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With the fall of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, students of conspiracy theories developed a prognosis according to which belief in such theories would gradually lose its political importance and be fed upon only at the margins of discourse.¹ That optimistic vision was, however, brutally checked by the early years of the twenty-first century. In reaction to important and tragic events, from the attacks of September 11, 2001 to the current refugee crisis, successive conspiracy narratives have only multiplied; according to reliable research, four million Americans believe that the world is ruled by Lizard People, reptiles from space.² The White House is forced to issue a public assurance that it is not planning to invade Texas,³ France has introduced special courses in schools to

¹ D. Pipes, *Conspiracy. How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*, New York 1999, p. 184.

² J. Williams, *Conspiracy Theory Poll Results*, Public Policy Polling, 2.04.2013, <http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2013/04/conspiracy-theory-poll-results-.html> (6.03.2016).

³ *Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest*, White House, 29.04.2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/04/29/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-42915> (6.03.2016).

combat the growing belief in conspiracies among pupils,⁴ and pro-Putin propaganda is working full steam to advance conspiracy narratives in the realm of public opinion, exposing alleged perfidy on the part of the West.⁵ In Poland, too, the conspiracy-centred mentality is thriving, although – in keeping with the traditional national imagination – the role of the villain is played here not by space lizards but by Jews, Russians, and Germans, to whose company Muslims have also been recently added. Two years ago, the Polish Minister of the Environment, before assuming his post, addressed a question to the Prime Minister about the possible advisability of producing *chemtrails* – smog left in the sky by planes, believed by adherents of conspiracy theories to contain specific chemicals that cause impotence and serve the purpose of artificial population control.⁶

Journalistic analyses of conspiracy theories usually suggest two causes for this state of affairs. First, cynical manipulators who promote conspiracy narratives in public opinion to achieve their own ignoble ends are unmasked. Such an interpretation, obviously, indirectly confirms the existence of powerful conspiracies, merely shifting the source of the machinations elsewhere. The second cause indicated is a general decline in the level of public debate,

⁴ N. Vallaud-Belkacem, *Journée d'étude "Réagir face aux théories du complot"*, education.gouv.fr, 9.02.2016, <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid98418/journee-d-etude-reagir-face-aux-theories-du-complot.html> (6.03.2016).

⁵ J.C. Castellón, *Panowie świata. Dzieje teorii spiskowych*, trans. J. Partyka, Warszawa 2007, p. 254.

⁶ J. Szyszko, Interpelacja nr 16893, 2.04.2013, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm7.nsf/InterpelacjaTresc.xsp?key=0A8244A2> (6.03.2016).

a lack of critical thinking, reinforced by the negative influence of the internet, inundating its users with unverified assertions. Anne Applebaum, warning against the internet activity of trolls controlled by the Kremlin, quotes a Twitter campaigner (whose handle is @AvoidComments), advising: “You wouldn’t listen to someone named Bonerman26 in real life. Don’t read the comments.”⁷

The above diagnosis is no doubt correct on many points, but appears not to explain why, among the many un-, quasi- and pseudoscientific forms of content available it is precisely conspiracy narratives that so easily persuade contemporary audiences. In order to understand what is driving the rescrudescient popularity of conspiracy theories, we must reach considerably deeper and return to the beginning of the formation of the cultural and political paradigm of Modernity, together with its project of emancipation of the individual subject. That analysis leads to the conclusion that thinking in categories of conspiracy is a reversal, permanently attached to Modernity, of its emancipation process. Against the background of the broadly defined dialectic of the Enlightenment – containing both truly emancipatory moments and dangerous sources of objectification – a long process is constantly taking place. It involves the expansion of the conspiracist mentality, which likewise has its own internal dynamic, in which an unflagging tension exists between

⁷ A. Applebaum, “Another Reason to Avoid Reading the Comments,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anne-applebaum-another-reason-to-avoid-reading-the-comments/2014/11/28/b37a9f30-7722-11e4-a755-e32227229e7b_story.html?utm_term=.819c002d557d (13.10.2016).

the emancipatory, subjectifying element and objectifying constraint. It seems that the mutual dependency of these two processes is not accidental, that both processes are conjoined within a peculiar interdependence which constitutes the hidden mechanism of modern history, guaranteeing their transition from the level of theory to that of political practice.

