

# **Conspiracy theories as counter-knowledge: Alternative approaches to the current crisis of the capitalist system**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to identify and analyse conspiracy narratives as popular counter-knowledge and as alternatives to leftist discourse and explanations of the contradictions of a capitalist system in a systemic crisis.

The study makes a distinction between pathological and cultural approaches to conspiracy theories. While pathological approaches critically assess conspiracy theories as expressions of a certain political paranoia, cultural approaches are more inclusive and view conspiracy theory as cultural expressions of the postmodern condition. The cultural understandings break the categorical link between conspiracy theories and irrationality and allows a further discussion on how conspiracy theories might relate to leftist discourse and its attempts to counter neoliberal hegemonic structures.

The approach taken by the study relies on the theoretical framework of historical materialism. Key theories used derive from Karl Marx, along with Gramscian, World Systems theory and critical approaches to global political economy. In the historical analysis that was performed, the understanding of structures in the historical development of the world economy, as well as the role of social forces which lead to changes in these structures were shown to be better approaches for understanding both historical events and the current crisis in the capitalist system. However, even within the opportune movement of an on-going capitalist crisis, the Left struggles to create a consistent counter-hegemonic narrative, and current counter-hegemonic movements, whilst being influential, are not succeeding in being transformative

This suggests that leftist discourse fails to address the micro-level manifestations of the contradictions of the current system in a way that appeals to the masses. Accordingly, conspiracy theories as frameworks from which to critique the current global political economy are discussed. It is argued that although conspiracy theories are essentially reactionary, as well as historically a product of the far right, these theories might be understood as allegorical narrative constructs that serve as tools of orientation in a confusing political reality and, as such, the label of irrationality should not be applied without further consideration.

It is further suggested that there is a proximity between various critical perspectives and conspiracy theories, although it is not implied that there is an exchange of ideas. It is argued that strands of critical theory and conspiracy theory share certain convictions about how the social world is constructed. While leftist/critical discourse relies on a scientific historical analysis, conspiracy discourses are often categorised lacking in scientific support. Critical theoretical perspectives are therefore suggested as the most effective remedy against utopian and simplistic narratives.

While the thesis does not challenge the appropriateness of Marxist/critical perspectives at explaining economic crisis and global inequity, it aims at discussing the popularity of conspiracy theories as, for many, preferable tools of orientation in the present times. While political scientific theories and conspiracy theories are generally understood as in essence incompatible, this thesis attempted to discuss and analyse whether this established view could be challenged in light of recent scholarship on conspiracy culture. The study concludes that Marxist/critical approaches should understand conspiracy theories as alternative counter-knowledge and as popular doorways into major social issues that define global political culture, which could actually complement traditional leftist discourse.

## OPSOMMING

Die doel van die studie is om sameswerings-verhale as populêre teen-kennis en as alternatiewe vir linkse diskoers en verklarings van die teenstrydighede van 'n kapitalistiese stelsel wat 'n sistemiese krisies beleef, te identifiseer en te analiseer.

Die studie onderskei tussen patologiese en kulturele benaderings tot samesweringsteorieë. Patologiese benaderinge raam samesweringsteorieë krities as uitdrukkings van bepaalde politieke paranoia, terwyl kulturele benaderinge meer inklusief is, samesweringsteorieë beskou as 'n kulturele uitdrukking van die postmoderne toestand. Die kulturele begrip breek die kategorieëse skakel tussen samesweringsteorieë en irrasionaliteit en fasiliteer nog 'n gesprek oor hoe hierdie teorieë moontlik verwant sou kon wees aan linkse diskoers, asook laasgenoemde se pogings om neoliberale hegemoniese strukture teen te staan.

Die benadering wat gevolg word in die studie steun op die teoretiese raamwerk van historiese materialisme. Die vernaamste vertrekpunte wat gebruik word is afgelei van Karl Marx, tesame met Gramsciaanse, Wêreldstelsel-teorie en kritiese benaderings tot globale politieke ekonomie. In die historiese analiese wat onderneem is, word gedemonstreer dat 'n begrip van strukture in die historiese ontwikkeling van die wêreld-ekonomie, asook die rol van sosiale magte wat verandering in hierdie strukture meebring, beter verklarings bied vir beide historiese gebeure en die teenswoordige krisies in die kapitalistiese stelsel. Nietemin, selfs met die geleenthede wat geskep word te midde van die aangaande kapitalistiese krisies, sukkel Linksgesindes om 'n konsekwente teen-hegemoniese “verhaal” te skep. Kontemporêre teen-hegemoniese bewegings, ongeag hul skynbare invloed, slaag nie daarin om verandering te weeg te bring nie.

Dit wil voorkom asof linkse diskoers nie daarin slaag om die manifistering van die teenswoordige stelsel se teenstrydighede aan te spreek op 'n wyse wat aanklank vind by die massas nie. Dienooreenkomstig word samesweringsteorieë bespreek as raamwerke vanwaar en waaruit die huidige globale politieke ekonomie gekritiseer kan word. Die argument word aangevoer dat, alhoewel hierdie teorieë essensieel reaksionêr is, asook histories gesien 'n verregse produk, hulle moontlik verstaan kan word as allegoriese verhaal konstruksie wat dien as middele vir orientasie in 'n verwarrende politieke werklikheid. As sulks, behoort die etiket van irrasionaliteit nie sondermeer en onkrities aan hulle toegedien te word nie.

Verder, word daar in die studie voorgestel, dat daar raakpunte is tussen verskeie kritiese perspektiewe en samesweringsteorieë. Daar word egter nie gesuggereer dat daar 'n uitruil van idees is nie. Daar word egter wel ge-argumenteer dat daar elemente van kritiese teorieë en samesweringsteorieë is wat bepaalde oortuigings deel oor hoe die sosiale werklikheid gevorm word. Terwyl linkse en kritiese diskoers gekoppel is aan wetenskaplike-historiese analise, word samesweringsdiskoerse gekategoriseer as verklarings wat gebrek lei aan wetenskaplike ondersteuning. Kritiese teoretiese perspektiewe word dus voorgehou as die mees effektiewe oplossing teen utopiese en simplistiese narratiewe.

Terwyl die tesis nie die toepasbaarheid van Marxistiese/Kritiese perspektiewe, as verklarings vir die ekonomiese krisies en globale ongelykheid, uitdaag nie, het dit gepoog om die populariteit van samesweringsteorieë, as voorkeur raamwerke vir oriëntering in teenswoordige tye, aan te spreek. Die tesis het onderneem om vas te stel en te analiseer of die algemeen aanvaarde aanname dat politiek wetenskaplike teorieë en samesweringsteorieë essensieel onversoenbaar is, uitgedaag kan word, gesien in die lig van onlangse akademiese werk oor samesweringkultuur. Die studie bevind dat Marxistiese/kritiese benaderings samesweringsteorieë behoort te verstaan as alternatiewe teen-kennis en as populêre ingangspunte tot belangrike sosiale kwessies wat die globale politieke kultuur definieer. In die sin, sou samesweringsteorieë selfs tradisionele linkse diskoers kon aanvul.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1 Background .....	1
1.2 Research questions .....	4
1.3 Theoretical approaches and conceptualisations .....	6
1.4 Methodology .....	7
1.5 Rationale for the study .....	10
1.6 Other considerations.....	12
1.7 Chapter outline .....	13
<b>Chapter 2: Conspiracy theories - A literature review</b>	
2.1 Introduction .....	15
2.2 Historical overview of conspiracy theories .....	18
2.3 New World Order conspiracy theories .....	23
2.4 Pathological approaches to conspiracy theory and the structure and characteristics of New World Order theories .....	28
2.5 Epistemological approaches to conspiracy theories .....	33
2.6 Cultural approaches and New World Order as post-modern meta-narrative .....	35
2.7 Conclusion.....	43
<b>Chapter 3 The ideology of counter hegemonic resistance</b>	
3.1 Introduction .....	44
3.2 Historical –materialist theoretical framework of counter-politics .....	46
3.3 World-System Theory - Hegemony and World Order .....	49
3.3.2 Gramsci and Hegemony .....	52
3.3.3 Cox and Neo-Gramscian perspectives - Hegemony and World order .....	55
3.4 The Occupy Wall Street Movement.....	59



3.4.2 The financial crisis and the protest against neoliberal hegemony.....	60
3.4.3 The Occupy movement .....	62
3.4.4 Occupy as a counter-Hegemonic Movement .....	64
3.5 Counter politics and conspiracy theories .....	66
3.6 Concluding remarks	68

#### **Chapter 4 Conspiracy theory and conventional critical approaches to hegemony**

4.1 Introduction .....	69
4.2 Class analysis and conspiracy theory .....	71
4.3 Theory or conspiracy theory? A matter of disqualification by discursive position	80
4.4 The role of secret agents in class formation in the works of Kees van der Pijl	87
4.5 Conclusions .....	90

<b>Chapter 5 Conclusion</b> .....	87
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<b>Bibliography</b> .....	92
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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The ideas of Karl Marx, it is argued, became influential partly because of his ability as a professional journalist to communicate the true exploitive nature of the capitalist system to the working class. He allegedly did this through stories that exemplified the grim realities under which the working classes lived. It has been argued<sup>1</sup> that the strength of these narratives, just as much as the theoretical framework of historical materialism, is the reason why so many countries have been governed according to political platforms that refer to Marx's name, while there have been no political programs that have been called Hegelian, Nietzschean or Kantian. There are, of course, other reasons for this but perhaps it suggests something about a precondition for transformative change, the importance of having material conditions narrated in a way that serves to mobilise the masses.

In the present global situation, the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system have been manifested in the financial crisis that began in 2007. The crisis must be understood as a systemic crisis of the capitalist system and not only a result of the collapse in the mortgage market in the United States of America (USA) in 2007 and 2008. Neither is the greed of Wall Street's Corporate Executive Officers (CEOs) and other highly ranked executives the full explanation to the crisis - although their actions might well deserve both public scrutiny and legal persecution. The crisis is of a systemic nature, and therefore there is no quick fix. Mainstream approaches to the crisis fail to grasp its magnitude and, furthermore, do not suggest an alternative.

The most notable manifestation of resistance towards the neoliberal hegemony in recent years has been the Occupy Movement. This movement, as with other contemporary movements, has been understood as influential, although not transformative. Immanuel Wallerstein, who at first described the revolution of 1968 as the most important transformative event in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wallerstein, as cited in Schouten 2008: 1), later regarded the Occupy Movement in the USA, which according to Wallerstein directly evolved from this revolution, the most important political happening in the country since 1968 (Wallerstein, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> This opinion was heard in a radio programme to which this researcher no longer has any reference.

Noam Chomsky, who has attended Occupy events and openly stated his support for the movement, has expressed the hope that “these courageous and honourable protests should bring the gangsterism into public attention to help to get the US and the world on a better course” (Chomsky, 2011). And while Slavoj Zizek (2011) saw the Occupy Movement as a reaction to a systemic crisis of capitalism rather than the failure of institutions, Jeffrey Sachs (2011) blames certain political and economic elites for how Wall Street “lost its common-sense” and how it made some of the biggest firms in the USA act in an “epidemic of corporate greed”. Sachs, however, did not see any alternative to capitalism. Niall Ferguson (2011) fundamentally ridiculed the movement by describing it as a populist backlash to the financial crisis, founded on the misunderstandings of its sources. In an article in *The Daily Beast* (2011), he suggested that the strongest force of the movement was simply that the young people involved think that demonstrations are “way cool”, and he further portrayed the appearance of Slavoj Zizek as a 1968 parody and depicted their retrogression of the language of 1968 as a sign of political disillusionment. Francis Fukuyama (2012) pointed out the limited uprising from the Left, and the difficulty of mobilising around class issues in the USA and elsewhere.

