What is the difference between critical and conspiracy theories?

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Introduction

How can critical theories be distinguished from conspiracy theories? This is a problem that Bruno Latour famously raised in a 2004 article in which he tried to confront the disturbing similarities between the critical social science tradition that he belonged to, and the growing number of post-9/11 conspiracy theories that he encountered. As Latour (2004:228-229) describes, 'I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation … it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly'.

By critical theories, I mean not just, or even primarily, those of the Frankfurt School, but a broader tradition of such ideas starting with Marx's analysis of capitalism, and that has since expanded on to cover culture, gender, science, colonialism, race, and sexuality. Critical wings of topical or regional 'studies', like critical development studies, critical media studies, or critical African studies emphasise factors such as power, exploitation, race, or ideology that are otherwise missing in orthodox ideas and practices. While there are considerable specificities and differences between these bodies of knowledge, there is also a broader connection that these critical literatures share as a common left-wing intellectual and political project that challenges conventional understandings of contemporary society, and that promotes an alternative, deeper form of emancipatory knowledge and intervention.

In contrast, conspiracy theories commonly refer to false, absurd, and malicious narratives about real and imagined events. They provide implausible, simplistic, and inflammatory explanations, based on false evidence and flawed reasoning, that are not open to challenge or refutation. They emerge and circulate through ungrounded rumours and illicit channels, ascribing complex events and random misfortunes to conscious intentionality, and the hidden hand of a hostile puppeteer.

There is as such no apparent reason why critical and conspiracy theories might be considered similar: they are distinct epistemic categories, produced in different ways, and that circulate within very non-overlapping communities. But the explosive growth of conspiracy theories in contemporary Euro-America has changed the context, and has disrupted that once comfortable distance that was imagined between the two. The 'paranoid style' that Hofstadter (1966) once described as a marginal fringe has become mainstream in an age of post-truth politics, unregulated social media, and the disinformation wars. A survey of conspiracy beliefs from 2023 shows that 31 percent of Americans think that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, 20 percent believe the U.S. government

was behind the 9/11 attacks, and 20 percent believe that the U.S. government is using the COVID-19 vaccine to microchip the population.

What Latour points to is that both critical and conspiracy theories have significant structural similarities. Critical theorising is inherently suspicious of the triumphalist claims and the positivist understanding of modern capitalism, technology, and liberal democracy, with Marx's analysis of the fetishism of commodities setting the epistemological mood music that appearance is not essence (Geras 1971). Similarly, conspiracy theories promote scepticism about many accepted truths and find instead that these are myths that serve the powerful and predatory. They argue that reality is not as it seems; that people are secretly controlled, exploited, and dominated by malign systems of hidden power; that the authoritative sources of information and expertise from the media, corporations, science, and government are complicit in this project through widespread forms of dissimulation.

The possibility for ambiguity and overlap between them can be illustrated in many ways. For example, the survey cited above on conspiracy beliefs found that 41 percent of Americans agreed with the statement 'Regardless of who is officially in charge of the government and other organizations, there is a single group of people who secretly control events and rule the world together'.[1] Presumably the intention here was to test belief in widely circulating conspiracy theories about secretive elites, such as the Illuminati, Jewish bankers, or the Bilderberg group. But this statement could equally be consistent with a Marxist or feminist explanation of the operation of power through class domination or patriarchy. Another example, examined in greater detail in this article, is the case of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, one of the world's most celebrated critical thinkers. Agamben's writings on the 2020-21 Covid pandemic led many of his peers, including his own English translator, to denounce and ridicule him as a paranoid conspiracy theorist.

What explains the overlap and ambiguity between these manifestly disparate categories? How can they be distinguished? How are they connected? In this chapter, I argue that the difference between critical and conspiracy theories is not ontological, but sociological. I propose that both critique and conspiracy arise from a commonly held form of thinking called the sceptical reasoning of uncertainty: a way of knowing that is animated by doubt, fear, and the search for hidden causality. What distinguishes them is not epistemic substance but the way that reason is governed to privilege social location and disciplinary endorsement. Through an examination of Giorgio Agamben's controversial writings on the COVID-19 pandemic, I describe how a scholar once celebrated for radical critique was reclassified as a conspiracy theorist when he was judged to have crossed the limits of reason. What emerges is that those limits corresponded not to any criteria of plausibility, but to a left-right political affiliation.

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[1] Americans' opinions on conspiracy theories, November 2023. YouGov
https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/48113-which-conspiracy-theories-do-americans-believe

The chapter proceeds in three layers: firstly, it seeks out the formal rules of demarcation. It draws on the diverse literatures on critical and conspiracy theories across several disciplines to seek out the definitions and essential criteria that delineate the boundary between them, so that ideas which are ambiguous can be clearly identified and correctly classified as the one or the other.

