science, as important as this may be). In short, conspiracy theories are a forceful reminder that our era is marked—or marred—by both epistemic instability and social inequality.

The term crisis, however, is in itself problematic. It can be used to deflect from or close down discussions about the underlying causes of a situation, particularly from a non-hegemonic or minority perspective. Many people, regardless of political affiliation, now share the view that our current era is one of crisis, or even of multiple and entangled crises, though opinions vary widely as to cause and remedy. As observed by Nilges (2020), centre- and far-right groups assert that our current crisis is largely due to divisive and extremist theories about identity and social justice rather than to the contradictions of capitalism and neo-liberal austerity measures. The creation or shaping of a perception of crisis, in other words, can be used precisely to further limit democratic participation. Similarly, Farkas and Schou (2024) forcefully argue that crisis terms, such as “infodemic”, “post-truth era” and “misinformation age”, serve to buttress a prevailing alarmist narrative in which truth and reason (and by consequence, post-truth) are posited as the key concern for democratic societies. Furthermore, these claims once again reassert and justify the implementation of technocratic governance over issues that should arguably be open to broad public debate rather than nar-

5 As already noted, there are evidently also examples in which powerful actors create or appropriate conspiracy theories in order to justify their actions. Prime examples are antisemitic conspiracy theories that have been put forward by various actors throughout history. Another important exception are the many and varied claims and conspiracy theories put forward by Donald Trump, particularly about immigrants but also other minorities within the US.

row, top down, and expert-driven forms of decision making (more on this issue below). Such a narrative, moreover, not only misrepresents the relationship between truth, reason and democracy, but also denies that healthy democratic societies are (or should be) open, participatory and dynamic, that is, characterised as much by political differences and pluralism as by controversy and debate, in short, “rule by people, rather than rule by truth” (Farkas & Schou, 2024, p. 11). Once democratic politics is reconceptualised as an agonistic space wherein multiple truths can and should be negotiated (*e.g.*, Mouffe, 1999; 2000; 2005), the role and meaning of many conspiracy theories will become much less threatening, representing merely one (fringe) position among many, but nonetheless one that is allowed to be articulated, heard and possibly recognised as potentially valid.⁶

Finally, one dominant response to the notion of crisis that is particularly relevant to the topic of conspiracy theories has been that of technocratic governance, in which it is not democratically elected representatives but technoscientific experts or professional elites who are called upon to provide more stability and faster decision-making. Although justifiable to some extent in urgent situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, technocratic approaches come with significant drawbacks: not only do they limit epistemic pluralism and public participation, but they also undermine the ideal of democracy more broadly (Scicluna & Auer, 2019). In the context of a global pandemic, for example, conspiracy theories have been considered particularly problematic and harmful. Yet it has also become clear that grouping together every possible doubt and objection to vaccines and rejecting them all as irrational and dangerous does not do justice to the different positions and their arguments. Thus measures that focus on “debunking” or “countering” conspiracy theories by using automated systems on social media platforms can be considered unhelpful and even counterproductive, because they fail to address the underlying issues—one could say “real crises”—of social inequality and democratic deficit (Harambam, 2021; Farkas & Schou, 2024).

6 This is not to say that agonistic pluralism is a framework without limits. Conspiracy theories with a specific anti-democratic bent, just like some anti-democratic positions, cannot be accommodated even within agonistic pluralism.

2. Conspiracy Theories as Critique

The previous section outlined the relationship between conspiracy theorising and various kinds of ‘untrue’ information, and situated the emergence of contemporary conspiracy theorising in its broader historical context, namely structural inequality, economic crisis, populism, and democratic deficit. Below I build further upon and extend this reframing of conspiracy theorisation in an attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff in ‘conspiracy theory thought’, and thus to conceptualise it as a distinct epistemological and political form of critique.

2.1. Conspiracy Theories as Knowledge Production

First, conspiracy theories are not necessarily based only on an anti-science stance or a lack of knowledge; they can also be informed by limited or incomplete knowledge that nevertheless counts as knowledge, even as “common knowledge”. This observation is important, because conspiracy theories often emerge in circumstances in which certain claims are plausible but difficult to prove (for reasons of power inequality, for example). My argument holds that many science-focused conspiracy theories contain a valuable kernel of truth or at least elements that are uncontroversial and even rational, which is precisely why they can be so persuasive. One such kernel of truth is the well-established social-constructivist insight that reality—particularly our collective knowledge about reality and the institutions that represent this knowledge—is shaped by powerful interests, and that such interests often succeed at obscuring their ability to shape reality.