Occupy is further typically compared with the anti-globalisation movements of the 1990s. For example, the Attac Movement, solidly rooted in Marxist traditions, originated from an article in the French *Le Monde* that addressed new ways of taxing big multinational corporations. The language was more or less classic Marxist, and the flags and banners were red and black. The movement died out rapidly, however, especially after the New York 9/11 attacks, and perhaps the anti-globalisation movements largely disappeared in the patriotism and militarism that followed these acts of terrorism (Klein, 2011).

The decline of the anti-globalisation movement is further commonly understood to be a consequence of Marxist disillusionment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this connection, Boltanski (2002) argues that the Left in Europe has, since 1968, struggled with the heritage of continuing the quest for “total revolution”. Zabala (2012) maintains in an article in *Al Jazeera* that being a communist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an existential matter rather than a political choice, and that it now takes the form of a critique of capitalism rather than a longing for a complete transformation of the social order.

Contemporary movements and counter-hegemonic discourse in general is perhaps best understood as “post-political<sup>2</sup>” (Schlembach, 2012: 234). They are social movements in an era of “programmed societies” that cannot be understood in traditional terms of class struggle or political-ideological affinity. With the “post-politics” approach, it is most interesting to which degree political change actually is possible in a “programmed society” in which the political sphere is, by and large, closed by the neoliberal hegemony (Schlembach 2012: 235). In this climate, the political economy is not subject to real contestation, and is increasingly being policed by a technocratic elite, which leaves little room for real political debate (Schlembach 2012: 235). Given this political climate, there is therefore something distinctive about the current counter-hegemonic struggle. While the anti-globalisation movement 15-20 years ago protested against forces that advocated free market liberalism, it is now the neoliberal project as a whole and, more radically, the formal democratic consensus that is being questioned. The goal of current counter-hegemonic resistance is to break consensus, thus allowing a real political debate (Schlembach 2012: 236).

Kees van der Pijl has a similar understanding of a “managerial cadre” that manages the globalised world and depoliticises the Left (Van der Pijl as cited in Schouten, 2008: 3). This “managerial cadre”, or the technocratic elite, typically comes to the fore in times of crisis, as well exemplified by the appointments of former European Union commissioner Mario Monti, and the former European Central Bank employee Lucas Papademos as prime ministers in their respective countries. This was done not to serve political ideologies or social forces within the country, but to serve the economy as a whole and the economic orthodoxy of neoliberalism (Schlembach 2012: 237).

The Left’s historical analysis, The Marxist, Leninist, Hegelian, Gramscian theoretical texts, to mention a few, are quite dense and both inaccessible and unappealing to most people. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, provide a comprehensible entry point to an otherwise confusing struggle against hegemony or other power structures against which individuals feel marginalised and alienated. Although conspiracy theories are discredited, ridiculed and intentionally disqualified from both academic and other discourses (and not without reason),

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<sup>2</sup> “Post-politics” refers to a particular radical critique of the post-Cold War climate in which it is argued that politics have been reduced to social administration. Proponents of this approach include Jacques Ranciere (2007) and Slavoj Zizek (1999), among others.

these theories deserve a less categorical scrutiny in an opportune time of persistent systemic crisis of the capitalist system in which hegemonic ideas remain largely uncontested.

However, conspiracy theories of the grandiose kind that claim to explain how history is being moved by the agenda of secret forces are generally untrue. At least, we have no warrant (Keeley, 1999: 110) to believe that such omnipotent secret organisations have ever existed. Such conspiracy theories are based on a misinformed understanding of historical development, a misunderstanding of roles in society of the rich and the powerful and their means available. These theories often portray an understanding of the international system as one that is extremely ordered, in which historical development is largely under the control of a handful individuals.

Furthermore, the fact that conspiracy theories historically have been a product of the political far right should not be ignored. Conspiratorial world views have often been articulated in explicitly racist terms, and fascist regimes have typically created and used such narratives to justify oppression and persecution of ethnic minorities. The flaws of conspiracy thinking as historical analysis are obvious. However, there are other understandings of the popularity of these narratives that are arguably more up-to-date and which might help to inform a better understanding of contemporary struggle against counter-hegemonic ideas and institutions. While leftist discourse, political orientations that rely on historical materialist understandings of historical development and class formation, generally contains a stronger theoretical and historical approach to current political and social issues, it seems to contain limitations as a framework to narrate the essence of the current crisis. Leftist theory provides broad explanatory frameworks, but these are often less relevant on a micro-level, and therefore contemporary counter movements seem to not affiliate with leftist theory to the degree one might expect.

## **1.2 Research question**

*How can conspiracy theories be understood as a form of populist anti-establishment counter-knowledge, and how could traditional leftist stances relate to this theoretical possibility?*

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss ideas counter to the neoliberal global order by using the recent popularity of conspiracy theories as a doorway. While the Left, generally speaking, struggles to provide a framework with transformative potential, conspiracy theories are seen to be a way for a significant number of people to address the increasing levels of inequality and other manifestations of the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system. While radical system critique has traditionally focused on processes of capital accumulation and structural exploitation, with concepts such as surplus value, hegemony and imperialism, it has become increasingly common to assume that some secretive group is in control of historical development. Conspiracy narratives, by and large, lack a sound and comprehensive historical analysis of the capitalist system, and thus of the present world order. However, the popularity of these explanations is understandable and could be viewed as a natural part of the political climate of the post-Cold War era in which insecurity and alienation are prominent features of the culture, and in which class awareness is low compared to that of earlier decades.

This researcher therefore suggests that a theoretical investigation of how traditional anti-capitalist stances relate, or could relate, to populist conspiratorial world views. What is suggested is that the Left should reflect on its “conspiracy panic” (Bratich, 2008: 12) approach to conspiracy culture, and acknowledge that conspiracy culture is not only reactionary, far-right-wing thought categorically associated with irrationality and racism without further consideration. Conspiracy theories, as Aupers (2012: 22) suggests, offer explanations in a world that is increasingly complex and confusing, and address discontent, fear and alienation in the postmodern condition. These theories could therefore be seen as a natural part of an on-going process of modernisation rather than exclusively political pathology.

If the “intersubjective mentality at the heart of global capitalism” is weakening with the decline of American hegemony (Cobbett & Germain 2012: 110), one could expect this to be grasped and articulated by others than those aligned with the 1968 tradition of counter-hegemonic activism. It is, therefore, questioned whether conspiracy narratives could be complementary to a Left that, arguably, has been co-opted by liberal forces, and which has contributed to limiting the acceptable room for dissent within a certain “rationality” as defined by the works of “governing at distance” (Bratich, 2008: 98). More generally, it is questioned whether the popularity of conspiracy theories could be used as a doorway into major political and cultural issues of present times.

### 1.3 Theoretical approaches and conceptualisations

Conspiracy theory is not a fixed category. It comes in many types and styles, from the most fantastical and harmless urban legends, to scapegoating conspiracy theories that have real consequences in creating a disquieting social reality (Heins, 2007: 788). Perhaps most appropriate is the discursive approach to conspiracy theory suggested by Bratich (2008). Here, conspiracy theory is understood, or rather disqualified as such, by its discursive position towards a regime of a particular “rationality”. However, in this thesis, the term “conspiracy theory” concerns a limitation of the argument, by necessity, and is used as a bridge term throughout the text. The meaning of the term must thus be understood in relation to its various contexts, which, in fact, is also the case concerning the daily use of the term.

In a similar vein, the “Left” or “leftist discourse” is used in a broad sense, and often without a clear spatial context,<sup>3</sup> although the “Left” in the USA and, for example, in Latin America or Europe, refers to a different political tradition. The left side of the political spectrum contains many subcategories and nuances, and some can be expected to have a significantly different outlook towards a given political question than others. However, “the Left” is understood as discourses, in the broad sense, as political orientations which draw on a materialist understanding of historical development, and the theoretical legacy of Karl Marx; in other words, these are outlooks that support social equality, oppose social hierarchy and structural exploitation. The application of leftist ideology in this thesis is done both in a general vein, as well as with the specific application of the critical theoretical approaches of Robert W. Cox and Kees van der Pijl.

There are spatial contexts concerning both “conspiracy theory” and the “Left” that might seem confusing. In particular, it may be confusing whether various theoretical approaches to conspiracy theory refer to specific cultural, political or historical realities. Historically, conspiracy theories have predominantly been described as a scholarly theme from a US perspective, by US scholars, and predominantly as a US phenomenon. When cultural explanations are suggested for why people tend to be susceptible to beliefs in conspiracy theories, these most often are based in an American cultural reality. However, the research

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<sup>3</sup> It is believed, however, that for the purposes of this thesis, this lack of nuance is acceptable, and that the use of these terms will be given sufficient contextual meaning throughout the thesis,

problem of this thesis aims at addressing global conditions and ideas that counter hegemonic structures in a global sense, and the popularity of conspiracy theories is thus largely understood as a global phenomenon.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

The methodological approach used in this research is theoretical. The research is qualitative and could be classified as basic social research, as it primarily aims to increase the understanding of a societal subject. The research could further be classified as exploratory, as parts of the argument could be said to be in the fringe of the most common approaches to the subject, at least as a subject within the field of International Studies. Furthermore, the research is partly correlational, as described by Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee (2006: 43), as it aims to explain how conspiracy theory and leftist discourse relate to each other.

Central to the study is a comprehensive literature review of scholarly approaches to the subject of conspiracy theory. This review is done with the purpose of broadening the theoretical framework of this study and to include the latest developments in this area of research. A further purpose of the literature review is to identify weaknesses in earlier studies. In particular, the distinction between pathological and cultural/allegorical approaches to conspiracy theory is crucial for the further investigation of conspiracy theories as counter-knowledge. The inclusion of a broad selection of approaches in the literature review shows an awareness of conflicting perspectives. The distinction between the traditional “pathological” approaches to conspiracy theory and the recent cultural turn, which includes a more nuanced discussion. This is largely what justifies the particular approach of this study, since an exclusive and reductionist understanding of conspiracy theory as a “political pathology” would put an end to further discussion. The inclusion of cultural understandings of conspiracy theories and the understandings of conspiracy theories as allegorical simplifications of global political economy is what substantiates the discussion of whether political scientific theory and conspiracy theory are categorically incompatible as ways in which to critique the current order.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework of historical materialism will be presented against which conspiracy theory will be contested critically. The theories included here are in parts



significantly different, but by and large share many of the same assumptions about historical development. The outline of this framework starts with Karl Marx's writings, which form the basis of historical materialism. The ideas of Wallerstein (1974) are also presented briefly. The "World Systems Theory" represents a deeply structural understanding of the world system as a totality and is, as such, perhaps opposite to a conspiratorial world outlook that puts conspiratorial agency at the centre of analysis.

Gramscian and neo-Gramscian perspectives are further included to substantiate an understanding of counter-hegemonic struggles. While Gramsci introduced Hegemony as a constraint to emancipatory political projects, neo-Gramscian approaches possess more nuanced understandings of how conflicting social forces might both prevent and catalyse change, and of the importance of social forces within historical structures in the making of history (Cox, 1987). A brief examination of the Occupy Movement is also included. While the movement is not a subject of this study, it is included to substantiate the understanding of current social movements as reflections of a "post-political" society (Schlembach, 2012: 234).

The historical materialist framework is understood as the original basis for counter-hegemonic guidance and is thus central to the analysis of conspiracy theory as possible counter-knowledge. This framework is also helpful in analysing why Marxist/critical perspectives seemingly fail to fully address what underpins the current crisis in a narrative that appeals to the masses. This is the subject of the final theoretical discussion.