Sources of Modern Subjectivity

“Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own reason,” Immanuel Kant wrote in 1784 in his programmatic work *The Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* He proceeded to explain that “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.”⁸ A century and a half earlier, Descartes, commonly seen as the father of the modern concept of subjectivity, called for all statements to be brought before the tribunal of one’s own reason, and Francis Bacon discovered that reasoned knowledge constitutes power, allowing us to break free of dependence on Nature and render it obedient to human beings. “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters,”⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno concluded. At the same time, those philosophers who glorified Reason – from Bacon, through the French *philosophes*, to Hegel – underscored that individual emancipation could not take

⁸ I. Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” [in:] *On History*, trans. L. W. Beck, Indianapolis 1963, p.3; I. Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” [in:] *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays: on Politics, History, and Morals*, trans. T. Humphrey, Indianapolis 1983, p. 41.

⁹ M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott, Stanford 2002, p. 1.

place without the rationalization of social space, without mastering what we may, using the categories of critical theory, call the irrational nature of social life. Only when functioning in a reasoning reality is a person able to realize his or her causative subjectivity, and thus also truly anticipate the consequences of their actions.

In the construction of modern subjectivity sketched here, there nevertheless exists a fundamental internal fissure. On the one hand, the Cartesian subject, this thinking thing, has been defined as a substance, inextendible and indivisible, which as a result – in the course of the evolution of philosophical thought – was supposed to lead to the rise of the superindividual construction of Kantian transcendental reason, acquiring an increasingly social character in successive interpretations. On the other hand, it is hard not to perceive that Descartes also describes the subject in psychological categories, applied to the particular, individual person. The philosopher, after all, evokes that famous night between the 10th and 11th of November, 1619, when, lying on top of a brick oven in a Bavarian hut and playing with philosophical speculations, he came up with the formula *Cogito ergo sum*.¹⁰ Readers of the *Discourse on Method* can have no doubt that it is he, the thinking subject, and thus a particular, individual person, who poses questions and ponders outcomes as he presents a statement before the tribunal of his own reason. This second, individualistic tradition of interpreting subjectivity lies at the foundation of the liberal political

¹⁰ R. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations*, trans. L.J Lafleur, New York 1960, p. 18.

philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. That philosophy, starting from postulates of empiricism, is based on a “possessive” concept of the subject.¹¹ According to it, the person is understood as a concrete, reasoning biological being. He or she is born free primarily because they are, from birth, the owner of their own biological organism, and in further succession, in the process of living life, biologically, they acquire the right of ownership to everything that their organism “colonizes” from the world’s resources. The power of the biological organism, the equipped might of reason, allows them to rule over reality, and constructions of the social contract have as their only task the protection of this innate subjectivity in the space of interactions with other individuals.

It is true that Horkheimer and Adorno indicated some fundamental threats to the project of emancipation that resulted from the growing claims of instrumental reason, but Jürgen Habermas, in continuing the traditions of the Frankfurt School, has defended the ideals of the Enlightenment by placing an emphasis on reasoned communication, meant to counteract the threat of the individual’s objectification. Apart from these philosophical controversies, it seems that the category of agency and the postulates of ruling over Nature and rationalization of social interaction represent fundamental categories of modern subjectivity.

¹¹ T. Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca 2000, p. 14. Melley cites C.B. Macpherson as the progenitor of the concept of “possessive individualism.”

