Conspiracy Theories as Populist Counter-Narratives

Michael Butter

To say that conspiracy theories are populist counter-narratives may sound like stating the obvious. It has by now been well established by a rich body of research from literary and cultural studies, anthropology, and related disciplines that conspiracy theories are narratives (see for example, Fenster 2008; Butter 2014; Rabo 2020). Moreover, that there is a close relationship between conspiracism and populism has also been frequently observed and will be discussed in detail below. And that conspiracy theories always and necessarily challenge the official version of events is a widespread idea both among scholars and the public at large. In fact, several studies on the subject – ranging from John Fiske's classic *Media Matters* (1994) to the introduction to a recent collection of essays on conspiracy theories in central and eastern Europe (Deutschmann, Herlth and Woldan 2020) – see opposition to the official version of events as a defining feature of conspiracy theories. The position taken by media scholar Jack Bratich is even more extreme. Not only does he hold that "proving that conspiracy theories [are] disparaged by mainstream sources" amounts to "belaboring the obvious" (Bratich 2008, 7); he also argues that "conspiracy theory [is] a symptom of the discourse that *positions* it" (Bratich 2008, 16; emphasis in the original). In other words, Bratich suggests that labeling something a conspiracy theory is a strategic move by those in power to denounce certain views as illegitimate and false. Consequently, for him, conspiracy theories are by definition counter-narratives.

There is a lot of truth to Bratich's argument, but the story is more complicated. It is correct that the term "conspiracy theory" is a weapon, and it is also correct that it is often used to disqualify and ridicule unwanted ideas. But it is not true that it is impossible to define "conspiracy theory" in any other way. In fact, there is remarkable agreement among scholars from various disciplines as to how to define it, as the contributions to the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* show (Butter and Knight 2020).[1] Put simply, conspiracy theories assert the existence of a covertly operating group of people – the conspirators – who seek, from base motives and by underhand means, to achieve certain ends. Such theories assume that nothing happens by accident, that nothing is as it seems, and that everything is connected (Barkun 2003, 3–4). In other words, they hold that everything has been planned by the conspirators and that events unfold exactly as they intend; that these conspirators are operating in secret; and that there are links between seemingly unconnected events, organizations, and people.

If conspiracy theories are defined this way and if one assumes a historical and transcultural perspective, it quickly becomes clear that conspiracy theories are not always counter-narratives. Outside of the western world, they often constitute the official version of events until today (Gray 2010; Radnitz 2021; Boukari and Philipps, 2022); in the western world they only ceased being the official explanation of events during the late 1950s and early 1960s – a transformation that I address in the first part of this chapter. The second part addresses the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory and introduces the concept of science-related populism. It was recently proposed by Mede and Schäfer (2020) to capture how populists do not only oppose political elites but also challenge expert knowledge and common wisdom. In the third and longest

1 In Germany, the term "conspiracy theory" has received considerable criticism in recent years, however, mostly outside of academic discourse. Internationally, the term remains unchallenged. I have discussed the proposed alternatives and the reasons why the original term captures the phenomenon best elsewhere (see Butter 2021).

part, I apply the idea of science-related populism to the conspiracist documentaries *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19* and *Plandemic: Indoctornation* to demonstrate which strategies of resemanticization they employ to cast doubt on the official narrative of the pandemic and how their arguments are tied to a populist agenda.

1. Conspiracy Theories as Counter-Narratives

It seems as if conspiracy theories have never been more popular and influential than in the past two decades. However, as Uscinski and Parent conclude in their quantitative study on the role of conspiracy theories in American public life since the 1890s, "[t]he data suggest one telling fact: we do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not for some time" (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 110–111). Their conclusion is confirmed by a plethora of qualitative studies on the role of conspiracy theorizing in Europe and North America since the early modern period, which all stress that it was perfectly normal to believe in conspiracy theories in previous ages (Bailyn 1967; Cubitt 1993; Butter 2014). Far into the twentieth century, the western world regarded conspiracy theories as a legitimate form of knowledge, rooted within the mainstream of society, believed by ordinary people as well as elites, corroborated by scholars and spread by the media. Had there been polls trying to capture a conspiracy mentality as they are conducted now, probably more than 90 percent of people in North America and Europe would have affirmed their belief in conspiracy theories one or two hundred years ago (Butter 2020, 93–99).

Accordingly, conspiracy theories often had significant impact on events and developments. For reasons of brevity, I restrict myself to examples from the United States, but many episodes from European history could be mentioned as well. During the seventeenth century, the Puritan settler-colonists in New England saw themselves as the victims of a conspiracy led by the devil and comprising Native Americans, witches, and Catholics (Butter 2014, 66–112). A century later, colonial leaders like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams became convinced that the British colonies in America were the victims

of a sinister plot orchestrated by King George III and his ministers. As Bernard Bailyn (1967) has demonstrated, this belief was one of the major driving forces behind the American Revolution. During the 1850s, then, the so-called "Slave Power conspiracy theory" became "the founding ideology of the Republican Party" and the most important cause of the Civil War (Butter 2014, 171). In his 1858 "House Divided" speech, for example, Abraham Lincoln accused the current president James Buchanan, his predecessor, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, and an influential Democratic congressman of having orchestrated all events of the past decade to further the goal of introducing slavery everywhere in the United States (Butter 2020, 40–42). A century later, during the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s, the fear of a Communist conspiracy masterminded in Moscow pervaded American society. It was regularly discussed in Congress, loyalty programs were initiated in response, and the Communist Party was virtually outlawed (Butter 2014, 236). A few years later, however, conspiracy theorizing stopped being normal both in the United States and in most of Europe.