### **1.5 Rationale for the study**

This thesis takes the form of a discussion on how conspiracy theories relate to other counter-hegemonic ideas in the present time. More generally, conspiracy theory is suggested as possible doorways to discuss the political ideas that currently guide the petition attempts to counter the ideas of the hegemony of liberal capitalist democracy. Central to the analysis is a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the popularity of conspiracy theories, and how conspiratorial world views relate to leftist theory. The strengths and weaknesses of both conspiracy theory and leftist theory are therefore identified. Furthermore, the study analyses whether conspiracy theory could possibly complement a Left that is to some extent co-opted by liberal forces seeking to limit the space for discussion.

Currently, it seems to be an opportune moment to expose the systemic flaws of capitalism and to suggest a radical alternative. But while there are growing signs of dissatisfaction with the way neoliberal capitalism is “wreaking havoc” on the planet, it is in the nature of the managerial class of hegemonic structures to bring social cohesion back in balance (Van der Pijl, 2001: 381). Movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party Movement, Spanish Indignados, the 2013 uprising in Turkey and elsewhere, are to some extent related and indicate a global discontent over the current capitalist global order. However, transformative change seems unlikely on account of the weakness of current counter-hegemonic movements, and of an arguable lack of a clearly narrated alternative. As Worth (2013: 2) argues, earlier crises have typically paved the way for new kinds of economic governance. For example, the crash of 1929 led to the era of Keynesian economics, and the stagnation in the 1970s opened up the neoliberal free market fundamentalism of the Reagan/Thatcher era. If the current crisis is not met with counter hegemonic forces, a further strengthening of the neoliberal order is likely.

Even though the crisis of 2007/2008 created a more open debate about the underlying weaknesses of neoliberal capitalism, there seems to be a reluctance to break away from its overall rhetoric and logic. There is not quite anything in the *Zeitgeist* of today that suggests a radical change in the way the global political economy is managed. This researcher believes that the result of the 2007/2008 financial crisis is symptomatic of the lack of a clear narrative about what is wrong. In the aftermath of this financial crisis, the fraud and deliberate theft of people’s property were obvious, and yet not a single CEO or profiled Wall Street executive has been held properly accountable. Although everyone more or less understood what happened, the US Justice Department was not able to create a narrative that could put sufficient pressure on those who should have been held responsible. The contemporary counter-hegemonic social movement also, arguably, struggles with the same absence of a strong narrative to challenge the *status quo*.

Although Occupy represents hope, it does not seem to carry the potential of a transformative historical force. In the late 1960s, the revolution in the world system was backed by a vibrant music scene, radical intellectuals and remarkable characters of the time. In France, 11 million workers joined the student uprising in a general strike. Antonio Gramsci has argued that a truly transformative revolution requires a fundamental transformation in mindset from the existing one. It must be a transformation that changes the common sense of everyday life in a

way that reflects the changes in political economy (Gramsci, 1971 as cited in Worth 2013: 3-4). Wallerstein (1989: 431) argues that 1968 was that kind of a transformative revolution that definitely changed the cultural-ideological realities of the world system.

It is, therefore, no wonder the Left has been stuck in the moment of 1968 and arguably still carries much of the same ethos and narrative. What once represented something radical has since naturally become part of the establishment and mainstream culture. Jim Morrison, for example, does not frighten anyone anymore; Bob Dylan is receiving medals and orders; the lip logo of the *Rolling Stones* has been sold to the most mainstream clothing chains, all of which could be understood as a natural dialectical development of ideas. The same goes for other kinds of radical social critique of the same era. If not completely mainstream, this kind of former radical critique has become a marker of those who are of the well-to-do, middle-class political orientation - a mere bourgeois world outlook.

Latour (2004: 231) argues that the tools of radical critique and deconstruction have, in a “degenerated way”, been used both by populist and mainstream voices and in a way that serves to confuse critique, rather than to challenge regimes of power. The Occupy Movement might have changed the way people talk about inequality, but it does not seem to carry the potential for changing the common sense of everyday life. In other words, the popular discourse has been changed, but the overarching power structures have not been challenged. A revolution would be structural and would necessarily imply a reduction of the discipline imposed by capital on society and nature (Van der Pijl, 2001: 381)

It seems conspiracy theories are able to upset, disgust, annoy and fascinate people differently. They represent a break with what is acceptable and what is generally considered adequate thinking. They are anti-establishment and usually contain some utopian, if not ‘magical’, thinking. There is, however, no such thing as a grand conspiracy. Not in the current world order and it is unwarranted to believe that a significant degree of historical change has been driven by secret conspiracies. Therefore, conspiracy narratives by and large articulate an inaccurate understanding of global political economy and historical development, and express misunderstandings of the roles and incentives of the rich and the powerful.

It is not fruitful to form a political programme or a transformative social movement on the basis of conspiracy theories. Nor is the ideal universe of, for example, conspiracy theorist

David Icke, if taken literally, suitable for addressing the systemic and structural contradictions of late capitalism. “To have any influence over events, or at least to forestall the worst eventualities, it is necessary to begin with an understanding of the conditions not chosen by oneself in which action is possible” (Cox, 1987: 241). However, if the Left sincerely seeks to revitalise and rethink the politics of counter-hegemony, it is suggested in this thesis that alternative approaches deserves a broader discussion. On the one hand, while the dominating approach towards conspiracy theories, which Bratich (2008: 12) calls “conspiracy panic” and “will-to-moderation”, is healthy and democratic, it is on the other hand suggested by this researcher that these narratives are often categorically ridiculed without further consideration.

Although the weaknesses of the theories are obvious, a claim which is substantiated throughout Chapter Two of his study, the belief in them is fuelled partly by a longing for a better world. Moreover, conspiracy theories address social inequality and exploitive structures, as well as typically countering conventional knowledge about the desirable effects of globalisation. Although conspiracy theory by and large lacks a sophisticated understanding of historical development, and thus suffers from an over-emphasis on personalised agency in historical change, mainstream understandings of the current crisis are often no less irrational. Both leftist discourse and many conspiracy theories are fuelled by a longing for a more just economic system and a will to ask critical questions about the legitimacy of the current system. A clear understanding of what the two represent and how they relate to each other is relevant to this study. It is this researcher’s personal motivation for devoting this thesis to a discussion about conspiracy theories in relation to leftist discourse and counter-hegemonic social movements.

Conspiracy theory relates to leftist discourse in the following way: historical materialist approaches have their strength in their broad understanding of long historical developments in which the role of secretive conspiring agents can only be of limited importance. As such, conspiracy theories and leftist discourse have historically been incompatible as conspiracy theories have traditionally been products of the political right. Since conspiracy theories are understood to be based on misperceptions of historical structures, power relations and institutions, and of the roles in society and the incentives of the rich and powerful, the discourse is generally considered not suitable to guide the progressive transformation of society. However, with more recent scholarly interest in conspiracy theories and especially the cultural aspects of their popularity, this picture has now become more nuanced. The link

between conspiracy theory and irrationality is somewhat broken, and the idea of conspiracy theories as allegorical constructs makes them even more inclusive along the political left/right divide. In addition, an understanding of conspiracy narratives, with their limited discursive relationship towards an “acceptable debate”, broadens this discussion further.

This perspective unveils the weakness of leftist discourse as it is said to assimilate with liberal forces to disqualify certain critical perspectives as “conspiracy theory”. If the Left has been subject to such hegemonic manoeuvring, it has arguably contributed to limiting the acceptable range of dissent. In such a situation, it could be discussed whether conspiracy theory could actually complement the Left. Then, the strength of conspiracy theory, whether understood as such by its discursive position or by its narrative content, is arguably that it has been created outside hegemonic structures, and therefore has not been subject to the constraints of gate-keeping “governing at a distance” (Bratich, 2008: 98), or by hegemonic class manoeuvring by the managerial cadre of the ruling class (Van der Pijl, 2009: viii). It is also interesting to discuss whether a balance between conspiracy theory and historical materialism approaches could be identified. In this thesis, Kees van der Pijl’s ideas about transnational class formation, and the importance of agency in relation to this, are explored and suggested as a balance between conspiracy theory and Marxist/critical theory.

## **1.6 Other considerations**

A possible ethical concern related to this research is that there may be the perception that this thesis is supportive of specific theories and narratives. There are examples in the thesis where there is a thin line of perception between conspiracy theories about financial and political elites and the traditional anti-Semitic theories often affiliated with Fascist ideologies and right-wing extremism. In this regard, one has to be careful about conceptualisations and normative assessments. It is not the intention here to give support to specific conspiracy theories or to provide support for conspiracy theories as an epistemological tradition in a traditional way. The only aim is to identify misconceptions about these narratives and their importance in contemporary mass culture and as alternative approaches to critique of the current global order. This is particularly true for the theoretical approaches to conspiracy theories that are called “allegorical” in this study, which are of the cultural/postmodern theory

tradition as they risk giving some kind of critical legitimacy to far-Right content. This is by no means the writer's intention or the intention of the scholars referred to.

## **1.7 Chapter outline**

A brief chapter outline for this thesis is provided below.

The second chapter is a review of critical scholarly approaches to conspiracy theory. It firstly presents an historical overview of conspiracy theories, and describes briefly the characteristics of various categories of conspiracy theories. It then outlines critical approaches to conspiracy theory that are in alignment with what Fenster (2008) describes as the dominant mode of understanding conspiracy theory, namely conspiracy theory as political, pathological paranoia. The New World Order conspiracy narrative will also be discussed. These narratives arguably articulate, although in simplistic ways, both an approach to the current and earlier world orders and, more specifically, a stance against the process of globalisation that contradicts mainstream views. These narratives are critically assessed on account of their epistemological standard and historical analysis. Lastly, the chapter presents what is termed cultural/allegorical/discursive approaches to conspiracy theory. While the weakness of a traditional/pathological understanding of conspiracy culture arguably leads to academic stagnation on the subject, an emphasis on conspiracy theories as cultural practice and as ideological allegories broadens the discussion and enables a more interesting debate on how leftist counter-hegemonic theory could relate to conspiracy theories.

The third chapter contains the theoretical framework used to place conspiracy theories into perspective. It provides the theoretical framework of historical materialism, from which conspiracy theory discourse is analysed. The chapter starts with Marx. This is followed by a description of the main concepts of Immanuel Wallerstein's particular historical approach, that of "World System Theory". Further perspectives of the framework consist of the ideas and concepts of Antonio Gramsci and neo-Gramscian approaches to world order and, in particular, the legacy of Robert Cox. Ultimately, the most relevant aspects of the Occupy Movement are outlined as an example of a counter-hegemonic movement. The purpose of this is to substantiate the understanding of current counter-hegemonic movements as guided, to a lesser degree, by a particular ideology.

The fourth chapter is a discussion of how leftist ideology relates to conspiracy theories. Firstly, the fundamental differences between Marxist/critical approaches, or what Chomsky (2004) terms “institutional analysis”, and conspiratorial world views, are explored. This is followed by a discussion on how the Left has reacted towards an increasingly “common ground” claimed by conspiracy theorists in a way that has possibly reactive consequences. It is argued that this provides an interesting perspective of current counter-hegemonic ideas and of “critique” more generally. It is suggested that Kees van der Pijl’s specific critical theoretical approach to Global Political Economy is understood as a balance between conspiratorial understandings of agency in historical development and Marxist/critical class analysis.

The fifth chapter picks up the research question to conclude on the aims of this research; to discuss conspiracy theory as possible counter-knowledge and as possible alternative approaches to traditional Marxist/critical stances. It will further be concluded on whether a theoretical investigation of conspiracy theory as possibly complementary to leftist discourse could be argued to be a valuable path to follow.