Conspiracy Theories and the Dialectic of Emancipation

Conspiracism, based on the principle of Manichaeism, subordinates all of reality to an imagined struggle between good and evil, thereby ruling out utterly any possibility of detached description.¹² Without entering into particular problems of what defines a conspiracy theory, one can name its basic elements. Sebastian Duda writes: “What is a conspiracy theory? The question seems easy to answer. Intuition tells us it is an interpretation of facts that contradicts officially acknowledged explanations, and whose chief element is the belief in great influences on what is happening in the world and history, various conspirators seeking to hide their activities from public opinion.”¹³ Janusz Tazbir adds that the conspiracist vision of history is “not merely interest in these kinds of plots, but attributing decisive significance to them. This is usually related to a disregard for or negation of other causative factors.”¹⁴ Jerzy Topolski further notes that instead of mass processes, these theories see action by smaller groups or individuals.¹⁵

It appears obvious that conspiracy theories understood in these terms have been seen by scholars as contradicting Kant’s formulation of the Enlightenment postulate of rational subjectivity, which represents a condition of emancipation. By treating each event as the result of in-

¹² L. Zdybel, “Teorie spiskowe” jako fenomen globalny: analiza krytyczna i metakrytyczną,” *Kultura – Historia – Globalizacja* 14/2013, p. 322.

¹³ S. Duda, “Historia spisków, historia lęków,” *Więź* 3/2015, p. 183.

¹⁴ J. Tazbir, *Protokoły mędrców Syjonu. Autentyk czy falsyfikat?*, Warszawa 1992, p. 9.

¹⁵ J. Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej*, Poznań 1983, p. 156.

tentional action, they become inscribed in what we may call, using Horkheimer and Adorno's terms, the anthropomorphic logic of myth, against which the Enlightenment did battle. They propagate a false image of the world, rendering rational knowledge of real historical processes impossible. By the same token, they can serve as a perfect tool of manipulation, useful both for would-be despots and for existing regimes seeking to direct social discontent into safe channels. The classical theory of conspiracy narratives, drawn from, among other places, the research of Karl Popper, saw in "conspiracy theory society" a real threat to the realization of the ideals of the open society.¹⁶

Scholars were fairly quick to observe a connection between the popularity of conspiracy theories and a certain psychological type. They refer to the paranoid style, the conspiracy mentality, or the authoritarian personality, and there is even some mention of a neurobiological predisposition in the brain.¹⁷ A crucial link has often been asserted between susceptibility to belief in conspiracy theories and the desire to maintain a feeling of control over reality. "The attractiveness of conspiracy theories," Professor Krystyna Skarzyńska observes, "derives from the fact that they fulfil certain important human needs – above all, they provide a feeling of having control over our own lives, and perhaps over the reality that surrounds us."¹⁸ Only such a feeling of control allows us (from the

¹⁶ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, pp. 31–40.

¹⁷ R. Robinson, J. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*, New Haven 1997, p. 76; R. Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harpers* 11/1964, p. 86; K. Skarzyńska, "Bin Laden żyje, chociaż jest martwy," *Więź* 3/2015, pp. 199–201.

¹⁸ K. Skarzyńska, "Bin Laden żyje..." op. cit., pp. 194, 197.

perspective of our subjective consciousness) to maintain a feeling of causative subjectivity. Sławomir Mrożek captured the essence of this paradoxical relationship in a perverse but unusually apt remark, writing: “Why do I wish to believe in a Conspiracy? In order to finally know, what it’s all about, where all this is heading, mister. To know that someone is in control of it all, somehow. Even if they are against me, they are in control. That would mean that it’s possible to control it, that it can all be controlled after all. I am being controlled, goddammit, but if everything is under control, and the best evidence shows that it is, since they are controlling me, then I can counter-control.”¹⁹

By linking psychological considerations that usually relate to the individual personality with an analysis of the broader formation process of contemporary subjectivity, in its super-individual aspect as well, it seems we can put forward a theoretical model of the formation of a connection between conspiracist thinking and the emancipatory postulate, distinguishing four stages in this relationship. The first is the constitution of a defined social group, which either ascribes to itself the role of a historical subject or aspires to that status. The second stage consists of the discovery of limits to agency, seen in the perspective of history in its entirety or in confrontation with an important historical event, in relation to which the results of actions undertaken deviate significantly from intentions and goals. The third stage involves the discovery of History understood as a set of objective laws, existing independently

¹⁹ S. Mrożek, “Spisek,” *Gazeta Wyborcza* 143/1997, p. 11.

of human efforts: Providence, Progress, the progression of the Spirit of History or the laws of dialectical materialism. Formulated thus, however, the theory looks overly subtle and abstract – as a result, it leads, in the popular interpretation, to quietism and passivity. The fourth stage in the shaping of the conspiracist narrative thus involves an attempt at regaining a subjective sense of subjective agency through the identification of the causative force active in history with some particular group or individual.

