

Conspiracism and the Shadows of Transparency

Radek Chlup

<https://doi.org/10.14712/25704893.2023.1>

Abstract: Following the approach of cultural studies, which views conspiracism as reflecting larger cultural and social anxieties and concerns, the paper argues that one of these anxieties is connected with the modern ideology of transparency. While at first sight a widely shared positive value, transparency can be shown to hide various tensions and paradoxes on closer inspection. This paper interprets conspiracy theories as imaginative attempts at capturing these tensions, at highlighting the inconspicuous opacity of the late modern transparent world and its institutions. Conspiracists are themselves entangled in the modern ideology of transparency, but at the same time, they knock against its boundaries, making explicit the unspoken premises of the entire system in all their paradoxicality. They draw attention to numerous inconsistencies and dark cracks in our late modern social and ideological system, symbolising them through various disturbing narratives that should not be taken literally but that are interesting precisely in that they offer an opportunity to reflect on the limitations of transparency.

Keywords: conspiracism; conspiracy theory; transparency; opacity; occult cosmology

Abstrakt: Článek vychází z přístupu kulturních studií, která konspiracismus chápou jako odraz širších sociokulturních obav a úzkostí, a tvrdí, že jedna z těchto obav souvisí se současnou koncepcí transparentnosti. Ta se dnes na první pohled může jevit jako veskrze pozitivní hodnota, při bližším pohledu však zjistíme, že v sobě skrývá nejrůznější napětí a paradoxy. Konspirační teorie můžeme chápat jako imaginativní pokusy o zachycení těchto napětí, o postžení nenápadné neprůhlednosti pozdně moderního transparentního světa a jeho institucí. Ač jsou konspiračisté do moderní ideologie transparentnosti sami zapleteni, narážejí zároveň na její hranice, čímž pomáhají zviditelňovat nevyčlenené předpoklady celého systému v celé jejich paradoxnosti. Ukazují tak na četné nesrovnalosti a temné trhliny v našem pozdně moderním společenském a ideologickém systému a symbolizují je prostřednictvím různých znepokojivých vyprávění. Tato vyprávění není na místě brát doslova – jsou však zajímavá právě tím, že nám nabízejí příležitost zamyslet se nad mezemi transparentnosti.

Klíčová slova: konspiracismus; konspirační teorie; transparentnost; jasnost; okultní kosmologie

This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund-Project „Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World“ (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

Received: 23 May 2022

Accepted: 18 October 2022

doc. Mgr. Radek Chlup, Ph.D., Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
E-mail: radek.chlup@ff.cuni.cz

© 2021 The Author. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

Since the day of Popper and Hofstadter, the study of conspiracy theories has for a long time been dominated by the “pathologising paradigm” that sees them as a minority phenomenon threatening the liberal-democratic consensus, an outburst of irrationality and an expression of a “crippled epistemology”, an “unscientific way of understanding social relations, which had emerged as a reaction and in opposition to the Enlightenment”.¹ Cultural studies have played a crucial part in offering an alternative, more positive approach that views late modern conspiracism as a mainstream phenomenon linked to popular culture rather than a marginal aberration and analyses it as reflecting larger cultural and social anxieties and concerns. Thus, for instance, Dean² interprets conspiracy theories as reflecting a general mistrust of experts and politicians in an age of virtuality, while Melley³ understands them as an expression of “agency panic” arising out from the confrontation between the liberal individualist model of personhood and the postmodern decentred subjectivity of our times. For Fenster, they represent “a utopian desire to reflect upon and confront the contradictions and conflicts of the contemporary democratic state and capitalism”.⁴ A particularly rich account has been given by Knight,⁵ who not only identifies a wide range of functions of contemporary conspiracy theories but points out their connection with the “routine paranoia” of our late modern age of epistemic uncertainty.

My paper will follow this tradition but will focus on a topic that has so far been less prominent in interpretations of conspiracism. I will read conspiracy theories as a specific reaction to the modern ideology of *transparency*. While at first sight a widely shared positive value, upon closer inspection, transparency can be shown to hide various tensions and paradoxes and to cast numerous shadows. Conspiracy theories may be read as imaginative attempts at capturing these paradoxes, at highlighting the inconspicuous opacity of the late modern transparent world and its institutions.

My interpretation will not be entirely original. Conspiracism has already been analysed as a reaction to transparency by various scholars.⁶ I will use their insights

¹ MICHAEL BUTTER and PETER KNIGHT, “The History of Conspiracy Theory Research: A Review and Commentary”, in JOSEPH E. USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, p. 34–40.

² JODI DEAN, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1998, *passim*.

³ TIMOTHY MELLEY, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000, p. 47–78.

⁴ MARK FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2008, p. 128.

⁵ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*, London, New York: Routledge 2000, *passim*.

⁶ JODI DEAN, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes On Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2002, *passim*; HARRY G. WEST and TODD SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, in HARRY G. WEST and TODD SANDERS (eds.), *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2003, p. 1–57; CLARE BIRCHALL, “Radical Transparency?”, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 14 (1, 2014): p. 77–88; MATTHEW CAREY, *Mistrust: An Ethnographic Theory*, Chicago: HAU Books 2017, p. 85–106; MATTHEW FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency: Reflecting on Knowledge in the Twenty-First Century”, *Review of International Studies*

and employ them as building blocks for a fuller synthetic picture that also draws on Critical Transparency Studies⁷ and anthropological study of “occult cosmologies”.⁸ I will first provide a brief sketch of the modern ideology of transparency and then point out some of its shadowy aspects. In the second part of the paper, I will ask how conspiracism relates to transparency. I will argue that while to some extent it shares its principles, it takes them more literally, and thereby it paradoxically arrives at their very opposite and functions as an “occult cosmology” that depicts power as exceeding the system’s rules and operating secretly in the background. Conspiracism draws attention to numerous inconsistencies and dark cracks in our late modern social and ideological system, symbolising them through various disturbing narratives that should not be taken literally but that are interesting precisely in offering an opportunity to reflect on the limitations of transparency.

Transparency and Modernity

Transparency is “perhaps the ultimate consensual value of our time”.⁹ It is something that we regard as a self-evident good, similar to, say, personal freedom, democracy, or free speech. It functions as one of the “magic concepts”, i.e. concepts “imbued with a magic aura which promises to solve major dilemmas encountered by society”.¹⁰ We all hope that informational access for all citizens ensures better governance, accountability, procedural fairness and rationalisation. It is mainly in the post-ideological era after the end of the Cold War that transparency achieved prominence – perhaps best symbolised by the foundation of Transparency International in 1993, as well as the *Code of Good Practices on Fiscal Transparency* introduced by the International Monetary Fund in 1998. With the development of the Internet, transparency has reached yet another stage, as we can now access data more easily than ever before.

The roots of transparency, however, lie much deeper in the past, in the age of Enlightenment. One of its primary sources is modern science. The invention of the telescope and the microscope allowed scientists to peer beyond and beneath appear-

42 (1, 2016): p. 48–73; ADRIAN J. IVAKHIV, “Occult Geographies, or the Promises of Spectres: Scientific Knowledge, Political Trust, and Religious Vision at the Margins of the Modern”, in PAUL STENNER and MICHEL WEBER (eds.), *Orpheus’ Glimpse: Selected Papers on Process Psychology*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Éditions Chromatika 2018, p. 115–144.