## Chapter 2: A literature review of conspiracy theories

*The only thought which philosophy brings with it, in regard to history, is the simple thought of Reason—the thought that Reason rules the world, and that world history has therefore been rational in its course.*

G. W. F. Hegel (as cited in Keeley, 1999: 109)

*The powers of financial capitalism had another far-reaching aim, nothing less than to create a world system of financial control in private hands able to dominate the political system of each country and the economy of the world as a whole. This system was to be controlled in a feudalist fashion by the central banks of the world acting in concert by secret agreements arrived at in frequent meetings and conferences. The apex of the systems was to be the Bank for International Settlements in Basel, Switzerland; a private bank owned and controlled by the world's central banks which were themselves private corporations. Each central bank . . . sought to dominate its government by its ability to control Treasury loans, to manipulate foreign exchanges, to influence the level of economic activity in the country, and to influence cooperative politicians by subsequent economic rewards in the business world.*

Carol Quigley (1966)

### 2.1 Introduction

We seem to live in a time of citizen speculation and distrust. Conspiracy theories have been pulled out from the margins of public discourse and into the very heart of current political issues (Wolf, 2008). There are hardly any major events that happen without the suggestion of an alternative story plot.

In the writer's own country, Norway, it was interesting to follow the public debate in the hours after the massacre in Oslo in the summer of 2011. The main rumor went in direction of a Muslim perpetrator with ties to Al Qaeda being behind the bombing of a Government quarter in the centre of Oslo and later the massacre of young members of the Labour Party's youth organisation on the island Utøya. After a few more hours, a white Norwegian man from an upper middle-class part of town was identified as the perpetrator of the massacre. Furthermore, it was clear quite early that he had acted alone, and that he was not part of any kind of conspiracy or organisation. Norway is a small, relatively open and transparent society. The victims at Utøya Island, employees in the intelligence branch of the police, friends and relatives of the perpetrator and members of the Masonic Lodge are typically connected by no more than a friend of a friend. Nevertheless a variety of conspiracy theories appeared within



the few weeks following the massacre, which included everything from the CIA to the Mossad, and even the Labour party itself (Heinesen, 2012: 18).

The Oslo massacre was an example of what conspiracy theorists are capable of claiming against all the evidence. However, belief in the theories seems not to be as marginal as one would think. This is exemplified with the internationally acknowledged academic Johan Galtung, who is known as the inventor of the study field of peace research and is the founder of the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO). In a lecture at the University of Oslo and in a journal article, Galtung presents the surprising claim that the connection between the Masonic Lodge in Oslo<sup>4</sup> and the massacre should be investigated, and further that the massacre could possibly be seen in connection with the arrival of the Knights Templars in Jerusalem in 1099 and the terrorist bombing of Hotel David in 1946, both of which apparently occurred on the same day as the Oslo massacre, 22 July. In another article<sup>5</sup>, Galtung elaborated on arguments about the influence of Jewish power in the current world order. With these statements, Galtung puts himself in the tradition of populist far-Right conspiracy theorising.

New World Order (NWO) conspiracy theories have been a way for at least two specific sub-cultures - the military anti-government Right and Christian fundamentalists - to try to make sense out of a world that is otherwise confusing, whether it concerns the tax authorities, the Jews, the Bilderbergers or the Black Helicopters (Samal 2012: 97). Currently, however, there are signs that conspiracy culture has not only become mainstream and part of mass culture, but has also penetrated deeply into leftist spheres. As Cockburn (2006) has noted, while it is more understandable that the populist Right in the US instinctively distrusts the Government, it is more surprising to see how 9/11 conspiracy theories have also evolved to become acceptable common sense on the Left and have become part of the Leftist critique system with the “9/11 truth movement”. There are also a number of quantitative empirical studies showing belief in conspiracy theories across the political spectrum, for example, Sanders and West (2004) and Wood, Douglas and Sutton (2012). Even so-called “event conspiracy theories” are often a symptom of a susceptibility to believe in larger conspiratorial theoretical constructs, which may entail a world view, or a certain conspiratorial outlook on world orders, and thus on current global political and economic issues.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://morgenbladet.no/samfunn/2011/ti\\_teser\\_om\\_22\\_juli#.UnBT6lOoCTQ](http://morgenbladet.no/samfunn/2011/ti_teser_om_22_juli#.UnBT6lOoCTQ)

<sup>5</sup> <http://humanist.no/galtung2.html>

This chapter unveils and discusses various weaknesses of conspiracy theories, and different ways in which to see these weaknesses. The most common way to understand conspiracy theory has been to see it as political pathology; something irrational, reactionary and simplistic, and often with racist undertones. Conspiracy theories are often scrutinised and debunked on the basis of their epistemological standard and narrative content. Recent scholarly interest in the subject has, however, taken a new turn with more focus on sociocultural explanations for belief in conspiracy theories.

This view of conspiracy theories breaks the categorical link between conspiracy theory and irrationality by viewing conspiracy theories more or less as ways in which to map and understand confusing societies in the postmodern condition. The argument is further that conspiracy narratives have, to some extent, replaced former theoretical frameworks and leftist discourse. With this understanding, it could even be implied that conspiracy theories could complement mainstream and leftist/critical perspectives in that they might contain comparative strengths, and because they are created in spheres that are free of hegemonic control and various forms of gate-keeping. Conspiracy theories are also able to direct attention to aspects of political economy that are otherwise often ignored (Todhunter, 2012).

The pathological approach that derived from Richard Hofstadter's (1964) seminal essay *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays* is the most established, most broadly accepted approach, with its focus on political science, political history and psychology. Most pathological approaches assert that conspiracy theories reflect a cry from the political and social margins, and typically associate these theories with irrationality and extremism. Scholarship of this pathological approach was, and still is, typically concerned with critically dissecting, debunking and neutralising conspiratorial beliefs. The second approach - broadly called here the sociocultural/allegorical approach - consists of contributions that were mostly of a more recent date and were often rooted in postmodern, critical and poststructuralist scholarship, in which conspiracy theories and their recent popularity are understood as "metaphorical and narrative embodiments of the epistemological shifts and identity politics within Western culture in the fin de siècle/millennial eras" (Ballinger 2011: 5).

It is hoped that this presentation of the variety of scholarly approaches in the current chapter assists in showing that the mainstream understanding of conspiracy theory, which is the basis of the uncritical, pejorative use of the phrase, is determined by a narrow, outdated and flawed approach stemming from a particular political and historical climate, as observed by Richard Hofstadter and his contemporaries in the 1960s.

## 2.2 Historical overview of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories as a general category are not necessarily incorrect. In fact, history is full of conspiracies that have proven to be actual historical events. Watergate and the CIA-backed Iran-Contra plot, for instance, are often mentioned as examples of how small groups of people secretly sought to affect the course of history (Keeley 1999: 112). Bale (2007: 56-57) used the example of a secret Masonic Lodge in Italy that, according to credible historical records, infiltrated all the state security agencies in order to forward its influence in government corridors. Similarly, the South African secret society, the “Afrikaner Broederbond”, which played a significant role in promoting apartheid and Afrikaner political dominance throughout the apartheid era, was used to exemplify the historical existence of real conspiracies.

On the other hand, many conspiracy theories arguably belong in the same epistemological category as myths, folklore, legends and miracles. We cannot say for sure that the British Queen is not of reptilian or alien descent, for example, as claimed by Icke (1999), but perhaps, as David Hume (as cited in Keeley, 1999: 110) asked when referring to miracles, is there a category of explanations to which we, by definition, should not assent? Keeley, therefore, made a distinction between “warranted” and “unwarranted” conspiracy theories. He identified the same epistemic problem with “unwarranted” conspiracy theories with reference to Hume’s understanding of miracles. Just as Hume could not say that miracles have never happened, one cannot say today that the world economy is not under the control of a secret group of individuals - only that we have no “warrant” to believe so. Even if there were actually strange things going on in the world, according to Keeley, “we ought not necessarily believe everything which is, in fact, true” (Keeley 1999: 111). In other words, it is more essential that there is warrant to believe something than whether something is actually true or not.

Conspiracy theories exist across a broad spectrum of historical events, secretive groups, power relations and various contemporary phenomena. In terms of historical events, 9/11 has been the subject of extensive, creative public speculation. Conspiracy theories about 9/11 usually vary regarding the degree to which agents of the government knew something or even played an active part in the events. Certain categories of conspiracy theorists naturally expand theories around such dramatic events and claim the involvement of secretive groups who were

either responsible for the events or, more dramatically, have an evil agenda for a new global social order. Groups such as the Illuminati, the Masonic Order, the Bilderberg group, the Skull and Bones, the Trilateral Commission, the Club of Rome, “the secret group of Jewish International Bankers” and the Catholic Church are examples of organisations that are often mentioned in relation to NWO conspiracy theories. This category of conspiracy theories is systemic to some extent and might be seen as a simplistic form of political analysis. Such theories of total conspiracies are regarded as being the most relevant to this research project. Contrary to other categories of conspiracy theories, they represent a popular form of political analysis that can be challenged as such (Berlet, 2009:2).

Murder mysteries are also the subject of investigation by conspiracy theorists. They may be linked to NWO conspiracy theories as in the case of speculation around the assassination of John F. Kennedy (JFK). As such systemic conspiracy theories can be understood as constructs that explain events. Other theories are limited to simply telling an alternative story about the deaths of high-profiled people, such as Princess Diana, Tupac, Malcolm X, Marilyn Monroe and John Lennon. There is also speculation on mysterious phenomena. Often this tends to be more in the X-files tradition, and although serious enough to some, these theories are generally more fantastical in nature, for example theories about Area 51 and the Roswell incident, Crop Circles, “Men in Black”, The Moon Landing or the idea that planet Earth is hollow (Greig, 2008).

Perhaps the more grounded theories that have warranted belief were those that speculated about political cover-ups, such as the infamous Watergate incident, the Iran-Contra scandal or the CIA’s involvement in the overthrow of Chile’s dictator Salvador Allende in 1973. While some theories about the CIA’s activity and its role in de-stabilising socialist regimes are difficult to take seriously, others seem more credible, although often difficult to prove. In this specific category of theories there are, of course, cases where cover-ups by governments and intelligence agencies are documented in reliable historical records. In this regard, it is not too controversial to claim that the CIA had an operation in progress to undermine the popularity of President Allende. Likewise, the Iran-Contra conspiracy is an example of a case where it seems that American government officials acted with little regard to congressional or international law, or conventions of modern liberal democracy. This suggests to a conspiratorial mind that conspiracy continues to lie at the centre of government business, not only in totalitarian states, but also in liberal democracies (Greig 2008: 129).

These theories therefore, should not be placed in the magical world of conspiracy theories, as intelligence agencies, of necessity, work secretly. The CIA, for example, can be seen to be the definition of a conspiratorial agent by the way in which the agency uses covert and secret conduct. At the same time, the CIA, as an institution, is a part of the national security of the USA and might in that way be seen as institutionalised conspiracy. For example, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was quoted commenting on the US “sellout” of the Kurds in Iraq in 1975, “Before the Freedom of Information Act, I used to say at meetings, ‘[t]he illegal we do immediately; the unconstitutional takes a little longer’” (Russia Today, 2013<sup>6</sup>). However, it is argued here that this category of theories lies closer to critical/investigative journalism than to what Keeley (1999: 111) understands as typical “unwarranted conspiracy theories”. Or as stated by Bale (2007: 56), although there has never, for certain, existed a single monolithic all-encompassing conspiracy, the world is full of real conspiracies.

Lastly, there is a category of conspiracy theories that can be ridiculed outright. These are theories that are odd in every sense, and which could be disproved by simple means. These theories are of a distinctive, New Age, spiritual/religious nature. For example, an urban legend created on the internet claims that the German city of Bielefeld (with around 400 000 inhabitants) simply does not exist. Another modern legend claims that Paul McCartney died in a car crash in 1966, and that he was immediately replaced by a look-alike (Greig , 2009).