This subjective sense of agency is naturally burdened with a fundamental ambivalence. It has the power to mobilize us to take action, but because it is based on a false image of the world, it cannot be fully effective, and as a result the mobilizing act of the subject's emancipation must be constantly renewed.

From Utopia to Revolution

The Cartesian and Kantian postulate of rationalism was fundamentally universal in character. Those philosophers believed that Reason, in whose name they were acting, belonged to the nature of humanity and as such was the birthright of all people. However, belief in the rational potential dormant in humanity was necessarily accompanied by a pessimistic diagnosis regarding the achievements of civilization thus far. The human being, ably using his reason, could know and master nature, or discover and bring into being just principles for the organization of society, but for some reason had so far failed to do so. The question arose: Why?

Answers to that question varied, but initially focused on bringing into relief certain objective difficulties. Kant demonstrated that the human condition joined within itself a rational element and an animal one, and as a result the human being was guided completely neither by instinct nor by reason.²⁰ “Nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as that which man is made of”²¹ – this statement applies as much to speculative knowledge as it does to social existence. Descartes saw the reason for the failures of knowledge in the lack of an appropriate method of understanding and in the objective difficulty with questions about the principles on which nature functions. The matter was further complicated by the tendency to be ruled by emotions that disturb rational reasoning and lead reason astray, a tendency immanent in human nature. Francis Bacon developed the theory of the *idola*, or illusions that cause errors in reasoning. He saw the source of failure in human nature – *idola tribus*, as well as in deficiencies of language and social communication – *idola fori*.²²

Parallel to the solutions outlined above, in their background as it were, the scholar of the history of philosophy can observe an opposite tendency that involves the formation of an interpretation of the history of civilization which, in place of the objective difficulties facing Reason, looked to the purposeful action of particular inter-

²⁰ I. Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View”, [in:] *Idem., On History*, trans. L.W. Beck, R.E. Anchor, E.L.Fackenheim. Indianapolis 1963, pp.15-16.

²¹ I. Kant, *Political Writings*, trans. H. S. Reiss, Cambridge 1991, p. 46.

²² F. Bacon, *Novum organum*, trans. J. Wikariak, Warszawa 1995, p. 68.

est groups. Thomas More, criticizing the irrationality and injustice of the organization of society in his time, wrote in *Utopia*: “as I hope for mercy, I can have no other notion of all the other governments that I see or know, than that they are a conspiracy of the rich, who, on pretence of managing the public, only pursue their private ends, and devise all the ways and arts they can find out; first, that they may, without danger, preserve all that they have so ill-acquired, and then, that they may engage the poor to toil and labour for them at as low rates as possible, and oppress them as much as they please; and if they can but prevail to get these contrivances established by the show of public authority, which is considered as the representative of the whole people, then they are accounted laws [...]”²³ Without taking an exaggerated view of the extent to which that diagnosis was accurate and to what extent a rhetorical device, we should note that More’s method of interpretation later showed itself to be extremely influential. Voltaire, seeking to explain how it was possible that Christianity – a religion of provincial shepherds, who could not equal the genius of Greek philosophy – attained power in Rome and medieval Europe, speculated on a conspiracy of charlatans who, pretending to work miracles, deceived influential aristocrats in order to profit together from the feudal system, naturally at the people’s expense.²⁴ This view was quite popular among the French philosophes of the eighteenth century. Rousseau,

²³ T. More, *Utopia*, trans. G. Burnet, Seattle 2015, p. 81.