⁷ EMMANUEL ALLOA and DIETER THOMÄ, “Transparency: Thinking Through an Opaque Concept”, in EMMANUEL ALLOA and DIETER THOMÄ (eds.), *Transparency, Society and Subjectivity Critical Perspectives*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2018, p. 1–14; CLARE BIRCHALL, *Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America*, Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press 2021, passim.

⁸ JEAN COMAROFF and JOHN COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony”, *American Ethnologist* 26 (2, 1999): p. 279–303; WEST and SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, passim.

⁹ ALLOA and THOMÄ, “Transparency: Thinking Through an Opaque Concept”, p. 2.

¹⁰ EMMANUEL ALLOA, “Transparency: A Magic Concept of Modernity”, in ALLOA and THOMÄ (eds.), *Transparency, Society and Subjectivity Critical Perspectives*, p. 28–29.

ances, helping to “render the mysteries of nature ‘transparent’”.¹¹ Autopsy and experimentation now had more weight than tradition. On a more fundamental level, the entire project of modern science presupposes an essential transparency of the world in the sense of its availability to scientific inquiry. As Weber explains in “Science as a Vocation” (1917), this does not imply that we would actually fully understand the conditions of our lives: “it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted”.¹² Science keeps on gradually shedding its light on the world, step by step eliminating the zones of darkness.

Equally significant was the spread of the transparency ethos in politics. Whereas at the beginning of the 17th century, “secrets of the state” (*arcana imperii*) were still seen as crucial,¹³ in the second part of the 18th century, highly praised political values shifted to include openness and publicity. One of their famous defenders was Rousseau, condemning the hypocritical world of masks and false appearances and longing for a world in which all men are transparent to one another.¹⁴ As Foucault notes, Rousseau’s utopian dream inspired the French revolutionaries:

It was the dream of a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogatives of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men’s hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles.¹⁵

Rousseau’s vision may have been radical, but it was in line with the general spirit of the times. According to Foucault, the latter half of the eighteenth century was haunted by a “fear of darkened spaces ... which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths”, of the “unlit chambers where arbitrary political acts, monarchical caprice, religious superstitions, tyrannical and priestly plots, epidemics and the illusions of ignorance were fomented”.¹⁶ These fears (powerfully captured by the Gothic novels) led not just to the onset of new political ideas but also to new forms of architecture emphasising openness, hygiene, functionality, and free circulation of air¹⁷ – a development that, in the 20th century, culminated into modern glass buildings and open-space offices.

¹¹ JEAN COMAROFF and JOHN COMAROFF, “Transparent Fictions, or, The Conspiracies of a Liberal Imagination: An Afterword”, in WEST and SANDERS (eds.), *Transparency and Conspiracy*, p. 292.

¹² MAX WEBER, “Science as a Vocation”, in HANS H. GERTH and C. WRIGHT MILLS (trans., eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press 1946, p. 139.

¹³ DANIEL JÜTTE, *The Age of Secrecy: Jews, Christians, and the Economy of Secrets, 1400–1800*, trans. Jeremiah Riemer, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 2015, passim.

¹⁴ JEAN STAROBINSKI, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988, passim.

¹⁵ MICHEL FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, in COLIN GORDON (trans., ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon 1980, p. 152.

¹⁶ FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, p. 153.

¹⁷ FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, p. 148–149.

On the level of state governance, this led to an emphasis on the public accountability of all political decisions. Kant, in his treatise “Toward Perpetual Peace” (1795), formulates a “transcendental formula of public right”, according to which “all actions relating to the rights of others are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity”,¹⁸ i.e. if they are not planned to withstand the scrutiny of the ideal rational public. Bentham reached a similar conclusion from a utilitarian perspective. In his “Essay on Political Tactics” (1791), he argues that there is no better way to prevent those in power from becoming corrupt than “the superintendence of the public”: “Let it be impossible that any thing should be done which is unknown to the nation – prove to it that you neither intend to deceive nor to surprise – you take away all the weapons of discontent”.¹⁹

Perhaps most importantly, the ideal of transparency led to a new form of subjectivity and social control. Its roots lay in Protestantism with its penchant for self-inspection. By the end of the 17th century, the technology of glass production allowed the Dutch and British Protestants to have houses with large windows without curtains “so that one could see inside of the house of one’s neighbor and ensure that no one inside was engaging in sin”.²⁰ The new ethos of transparency thus implied not just being able to see others but being seen by them as well. Bentham provided a typical image of this in his “Panopticon” (1791), a prison house in which all the prisoners were fully and constantly exposed to the gaze of the guards while the guards themselves were, in turn, watched by the head inspector. As Foucault explains, this was revolutionary not just in that the soft power of the gaze now replaced the formerly violent forms of submission but, even more importantly, the gaze was meant to be internalised to the point that each individual becomes his own overseer, “thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself”.²¹

This meant an entirely new conception of power. In the old system, the source of power was the king, who exercised it alone and totally over the others. In the new bourgeois regime, it is really the system as such that is the source of power. “It’s a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised”.²² As Han points out, this is again something that has been brought to perfection by the technoculture of our times, when the “digital panopticon” of social media allows its inhabitants to “actively collaborate in its construction and maintenance by putting themselves on display and baring themselves”.²³ The

¹⁸ IMMANUEL KANT, “Toward Perpetual Peace”, in MARY GREGOR (trans., ed.), *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 347.

¹⁹ JEREMY BENTHAM, “Essay on Political Tactics”, in JOHN BOWRING (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. II. Edinburgh: William Tait 1843, p. 310–311.

²⁰ BRIAN FARMER, *American Conservatism: History, Theory and Practice*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press 2005, p. 105; cf. LEWIS MUMFORD, *Technics and Civilization*, New York: Harcourt, Brace 1934, p. 128.

²¹ FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, p. 155.

²² FOUCAULT, “The Eye of Power”, p. 156.

²³ BYUNG-CHUL HAN, *The Transparency Society*, trans. by Erik Butler, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2015, p. 46.

result is a society where “communication and commerce, freedom and control, collapse into one” and each of us is “the master and entrepreneur of oneself”.²⁴

Transparency and its Invisible Distortions

Transparency is seen as something entirely positive and enlightening today, but this does not mean that it does not cast any shadows. What are these? The most common critique points out the invisibly distorting nature of transparency. Transparency pretends to be neutral, “a mode of disclosure and regulation that transcends personal or ideological interpretation”,²⁵ presenting the world in an unmediated way. We give you all the facts and data, and it is up to you to interpret them and decide. In fact, however, this is largely an illusion. Data are never presented “raw”, in a neutral manner. Somebody always has to choose what to reveal, thus already presenting the data from a perspective. “Data are always already social, subject to narrative and interpretation”.²⁶ Every form of disclosure conceals something that might appear from a different interpretive perspective.

Politicians and officials are usually apt at “strategically disclosing ‘information’ through coordinated public relations campaigns that produce pre-packaged, tightly controlled ‘news’”.²⁷ In effect, “politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalised practices centered on advertising, public relations, and the means of mass communication”.²⁸ Even disclosures of complete data sets are not of much help here, as they usually lead to such an overload of data that it is in no one’s power to go through them all. “In this way, extreme transparency begins to have the same effect as secrecy”.²⁹

However, the problem with transparency lies not just in its possible corruption by public relations and entertainment culture. Even if we did manage not to succumb to this pitfall, a distortion of a more fundamental kind would still remain – one that is implied in the hegemonic epistemology of modernity. For its analysis, we may follow Fluck³⁰ and turn to Adorno and Horkheimer, who, in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944), see the fundamental problem of modernity in its tendency to reduce everything to quantifiable homogeneous units – data or commodities. “Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers ... is illusion”.³¹ This is true not just of modern science but also of

²⁴ HAN, *The Transparency Society*, p. 47–48.