Secondly, in place of formally inscribed, de jure rules, I search for the empirically observable de facto reality in implicit rules or informally held rules of thumb. How, I ask, are the real world boundaries between critical and conspiracy theories governed? I approach this second layer through a case study of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who was recategorised in the public realm from critical to conspiracy theorist during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thirdly, rather than asking how they are differentiated, I seek out how they are connected. What explains their resemblance, and what does this imply about their origins and their present day dynamics? I do so by examining the existing options offered in the literature, and by presenting a framework to understand the shared origins of critical and conspiracy theories in the sceptical reasoning of uncertainty.

2. Essential Criteria of Demarcation

How can critical theories be differentiated from conspiracy theories? Where do the precise boundaries between them lie, and what criteria can be deployed to identify, clarify and classify each one accurately? In the philosophy of science, this takes the form of the demarcation problem, that seeks to identify and purify genuine and legitimate scientific knowledge. Karl Popper famously posed and answered this problem in terms of the falsifiability test: a simple, elegant, and universal condition by which all theories which are scientific must have the capacity to be rendered false by contrary evidence (Popper 2002). Theories that do not meet this condition are, by definition, beyond the boundaries of science, and fall into non-science or pseudo-science. In addition to falsifiability, Gieryn (1994) provides two other essential criteria that define the boundaries of science. These are the four Mertonian norms that guide good scientific conduct, and Thomas Kuhn's (1962) description of scientific paradigms.

Kuhn is particularly relevant here because his explanation of the evolution of scientific thought explicitly distinguishes science from social science. That is, Kuhn argues that his ideas of a paradigm, paradigmatic consensus, and the uneven trajectory of knowledge that these generate are unique and definitional to science. There are no paradigms in social science because there are fundamental disagreements on foundational questions that preclude the possibility of achieving a paradigmatic consensus. Gieryn (1994:403) writes: 'The periodically successful achievement of paradigmatic consensus within a research community separates mature science from immature science, social science, Baconian science, art, technological craft work, astrology, and other realms of non-science.'

Is it thus possible to identify similar essential criteria that would delineate the bounds of critical knowledge? Can these be used to provide reliable guidance on how to differentiate it from conspiracy theories? The answer is unfortunately no, on several counts.

Firstly, social science lacks a falsifiability test. There are no comparable over-arching criteria in social science that define the bounds of valid knowledge as in science. Instead, there are internal disciplinary and epistemological boundaries. But other than the norms that define legitimate and rigorous scholarly knowledge production, none of these boundaries explicitly attempt the task of separating themselves from conspiracy theories. As Kuhn describes, social science is characterised by basic disagreements on ontology, epistemology and ethics - i.e. of how social reality is constituted, how it can be understood, and what its value orientation should be. The primary fissure in this regard is over the extent to which social science can be understood as an extension of natural science.

Positivists see valid social science knowledge as conforming to the norms, criteria, and epistemology of science (Hempel 1942, Lundberg 1947, Popper 1957), to produce knowledge that is value-neutral, subject to falsifiability, based on methodological individualism, and exposed to empirical testing. Disciplines such as economics have embraced this entirely, fashioning themselves as a science, and adopting scientific practices and norms. Milton Friedman (1953:4) explains, 'Positive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgments. …[It is] an "objective" science, in precisely the same sense as any of the physical sciences'. It follows thus that in this view, critical knowledge is not scientific. In the binary epistemic hierarchy of positivism, critical knowledge is thus effectively downgraded to a non-science or pseudo-science. Indeed, Popper goes much further in the course of his critique of the historicism of Hegel and Marx in the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Here, he takes aim at holism and holistic categories such as class or patriarchy, because of the intentionality they contain as the building blocks of structural explanations. Popper describes them as a sociological 'superstition' which he equates with ancient religious belief and modern conspiracy theories, including anti-semitism:

The belief in the Homeric gods whose conspiracies explain the history of the Trojan War is gone. The gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups—sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from—such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists (459)

Secondly, and as extension, critical theories are defined and conceptualised in terms of their difference from positivism. However, there is no commensurate attention paid to establishing how they differ from conspiracy theories. The critique of positivism, and the rise of critical theorising has a long history from the *methodenstreit* in the late-19th century, (Schumpeter 1954, pp.800-820), the value-orientation debate in the early 20th century (Weber 1917), the rise of the Frankfurt school in the inter-war decades, and the positivism debate between Adorno and Popper in the mid-20th

century (Adorno et al, 1976). Through this time, the critical tradition has carved its identity by explicitly rejecting science as a model to study society, arguing that social reality is inherently subjective (Schutz 1932), and that value-neutrality is a fiction that amounts to a passive acceptance or complicity with existing power hierarchies (Adorno 1976). Moreover, it has subjected science itself to hostile scrutiny, questioning its ideas of linear progress (Kuhn 1962), its deployment as a tool of social control (Foucault 1966), the special epistemic status of science (Bloor 1976), the construction of scientific facts (Latour and Woolgar 1979), and the androcentric bias of scientific knowledge (Harding 1986). As Horkheimer (1937) argues, critical theories are reflexive, emancipatory, non-mechanistic, and historically informed, and are ethically and diagnostically superior to orthodox scientist theories. There is as such, a well defined body of writing to distinguish critical theories from positivist theories. There is, however, no commensurate body of rules that can clarify whether a given explanation amounts to critical theory or conspiracy theory.

