

**CzasKultury/English**

**The Invisible Root.**  
**On Contemporary**  
**“Conspiracy Culture”**

**Wojciech Hamerski**

**2/2016**

# The Invisible Root. On Contemporary “Conspiracy Culture”

Wojciech Hamerski

Chris Carter, the writer and director of the TV series *The X Files*, pulls no punches in the first episode of the new season – long-starved fans get to see a dramatic UFO crash straight away, with off-screen commentary by Agent Fox Mulder. His monologue ends with a series of questions that, as usual, receive no answer: “But we must ask ourselves are they really a hoax? Are we truly alone? Or are we being lied to?”<sup>1</sup> For aficionados of the series, it only gets better, i.e., the same thing as before only more so – in the reactivated FBI agent’s fevered reasoning, everything is connected with everything else; the conspiracy theories most persistently mulled over in pop culture fit into a readable pattern – from Roswell and Aztec encounters with aliens to the CIA’s deliberate distribution of crack-cocaine in American inner cities or manufacturing the AIDS virus, to deliberate efforts made by pharmaceutical concerns to harm communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The X Files*, written by Chris Carter, 2016.

This cocktail of conspiracies would be hard to swallow without some familiarity with the pastiche conventions of the series. As Peter Knight, author of the book *Conspiracy Culture. From Kennedy to the X Files*, has argued, American identity from its very beginnings “was shaped by the continual fear of sinister enemies,” though only since the 1960s (and what we may call the symbolic moment of the Kennedy assassination) have conspiracy theories become “the lingua franca of many ordinary Americans [...]”<sup>2</sup> Knight describes the process of demonumentalization of conspiracist explanations, which were once associated with dangerous political paranoia and are now a routine practice among both creators and consumers of culture, and not just popular culture. A peculiarly “world-weary paranoia” in the contemporary world contains “its own built-in diagnosis” and *The X Files* “deliberately and wittily exploits a self-ironizing aesthetic” in order to lay bare its own links to conspiracy culture.<sup>3</sup> In the series, we always more or less know what is going to happen – Mulder will maintain his resistance to common sense persuasion, while Scully, no matter how many times she encounters proof of the existence of extraterrestrial life or a government conspiracy, will remain sceptical. The erotic-ironic tension of the situation, in which Scully’s “masculine” rationality is frequently tested by Mulder’s “feminine” imagination, offers a powerful illustration of the contemporary romance between conspiracy theories and critical analyses of them made by representatives of various disciplines in the social sciences.

---

<sup>2</sup> P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture. From Kennedy to the X Files*, London 2000, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, pp. 2, 50.

The characters in the series represent the dynamic paralysis that has taken hold of the current cultural scene, described by Franciszek Czech – author and editor of two books on conspiracy theories, to be discussed herein – as a “profound conflict of two different kinds of (nar)rationality, which clash, but also mutually define each other.”<sup>4</sup> Mulder and Scully are like the “two rocks” in the song by Polish songwriter Jacek Kaczmarski, used as an epigraph to Czech’s *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje* (Conspiracist Narratives and Metanarratives): the “rock of madness and the rock of reason” are two seemingly separate explanatory systems which nevertheless “are joined deep down by an invisible root.” Not conspiracist narratives themselves or critical metanarratives, but their mutual contact and placement within the broader framework of postmodern culture seem to me to constitute the crucial theme of both the Kraków sociologist’s original treatise and his pioneering anthology of translations in *Struktura teorii spiskowych*, including the introduction from the book, cited above by Peter Knight, the leading authority on contemporary “conspiracy culture.”

