

JFK ASSASSINATION OR HOW NOT TO BE PARANOID IN THE ENLIGHTENED AGE OF CONSPIRACIES

Abstract. In the article, we compare the interpretational paradigms of conspiratorial, magical and scientific reasoning. We conclusively demonstrate that rationalism, scientific progress and the postmodern condition did nothing to prevent people from mystical, irrational and paranoid reasoning, which is embodied in conspiratorial thought. To the contrary, it is our thesis that the conspiratorial ideation is, in the final analysis, actually a full blown realization of the ideals of the scientific Enlightenment, one of the few still ordered, uniform and internally coherent ways of thinking in “disenchanted” societies of the West. There exists a greatly generalized paranoid attitude that, as we will show, can contextualize and/or elucidate the tendency of an ever rising conspiratorial ideation.

Key words: JFK assassination, conspiracy theories, scientific reasoning, epistemology, anthropological theory of magic

The masses’ escape from reality is a verdict against the world in which they are forced to live and in which they cannot exist, since coincidence has become its supreme master and human beings need the constant transformation of chaotic and accidental conditions into a man-made pattern of relative consistency.

Hannah Arendt

Conspiracies and conspiracy theories have been there throughout human existence, albeit they seldom focused on the same topic. The greatest conspiracy theory of them all is probably anti-Semitism (Arendt, 1958) which, several times in history, appropriated dimensions of a full blown social delusion with very unfortunate consequences in political, economic

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and cultural quotidian life. There is, then, nothing modern or even postmodern about conspiracy theories. However, in the article we will try to demonstrate that rationalism, scientific progress and the postmodern condition did nothing to prevent people from mystical, irrational and paranoid reasoning, which is embodied in conspiratorial thought. To the contrary, it is our thesis that the conspiratorial ideation is, in the final analysis, actually a full blown realization of the ideals of the scientific Enlightenment, one of the few still ordered, uniform and internally coherent ways of thinking in disenchanted, “liquid”, patchwork-like end-societies of the West. Furthermore, the article assigns to the JFK assassination a privileged inaugural point of “the mother” of all contemporary conspiracies, turning already existent conspiratorial thinking inwards. While more traditional conspiracy theories, fashioned before the Kennedy conspiracy theory, demonized the foreign and/or distant Other, contemporary conspiracy “can be characterized as paranoia about the human-made institutions of modern society itself. Ideal-typically, then, this modern type is diametrically opposed to the traditional type since its theories are about ‘the enemy within.’” (Aupers, 2012: 24) In the beginning of 21st century, there exists a greatly generalized paranoid attitude that, as we will show, can contextualize and/or elucidate the tendency of an ever rising conspiratorial ideation.

Let us be precise about the vague term. The definition we depart from in the text is, as follows: “A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons – the conspirators – acting in secret.” (Keeley, 1999: 116)

On the 50th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the media is feeding us with a seemingly naive observation that, after half a century, there are still doubts that on that fateful day of November 22nd, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, which was an official finding of the infamous Warren Commission. This way of putting it is, in fact, misleading: it is not, as the dictum would like to persuade us, that there still exist lingering uncertainties, which are withering away. To the contrary, the percentage of people, who believe in the existence of a conspiracy behind the assassination, has risen over time. While in the 1966 Gallup poll 36% of the respondents believed that Oswald acted alone, this “percentage was 11 in both the 1976 and 1983 Gallup polls, and 13 % in a 1988 CBS poll.” (Goertzel, 1994: 731) Furthermore, “a national survey by the New York Times (1992) showed that only 10% of Americans believed the official account that Lee Harvey Oswald was acting alone.” (Ibid.) Half a century later, according to Wikipedia, a 2013 Associated Press poll showed that although the percentage has fallen, more than 59% of those polled still believed that more than one person was involved in the President’s murder.

