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Article

Sociopolitical Genealogy of Populist Conspiracy Theories and the Hyperpolitics

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Abstract: The wide circulation of conspiracy narratives and their frequent intertwining with populist rhetoric is both an element of concern and a topic of intense scientific and philosophical debate. The depth of the link between conspiracy theories and populism represents a crucial issue whose comprehension can facilitate understanding their specific nature and the factors behind their diffusion in public communication. To this end, it is necessary to cultivate an interdisciplinary approach and great critical attention, eschewing monocausal explanations. This paper addresses the question of the essentially political nature of conspiracism confronting the recent epistemological debate that, by putting the positivist paradigm aside, has sought to explore and understand the socio-cultural roots of conspiracy rhetoric, with its sceptical, antagonistic and hermetic traits. By integrating the reflections of epistemologists such as Cassam or Harris with the considerations of political scientists such as Taggart and with Schmitt's radical reflections on politics, it is perhaps possible to reintegrate the different approaches to populist conspiracism into an overall social genealogical perspective, thanks also to recent demographic elaborations. Thus, we could ascribe the spread of conspiracism to the prevalence in societies of a *hyper-political* discursive regime, i.e., founded on the principle of opposition, without the possibility of compromise, between different groups and interests. At the basis of such Manichaeism, it is plausible to place in the first place the growing inequalities and related social disintegration, which hinder the circulation of trust and recognition between individuals and groups, thus ending up undermining democracy at its roots, as a political system that legitimises and thus peacefully regulates conflict.

Keywords: conspiracism; populism; hyperpolitics; democracy; inequality; social capital; trust; power

1. Introduction

Conspiracy Theories (from now on C.T.¹) have become a topic of great political and journalistic debate in recent years, and philosophers and social scientists have also begun to realise the considerable problematic nature of the concept, epistemologically, ethically and politically (Butter & Knight 2020; Ritola & Räikkä 2020). In 2016, a candidate became president of the USA who extensively used conspiracy rhetoric and references in his campaign (Harris Kr. 2023). The dissemination of C.T.-inspired speeches has long since gained space in the public sphere, probably due to a combination of factors, although there are scholars like Butter (2014) who deny a wider diffusion of C.T.

On closer inspection, however, the propensity to denounce conspiracies which very often do not exist dates back at least as far as the *modern age* (Butter 2014), although the appearance of the specific expression seems to date back to the period between the 19th and 20th centuries and its subsequent evolutions (McKenzie-McHarg 2019). It was only later and only with Popper's reflections in the '30s (2006) that the expression 'conspiracy theory' became a way of stigmatising completely irrational when not demented forms of reasoning and worldviews (Butter & Knight 2018): this path found its

¹ See below Cassam's (2019) distinction between "Conspiracy Theory" and "conspiracy theory".

acme in Hofstadter's work (1964) which represents a milestone for any discourse on the subject, regardless of the theoretical approach adopted.

However, in this work, I refer to the definition of C.T. by Cubitt (1989), for whom they are characterised by intentionalism, dualism and occultism: every C.T. maintains that adverse events are the result of the action carried out strategically and covertly by a very minority but more powerful part of society, as opposed to the majority and less aware part. This approach almost always accompanies the moral stigmatisation of this active minority, and thus the victimisation of the part considered innocent, so it consists of an ethical-political denunciation (as a scapegoating dynamic, see Hassan 2020). From the epistemological point of view, the "self-sealing" quality is the distinctive element of C.T. whereby any element that can refute a conspiracy hypothesis is, by its proponents, converted into favourable evidence (Sunstein, C. & Vermeule, A. 2009²). In this sense, C.T. are anti-scientific and inherently false since they are based on premises that deny *a priori* their falsifiability. In short, one could consider C.T. as inspired by a Manichean and Gnostic logic, but this result, as I mentioned, doesn't exhaust the debate on the matter; on the contrary, it has encountered a real critical turn, starting from the end of last century (Butter & Knight 2020).