This observation holds beyond the realm of science, technology, and medicine. Even the least informed members of society are aware of historical events in which cultural and political elites—governments and intelligence services, media organisations, scientific researchers and public intellectuals—were involved in the planning or execution of manipulative tactics—whether directed at fellow citizens or foreign governments—or in the construction of a hegemonic narrative intended to obscure such tactics. Infamous cases include the involvement of the US intelligence agencies in the overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953 and 1979 and in the Chilean coup of 1973, Nixon’s actions at the centre of the Watergate scandal, the Tuskegee syphilis study, and the role played by the Reagan administration in the Iran-Contra affair. A list of such events—particularly actions undertaken by the US and UK

governments and their secret services to influence prominent members of society and public institutions such as the media—would fill many pages. Several more recent examples—the revelations contained in the Snowden papers, the Libor exchange scandal, the Epstein child-trafficking scandal—similarly show how powerful groups and individuals can shape the world to their own advantage and manipulate our knowledge of their actions. That authorities have often failed to acknowledge, let alone punish, such well-established realities only underline the asymmetrical power relations that underpin their disputed status as facts.

It is not only governments but also corporations that have long shaped the public perception of “reality”, both through their advertising and by manipulating scientific discourse. By turning towards corporations, the harmful role of seeking financial gain over broader social benefits becomes clear. The tobacco, chemical, fossil fuel and pharmaceutical industries provide the most obvious examples (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Sismondo, 2018). They have all contributed adversely to human, environmental and global health by pursuing profit over social benefit, at the same time obscuring their commercial interests and the detrimental effects of their products. This is a much more subtle but equally powerful way of shaping reality and our perception of it. Moreover, science, medicine, and engineering—as practiced in public institutions rather than in private or corporate settings—are not fields of pure and unblemished conduct: their offences range from cases of individual fraud to larger and more structural issues, such as data fabrication, the irreproducibility of results, and labour exploitation, often exacerbated by corporate funding (McGarity & Wagner, 2008). Even “normal science” involves the construction of “objective” knowledge that aligns with the intellectual investments, institutional alliances, and socio-cultural background and positionality of scientists. Examples that are less related to the misuse of science but illustrative of the abuse of power by elites in “tech”, finance, and industry can be found in the collapse of Enron in 2001, the swath of banks, insurance companies, credit raters and regulators involved in the financial collapse of 2008, the Volkswagen emissions scandal, the Cambridge Analytica scandal involving Facebook (now Meta) and the recent collapse of the FTX cryptocurrency exchange, to name but a few prominent instances.

In reference to Hofstadter’s classic text on the “paranoid style” (1964), we would do well to remember how reasonable it is to believe that powerful groups frequently conspire to manipulate public dis-

course, news reports, historical events and even scientific facts. This is done both overtly and covertly. Indeed, one might wonder why people do not identify in larger numbers as paranoid, since it is “common knowledge” that those in power regularly and unscrupulously pursue their goals while obscuring their actions and avoiding accountability. Some researchers have even suggested that it is the “phobia” of conspiracy theories, as well as the naïve yet persistent belief in the good intentions of governments and corporations, that requires further explanation, rather than questioning the not at all unreasonable belief that conspiracies abound (Räikkä & Basham, 2018).

It is the “rational” element of conspiracy theories that makes them so persuasive, which is reason enough to exercise more caution in condemning an entire “alternative approach” as uninformed, irrational, paranoid and conspiratorial. Conspiracy theories can hardly be understood as monolithic entities, and dismissing all such theories as irrational denies the reality of the crises that prompt them. More importantly, such totalising labels can be seen as self-serving attempts to delegitimise challenges to one’s power. Potentially harmful theories may be rightly criticised, but if some of their claims are valid, failure to acknowledge these can be deleterious and counterproductive, as evidenced by “stigmatised knowledge” communities (Hesselbein, 2023; Urbano, 2023; Neresini *et al.*, 2024). It can be tempting, for example, to take all the objections to vaccines raised by the various anti-vaccination movements, lump them together, and reject them all as conspiratorial. However, the sweeping condemnation of such varied arguments, many of which contain justified critiques of our current modes of knowledge production, such as the uncomfortably close relationship between pharmaceutical companies and venture capitalists (Blume, 2006), only proves that their concerns are not being taken seriously. What is more, the lumping together of such diverse groups suggests alliances between these groups, draws false equivalences between their varied arguments, conflates their potential threats, and subtly signals a need to close ranks against those who challenge the power of the *status quo* (Uscinski, 2018).