Over the past 50 years, everybody that is anybody in the world has at some point or another been accused of killing John Kennedy. First there were the usual suspects: the successor in the presidential office Lyndon Johnson, the FBI, the CIA, the Secret Service, the Illuminati, the Russians, Fidel Castro and/or the militant anti-Castroites. Then of course, came the mafia, the Vatican, the aliens, the Pentagon, followed by Joe DiMaggio (late Marilyn Monroe's ex-husband), George Bush Sr. (who was seen in Dallas on that day), the New Orleans gay lobby (supposedly associated via Jack Ruby, Oswald's assassin), Richard Nixon (who held a grudge over losing the 1960 presidential elections), the Ku Klux Klan (enraged by Kennedy's advocacy of civil rights), Carlos Prio Socarras (Cuban pre-revolutionary president), the local Texas cowboys (for Kennedy had scaled back the oil depletion tax credit), to mention but a few. At one time or another, conspiracy theorists have accused 42 groups, 82 assassins, and 214 people by name of being involved in the assassination.¹

Adding a supplementary meta-conspiratorial spin, it eventually became very suspicious if one was not mentioned on the list of possible conspirators. "It is interesting – but not surprising – to note that in all the words written and uttered about the Kennedy assassination, Israel's intelligence agency, the Mossad, has never been mentioned," said Illinois Representative Paul Findley, in the 1992 Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs.²

Completely in line with the Kennedy assassination as the "mother of all conspiracies", it was only logical for the one comparably traumatic event in American history, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, to also become intrinsically linked to the Kennedy conspiracy. In linking the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations, it becomes embarrassingly obvious that what Enlightenment science and conspiracy theories share is a crucial common denominator: obsessive searching for connections and causal relations between pieces of observed realities, which would end up in a unified explanatory model (Stewart, 1999: 25).

The Internet, a perfect metaphor of a conspiratorial model in itself, is littered with spectacular accounts of this sort. Abraham Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1846 and John F. Kennedy was elected to Congress in 1946. Abraham Lincoln was elected as president in 1860 and John F. Kennedy was elected as president in 1960. The names Lincoln and Kennedy each contain seven letters. Both men were particularly concerned with civil rights, both wives lost their children while living in the White House, both presidents were shot on a Friday, both were shot in the head. Lincoln's secretary,

¹ According to *The Daily Beast* (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/11/20/who-really-killed-jfk-experts-pick-the-wildest-conspiracy-theories.html>).

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Kennedy, warned him not to go to the theatre, and Kennedy's secretary, Lincoln, warned him not to go to Dallas. Both were assassinated by Southerners. Both were succeeded by Southerners. Both successors were named Johnson: Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Lincoln, was born in 1808, and Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy, was born in 1908. John Wilkes Booth was born in 1839, while Lee Harvey Oswald was born in 1939. Both assassins were known by their three names. Booth ran from the theater and was caught in a warehouse whilst Oswald ran from a warehouse and was caught in a theater. Booth and Oswald were both assassinated before their trials. Lincoln had two sons named Robert and Edward. Edward died young and Robert lived on, whereas Kennedy had two brothers named Robert and Edward. Robert died young and Edward lived on. And last, but not least: Kennedy was shot in a car named Lincoln.

When faced with such uncanny sets of coincidences, even the most critical and rational of minds is expected to encounter serious difficulties trying to refrain from sinking into the abyss of all-encompassing connectedness of the conspiratorial ideation. Partly, it is due to the status of (post)modern science, and partly it is due to a (post)modern condition of man in the contemporary *Zeitgeist* – the end times (Žižek, 2010).

Magic as Conspiracy Theory

In social anthropology, one can encounter an interpretative paradigm, which to a crucial extent resembles modern conspiracy theories – ancient magic.³ In a well-known formulation from his voluminous all-encompassing theory of magic, one of the founding fathers of anthropology, James Frazer, (1994) defines magic as a “bastard science”. In the vogue of the day, he conceived of the progress of human civilization in terms of phases of development of rational thought, gradual processes of history, and linear acquisition of knowledge about the true nature of the laws that govern human existence. An Enlightenment scientist through and through, he was