Czech’s anthology presents an interdisciplinary panorama of academic theories that have developed on the subject of conspiracy theories since the mid-20th century, while the first part of Czech’s own book presents an exhaustive commentary on the materials in the anthology (he reconstructs the history of the theories he calls “conspiracist metanarratives”), replete with interpretative sallies and polemical jousts, outlining the methodological horizon

---

<sup>4</sup> F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, p. 16.

for the second part, in which Czech presents the results of his own research. The sociologist forges his own definition and typology of conspiracist narratives, as well as presenting a survey of the most popular contemporary Polish conspiracy theories. Among them, he singles one out for particular attention in the final chapter, devoted to an “anatomy of attack narratives,” constituting a sociological examination of the Polish conspiracy tale to end all conspiracy tales, interwoven with unofficial (until recently at least) explanations for the causes of the Smoleńsk crash.

For the purposes of the anthology, Czech, together with students participating in his “Conspiracy Culture” translation seminar at Jagiellonian University, selected and translated a representative group of scholarly texts containing a variety of approaches to the theoretical conceptualization of the problem. That gives the collection undeniable value, considering that until now the accomplishments of Western “conspiratology” were unknown to the Polish-language reader, except for *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* by Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, or *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* by the American historian Daniel Pipes. Both books are for the general public and work within the classical paradigm in which conspiracy theories are the warped creations of paranoid minds, explanations based on false principles, and dangerous to boot. Czech maintains a certain distance from both volumes. They have a certain “educational mission”<sup>5</sup> to execute, relying on a predictable

---

<sup>5</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 63.

set of examples (with conspiracist anti-Semitism foremost among them) aimed at defining and discrediting conspiracist thought as such. Czech notes that the interventionist and alarmist character of these books, rousing readers to keep vigilant and warning them against the lurking evil caused by conspiracist thinking, has the effect of steering them into the same kind of paranoid thought pattern they claim to be fighting against. Both works represent popularized (and, one is tempted to say, pauperized) forms of the position represented by the classics of conspiracy metanarrative, Karl Popper and Richard Hofstadter.

Popper, author of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, never crystallized his arguments into a stand-alone text, which explains the absence of his surname in the table of contents of Czech's anthology, but his analysis nonetheless remains an important reference point for many of the texts included therein. Popper, who brought the concept of the "conspiracy theory of society" into use in the mid-twentieth century, lay the cornerstone of modern studies of the subject – he was the first to place conspiracy theory "within a broader conceptual system, defining both desirable [...], and undesirable attitudes."<sup>6</sup> According to Popper, conspiracy theories belong to the undesirable category, because they constitute a threat to open society. His unambiguous critique of them suited the postwar mood. Popper reminded readers that belief in a conspiracy activates anti-conspiratorial ways of thinking, leading to exclusion and hostility – the belief in the plot by the El-

---

<sup>6</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 40.

ders of Zion culminated in the counterplot that led to the Holocaust. Hofstadter wrote in a similar spirit in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* about conspiracy theories as manifestations of “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy [...]”<sup>7</sup> For this historian, who bases his argument on American examples (for example, he describes bloody nineteenth-century anti-Catholic fantasies, fed by, among other things, the report by runaway nun Maria Monk on children raped and strangled by priests<sup>8</sup>), but encourages readers to extrapolate from them into other contexts, the paranoid style represents “a common ingredient of fascism [...]”<sup>9</sup> To link conspiracism with the concept of paranoia – as Hofstadter does metaphorically, not clinically – moves beyond the horizon outlined by Popper, initiating the tradition of providing psychological explanations for why conspiracist narratives arise, a tradition continued by Robins and Post, Pipes, and also Serge Moscovici, author of an essay included in Czech’s anthology on “the conspiracy mentality” – it is fed by resentment and contempt mixed with a sense of inferiority and veiled envy, often manipulated by politicians against weaker groups, in particular minorities.<sup>10</sup>

The constellation of views outlined above acquired the status of the classic conspiracy metanarrative in the second

---

<sup>7</sup> R. Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harpers* 11/1964, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> “Her book, hotly attacked and as hotly defended, continued to be read and believed even after her mother, a Protestant living near Montreal, gave testimony that Maria had been somewhat addled ever since childhood when she had rammed a pencil into her head.” Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style...”, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style...”, op cit. p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> See Czech, *Struktura*, p. 67.