²⁵ BIRCHALL, “Radical Transparency?”, p. 82.

²⁶ BIRCHALL, “Radical Transparency?”, p. 82.

²⁷ MARK FENSTER, “The Opacity of Transparency”, *Iowa Law Review* 91 (2006): p. 926.

²⁸ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 3–4.

²⁹ BIRCHALL, *Radical Secrecy*, p. 180.

³⁰ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, *passim*.

³¹ THEODOR ADORNO and MAX HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002, p. 4.

modern society, which has replaced the old inequality of birth with the new equality of the market, reducing unique individuals to “things, statistical elements, successes or failures”.³²

As a result, the world becomes transparent, available to the objective inquiring gaze of science. At the same time, however, this leads to a reification of both the world and human beings, leaving out all that is unique, incommensurable and mysterious. As Han puts it, “transparency flattens out the human being itself, making it a functional element within a system.”³³ An example can be found in “the glass partitions of modern offices, the huge rooms in which countless employees sitting together can be easily supervised both by the public and by their managers, no longer countenance private conversations and idylls”.³⁴ In this way, something essentially human is bracketed off, leaving us with depersonalised institutional mechanisms.

On the level of institutions, this approach produces modern bureaucracy, a rational system of administration based on transparent rules and equality before the law. As Weber stresses,³⁵ bureaucracy has the advantage of providing us with “legal guarantees against arbitrariness”, since it demands “a formal and rational ‘objectivity’ of administration, as opposed to the personally free discretion flowing from the ‘grace’ of the old patrimonial domination”. However, this is once again achieved at the price of reification, ignoring the unique details of the case under consideration and reducing it to a mechanical procedure. As David Graeber puts it: “Bureaucratic knowledge is all about schematisation. In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae.”³⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that the transparent bureaucratic procedures frequently result in an opaque maze of senseless regulations so impressively portrayed by Kafka’s novels.

This creates feelings of alienation when modern “institutions and structures are experienced as something alien and unresponsive”.³⁷ Modern individuals react by wishing to know more: “they turn to epistemic ideals or projects promising access to data or the facts in the hope that in doing so they will come to understand or influence the structures with which they are faced”.³⁸ By doing this, however, they only replicate the fundamental problem, for the data and facts they seek are still reified. They are “the very bricks from which the impenetrable ‘façade’ of modern institutions is constructed”.³⁹ Thus, all they achieve is a “false clarity”,⁴⁰ which seemingly reveals everything but does so in a schematic and reductionist manner. Han fittingly com-

³² ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 21.

³³ HAN, *The Transparency Society*, p. 3.

³⁴ ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 183.

³⁵ MAX WEBER, “Bureaucracy”, in GERTH and MILLS, *From Max Weber*, p. 220.

³⁶ DAVID GRAEBER, “Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2, 2012): p. 119.

³⁷ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 66.

³⁸ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 67.

³⁹ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 67.

⁴⁰ ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xvii.

pares this to pornography which “subjects everything to compulsory exhibition”,⁴¹ depriving things of their singularity and hermeneutic depth and turning them into commodities. In this sense, even the transparent institutions of late modernity are “pornographic”: they reveal all kinds of details to the public gaze, but they do this either through commodifying PR campaigns or through objectivised data sets that reproduce the alienating maze-like quality of modern bureaucracy.

In our late modern times, all of this has taken a particular turn. On the one hand, we are more radical in our transparency efforts than ever before, and at first sight, it may seem that our emphasis on open e-governance and public participation has brought democracy to a new height. At the same time, however, many authors point out that these worthy claims are actually “part and parcel of a nexus of associated ideas that together make up the new, globalised market rationality”, being “closely linked to a neoliberal ethos of governance that promotes individualism, entrepreneurship, voluntary forms of regulation and formalized types of accountability”.⁴² As such, transparency functions as the ideology of neoliberalism, “facilitating global fiscal transactions by increasing the legibility of local regulations”⁴³ and shaping our subjectivity accordingly. Transparency indeed reveals a great deal these days, but it hides its own ideological premises, which effectively undermine its potential. While promising public empowerment, in fact, “it enlivens defences for the very mechanisms that embody power in late capitalism: the digital bureaucracies, intuitive interfaces, automated algorithms, minimalist looks and carefully designed ‘background’ technologies that colonise the fringes of our awareness, rendering consumption frictionless, circulation seamless, and production unobtrusive”.⁴⁴

Transparency Driven by Secrecy

Nevertheless, transparency does not just hide its ideological background. It actually employs secrecy in quite an explicit manner, requiring it as its condition of possibility. How exactly this works has been forcefully explained by Jodi Dean in *Publicity's Secret*.

Dean conceptualises transparency in a dynamic manner: not as a state of translucence in which everything can be seen but as a process of *publicity* which strives to make secret things public. Publicity implies that we want all secrets to be revealed but that this has not yet fully happened. “Secrets appear as lures, enticing us as ever-present objects of desire”.⁴⁵ This means, paradoxically, that publicity is based on

⁴¹ HAN, *The Transparency Society*, p. 11.

⁴² CHRISTINA GARSTEN and MONICA LINDH DE MONTOYA, “Introduction: Examining the Politics of Transparency”, in CHRISTINA GARSTEN and MONICA LINDH DE MONTOYA (eds.), *Transparency in a New Global Order: Unveiling Organizational Visions*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2008, p. 2–3.

⁴³ BIRCHALL, *Radical Secrecy*, p. 76.

⁴⁴ JORGE I. VALDOVINOS, Transparency as Ideology, Ideology as Transparency: Towards a Critique of the Meta-aesthetics of Neoliberal Hegemony, *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (1, 2018): p. 656.

⁴⁵ DEAN, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 1.

the secret. The secret is what provokes us to search further, gather more information, take into account yet another expert opinion, and click one more time. However, the entire secret “can never fully or finally be revealed”, for it is “a matter of form, not content”.⁴⁶ Even when technically speaking, all the information is available “out there” online. There is always more of it than any of us can comprehend. Full transparency is just a mythical ideal we aim for but can never reach. What we actually have is the secret-based system of publicity, of never-ending revelation. The secret thus appears as “an exception to the rule that everything should be out in the open”, which “imbues the secret with mystery and importance”.⁴⁷ Those who know more than others have more power. But not even they know everything. There is always something that resists knowledge, enticing us to keep searching.

For Dean, publicity plays an essential ideological part: it helps to establish the notion of the *public*, allowing us to feel like a unified democratic body of self-governing citizens despite considerable differences in culture, race, opportunity, status, education etc. A unified public is ultimately just a fantasy, but one that seems very plausible precisely due to publicity, the practices of which make the public appear as a “subject from whom secrets are kept and in whom a right to know is embedded”.⁴⁸

Dean illustrates this using Bentham’s publicity discussion in his “Essay on Political Tactics”. One objection Bentham needs to face is that the public is incompetent to judge political matters “in consequence of the ignorance and passions of the majority of those who compose it”.⁴⁹ He resolves this by distinguishing between the elite “public-supposed-to-know” (as Dean calls it), whose members judge for themselves based on information, and the common “public-supposed-to-believe”, which cannot really judge but trusts the knowing class and adopts their opinions. What unifies the two classes is publicity, which assures the public-supposed-to-believe that all the information is there for them, too, but that they need not know it all and may simply trust those who do. What this means, however, is that there is always something the public-supposed-to-know knows while the public-supposed-to-believe does not. In other words, the authority and mysterious power of the knowing elites are based on a *secret* – “that key to representational power that had been reserved to the king” that now is “linking together knowledge and belief”.⁵⁰ Again, the secret need not consist just of something wholly hidden from public sight but also something that, in theory, is accessible “out there” to everyone (such as scientific studies or various sets of government data) but that most of us would find too complicated or difficult to find and understand. In cases such as these, “knowledge” means knowing where to look and how to interpret what we find.