Some scholars deny at root the legitimacy of the concept of C.T. itself because they believe it is not epistemologically grounded and a stigmatising intent connotes it (Dentith 2014; Pidgen 2007). Other scholars trace its diffusion to the psychological or sociopsychological dimension (Abalakina-Paap; Stephan, Craig; Gregory 1999; Van Prooijen & Douglas 2018) and Vermeule & Sunstein (2009) have focused on the cognitive-cultural aspect, questioning the epistemological fallacy that distinguishes them (*crippled epistemology*). Still, others have emphasised how C.T. is a simple, and therefore reassuring, explanation of the current global complexity (Marcin et al. 2022) holding together the epistemological and socio-psychological aspects. One strand is also the one that attributes a particularly relevant role to the introduction of new technology of communication, such as the Internet and the smartphone, at the basis of the platform society and socio-cognitive phenomena such as *filter bubbles*, *echo chambers* and *misinformation* (Barberis 2020).

A further strand is whether or not C.T. have an essentially political nature (and thus can be considered as ideologies). Scholars interested in this question, perhaps more than others, have shifted their attention from examining the inherently false content of conspiracy narratives to the historical-political and socio-cultural context that allows them to emerge and spread, thus to the genealogical-structural dimension.

On the one hand, epistemologists such as Cassam (2019; 2023), following previous reflections by Coady (2006), have attempted to distinguish C.T. from reasonable and doubtful discourses on the existence of conspiracies (called by him simply *conspiracy theories*), identifying at the basis of the former the logic of Power as a force always capable of manipulating the truth. This logic should better explain how any element capable of disproving such theories is converted by their followers into evidence in favour of them, precisely as an indication of the action of hidden Power.

Other scholars, who have intentionally left the epistemological issue aside, have tried to explain C.T. by framing them in a discourse that problematises the relationship between truth, Power and knowledge. These researchers argue that C.T. have pragmatic/performative character, i.e., political rather than narrative or, in any case, merely theoretical nature (Hristov 2019). They emphasise the background of C.T.: the present historical phase characterised by uncertainty and distrust, so that the distinctive trait of the C.T. is the *parresiasitic* one, i.e., an index of revolt against institutional Power. Moreover, scholars such as Fenster (2008) have argued that C.T. are discourses about Power.

On the other hand, historical and literary research has shown how, for a long time, the function of the C.T. was quite different from today: while today they convey an attitude of contestation of institutional power structures, branded as falsely democratic, for centuries the stigma that the C.T. bore was pinned precisely on the subaltern or contesting classes (Butter 2014) (Thalmann 2019).

Finally, in the field of politology, more and more often, C.T. have been related to the other central contemporary theme, that of populism (Bergmann 2018; Castanho Silva, B., Vegetti, F. and Littvay,

² See also Eco's (1990) concept of classical *hermetic semiosis* as an antecedent of this logic.

L. 2017)—which are often intertwined with conspiracy narratives or make opportunistic use of them. Populism and C.T. share a hostility towards institutions and their procedures, to which they counter truth and justice that reside in what they call the *common people* or the People and in its common sense. Both phenomena display a Manichean conception of society (Taggart 2018), based on the opposition between The Us and Them: the people, i.e., the majority and the elite, i.e., the manipulative and usurping minority of sovereignty, according to the minimalist definition of populism, now widely used, proposed by Mudde (2004). Another important trait shared by populism and C.T. is that of the problematic epistemology, also linked to the stigmatising meaning of the term.

On the other hand, in parallel, the focus on the phenomenon of populism has also been expanding, and many different approaches have been proposed (Palano 2017), both to explain its origin (economic, cultural, generational, etc.) and its various manifestations (left-wing or right-wing, protest or governing, etc.).

Significantly, just as conspiracy theorists were primarily framed in the light of the rationality paradigm, so populism was classified as a form of paralogism (Taguieff 2003; Merker 2009), but attention has gradually shifted towards the socio-historical context and the function that populism and conspiracy theorists might play within that framework. For all these reasons, as I have said, the hypothesis has gained consensus that it is better to link the question of truth with that of Power more than that of knowledge in order to understand the historical and social significance of the C.T. So that we can hypothesise an almost genetic link between populism and C.T. and above all indicate an essentially political nature of the latter.

The problem I intend to address in this paper is not that of the mere existence of C.T., but the reason for their greater diffusion in specific historical moments and different social contexts rather than in others—hence the origin of such a dynamic, in the conviction that only by understanding this, it is possible to understand the very meaning of C.T. and populism.