half of the twentieth century. The next generation of scholars carried out a multi-level revision of it, defined by Czech as “the cultural turn in conspiracy metanarrative,” whose decisive phase came at the turn of the twenty-first century. His anthology contains a broader sample of such revisionist formations. The structure of *Struktura teorii spiskowych* thus gives away Czech’s own methodological sympathies, which were more explicitly laid out in *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, in both its historical commentary and in the passages where the author configures his theoretical apparatus. The polemic with classical analyses (which, according to Czech, constitute the matrix for common knowledge on the subject to this day) that emerges from the articles gathered in the anthology relate primarily to the following three problems: the definition of conspiracy theory, the reasons for such theories’ development, and their possible consequences.

Calling any explanation of events a conspiracy theory is a powerfully persuasive act, a kind of “rhetorical knockout” that cuts discussion short. Czech draws attention to the fact that the first serious scholar to name this rhetorical violence for what it is was Noam Chomsky, who has himself frequently been on the receiving end of such knockouts due to his anti-government views. Of the authors in the anthology, Charles Pigden engages in the most direct polemic with Popper. In “Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?” Pigden argues that the philosopher, by manipulating the term and its definition, exaggerated the consequences of conspiracist thought.

Conspiracism, as presented by Popper, was shown to be a purely deterministic form of thought – the people who wielded it used conspiratorial activity to explain literally everything and “confers god-like powers on the conspirators [...]”<sup>11</sup> If this were truly the case, Pigden observes, Popper’s fears would be sensible, but the problem is that the philosopher takes conspiracy theories to extremes, and in effect “renders [their] denial uninteresting.”<sup>12</sup> Pigden’s polemic is tied to the discovery that conspiracy narratives constitute a varied aggregate of explanations that cannot be thrown together into one bag. From that epiphany, it requires only one step to reach the statement that both the range and the probability of conspiracy theories represent a continuum. “We seem to be confronted,” writes Brian L. Keeley, with a spectrum of cases, ranging from the believable to the highly implausible.”<sup>13</sup> The dogmatic belief in the falsehood of conspiracy theories has been undermined – structurally, the category includes both certain narratives relating to the illegal activities of the Nixon administration, and those about kidnappings by lizard people.

Within the revisionist current, psychological explanations for how conspiracy theories take shape are confronted with social explanations. Czech adroitly describes the resulting change in outlook as a passage “from wildness to wilderness [...]”<sup>14</sup> The conspiracist image of power emerges “not

---

<sup>11</sup> C. Pigden, “Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong With Conspiracy Theories?,” *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, 25:1 (1995), p. 4; quoted in Czech, *Struktura*, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Pigden, “Popper Revisited,” p. 8; quoted in Czech, *Struktura*, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> B. L. Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theory,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96:3 (1999), p. 126; quoted in Czech, *Struktura*, p. 112.

<sup>14</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 87.

as the result of individuals' mental problems, but as a consequence of their unfavorable position in the social hierarchy"; it is linked to "the inability to precisely describe the complicated contemporary world [...]".<sup>15</sup> Democracy promises transparency from the authorities and participation by citizens in the formation of the state, yet to the majority of the citizenry even electoral law itself, with its complex algorithms for counting votes, makes no sense, let alone the global mechanisms of capital flows, which occur utterly independent of elections. As Fredric Jameson writes, the treatment of conspiracist narratives as a "desperate attempt to represent the [late capitalist] system"<sup>16</sup>) leads to yet another revaluation – after the "cultural turn" it is possible to look differently at the question of conspiracy theories' potential effects. It turns out that instead of serving the majority's stigmatization of minorities, as in the anti-Semitic model, they can provide a tool for the minority, "a rhetorical weapon for the excluded, thereby undermining the truth of the oppressive majority [...]".<sup>17</sup> This second function of conspiracy theories also becomes manifest in the defensive Afro-American narratives reported by Mark Fenster in the anthology, alleging that HIV was produced in government laboratories with the intention of perpetrating genocide against the black population of the US; a similarly demonic purpose was thought to have animated the Church's Fried Chicken restaurant chain, said to be a Ku Klux Klan front, serving food that caused infertility in black men.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, pp. 95-96, 90.