⁴⁶ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ BENTHAM, “Essay on Political Tactics”, p. 312.

⁵⁰ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 22.

This means, paradoxically, that publicity is a “system of distrust”:⁵¹ the public is suspicious of those who know, enjoying the revelations of their doings. We eagerly read the news concerning government plans, political deals, corruption accusations or expert opinions. Indeed, even the truly secret operations of the state, such as those tied to intelligence agencies, require some measure of revelation to gain public approval. That is “why military agencies routinely permit the use of their equipment in Hollywood films and why the CIA has a large public relations division”,⁵² which is concerned not just with carefully releasing bits of information but also with spreading disinformation and “strategic fictions”.⁵³ Publicity is based on revealing elite secrets, but it implies that there is always something more to reveal. “The suspicion that something has been withheld, that the information needed for judging properly is hidden and needs to be exposed, sustains this system”.⁵⁴ Frustrating as this may seem, it has the added value of making publicity thrilling. As Bentham points out, one of the advantages of publicity is “the amusement which results from it”.⁵⁵ Publicity is thus fundamentally about the media and the entertaining new revelations they keep on bringing every day.

The implications of this become fully obvious in our era of technoculture, with the Internet greatly facilitating access to information. While originally, this was supposed to make the public more informed and educated, in fact, it has led to a loss of trust and a collapse of the distinction between the public-supposed-to-know and the public-supposed-to-believe. “The endless exposure of ever more secrets hails... each as an expert entitled to know even as it undermines any sense that anyone knows anything at all. Precisely because each is an expert, no one believes in the expert opinion of anyone else. Everybody has to find out for him or herself”.⁵⁶ The resulting frantic search for information still manages to sustain the fantasy of the public, though one that is very much fragmented and thus incapable of coordinated political action. Moreover, “the practices of searching, clicking, and linking in technoculture turn us all into conspiracy theorists, ... as it were, suspicious subjects who trust no one”.⁵⁷ What makes conspiracists, in the narrow sense of the term, different from the rest of us is that they take this side of our subjectivity more at its word.

Conspiracism as Yet Another Type False Clarity?

How, then, does conspiracism relate to the ethos of transparency? At first sight, it would appear to embrace its principles, striving to bring the dark conspiracies to

⁵¹ BENTHAM, “Essay on Political Tactics”, p. 314.

⁵² TIMOTHY MELLELY, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2012, p. 9.

⁵³ MELLELY, *The Covert Sphere*, p. 29.

⁵⁴ DEAN, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 22.

⁵⁵ BENTHAM, “Essay on Political Tactics”, p. 312.

⁵⁶ DEAN, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 40.

⁵⁷ DEAN, *Publicity's Secret*, p. 48.

light. As Carey puts it, “conspiracy theories, like the social sciences, aim to make the world pellucid by revealing the secret structures of existence”.⁵⁸ According to Fluck, conspiracism “reflects the reality of an information society in which faith in clarity has been elevated to the status of a political ideal and defining feature of individual identity”.⁵⁹ In doing this, conspiracism even appears to follow the scientific principle of the fundamental knowability of the world by means of rational analysis. As Hofstadter, in his classic analysis, pointed out already, conspiracism is “intensely rationalistic” in that “it believes that it is up against an enemy who is as infallibly rational as he is totally evil, and it seeks to match his imputed total competence with its own, leaving nothing unexplained and comprehending all of reality in one overreaching, consistent theory.”⁶⁰

The difference between conspiracism and mainstream scientific or political thought thus seems to lie in the fact that the former is distrustful of the political and scientific institutions of the modern world in a more essential manner. As Fluck puts it:

... because conspiracy theorists do not believe the sources of clarity to lie in prevailing institutions, their attitude reflects the reality that many of the current structures of governance are experienced by large numbers of people as unresponsive or as a threat, and that this cannot be rectified simply by means of access to the information institutions themselves provide. In other words, it reflects the truth that technical knowledge is generally used to promote goals other than popular empowerment, that institutions of global governance are experienced as malicious or indifferent actors.⁶¹

Conspiracism understands that transparency cannot be achieved by making the institutions reveal their data, as each data set has to be selected and presented by someone. And if this “someone” is the institutions themselves, they will make sure that their true secrets remain unrevealed.

In this regard, Fluck admits, conspiracism does indeed see through the illusion of modern transparency. Nevertheless, while perhaps correctly diagnosing the alienating and unreliable character of modern institutions, conspiracism makes the mistake of replacing the standard ideal of transparency with yet another type of “false clarity”. Adorno and Horkheimer give modern anti-Semitic conspiracy theories as an example. In their view, their purpose is “to conceal domination in production” by blaming it on the Jew: “He is indeed the scapegoat, not only for individual manoeuvres and machinations but in the wider sense that the economic injustice of the whole class is attributed to him.”⁶² Thus, as Fluck comments, the complex and hard-to-grasp form

⁵⁸ CAREY, *Mistrust*, p. 102.

⁵⁹ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 71.

⁶⁰ RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1964, p. 36–37.

⁶¹ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 71.

⁶² ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 142.

of “exploitation involved in the capitalist system” is, in a simplifying manner, falsely replaced “by readymade categories and stereotypes, a process which reflects the reification involved in enlightened thinking in general”.⁶³ In this regard, conspiracism presents no real alternative to the falsely transparent world of modern capitalism. While criticising the hegemonic epistemology of transparency, it does not seriously question some of its main principles.

Conspiracism and the Limits of Transparency

However, while we may agree that conspiracism embraces the transparency ethos to some extent, the actual situation seems more complex. Fluck is talking about classic modern conspiracism, which amounted to “a paradoxically secure form of paranoia that bolstered one’s sense of identity”,⁶⁴ usually by engendering a sense of peril and putting the blame on a scapegoat, on “them” standing against “us”. In this case, the diagnosis of “false transparency” is perhaps appropriate.

As Knight and others have shown, however, in recent decades, these straightforward scapegoating narratives have been overshadowed by a new “postmodern” type of conspiracy discourse characterised by “a far more insecure version of conspiracy-infused anxiety”, which stirs up “a permanent uncertainty about fundamental issues of causality, agency, responsibility and identity”.⁶⁵ This recent type of conspiracism still attempts to understand the incredibly complex and unintelligible order of the late modern world by identifying a far simpler system of personified agents behind it, but what it achieves is the opposite: “an infinite hermeneutic of suspicion”.⁶⁶ The secret rulers of the world inevitably turn out to be more complex than they seemed at first. Every revealed secret usually points to yet another unrevealed one. A typical conspiracy website does not provide a single clear account of how things “really are” but offers a dazzling multitude of suggestions and possibilities that stimulate questions instead of providing unambiguous answers. The result is not a feeling of clarity but rather that of catching a glimpse of another secret level of reality whose exact mechanisms are yet to be discovered.