The third problem of demarcation is that available definitions of conspiracy theories struggle to adequately define this phenomenon. Research into conspiracy theories has expanded significantly in recent years in the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, political science and culture studies (Butter and Knight 2019). There are a number of concerns to raise about this literature, the most problematic of which is the tendency to pathologise conspiracy theories (Darwin et al, 2011, Swami et al 2014 and to ascribe them to mental inadequacies. But of greater relevance to this article are two other issues.

Firstly, the literature often takes a literalist view of conspiracy theories, assuming them to be *theories about conspiracies*. For example, Keeley (1999: 116) defines it as: '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'. But contrary to what the name suggests, the contemporary phenomenon of Euro-American conspiracy theories rarely points to secret plots by small groups of conspirators any more. Instead, prevalent conspiracy theories about climate change, 9/11, vaccine-based micro-chipping, QAnon, Covid-19, the Global Reset, Illuminati, Chemtrails, or even Area 51 aliens invoke the spectre of a larger invisible *system* of hostile, predatory power. As Timothy Melley (2000) describes, 'it frequently refers to the workings of a large organization, technology, or system- a powerful and obscure entity'. It is this feature of conspiracy theorising that brings it into proximity with structural explanations of critical theories.

Secondly, conspiracy theories are often inadequately conceptualised, so much so that they inadvertently capture critical theories within them. For example, an influential article by Sunstein and Vermeule (2009:205) defines conspiracy theories as 'an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished).' Similarly, Douglas et al, (2017:538) explain that conspiracy theories are different from other causal theories because they are 'speculative in that they posit actions that are hidden from public scrutiny, complex in that they postulate the coordination of multiple actors, and

resistant to falsification in that they postulate that conspirators use stealth and disinformation to cover up their actions.' What is important to note about these largely inadequate definitions, (which are illustrative of the literature at large), is that they readily apply to and capture critical social theorising within them.

This in turn is indicative of a more serious and unacknowledged problem in this literature: contrary to their assumption, conspiracy theories are not a stable, naturally occurring set of timeless ideas with consistent, shared, self-evident features. This means that they are simply not amenable to analysis based on the essential criteria of their content. This is a point well illustrated by Pelkman and Machold (2011:76), who compare the way two different false explanations for 9/11 have evolved, so that one is firmly lodged in the American public debates as a conspiracy theory, while the other, equally implausible, has managed to evade this designation. They conclude that 'There are no persistent epistemological differences between conspiracy theories and other theories'.

The point is that conspiracy theories constitute a synthetic collection of formulations that are united not in terms of their inner essence, but their public reputation as false, absurd, and dangerous. To designate an idea as a conspiracy theory is thus not a description of its features, but is a label, which discredits it as false, and characterises those who believe it as credulous or delusional. As Byford (2011:22-23) describes, the label serves as a 'resource for delegitimation', and 'character assassination'.

This does not mean conspiracy theories should be considered as an entirely arbitrary or fictitious category. There are for sure, a range of entirely implausible interpretations of reality that are the product of mischievous misinformation and febrile fantasy. But as the many flaccid and inadequate definitions of conspiracy theories indicate, their boundaries are unstable, poorly drawn, and inconsistent, with significant anomalies of inclusion and exclusion. By extension, this also means that the distinction between critique and conspiracy is not a self-evident, immutable timeless gulf between two solid ontological entities. They are instead similarly unstable and fluid, based on contingent, subjectively informed understandings of what constitutes legitimate and plausible interpretations of reality.

To summarise this section, the literature does not adequately address the problem of how critical and conspiracy theories can be demarcated from one another, and the search for such criteria leads to an impasse. Existing lines of knowledge demarcation place the two in the same category. Critical theories are formally defined and differentiated only from orthodox theories, but not from conspiracy theories. Definitions of conspiracy theories chronically lack precision and are broad enough to inadvertently capture critical theories within them. Finally, the fluid, socially constructed nature of conspiracy theories means that any essential markers of definition that are drawn around them are invariably either flawed or transient.

Where does this leave the questions set out in this article? If such essential delineations and de jure rules do not exist or fail to provide clarity, is it instead possible to find a de facto reality? That is, is it possible to uncover how the distinction between these two bodies of knowledge takes place in real world practices? The following section examines the case of Giorgio Agamben, an acclaimed critical theorist who was widely accused of having become a conspiracy theorist in the context of the 2020-21 Covid pandemic. Can an examination of the circumstances of this case yield a shared implicit rule that is widely understood and acted upon, that distinguishes between critique and conspiracy?