<sup>16</sup> F. Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," [in:] C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, L. (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana 1988, p. 356; quoted in Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, 97.

<sup>18</sup> See Czech, *Struktura*, pp. 158-159.

Czech, emphasizing the most important landmarks on the road from the classical to the contemporary interpretation, places them in the broader context of changes in the social sciences – he points to the shift from the classical paradigm, based on nineteenth-century historiography, “toward the hazy perspective of cultural studies and the postmodernist and constructivist revisions.”<sup>19</sup> In describing the dislodgement of global narratives about worldwide conspiracy based on the mechanism of the scapegoat (a function fulfilled by the Jesuits, the Illuminati, the Masons, the Jews, and others), by smaller narratives that offer handy ways of understanding the world to marginalized persons of varying views, Czech refers to the “Brueghelian turn” particular to his own discipline, which initiated the current of sociology of everyday life, but the phenomenon can also be analyzed in the context of the crisis of grand narratives, the rhetorical turn, the postmodernist erosion of referential concepts of truth, and so on.

One interesting result of the “cultural turn” is the discovery – which caused a certain sense of bewilderment – of the uncomfortable kinship between conspiracy theories, considered to be illegitimate, and ostensibly legitimate forms of cultural or critical theory. I refer to what Clare Birchall has called the “aporia of legitimacy”: “it becomes impossible to map conspiracy theory and academic discourse onto a clear illegitimate/legitimate divide.”<sup>20</sup> The strong ties between

---

<sup>19</sup> Czech, *Struktura*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> C. Birchall, “Just Because You’re Paranoid, Doesn’t Mean They’re Not Out to Get You,” *Culture Machine*, vol. 6, 2004. <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/12/11> (accessed 23.11.2016).

narratives of conspiracy and the critical paradigm in the social sciences, in whose disciplines narratives about those narratives take shape, is revealed, for example, in the contemporary fascination with the “demystification of more or less discrete forms of rule and cultural hegemony.”<sup>21</sup> In this interpretation, the tendency toward academic delegitimization of conspiracy theories (as in Pipes’s *Conspiracy*, for example) is unmasked as “a refined form of social control.”<sup>22</sup> The revisionist current thus does not rule out the basic rationality of narratives previously treated as paranoid. Conspiracy theory as a form of interpretation of reality may contain errors and miss its mark, but scientific theories can also err. The unfalsifiability of conspiracy narratives need not automatically signal their irrationality, as Lee Basham observes, “there is nothing *inherently* exaggerated or distorted in them.”<sup>23</sup> *De omnibus dubitandum est*, everything should be subject to doubt – Czech chose this as the second epigraph to his book, referring readers to the fundamental suspicion that lies at the sources of Cartesian rationality. At what moment does overweening academic suspiciousness towards conspiracist suspiciousness itself take on the shape of paranoid thought?

The passages in Czech’s book where he describes “the linkage between views defined as conspiracy theories and theses about what those views really represent”<sup>24</sup> have great analytical value for me. And even a superficial glance at

---

<sup>21</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 258.

<sup>22</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 259.

<sup>23</sup> L. Basham, “Global Conspiracy Theory,” in *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, ed. David Coady, Burlington 2006, p. 103; quoted in Czech, *Struktura*, p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 12.