The stigmatization of conspiracy theories, which resulted in their transformation from orthodox into heterodox knowledge and thus from official to counter-narratives, has been traced in detail for the United States by Katharina Thalmann (2019). There is no similar study for Western Europe yet, but the evidence suggests that conspiracy theories underwent the same shift in status there (McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim 2017; Girard 2020). As Thalmann (2019, 25–69) demonstrates, in the United States, conspiracist beliefs were first problematized by social scientists, and this skepticism then gradually seeped into Americans' everyday consciousness. To cut a long story short, social scientists began to problematize conspiracy theories in two different ways during the 1940s and 1950s. Some scholars, most notably Karl Popper, argued that conspiracy theories were bad explanations of social and political processes because they overemphasized intentions and neglected unintended consequences and structural effects. Another group of scholars, among them Theodor W. Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, looked from their U.S. exile to Germany where the conspiracy theory of a Jewish-Bolshevist plot for world domination led to the Holocaust.

These scholars argued that conspiracy theories were not only wrong but also extremely dangerous.

These arguments were initially restricted to the ivory tower of academia and had no wider repercussions. During the 1950s, however, they were taken up by a new generation of researchers. Scholars such as the sociologist Edward Shils or the political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset switched their attention from totalitarianism in Europe to the situation in the USA, where many liberal intellectuals were suspected to be part of the communist conspiracy. To rebut these accusations, academics either tackled the conspiracy theorists in the manner of the Frankfurt School, branding them as "pseudo-conservative" or "populist", or they took the Popperist line, attacking their pattern of reasoning and labelling them "pseudoscientific". Unlike the work of Adorno or Popper, these studies attracted notice beyond the bounds of academia. This was due partly to the efforts of Shils, Lipset and others who adopted an accessible style that would reach a wider public, and partly to the help of multipliers outside universities. Many journalists also regarded the Red Scare conspiracy theories as a danger to American democracy and seized on the research findings, thereby helping to popularize them.

This development was reinforced by another factor that Thalmann also discusses. Not only were the ideas of Lasswell, Lipset and later Richard Hofstadter catching on outside universities; after World War II, more and more Americans were also going to university. Under the G.I. Bill of 1944, former mobbed soldiers were able to go to college. For soldiers from low income and ethnic groups who had previously been denied the chance to study, this represented a great opportunity, and many took advantage of it. Large numbers of students thus came into contact with studies explicitly critiquing conspiracist thinking and learned about more nuanced social science models emphasizing structural constraints over human agency.

The effect of these developments became quickly apparent. While the idea of large-scale communist subversion orchestrated from Moscow was firmly anchored in mainstream U.S. society in the mid-1950s, ten years later only members of the far-right John Birch Society and similar groups continued to believe in a communist plot to undermine American

institutions. In this and other cases, conspiracy theories were no longer the official version of events. As they moved from the mainstream to the margins of society, they became counter-narratives that challenge generally accepted explanations.

Broadly speaking, the stigmatization of conspiracy theories has left their proponents with two options: they can pretend to be just asking questions about the official version to hide the fact that they are conspiracy theorists and to maintain their mainstream appeal, or they can consciously accept their marginal status and make a virtue of it by openly employing the language of plots and schemes (Thalmann 2019, 130). At a deeper level, however, the rhetorical maneuvers conspiracy theorists perform are always remarkably similar, no matter which of the two paths they choose. In fact, it is only at this historical moment that the strategies of semantic subversion and rhetorical inversion that this volume is interested in became relevant for conspiracy theories.

However, to say that conspiracy theories became a stigmatized form of knowledge does not mean that they became entirely unpopular. As many studies have shown, conspiracy theories have retained considerable popularity throughout the western world (Uscinski and Parent 2014), albeit at a much lower level than before they were challenged by the social sciences. What is more, at least in the United States, conspiracy theories appear to have undergone a process of destigmatization over the past decade. When Barack Obama was running for reelection in 2012, most Republican politicians were extremely unwilling to openly embrace the birther conspiracy theory, which claims that Obama was an illegitimate president because he was allegedly not born in the U.S. – at least when they were on the record (Butter 2014, 300). By now, however, the claim that the presidential election of 2020 was stolen and that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president and has become the major tenet of the Republican Party, and members who openly disagree like Liz Cheney have been demoted. A detailed discussion of these factors – among them, growing polarization – and actors – among them, of course, Donald Trump – have fueled this process of de-stigmatization and to what degree and which effects conspiracy theories have gained legitimacy again is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that

the destigmatization has by no means affected all areas of American public life and thus not restored conspiracy theories to their earlier status as perfectly acceptable knowledge. While they can be more openly articulated now with impunity, it is exactly the fact that they contradict knowledge produced by traditional experts and epistemic authorities that makes them so attractive for Donald Trump and other populists. Due to the democratization of media use, they can spread them even when the traditional media still shun them, and thus position themselves against political, intellectual, and scientific elites (Thalmann 2019, 198).