2. Caro Giorgio…

On 26 February 2020, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, widely known for his contributions to the critical study of biopolitics, power, and sovereignty, published a short article titled 'The invention of an epidemic' (Agamben 2020a). It was a sharply worded attack on the new emergency lockdown measures introduced to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus in northern Italy. Agamben argued that the rules were unwarranted, disproportionate, and had a hidden agenda. He repeated and expanded these arguments in numerous short articles that were published over the Covid-19 pandemic period of 2020-21. Agamben's writings shocked many of his colleagues and admirers. It provoked a storm of angry and anguished responses from philosophers and critical scholars in Italy and beyond, who dismissed and mocked his views as paranoid and conspiracist.

As a philosopher, Agamben's writings cover a wide range of topics including aesthetics, religion, and law. However, he only gained widespread academic fame and an international readership after the English translations of his 1995 book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, and his 2003 book *State of Exception*. His theorisation of sovereignty, citizenship, and biopolitics have inspired and framed the writings of critical scholars on a wide range of topics, such as the nature of executive power, surveillance, citizenship, refugees, and counter-terrorism laws. Brandmayr (2024) notes that 'for many academics and leftist commentators, he was one of the greatest living philosophers'.

Agamben's writings about the pandemic in 2020-21 articulate four main problems. Firstly, he questioned the necessity for the lockdown, arguing that the scale of the threat was exaggerated, and that the evidence presented was flawed. In a blog article published on 28 April 2020, he alleged, 'What we are now living through is… a massive campaign to falsify the truth … I am not alone in having noticed that the data on the epidemic is offered vaguely and without scientific scrutiny' (Agamben 2020b).

Secondly, he lamented the consequences of the lockdown and the diminished quality of human life it had created. Under conditions of seclusion and social distancing, he argued, human existence had become devoid of social relationships. It had instead shrunk to a state of lonely 'bare life', a minimal biological existence that he had written about extensively, and had deployed to describe life in the

concentration camp. In an interview with Swedish Public Radio on 19 April 2020, he described, 'people have been confined to their houses and, deprived of all social relationships, reduced to a condition of biological survival' (Agamben 2021a:156).

Thirdly, he argued that governments would abuse and exploit the extraordinary powers and technologies that they had gained access to under the pandemic to institute permanent controls and limitations on personal freedoms. In his article on 26 February 2020, he wrote, 'once terrorism ceased to exist as a cause for measures of exception, the invention of an epidemic offers the ideal pretext for widening them beyond all known limits' (Agamben 2020a).

Fourthly he questioned vaccines, which he alleged were deployed without adequate testing, and with vaccine mandates that discriminated against the unvaccinated. In an article on 16 July 2021 which won widespread condemnation, he wrote:

the debate is still ongoing on the safety and efficacy of vaccines, which, according … doctors and scientists …, were produced hastily and without adequate testing. … The 'green pass' [Italian vaccine certificate/pass that allowed access to public places] makes those who do not have it bearers of a virtual yellow star (Agamben 2021b).

The negative response to Agamben began immediately after his first article. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2020) explained that Agamben suffered from a long-standing problem of poor judgment. Italian philosophers Sergio Benvenuto (2020) , Paolo Flores d'Arcais (2020), and the social theorist Marco D'Eramo (2020) rejected Agamben's views as 'paranoid interpretations of history', 'a bullshit philosophy', or 'paranoid conspiracism'. Others described his writings as 'symptomatic of theory's collapse into paranoia', (Berg 2020), or that it 'made him sound like Coronavus denialists such as Bolsonaro or Trump' (Christaens 2000). On 28 March 2020, Agamben was featured in the French website Conspiracy Watch in an article titled 'Conspiracy theory legitimised: Giorgio Agamben and the pandemic' (Rastier 2020). Many of his critics noted with regret that an otherwise brilliant thinker had abruptly lost his bearings and sense of judgment in the pandemic. His translator, Adam Kotsko (2022) acknowledged this transformation, and noted that his previously 'authoritative work has taken on a distorted new shape in Agamben's own hands'.

Agamben persevered and continued to write against the Covid-19 lockdown, pausing occasionally to respond to his critics. As the pandemic stretched out into 2021, he increasingly targeted vaccines, mass vaccinations, and the vaccine mandate rules. His views and celebrity status had gained him a new audience of supporters among vaccine sceptics and opponents to the pandemic measures, leading in October 2021 to an invitation to address the Italian Senate. In response, his detractors launched a renewed round of attacks on him. Whereas the first phase in early 2020 featured responses that express shock or ridicule, the second phase in 2021 was notable for responses that were framed with the broader strategic objective of protecting philosophy and critical scholarship.

A public statement signed by over 100 Italian philosophers titled 'Not Just Agamben', (Abbate 2021) expressed frustration that philosophical contributions to the Covid-19 pandemic were dominated by this one erratic and outspoken individual. The statement laid out an alternative, collective position on the role of philosophy in science, the state-citizen relationship, the role of vaccine certificates, and individual freedoms. The Italian philosopher Donatella Di Cesare (2021) wrote an article titled 'Dear Agamben, we have to save you and your philosophy from your conspiracy theories'. British literature scholar Martin Paul Eve (2021) called for Agamben to be dropped from academic syllabi. Finally, Agamben's own translator, Adam Kotsko (2022), publicly broke with him, and wrote a long article that characterised his views as paranoid, and reminiscent of a 'right-wing crank'.