A good analysis of this side of late modern conspiracism has been given by Fenster, who reads it as a manifestation of “a popular desire to reconstruct the master narrative” (2008, p. 95) in the postmodern era that is no longer capable of believing in such narratives. In effect, the conspiracist desire is perpetually frustrated. Whenever a possible conspiracy is discovered, it faces a number of problems and obstacles that require further search. “Conspiracy theory demands continual interpretation. There

⁶³ FLUCK, “Theory, ‘Truthers’, and Transparency”, p. 71.

⁶⁴ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 4; cf. JARON HARAMBAM, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*, London and New York: Routledge 2020, p. 59–66.

⁶⁶ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 28.

is always something more to know about an alleged conspiracy”.⁶⁷ In the end, the search turns out to be endless. “The conspiracy is an enormous structure always on the horizon of interpretation, always the cause of everything, always the point toward which interpretation moves but which it never fully reaches”.⁶⁸

Dean goes even further and stresses that conspiracism is fundamentally not about the desire for totalising grand narratives but about doubts and scepticism: “conspiracy thinking is so uncertain that one is rarely fully convinced; instead, one becomes involved in a reiterative back-and-forth that mobilises doubt and reassurance into a never-ending, never-reconciled account of possibility.”⁶⁹ In effect, “conspiracy theory rejects the myth of a transparent public sphere, a sphere where others can be trusted, ... although it continues to rely on revelation”.⁷⁰ This does not mean that postmodern conspiracism goes against the rational values of the Enlightenment. Instead, it takes the Enlightenment system of publicity at its word, thereby revealing its unspoken premises – namely, the fact that it is based on distrust and on revealing secrets. “We might say that by reiterating the compulsions of publicity, conspiracy’s attempts to uncover the secret assemble information regarding the contexts, terms, and conditions of surveillance, discovery, and visibility in a culture in which democracy is embedded in a system of distrust”.⁷¹

Conspiracism “challenges the presumption that what we see on the screens, what is made visible in traditional networks and by traditional authorities, is not itself invested in specific lines of authorisation and subjection”.⁷² It draws attention to the fact that the transparency game of rational citizens democratically debating public matters on the basis of trustworthy information is really just an appealing fantasy, that there are other, opaque factors at play, that power always “exceeds the conditions that authorise its use”.⁷³ We all know that politicians occasionally abuse their power, that shady backstage deals tend to be more important than public proclamations, that public contracts are sometimes concluded to benefit private companies, that opaque multinational corporations and financial groups nowadays have more power than state governments, that the covert state sector has constantly been growing since WWII. To most of us, however, these are only irregular excesses that do not disprove the notion of democratic politics based on transparent public debate. On the other hand, conspiracists have lost precisely this fundamental faith in the system. In this sense, they have indeed “taken the red pill” and “seen through the matrix”, as they frequently claim.

This is not to say we should take conspiracy theories at face value. They are usually not correct in the particular contents of their revelations but just in pointing out the

⁶⁷ FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 94.

⁶⁸ FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 94, p. 103–104.

⁶⁹ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 93.

⁷⁰ JODI DEAN, “Theorizing Conspiracy Theory”, *Theory & Event* 4 (3, 2000), available online at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32599>.

⁷¹ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 53.

⁷² DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 53.

⁷³ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 50.

limits of the official system. The concrete narratives through which they try to grasp what is going on behind the scenes should rather be understood in the manner of dream images that, in a condensed manner, symbolise tensions and paradoxes too complex to be expressed directly. The dream-like symbolic nature of these images explains their inconsistent plurality. Are Covid vaccines, for instance, risky for their side effects? Do they modify our DNA? Has the pandemic been artificially induced by Bill Gates to double the profits of the vaccination companies he has invested in? Do the vaccinated emit a dangerous spike protein? Or do the vaccines contain microchips through which large businesses will be able to control us via a 5G network? Far from providing a satisfactory account of what is really going on, these theories rather function as experimental fantasy images that obsessively circle around specific issues, testifying to their essential opacity and elusiveness. Their chief effect is the breakdown of the dominant narratives that define the symbolic order. “Rather than mapping totality, conspiracy’s questions and insinuations disrupt the presumption that there is a coherent, knowable reality that could be mapped”.⁷⁴

In other words, while seemingly desiring transparency, in actuality, present-day conspiracism helps to highlight the opacity of the postmodern world. In conspiracy narratives, the globalised order of late capitalism appears governed by shadowy international forces whose precise workings are impossible to comprehend fully. “Conspiracy theory represents the desire for, and the possibility of, a knowable political order; yet, in its disturbing revelations and uncertain resolution it also implicitly recognises the difficulty of achieving transparent, equitable power relations in a capitalist democracy”.⁷⁵ What conspiracism “reveals”, therefore, is a fundamental mysteriousness implicit in late modern institutions. Behind the seemingly transparent surface of the social order, it postulates a secret “true reality” that turns out to be ultimately unfathomable. Conspiracism does not offer final answers and quiet repose. It always promises more than it can deliver. It always points beyond itself. It implies a kind of transcendence.

Conspiracism as an Occult Cosmology

It is fitting in this regard that West and Sanders treat conspiracism as one type of “occult cosmologies”, i.e. cosmologies that “suggest that there is more to what happens in the world than meets the eye – that reality is anything but ‘transparent’, ... that power sometimes hides itself from view, ... that it conspires to fulfill its objectives.”⁷⁶ Conspiracism would thus be akin to such phenomena as witchcraft, magic or divination.

The parallels between conspiracism and witchcraft are particularly striking. In both cases, we are dealing with narratives of malevolent agents acting in secrecy while appearing friendly and benevolent on the surface. Therefore, it is not surprising

⁷⁴ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 51.

⁷⁵ FENSTER, *Conspiracy Theories*, p. 150.

⁷⁶ WEST and SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, p. 6.

that these two types of occult discourses are frequently combined in Africa. A detailed analysis of popular narratives concerning HIV in Zimbabwe, for example, has shown that witchcraft and conspiracy explanations function as two complementary types of occult causes. Witchcraft “is invoked in order to explain hardship inflicted on an individual or a small group of related people”, while “conspiracy theories are more commonly invoked to explain collective woes, explaining why larger social, regional, ethnic, racial, or other groups encounter misfortune”.⁷⁷ It seems, therefore, that witchcraft and conspiracism are closely related phenomena, the difference between them lying chiefly in the type of images they choose and the scale of issues they address.

At first sight, witchcraft or magic might seem to have little to do with modernity and its ideology of transparency. Yet, as many anthropologists have shown, these occult phenomena flourish outside the Western world under the very conditions of late modernity and may often be shown as its curious reflections.⁷⁸ West and Sanders argue “that modernity is experienced by many people as a fragmented, contradictory, and disquieting process that produces untenable situations and unfulfilled desires and that power is, in the modern world, perceived by many to be something that lies beyond their grasp. Modernity, paradoxically, generates the very opacities of power that it claims to obviate.”⁷⁹

Occult cosmologies may thus be seen as imaginative attempts at capturing this strange opacity that modern transparency casts as its shadow. In Africa, their revival in the 1990s was closely tied with the advent of a globalised neoliberal economy which has brought unfettered new desires and possibilities of money-making and consumption but which, at the same time, has not provided sufficient economic means to attain these ends.⁸⁰ The result is a world in which a handful of people can mysteriously enjoy suspicious wealth and power at the expense of the majority. Popular narratives of witches killing their victims and turning them into zombies who work for them at night, depriving the living of work opportunities, thus serve as “an apt image of the inflating occult economies of postcolonial Africa, of their ever more brutal forms of extraction”.⁸¹ Stories of this kind indeed bring to light the exploitative nature of global capitalism, though what they reveal is precisely the enigmatic ruthlessness of its power.