2. Conspiracy Theories and (Science-Related) Populism

While there is widespread agreement when it comes to defining "conspiracy theory", "populism" is a far more contested concept. Over the past twenty years, populism has been conceptualized as the underlying logic of the political (Laclau 2005), a rhetorical strategy (Barr 2009), a mode of political practice (Jansen 2011), a discourse (Aslanidis 2016), a performative style (Moffitt 2016), and, arguably most influentially, an ideology (Mudde and and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The dividing lines in these discussions run both within and between disciplines; frequently, they are related to more fundamental disagreements about, for example, the nature of democracy, representation, or ideology.

It is not my intention to intervene in this debate because the different approaches to populism agree on key features that suffice for my purposes here. As Woods, drawing on Stanley (2008), convincingly argues, most definitions of populism converge in the identification of four core elements: (1) the existence of the two groups of the people and the elite; (2) their antagonism; (3) the celebration of popular sovereignty; and (4) the moral glorification of the people and the critique of the elites (Woods 2014, 11). Moreover, the debates about the nature of populism are to a certain degree moot because different definitions focus on different aspects of a more comprehensive phenomenon. Rhetoric and style, on the one hand, and ideology and discourse, on the other, are, as Woods also

points out, "integral to each other" (Woods 2014, 15). In fact, it is one of the central tenets of my discipline – American literary and cultural studies – that form and content are inextricably connected. Ideas do not exist independently of their representations: Language, narrative, and discourse do not simply express preexisting ideas but shape them in the process of articulation (Hall 1997).

The close connection between populism and conspiracy theory has been repeatedly addressed in recent years (see, for example, Fenster 2008; Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay 2017; Taggart 2019), but, as Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser put it, "[d]espite the fact that various scholars have pointed out the link between populism and conspiratorial thinking … there is a dearth of empirical research on this argument" (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 530). So far, the relationship has been most thoroughly theorized by Bergmann and Butter (2020). They argue that populism and conspiracy theory share several characteristics: they purport a Manichean worldview, reduce complex political landscapes to binary opposition, and are usually driven by nostalgia for a golden past that only ever existed in the minds of those who bemoan its passing (Bergmann and Butter 2020, 333). In the Americas and most of Europe, that is, in countries in which conspiracy theories underwent the process of stigmatization discussed in the previous section, politicians can use them to perform the typical populist gesture of performing "bad manners" (Moffitt 2016, 59) or "flaunting of the low" (Ostiguy 2017, 84) in order to fashion themselves as anti-elitist. Overall, Bergmann and Butter consider conspiracy theories a secondary feature of populism:

> Conspiracy theories, then, offer a specific explanation as to why the elites act against the interests of the people. This explanation tends to co-exist within a populist movement or party with other explanations such as negligence or personal enrichment. In other words, conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of populist discourse and ideology, and they are not necessarily believed by everybody in the populist movement or party in which they are circulating. (Bergmann and Butter 2020, 334)

Bergmann and Butter do not say so explicitly in this passage, but their focus is on the contrast between political elites and the people, as almost all literature that discusses the link between conspiracy theories and populism concentrates on this dimension. However, populists do not only frequently position themselves against the *political* establishment but also in opposition to *scientific* elites, and it is this dimension that I explore in the remainder of this chapter.

Mede and Schäfer have recently conceptualized such critiques of scholars, academics, and experts as "science-related populism" (Mede and Schäfer 2020, 480). At the core of this specific kind of populism is not the conflict between the people and the political elite, but that between the people and the "academic elite": "a subset of a general elite – those who have supreme epistemic authority and can make science-related decisions, that is, organizations such as universities or research institutes as well as individual scholars and scientific experts" (Mede and Schäfer 2020, 480). Whereas the conflict between the people and the political elite revolves around "decision-making sovereignty" (Mede and Schäfer 2020, 481), the people compete with the academic elite for "claims for *epistemic* authority, that is, for sovereignty over how 'true knowledge' is produced" (Mede and Schäfer 2020, 482; italics in the original). According to Mede and Schäfer, populists regard the truth claims of the academic elite as "*illegitimate*, because scientific approaches to knowledge production do not prioritize the everyday experiences and opinions of ordinary people, but rely on seemingly alienated theories developed in the proverbial ivory tower" (Mede and Schäfer 2020, 483; italics in the original). Referring to Ylä-Anttila's concept of "experienced-based common sense" (Ylä-Anttila 2018, 363), they conclude that "*[l]egitimate* truth-speaking sovereigns are, according to science-related populism, only the ordinary people themselves" because they derive their knowledge from common sense and their own experience (Ylä-Anttila 2020, 483; italics in the original).

However, this eventual theorization of science-related populism is a bit too one-sided and falls back behind an important distinction that Mede and Schäfer make earlier. Reviewing the extant scholarship on alternative epistemologies they identify two ways in which the truth

claims of the academic elite are challenged (Mede and Schäfer 2020, 478–480). On the one hand, there is the fundamental challenge of the scientific method that their conceptualization of science-related populism later draws on. The way the academic elite produces knowledge is rejected in favor of common sense and personal experience; "I-Pistemologies" are seen as superior to traditional scientific epistemology (van Zoonen 2012). On the other hand, though, there is also a less fundamental challenge which does not question the validity of the scientific paradigm as such but claims that institutionalized science and generally acknowledged experts do not produce accurate knowledge. Allegedly, they are not as disinterested as they should be but either ideologically misguided, which makes them involuntarily produce falsehoods, or actively promoting the agenda of the political elites, which makes them intentionally produce falsehoods. Populists and others who criticize the academic elite in this way claim that there are better scientists and truly disinterested experts whose superior truth claims, however, are ignored, stigmatized, or silenced by the elite. I argue that in science-related populism, both strategies are usually combined, often in the same text; for example, in the *Plandemic* movies, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