2.2. Conspiracy Theories as Public Participation

Conspiracy theories, in addition to containing uncontroversial and rational aspects that make them persuasive, can also be understood as attempts to formulate political critiques of social inequality, knowledge

production, and democratic failure from a position of partial or incomplete knowledge and disempowerment (Scheper-Hughes, 1996; Fassin, 2011). Concerns about the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge are, of course, also concerns about the boundaries between the legitimate and illegitimate exercise of power (Shapin & Schaffer, 2011). Who decides what counts as knowledge? Employing which criteria? And how should one act on such knowledge? These are key questions that inform the exercise of power in society. We thus move from conspiracy theories and their critiques of scientific knowledge production to another form of critique, namely that of democratic participation. In an age marked by increasing social inequality, military invasions, genocide, global migration and climate change—with the institutions, structures and means to deal with these problems concentrated in the hands of a select few—it is no surprise that the disenfranchised and the disempowered turn more and more to such “weapons of the weak” as conspiracy theories (Scott, 1985).

In other words, we should think of conspiracy theories not just as a social movement antagonistic to institutionalised science but also as a phenomenon that is frequently concerned with criticising broader social structures, of which the institution of science is only one (albeit a particularly important and powerful one). Conspiracy theories are a major concern for modern democracies, precisely because they can be an outcome not only of social inequality but also of the crisis in political representation and legitimisation faced by many of our social institutions, particularly the institution of science—traditionally the principal arbiter of fact and falsehood. Many conspiracy theories are thus better understood as “situated knowledges”, even if partial and flawed ones, which are an outcome of or reaction to democratic crises and social inequality, rather than the cause or driver of such crises (Farkas & Schou, 2024). It is clear that citizens in every echelon of society and in many countries are sceptical of the efficacy of traditional means of political participation to determine the governance of their communities. In the opinion of many, governments are not only failing to represent their needs, uphold their rights as citizens, and tackle social inequality, but even in some instances actively colluding with powerful elites whose interests lie less in maintaining democratic values and more in pursuing commercial self-interests. Much of the discourse around conspiracy theories (and mis-, dis-, and malinformation) can justifiably be seen as obfuscation and scapegoating that seeks to place the blame on irrational or subversive groups (both inside and outside civil society), populist

politicians and social media platforms, rather than blaming the neoliberal austerity policies that have increased social inequality over the past decades (Nieminen, 2024).

It is no coincidence that almost all science-centric conspiracy theories follow the same pattern: they point to the uncomfortably close relationship between science and industry, and to the broader capitalist context in which the production of scientific knowledge and the pursuit of commercial success are yoked together (Harambam & Aupers, 2014; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Harambam, 2020). The above-mentioned fact, namely that various industries are guilty of manipulating public and scientific discourse in the interest of corporate profits, is hardly a claim that can be rejected as conspiratorial. For example, the anti-vaccination activists who point out that most vaccines are developed by large pharmaceutical companies whose primary goal is to produce profits for stockholders are not necessarily rejecting science (although some factions of this movement certainly are); they are engaging in critiques of capitalism (Blume, 2006). An important core concept of the conspiratorial framework is precisely this objection to the production of scientific knowledge and technological innovation in a context in which commercial gain is the primary goal (Hesselbein, 2023). And this objection will only become more strenuous as the boundaries between pursuits in the public interest and those driven purely by profit become increasingly blurred, and as the ties between science, engineering and corporations grow ever tighter.