What insights can the case of Agamben reveal about the difference between critical and conspiracy theories? The answer to this requires an investigation of the basis on which his detractors judged him to have crossed that frontier. The assumption here is that there exists a widely understood, rules-based practice to identify the difference between legitimate social critique and conspiracy theory, and it is on this basis that Agamben was briefly cancelled. The people in that environment - the community of critical scholars - share an understanding of these rules, deploy it and act upon it, although it remains implicit, and is rarely articulated in its raw form. This is not because they are secret or withheld as such. It is, as Mary Douglas (1989:3) describes, a category of knowledge that is left obscured not because it is actively suppressed, but because it is 'too true to warrant discussion'.

This means that this body of rules and the boundary it generates become manifest only in terms of their effects, and only when they are put into practice. The circumstances of Agamben's reclassification from revered critical scholar to ridiculed conspiracy theorist in the Covid-19 period provide an opportunity to locate that dividing line, and to render it legible. This requires one to recover the underlying principle and the reasoning that was used to adjudicate between the two categories. In practice, it becomes necessary to identify what Agamben wrote during the pandemic that placed him beyond the pale, and that was a departure from his previous writing. The community of critical scholars who rhetorically expelled Agamben from their midst clearly held certain red lines in mind, which they deemed him to have breached. What exactly was this transgression?

Briefly, there were three such problems that his accusers identified: firstly, that his diagnoses were based on flawed assumptions and paranoid extrapolation; secondly, that his language was hyperbolic and exaggerated, drawing offensive comparisons of lockdown measures to the holocaust (Salzani 2021); and thirdly, that his writings promoted and enabled populist far-right politics. All three need to be scrutinised in turn.

In response to the first, a comparison of the substance of Agamben's writings before and after the pandemic does not suggest any fundamental change. As Brandmayr (2024) describes, 'The claim made by some "embarrassed allies" that the original theory is sound, and that Agamben simply

misapplied it in the case of the pandemic appears difficult to prove'. In other words, Agamben consistently interpreted the pandemic through the lens of his own dystopian framework of bare life, the state of exception, and biopolitical control. His concerns about the lockdown, emergency powers, and vaccines were not a departure, but an affirmation and logical extension of his earlier ideas. Kotsko (2022) confirms this, and explains that Agamben viewed the lockdown as 'a radical confirmation of his thesis'.

In terms of the second point, there are indeed some stylistic differences that can be attributed to the medium, format, and the immediacy of events he was commenting on. Agamben's Covid-19 writing took the form of short blog posts rather than monographs, and they comment on current events and emerging scientific evidence, rather than his areas of expertise. But there are also continuities even in this regard. Hyperbole and exaggeration were not unique to his pandemic writings, but were widely known features of his writing style. Agamben's technique of narrative theorising, which his contemporaries routinely remarked on (Butler 2004, Fitzpatrick 2006, Lemke 2011), was to extrapolate the exceptional as the normal, and to generalise the extreme as the totalising reality. As Prozorov (2021: 25) describes: 'It would thus be incorrect to read Agamben's coronavirus statements as polemical exaggerations at odds with the measured tone of his more academic writings. Polemical exaggerations were abundant in the latter writings as well'.

It follows thus that if both the substance and style of Agamben's Covid-19 writings were consistent with the past, these were not the red lines that were breached. One would thus have to discard the notion that he suffered an abrupt lapse in his faculties and judgment during the pandemic. This leaves only the third complaint: that Agamben's pandemic views were politically aligned with, and legitimised populist far-right politics. Indeed, Agamben experienced what Brandmayr (2024) describes as an 'audience switch' from left to right. He lost the support of the liberal-left wing, while gaining an entirely new following from the populist right-wing, who had similarly championed opposition to the Covid-19 lockdown and vaccines. Agamben's views were, for a brief while, quoted and amplified by right-wing politicians, activists, and media in Italy.

What this means is that the only significant difference between the critical Agamben and his conspiratorial alter-ego is the changed ideo-political composition of his audience. The breached red line in question is none other than the left-right political divide. Agamben was admired by critical theorists before the pandemic when his writings articulated their ethical concerns and amplified their politics, even though they might well have been bombastic in style and unevidenced in substance. The same Agamben, who remained consistent in his tone and ideas, was denounced by them as a conspiracy theorist when his writing spoke instead to the right.