In fact, drawing on both one's own commonsensical experience and alternative experts is characteristic not only of science-related populism, but also of the conspiracist discourse in the western world in the past decades in general. During the long period in which they were an accepted form of knowledge, conspiracy theories were articulated and believed by academic as well as other elites. Since they became counter-narratives, however, they consciously position themselves against the truth claims of epistemic authorities who dismiss their claims as figments of the imagination. Usually, conspiracy theorists hold that they – or the experts they rely on – provide much better analyses than the experts heralded by the establishment. They claim that they and their experts are truly independent, disinterested and only committed to finding out the truth. Thus, they do not challenge scientific or scholarly methods but claim that they are the ones who are accurately applying them. Conspiracist texts of all kinds are filled with footnotes and ap-

pendices, graphs and tables, and conspiracy theorists quote studies and interpret data. As Richard Hofstadter remarked many years ago about the "paranoid style," his term for conspiracy theorizing, "[i]t is nothing if not 'scholarly' in technique" (Hofstadter 1964, 37). In recent years, however, this focus on alternative experts has been supplemented by an increasing reliance on one's own experience, perceptions, and common sense. As Andrew McKenzie-McHarg (2019) has demonstrated, this shift entails a parallel shift from written evidence to a focus on images, from experts to eyewitnesses, in conspiracist accounts. In conspiracy theories, then, the same strategies are at work as in science-related populism more generally.

Importantly for the purpose of this volume, these rhetorical strategies rely heavily on resemanticization. Let me just mention two examples here before I move on to the analysis of the *Plandemic* movies. First, what academic elites cast as coincidence, chance, or correlation, is reconfigured – re-emplotted would be the best term – as causality and intentional actions by conspiracy theorists. Since they imagine a world where every important event has been planned, they claim that those who benefit – or more correctly, allegedly benefit – from an event must be responsible for it. "Cui bono?" is thus their favorite question and most important strategy for identifying the conspirators. Accordingly, conspiracy theorists always tell their stories backward. They know who the culprits are early on in their investigation and their entire argument is geared towards confirming their suspicions.

By the same token, conspiracy theorists always cast doubt on members of the academic elite, arguing that they are incompetent and thus no real experts or questioning their integrity by claiming that they knowingly deceive the public to serve the sinister ends of the political elite. This move is then complemented by either challenging the scientific method and epistemology entirely, or by presenting their own alternative experts, whose credentials are played up. For example, during the pandemic, many German conspiracy theorists falsely claimed that virologist Christian Drosten, Germany's leading expert on the coronavirus, never properly completed his PhD and thus did not know what he was talking about. Simultaneously, they stressed the qualifications

of known conspiracy theorists like Wolfgang Wodarg, who has a background in medicine but is neither a virologist nor an epidemiologist. As we will see, the *Plandemic* films employ these and related strategies throughout to suggest that the people are being deceived by academic elites in league with the masterminds behind the conspiracy.

3. Resemanticization in the *Plandemic* Movies

The *Plandemic* series by documentary filmmaker Mikki Willis comprises two parts: the 26-minute short film *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19*, which was released online on 4 May 2020, and the feature-length *Plandemic: Indoctornation*, which was released on 18 August 2020. As the titles of the two existing films already imply, the series alleges that the pandemic is not a natural event but has been carefully orchestrated to achieve sinister goals. While this conspiracy theory is only hinted at in the first part, which mostly spreads disinformation about the coronavirus and viruses in general, it is developed in much detail in the second part.

Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19 went viral immediately. One week after its release, it had been watched several million times on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube and garnered 2.5 million comments, likes, and shares on Facebook alone (Frenkel, Decker and Alba 2020). From the very beginning, Willis and his collaborators anticipated that the film would be deplatformed quickly and therefore encouraged their audience to download the film and share it through as many channels as possible. Thus, although the film was removed from the major platforms within a couple of weeks after its release, it continued to find an audience in WhatsApp groups, on platforms like BitChute or via clips on TikTok (Nazar and Pieters 2021). Its catchy title, which condenses the conspiracist claim to a single word, had already been circulating as a hashtag on Twitter before the film came out (Kearney, Chiang, and Massey 2020), but it was the documentary's virality that made it a shorthand employed by conspiracy theorists throughout the western world over the next two years. Since the sequel had been publicly

announced, the big social media platforms were prepared when it was released three months later. The film was immediately removed from YouTube and flagged with warnings on Facebook and Twitter. According to its distributor, London Real, it was nevertheless watched 1.2 million times within the first 24 hours, a claim disputed by a Buzzfeed review, which asserts that the film had hardly any impact (Lytvynenko 2020).

The first *Plandemic* movie consists mostly of an interview with Judy Mikovits, a former scientist who became a staunch anti-vaccination activist after some controversial scientific claims she had made concerning the chronic fatigue syndrome were widely criticized and *Science* retracted an article of hers it had published. Talking to Mikki Willis, she makes several wrong claims about the virus and the government reaction and articulates conspiracist allegations. Although the film is subtitled "The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19," it does not develop any of the conspiracy theories she alludes to in depth. By contrast, the sequel unfolds a large global conspiracy theory that involves Bill Gates, John D. Rockefeller, Google, fact-checkers, and the news media.