⁷⁷ ALEXANDER RÖDLACH, *Witches, Westerners, and HIV: AIDS & Cultures of Blame in Africa*, Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press 2006, p. 168.

⁷⁸ COMAROFF and COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction”, passim; PETER GESCHIERE, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, trans. by PETER GESCHIERE and JANET ROITMAN, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 1997, passim; HENRIETTA L. MOORE and TODD SANDERS (eds.), *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, London: Routledge 2001, passim; JANE PARISH, “From Liverpool to Freetown: West African Witchcraft, Conspiracy and the Occult”, *Culture and Religion* 6 (3, 2005): p. 353–368.

⁷⁹ WEST and SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, p. 16.

⁸⁰ COMAROFF and COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction”, passim.

⁸¹ COMAROFF and COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction”, p. 290.

Significantly, it is not just the merciless economic behaviour of international corporations that brings about the occult response. The same type of reaction frequently occurs in connection with humanitarian and development aid, which also offers salvific promises and involves large wealth transfers. Well-intentioned as such activities are, they “nonetheless include opaque bureaucratic practices and competition over knowledge, scarce resources, and institutional territory” and can thus “produce similar phenomena as has been described regarding contemporary witchcraft”.⁸² Thus, e.g., the humanitarian aid in Haiti in the 1990s frequently triggered competition between the aided victims, leading to witchcraft accusations both among the victims and against the NGO personnel. These were caused not just by the scarcity of resources but also by the fact that the humanitarian agencies typically reduce the unique subjectivity of the victims to “trauma portfolios” that circulate “as commodities in the humanitarian market”, serving as “a fund-raising tool to evoke compassion in distant charitable donors”,⁸³ thus repeating what Adorno and Horkheimer have identified as the fundamental problem of transparent modernity.

This means that the opaque shadow is cast not just by the morally suspect transparency preached by the neoliberal defenders of free trade but also by the well-meant idealistic type of transparency professed by liberal activists. In other words, the shadow is not just a problem of one possible form modernity may take (that produced by global capitalism) but seems inherent in the basic modern principles of rationality, equality, openness, human rights and inclusivity. In the end, these produce a reified and non-transparent system of bureaucracy, and they are often directly connected to the global market, serving as its charitable face compensating for its ruthlessness.

Viewed from this perspective, Western postmodern conspiracism appears as yet another way of articulating the opaque paradoxes generated by transparent modernity. In this case, the paradoxes are usually tied to the economic order in a less direct manner, one that concerns cultural identity more than material deprivation. They are connected with what Bauman calls “liquid modernity”, a de-localised world ruled by the volatile global capital which calls for permanent mobility and flexibility, a world in which “society is no longer protected by the state” but “is now exposed to the rapacity of forces it does not control”.⁸⁴ It is these powerful but, at the same time, anonymous and largely invisible forces that present-day Western conspiracy narratives try to name and reveal. George Soros, one of the frequent conspiracy villains, is their perfect mythical representative: while famous for propagating the transparent democratic values of “open society”, he is one of the best-known representatives of global capital, notorious for his 1992 speculative attack on the British pound that led to its drastic devaluation, thus encapsulating the paradoxes inherent in late modernity.

⁸² ERICA C. JAMES, “Witchcraft, Bureaucraft, and the Social Life of (US)AID in Haiti”, *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (1, 2012): p. 51–52.

⁸³ JAMES, “Witchcraft, Bureaucraft, and the Social Life of (US)AID in Haiti”, p. 52.

⁸⁴ ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge and Malden: Polity 2007, p. 25.

Soros is a good illustration of both the similarities and differences between conspiracism and witchcraft accusations.⁸⁵ Both locate the source of evil in a concrete person that deliberately uses occult powers to inflict harm on others. However, while witchcraft accuses a member of the local community that one knows in person, conspiracy imagery tries to capture the occult side of the global powers of late modernity, blaming distant personalities of global influence and renown, who are furthermore usually seen as representing larger secret groups of global elites. The second chief difference lies in the type of imagery: where witchcraft accusations draw from traditional premodern sources, envisaging the witches as using herbs and spells, conspiracism draws from modern science, telling stories of biological warfare laboratories and microchip surveillance systems. Indeed, most of the more elaborate conspiracy theories actually include a social sciences-inspired critique of the late modern finance industry and multinational corporations.⁸⁶

What conspiracism, witchcraft, magic or divination share is not just a concern with the operation of mysterious unseen powers but also a peculiar epistemic stance. As various anthropologists have shown,⁸⁷ witchcraft or magic are rarely firmly believed in. A typical attitude is rather a mixture of belief and scepticism. This ambivalence is not just a sign of epistemic weakness or deficiency. It is an attitude that is actually quite adequate in relation to powers that are shadowy and non-transparent in principle. As Kyriakides claims: “Mystical forces and evil spirits do not take form through devout belief (or the lack of it), but through the confusion that surrounds the possibility and condition of their existence and purpose. It is the ambiguity of both belief and disbelief that brings spirits and witches into being.”⁸⁸

A similar epistemic ambiguity pertains to conspiracism. As Knight has shown, postmodern conspiracy culture “oscillates between the hoax and the accurate revelation, between the serious and the ironic, between the factual and the fictional, and between the literal and the metaphorical. In many instances consumers of conspiracy don’t really believe what they buy, but neither do they really disbelieve it either.”⁸⁹ We may speculate that, just as in the case of magic and witchcraft, this epistemic stance reveals something essential about the nature of the mysterious powers that conspiracists address. It shows conspiracism as indirectly doubting the modern project of rational transparency, drawing attention to its shadows.

⁸⁵ Cf. RÖDLACH, *Witches, Westerners, and HIV*, p. 159–169.

⁸⁶ HARAMBAM, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture*, p. 67–70, 72–75.

⁸⁷ E.g. JEANNE FAVRET-SAADA, “Death at Your Heels”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (1, 2012): p. 45–53; DAVID GRAEBER, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of our own Dreams*, New York: Palgrave 2001, p. 240–245; RICHARD DENIS GERARD IRVINE and THEODOROS KYRIAKIDES, “Just Out of Reach: An Ethnographic Theory of Magic and Rationalisation”, *Implicit Religion* 21 (2, 2019): p. 202–222.

⁸⁸ THEODOROS KYRIAKIDES, “Jeanne Favret-Saada’s Minimal Ontology: Belief and Disbelief of Mystical Forces, Perilous Conditions, and the Opacity of Being”, *Religion and Society* 7 (1, 2016): p. 75.

⁸⁹ KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 47–48.

Conspiracism and the Opacity of the Subject

Conspiracism is opposed to transparency in yet another way in that many of its narratives express anxiety concerning the autonomy and intimate opacity of the subject. Nowadays, this is best visible in various Covid-19 anti-vax narratives, which frequently picture the vaccine as invading the subject's privacy and implanting some electronic tracking or controlling device within it.