This leads to the important conclusion that conspiracy theorising, far from being only a destabilising or dangerous activity, can also be understood as a valuable form of democratic participation (Harambam, 2021). Conspiracy theorists can in fact provide a meaningful alternative to mainstream institutions, such as the media and the judicial system, by acting as a “court of last resort” (Uscinski, 2018, p. 238). Although conspiracy theorists are not always right—in fact, they frequently fail to convince—they provide a viable means for challenging potentially wrong or biased accounts, weeding out authorities’ mistakes and rectifying them through appeals, and insisting on the search for new information and its dissemination. By providing an important counterweight to the power of authorities and elites, and by persistently challenging power inequality, conspiracy theories can play a valuable role in a healthy, democratic society. Conspiracy theorising is a way of thinking about society, particularly about power differentials between social groups, and is therefore a means of social engagement. A conspiracy

theory may be a weapon of the weak, indeed even one for “losers”, because it often proves ineffective (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 131), but a weapon it is, nonetheless. Finally, if democratic politics is conceptualised as an agonistic practice through which various truths are negotiated (Mouffe, 1999; 2000; 2005), conspiracy theories—particularly those that seek to address and amend social inequality or that contain legitimate critiques of a lack of transparency or participatory input—can be seen as minority positions that have a right to be articulated and considered (with, of course, the exception of positions that espouse an anti-democratic, oppressive or violent stance).

2.3. Conspiracy Theories as Social Theory

A third and final point about the potential value of conspiracy theories, in addition to their rational, commonsensical elements and their critique of social inequality, is that such theories have an important function as a complementary framework for research in the humanities and social sciences. Previous scholarship has noted that the relationship between research in the social sciences and humanities and the formulation of theories that are categorised as conspiratorial is remarkably similar in a number of important ways. One obvious reason for this similarity is the fact that conspiracy theorists not only use the language and rhetoric of the social sciences to support their claims but also employ concepts and frameworks from critical social theory (Harambam & Aupers, 2019). Much like a critical sociologist, conspiracy theorists speak of the role of social institutions in creating and maintaining hierarchical social structures that centralise power in bureaucracies and organisations to preserve order and stability. Similarly, conspiracy theorists stress the importance of socialisation through educational systems, the manufacturing of cultural hegemony through media outlets, and the uneven distribution of the benefits of globalisation, which exacerbates inequality. In this sense, one can say that conspiracy theories compete with the theories and frameworks formulated by social scientists, since both seek to provide accounts of social inequality and control (Melley, 2000) and to “provide explanatory myths for mass societies in that they claim to uncover (supposedly) ‘hidden’ plots or machineries which have caused a particular state of affairs or event to take place” (Parker, 2000, p. 191). Indeed, some have argued that conspiracy theories are akin to “postmodern skepticism about ‘grand narratives’, social constructivist accounts of knowledge production, neo-Marxist perspectives on the power of

capital, and sociological assumptions about a (global) power elite” (Harambam & Aupers, 2014, p. 12). A central claim of this scholarship is that research in the social sciences and humanities, by drawing on disciplinary frameworks, methods and concepts, succeeds in accessing knowledge that “was somehow beyond the comprehension of ordinary people” (Parker, 2000, p. 192). The conspiracy theorist, much like the sociologist, aims to expose the hidden machineries of society, to make us understand what we cannot yet see.

As true and problematic as this interesting affinity between critical social theories and conspiracy theories may be—particularly because it goes some way towards explaining the anxiety and desperation of some social scientists to “furiously demarcate their ‘scientific analyses’ from ‘conspiracy theories’” (Harambam & Aupers, 2014, p. 12)—I wish to linger, first, on what might be the inverse or a correlate of this argument. That is beyond their attempts to expose the machinations taking place invisibly in our everyday lives, conspiracy theories can also be understood as theories about reality in the absence of hard facts or even the possibility of obtaining such facts. Formulated under conditions of uncertainty and “unknowability”, conspiracy theories can be seen as attempts to theorise the “unresearchable” and the “as-yet-unprovable”. Their claims about the human condition or the world can be perceived but not easily turned into ‘objective’ facts. Unlike dis-, mis-, malinformation, which can be disproven by recourse to established facts (even if doing so is ineffective), conspiracy theories make claims about society that are not only far more difficult to disprove (Uscinski & Enders, 2023) but also to grasp and articulate, even by experts who specialise in precisely this. In other words, conspiracy theories do not deal exclusively with so-called facts – (social) scientific or otherwise—but precisely with what is not yet a fact. Even if (partially or even largely) incorrect, putting conspiracy theories on a par with “untrue” information, and regarding them simply as symptoms of our purported “post-truth era” (McIntyre, 2018) is a problematic course of action from the perspective of democratic self-determination and freedom of expression in the public sphere (Harambam, 2021). Furthermore, taking conspiracy theories too literally and focusing only on their flawed facts rather than their broader social critiques and political goals is to miss the point in an important manner. Thus “debunking” them with scientific facts or expertise, as is common in much of the scholarly literature and in public commentary (e.g., Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2017; Cichocka, 2020), could be counterproductive because it fails to address the underlying issues