Most importantly, *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19* recasts Mikovits, who was ousted from the scientific community because of her untenable claims, as a genuine expert as far as viruses in general and the coronavirus in particular are concerned, and as one of the few people who refuse to be intimidated by the conspirators. To prove her expertise to the audience, the documentary early on falsely claims that one of her papers revolutionized HIV treatment. The reason why she lost her job and her scientific credentials, the film claims, is that she revealed truths about the nature of viruses that powerful actors did not want to become publicly known. As she tells Willis, she was set up and arrested without charges (in truth, the charges were dropped after a few days) to destroy her reputation and her career and thus to silence her. However, she refuses to give in because, as she affirms in the alarmist fashion characteristic of conspiracy theories: "If we don't stop this now, we can not only forget our republic and our freedom, but we can forget humanity because it will be killed by this agenda" (00:03:45–00:03:51).

Just as Mikovits is heroized, Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and head of

the US administration's coronavirus task force, is disqualified by the film in a corresponding move. His credentials as a researcher and policy adviser are challenged and he is charged with scientific misconduct instead. Moreover, Mikovits accuses him of being the mastermind behind the destruction of her career. Prompted into this direction by Willis, she says outrightly: "He directed the cover-up" (00:04:00–00:04:02) and calls on the public not to heed his advice concerning the pandemic: "What he's saying is absolute propaganda" (00:04:33–00:04:36). In the fashion typical of science-related populism, then, Fauci is cast as the member of a corrupt scientific elite that is not interested in the truth or the wellbeing of the people but promotes a corrupt agenda instead.

What follows almost automatically from this reversal of the roles of leading expert and scientific pariah is a complete reevaluation of the dominant discourse on the pandemic. Mikovits not only accuses the government of manipulating the numbers of Covid victims by counting everybody who died *with* the virus and even many that had not been tested for the virus as victims *of* Covid-19. She also claims that the virus did not emerge naturally but must be the result of a conscious manipulation in a laboratory of the version of the coronavirus responsible for the 2002–2003 pandemic: "It's very clear this virus was manipulated. … That's accelerated viral evolution. If it was a natural occurrence, it would take it up to 800 years to occur. This occurred from SARS-1 within a decade. That's not naturally occurring" (00:10:45–00:11:01). A little later, however, Mikovits also claims that the high death rate in northern Italy in the spring of 2020 was caused not by the coronavirus but by an untested new flu vaccine, and then claims that political elites and scientists are collaborating to take away peoples' civil liberties. Not only will the vaccine that they will eventually distribute be highly dangerous; its manufacture is also intentionally being delayed in order to impose lockdowns, mask-wearing and other measures.

Importantly, the scientific paradigm as such is hardly ever challenged in the film. On the contrary, Mikovits is built up as an excellent and courageous scientist, as somebody so committed to finding out and spreading the truth that she had to leave the entirely corrupted institutions of science. Thus, it is only logical that she says at the end

of the film that her goal is to "restore faith in the promise of medicine" (00:21:41–00:21:43) – a phrase that echoes the title of her co-written book *Plague of Corruption: Restoring Faith in the Promise of Science*, which was published a few weeks before the documentary was released and which she is of course promoting through her appearance in Willis's film. However, there are a few moments in the film where Mikovits articulates ideas that challenge the scientific paradigm and promote a radically different epistemology instead. At one point, for example, she criticizes the government for closing the beaches in order to contain the spread of the virus: "Why would you close the beach? You've got sequences in the soil, in the sand, healing microbes in the ocean, in the saltwater," Mikovits asks (00:17:45–00:17:58), esoterically positioning the powers of nature against scientifically sound measures for contact restrictions. This shows that the two ways in which science-related populism challenges official scientific claims are not at all mutually exclusive and can be articulated together not only in the same text but even by the same person, indicating that the worldviews of conspiracy theorists are just as contradictory as those of other people. Of course, for the film this has the added benefit that it allows catering to two audiences who are united in their conspiracist opposition to the Covid restrictions: those who think that science has been corrupted and needs to be purged, and those who think that it is nonsense and needs to be transcended.

The film's agenda of substituting its conspiracy theories for the dominant view of the current crisis, of recasting the pandemic as a "plandemic", hinges to a large degree on its form – an aspect that Mede and Schäfer do not touch upon at all in their discussion of science-related populism. *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19* employs many of the tropes of documentary filmmaking to signify authenticity and to corroborate its truth claims. Unlike an earlier generation of online conspiracy documentaries such as the *Loose Change* series (see Butter and Retterath 2010), the film's editing is calm and professional, and the lighting of the interview scene is flawless. The way Mikovits is framed by the camera in a close shot signifies her expert status, with a sidelight accentuating the feature of her face without casting sharp shadows. Frequent

reverse shots show Willis, who is similarly lit and framed. He is further visually aligned with Mikovits because both are dressed in black. Listening attentively, nodding repeatedly, and focusing his steel-blue eyes on Miscovits, he functions as a model for how the audience is supposed to listen to her. The form of the film thus supports the wholesale resemanticization the narrative undertakes.

