Introduction

In 2020, and in light of the beginning of the third decade, the current situation in the world seems increasingly shaped by anxiety, mistrust and a cutback in international cooperation between nation states and political and economic associations. This reminds one of the situation of the Cold War, when the atmosphere was heavily loaded with mutual accusations and suspicion. Oppositional groups were often blamed for secretly supporting the political enemy on the other side of the Iron Curtain, be it the United States or the Soviet Union.

A very similar constellation can be discerned today: the Russian government accuses non-governmental organizations of being sponsored by foreign powers and hinders their activities. Since 2012, organizations that pursue, or are considered to be pursuing, "political activities" and which receive funding from abroad are required to be registered and labelled as "foreign agents." Although the Russian legislation rejects any comparison of this administrative term with Soviet times, its semantics sufficiently suggest that the "foreign agent" organisation does not act out of an intrinsic motivation, but for another interest, one that "stands" behind and supports it.

On the other side, supporters of the opposition tend to claim that anybody who holds a more or less prominent position and openly expresses an understanding of the Russian government's viewpoints "is on Putin's payroll." The underlying concept of such legal arrangements or rhetorical figures of speech is pertinent to the idea of conspiracy which implies that actions or utterances are not simply performed straightforwardly; instead, real or relevant interests are concealed "behind" them. The mode of conspiracy-thinking is shaped by fundamental dualities, which may be characterized by oppositions such as open/secret, overt/covert, official/unofficial, simulated/real, dissimulating/sincere, phenomenological/ontological, illusive/real or even fictitious/factual.

With respect to conspiracies and conspiracy thinking (i.e., conspiracy theory), though, these distinctions are made in the world of human action and behaviour or, to put it more generally, in the world of culture. Its roots reach into the

fundamental human condition of the opacity of minds and the restrictions of embodied knowledge. Humans neither never fully know what others have in mind nor are they able to obtain knowledge about actions that happened in another time and in another place. This is especially evident in drama and tragedy—to name but a few: Corneille's *Cinna*, Shakespeare's *Julius Cesar*, Goethe's *Torquato Tasso*, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*—have drawn on this irreducible insecurity about the intentionality of others which is the precondition that, firstly, conspiracies can be planned and carried out, and that, secondly, a conspiratorial state of mind can speculate endlessly about the "real" meaning of other people's actions.

Conspiratorial thinking comes close to paranoia:[1] Although this way of thinking often seems highly irrational and "mad" in the truest sense of the word—especially in severe clinical cases of individual psychopathology—its manifestations in the world of culture are often not that easy to rebut, for reasons of a lack of clear evidence. Think about the most notorious conspiracy theory emanated in Eastern Europe: for ordinary people it was impossible to determine whether or not the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*[2] were authentic. Even after their unambiguous falsification, there are still people nowadays—especially in Arabic countries—who believe in the probability of a Jewish plot to obtain control over the world. These convictions are most likely grounded in deep anti-Semitic attitudes that are present in these cultures, but the impossibility of an inspection of the situation described—i.e., the blatantly absurd, but at the same time unverifiable assumption that once, in days gone by, a world-council of Jews met secretly to discuss matters of how to seize power and control mankind—significantly contributes to the persistence of such beliefs.

Other than conspiracy theories, conspiracies themselves are also a means of struggle against an adversary and are conducted secretly. The deployment of conspiracies often indicates an imbalance in power-relations in the social sphere

1 The concatenation of ideology, conspiracy theory and paranoia was introduced in the analysis of political culture by Richard Hofstadter in essays written as early as the 1950s and which were published cumulatively in Hofstadter 1965. For a recent critical appraisal of Hofstadter's assessments see Boltanski 2012: 266–73.

2 Although it has long been proven that the *Protocols* are not authentic, the accounts of their fabrication and dissemination are not yet fully known and themselves rely on invention and imagination – see the critical account in Hagemeister 2008. There are also other English translations of the title of the *Protocols* such as *The Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion* or *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*; in this volume, though, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is used.

in which the conspiratorial plot takes place; at the same time, their secrecy implies that either the sought-for goal, or the means applied, will not be met with broad acceptance, especially not from the side which is the target of the conspiracy. Partitioned Poland is a prominent example of a culture of conspiracy. Polish anticolonial insurgency discourse developed on the basis of the question of conspiracy, particularly in the years after the Napoleonic Wars and until the early 1860s: Is plotting a feasible, effective and morally justified means of political action? Would the use of conspiracy in the political struggle leave a moral stain on Polish society and, therefore, would overt insurrection—although this was probably more easy to subdue—not be a more noble means of pursuing the interests of the nation?