³ *It should come as no surprise then, that an official finding, according to which Oswald was the lone assassin of president Kennedy, was dubbed “a magic bullet theory” by conspiracy theorists. The crux of interpretation, which the Warren Commission report has been drawing from, was namely a notion that one single bullet caused all the wounds to the then Texas governor John Connally and the non-fatal wounds to the president (seven entry/exit wounds in total). This incredulity alone would inspire the majority of conspiracy theories to come. It should be noted, however, that there exists a not widely publicized scientific finding: the forensic Neutron Activation Analysis was performed, and demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that (not counting the fatal shot) a single bullet, therefore only one shooter, was involved in the assassination (Sturdivan and Rahn, 2004). To be sure, much more attention is given to a video game JFK: Reloaded (web.archive.org/web/20041209093612/http://www.jfkreloaded.net/), whereby the players are challenged to replicate the exact ballistics from the Warren Commission report. The best score up to date is 78.4 %.*

thinking in terms of savages, who have no notion of rationality and who, in their ignorance about the laws of nature, rely on the illogical notion of explaining everything that is happening in nature and society by magic. As society progresses, Frazer maintains, so do the modes of rational thinking: when those savages noticed that something was not quite right with magical thinking, that magic proved insufficient to explain events, they developed religion. In the subsequent step, religion, too, turned out inadequate in explaining what is going on in the world, hence they invented modern science. Modern science, according to Frazer and the rest of Enlightenment scientists, can, and definitely will, in the final analysis provide for a unified theory of everything, a single explanatory model of the ordered universe – in short, explain how things truly are. It all reads like a fairy-tale for the obvious reason – because it is a fairy-tale. Albeit scientific, it is still evolutionary, Enlightenment (science) fiction.

An alternative anthropological theory of magic was proposed by Evans-Pritchard (1976). Doing field-work amongst the Azande people of Sudan, he described a logical reasoning, which he to some extent found to be superior even to the rational paradigm of the Enlightenment, precisely in its accounting for the randomness, coincidence-ridden, and haphazard human condition. The Azande concept of witchcraft provides them with a cosmology, whereby relations between men and (unfortunate) events are clarified and ordered into a united explanatory paradigm.

If blight seizes the groundnut crop it is witchcraft; if the bush is vainly scoured for game it is witchcraft; if women laboriously bail water out of a pool and are rewarded by but a few small fish it is witchcraft; if termites do not rise when their swarming is due and a cold useless night is spent in waiting for their flight it is witchcraft; if a wife is sulky and unresponsive to her husband it is witchcraft; if a magical rite fails to achieve its purpose it is witchcraft; if, in fact, any failure or misfortune falls upon anyone at any time and in relation to any of the manifold activities of his life it may be due to witchcraft. /.../ To us witchcraft is something which haunted and disgusted our credulous forefathers. But the Zande expects to come across witchcraft at any time of the day or night. He would be just as surprised if he were not brought into daily contact with it as we would be if confronted by its appearance. To him there is nothing miraculous about it. (Evans-Pritchard, 1976: 15)

It would, however be unjust to Zande philosophy if we say that they believe magic and witchcraft to be the sole cause of phenomena. They use it only as a complementary explanatory paradigm, when all else fails or proves insufficient. Evans-Pritchard gives us an account of the moment he

realized that Zande logic might even outdo the ever rationalist judgments of why things are as they are.

In Zandeland sometimes an old granary collapses. There is nothing remarkable in this. Every Zande knows that termites eat the supports in course of time and that even the hardest woods decay after years of service. Now people sit beneath it in the heat of the day. Consequently it may happen that there are people sitting beneath the granary when it collapses and they are injured for it is a heavy structure made of beams and clay. Now why should these particular people have been sitting under this particular granary at the particular moment when it collapsed? That it should collapse is easily intelligible, but why should it have collapsed at the particular moment when these particular people were sitting beneath it? Through years it might have collapsed, so why should it fall just when certain people sought its kindly shelter? We say that the granary collapsed because its supports were eaten away by termites; that is the cause that explains the collapse of the granary. We also say that people were sitting under it at the time because it was in the heat of the day and they thought that it would be a comfortable place to talk and work. This is the cause of people being under the granary at the time it collapsed. To our minds the only relationship between these two independently caused facts is their coincidence in time and space. We have no explanation of why the chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them. Zande philosophy can supply the missing link. (Ibid.: 18)

The Zande of course knows that the supports were undermined by termites and that people were sitting beneath the granary in order to escape the heat and the sun. But he also knows why these two events occurred at a precisely similar moment in time and space. It was due to the action of witchcraft. If there had been no witchcraft, people would have been sitting under the granary and it would not have fallen on them, or it would have collapsed but the people would not have been sheltering under it at the time. Witchcraft and magic explain the coincidence of these two events.