A more creative theoretical universe is suggested by David Icke. Icke has a large number of followers and claims that the world, as it is perceived by the human race, is actually a hologram. This illusion of a “dream world we believe to be real” is created by a force that operates on the fringes of the “human perception band” (Icke, 1999). Icke claimed that representatives of this “force” are visible as powerful people, such as bankers and the British royal family (Icke, 2013). These are theories that he further expands on with a narrative of a global power elite that has been effective over centuries, and which is of both reptilian and alien descent, with various capacities of shifting shape between human and reptilian forms as their physical manifestation. Although this might sound like a science fiction myth from a psychotic mind, there are parts of the story that resonate to some degree with more conventional critical world views. For example, Icke believes that a political transformation is

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<sup>6</sup> The quote was published by Wikileaks as part of the “Kissinger Cables”. Retrieved 5 June, 2013 from <http://rt.com/news/wikileaks-assange-release-files-475/>

possible, and that the “force” (or the “The Babylonian Brotherhood<sup>7</sup>”) rules by consent rather than coercion. According to Icke, a change in human consciousness is thus all that is required to challenge the hegemonic power of the ruling reptilian brotherhood.

One would think that sceptics of conspiracy theories understand world history as “rational in its course” (Hegel as cited in Keeley, 1999: 109) and that therefore it should be possible to isolate the causes of belief in irrational explanations. To some, cognitive and social psychology suggest many causes for belief in conspiracy theories. For others, explanations can be found in larger historical and social causes such as the postwar lack of geopolitical and economic stability, loss of intellectual authority, the dramatic increase in surveillance undertaken by the state and by corporate interest, or more broadly, simply the result of postmodernity and late capitalism (Fenster 2009: 18). However, the belief in alternative explanations is, of course, not an exclusively postmodern phenomenon. History is full of people who have suggested theories and world views in the margins of the intellectual, religious and scientific establishment of their given time. As a curiosity, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of “Sherlock Holmes”, could be said to be a conspiracy theorist of his own time. While the Sherlock Holmes character was analytical and rational, the author himself was preoccupied with spiritualism, which involved conversations with both dead people and elves (Emberland & Pettersen, 2001: 29).

The term “conspiracy” is more commonly used as though it is a self-evident term and not subject to different cultural definitions and interpretations. This becomes problematic if one is to theorise about beliefs in conspiracy theories or to understand it as a cultural phenomenon or as a postmodern metanarrative in the internet age. As mentioned earlier, the term is often used simply in a pejorative way to discredit certain anti-establishment opinions, and to insinuate that a person who might question a consensus-based rationale in a social context is extreme, irrational or even insane. In relation to this, Bratich’s (2008) main interest in conspiracy theory is not what it represents as a theory tradition or the narrative content of the theories, but rather under which conditions something comes to be called a conspiracy theory. What is interesting with such an approach is the understanding of a certain political scepticism - a consensus “conspiracy panic” - which labels certain styles of radical anti-establishment critique and ideas - as conspiracy theory.

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<sup>7</sup> “The Babylonian Brotherhood” is purported to consist of a large network of secret societies, “at whose apex stands the Illuminati” (Barkun, 2003: 104).

The “conspiracy panic” notion, which is understood as an exaggerated fear of theories that smells of conspiracy theory, is arguably outdated and too reductionist in that it understands conspiracy narratives as something that solely belongs to the margins of society (Bratich, 2008: 162). It could rather be argued that the popularity of contemporary conspiracy narratives is more a part of mainstream culture than a result of the paranoia of individuals. A simple definition of what the term “conspiracy theory” implies would be too narrow for most purposes, but the most general understanding of it, as Fenster (2008: 1) has defined it, is, “the conviction that a secret omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and the social order or some part thereof”. More specifically, Barkun (2003:5) has suggested that belief in conspiracy theories is about delineating and explaining evil; with the most comprehensive theories, it becomes a way to understand the course of history as controlled by demonic forces with unlimited powers.

This writer has, however, yet to see a fully exhaustive definition of the phrase “conspiracy theory” and perhaps a valid approach to conspiracy discourse is to regard such a general definition as irrelevant. Conspiracy theories are either too complex, in that they refuse to accept that not everything that happens follows a perfectly executed plan, that “shit happens” (Mandik, 2007: 205) or, more typically, they are too simple in that they ignore the chaos and complexity of the modern political world (Goode, 2002: 3). These theories either refuse the simplest explanations, as the lone gunman theory, for example in the JFK assassination, or embrace the most simplistic explanation of a cabal as the main force behind historical development. Conspiracy theories could be both irrational and hyper-rational, and historically have been both fringe and mainstream. These theories have been used instrumentally by both fascist/authoritarian and democratic regimes.

There is, therefore, arguably no acceptable categorical approach to conspiracy theory. Since a “panic”-oriented approach is sustained despite the contradictory approaches to conspiracy theory, it might be suggested with Freud that “contradiction expresses the force of a desire” (Freud as cited in Bratich: 160). According to Bratich’s argument, the “panic” reaction towards conspiracy narratives represents a certain desire or a “will to moderation”, a will to align with a certain dominant rationality. Similarly, for conspiracy theorists, the will to believe, or to cognitively map a confusing postmodern reality, is arguably just as important an



aspect of belief in conspiracy theory as is the content and typical narrative structure of conspiracy theories.

Barkun (2003: 6) identified three types of conspiracy theories, namely (i) event conspiracies, (ii) systemic conspiracies and (iii) super-conspiracies. Super-conspiracies are constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be interlinked hierarchically. At the top of this hierarchy, there is usually all-powerful elite. Although conspiracy literature typically imitates the style of source citation and presentation of evidence of conventional scholarship, it becomes problematic with these particular kinds of conspiracy theories since they are, in essence, indisputable, and thus it becomes a matter of faith rather than empirical proof (Barkun, 2003: 7). The most common examples of such conspiracy theories are those of the NWO.

### **2.3 New World Order conspiracy theories**

*I am the Lizard King, I can do anything.*

Jim Morrison (1991: 37)

Although ‘normal’ and well-informed people can be found who honestly believe that the world is secretly governed by a satanic-Jewish mafia, the less concrete versions of the “Grand Conspiracy” are more widespread. Such conspiracy theories are found on both sides of the political spectrum. The Right has traditionally and typically been most inclined to see the socialist threat ‘under every bed’, and to identify scapegoats among minorities to explain the present social order or dramatic events. And while Leftist radical critiques of society have traditionally focused on the underlying logic of capital accumulation and the inherent contradictions of capitalism, there are aspects of NWO theories that seem to appeal across the political divide. Arguably, there is a parallel with Leftist discourse, which sociologists call “Left functionalism”, which views everything undesirable in society as a consequence of capitalism (Todhunter, 2012). The way in which these grand theories are structured makes them more a basis for a world view than any political analysis.

Conspiracy theories may possibly share the dualistic world view with some interpretation of Leftist ideology, but by other accounts, conspiracy theory represents the opposite of all institutional or structural analysis (Chomsky, 2004). While conspiracy theory focuses on



secretive coalitions of individuals, conventional theory/institutional analysis is focused on the long-term behaviour of publicly known institutions and economic agents. Often referring to highly dubious records, conspiracy theorists seek to explain the current order in terms of secret societies, codes and symbols, or even less secretive organisations, and often refer to the establishment of a few family dynasties, such as the Rothschilds or the Rockefellers. This follows the logic that state-corporate hegemons are no longer driven solely by economic incentives, but rather by the formation of a Fascist one-world government with the ultimate goal of having the entire population of the world micro-chipped (Icke, 1999).

Typically, according to conspiracy theorists, world history, as it is commonly understood, is falsified as if we are already under a totalitarian Orwellian rule: “He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present, controls the past” (Orwell, 1949: 37). For conspiracy theorists, world history is rather a story about the power behind the power, the coalition that stood behind and enriched itself on the financial crisis in 1929, planned the First and Second World Wars, and that financed both the Soviet Union and the rise of Hitler<sup>8</sup>. These theories view globalisation as a manifestation of a NWO agenda. In this narrative, globalisation is pushed forward by the conspiracy and the super-rich, and other sections of the elite establishments. Market reforms and the dissolution of traditional values and family structures and other aspects of globalisation are commonly understood as pieces of the grand agenda to create a totalitarian world government.

The agents and organisations apparently involved in the plot vary. In David Icke’s universe, which Barkun (2003: 103) labelled as “New Age Conspiracism”, the “Babylonian Brotherhood” is at the centre of such an analysis. Icke lacks the critique of subjectivity to absurdity, and is seemingly obsessive in his desire to create narratives and make connections. In summary, the product is his colossal narrative, the “Reptoid Hypothesis”, with unlimited powers of explanation. His argument, in essence, is that humanity is created and ruled by secret societies consisting of ancient blood lines from the Middle East, which Icke called “The Babylonian Brotherhood”. The bloodline of the brotherhood is of both extra-terrestrial and reptilian and has been extended to American Presidents, Egyptian pharaohs, European royal families and not least the “Eastern Establishment families” of the USA. Moreover, groups, think-tanks and organisations such as the Illuminati/Freemasons, the Bilderberg

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Sutton (1974), “Wall Street and the Bolshevik revolution”.

group, the Trilateral Commission, the Council of Foreign Relations, the Club of Rome, Corporate Media, the CIA, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and others are all under the control of the “Brotherhood”. In addition, the Illuminati is also understood to be the manifestation of the Brotherhood throughout history and is ultimately thought to be descendants of the reptilian constellation known as Draco, a monster-like creature that again descends from reptilian Gods known as Anunnaki, whose ultimate goal is the enslavement of humanity to mine the mineral base of the earth and, in particular, gold (Icke 1999: 30-38; Barkun, 2003:103-106; Lewis & Kahn, 2005: 8-10).

For those who are not quite willing to follow Icke down the rabbit hole, the Illuminati myth remains persistent as a way of understanding the current political world for conspiracy theorists. The historical Illuminati, it is claimed, consisted of a relatively small group of Germany’s enlightenment philosophers led by Professor Adam Weishaupt. It is said that they operated secretly to hide from the conservative political and religious establishment at the time. Their goal was apparently to replace the feudal order with the enlightenment’s ideas of rationality, free thought, secularism and gender equality. Many of the same ideas came into expression with the French Revolution, which led to the increased popularity of conspiracy theories already in existence at that time. In the USA, scepticism towards European influence became widespread and was directed towards cosmopolitan intellectuals who allegedly sought to undermine the fundamentals of Christianity. This was often with direct reference to the Bavarian Illuminati, as Pastor Jedediah Morse preached in 1798:

*Secret and systematic means have been adopted and punned, with zeal and activity by wicked and artful men in foreign countries, to undermine the foundations of this Religion, and to overthrow its laws, and thus to deprive the world of its benign influence on society. These impious conspirators and philosophists have completely effected their purposes in a large portion of Europe and boast of their means of accomplishing their plans in all parts of Christendom, glory in the certainty of their success, and set opposition at defiance (Hofstadter, 1964: 9).*

In a similar vein, at around the same time the preacher Abbiel Abbot wrote about a “grand conspiracy” with a diabolic plan for the total eradication of the then religious and social order (Hofstadter 1964: 14). These early versions of conspiracy narratives are also part of the

provincialism and anti-intellectual fear of cosmopolitan ideas and values. It was also visible with the xenophobic and anti-Semitic populism of the 1890s, and was similar to the fundamentalist Christian movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For later right-wing populists, the speculations about a threatening internationalist agenda can be seen as a reaction against the modernism and secular humanism of the new century.