The hypothesis that I intend to propose is that neither economic nor technological nor cultural factors, considered in isolation, can integrate an overall picture of this dynamic because, at the origin, there are structural transformations that have affected society as a whole, understood as a system of relations, which we can describe through the concept of *social capital* and *social distance*. Thus, the growing social distance resulting from the weakening of social ties represents the genealogy of the dynamic that sees populist conspiracism gaining more and more space in the public sphere. Recent research reinforces the hypothesis that growing inequalities are closely related to this growing anomie, in parallel with the crisis of democratic policies and the extension of market logic in society. I hypothesise in conclusion that this anomic conjuncture is associated with the affirmation of a rhetorical paradigm based on the recirculating delegitimisation of the various social actors, which I call hyperpolitics and which is the basis of the typical Manichaeism found in both conspiracism and populism.

It is, therefore, a question of reintegrating the issue of populist conspiracism and its worrying rise into the field of political sociology.

Concerning the political nature of C.T., I identify three central positions: Cassam (2019, 2023), Harris (2023) and Taggart (2018): in the following, I will proceed by considering these positions in order to propose the thesis that C.T. should be understood as essentially political discourses, albeit in a broad sense, based on the theoretical elaborations of Carl Schmitt. Next, I will address the question of the origin of C.T. in the context of social structures based on recent findings. Finally, I will first reflect on the concept of hyperpolitics, understood as a highly problematic socio-cultural dimension, in its dialectical connection with the technocratic depoliticisation that has inspired much rhetoric and many government policies in recent years.

2. Political Character of Conspiracism

To try to understand conspiracism and especially its ample diffusion means trying to frame it rationally, renouncing to present it simply as foolish and/or needing to be pigeonholed in a semantic domain entirely apart. On the contrary, rationalising the intrinsic—and often proclaimed—

incongruity of conspiracy discourses means integrating them into the general context, striving to trace their links with other situations, other discursive traditions and other cultural materials.

As I have said, there are grounds for wondering whether the most effective direction of research that can be invested with this task is one that emphasises the critical relationship between conspiracy and Power and thus questions the nature, i.e., the function, of conspiracism as essentially political.

This is certainly not a new debate, and Popper's reading and, on closer inspection, Hofstadter's reading were already rooted in such a dialectical framework, but what they emphasised was the relationship between irrationality and politics (Butter-Knight 2020), which was at the basis of conspiracy understood, as we know, as a 'conspiracy theory of society', into which could be inserted discourses that later were no longer even appropriately considered conspiracism-related.

Subsequently, the topic has been forcefully taken up, but I cannot go over it again. Instead, I will focus on three fundamental positions that have emerged more recently.

The first is that of Cassam (2019), for whom C.T. represent a 'form of political propaganda' and are essentially, not only occasionally, political discourses.

He clarified first of all that talking about C.T. does not mean, contrary to what is argued by the proponents of the 'neutral' approach to this topic (e.g., Dentith 2014), talking about any discourse that mentions the possibility of a conspiracy as the cause of an event: this would go against common sense and would dissolve the concept of C.T. and, if anything, focus on that of 'conspiracy theory phobia', or conversely, paradoxically, present almost any critical theory of society as a C.T. in the wake of Popper.

Instead, Cassam returned to the distinction posed by Coady (2006) and Keeley (2006), based on a still fundamentally epistemological approach, between C.T. and mere talk about possible conspiracies. In particular, he emphasised that while the proponents of the 'neutralist' approach believe that any theory must be assessed a posteriori based on the specific examination of the evidence for or against it (so that ultimately, no theory can ever be stigmatised as conspiracy-based and therefore fallacious because as Popper explains, the empiricist approach is by definition always open), Cassam instead pointed out that it is possible to classify a priori a discourse as C.T., and therefore fallacious, precisely because it is a political-ideological discourse, given that a prejudicial contrast with an official truth characterises it. This polemical character refers to an overall, aprioristic and, in this sense, ideological view of reality that sees authorities and institutions as always and, in any case, deceptive, both political and epistemic.