Believing in magic in cultures, where magic is a valid, legitimate and/or complementary explanatory model is nothing like the paranoid ideation. So the Azande would have justifiably protested if called paranoid. They appear so only to the Western gaze, which supposedly logically differentiates between haphazard chance occurrences on the one side, and causal relations behind the events on the other. Paranoia denotes a pathological line of reasoning that is outside of the boundaries of existing cosmologies and scientifically valid interpretations of a given culture. Or does it? As we can all

see, it can – and in the end-times it actually did – become a legitimate interpretational pursuit, disguised in so-called conspiracy theories. Moreover, in the end-times *Zeitgeist*, the conspiratorial ideation becomes what magic is to Zande – a “common sense”, obvious and uncontested reasoning for fully explaining how things are nowadays; always one uncanny plot after another. Very much like Aupers (2012: 23) argues: “Conspiracy culture is not the antidote to modernity. Quite the contrary: it is a radical and generalized manifestation of distrust that is deeply embedded in the cultural logic of modernity and is, ultimately, produced by ongoing processes of modernization in contemporary society.”

Believing in magic and witchcraft is, then, to a crucial extent epistemologically comparable to believing in conspiracy. But, alas, since “conspiracy theorists are some of the last believers in an ordered universe” (Keeley, 1999: 123) they come dangerously close to an old-fashioned Humboldtian professor who also still insists on the prerequisites of his science. Both of the survivalists, the conspiracy and scientific theorist, still cling to a hope that things happen for a reason, and that reason is capable of finding the truth, no matter how hidden, ephemeral, random, and/or absurd it may seem. “The truth is out there,” the motto of one of the most celebrated TV series of the nineties, which dragged on for nine long seasons of conspiracies, uncanny plots, cover-ups, distrust, and neck-breaking orderings of coincidences is actually the epitomization of the Enlightenment project.

Living in End-Times

The past two decades have been labeled the end-times by many social thinkers. Fukuyama talks about the end of history, the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” (1992: 27) Contemporary sciences of culture and society are littered with descriptions of our society being the age of cynicism, alienation, moral crisis, atomization, skepticism, disenchantments, disempowerments, disillusion and decay. All this cannot be blamed on an average and quite commonplace narcissism of any present condition, which is always already nostalgic about the past and pessimistic about the future. The all-pervasive feeling of living in doomsday is supported by a genuinely felt apocalyptic attitude, which permeates the public and private domains, and implies an awe-inspiring radical transformation of humankind. According to Žižek, “there are at least three different versions of apocalypticism today: Christian fundamentalism, New Age and techno-digital-post-human.” (2010: 336) They all are drawing their conclusions from an observation that the majority of the world’s population is powerlessly subjected to ecological catastrophes, genetic engineering,

social unrest, a crisis of parliamentary democracy and capitalism, and to new technologies and electronic surveillance, to mention but a few perils for the established, ordered and predictable quotidian. Mirroring these doomsday prophecies, there is a persuasive perception that old authoritative ideologies' institutions (science, religion, state), all decisions-making processes and politics are really in the hands of one malicious agency or another. For the lack of the shared phantasm of transparency and manageability, there rise "conspiratorial fear, the most extreme form of political cynicism, where dissatisfaction winds up stabilized within a narrative. This provides the 'certainty'. /.../ The certainty of conspiracy theory lies in its utter lack of trust: the only thing of which one can be truly certain is the deception with which rulers rule." (Pratt, 2003: 267–8) In the end-times, when all the ideologies established and nurtured for hundreds of years have proven to be deficient, incomplete and obsolete, the only ideology still standing is the one about the conspiratorial nature of events. Hannah Arendt's admonition should serve as a case in point:

Before the alternative of facing the anarchic growth and total arbitrariness of decay or bowing down before the most rigid, fantastically fictitious consistency of an ideology, the masses probably will always choose the latter and be ready to pay for it with individual sacrifices – and this not because they are stupid or wicked, but because in the general disaster this escape grants them a minimum of self-respect. (Arendt, 1958: 351)

While conspiracy theorists seem to be very reluctant to vary, modify and/or adjust even the slightest fraction of their all-encompassing scenario, they are willing to abandon it altogether if one prerequisite is met: if they get an altogether alternative conspiratorial scenario, changing thus every and each aspect of the story but one – there was A conspiracy. To conspiracy theorists this does not seem an irrational leap of logic since the main crust of the pattern of their logical thinking, namely paranoid ideation, is preserved. This also correlates with the empirical evidence that the person who believes in one conspiracy theory is more likely to believe in others, too (Goertzel, 1994). The key issue, then, is not the belief in a specific conspiracy, but the logical processes which led to that belief.