NWO conspiracy theories could be seen to stem largely from this tradition. While right-wing scepticism, traditionally in the form of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism or anti-Masonry, has in the last decades kept its form and the same world view, it is now pointing at financial moguls, think tanks and banking institutions. In the 1960s, this new kind of right-wing populist, such as members of the John Birch society, combined the nationalist critique of corporate internationalism with a theory of a “super conspiracy” (Barkun, 2003: 6) and claimed that the “Eastern Establishment” of the USA had been financed by an international banking cabal to introduce an oligarchic NWO. In the introduction to this chapter a quotation from Professor Carrol Quigley’s (1966) book *Tragedy and hope: A history of the world in our time* was provided. Quigley, as a university professor and arguably an insider and scholarly whistle-blower, has been embraced by conspiracy theorists as one of the most credible proofs of the “Eastern Establishment’s” plan for world government, and has thus substantiated similar views both on the populist Right and the Left.

John Coleman (1992) theorised along the same lines and is often quoted by other conspiracy theorists, such as David Icke. For Coleman, the plot is the same, only he has alleged the existence of a group called the “Committee of 300”, first described by Walter Rathenau in 1909 (Barkun, 2003: 68). Coleman, however, as a former British intelligence officer, claimed to have had first-hand information about this group that is allegedly superior to other groups mentioned in relation to NWO theories such as the Bilderberg group, the Trilateral Commission and the Council of Foreign Relations. In Coleman’s narrative, the new order is described as follows:

*A One World Government and one-unit monetary system, under permanent non-elected hereditary oligarchists who self-select from among their numbers in the form of a feudal system as it was in the Middle Ages. In this One World entity, population will be limited by restrictions on the number of children per family, diseases, wars, famines, until 1 billion people who are useful to the ruling class, in areas which will be strictly and clearly defined, remain as the total world population (Coleman, 1992: 161).*

Quotations like this have been typically re-quoted, re-written and developed into new internet “memes” (Goertzel, 2013). They become common sense in the conspiratorial universe, recognisable lines of text to give an anchor and a kind of proof for further theorising. Sometimes conspiracy theorists themselves are quoted, but more typically, quotations from powerful and influential people are interpreted in a certain way following the particular conspiratorial narrative, or are simply taken completely out of context. The financial mogul and philanthropist David Rockefeller is often mentioned and identified by conspiracy theorists as one of the main “globalists” and leading figures concerning belief in the existence of a global NWO agenda. The following quotation is a good example of how the conspiracy is believed to have omnipotent powers:

*We are grateful to The Washington Post, The New York Times, Time Magazine and other great publications whose directors have attended our meetings and respected their promises of discretion for almost forty years. It would have been impossible for us to develop our plan for the world if we had been subject to the bright lights of publicity during those years. But, the work is now much more sophisticated and prepared to march towards a world government. The supranational sovereignty of an intellectual elite and world bankers is surely preferable to the national autodetermination practiced in past centuries.<sup>9</sup>*

Although the institutional and economic analysis, which undeniably constitutes an important part of the narratives, is downplayed in favour of more sensational and personalised aspects of the theories when problematised critically, and although the populists have borrowed from

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<sup>9</sup> Quotations like this typically circulate on internet sites as “memes”. This quotation can be commonly found as part of the argumentation in NWO narratives, and is alleged to have been stated by David Rockefeller at a Bilderberg meeting in 1991. The authenticity of the quote is, of course, highly dubious, but it illustrates well how the NWO conspiracy theorists think about the capabilities and means available to the conspirators. This particular quotation is retrieved from [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/David\\_Rockefeller](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/David_Rockefeller).

and cited leftist research while referring to concepts such as “manufactured consent” (Bratich, 2008:125), there is no doubt that NWO accounts are rooted in a right-wing political rationale historically. Conservative forces at work in the militia movement in the 1960s articulated these theories in explicitly racist and anti-Semitic ways (Bratich, 2008: 125). Alternative approaches to conspiracy theory should, therefore, be cautious when downplaying this historical origin of the theories. However, as it is argued in chapter four, NWO theories of the post-Cold War period have appeared as anti-globalisation conspiracy narratives, and should be explored further given the ambivalence and confusion within leftist discourse. This would be relevant, for example, in relation to the 9/11 conspiracy theories and American foreign policy in the post-Cold War period.

#### **2.4 Pathological approaches to conspiracy theory and the structure and characteristics of New World Order theories**

*So a conspiracy theory is the unnecessary assumption of conspiracy when other explanations are more probable.*

Aaronovitch (2010: 5)

*We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.*

Hofstadter (1966: 86)

In popular culture and in the spheres of the internet, the commonly used terms used to divide conspiracists and debunkers of conspiracy theories are “believers” and “sceptics”, respectively. The believers are understood to be those who express belief in conspiracies, while the sceptics believe in the official version of historical events and power relations, and thus seek to debunk conspiracy theorists by identifying the logical and empirical weaknesses of their arguments. Most of the predominant scholarship dismissive of conspiracy theories and conspiracy culture makes reference to Richard Hofstadter’s (1966: 80) concept of the “paranoid style in American politics”. Hofstadter used the clinical psychiatric term “paranoid” to describe a style, or a kind of political personality, which he argued has been pre-eminent in American politics throughout its history. Hofstadter was opposed to more progressive accounts on the subject and saw conspiracy culture more as a manifestation of political paranoia than as a cultural phenomenon. His essay, from 1964, originally established the

leading analytical framework for the theorising of conspiracy theories and has thus contributed substantially to the way in which the term is used and understood today, both in academic and non-academic discourse (Berlet, 2009:14).

As part of a post-World War Two intelligentsia, Hofstadter was concerned with normalising the general conceptions of democracy as integral to American political practice and cultural identity (Ballinger 2011: 11). When Hofstadter termed conspiracy thinking political paranoia, he saw it as a pathology suffered by people outside of the American pluralist consensus. As an historian, Hofstadter described “the paranoid style” as a longstanding strain in American politics and gave the examples of anti-Illuminism, anti-Masonry, the Jesuit threat and the anti-Catholicism movement (Hofstadter, 1966). However, Hofstadter’s account could also be understood as a reaction to a specific development at the time the article was written, and in particular to the rise of the New American Right, McCarthyism and reactionary groups such as the John Birch Society.

As a consensus historian, Hofstadter saw the paranoid fear in conspiracies as one of a few specific attributes of extremist ideology. Even though Hofstadter had been critical of American opinion and had described the American political tradition as “Democracy in cupidity” (Fenster 2008: 30), he later moved towards mainstream liberalism to focus his attention on political extremism and conspiracy theory. Given this intellectual position towards the political climate of the time, Hofstadter and his contemporaries developed a view on ideas outside of the political mainstream that, ironically, could be seen as almost paranoid with its narrow focus on the social, psychological causes for beliefs in conspiracies. Hofstadter’s account is, however, still relevant and interesting, at least in the way he suggested an emphasis on the rituals and symbols of political practice rather than seeing politics simply as rational reactions imposed from the top downwards. With a focus on culture and popular political practice, Hofstadter broke with his contemporary progressive historians who largely saw American politics as a history of a conflict of interests (Fenster, 2008: 30-31).

A further interesting point is that although Hofstadter understood culture and irrational behavior as historically significant, he saw it as a destructive and dangerous part of American politics. He acknowledged that real conspiracies exist, and even that secrecy and conspiracy are often necessarily a part of legitimate political processes, but he maintained that this does

not mean that conspiracies themselves constitute historical forces with real world effects. To think along these lines is what Hofstadter described as the “paranoid style”. He defended this in the introduction of the essay when he purposefully used a clinical psychiatric term in a pejorative way: the “paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than for good” and, further, “[t]he paranoid style is an old and recurrent phenomenon in our public life which has frequently been linked with movements of suspicious discontent” (Hofstadter, 1966: 77).

Pathological approaches to conspiracy theory have the following a few certain characteristics (Ballinger, 2011: 11-13; Hofstadter, 1966: 29-38): The alleged conspiracy has a universal and historical scope. In other words, the paranoid style is a way to perceive history; The paranoid theoriser has an apocalyptic world view. The magnitude of the theories often include the birth and death of whole worlds, political orders and whole systems of human values. The paranoid is thus constantly living at a turning point in human history; There is always a tone of activism and urgency, and there is no time for compromise. What is at stake is usually a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil; The conspiratorial agents are omnipotent. The enemy of the free society is free and active but demonic agents that construct the mechanism of history themselves, or at least deflect the normal course of history, do so in an evil way. Dramatic events and political conditions cannot, therefore, be seen as a part of the stream of history, but as a consequence of someone’s will; and The paranoid is particularly pedantic about evidence. Paranoid “scholarship”, or what Hofstadter referred to as “pseudo-scholarship”, typically starts with a careful accumulation of what is presented as facts, which are then marshalled together for an overwhelming proof of the particular conspiracy. Interestingly, the paranoid mentality is often far more coherent than the real world. Whereas the real world is chaotic, with many of the structures of the political world often first and foremost characterised as anarchic and even chaotic, the paranoid mentality leaves no room for coincidence, mistakes or ambiguities (Ballinger, 2011: 11-13; Hofstadter, 1966: 29-38).

The tradition of theorising conspiracy theory as political paranoia has continued to be the dominating approach, and is commonly referred to as the pathological approach. For example, Elaine Showalters (1997) viewed conspiracy thinking in relation to ideas of “hysteria” that came from a group anxiety created by the sensationalist ethos of modern media culture. Daniel Pipes’s (1997) study is another negative view on the psychosocial aspects of conspiracy theories. Pipes regarded paranoid political thinking as diseased thought, a mixture of extremism and individual psychosis. There are many approaches to conspiracy theory that



attempt to explain the various psychological factors that attract believers. Jostmann and Prooijen (2013: 109), for example, have looked at how the moral standard of an authority influences the probability for belief in conspiracy theories. Other pathological approaches focused on a psychological predisposition for belief in conspiracy theories. Goertzel (1994: 733) pointed out the statistical correlation between belief in one conspiracy theory and belief in other theories and, perhaps most interestingly, Wood, Douglas and Sutton (2012) showed in a study that even mutually incompatible conspiracy theories are positively correlated in a similar vein. Feldman (2013: 100) showed in a quantitative study how conspiracy theories about Jewish people could be understood as a function of situational factors related to increased anxiety in a society.

Chip Berlet's (2009) analysis also viewed conspiracy theory as a pathological political paranoia that is unhealthy for democracy. However, with his background as an investigative journalist and a scholar with Leftist sympathies, Berlet pointed out a weakness of Hofstadter's pathology being that it was overly reductionist. For example, Berlet draws a clearer distinction between the clinically paranoid and the politically paranoid theoriser:

*The clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically against him, whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose faith affects not himself alone but millions of others* (Berlet, 2009: 14).

Berlet's account is arguably a more progressive approach as it challenges conspiracy theories as a form of political analysis by pointing out how the basic elements were often the same, sometimes rooted in fear and bigotry, and that the same meta-narratives tend to recur. Berlet claimed to be able to show how these narratives can be revealed by identifying the attributes most conspiracy theories have in common, regardless of the content. Firstly, conspiracy theories picture a dualistic world view and a struggle between good and evil. Secondly, conspiracy narratives typically give the impression that we are on the eve of apocalyptic aggression, that the conditions for human life are about to be dramatically altered unless the secret plot is unveiled to the masses and that this calls for immediate response by the people. Thirdly, Berlet claimed that scapegoating was another attribute of conspiracy theories. Persons or groups are typically stereotyped and blamed for societal problems. The most



persistent variation of this historically is, of course, theories with anti-Semitic content. This is sometimes explicit but, more often, is revealed in understatement or poorly hidden references to historical Right-wing theories. Recognisable in relation to this are the phrases “international bankers”, “the Zionist elite” or even references to certain family names such as the “Rothschild dynasty”. The fourth attribute of most conspiracy theories is what Berlet identified as the “tool of fear”, namely “demonization”; this is the way in which groups and persons are portrayed as the embodiment of evil (Berlet 2009: 9, 13).