the table of contents, suggesting a sharp division between conspiracy metanarratives (part I) and narratives (part 2), might give the impression of an argument securely in the tradition of classical methodology, leading to an acknowledgement of the “aporia of legitimacy” as common to all interpretations. Instead, however, this sociologist comes out as a proponent of a constructivist understanding of culture, postulating that academic metadescription is a product of historic circumstances which is ideologically far from neutral. Equipped with that kind of self-consciousness, the conspiracist metanarrative corresponds to Hayden White’s project for a historical metanarrative: “By drawing historiography nearer to its origins in literary sensibility, we should be able to identify the ideological, because it is the fictive, element in our own discourse.”<sup>25</sup> Of course, Czech’s own argument, despite his painstakingly cultivated scholarly distance, cannot break away from this paradigm; it, too, is “constructed in defined social conditions.”<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the social conditions in which *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje* was written were rather extraordinary, marked by a painful polarization of Polish opinion regarding the influential conspiracy narrative about the real reasons for the Smoleńsk crash: “It is rare that an explicit conspiracy theory has institutional support from the leading opposition party [now the party in power–W.H.] in a country.”<sup>27</sup> I cannot resist the impression that the

---

<sup>25</sup> H. White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” [in:] *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, Brian Richardson (ed.), Columbus 2002, p. 201.

<sup>26</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 197.

weight of that context subtly influenced the trajectory of Czech's argument. The sociologist resists the temptation to indulge in journalistic polemics, whether he is writing about the machinations of the lizard people or the Kennedy assassination, leading his argument toward a monotonous avoidance of controversy that may be disappointing for conspiracy theory buffs. This ostentatious neutrality, which I suppose to be guided by a sense of ethics, appears to be a form of solicitude for the potential hurt feelings of readers, but also represents an attempt at critical distance, the very possibility of which Czech earlier undermined. Out of what is this distance constructed? Primarily out of declared lack of knowledge: "I do not possess the competencies or wherewithal in each case [...] to make a final judgment on the accuracy of individual claims."<sup>28</sup> In truth, conspiracy theories rely on specialist knowledge (of ballistics, chemistry, aeronautics, etc.), the obtainment of which exceeds the opportunities available to a single person – it is typical that very few people have read the 200-page report by the Macierewicz Commission, while almost everyone has an articulate opinion on the subject. As a result, Czech does not wish either to propagate the theory of an attack (such as that propounded by Antoni Macierewicz), or to dismantle it as myth (as Wojciech Orliński aims to); however, he does not hesitate to call out both sides for rhetorical fouls (such as tendentious media reports).

This scholarly position has some justification in the definition of conspiracy theories that Czech distilled from the

---

<sup>28</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 126.

academic theories mentioned above. It goes as follows: they are “stories expressing the belief that contrary to influential opinions, official positions, and widely-held views, crucial information about public affairs remains hidden as a result of the activities of a group of individuals secretly colluding with one another for the purpose of achieving ends that run counter to the common interest.”<sup>29</sup> As understood in this concentrated formula, conspiracy theories always relate to public affairs (no private conspiracy theories have gone into wide circulation) and always undermine the *status quo*, so that they are by nature polemical. This definition also presents the structure of such narratives as the object of reflection, so that products of “conspiracy culture” are examined without venturing into psychological explanations for their formation. Czech is also not interested, *ex definitione*, in determining the truth or falsehood of the narratives under discussion, nor their socially harmful or beneficial effects.

The second part of the monograph, when compared to the first, which presents a disciplined argument of high cognitive and methodological value (particularly for non-specialists, of whom the present author is one), may at first seem disappointing— in it, the author, armed to the teeth with carefully weighed theories and his own original definition, presents “a map of contemporary Polish conspiracy theories.” The map has the virtue of not being a guide – it does project the situation, mutual relations and dimensions of particular theories in appropriate dimensions,

---

<sup>29</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 125.