In this sense, Cassam's approach, when he presents C.T. as ideologies or at any rate as an engrossing part of political-ideological projects, can be linked back to Mannheim's tradition of sociology of culture and Foucault's postmodern philosophy. On this basis, he contrasted an exquisitely political approach with a purely epistemological one (which would run the risk of going around in circles) and a psychological one and can take on board the potential for general critique brought about by the C.T., pointed out by the 'neutralists', without, however, throwing the foundations of modern epistemology up in the air, falling into a speculative, almost nihilistic irrationalism.

On the other hand, the approach that places as the primary criterion for reliability not the content of the discourse but the identity of the person producing, that is the logic of C.T., it is an inherently anti-scientific, anti-rational and anti-democratic approach (see Vernant 1976 on the link between rationality and democracy).

I will return to the polemical-political connection, before it is essential to point out, along with Cassam himself, how, of late, many conspiracy discourses are not even theories but, as explained by Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2019), are 'conspiracy without the theory' because they no longer even strive to imitate the academic argumentative form, but instead oppose science head-on using iterative and emotive communication, which essentially consists of endlessly repeated slogans in a communicative sphere completely closed to other discursive proposals. Essentially, "The new conspiracism—all accusation and no evidence—substitutes social validation for scientific validation" (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2019: p. 3). This means that conspiracism at the bottom is never a theory but presupposes a theory; it does not seek the truth but proclaims it and takes it for granted; in essence,

it is nothing more than a denunciation based on an ideological rather than a critical attitude. Moreover, I stress that such discursiveness is structurally rooted in a system of social and communicative relations. Indeed, the fragmentary and disjointed discursiveness conveyed on the Internet highlights a conspiracy mindset and, even better, a socio-cultural atmosphere characterised by resentment and polemical ardour without any self-reflexive propensity. Corresponding to the stigma towards conspiracism is the stigma towards others on the part of conspiracists, and the latter can well refute any criticism based on the principle that official knowledge is compromised with Power and therefore suspect by definition.

Indeed, Cassam (2023) explains that the function of C.T. is to express and promote an ideology and that they operate in an ideological space. Cassam refers to the definition of ideology of Uscinski & Parent as “a set of interrelated beliefs that provide a way for people to understand the world. Ideologies tell people what is important, who the good guys and bad guys are, what their goals are, and how those goals should be reached” (Uscinski & Parent 2014, p. 12) and argues that the ideology founding the conspiracism is the stigmatisation of “the mainstream media and other members of the so-called elite” (Cassam 2023, p. 198). In conclusion “The ideological motivating force of new conspiracism is not opposition to democracy as such but the belief that the *status quo* is not truly democratic and needs to be replaced by a different form of government that genuinely expresses the will of the people” (Cassam). On closer inspection, C.T. corresponds to a “purely negative” (Ivi, p. 194) political programme that aims to delegitimise democracy as we know it, whereby “Disorientation and delegitimation are its two main products” (Cassam).

Nevertheless, the link between delegitimation and C.T. is genetic. What I will try to argue is that it is also genealogical, in the sense that the delegitimation of the authorities, and thus also of science, which characterises a significant part of public discourse, is at the origin of the very intensity and diffusion of C.T. in today's society.

In order to understand this, it is necessary to reconnect, more than Cassam does, the social dimension closely with the political-institutional one, and I will try to do just that by reasoning on the objections that Harris posed to Cassam, recovering classic suggestions from Schmitt's political thought, also taken up by other contemporary authors.

The main objection presented by Harris (2023) to Cassam was that the “contrarian nature” of C.T. “does not imply that conspiracy theories are inherently political” (p. 22). He points out the assumption that “conspiracy theories are, by definition, contrary to the claims of authorities” (p. 23) and suggests that “This approach can be elaborated in at least two ways [...] On one approach, the relevant form of authority is governmental or otherwise related to Power. According to an alternative approach, the relevant form of authority is epistemic” (Cassam) and not accidentally “some prominent conspiracy theories have no immediate connection to any political agenda” (p. 25). For Harris, the intrinsic function of C.T. is to manifest antagonism towards authority, and often more specifically epistemic authority, as a premise for “facilitate the reassertion of epistemic autonomy” (p. 22).