When one takes a look at history, especially at the history of Eastern Europe, one may be tempted to see a correlation between societies' political constitution and the implementation of conspiratorial strategies in the political struggle: the more restrictive the access to power and to the throne, and the more despotic the exercise of power on the society, the more likely people are to resort to plotting and to conspiratorial activities. Examples extend back to the reign of Ivan IV ("the Terrible") in the sixteenth century, to the political upheaval in the Russian and Ottoman empires throughout the nineteenth century until the end of World War I: the Decembrists in the aftermath of the Russian war against Napoleon, the insurrections in Poland in 1830–31 and 1863–64. The Poles invented *wallenrodism*, based on a poem by Mickiewicz, as a strategy of undermining Russia's overwhelming power. The Russian administration, for its part, discovered harmless associations of young scholars like the Vilnius "Philomates and Philarets" of 1823 or the Kievan "Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood" of 1847 to be politically dangerous conspirations. The revolutionary terrorism under the tsars Alexander II, Alexander III and Nicholas II and the movements of the Black Hand and Young Bosnia would not have been possible without clandestine forms of organization that could be considered conspiratorial. As soon as the political system allows for legal access to power, then conspiratorial activities often lose their relevance and recede from the political scene.

Along with conspiracy itself, conspiracy *theory* can serve as a political means as well. The relation of the former to the latter corresponds to the opposition of secrecy and plainness or concealment and bluntness. Whereas conspiracies have to be prepared secretly for the sake of them not being revealed, conspiracy theories are discourses that strive for acceptance and social dissemination. Their realm is publicity, rather than secrecy—conspiracy theories take aim at mass-media in order to be spread more swiftly. Communication is necessary for conspiring, certainly, but it still has to remain undercover and must not es-

cape the control of the conspirators who anxiously avoid publicity by applying techniques of encryption and exclusivity.

The strong reliance on publicity and significant dissemination leads to an analogy that might seem surprising at first glance—historically, conspiracy theories were an important tool in the struggle against the authorities, the church, the court and against other powerful institutions in late modern Europe.[3] In a way, the exposure of conspiracies—i.e., the elaboration of theories serving to bring *real* intentions and concealed interests behind political actions to light—was a crucial goal of the Enlightenment. It is no accident that many conspirational ideas that persist to this very day (the struggle against alleged plots organized by the Illuminati, the Jesuits, the Freemasons, the Jews, or the Judeo-Masons…) emerged at a time at which the legitimacy of the political and religious authorities of ancient regime Europa were being questioned.

Conversely, the French Revolution itself was seen as the work of a conspiracy by many traditionalist intellectuals.[4] The printing press was certainly a powerful instrument in this context. It allowed for campaigns to be launched that reached large audiences. However, one crucial feature of conspiracy theories made itself felt: the high productivity of the conspiratorial mode of thought and its inability to limit itself. More often than not, the conspiracies one could read about in brochures, pamphlets or newspapers or hear about in gossip and talk of the town were not real, but made up—these were no longer real conspiracies, but "conspiracy theories" in the contemporary, pejorative and disqualifying sense of the term.[5]

The conceptual link between conspiracy and conspiracy theories is, therefore, not just substantiated by the fact of real conspiracies that boost the suspicion that secret forces lurk behind any social phenomenon and influence its trajectory.[6] Moreover, conspiracies and conspiracy discourse are closely entwined: for instance, many people were accused of taking part in huge anti-Soviet activities during the ill-famed Stalinist trials of the late 1920s and the 1930s: these charges were deliberately disseminated by the authorities and significantly contributed to a Soviet culture of conspiracy that pervaded all spheres

3 See the chapter "Verschwörungstheorien der Aufklärung" in Klausnitzer 2007: 179–249.

4 Cf. Hofman 1993.

5 Cf. "Une théorie du complot est une théorie non seulement fausse mais dangereuse. Une théorie paranoïaque" – Boltanski 2012: 274.