and furthermore is furnished with a key, allowing readers to consult a typology classifying narratives from the most general to the most detailed; but it does not contain any clearly conceptualized proposals for interpretative excursions. Czech is aware that he is using “newsflashes that signal the existence of broader phenomena”<sup>30</sup> – the signaling mechanisms are not as well developed as they should be, however, which is why the book leaves an impression of being full of curiosities, but nonetheless intellectually too weakly developed in its presentation of the narratives and mini-narratives circulating on the net. Czech follows primarily internet narratives (on blogs and fora), allowing him to spontaneously formulate his thoughts, but whether the sample he presents is in any way representative remains unclear, since he does not share his methods of evidence-gathering or the mechanism by which he selected among the materials he gathered from the net. The most general, and simultaneously traditional, narratives about conspiracy by Jews or Masons, no less than those exposing a secret “world government,” are – as one might expect – “simply translations or compilations of English cultural texts.”<sup>31</sup> Medium-range reports have a rather more idiosyncratic nature and deal with details of secret influence exerted by Russia, Germany, Jews, the Vatican, or the European Union on Polish life, “expressed by means of strong hyperbole,”<sup>32</sup> but also more global issues that relate to the crimes of the vaccine industry, global warming, and chemtrails. All of the structural features of the medi-

---

<sup>30</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 133.

<sup>32</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 137.

um-range conspiracy narrative are also present in the story of how laundry detergent powders sold in Poland are of worse quality than the equivalents sold in the West, which in fact was revealed to be true – this example confirms the need to detach from definitions of conspiracy theories the label that they are “always false.” Czech likewise has compiled many individual narratives concerning particular events, such as the deliberate falsification by referee Howard Webb of the results of the Poland-Austria football match during the 2008 European Championships, false elections in Poland, the murder of General Marek Papała, and, last but not least, the Smoleńsk air disaster.

According to Czech, general conspiracy narratives now play a smaller role than these more detailed ones – he even admits that many of his students do not know who the Masons were (and are). Czech also argues that there exist “latent narratives” which are activated by the influence of external circumstances (or carefully phrased questions in a survey) and sudden increases in the belief in clandestine activity due to tragedies such as the crash of the presidential plane, seemingly confirming “that we are lost in a wilderness in contemporary reality rather than simply overtaken by the wildness of insanity.”<sup>33</sup> In this part of the book, Czech also interprets a research survey he conducted in 2014 on the extent to which people internalize conspiracist narrative schemas. The conclusions drawn from answers given to seven questions are interesting – it turns out that the narratives of conspiratorial intrigue most

---

<sup>33</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 173.

commonly advanced in certain media in fact represent the explanations least accepted by those surveyed. Czech believes this to confirm the thesis that conspiracy works as a “metaphor for the contemporary sociopolitical system,”<sup>34</sup> a plot that occurs without the intervention of agents from hostile foreign powers. At the same time, he includes the survey answer option “Hard to say” in the realm of “conspiracy culture,” noting that it is not a statement of indifference, but in keeping with the nature of conspiracy theories, which are often not “great explanatory systems,” but hypotheses “expressing rather a state of uncertainty.”<sup>35</sup> In disenchanted modern and contemporary societies this “state of uncertainty” or “wilderness” becomes an almost commonplace experience. Uncertainty as to the weightiest issues is linked with the intuition, a recurring motif in the anthology, of a cryptoreligious subtext to many conspiracy narratives. For Popper, as Pigden writes, “the conspiracy theory is a secularized version of a religious belief”<sup>36</sup> – even if the philosopher exaggerates in his claim that conspiracies are attributed “god-like powers,” in the context of the history of ideas one can defend the thesis of the existence of a kind of “metaphysics of conspiracy.” Hofstadter likewise referred to the “apocalypticism of the paranoid style,” presenting a “conflict between absolute good and absolute evil,” amounting to a “secular and demonic version of adventism.”<sup>37</sup> (He thus highlights the significant overlap between conspiracist and millena-

---

<sup>34</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 182.

<sup>35</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 184.