Some of the examples Harris gives, such as ‘flat eartherism’ or the supposed faked death of Elvis, would indicate the lack of political substance in many C.T. discourses and that such discourses instead end up being encompassed by populists not because of an elective affinity but because they share a bitterly polemical trait. For this reason, populist politicians have a good game in deploying opportunistic tactics to enlist many conspiracists in their ranks. However, for Harris, there is quite a distance between C.T. and populism.

In essence, at the origin of the belief in C.T., according to Harris, there is not a political ideology but “those who resent what appears from their perspective as the shaping of the epistemic landscape by alien perspectives” (2023, p. 22).

To this criticism, Cassam responds, as we have seen, that even those C.T. that seem to lack a political component are political in the broadest sense. They all seem to float in an ideological atmosphere that, as we have already said, is characterised by a radical scepticism towards all forms of authority. Whoever believes that the NASA missions did not reach the Moon does not doubt even before the governmental authorities themselves.

For an example of the Italian social landscape, we can cite the popular support, characterized by conspiracy rhetoric, for the medician De Donno, who proposed to cure COVID with alternative methods to those supported by the national health authorities (ANSA 2021). How can one explain it if not with antagonism towards the government itself, and not only towards science, given that the doctor was an accredited specialist, albeit isolated from his colleagues?

Another reason why it is challenging to distinguish between political authorities and epistemic authorities, especially in the democratic sphere, and this is only apparently paradoxical, is that the legitimacy of epistemic authorities is at least partly based on the democratic principle: who if not the political authorities, elected by the people, is in charge of the basic rules for funding and recruiting academic, scientific, technical institutions? And then, what else of the consensus found within the vast community of scholars guarantees the public of non-experts that certain scientific positions are worthy of respect?³

All this may lead to the conclusion that it is possible only by reasoning in political terms to understand the nature and origin of C.T. and I argue that it is possible to fully understand the origin and political character of C.T. by recovering Schmitt's (1972) reflection on the concept of the political, supported by the interpretation of a scholar like Kervegan (2016).

The controversial German philosopher based his entire work on the idea that, on the one hand, politics does not have its specific nature (Schmitt 1972, p. 109) and, on the other hand, that precisely because of this, everything could be political, especially since the distinction between the legal and the socio-political level, so to say between institutions and what lies outside them, can only be made based on a starting point that is in itself essentially political—perhaps because it is primarily political to decide what is political, i.e., legitimately debatable, as it is to decide what is not, and is instead technical, whose discussion is therefore not open to all, or not at all (Kervegan 2016; Preterossi 2009).

As it is well known, the other trait that characterises the political for Schmitt is the agonistic one, by which politics, it must be emphasised once again, cannot claim its own substantiality but must be understood in a dynamic and, above all, relational sense (Kervegan 2016, especially p. 165).

For this reason, I argue we can support authors such as Cassam and hypothesise that even abstruse theories, such as those on the flat earth, have an intrinsically political value (which their proponents often claim) and deserve the utmost consideration. In C.T., there is always an element of acute polemics towards institutions; indeed, they always seem to proceed from the identification of institutions as enemies, in Schmitt's sense of the term, and for this reason, their nature can also be considered essentially political.

We see that the debate on the C.T. helps emerge that the real problem is what is political and what isn't, leading to the topic of contemporary democratic societies and their crises. So, while Cassam asserted the political nature of C.T. and Harris denied it, political scientist Taggart (2018) (who is a scholar of populism) claimed that C.T. have a 'non properly political' nature and attempted to delineate this dimension and link to it C.T. as well as populism.

Basically, for Taggart—for which “we need to re-insert a fuller sense of populism's relationship to politics into the definition of populism” (p. 79)—Populism and conspiracism not only share a Manichean attitude (the glorification of the people and the demonisation of elites) they also share an ambiguous view of politics, precisely what he calls *unpolitics*, whereby in populism there is “a tendency towards conspiracy theory” (Taggart 2018, p. 84).

Taggart explains that “Unpolitics is not the same as anti-politics or being apolitical” (p. 81) since instead unpolitics is “the repudiation of politics as the process for resolving conflict [...] but staying within a democratic frame of reference” (Cassam) and additionally “It is clearly not apolitical as populism can lead to the full engagement in politics [even though] it is the emergence of a sense of crisis that mobilises this constituency to rise up and start to become engaged actively in politics” (Cassam).