Bale (2007) took a similar approach but with a focus on the seemingly superhuman qualities of the agents typically theorised by conspiracy theories. He found that in these narratives, the conspiratorial group is viewed as monolithic, omnipresent and virtually omnipotent, or even - as in David Icke’s “reptoid theory” - the motivating force of all historical change (Bale 2007: 52).

While Berlet’s book also focused on the historical roots of modern conspiracy culture, Barkun (2003:9) argued that these super-conspiracy narratives popularised in the millennial “climate” were created from seemingly disparate historical influences, such as European anti-Semitism and American New Age thought. Barkun further argued that the popularisation of these constructs has moved prevailing opinion beyond what could be seen as a healthy scepticism of authorities, and that the familiarisation of conspiracy theories has largely to do with 21<sup>st</sup> century media characteristics. On the one hand, there is the impact of conspiracy theories in the entertainment industry, such as Oliver Stone’s JFK film or Dan Brown’s “The DA Vinci Code”. On the other hand, Ballinger (2011) and Barkun (2003) have focused on the effect of the internet as a new arena outside the reach of traditional gatekeepers such as the mainstream media. Another historical approach to conspiracy theories suggested that conspiracy narratives have become so popular simply because of an increasing number of what can be seen to be high-level conspiracies that began over the last decade, and that the trust in government officials and institutions is, therefore, weakened (Knight 2000:18).

## 2.5 Epistemological approaches to conspiracy theories

*Doubt is an uncomfortable condition, but certainty is a ridiculous one.*

Voltaire (as cited in Bryant (2007))

Over the last decade, there has been a new debate concerning epistemology, political philosophy and questions of a religious/spiritual nature in relation to conspiracy theory. Although most academics and intellectuals tend to understand conspiracy theories as reactionary, populist, undemocratic and irrational, it is not clear, according to scholars such as Coady (2007b: 1), that conspiracy theories are either universally or typically irrational. In general, the academic interest in the subject could be divided into two camps, namely: (i) those who, without further consideration, accept the link between irrationality and conspiracy theories, and (ii) those that argue that conspiracy theories do not necessarily deserve their reputation of irrationality.

Anderson (1996) described conspiracy theories as fundamentally a sociological, and not a psychological, phenomenon. For Anderson, conspiracy theory is a form of political discourse in which the underlying argument starts with an hypothesis that is backed up by speculations to fill in what is not known. Anderson further claimed that conspiracy theories share, with other modes of political analysis, “[a] tendency to retrodict or impute motives from consequences which, with the Latin cliché, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, students are taught is fallacious” (Anderson 1996: 96).

Sapountzis and Condor (2013:1) have argued that conspiracy theories, in their modern form, must be understood as secularisation of religious superstition. It is interesting to further interrogate the relationship between religious beliefs and belief in conspiracy theories. Keeley (2007: 135) suggests in this regard God as the “ultimate conspiracy theory”. The claim is that religious beliefs and the belief in omnipotent conspiracies face the same epistemological questions. A similar article (Keeley, 1999) took its base in miracles, and concluded that there is never sufficient epistemological warrant to believe in them, and since miracles are literally “incredible”, we cannot say for sure that a testimony of a miracle is “credible”. Similarly, many conspiracy theories are “incredible” in that it is not fruitful to make them the subject of intellectual scrutiny.

However, conspiracy theories arguably share this epistemological incredibility with God (Keeley, 2007: 138). God, who in fact is quite commonly believed to exist, belongs to the epistemological category of the supernatural in a way that, according to Keeley, is so similar to conspiracy theory that he suggests that it might be interesting to shed light on religious epistemology through the epistemological discussion around conspiracy theories. God's mysterious ways are arguably neither unlike the alleged works of omnipotent conspirators, nor are they to be rejected *a priori* (Keeley, 2007: 146). Most interestingly, Keeley's argument suggest how conspiracy theory enriches the understanding of what truth is, and which truths are better than others.

Further, Coady (2007b: 193) took a similar general stand against the idea that conspiracy theories are, by their epistemological standard, irrational. Pigden (2007: 219) had a similar understanding of the epistemology of conspiracy theories compared to "conventional wisdom". Both history and the daily news, as well as common sense, Pigden argued, all tell the same story; "people often conspire", and therefore a theory that postulates conspiracies is not more likely to be untrue than theories that describe the same events without descriptions of conspiracy (Pigden, 2007: 223).

Furthermore, Pigden suggested that in a sense, as a matter of propositional logic, we are all conspiracy theorists; "Unless you believe" that the history books and the nightly news are largely false, you are a conspiracy theorist, and "if you do believe" that the history books as well as the nightly news are largely false, you are also a conspiracy theorist. In conclusion, you are a conspiracy theorist (Coady, 2007: 193). For example, Pigden argues that the foreign policy of Britain under the leadership of Tony Blair was largely based on conspiracy theories, namely that of the theory of Saddam Hussein being in league with Al Qaeda, and that the Iraqi regime conspired to evade UN inspectors and had acquired weapons of mass destruction (Pigden, 2007: 228). Pigden's point is that "conventional wisdom", historical records and mainstream news cannot be that easily distinguished from conspiracy theory on account of epistemology.

However, most critical accounts on the epistemology of conspiracy theories defend the view that there is something deeply wrong epistemically with these theories. For Mandik (2007: 205), the main problem is that conspiracy theory applies explanations to a problem

intentionally in a way that, in turn, eliminates all competing explanations<sup>10</sup>. Lastly, Baumann views fundamentalist beliefs as a rational adaption to a special living context in which there are high levels of distrust towards the outer society; members of a group would rather rely solely on the authorities of their own group (Baumann, 2007: 150).

## 2.6 Cultural approaches and New World Order as post-modern meta-narrative

*Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot escape.*

Friedrich Nietzsche (as cited in Reginster, 2009: 84)

So far, the literature reviewed more or less fits within the approach that labels conspiracy theories “pathological”. Broadly speaking, this approach considers the conspiracy theory within the theoretical framework of mainstream political science, psychology and history. This has been the conventional way of theorising on the subject, making use of established positions and concepts of mainstream social science. The phrase *conspiracy theory* developed negative connotations because it was commonly used in a pejorative way in relation to views outside the general understanding of political issues. The common use of the phrase and the dominant mode of understanding conspiracy theories are in accordance with Hofstadter’s “paranoid style”. When this thesis refers to new understandings and “new” ways to theorise conspiracy theory, this refers to approaches that argue that the dominant mode of understanding is flawed, a statement that implies a view on conspiracy theory within the framework of culture theory and postmodern/post-structural culture theory. With this study’s particular approach, it is suggested that since the pathological understanding is the template for the common use of the phrase, the appearance of conspiracy culture in various contexts might be misunderstood or understood too narrowly.

Mark Fenster has been a dissenting voice as an academic occupied with conspiracy theories positioned within the cultural studies tradition. With his two editions of *Conspiracy theories in American culture* (1999; 2008), Fenster is openly intrigued and even sympathetic to conspiracy theories. Although his book is not about supporting or debunking any particular conspiracy theories, Fenster’s account was unusual in that, with a broad cultural approach, he investigated why people believe in conspiracy theories in the first place. He argued that those who dismiss belief in conspiracy theories without further consideration miss an important part

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<sup>10</sup> The question is perhaps also if this applies to other theory discourses.

of the whole picture. Perhaps most interesting is the way in which Fenster has argued conspiracy culture as a legitimate form of protest. Although he accepted the main arguments of Hofstadter and Berlet, among many others, he maintained that mainstream/consensus interpretations of politics might be proved pathological as well. And while Berlet saw conspiracy thinking as “toxic to Democracy” and, in essence, fascist, Fenster has argued that the ideological focus in relation to conspiracy theories was a misunderstanding, and furthermore that the Left/Right divide was not particularly relevant (Fenster, 2008: 17).

Fenster made two main claims in his book, namely: (i) the most common understanding of conspiracy theory was faulty, and that academics and journalists wrongly understood it as a pathological cry from social margins; and (ii) conspiracy theory, first of all, must be understood as a subset to populism, which has a long and important tradition in American culture and politics. Even though the theories are largely far from being the correct interpretation of historical events and power relations, they represent, according to Fenster, a “[c]onsistent populist logic and a critique of power that must be understood as a legitimate part of capitalist democracy” (Fenster, 2008: 281). He further argued that what they illustrated was a populist force that goes far back in history, that is still remarkably popular, and that conspiracy theories have played a key role in many social movements throughout American history as a way to narrate a world of unequal power.

Of particular relevance to this thesis is Fenster’s (2008: 12) suggestion that conspiracy theories generally worked as a tool with which to narrate and explain a world of unequal power. According to Fenster, the way in which conspiracy theorists move from a general theory of global power to the specific style of narrative and interpretive acts (as described by Hofstadter, 1966; Bale, 2007; Berlet 2009; and Ballinger, 2011) is part of the Western political and cultural landscape. When this is commonly understood as “pathology”, the pervasiveness, attraction and authority of conspiracy theories in the present day are overlooked (Fenster, 2008: 281).

Jones (2012: 44) suggested that conspiracy theory is a “way of knowing” what is increasingly a part of contemporary global life. Since conspiracy theory increasingly becomes “common sense”, permeating spheres of popular culture, politics, and even science, there has been a need to move beyond the phrase ‘conspiracy theory’ and a direct association with Right-wing and other fringe positions. Jones, therefore, suggested a more nuanced understanding by

considering conspiracy theory as a knowledge-producing discourse. It is particularly interesting that Jones identified conspiracy theories as genuinely radical and anti-establishment on a global level by the way in which conspiracy theories often speak directly to concerns of critical and feminist geopolitics, and away from the official and elite visions of global spaces (Jones, 2012: 46). The concern of critical geopolitics, Jones argued, was to deconstruct dominant discourses and reveal hidden power structures. The 9/11 Truther movement is an example of how conspiracy discourse can turn into a “way of knowing”. Conspiracy narratives are thus a highly visible and increasingly “commonplace” part of global life.

In addition, conspiracy can be engaged with both from positions of power and marginalisation. Although the latter is most commonly presumed, conspiracy theories and the manipulation of public fear has often historically provided states with political capital not available in times of stability (Jackson, 2005, as cited in Jones, 2012: 45). Jones has argued that conspiracy thinking can offer diverse publics an alternative way of understanding societal issues and recognised the potential of conspiracy theories to challenge political power structures. For example, it is mentioned how conspiracy theories have been a way for feminists and African Americans to narrate the patriarchal and racist institutional forces aligned against them (Jones, 2012: 45-49).

Jamil and Rousseau (2011) had similar arguments that looked at the influence of culture on the formation of conspiracy discourse. Their study examined 9/11 and the gap between systems of meaning comprising the mainstream understanding of the events in North America and the common meaning given to these events in Pakistan and Pakistani communities in Canada. Not surprisingly, and in contrast to the traditional pathological approaches, the study showed that views of global power relations that stemmed from particular cultural contexts played a role in shaping conspiracy theory discourses (Jamil and Rousseau, 2011: 163).

This kind of discursive approach, which follows from the post-structural tradition of Michel Foucault, among others, is used by Bratich (2008: 13) in his concept of “conspiracy panic”. To Bratich, it was of secondary interest what a conspiracy theory was and what the common properties and attributes of these theories were. Instead, he asked under which conditions something gets to be called a conspiracy theory. Implied in this understanding is the notion that conspiracy theories are defined and identified with the purpose of marginalising certain

theories. It is further thought to be possible to identify a certain political rationality or a “will to moderation” that was seen as the will to identify specific narratives as “conspiracy theories”. If this researcher understands Bratich correctly, this “will to moderation” is an expression of the establishment’s agents and powerful discourses using “conspiracy panics” as a “tool of governing at a distance”. This deliberate identification of certain discourses as conspiracy theory transcends Left/Right positions, and it is suggested that what conspiracy theorists call “Left gatekeeping” can be understood here to be in a similar vein.