What is also important to note here is that this sequence of events occurred in the broader context of the emergence of a populist right wing, and a transposition in what traditionally constitutes the relationship of the left- and right-wing to state authority. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Italian

and Euro-American left-wing found themselves in an essentially conservative position of defending state power, the rule of law, social order, and the dominant epistemic authority (of science). In contrast, the right-wing had become populist and radical iconoclasts who rejected all of these positions. They questioned the epidemiological evidence, opposed the extraordinary restrictions on movement, and raised grave concerns about vaccines. The circumstances of this transformation are complex and beyond the scope of this chapter. But what is relevant to note is that the left-right divide which Agamben breached is not a fixed certainty, but a fluid and evolving line of confrontation.

To summarise this section, judgments about Agamben by critical scholars and philosophers tended to be based on the political alignment of his writings. Agamben was reclassified from critical to conspiracist when his writings crossed the left-right divide. This resulted not from any change in his politics as such, but from the logical extension of his earlier work in style and substance to the circumstances of the pandemic. Given that the left-right political divide was itself fluid and had significantly shifted shape in recent years, it necessarily follows that it was not Agamben who changed position to cross a stationary red line, but vice versa: the red line had changed position and crossed a stationary Agamben.

This would mean that the de facto demarcation between critical and conspiracy theories is fundamentally based on subjective value attachment, and on the evolving lines of confrontation that divide fixed political communities. It implies that ideas and thinkers who may be seen as critical today may, without changing their position, be later judged as conspiratorial, and vice versa. These conclusions are consistent with those drawn from the earlier section, that the distinction between critical and conspiracy thinking is not a fixed reality, but is fluid and depends on a shifting consensus on what constitutes legitimate and plausible interpretations of reality.

3. How are critique and conspiracy related?

Thus far, the problem of understanding the ambiguity and blurring of lines between critical and conspiracy theories has been approached by seeking out their differences. This compulsion to demarcate, whether in science, religion, or even aesthetics, is essentially an act of establishing and protecting epistemic superiority. It is the work of protecting a superior or legitimate knowledge from an inferior and illegitimate one by determining what is true, verified, orthodox, sacred, or permitted, and purifying it from that which is false, speculative, heretical, profane, and forbidden. It is, in brief, the work of regulating and governing knowledge. One way in which to evade complicity in that governmental work of hierarchical purification is to move away from asking how these two categories are differentiated, and instead to ask how they are connected. What underlying factors explain why they appear so similar and indistinguishable? Here too, the literature provides little explicit guidance, but there are four broad possibilities that can be inferred.

Firstly, a predictable explanation from Popper, science, and positivism, that *critical theories are effectively sophisticated conspiracy theories* (Popper 2013, Sokal and Bricmont 1999, Labinger and Collins 2001). A second explanation, and a response to the first comes from the opposite camp of critical social theory, which explains conversely, that *conspiracy theories are folk critical theories.* This school of thought rejects and transcends the positivist dismissal and pathologisation of conspiracy theories as deranged or paranoid. Instead, it sees them as a dysfunction to be empathetically decoded, so that, as Frederic Jameson (1988) describes, they are a 'poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age'. Melley (2000: 13) similarly describes that they are attempts by ordinary people to construct culturally resonant narratives that explain a rapidly changing world: 'Conspiracy theory arises out of radical doubt about how knowledge is produced and about the authority of those who produce it (Melley 2000:13). Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) explain that conspiracy theories in contemporary South Africa not only fill an 'epistemic black hole', but in doing so, they connect it to an emancipatory logic, where official explanations are unconvincing, and where these narratives assume the form of resistance against predatory systems of power.

In contrast to these, Latour (2004) himself, along with Naomi Klein (2023), provide a novel third explanation that *conspiracy theories are deformed critical theories.* This is in effect a social science version of the Frankenstein or 'lab leak' horror story. In this account, conspiracy theories are critical theories that have spun out of control as unauthorised, mutant offspring. Indeed, Latour invites readers to consider conspiracy theories as dangerous weapons that have proliferated into the wrong hands, or as viruses that escape a sterile laboratory to mutate and infect the public.

Fourthly, there is the intriguing, but under-articulated Paranoiac-Critical Method (PCM) of Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dali that draws on Freud to invert Latour's lab-leak hypothesis. As Jamer Hunt (1999:21) describes, PCM brings out the 'often lost continuity between the delusional and rational'. What this means is that paranoid speculation is an intrinsic part of the process by which mature and robust social theory is assembled. Conspiracy theories might thus be seen not as the rogue derivatives of critical theories, but the opposite, as their precursors, prototypes and early iterations.

I suggest instead that an adequate explanation for the relationship for critical and conspiracy theories takes as its starting point the conclusions drawn from the previous two sections. That is, there are no essential demarcation lines or epistemic differences between critique and conspiracy, that existing demarcations and definitions tend to conflate them, conspiracy theories are a label rather than an internally consistent category, and the differences between these categories in practice are fluid and unstable. With these in mind, the framework that I present identifies critical and conspiracy theories as examples of a common and widespread pattern of thinking called the *sceptical reasoning of uncertainty.* That is, they appear similar because they are indeed fundamentally similar. They have a

familiar structure and function because they arise from the same cognitive processes in response to the same kinds of impulses.