³ See Levy (2007). For a recent *pragmatic* account of the relationship between science and democracy, see Barrotta (2016).

From this root, we would derive as much the propensity of populists for forms of intense antagonism, such as war, as for the intense moral dimension of religion, both often accompanied by the inclination towards conspiracism.

In the end, following Taggart, in populist *unpolitics* we would find the genealogy of conspiracism itself, which would be confirmed as a political phenomenon, but in an 'improper' way, perhaps not entirely ascribable to a rational explanation.

He says that "underlying populism as an ideology is a very profound and fundamental ambivalence about politics such that it implicitly celebrates or is drawn to unpolitic" (2018, p. 85). This defines an admittedly political attitude, but 'in the negative', i.e., by the absence of politics (unpolitics) as opposed to actual politics whereby "populists will often, but not always be pulled into narratives and ways of thinking associated with activities divergent from politics, namely war, religion and conspiracy theories" (2018, p. 85).

We have even a definition of politics by Taggart (2018, p. 85): "Politics as practice is about settlement" while "Populism tends to relish unsettling politics" whereby, in essence, politics is identified with representative procedures and liberalism, and populism again becomes an irrational form of politics, so much so as to be basically indefinable, or definable only 'in the negative'. Here, the problematic nexus of the relationship between C.T., populism and politics emerges again.

Indeed, Taggart admits that "I am equating politics itself with either liberalism or representative democratic politics [...] Of course, other forms of politics exist" (2018, p. 85), arguing "The disjuncture between unpolitics and politics is that make populism often so spectacular and so perplexing to students of politics" (Cassam). In any case, for Taggart, "it is the confrontation of this unpolitics with the functioning of representative politics that makes populism so potent and so provocative to contemporary representative democracy" (79).

Taggart concludes, "The prevalence of contemporary populism then means that we need to address what it is that makes unpolitics so palatable and politics so unpalatable to so many [...] The success of populism and the celebration of unpolitics represents perhaps a particular failing of politics at a particular time" (2018, p. 86).

Thus, Taggart recognises the political character of the context in which C.T. are spreading but does not recognise their political nature, leaving the definition of *unpolitics* uncertain. In fact, it is precisely on the basis of Schmitt's lesson that we can attribute an undoubtedly political nature to populist conspiracism precisely because of its intensely agonistic and radical character. The fact that the conspiracy and populist mentality is characterised by hostility towards liberal institutions, as everyone knows, should not be attributed to supposed unpolitics but rather to their essentially political character.

As seen, Schmitt (1972) argued that the decision on the institutional arrangements always precedes these arrangements, so it is logical that the highest level of politicalness coincides with the radical questioning of the institutions themselves and of their legitimacy. As Taggart recognises, on the other hand, liberal politics exist, as well as other political tendencies, albeit the latter ones are by no means peaceful and hostile to the rational logic that should inform democracy. These tendencies derive their strength from social events, and it is by systematically considering this dimension that we can understand C.T. because, as Schmitt argues, it is at the social, pre-institutional level that politics is fully expressed so that legal institutions are formed because it is at that level that the legitimacy of the very laws that will later be written is formed. Therefore, continuing the reasoning on the political nature of C.T. will allow us to grasp its rootedness in an overall socio-historical situation.

3. Social-Psychological Genealogy o Conspiracism

As I anticipated, Harris rightly identifies in conspiracists a feeling of cultural alienation, which drives them to elaborate polemical discourses against science and its institutions. Hence, he considers the political trait of C.T. to be only secondary to the quest for epistemic autonomy. This is his alternative hypothesis to that proposed by Cassam. But as Lee Basham (2006, p. 67) wrote, "The background suspicion of most conspiracy theorists is that public institutions are and perhaps always

have been untrustworthy”, and it would be wrong to “imagine that conspiracy theorists begin in isolation from this broader scepticism”. In essence, Harris does not question why so many people are embarrassed by contemporary science and, in fact, denies that there is a root connection between political antagonism and feelings of cultural alienation—while Taggart locates the roots of conspiracy theorists and populism in the social situation but does not clearly answer why so many are embarrassed by the workings of politics, and Cassam instead traces C.T. almost exclusively to a reactionary cultural tradition (Cassam 2023, p. 198).