of social inequality and democratic deficit (Harambam, 2021; Farkas & Schou, 2024).

The main obstacle to obtaining *true* insight is, of course, an imbalance of power. Mighty groups—be they cultural elites, government officials or “tech” billionaires—are practically impossible to gain access to, let alone study, even for those with the relevant academic credentials and expertise. As noted above, conspiracy theories tend to be directed by the relatively powerless towards the relatively powerful, namely elites or “the establishment” (Uscinski, 2018; 2019). As frameworks for researching and theorising about powerful groups, given the difficulty of penetrating or collecting information on them, conspiracy theories can be seen as attempts at “studying up” (Nader, 1974). In other words, because it is extremely difficult for those with less power to access information on the more powerful, conspiracy theorising is done in lieu of “studying up”. Perhaps equally important is that the “counterknowledge” and opportunities for identity formation provided by conspiracy theorising (Gosa, 2011) are not just reactions to complex and uncertain circumstances but also attempts to wrest control from those who are perceived as conspiring. This endeavour requires both knowledge and collective action to develop the means of acquiring some degree of traction over important parts of society that are practically unreachable, and therefore unresearchable and unknowable.

The emergence and persistence of conspiracy theories serve as a continuous reminder not only of power imbalances in society, but also of our continuing struggles and perhaps inability, as researchers in the social sciences and humanities, to conduct critical research on the “powerful” in a manner analogous to studies on the relatively “powerless” (Nader, 1974), such as disadvantaged minorities. To be clear, research on every segment of a society is worthwhile and important, particularly for understanding the causes and effects of inequality. Existing approaches, such as those drawing on (neo)Marxist, feminist, decolonial, and disability-based frameworks, seek to tackle existing inequalities by addressing the issue of elite power, with varying degrees of success. However, it is debatable whether and to what extent the category of “elites” overlaps with the groups focused on by Marxist, feminist, or decolonial scholars, which is not an issue that can be addressed within the scope of this article. Nonetheless, despite repeated reminders of the importance of “studying up” (e.g., Gusterson, 1997; Nader, 2011), and even the recent revival of the field of elite studies (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2021), those researching inequality continue

to struggle to produce studies on the rich and powerful. As attempts to collect information on and theorise about unresearchable groups and their obscured and perhaps unknowable actions, conspiracy theories are important reminders of the limits of our own methods and frameworks, indeed our own “critical theory”, and thus of our inability or failure to study, with equal thoroughness, both “up” and “down”.

Finally, conspiracy theories have another stimulative value for the humanities and social sciences in that they force us academic researchers and instructors to acknowledge our own positionality as (relative) elites. As part of an educational elite of experts, we are also part of the problem of inequality, even though some of us come from (relatively) disadvantaged backgrounds. It is no surprise, then, that conspiracy theories persistently “point toward the structural inequalities between the educated, scientifically trained experts and ordinary laymen” and argue that the former group is predominantly concerned with protecting its own interests to the exclusion of those of the latter (Harambam & Aupers, 2014, p. 11). Our tendency to study mostly “down”, rather than “up”—despite being the group most capable of doing so—as well as our simultaneous rejection of conspiracy theories as irrational and dangerous, demonstrates both a failure to reflect on our own shortcomings and a lack of courage to challenge the most powerful. The alacrity with which many academic researchers lump together all conspiracy theories—with no attempt to understand the underlying issues and no willingness to acknowledge their sometimes valid critiques—is at best counterproductive and at worst hypocritical. Too often, the term “conspiracy theory” is used to delegitimise critiques and divert attention from our own complicity. The results of decades of social science research on inequalities and critical theorisation have done remarkably little to address the issue constructively or forcefully. Just as pseudoscience can be understood as “the shadow of science: it is the reflection of the scientific community” (Gordin, 2021, p. 101), conspiracy theories can be understood as the shadow of society and even of the academic fields that study society. Such theories expose our weaknesses and remind us of the work that needs to be done.