This way of thinking about critique and conspiracy is sympathetic to some elements of the explanations provided in the above discussed literature, notably that conspiracy theories are socially constructed, that critical and conspiracy theories are similar versions of one another, and that they are a response to social anxieties. What it rejects are the psychological reductionism, and the parochial explanations that pathologise conspiracy theories as mental disorders, or that visualise them as a unique problem of contemporary Euro-America, associated with the recent rise of ideas such as climate denial, QAnon, or 9/11 trutherism. As Butter (2014) explains, what would today be described as conspiracy theories were considered normal and legitimate beliefs in the USA before the 1950s. It is only after this period, when Popper had written and publicised the term, and when Hofstadter had illustrated the paranoid culture that underpinned it, that conspiracy theories gained a name, and became part of a recognisable public phenomenon. As Oliver and Wood (2014: 963-964) find on the basis of data from the US, conspiracy theory belief is still very widespread, and does not reflect ignorance about reality:

With the exception of those adherents of ideological conspiracy theories such as Birthers or Truthers, respondents who endorse conspiracy theories are not less informed about basic political facts than average citizens. Far from being an aberrant expression of some political extreme or a product of gross misinformation, a conspiratorial view of politics is a widespread tendency across the entire ideological spectrum.

The sceptical reasoning of uncertainty is a commonplace form of thinking, both historically and geographically, and is manifest in a range of other phenomena labelled variously as rumours, myths, witchcraft, mass hysteria, or urban legends. The purpose here is not to discredit critical thinking by associating it with the world of magic and paranoia, but to cast doubt on its own origin myth as a unique and special knowledge created and gifted to the world by the European enlightenment. Neither is it the case that conspiratorial thinking can be understood as an abnormal, deranged, or pathological set of ideas that have emerged in contemporary Euro-America as bastardised forms of critical social theory. The ideas variously labeled as critical theories, conspiracy theories, or otherwise, are different forms in which the random uncertainties and misfortunes of everyday life are condensed into reasoned explanations about hidden systems of malign power.

In his classic study of the Zande, Evans-Pritchard (1976) describes the operation of witchcraft, which is invoked to decode acts of 'mundane misfortune' that cannot otherwise be explained by the manifest facts at hand. What does this share with Arturo Escobar's (1995) argument that the benign language of development and poverty alleviation conceals an agenda of neo-colonial domination and control? Both of these explanations arise from a deeper concern with uncertainty: that human society is vulnerable to powerful, dangerous, and sophisticated forces. These antagonists and their

mechanisms are not always visible to the naked eye and to everyday common sense, so that it requires careful work, often under the guidance of a specialist, to render them legible and plausible. This work involves using expert knowledge with the tools of inference, intuition, deduction, interpolation, and informed speculation to transcend the mundane and the superficial. They connect an incomplete set of verifiable referents by processing them through a culturally meaningful framework of interpretation to arrive at a satisfying explanation. The explanations they provide are consistent with existing social imaginaries, and give a rationale to the irrational, and finite certainty to the random and uncertain.

In other words, the common element between critique and conspiracy is not that they are both unscientific or superstitious beliefs, as Popper would assert. Rather, it is that they are both forms of reasoned explanations to provide a coherent and culturally meaningful understanding of an uncertain and predatory world. Robin Horton (1967)'s comparison of Western science with African supernatural thinking similarly demonstrates how the actual practice of arriving at 'theory' operates in fundamentally similar ways across diverse thought systems. The notable feature of Zande witchcraft is thus not that it is a departure from reasoned scientific thought, but as Evans-Pritchard describes, that it is constitutive of careful reasoning.

People seek explanations for complexity that explain the malign chaos of the everyday world by identifying their causal factors. These invariably feature familiar antagonists and tropes, whether they be witches, neo-colonialism, vaccines, the CIA, Bill Gates, or the deep state. This is what the social psychology literature describes as the narrative construction of reality (Bruner 1991) or the illusion of causality. People search for patterns and meaning to mitigate the unpredictability of a chaotic world. They understand reality in terms of meaningful sequences and a compelling storyline. As Kahneman describes:

Narrative fallacies arise inevitably from our continuous attempt to make sense of the world. The explanatory stories that people find compelling are simple; are concrete rather than abstract; assign a larger role to talent, stupidity, and intentions than to luck; and focus on a few striking events that happened rather than on the countless events that failed to happen.'

In this process of interpretation, story-telling, and the connecting of faint dots into causal chains, there is no clear dichotomy between conspiratorial paranoia and critical insight. This is on the one hand because judgments are based on their resonance with a particular audience. As Timothy Melley (2000: 19-20) explains, 'the difference between a paranoid theory and a brilliant theory may only be a matter of how much explanatory power the theory has for a given interpretive community.' But it is also because the underlying process that gives rise to them is the same, and it is only the circumstances of their parentage, social validation and public articulation that fashions them into different categories.