Paranoia versus Science; Conspiracy versus Ephemerality

When the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, was asked about the difference between himself and a celebrity paranoiac Daniel Schreber, he answered that the only difference was that some people actually

did believe him, whereas Schreber was believed by no one. In this remark, Freud was probably employing the rhetorical device of exaggeration to prove a point – the point being that mathematical certainty and concordance with facts are of secondary importance when attributing scientific status to a particular idea. A persuasive argument that the statement above is not only witty, but also bares some weight, can be found in some (un)usual places; in Perelman's theory of argumentation and post-structural theory of language and discourse as authored by Jacques Lacan.

There are some basic framework and points of departure which must be agreed upon before making any argument. Firstly: humanities and social sciences are about concepts, i.e. ideas, not about things or observable ontological facts. The field of human affairs is inconceivable, simply not visible without a certain paradigm, which is, in final analysis, an ideological paradigm, and as such bound to certain political, economic and historical constraints. Paradigm is the way ideology is inscribed into observed reality – in other words: there is no such thing as immaculate perception. Facts, thus, do exist, but only if taking place and forming relations in a structured totality, which is a result of some articulation practice. Things are always symbolically mediated (argued), never directly expressed (demonstrated). Something is recognized as having an existence only in retrospect, retroactively, when it is articulated in language, acquiring a place in a recognized interpretative practice. Human reality is a field of symbolically structured representations. To put this in different terms; "There is no meaning or meaning bearer behind language that is not itself a language-like phenomenon." (Wheeler 2000: 44)

Secondly: every screen of reality includes a constitutive blind spot which marks the trace of what had to be precluded from the field of reality in order for this field to acquire its consistency. The non-symbolized stain, this hole in reality, the void, designates the ultimate limit where words fail. For example, let us refer to the famous image of a bearded man in a darkened room in Descartes' engraving from his *Optics*: the only picture he has of the outside world is projected through another person's dead eye placed in a hole in the wall. The dead eye's retina does provide us with the images of the objects outside, but any comparison of the retinal images to things themselves is illusory. To be more specific, we could say that we are constantly in such a room, and our own eye is such a darkened place. We are forever entrapped in a room in which we deal with images only, and never with things themselves. To make matters worse, it is simply not possible to take a step back and observe the point of view which we are looking from at that moment in time. In more than one sense, this blind spot represents the exact stitch, by which a subject is bound to symbolic reality, the Lacanian big Other, represented by a chain of signifiers – i.e. language. For Lacan,

there is no other reality but language. For him, to become a human being is irreversibly linked to being able to define oneself in both ways: in terms of language, and as a being of language. This blind spot we are talking about also represents some loss of the subject's essence. Namely, symbolic representation has its side effect in the form of an indivisible remainder (Žižek, 2007) in any symbolization; there always remains something which cannot be articulated in language. If an individual is to become a social subject, a being of language, they must themselves become a language-like phenomenon. We are always already dealing with a split subject, "there is always a disjunction, according to Lacan, between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the utterance; in other words, the subject who speaks and the subject who is spoken." (Homer, 2005: 45) To be recognized as a subject means to sacrifice some pre-symbolic existence, an essence which can never be articulated in terms of symbolic medium. This all forces us to acknowledge a double gap; a gap in the subject and a gap in the symbolic order. The former is established through the ritual of forced choice; the subject has to choose between becoming irreversibly un-whole upon entering the realm of symbolic mediation (*ipso facto* sacrificing its very essence), or remaining a silent feral child, *homo ferus*. The outcome of the first choice is a split subject, while the outcome of the second one is entrapment in pre-symbolic object reality. The antagonism of these two gaps, the gap in the subject and the gap in symbolic order, is purely topological. What we have here is the same element put in two registers: the stain in the picture is nothing but the way in which the subject is present in the picture itself. The gap in the symbolic order of big Other can also be referred to as an absence of "meaning of meaning" – although we do have meanings, a meaning that would express the notion of meaning itself does not exist. This absence has a persistent need to be masked by both: a discourse of universalistic science and the structure of conspiratorial ideation. A notion of universalistic science that would establish a unity of expert knowledge, partial subjective realities and objective truth, independent of cultural, historical, linguistic or any other differences, is nothing but a fantasy scenario, in which both, the observed reality and the subject that is observing, are perceived as whole, as non-split. In this fantasy, science is understood as something that can be objectively observed and rationally organized, as a narrative without a stain, as truth that can become non-conflicting; and also as pertaining to a subject that is not a language-like phenomenon. In this fantasy, science becomes meta-language. The possibility of meta-language, Husserl termed it "magical language of thought", would eradicate all blind spots determined by the suture between the subject's gaze (Vico's *topos*) and the picture. However, if we perceive the field of reality as "having its consistency only through concealing the gaze in the vision" (Žižek, 1991: 98), if, along the lines of Saussure's