By highlighting these anxieties, conspiracism draws attention to yet another fundamental paradox of transparency, namely the fact that it concerns not only institutions but ourselves as well. In the modern world, we are not just subjects searching for information but also the objects of this search. We are being recorded by surveillance cameras; we are listed in various databases; Google and Facebook know our interests and shopping habits. We have been reduced to information, feeling alienated and threatened. "Surveillance cameras, like the bureaucratic systems of rationality and efficiency they are meant to serve, aim for transparency but breed secrecy and paranoia".⁹⁰

Conspiracists are not the only ones drawing attention to this problem. Personal data protection is a general issue today. We want the world to be transparent, but we do not want anyone to spy on us. The mainstream approach tries to reconcile these demands by insisting that institutions should be transparent, whereas individuals should have their privacy protected. We are aware, of course, that this is frequently not the case, that institutions are more powerful than individuals, and as a result, the surveillance cameras are often pointed downward on us rather than upward on them. However, we see this just as a defect to be corrected by political action. In other words, we accept the general rules of the game, hoping to deal with its shortcomings through piecemeal reforms. Yet, it is questionable whether the private sphere can be shielded from the public gaze that easily. After all, we have seen that the internalisation of the public gaze has been a critical component of the transparency ethos from the very beginning. And the "digital panopticon" of computer technologies and social media certainly does not make the task of shielding any simpler.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the conspiracists again take a more radical course, rejecting the rules of the game and seeing our system's inconsistencies as insurmountable. They chose extremely vivid images to express the danger that full transparency will deprive us of the mysterious core of our unique subjectivity. In the baroque version of David Icke, for instance, Covid vaccines contain nanotechnological receiver-transmitters designed to connect us through a 5G smart grid to the artificial intelligence that is meant to replace "the human mind as we know it", disconnect us from our "greater consciousness" and turn us into robots.⁹¹

⁹⁰ IVAKHIV, "Occult Geographies, or the Promises of Spectres", p. 125.

⁹¹ DAVID ICKE, "What's Going On? This Is Going On" [online], June 2021, accessed 24 July 2021, available online at <http://davidicke.com/2021/06/18/whats-going-on-this-is-going-on-david-icke-dot-connector-videocast>.

The paradox is intensified by the fact that while fearing excessive surveillance, at the same time, we actually *want* to be watched. As Jodi Dean claims, modern subjectivity is characterised not just by the desire to know more and reveal secrets but also by the drive to be known ourselves. We all want to be “celebrities”. In part, this is our reaction to the fact that while we are well aware that we are known and information-alised, “one is never sure how one is being known, one is never certain of one’s place in the symbolic order”.⁹² In response, we are driven to make ourselves visible over and over again in a controlled manner, thus desperately trying to take charge of our identity in the symbolic order. Social media give us ample opportunities for self-presentation, revealing our feelings, voicing our opinions, and documenting our meals and travels. The result of this theatre of self-presentations, however, is that they are turned into banalities (into pornography, as Han would say). One ends up as media “content”, and thus “one realises that one may well be unique but trivial. As content, one doesn’t have a secret that marks the mysterious kernel of one’s being”.⁹³ In effect, we worry that “those precious dimensions of ourselves that we hold most dear will be stained and tarnished by circulating as so much Net drivel. Yet, at the same time, we worry that our secrets won’t be revealed, that who we are isn’t significant enough to merit a byte of attention”.⁹⁴

For this reason, the conspiracists are desperate to defend this “mysterious kernel of one’s being” – despite the fact that they are “celebrities” like everyone else. The paradox is well-expressed by a Czech meme poking fun at anti-vaxxers that circulated on Facebook in Spring 2021:

You let your smartphone scan your fingerprint and do your facial recognition. In your running app, you enter your weight, height, and age, and the app knows how fast you walk and run. You buy bus and flight tickets through your smartphone. You share all your locations. You take pictures of all the meals you eat. Your smartwatch knows your pulse and your blood pressure. From your credit card, one can find the brand of your toothpaste and toilet paper. And now you are scared to death because you do not want a microchip from Bill Gates?⁹⁵

Ostensibly, the meme reveals the irrationality of vaccination fears, but it unwittingly captures their internal logic well. The fear is precisely a reaction to all the other self-revealing things we do and through which we gradually get entangled in a system of transparency that is scary in effect. While every one of those things is harmless and voluntary, all together, they create something frightening. Narratives of micro-chipped vaccines help to articulate this kind of anxiety. They serve as symbols capable

⁹² DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 123.

⁹³ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 129.

⁹⁴ DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret*, p. 1.

⁹⁵ JAKUB HORÁK, “Iluze o soukromí, jdou po nás, jdou” [online], E15.cz, 18 June 2021, accessed May 2022, available online at <https://www.e15.cz/nazory/jakub-horak-iluze-o-soukromi-jdou-po-nas-jdou-1381451>.

of condensing in one image disparate meanings and feelings that, in real life, are hard to reconcile.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that while transparency functions as a consensual magic concept that is generally seen as entirely positive, it does cast various shadows that undermine its promises. While seemingly revealing things in a neutral manner, in fact, it always distorts what it reveals, whether by turning politics into PR campaigns or, on a more fundamental level, by reifying the world, reducing human beings to data and functional elements in a system, and paving the way for the opaque forces of the global market. Moreover, transparency is actually grounded in secrets, for it is not a static state of translucence but a dynamic process of making secret things public. It is driven by a desire for revelation that can never be satisfied and that creates a system of distrust, though it manages to do so in a manner that turns the never-ending disclosures into media entertainment. Last but not least, because of transparency, we are not just subjects searching for information but also the objects of this search, having ourselves been reduced to information and feeling alienated and threatened as a result.

Conspiracism may be seen as an imaginative attempt at articulating these paradoxes, drawing attention to the disquieting occult forces operating behind the facade of our transparent world. While most of us are somehow able to downplay the inconsistencies of late modernity, clinging to the fantasy of society based on a transparent public debate of rational citizens, conspiracists are no longer able to play this game. The gaps in the social order are too big for them to be convincingly plastered over by hegemonic narratives. Conspiracists are entangled in the modern ideology of transparency and still play by its rules, striving to bring secrets to light. At the same time, however, they knock against the boundaries of the whole system, making explicit its unspoken premises in all their paradoxicality. While desiring transparency, they actually help to bring out the fundamental mysteriousness implicit in late modern institutions. Their allegations function as disturbing dream images that incoherently circle around various problematic issues, disrupting the official narratives and revealing the dark cracks in the system, though without ever reaching any satisfactory conclusions.⁹⁶

My argument has some interesting implications for dealing with conspiracism. It is sometimes suggested that making our institutions more transparent will lessen the need for conspiracy theories.⁹⁷ I am sceptical about this. What conspiracists long to

⁹⁶ Cf. HRISTOV, *Impossible Knowledge*, p. 21–24.