There are thus three components to the sceptical reasoning of uncertainty. First, there is a fundamental human need to find reasoned explanations and interpretations for existential uncertainties and random calamities - deprivation, natural disaster, death, or disease. Such explanations mitigate and regulate uncertainty by reducing chaos to a finite set of antagonistic causal factors. As Melley (2000:9) describes, 'it makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening way'. Second, it is about the recognition that there is more to reality than what is superficially visible, and that there are malign forms of power and control over everyday human life. These can take the form of masked predators, cosmological beings, the hidden systems of power, or pathogenic microbes. Thirdly it is culturally meaningful, which means that the identity of the culprit is often pre-existing within a known framework of demonology or an ur-critique: the plague is thus attributed to the Jews; the under-development of Latin America is the result of its colonial past; the declaration of a health emergency is a ploy by the government to seize extraordinary powers.

6. Conclusions

Terry Eagleton (2016) observes that 'the line between eccentricity and insanity in the English aristocracy has always been hard to draw'. He uses the case of an 18th century English aristocrat to question the boundaries between sanity and insanity, and to illustrate the way that social power and privilege affect how this is labeled and presented publicly. This chapter has addressed a similar concern over the indeterminate lines between conspiracy and critical theories, and has approached it in three ways.

Firstly, it searched for essential criteria and clearly delineated boundaries that could help identify the one from the other, and found that these do not exist. This is because critical theories are under-specified, and also because conspiracy theories lack conceptual stability or internal consistency. Secondly, it searched for observed practices of delineation, and found that the lines in the sand between the two correspond not to clear natural or ontological boundaries, or to evidence of plausibility, but to the political cleavage between left and right. Thirdly, it sought to transcend the idea of delineation by explaining the underlying relationship between these two in terms of a widespread, shared form of quotidian reasoning about uncertainty.

The conclusion that it leads to is that the main differences between critical and conspiracy theories are not ontological but social and cultural. They are organically similar forms of reasoning that arise in response to similar circumstances. One subset of this form of reasoning, produced under certain social circumstances, and with claims to a superior value-orientation is judged, by an internal social consensus, as legitimate, plausible, and emancipatory. Another subset is filtered out by this process as illegitimate, paranoid, and dangerous.

With this conclusion in mind, how do we situate Latour's perplexed horror at the growth of conspiracy theories? And how can we understand the subsequent responses he provoked on the future of critique, such as Didier Fassin's (2017: 7) rhetorical question: 'Should we throw the baby of critique out with the bathwater of denialist and conspiratorial ideas?' Fassin's answer is of course that we should not, and that we instead need to persevere with critique to clarify its function and strengthen its legitimacy. But if we take Latour and Fassin's views on the state of critique not as a complaint or instruction, but as objects of diagnosis within the framework of the epistemic governance of reason, it provides a different understanding.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains that the legitimate use of reason is to draw conclusions drawn from human sensory experience, but not from the 'noumenal' or metaphysical realm beyond that. His later essay 'What is Enlightenment?' extends his answer to the public sphere, where he endorses the use of reason to question and debate (that is, to critique authority), albeit within limits. Almost two centuries later, Foucault reflected on Kant in his 1978 essay 'What is Critique?', to explain how critique has taken on the role of interrogating the certitudes supposedly produced by reason. Critique has, he notes, come to define:

the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped. Illegitimate uses of reason are what give rise to dogmatism and heteronomy, along with illusion.

What Kant and Foucault's interventions signify is that the real world of reasoning is not a binary process in which reason is clearly distinguishable as an advance over unreason or superstition. It is, instead, a chaotic process that can incubate a plurality of different narrative formulations. There are many possible ways in which the random uncertainties of the social and physical world can be cognitively reduced into a finite set of causal factors. The establishment and preservation of a particular epistemic regime occurs through its capacity to institute robust mechanisms of regulation, verification, and discipline over these diverse fruits of reason. This formulation resonates with traditional concerns in Science and Technology Studies (Jasanoff 2004, 2012) about the governance of reason, and the co-production of epistemic authority and socio-political order.

It is in this context that Latour, Fassin, and their interlocutors on the future of critique can be situated. That is, by raising the alarm over the proliferation of conspiracy theories, Latour is in effect complaining about the breakdown of this epistemic regime, albeit due to the corrosive force of critique itself, which has metastasized into conspiracy. Fassin's call for us to clarify critique and strengthen its legitimacy is similarly the work of addressing this anxiety by constructing a more robust governance regime and by articulating more explicit lines of demarcation, which, as discovered earlier in this chapter, are missing.

The answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article is thus that there are no hard boundaries to demarcate critical knowledge from conspiracy theories, but that this occurs in practice through the socially constructed boundaries by which reason itself is regulated. Critique is an expert use of sceptical reason. It involves critical experts who are trained and verified, and who perform the rituals of academic expertise competently. Critical reasoning thus constructed enters into the community of similar experts who verify and legitimise it. Conspiracy theories do not have that social origin or validation. These ideas consequently remain raw, unfiltered, or as Latour himself might describe, unpasteurised.

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