On the other hand, as we have previously mentioned, the ideology underpinning the C.T. is nourished by a radical scepticism towards both democratic institutions and modern thought itself, and their epistemological approach is directed against both science and liberal democracy, so once again, it is difficult to distinguish the polemic against government authorities from that against scientific authorities.

The point is that C.T. must be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective because neither the epistemic nor the political or other factors can be understood outside of a systematic sociological approach. From where does this come? The hypothesis I propose to account for the extreme polarisation that characterises our age, which I believe is reflected in the Manichean tendencies of C.T. and populism, is that recent work in social statistics is very useful.

In fact, inequalities are growing at an ever-improving speed, as demonstrated last “Oxfam Global Report’ Inequality Inc” of January 2024 (OXFAM 2024), where we can read that “The wealth of the world’s five richest billionaires has more than doubled, in real terms, since the beginning of this decade, while the wealth of the poorest 60% of humanity has not grown at all [...] In Italy, at the end of 2022, the richest 1% owned 84 times more wealth than that held by the poorest 20% of the population, whose share of national wealth halved in one year [...] Economic Power, its extreme concentration and the associated rents of associated position rents favour the accumulation of enormous fortunes in the hands of a few and generate wide gaps in society [...] Corporate earnings are extremely concentrated: just 0.001% of the largest companies take in almost a third of all global corporate profits. For every \$100 of profits made between July 2022 and June 2023 by 96 of the world’s largest companies in the world, \$82 went to shareholders in the form of dividends or share buybacks (*passim*).

We should argue that polarisation, in turn, originates from inequalities and social disintegration: this dynamic, and its connection to the spread of populism and conspiracy, was found in a very recent demoscopic exploration (Golob, T.; Gorišek, M.; Makarovič 2023), by a team that interrogated the statistics made available by the *European Social Survey*, to test the link between social fragmentation and political-cultural divisions, and in particular between social stratification on the one hand and trust in democracy or inclination towards populism and conspiracism on the other, coming to find how the simultaneous lack of social, cultural, economic resources, in individuals, proves to be a predictor of the inclination towards populism and conspiracy (see pgs. 31, 50 particularly). This study, hinging on the concept of social capital⁴ valued by authors such as Bourdieu (2001), confirmed how greater social inequalities are accompanied by a deterioration of general social capital, fueling among citizens distrust, disorientation and thus a sense of distance from institutions, something that threatens the survival of representative democracy. In fact, each person’s social capital consists of a network of exchanges—and the contribution that each element of the network makes to the others—whose limit “also constitutes the limit of the group beyond which there can be no legitimate exchange” (Moro 2007, p. 167, my transl.) so that it can be said that through social capital “passes not only mutual recognition but also denial and discrimination” (Moro 2007, p. 168). Thus, it is precisely from the decay of social capital that a growing social distance originates, understood as “the relational unavailability and closure [...] of a subject towards others perceived [...] as different on the basis of their traceability to social categories” (Lo Verde and Introini 2007, p. 44, my transl.). We might hypothesise here, then, that the Manichean distinction between Us/People and Them/Elites, which is

⁴ For an overall account of the usefulness of the concept of social capital in a systematic approach to sociology see also Andriani, L. (2013).

the cornerstone of populist and conspiracist rhetoric (and ideology), represents the symbolic-spatial crystallisation of this process of social distancing and consequent delegitimisation and stigmatisation at the political level.

4. Conclusions

In this section, I will attempt to propose a synthesis of what I have outlined above, putting forward a hypothesis on the genealogy of populist conspiracism.

Of this phenomenon, or rather of the dynamic whereby conspiratorial and populist discourses, in recent years, have been gaining ever larger shares of the public sphere, I have proposed an essentially political reading, supplementing the reflections of a scholar like Cassam with references to Schmitt's thought. In fact, for the German jurist, what characterises the political is the essentially relational nature, by virtue of which everything can become political, and in addition, the agonistic dimension, more or less intense, that invests the formation and functioning of institutions. In essence, for Schmitt, the political dimension is not to be confused with the properly legal-institutional dimension, of which it constitutes the premise: in fact, the very legitimacy of every institution, including epistemic institutions, is the fruit of a decision that is placed at the level of social reality, that is, of social relations, and which is never final.