²⁴ Voltaire, *A, B, C or Alphabet* [in:] idem, *The Works of Voltaire, A Contemporary Version*, trans. W.F. Fleming, New York 1901; Idem, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, Oxford 1994

who considered himself the victim of numerous conspiracies, formulated his famous theory of the origin of private property by depicting the devious behaviour of the first private owner, who first surrounded a plot of earth with a fence and then managed to persuade his fellow citizens that he was specially entitled to it. The essence of that manipulation consisted in the fact that these fellow citizens, who included agricultural workers and tenants, went on to defend the rights of the putative landholder, unconscious of acting against their own interests.²⁵

The theories cited here do not, of course, represent whole conspiracy narratives of the type we can encounter in the literature that has arisen increasingly since the French Revolution, but the basic premise of conspiracist thought had already been formulated therein: the idea that beneath the surface of visible political and social disputes a certain group of people is taking deliberate action to pursue its own interests in a concealed way that goes against the interests of the general citizenry. The discovery of a particular enemy made possible the transition from theoretical reflection to political practice – from a belief in rational and moral rightness to the legitimization on that basis of the right to political power, and as a result heralded the approaching eruption of the French Revolution. Paradoxically, this process took place with no small contribution from the conspiracist strain, because the secret societies in fact played an important role in the popular dissemina-

²⁵ J.J. Rousseau, "Rozprawa o nierówności," [in:] idem, *Trzy rozprawy z filozofii społecznej. Rozprawa o nierówności*, trans. H. Elzenberg, Warszawa 1956, pp. 186–187, 204–207.

tion of the nation's new reconfiguration and changed attitude (though not in the course of the revolution itself).²⁶ The course of the revolution, as well as its concomitant discourse, appear to confirm the correctness of the proposed four-stage model for the connection between the emancipation process and conspiracist thought. The people's aspiration to political subjecthood was accompanied by a continual sense of the danger of losing their agency. The political struggle was focused on the question of who was qualified to represent the people's will, and the category of conspiracy was its basic weapon.²⁷ The sense of danger integrated the revolutionaries, and a series of particular revolutionary acts resulted directly from the belief in the existence of the alleged conspiracies. For example, the Great Fear, the slaughter of feudal aristocrats in late July and early August 1789, was caused by a belief that the aristocracy was plotting to plan a famine that would lead to the mass death of recalcitrant peasants.²⁸

Newly stirred subjecthood was nonetheless attended by the discovery of limited agency. Against expectations, not all of the revolution's goals were achieved, and the post-revolutionary order did not fulfil the expectations of any faction.²⁹ The solution to that state of affairs was found in great historiosophical narratives that empha-

²⁶ R. Koselleck, *Krytyka i kryzys*, trans. J. Duraj, M. Moskalewicz, Warszawa 2015, pp. 279–283.

²⁷ F. Furet, *Prawdziwy koniec Rewolucji Francuskiej*, trans. B. Janicka, Kraków 1994, p. 67.

²⁸ G. Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From Its Origins to 1793*, London, New York 2001, pp. 116–117.

²⁹ See J. de Maistre, "Considerations sur la France," trans. J. Trybusiewicz, [in:] J. Trybusiewicz, *De Maistre*, Warszawa 1968, p. 126.

sized the role of History, in charge of the course of events, modifying the results of human efforts.

The broad masses, however, sought a more concrete reason for these failures, a concrete enemy. A conspiracy of aristocrats, a conspiracy by Robespierre to steal the revolution, or – from the other side of the barricades – the impressive structure of triple conspiracy worked out by Abbé Augustin Barruel: the philosophers, the Freemasons, and the Illuminati³⁰ – all of these mobilized the populace to a great degree by indicating an adversary. Adam Weishaupt, the leader of the Bavarian Illuminati, was even suspected of being an agent of the Jesuits.³¹

Conspiracy theories, functioning as vulgarized versions of the “sacrificial goat” concept, have enabled many people to reclaim their belief in the possibility of emancipatory struggle and the causative configuration of the world. Nevertheless, this populist interpretation of emancipatory postulates, even if it has been a constant companion to modern subjecthood, has frequently been revealed to be a dangerous tool, leading to horrific consequences. It is worth remembering the remark, ascribed to social democrat August Babel, that “anti-Semitism is the socialism of the stupid.”

translated by Timothy Williams

³⁰ D. Pipes, *Conspiracy...*, op. cit., pp. 69-78, S. Duda, *Historia spisków...*, op. cit., pp. 189–191.

³¹ J.H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men. Origins of the Revolutionary Faith*, New York 1980, p. 118.