theory, we insist on language as a set of differential relations which condition the very nature of what we see and how we see it, there can only be one conclusion – meta-language does not exist. Meaning, if a conspiracy theory, to use a cynical expression, is “bullet-proof” it probably isn’t reflective of human affairs.

Thirdly: a credible and persuasive theory of human reality, as the story goes, must logically reflect factual reality. But if facts are to be understood only as effects of a discourse, established by the use of a paradigm (i.e. do not exist empirically, but only on a phenomenological level as vehicles of meaning, when and as encoded by language), the main prerequisites of an Enlightenment rationalist approach (e.g. theory must be in concordance with facts) become highly speculative at worst or philosophical at best. As such, facts become not only improvable but also irrefutable, which is why it is generally more difficult to establish that something does not exist than to establish that it does – a logical *sine qua non* of all conspiracy theories! Social facts are not something naturally or neutrally given, something that science only uncovers. They were produced by science when society became an object of its research. Following this principle and combining it with Aristotle one can distinguish hard core natural sciences from soft humanities and/or social science, *episteme* (i.e. real science) from *phronesis* (i.e. cleverness, or Kant’s practical reason). As long as facts do not exist, as long as the field of human affairs is inconsistent, split, or traversed by antagonisms which resist being wholly reabsorbed into ideological symbolization, and as long as human affairs are structured around some central impossibility (split subject and split Symbolic reality), the lacks, the voids will always be filled by fantasies. *Phronesis*, for example, does not provide us with ontological safety; the safety one is able to acquire is only epistemological. In Cartesian terms: ontological safety is provided for by demonstration, while epistemological safety rests within argumentation.

Argumentation is not concerned very much with Enlightenment’s facts and the Cartesian notion of evidence, but deals with principles of formal logic such as consistency and homogeneity. Its prime goal is to establish consensus about conclusions, which can be done only if there exists an audience, an auditorium – the people who share common preconceived convictions (both rational and irrational) about the underlying principles of reality (*endoxa*).

Let us now return to Freud and Schreber. Schreber (Freud, 1986) was an ultimate psychotic, a severe mental patient, characterized by paranoid delusions. But Schreber’s theory of reality was not so very different from Freud’s; it was perfectly ordered, remarkably coherent, and exceptionally well structured. What brought him to a mental hospital was not a lack of formal logic in his reasoning, but the absence of an audience, people who

would agree with him about the fundamental premises of reality. It was not, then, his argumentation that was faulty. After all, it is not difficult to discover and establish facts with a consistent theory which is a derivative of pre-suppositions about the existence of the very same facts that made theory possible in the first place. Facts are thus not really discovered, they are invented. As demonstrated by Foucault (1984), something that can be termed neutral knowledge, does not exist; the fantasy of neutral knowledge is a product of some institutionalized power and always serves to legitimize that power itself. In fact, this is one of the most important reasons for producing neutral knowledge in the first place – institutionalized science produces this neutral knowledge so that it can legitimize its own position of scientific reasoning. What was missing for Schreber, then, to begin with, was an authoritative function which would enable the birth of an auditorium. This very much resembles Perelman's notion of the relation between argumentation and auditorium: "Argumentation does not take place in a vacuum. It is preconditioned by a mental association between the speaker and the audience." (Perelman 1993: 20)