6 This connection is too narrow and does not fully capture the differences between conspiracies and conspiracy theories – see Johannsen/Röhl 2010.

of society.[7] Openly encouraged suspicion of ubiquitous conspiracy was expected to contribute to the reduction of privacy and secrecy, which is vital for real conspiration. Conspiracy discourse was systematically introduced in order to raise anxiety and cautiousness, on the one hand, and to strengthen belief in revealed conspiracies (no matter how far-fetched and absurd the accusations might have been) on the other. So, by virtue of the necessary publicity, conspiracy theories are closer to the official sphere, even being endorsed thereby, whereas conspiracies are never organized before anybody's eyes (or they are dissimulated if they are carried out openly).[8]

Conspiracy theories can be considered in terms of a specific version of the "world" (or at least, of some social phenomenon) and as manifestations of discourse (understood here in its Foucauldian sense as socially relevant utterances which bear a close relation to institutions of knowledge and power and with particular truth claims). As such, they are highly indicative of issues and conditions in societies and cultures. The political situation in contemporary Poland, for example, significantly relates to interpretations and versions of the airplane disaster that took place in Smolensk in April 2010, when a Polish Air Force aircraft crashed due to a failed landing attempt. 96 people, among them the president and his wife, alongside other representatives of Poland's elite, fell victim to the crash. Many people in Poland adhere to the opinion that the crash was concocted by Russian secret service; some even suspect Donald Tusk, then prime-minister, to have had a hand in it. Cultural memory is particularly relevant in the emergence of this belief: manifold historical experiences, many of them lieing not that far in the past as the time of the partitions, seem to have led to an almost endemic mistrust of Russia among the Polish people. The plane's passengers were on the way to a remembrance ceremony in Katyń, a place where the NKVD had killed about 4,000 detained Polish officers, representatives of the military elite of inter-war Poland in early 1940. The truth about what had happened in Katyń was carefully hidden from the public, a fact that probably paved the way for the immediate emergence of conspiracy theories after the fatal event and during the period of communist rule in Poland. Although the speculations about a malicious Russian attack constantly point out some more or less astonishing details in the accounts of the crash, they lack either substantial factual evidence or a convincing motive for such a violent operation on the part of Russia's secret services. It

7 For a convincing functionalist analysis of the officially endorsed conspiracy thinking in the Soviet Union, see Rittersporn 2001 and as well Dentith 2014: 85–90.

8 For a typology based on the opposition of secrecy/non-secrecy; see also Barkun 2003: 4–5.

is safe to say that the suspicion fell on Russia for historical reasons. Given the complicated history of Polish-Russian relations and the symbolic density of the circumstances—members of the Polish elite fall victim to a catastrophe in the immediate vicinity of the spot where thousands of Polish prisoners of war had been executed seven decades ago, a crime ordered by Soviet authorities that had been officially abnegated for decades—it would, in fact, have been rather surprising had this event *not* given rise to conspiracy theories.

Both conspiracies and conspiracy discourse induce remarkable mistrust in social and political communication. When one takes for granted that other people are substantially non-transparent, at least in their intentions and private thoughts, then the mere idea of hidden motives and aspirations easily leads into cautious reservations, disbelief and distrust. Over time the other person easily falls under the general suspicion of harbouring evil intentions. One extreme consequence of this insecurity and mistrust is that it can lead to paranoia, a mental disorder which significantly correlates with social circumstances and positions. Those occupying leading positions within a group or society often guess the enviousness of the people that surround them and suspect latent conspiracy which is directed against them (most peculiarly, historical drama develops this motif). At lower positions, people who have some knowledge of secret services and their practices are more inclined to fear falseness on behalf of others or to fear their uncandid treason.

A frequent *topos* that is encountered in the analysis of conspiracy theories is information complexity: one might feel inclined to resort to "easy" models of explanation when confronted with the impossibility of establishing causal relations or sound explanations for particular events. A more or less common model is the identification of someone who might be—in the long run—responsible for the social *explicandum*. This desire for an explanation is understandable; it fuels scientific or scholarly accounts of reality as well as conspiracy thinking. Reductiveness is not a feature to be encountered solely in conspiracy thinking. Given the complexity of the world, any explanation cannot but reduce this complexity in relation to the principles of methodology and disciplinary practice.