⁹⁷ JAN-WILLEM VAN PROOIJEN, “Empowerment as a Tool to Reduce Belief in Conspiracy Theories”, in USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, p. 432–442; JOSEPH E. USCINSKI, “Conspiracy Theories for Journalists: Covering Dubious Ideas in Real Time”, in USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, p. 443–451.

expose is not really the actual working of our institutions but rather the principal limits of the entire system. They reveal the shadows that our transparent institutions cast. It is not likely, therefore, that more transparency would help. Instead, we might perhaps take the extravagant images of conspiracy theories as an opportunity to reflect on the limitations of transparency. What does it hide behind its constant revelations? What undesirable effects does it have? How does it impoverish our social experience? What tensions does it create? Seriously facing these questions will perhaps not decrease the attraction of conspiracy theories straight away, but in the long run, it may contribute to social stability more than idealistic attempts to defend the values of the liberal-democratic consensus.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ADORNO, THEODOR and MAX HORKHEIMER, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002, 305 p.
- ALLOA, EMMANUEL, “Transparency: A Magic Concept of Modernity”, in EMMANUEL ALLOA and DIETER THOMÄ (eds.), *Transparency, Society and Subjectivity Critical Perspectives*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2018, p. 21–56.
- ALLOA, EMMANUEL and DIETER THOMÄ, “Transparency: Thinking Through an Opaque Concept”, in EMMANUEL ALLOA and DIETER THOMÄ (eds.), *Transparency, Society and Subjectivity Critical Perspectives*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2018, p. 1–14.
- BAUMAN, ZYGMUNT, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge and Malden: Polity 2007, 115 p.
- BIRCHALL, CLARE, “Radical Transparency?”, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 14 (1, 2014): p. 77–88.
- BIRCHALL, CLARE, *Radical Secrecy: The Ends of Transparency in Datafied America*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2021, 244 p.
- BENTHAM, JEREMY, “Essay on Political Tactics”, in JOHN BOWRING (ed.), *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. II, Edinburgh: William Tait 1843, p. 299–373.
- BUTTER, MICHAEL and PETER KNIGHT, “The History of Conspiracy Theory Research: A Review and Commentary”, in JOSEPH E. USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, p. 33–46.
- CAREY, MATTHEW, *Mistrust: An Ethnographic Theory*, Chicago: HAU Books 2017, 128 p.
- COMAROFF, JEAN and JOHN COMAROFF, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony”, *American Ethnologist* 26 (2, 1999): p. 279–303.
- COMAROFF, JEAN and JOHN COMAROFF, “Transparent Fictions, or, The Conspiracies of a Liberal Imagination: An Afterword”, in HARRY G. WEST and TODD SANDERS (eds.), *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2003, p. 287–299.
- DEAN, JODI, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1998, 242 p.
- DEAN, JODI, “Theorizing Conspiracy Theory”, *Theory & Event* 4 (3, 2000), available online at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32599>.
- DEAN, JODI, *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes On Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2002, 211 p.
- FARMER, BRIAN, *American Conservatism: History, Theory and Practice*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press 2005, 476 p.

- FAVRET-SAADA, JEANNE, "Death at Your Heels", *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (1, 2012): p. 45–53.
- FENSTER, MARK, "The Opacity of Transparency", *Iowa Law Review* 91 (2006): p. 885–949.
- FENSTER, MARK, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2008, 371 p.
- FLUCK, MATTHEW, "Theory, 'Truthers', and Transparency: Reflecting on Knowledge in the Twenty-First Century", *Review of International Studies* 42 (1, 2016): p. 48–73.
- FOUCAULT, MICHEL, "The Eye of Power", in COLIN GORDON (trans., ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon 1980, p. 146–165.
- GARSTEN, CHRISTINA and MONICA LINDH DE MONTOYA, "Introduction: Examining the Politics of Transparency", in CHRISTINA GARSTEN and MONICA LINDH DE MONTOYA (eds.), *Transparency in a New Global Order: Unveiling Organizational Visions*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2008, p. 1–21.
- GESCHIERE, PETER, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, trans. by PETER GESCHIERE and JANET ROITMAN, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 1997, 311 p.
- GRAEBER, DAVID, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of our own Dreams*, New York: Palgrave 2001, 337 p.
- GRAEBER, DAVID, "Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor", *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2, 2012): p. 105–128.
- HAN, BYUNG-CHUL, *The Transparency Society*, trans. by Erik Butler, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2015, 58 p.
- HARAMBAM, JARON, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*, London and New York: Routledge 2020, 243 p.
- HOFSTADTER, RICHARD, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1964, 330 p.
- HRISTOV, TODOR, *Impossible Knowledge: Conspiracy Theories, Power, and Truth*, London and New York: Routledge 2019, 99 p.
- ICKE, DAVID, "What's Going On? This Is Going On" [online], June 2021, accessed 24 July 2021, available online at <http://davidicke.com/2021/06/18/whats-going-on-this-is-going-on-david-icke-dot-connector-videocast/>.
- IRVINE, RICHARD DENIS GERARD, and THEODOROS KYRIAKIDES, "Just Out of Reach: An Ethnographic Theory of Magic and Rationalisation", *Implicit Religion* 21 (2, 2019): p. 202–222.
- IVAKHIV, ADRIAN J., "Occult Geographies, or the Promises of Spectres: Scientific Knowledge, Political Trust, and Religious Vision at the Margins of the Modern", in PAUL STENNER and MICHEL WEBER (eds.), *Orpheus' Glance: Selected Papers on Process Psychology*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Éditions Chromatika 2018, p. 115–144.
- JAMES, ERICA C., "Witchcraft, Bureaucraft, and the Social Life of (US)AID in Haiti", *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (1, 2012): p. 50–75.
- JÜTTE, DANIEL, *The Age of Secrecy: Jews, Christians, and the Economy of Secrets, 1400–1800*, trans. by JEREMIAH RIEMER, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 2015, 431 p.
- KANT, IMMANUEL, "Toward Perpetual Peace", in MARY GREGOR (trans., ed.), *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 311–351.
- KNIGHT, PETER, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*, London and New York: Routledge 2000, 287 p.

- KYRIAKIDES, THEODOROS, “Jeanne Favret-Saada’s Minimal Ontology: Belief and Disbelief of Mystical Forces, Perilous Conditions, and the Opacity of Being”, *Religion and Society* 7 (1, 2016): p. 68–82.
- MELLEY, TIMOTHY, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000, 239 p.
- MELLEY, TIMOTHY, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2012, 289 p.
- MOORE, HENRIETTA L. and TODD SANDERS (eds.), *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, London: Routledge 2001, 253 p.
- MUMFORD, LEWIS, *Technics and Civilization*, New York: Harcourt, Brace 1934, 495 p.
- PARISH, JANE, “From Liverpool to Freetown: West African Witchcraft, Conspiracy and the Occult”, *Culture and Religion* 6 (3, 2005): p. 353–368.
- RÖDLACH, ALEXANDER, *Witches, Westerners, and HIV: AIDS & Cultures of Blame in Africa*, Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press 2006, 259 p.
- STAROBINSKI, JEAN, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1988, 421 p.
- VALDOVINOS, JORGE I., “Transparency as Ideology, Ideology as Transparency: Towards a Critique of the Meta-aesthetics of Neoliberal Hegemony”, *Open Cultural Studies* 2 (1, 2018): p. 654–667.
- VAN PROOIJEN, JAN-WILLEM, “Empowerment as a Tool to Reduce Belief in Conspiracy Theories”, in JOSEPH E. USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, p. 432–442.
- USCINSKI, JOSEPH E., “Conspiracy Theories for Journalists: Covering Dubious Ideas in Real Time”, in JOSEPH E. USCINSKI (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, p. 443–451.
- WEBER, MAX, “Bureaucracy”, in HANS H. GERTH and C. WRIGHT MILLS (trans., eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press 1946, p. 196–244.
- WEBER, MAX, “Science as a Vocation”, in HANS H. GERTH and C. WRIGHT MILLS (trans., eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press 1946, p. 129–156.
- WEST, HARRY G. and TODD SANDERS, “Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order”, in HARRY G. WEST and TODD SANDERS (eds.), *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 2003, p. 1–57.