Mental association is a vague term that can be translated into a notion of transference, as outlined by Jacques Lacan (1977), while Perelman's term speaker can be referred to as Lacanian *Le sujet supposé savoir* (SSS), "the subject supposed to know" (Homer, 2005: 123–124). What enables a constitution of an authoritative function, the subject supposed to know, is an irrational belief that one has a privileged insight into the ontological level of the order of the Other, the symbolic reality, the reality which both, the speaker and the audience, already share, and which remains beyond provability. In this sense SSS takes upon itself to save the entire symbolic order from the knowledge of its inconsistency and powerlessness; the function of the subject supposed to know is to conceal the fact that the big Other exists only to the extent that the subject presupposes the Other as an ideal order – a system, logic or discourse which assures the meaning and consistency of the subject's argument and action. We get caught in a circle; by assuming that the hegemony of the order of the Other exists, we acknowledge SSS, but SSS has first to acknowledge us as subjects having a faculty of judgment and thus being capable of meaningful and consistent reasoning. The subject supposed to know must therefore acknowledge us as subjects in advance, but it does that precisely so that we can then give it legitimacy. This is a classic catch 22 situation that is so well described by Perelman: "Auditorium is not some empirical addressee, it is the audience created by the very speaker" (Perelman, 1979: 24). The latter, the speaker, is, in turn, created by the auditorium's belief that he/she possesses some surplus knowledge, an ontological certainty – an illusion held by the auditorium and established through transference. And as far as consensus is concerned; it does not revolve

around evidence, it pertains to construction of symbolic reality. It is therefore not consensus about facts, which remain tacit; it is consensus about judgments on facts. It is in this manner that the auditorium and the speaker, hand in hand, produce “a justified true belief”, which, in the tradition of analytical philosophy at least, is a synonym for knowledge. Perelman’s cogito, then, is not to be understood in terms of the Enlightenment project. In *Meditations*, Descartes is asking himself how we might know the truth of our beliefs and our perceptions of reality: “There is therefore no doubt that I exist ... he /God/ can never cause me to be nothing, so long as I think I am something ... the proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true, every time I express it or conceive of it in my mind.” (Descartes, 1968: 103) However, in a manner of Hegelian critique of Kantian thing-in-itself, Lacan opposes this Descartes’ certainty-in-itself, paraphrasing it thus: “By virtue of the fact that I doubt, I am sure that I think.” (Lacan 1977: 35) Doubt implies discord between certainty that is attainable through language and certainty-in-itself. The very moment we enter the realm of symbolic order the immediacy of the pre-symbolic thing-in-itself is lost forever – the certainty itself becomes a language-like phenomenon, by the very fact of language it becomes inaccessible. Certainty itself becomes a sign in a differential system wherein the meaning of a sign is determined not in relation to the thing it refers but in its difference from other signs, it becomes always-already, overdetermined by the symbolic framework which structures our perception of reality. In other words:

So while Descartes was right to think that he could be certain as to how things seemed to him, or how things were in his own mind, he was wrong to suppose that the basis of this certainty lay within his own mind, or could be found in the first-person perspective. Insofar as my intellectual practice could not be made sense of by another, I should have no right to regard it as correct myself. (Hopkins, 1995: 67)

Perelman’s cogito is rather Kantian (and Lacanian for that matter), a cogito which can only appear within the space of intersubjectivity. When Kant conceives a subject as constituted of purely negative determinations, devoid of all positive natural properties, as an empty form of apperception, that means that the subject is always in need of another subject to ground its identity:⁴ “As long as I am an empty, split subject, what I am is always linked

⁴ In the essay *Logical time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty*, Lacan develops three modalities of logical time: an instant of looking, time for understanding and moment for concluding. The first modality involves a solitary subject who sees the state of things, but has no way of knowing what it is that one sees. In the second modality, the subject transposes oneself into a reasoning of another; what is it that the other sees, is his/her reasoning at all meaningful? However, this is not yet intersubjectivity in its

to what the Other (in sense of another human being, as well as the symbolic order) thinks I am.” (Salecl, 1994: 117)

Issues of argumentation and epistemological safety become relevant only when some basic conditions have already been met, only after the language has done its job of alienating us from the pre-symbolic reality. These conditions are all bound to a realm of belief and preconceived notions. All this actually means that scientists can argue, agree or disagree about knowledge only when they already share the same system of beliefs concerning underlying principles of reality, when they are all attuned to the same order of the big Other.