The same formal tropes are employed in the sequel, *Plandemic: Indoctornation*. Except for the first few minutes, however, the film's focus is not on Mikovits but on a whole array of experts whose statements are intercut with reverse shots of Willis listening and nodding in agreement. Generally, though, the narrative is much faster because the film covers far more ground than the first part and paints a much more comprehensive picture of the alleged conspiracy. As in contemporary conspiracy theory films, it is characterized by a high degree of "speed" – "a multiplicity of events [depicted] in brief scenes," as Fenster describes it, and "velocity", which refers to "the geographic, geopolitical, and cognitive aspects of the conspiracy narrative's movement," which is "both global and increasingly rapid as the narrative progresses" (Fenster 2008, 133–134). Over the course of seventy-five minutes, the film moves back and forth between the U.S., Wuhan, and Europe, and from the present to the early twentieth century and back to present. All of this is held together by the calm voice-over narration of Willis, who interprets the sheer endless array of clips from news reports, graphics, and statistics in his attempt to interpellate the audience as conspiracy theorists. In a nutshell, the film takes up and develops the claim from the first part that the virus was artificially manufactured to, on the one hand, generate profit for the pharmaceutical industry through the selling of vaccines, and, on the other, to serve the elites as a tool of population management.

This argument is first articulated by David Martin, the second part's leading expert about ten minutes into the film. At the beginning of this scene, we see Martin putting on a dark suit and a bow tie for his interview, an act that is obviously meant to underline his expert status. This is then corroborated by the captions, which highlight not only his PhD but also introduce him – bending the truth considerably because he runs a small company that assesses the value of other companies based on the

patents that they own – as an "intelligence analyst" and thus as somebody who possesses insights that most common people do not have. Martin states correctly that the Center for Disease Control filed a patent for the 2003 coronavirus, but he implies that this was done to turn "coronavirus from a pathogen to profit" (00:10:59–00:11:01) and not to make sure that researchers had unrestricted access to the virus. Moreover, the film's narrative picks up on his claims by cutting to a montage of stock market analysts who compare the race to produce the first vaccine against Covid-19 to a gold rush.

Whereas all other "experts" that Willis talks to are present only in one scene or short sequence, the narrative returns again and again to Martin. Next to Willis's voice-over, he is the film's second anchor, and his scenes work to hold the film's fast-paced narrative together, as it is often difficult to follow. After each major section, the film fades to black and then returns to Martin to have him introduce the topic of the next section. In fact, Martin is the one who is literally connecting the dots for the audience by painting the broader picture and showing how everything is linked. This is supported by the sequences in which he appears with intercut images of a table on which pictures representing the topics of the different sections of the film such as social media companies, fact-checkers or the WHO are connected by an array of lines. Unsurprisingly, the image at the center shows a model of the coronavirus. The film thus visualizes its claim that the pandemic is not an event that occurred naturally but as the result of a carefully planned conspiracy.

After an introductory sequence in which the film takes up the criticism directed at the first part and introduces Martin and its overall claim, the first half of the film works to immunize the conspiracy theory that will be developed in the second part against critique. Using mostly the allegedly unfair treatment of Mikovits as an example, the film argues that fact-checkers are not interested in the truth but are used by elites to spread their propaganda. Wikipedia and the Google search engine, the film implies, are employed in identical fashion by those in power. The same goes for the media, ranging from news on the major networks to cable comedy shows, which, *Plandemic* alleges, have been controlled by the CIA for decades. Recasting all of these entities as part of the plot

that the first part of the series began to uncover and that the second part now exposes completely, the narrative tries to make it impossible for viewers to verify and dismiss its claims.

The second half of the documentary, then, develops the conspiracist claims in detail. Whereas the narrative has so far focused – with a short detour on China – on the U.S. and the past few years, it now assumes a distinctively global perspective by focusing on the World Health Organization and the activities of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Africa and India. The film suggests that the U.S. medical system has been a sham for the past 100 years, since John D. Rockefeller realized that he could manipulate it to generate vast amounts of money. This claim is the starting point for the film's argument that the pandemic has been manufactured to cash in on the vaccines that are being developed to contain it. Moreover, the film contends that vaccines in general are unsafe and usually not needed and that the Covid vaccines will be particularly dangerous because they have been produced far too quickly. The film includes a clip from a CBS interview with Bill Gates in which the interviewer asks him about the high number of people participating in the trials who experienced "systemic side effects" (01:06:12–01:06:15). Gates's answer is, unfortunately, not very precise. Instead of saying that these side effects were mostly some fever or headaches, he remains vague, which creates the impression that he has been cornered and that the vaccines are very dangerous.

As the screen begins to fade to black, David Martin's voice-over declares: "This isn't a vaccine story. It's a population management story" (01:07:00–01:07:03). This is the film's second major conspiracist allegation: that the pandemic has been carefully orchestrated to reduce the number of people on the globe both through the virus and the vaccines. The goal of the plot is, as Martin puts it, "an exclusive playground for the entitled few" (01:07:09–01:07:11). The film locates the origins of this agenda in the 1974 Kissinger Report, which defined the purpose of U.S. foreign policy in Africa as "reduc[ing] the population" there (00:58:23–00:58:24). Completely taken out of context and severely misrepresented – the document talks about slowing the population *growth*, as is actually discernible in a quote highlighted in yellow – the report

becomes another piece in the jigsaw that the film claims to be putting together. Kissinger of course has been one of the usual suspects of American conspiracy theories for decades and thus lends himself to be included in the film's accusation. *Plandemic: Indoctornation*'s archvillain, however, is Bill Gates.