3. Conclusion

This article has elaborated on recent agnostic and ethnographic approaches to conspiracy theories in an attempt, first, to think through their relation to inequality and mis-, dis-, and malinformation and,

second, to recuperate conspiracy theories as a potentially valuable form of social critique. I have outlined three potential contributions that conspiracy theorising can make to the construction of knowledge, to participation in society, and to research and theorisation in the social sciences and humanities. These points have implications for understanding and addressing inequalities more broadly, underscoring that many science-centric conspiracy theories are socially and historically situated symptoms and reactions to rather than a cause of power inequality, and can in fact be seen as a form of resistance to such inequality. Such science-centric theories are particularly interesting, and potentially constructive, because they frequently problematise the existing links between scientific knowledge production and commercial interests in addition to challenging the often taken-for-granted role of technocratic experts in democratic decision making. Consequently, the most effective means of tackling the more harmful aspects of conspiracy theories does not consist in “debunking” such theories or “inoculating” against their so-called harmful content, but in addressing underlying economic inequalities and democratic deficits (Cichocka, 2020; Nieminen, 2024). Similarly, conspiracy theories are an insightful and forceful reminder of the shortcomings of social institutions and the failure of researchers in the social sciences and humanities to deal with inequality.

By no means do I wish to assert, by voicing these provocations, that conspiracy theories are unproblematic. Many such theories (particularly those characterised by dis- or malinformation) should be met with scepticism because they can be dangerous and harmful and must therefore be rejected. There is an urgent need to make a clear distinction between various conspiracy theories, particularly those adhered to by the powerful. Some conspiracy theories might indeed exacerbate social inequality, and some are hard if not impossible to reframe in any positive manner. A prominent example of this might be the “flat earth” conspiracy theory, which is difficult to reinterpret as having any value in terms of a potential contribution to either knowledge or critique. Theories that aim “down” rather than “up” are especially suspect, especially if they target identity-based minorities. However, conspiracy theories that aim “up” remind us that the problem at hand is inequality, not just oversimplified, reductive judgments, disingenuous accusations of irrationality and a lack of education. Further research that focuses on the relationship between conspiracy theorisation and inequality could bring out more meaningful distinctions in our conceptualisation and understanding of conspiracy theorising. For example, some conspiracy

theories can perhaps not be considered as an outcome of or reaction to crises of inequality and democratic participation. Similarly, some conspiracy theories very much “punch down” rather than “up”, and this dynamic can probably only be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Even so, a great deal of research is clearly needed. Conspiracy theories should be examined empirically to determine their common patterns, their precise critiques of social inequality and the ways they propose to remedy this. Furthermore, a particularly promising avenue for further research is to explore how the alternative epistemologies and critiques embedded in conspiracy theories can be articulated within post-Marxist and agonistic pluralist frameworks (Mouffe, 2000; 2005).

We must therefore proceed with caution, seeking to counter the problematic or dangerous aspects of conspiracy theories while acknowledging their sensible, sometimes valuable elements—all the while reflecting on our own potential role as educational elites. This is of the utmost importance in an era marked by the rejection of science as an authoritative arbiter of fact and falsehood, and an increase in educational inequality between experts and laypeople. An uncomfortable, underappreciated and frequently ignored part of this reality is the fact that researchers in the humanities and social sciences—as educational, cultural, and often also economic elites—are sometimes part of the problem of inequality. Our failure to acknowledge our own blind spots and the shortcomings of our critical theories, methods and institutions, not to mention our lack of humility and occasional complicity in perpetuating inequality, need to be acknowledged and addressed. There is a lesson here for all of us: it is easier to disregard others and their supposedly irrational beliefs and behaviours than it is to examine ourselves and admit that we, too, often hold beliefs and engage in practices that can be considered irrational, hypocritical and deserving of criticism.

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