To sum up: only if an idea receives recognition from the audience and is advocated by some authority which binds the speaker and the audience, reassuring the two about underlying premises of shared symbolic reality, only then can one start considering an epistemological safety assured by argumentation. The path, then, leading one idea into science, one belief into conspiracy theory, is paved by the same notions – those of authority, transference and auditorium.

Anthropology, again, has already bridged magical, irrational conspiratorial and scientific, rational thinking. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958) equated the modern scientist with the traditional witch-doctor, both having the same function – by making sense of disorganized, inconsistent, fractured, patchwork-like symbolic reality, by explaining why all things are as they are, they function as the subject supposed to know. They both suture meaning and establish a uniform horizon of interpretability and understanding. In other words: “to think conspiratorially, to posit links between actions and events, to imagine that there is another working behind the scenes, may well be reasonable, inseparable from reason, and part of the very operation of reason. Indeed, could it not be the case that denying this paranoid core is precisely the intrusion of irrationality.” (Pratt, 2003: 257)

To bring Freud’s remark back home: scientists perhaps shouldn’t try so hard to achieve ontological safety, for it is exactly what conspirationists such as Schreber enjoy and “normal” people such as Freud do not. Namely, according to psychoanalytical theory, a psychotic does not differentiate between reality of language and reality of objects, between epistemological and ontological. For a psychotic, symbols have real existence, they become

proper dimension as it remains arrested in a simple indefinite reciprocity; all that those subjects can do is exchange perplexed glances. Only the intervention of one other another, the big Other, leads to a conclusion and some genesis of certainty: only by assuming that there is some symbolic structure which would enable them to evaluate each other’s bewilderment, can they start noticing that they both share a common denominator, the same hindered gesture, a hesitation. By virtue of recognizing each other’s hindered gesture as belonging to the same realm of Symbolic can some form of assertion of certainty be inaugurated (Žižek, 2007: 132–136).

objects in themselves, and the spoken word collides with the real thing that it is only supposed to represent. For the psychotic, the (symbolic) order does not contain any blind spots, lacks or gaps – one knows literary everything, sees the truth in all its presence. Very much like a conspiracy theorist, a paranoiac always hits the nail on its head no matter where the hammer falls simply because the psychotic subject is not integrated into the Symbolic network which structures their symbolic identity – one is self-identical. A psychotic does not need others to define meanings and make sense of reality. Such an individual literally steps over the threshold of symbolic and detaches oneself from the ambiguity of words, achieving thus Cartesian certainty-in-itself. However, when composing our own personal identities, as well as scientific theories, we must always acknowledge that our gaze is excluded from the picture that we are seeing, and that our perception is structured by language. Even worse; the key cornerstones of humanistic endeavor, the subject, the interpretative practice, and the object of the interpretation, are all embedded in language, and, furthermore, they can all only be distinguishable analytically – which is to say epistemologically and not ontologically. Hence there always must be some room left for a shadow of doubt, that if we proposed to venture from a different epistemological position, which would have sensibly organized the observed field of reality, the outcome would have been quite different, but similarly homogeneous and equally, as well as always partially, true.

In the end the only honest way for a scientist to conclude one's own exercise in argumentation is akin to Freud's laconic statement: "It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe." (Freud, 1986: 79) Conspiracy theorists have no such luxury; they believe in truth, they are true to their beliefs, and they truthfully believe.

It is quite a paradox, then, to conclude, that what inherently keeps us able to sustain critical (non-conspiratorial yet scientific still) judgment is the discord between so called truth and belief. Critical judgment rests not on the linear progress of approximating belief to truth and their inevitable collision, but moreover on the human ability to believe things despite them being untrue. Enlightenment that began with a preposterous notion that the truth and believability are inherently linked has reached its end-times: even if it is the truth, nobody believes it. More precisely – nobody cares.

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