<sup>36</sup> C. Pigden, “Popper Revisited,” pp. 7-8; Czech, *Struktura*, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, pp. 28, 31; Czech, *Struktura*, p. 45.

rian thought– the latter tendency, according to Andrzej Walicki’s definition, represents “religious revolutionism,’ the predecessor and prototype of secular revolutionism.”<sup>38</sup> The historiosophical complications of nineteenth-century conspiracism have been acutely and comprehensively studied by Lech Zdybel – in his monumental work on the theme of the “idea of conspiracy,” Zdybel showed the rise of conspiracism during the period of the French Revolution, superimposed on the process of European societies’ secularization. Conspiracy theories thus take the form of a kind of “modernist gnosis” which reveals a crucial kinship with theories of Providentialism.<sup>39</sup> As can be seen, the “cultural turn” did not definitively eradicate the postulates of the traditional conspiracist metanarrative– many classic works in the discipline remain in force (here Czech refers as well to Hofstadter, who set the template for signalling broader phenomena using “analysis by exemplification”), even if it sometimes requires reining in, especially when veering too far into the radical or the general.

My reading of *Struktura teorii spiskowych* (inevitably distorted, I admit, by my effort to find possible analogies with the history of literary scholarship) was accompanied by the conviction that the discovery of the rhetorical as a common denominator in all narratives was an important moment in the history of theory relating to conspiracy theories. For Czech, however, the perception of the

---

<sup>38</sup> A. Walicki, “Millenaryzm i mesjanizm religijny a romantyczny mesjanizm polski: zarys problematyki,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4/1971, pp. 30–31.

<sup>39</sup> See L. Zdybel, *Idea spisku i teorie spiskowe w świetle analiz krytycznych i badań historycznych*, Lublin 2002, pp. 429 and passim.

tropological dimension of language is found to be “only the beginning” of changes that lead toward “more serious charges”<sup>40</sup> of an epistemological nature: “This does not mean rhetorical moves [...], I am interested chiefly in the definition of conspiracist (anti-)knowledge itself.”<sup>41</sup> Czech thus perceives a clear boundary between “conspiracist semantics” and “conspiracist rhetoric,”<sup>42</sup> and suggests an important leap from utterance formation to “more serious” questions of epistemology. Such a radical cut, in the light of the constructivist paradigm of which Czech is an adherent, seems neither possible nor desired, however. The discovery of the rhetorical aspect of critical argument (in the spirit of White’s *Metahistory*) appears to be one of the most serious blows delivered to the classic metanarrative, which postulates its own discourse’s epistemological advantage, its transcendental legitimization.

In “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” an important text for the American deconstructionist school – which itself, after all, represents a “mode of thought that (like conspiracy theory and potentially cultural studies) highlights an aporia of legitimacy, knowledge and interpretation,”<sup>43</sup> Paul de Man states that “It does not take a good semiotician long to discover that he is in fact a rhetorician in disguise.”<sup>44</sup> If, as de Man claims, “rhetoric cannot be separated from its epistemological function,” the same thing can be said with regard to the possible formulation

---

<sup>40</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 199.

<sup>42</sup> Czech, *Spiskowe narracje*, p. 124.

<sup>43</sup> C. Birchall, “Just Because You’re Paranoid,” op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> P. de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (Autumn, 1978), p. 29.

of “more serious charges” and their relationship (or lack thereof) to “conspiracist rhetoric.” This accords with the famous definition by the pioneer in this type of thinking, Friedrich Nietzsche, who claimed that “truth is a mobile [or narrativized?—W. H.] army of metaphors [...]”<sup>45</sup> As it turns out, when we undertake to escape the question of conspiracist narratives’ truth in the direction of problems with such narratives’ structure, we do not get very far – truth, if indeed it is an army of metaphors, must not be understood too literally. The supposed indifferentism of the constructivist conspiracist metanarrative represented by Czech is thus no less a “refined form of social control” – avoiding pronouncements on the truth or falsehood of conspiracy theories amounts to simply and quite reasonably avoiding a naïve literalization of metaphor. There remains, however, the search for a different kind of truth (figural), co-created in cultural interpretation, not without the help of successive metaphors (such as that of the wilderness). There is, then, one thing we can say for certain concerning conspiracy narratives after the “cultural turn”: they are always true.

**translated by Timothy Williams**

---

<sup>45</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, [in:] F. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York 1954, p. 46.