The film spends considerable time to recast the public image of Bill Gates, professing to deconstruct the legend he has created for himself. The narrative – in parts, correctly – suggests that Gates is not quite the creative genius as which he is often perceived. Instead, he is cast as an awful human being who used his father's funds and contacts to build his empire and betray his business partner Paul Allen when he was fighting cancer. The film also claims that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was only founded in 1998 to polish Gates's public image because Microsoft was being sued for antitrust violations. This allegation is articulated against a montage of scenes that show Gates in unfavorable moments during the trial. However, this is not true, as the foundation was set up in 1994 already. After playing up the negative consequences of the foundation's work in India and Africa – in a move that goes far beyond the legitimate criticism that has been voiced in non-conspiracist fashion by many parties – the attempt to cast Gates as an incarnation of evil culminates in making him a close friend of Jeffrey Epstein. Thus, when Willis's voice-over declares at the end of this section, "[p]ersonally, I would love to believe that one of the richest men in the world is giving away his fortune for the betterment of humanity… I wanna believe that his heart is as soft and warm as his sweaters. At the very least, I wanna believe that he is unaware of the damage he has done" (01:03:43–01:04:06), it is clear that Willis does not believe this, and neither should the audience.

After all, the film has gone to great lengths to "show" that the pandemic has been carefully planned by Gates's foundation. In fact, *Plandemic: Indoctornation* begins with and later returns for a whole section to Event 201 – a pandemic exercise organized by the Gates Foundation, The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, and the World Economic Forum in October 2019. During the exercise, the global spread of a coronavirus that first emerges in China and the reactions by politics, sci-

ence and civil society were simulated to prepare governments and relevant institutions for such an outbreak, which, many experts agreed, would occur sooner rather than later. For conspiracy theorists, however, the event signifies something entirely different: it is the blueprint for the pandemic that began only a few months later, a clear instance of the "foreknowledge" of the conspirators. Since conspiracy theories imagine a world where nothing happens by accident, an occurrence such as Event 201 must be part of a plan and thus proves the guilt and complicity of the parties involved beyond a doubt (Butter 2020, 50). And this is exactly how *Plandemic* integrates the event into its argument.

Tellingly, just as the first part, *Plandemic: Indoctornation* hardly ever challenges the scientific paradigm as such and rather suggests that the scientific community is mostly corrupt. Hence, the film highlights the academic credentials of the many people it presents as experts on the pandemic and the plot behind it. In fact, in the introductory segment of the film Willis stresses that his argument is based on interviews with "scholars from all over the world, among them top doctors, distinguished scientists and Nobel laureates" (00:04:05–00:04:12). Like Mikovits in the first part, these experts are presented as heroic figures who speak the truth despite occasionally severe personal consequences. However, also as in the first part, there are short moments where the film's argument transforms into a more general denunciation of science. The most pronounced of these moments occurs in the section in which Rockefeller is accused of having corrupted the U.S. medical system. Since he wanted to sell his oil-based drugs, Willis declares, "medicines used for thousands of years were suddenly classified as 'alternative,' while the new petroleum-based, highly addictive, and patentable drugs were declared the gold standard… Rockefeller leveraged his political influence by pressing Congress to declare natural healing modalities 'unscientific quackery'" (00:43:50–00:44:19). For a moment, the narrative here presents science as the opposite of medicine and healing and as inherently problematic. As it accuses Rockefeller and his allies of a major resemanticization, it engages in such an act itself. Overall, though, just as most populist conspiracist discourse, the second *Plandemic* movie contends to present the better, untainted and thus true science.

4. Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are always narratives, but, as I have argued, not always populist counter-narratives. However, throughout the western world where conspiracy theories underwent a process of stigmatization after World War II they have been functioning exactly as populist counter-narratives in the past decades. As they almost invariably position themselves against common wisdom and the official version of events, they challenge – just as populist discourse more generally – not only political but also scientific elites and accuse them of deceiving and acting against the interests of the people. As I demonstrated in my analysis of the two *Plandemic* movies, they employ various strategies of resemanticization. They recast events that just happened and are not controlled by anybody as part of a devious plan by translating coincidence and contingency into collusion; they dismiss the expertise and the motives of leading scientific voices in the then ongoing discussions because they consider them complicit in the conspiracy; in their stead, they work up the credentials of voices that provide radically different interpretations of the events they are concerned with to prove their conspiracist allegations. In the *Plandemic* movies, these scientific resemanticizations usually do not challenge the scientific paradigm as such but "merely" contend that those scholars and scientists that claim that the virus emerged naturally and is very dangerous are corrupt and therefore lying to the people. The conspiracy theorists therefore contend that they are listening to the better and – since they are working outside the system – more honest experts. By contrast, more radical challenges that replace the scientific method with other epistemologies occur only rarely. I would claim that this goes for most conspiracy theories, as they almost always tend to mimic academic discourse. However, this would need to be demonstrated on the basis of a far larger corpus.

Works Cited

Aslanidis, Paris (2016) Is populism an ideology? A refutation and a new perspective. *Political studies* 64(1), 88–104.

Bailyn, Bernard (1967) *The ideological origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Barkun, Michael (2003) *A culture of conspiracy: apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Barr, Robert R. (2009) Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics. *Party Politics*. 15(1), 29–48.

Bergmann, Eirikur and Michael Butter (2020) Conspiracy theory and populism. In: Michael Butter and Peter Knight (eds.) *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. London: Routledge, 330–343.

Boukari, Oumarou and Joschka Philipps (2022) "Complòóót?" Theorizing about Covid-19 conspiracies in Côte d'Ivoire. In: Butter, Michael and Knight, Peter (eds.) *Covid conspiracy theories in global perspective*. London: Routledge. forthcoming.