Conspiracy theories do not significantly differ from other modes of explanation, be they scientific or not, with regard to complexity and its necessary reduction. Therefore, the difference cannot be discerned either in the motives—the urge to make sense of an event or a sequence of events—or simply in the propositions given as explanations. A cardinal feature that allows for the discrimination of conspiracy theories lies in another direction: whereas scientific explanations should be congruent with methods and a disciplinary framework, conspiracy theories usually do not dwell on principles and methodology; instead, they put

their explanations at the fore. Whereas science is—with regard to its objects—highly self-referential, conspiracy thinking is nothing but hetero-referential. Its truth is always "out there" as something more or less obvious: conspiracy theories usually only refer to data, co-occurrences, causal relations and "revealed" links, thereby creating the illusion of careful empirical examination and rational judging, where the necessity of elaborating on the methodology is concerned. Apart from that, the discourse of conspiracy theory refrains from revealing the theoretical framework informing it. Scholarly explanations do not usually hesitate to pay tribute to their sources and inspirations, something which would often be too embarrassing for the promoters of conspiracy-thinking ('As our *premise* we have taken an evil force behind many phenomena'). The basic assumptions behind the "theory" are not reflected upon at all; instead, the "investigation" always arrives at the detection of conspiracies.

Contrary to its name, a conspiracy theory is not a theory in a scientific or even scholarly sense, but rather a sort of story or narrative pretending to explain certain affairs in another way than official accounts do. On behalf of their narratedness, conspiracy theories (manifesting themselves in—nowadays often multimedia—narratives) are greatly interesting to literary scholars, especially for narratology. The relevancy of conspiracy theory for scholars of literature must not be confused with fictionality as a cardinal feature of literary texts. Conspiracy theories claim to be truthful and authentic; it would be misleading, therefore, to classify them as fictitious from the outset. The problem resides rather in finding a "demarcation line permitting to distinguish … real conspiracies"—and their respective description or "theory"—from "imaginary" ones.[9] One may arrive at such a distinction after an examination of the conspiracy story narrated.[10] However, immediately qualifying conspiracy narratives as a kind of fiction is hardly a proper approach to such an astonishing and manifold cultural phenomenon. Moreover, proving or disproving an account of events often demands meticulous work and deliberation; in many cases it is impossible to definitively determine whether a given conspiracy theory is true or not.

Beyond a rigid discrimination of true and false (resp. fictitious) "stories," the examination of conspiracy narratives provides access to a society's problems, expectations and worries. Although their factual basis is most often rather questionable, if not outright nonexistent, conspiracy narratives remain a highly instructive indicator for the state of public discourse and collective imagination in

9 Boltanski 2012: 280.

10 Most likely, a part of the conspiracy story indeed refers to reals persons and events whereas a more or less great part of the story is fictitious.

a given society. In this respect they are similar to literature and the literary imagination which, free from the constraints of referentiality and truth, can still refer to real historical events and real social conditions. At least this would be the case for the mimetically oriented poetics of "realist" fiction—the events narrated have to be "probable." "Probability," whether we like it or not, is also a prerequisite for the success of conspiracy theories.

Literary fiction, in particular, qualifies for the depiction and deployment of both conspiracies and conspiracy discourse: discharged from the constraints of many other genres of discourse, literary discourse can also construct and represent plots (e.g., in drama or narratives). Literature can demonstrate ways of human reasoning and its appropriateness to the "world" (through fictitious introspection into the character's minds and by describing an entire situation from a distanced and omniscient vantage point as well). Furthermore, the act of reading literary fiction, or even poetry, generally bears some similarities to reading and interpreting the world in a conspiratological way: there is some obvious "first-hand" meaning, but is there also not another hidden second (or third) meaning behind these erratic signifiers? Just as readers of a (literary) text often speculate about its more or less plausible interpretations, so too do people often wonder about whether particular phenomena could also be assessed in other ways than from the ordinary viewpoint.

For these reasons, this volume contains theoretical texts on conspiracies as it deals with accounts of Eastern European social and political issues that usually pass for conspiracy narratives. Although the textuality of conspiracy theories and narrative accounts of conspiracies converge in some respects, they must not be confounded, given that in the first case truth claims are made, whereas literary discourse generally refrains from the pretention of explaining the states of affairs in the "real" world. The chapters of this book shed some light on a few more or less prominent cases of conspiracies and conspiracy thinking in Eastern Europe. They do so from a point of view that does not generally aim to solve the puzzles of a fragmented reality, but instead by observing the people who are (pre-)occupied with the puzzles and the texts produced thereby.

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