This is to say that the problem posed by conspiracies and populisms is essentially a problem of the social legitimacy of institutions, which, however, should not be deciphered with only an epistemological-cultural, economic, or politological paradigm because each of these approaches fails to grasp the radical nature of the problem at hand, but grasps only one aspect of it among many.

Confirming this, research such as that of Golob, T.; Gorišek, M.; Makarovič, M. (2023) shows that populist conspiracy is associated with the decrease in, at the same time, social, cultural and economic capital, along with increased social disintegration and distance, in a context of increasing socioeconomic inequality.

To recognise the essentially political root of populist conspiracism, in the sense that it invests the legitimacy of our institutional system at its root, is thus to recognise that the problem such phenomena pose invests the functioning and structure of our societies as a whole and no reductionist approach, be it epistemological, psychological, or political, is appropriate since we are talking about the symptom of an overall crisis of Western civilisation.

This anomic conjuncture I then hypothesise in conclusion that it should be associated with the establishment of a rhetorical paradigm based on the recirculating delegitimisation of various social actors, which I call hyperpolitics, and it is the basis of the typical Manichaeism found in both conspiracy and populism. What I propose to call hyperpolitics, developing suggestions from Esposito (2020) and Sloterdijk (2020), consists precisely of the social atmosphere characterised at once by the extension of an extreme polemical paradigm of politics to every sphere of social communication and by the extreme radicalisation of positions, such that there seems to be absolutely no room for compromise, and the rule that prevails is that of mutual complete delegitimisation and non-recognition of different social and political actors. It is this atmosphere of distrust that feeds the Manichean and aggressive rhetoric of populist conspiracism.

Recently, a young scholar like Jaeger (2022) has also recovered the term *hyperpolitics* in a series of publications: at the centre of the proposed reflection, there is the transition from the post-political phase (i.e., of depoliticisation) following 1989 to the later phase of intense, chaotic and sterile politicisation, i.e., transformation into a field of conflict of a wide variety of issues previously removed from the public sphere (with a large role played by the new media of course), as if the tendencies identified by Schmitt were coming back into vogue, through the activism of masses formed by solitudes not united by a project but only by resentment (see also Hassan 2020; Mishra 2017). Already scholars such as Bazzicalupo (2014) and Bickerton-Accetti (2021) have argued that such a hyperpolitical dynamic should be related to the technocratic depoliticisation and the *technopopulism* that have been widely held views in recent decades because this vision, which started from the distinction between technical and political, has ended up subjugating the political

democracy to the technical-economic globalization, realising a process that is exquisitely political, and that recalls Crouch's *postdemocracy* (see also Muller 2022).

Both democracy and modern science are based on the principle of discursive reason in the Habermasian way, and this, in turn, on the trust that it is possible to agree on some basic assumptions about what is true or false: I here propose that the collective malaise that arises from social disintegration affects not only governmental institutions but also epistemic institutions and science because and that with increased estrangement there is instead less willingness for mutual recognition, at least on the part of those who perceive that they have the least to gain in the current socio-historical situation. The result is the social polarisation that nurtures both populism and the systematic scepticism (Musgrave 1995) that underlies conspiracy theories and the "politicisation of science" (Lewandowsky, S.; Gignac, G.E.; Oberauer, K. 2013) or "epistemic populism." In sum, we could argue that the spread of populist conspiracism is the expression of that "empty secret" of Simmelian ascendancy (Eco 2020), which is a tool of Power. It's the correspondence of the lack of politics in the era of *postdemocracy* that induces a hyperpolitical attitude which, by claiming the myth of a redemptive democracy (Canovan 2005), delegitimises every institutional level. This attitude ends up materialising in a *mythology* (Jesi 1989) of *Power*, which, in the face of inequalities that belie the egalitarian assumptions of democracy, places precisely Power as the exclusive criterion at the expense of any value, including truth.

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