Bratich, Jack Z. (2008) *Conspiracy panics: political rationality and popular culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Butter, Michael (2014) *Plots, designs, and schemes: American conspiracy theories from the puritans to the present*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Linguae & Litterae.

Butter, Michael (2020) *The nature of conspiracy theories*. London: Polity Press.

Butter, Michael (2021) Conspiracy theories – conspiracy narratives. In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research/ Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 10(1), 97–100.

Butter, Michael and Lisa Retterath (2010) From alerting the world to stabilizing its own community: The shifting cultural work of the *Loose Change* films. *Canadian Review of American Studies* 40(1), 25–44.

Butter, Michael and Peter Knight (eds.) (2020) *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. London: Routledge.

Castanho Silva, Bruno, Federico Vegetti, and Levente Littvay (2017) The elite is up to something: exploring the relation between populism

and belief in conspiracy theories. *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*. 23(4), 423–443.

Cubitt, Geoffrey (1993) *The Jesuit myth: conspiracy theory and politics in nineteenth-century France*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Deutschmann, Peter, Jens Herlth and Alois Woldan (eds.) (2020) *"Truth" and fiction. Conspiracy theories in Eastern European culture and literature*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Fenster, Mark (2008) *Conspiracy theories: secrecy and power in American culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fiske, John (ed.) (1994) *Media matters: everyday culture and political change*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Frenkel, Sheera, Ben Decker and Davey Alba (2020) *How the 'Plandemic' movie and its falsehoods spread widely online*. Web: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/technology/plandemic-movie-youtube-facebook-coronavirus.html.

Girard, Pascal (2020) Conspiracy theories in Europe during the twentieth century. In: Butter, Michael and Peter Knight (eds.) *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. London: Routledge, 569–581.

Gray, Matthew (2010) *Conspiracy theories in the Arab world: sources and politics*. London: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart (1997) *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publishing.

Hawkins, Kirk A. and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) The ideational approach to populism. *Latin American Research Review* 52(4), 513–528.

Hofstadter, Richard (1964) *The paranoid style in American politics, and other essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Jansen, Robert S. (2011) Populist mobilization: A new theoretical approach to populism. *Sociological Theory* 29(2), 75–96.

Kearney, Matthew D., Shawn C. Chiang and Philip M. Massey (2020) The Twitter origins and evolution of the COVID-19 "plandemic" conspiracy theory. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1, 1–18. Web: https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/the-twitter-origins-and-evolution-of-the-covid-19-plandemic-conspiracy-theory/.

Laclau, Ernesto (2005) *On populist reason*. New York: Verso.

Lytvynenko, Jane (2020) *The "Plandemic" sequel is here. We give it zero stars*. Web: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelytvynenko/plandemic-sequel-review.

McKenzie-McHarg, Andrew (2019) Conspiracy theory: the nineteenth-century prehistory of a twentieth-century concept. In: Uscinski, Joseph (ed.) *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them*. New York: Oxford University Press, 62–81.

McKenzie-McHarg, Andrew and Rolf Fredheim (2017) Cock-ups and slapdowns: A quantitative analysis of conspiracy rhetoric in the British Parliament 1916–2015. *Historical methods: A journal of quantitative and interdisciplinary history* 50(3), 156–169.

Mede, Niels G. and Mike S. Schäfer (2020) Science-related populism: Conceptualizing populist demands toward science. *Public understanding of science* 29(5), 473–491.

Moffitt, Benjamin (2016) *The global rise of populism: performance, political style, and representation*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) *Populism: a very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nazar, Shahin and Toine Pieters (2021) Plandemic revisited: A product of planned disinformation amplifying the COVID-19 "infodemic". *Frontiers in public health*. 9 (649930), 1–15.

Ostiguy, Pierre (2017) Populism: A socio-cultural approach. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal. et al. (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 73–97.

Plandemic: Indoctornation (2020). Directed by Mikki Willis [Documentary]. London,: London Real.

Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19 (2020). Directed by Mikki Willis [Documentary]. Ojai, CA: Elevate Films.

Rabo, Annika (2020) Conspiracy theory as occult cosmology in anthropology. In: Butter, Michael and Peter Knight (eds.) *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. London: Routledge, 81–93.

Radnitz, Scott (2021) *Revealing schemes: The politics of conspiracy in Russia and the post-Soviet region*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stanley, Ben (2008) The thin ideology of populism. *Journal of political ideologies* 13(1), 95–110.

Taggart, Paul (2019) Populism and "unpolitics." In: Fitzi, Gregor, Jürgen Mackert and Bryan S. Turner (eds.) *Populism and the crisis of democracy*, vol. 1. Abingdon: Routledge, 79–88.

Thalmann, Katharina (2019) *The stigmatization of conspiracy theory since the 1950s: 'A Plot to Make us Look Foolish'*. London: Routledge.

Uscinski, Joseph E. and Joseph M. Parent (2014) *American conspiracy theories*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Van Zoonen, Liesbet (2012) I-Pistemology: Changing truth claims in popular and political culture. *European journal of communication* 27(1), 56–67.

Woods, Dwayne (2014) *The many faces of populism: diverse but not disparate*. In: Wood, Dwayne and Barbara Wejnert (eds.) *The many faces of populism: current perspectives*. Bingley, Emerald, Research in Political Sociology 22, 1–26.

Ylä-Anttila, Tuomas (2018) Populist knowledge: "post-truth" repertoires of contesting epistemic authorities. *European journal of cultural and political sociology* 5(4), 356–388.