Sapountzis and Condor (2013: 1) argue that conspiracy accounting is used by most ordinary social actors in the language of daily life. Rather than being an atypical and pathological form of political reasoning, it is argued that conspiratorial reasoning is being used to create complex causal arguments, and to challenge dominant ideological assumptions. Instead of being atypical and fringe, this kind of reasoning can thus be considered to be prototypical (Sapountzis and Condor, 2013: 17).

In the context of this thesis, it is interesting that Bratich has suggested that conspiracy theories might contain counter-knowledge that could possibly complement existing Leftist political programmes, and that might help to create new forms of analysis and activism (Bratich, 2008: 119-120). Bratich examined shifts within the Left in the post-Cold War era, and especially how dissent has been marginalised and negated when claiming alignment with conspiracy theories. He pointed out that the Left might be excluded from the productive and vitalising potential of conspiracy theories, and that there was some misunderstanding of how progressive movements were, or could be, impacted upon by conspiracy theories. Todhunter (2012) also pointed out that many conspiracy theories have been particularly informative on issues that have been missed both by the mainstream narrative and Leftist analysis.

## 2.6.2 Conspiracy theories as allegories

*The Human heart must have an absolute*

- D. H. Lawrence cited in Scherr (2004: 65)

Conspiracy theories as a world view are suggestively more about faith than political conviction in a traditional sense. These theories appeal to people who want to believe, or perhaps rather people who do not want to believe in the official version, or who may feel alienated when confronted with the official version presented on CNN. Interestingly, the moral philosopher, Mary Midgley (2010), talks about what religion means to people in the documentary, *The Bible: A history*. Midgley argues that we cannot understand the creation story of the Bible unless we fully understand the power of myths. She further questioned how we look at myths in general, saying that it was alarming that many people no longer see old religious texts for what they are. For Midgley, mythical imaginations of reality are something we cannot live without.

She also claimed that the modern desire to verify or falsify knowledge has simply gone too far. She referred to the works of Shakespeare, which carried a radical and anti-establishment message in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Nobody at the time would have considered questioning the accuracy of the biographical content. For instance, the play *King Lear* evokes a period of time when it was difficult to distinguish history from myth. Many have asked whether King Lear and his daughters really existed, which is, of course, irrelevant. The purpose of Shakespeare's story was to use a myth to say something about the nature of greed and the power relations of his time. In the modern secular world, Midgley argued, belief in scientific proof has become so dominant that it is not unlike religious belief systems, "only less nutritious". She furthermore suggests that we have become so unsophisticated that we do not know how to deal with mythical descriptions of the world (Midgley, 2010).

It is not the purpose of this research project to make an assessment of Midgley's statements or to engage in a discussion about religion. There are, however, approaches to conspiracy theories which regard the value of mythical accounts in a similar way. Those termed by Ballinger (2012) as "allegorical approaches" focus on the symbolic significance of conspiracy theories as a cultural discourse, rather than on the implications and meaning of conspiracy theories as a political discourse. Within this theoretical framework, the world views of



conspiracy theorists are considered as allegories or “metaphorical narratives for the relationship between society and the self within particular historical and cultural contexts” (Ballinger, 2011: 16).

An earlier reference in this thesis to “postmodern meta-narratives” (see 2.5), to which Fenster also referred, is a reference to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s (1984) concept of modernity, which pivoted upon particular dominant ways of understanding the world. These meta-narratives have, according to Lyotard, become common sense or “naturalized” as the conceptual frameworks upon which Western civilisation operates. The meta-narratives are further understood as totalising social and epistemological frameworks in the way in which it is assumed that certain ways of understanding reality are more true or correct than others. As Lyotard (1984: xxxiii) writes in the introduction to *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (1984), “Science has always been in conflict with narratives . . . but to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game”.

Lyotard and others of the postmodern tradition and, in a sense, scholars of other critical traditions as well, have argued that a grand narrative exists that is more or less common to everyone and that legitimises the way in which people are socially organised. Postmodernity is defined as mistrust of this grand narrative that has shaped the modern condition, or “incredulity towards meta-narratives” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). This postmodern condition is not dominated by a totalising and commonly accepted meta-narrative, but consists of a multiplicity of smaller and local narratives” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). Lyotard used the term “paralogy” to refer to these small narratives that he claimed were suppressed by the totalising meta-narratives. The concept of “paralogies” was further used to theorise conspiracy theories as “little narratives” that derive from all kinds of groups and individuals, and that directly challenge the ideas integral to the meta-narratives. As a consequence of this, theoretically, the popularisation of conspiracy theories could serve as a practical means of challenging the totalising nature of the dominant meta-narratives. According to this theoretical framework, since conspiracy theories could be understood as “little narratives” that challenge the ideas integral to the meta-narratives, conspiracy theories are necessarily regarded as an illegitimate form of knowledge and thus consigned to the margins of society (Ballinger, 2011: 17).

The “cognitive mapping” approach to conspiracy theories is also relevant, although it demonstrates a more negative understanding of conspiracy theories. The idea of “cognitive mapping” in relation to conspiracy theories stems from the postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson (1990: 347). He proposed that conspiracy theories should be seen in relation to his views on late capitalism as a totalising system. According to Mason’s (2002: 40) idea of conspiracy theory as “the poor man’s cognitive mapping”, the overwhelming effect of globalisation as a large scale, transnational, material and cultural force has changed the conditions for what serves as a basis for the formation of self and community identity, that it has dramatic impacts for how we understand the world (Mason, 2002:40).

Jameson (year) proposed two main ways in which to “map” the postmodern society: (i) the self-reflexive forms of postmodernist art; and (ii) the “omnipresence of the theme of paranoia”, which produces conspiracy theories. Postmodernist art is argued to be an inferior type of mapping since it only resolves into an endless mapping and remapping of the world. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, are understood as the marginalised man’s mapping of the postmodern world, and must be understood as the “degraded figure of the total logic of late capitalism”. Conspiracy mapping is thus not as useful a source of counter-hegemonic activist agenda as one might have assumed. Jameson has argued that since conspiracy theory create an analogy that is subsequently taken to be real, it creates a map of a parallel or imaginary world, and a map of misrecognised social systems and power structures (Jameson cited in Mason, 2002: 40).

According to Jameson’s view, conspiracy theories cannot be seen as allegorical maps of late capitalism, but rather as cultural fantasies that cannot serve as a basis for anti-capitalism critique, since they are inadequate in their analysis of the real world of political economy. Aupers (2012), however, does not agree with this and suggests that such accounts come from a kind of “moral panic” (Knight, 2000: 8, as cited in Aupers, 2012). He furthermore proposes that a general stance to conspiracy theories could perhaps be understood as “conspiracy theories about conspiracy theories”. Interestingly, Aupers (2012) referred to Bruno Latour’s (2004) concept of the “modern practice of purification”. This refers to the modern divide between rational science and irrational counterparts being reinforced by actively downplaying the similarities and over-emphasising the differences between these discourses. While many of the former scholarly positions on conspiracy theories explicitly claimed that these theories represent something reactionary and anti-modern, Aupers (2012: 23) has argued the opposite, namely that conspiracy theories are a generalised and natural expression of distrust that is

integral to the cultural logic of modernity, and one that is produced by an ongoing process of modernisation.

Lewis and Kahn (2010) have suggested that perhaps the most explicit understanding of conspiracy theories as allegorical constructs involved considering David Icke's "reptoid hypothesis" (see 2.3). These authors have questioned whether or not Icke really believed in the theory himself. They suggested that Icke's lizards with shape-shifting abilities should be understood as allegorical, almost as in a satire, for example a Shakespearian play, intended to alert people of the emergence of a global fascist state.

Lewis and Kahn (2010) also referred to Douglas Keller's (1995: 140) distinction between a reactionary "clinical paranoia", which traditionally has been associated with Right-wing conspiracy theories, and a critical progressive paranoia that confronts power and is suspicious of the stories presented in mainstream media. At first glance, most would immediately categorise Icke's theories as reactionary and clinically paranoid. However, Lewis and Kahn (2005) argued that the type of novel synthesis and the imaginative perceptions in Icke's theories must be understood in the light of what Kellner (1995: 140) termed a positive conception of paranoia. The argument is further that in the postmodern condition, it can be expected that a desire will appear to reconsider meaning in a world in which

*linearity, rationality, and causality have fallen into a postmodern black hole leaving citizens to fend for themselves in an often times perplexing cacophony of media simulations, cultural implosions and political fluctuations*

(Lewis & Kahn, 2005: 15).

This postmodern cultural theory approach, opposed to most understandings of conspiracy theory, both pathological and non-pathological, opens up the possibility of conspiracy narratives empowering forms of political agency. This is also supported by Dean (as cited in Lewis & Kahn, 2005: 15) who suggested that the imaginative aspects of conspiracy theories are helpful tools for the decoding of politics in what she calls the "techno-global information age".

Articulated in another way, the abovementioned authors have suggested that Icke's postmodern narrative might be a way of giving ordinary people narrative structure, which can

be used to question the mainstream assessments of current political issues. This postmodern narrative structure arguably represents a break with historical social forces. It is described by Lewis and Kahn as an “utopian longing”, and for Icke this involves reconstructing individualism and community outside current ideological confines and the constraints of historical determinates such as class and race (Lewis & Kahn, 2005: 16).

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that the phrase “conspiracy theory” refers to a category of different theories which can be analysed using a number of critical approaches. In particular, the distinction between pathological approaches as the traditional mode of understanding conspiracy theories, and cultural/allegorical approaches has been drawn. While the weaknesses of conspiracy theory exposed by the former approaches are valid, as are the concerns about its historical roots in the political far right, it has been argued that cultural/allegorical approaches to conspiracy theory allows a more inclusive discussion. While the flaws of conspiratorial world views are obvious, cultural/allegorical approaches suggest that belief in conspiracy theories represents a kind of counter position outside of both mainstream and leftist discourses. Concerning the aim of this research, to discuss conspiracy theory as alternative ways in which to approach the current crisis of the capitalist system, a broader understanding of conspiracy theory allows a further discussion on how these narratives could be understood in relation to Marxist/critical perspectives and other political scientific theorising. The next chapter will provide further theoretical depth to the understanding of conspiracy theory as counter-knowledge.

### **Chapter 3: The ideology of counter-hegemonic resistance**

*But if conspiracies exist, they rarely move history; they make a difference at the margins from time to time, but with the unforeseen consequences of a logic outside the control of their authors: and this is what is wrong with 'conspiracy theory'. History is moved by the broad forces and large structures of human collectivities.*

Frank Mintz (1985)

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Revolution is often carnival time. While a revolution is an uprising of the people and an effort to change the existing order, visually it often has more to do with street festivities rather than political demonstrations. Whether one looks at the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, Paris in 1968, the Rose revolution in Georgia in 2003, Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring of 2011, or the 2013 mass demonstrations in Istanbul and Rio de Janeiro, it is all about the mass mobilisation of the people. The forces that were unknown to most people prior to these uprisings were mobilised and directed towards largely authoritarian regimes, always corrupt regimes.

Arguably, the mobilisations can be seen as both popular and populist. Typically, these uprisings are organised without any central leadership because the demonstrators do not want this. There are usually a variety of aims to challenge those who possess money and guns and to achieve freedom without ideological strictures and straitjackets. Yet, the mass demonstrations of the last two decades or so show signs of a new generation of political resistance. These demonstrators have grown up after the fall of the Berlin wall and have the internet and social media as a natural part of daily life. These are, therefore, movements with a new language and new visual expressions, and could be understood as reflections of a “post-political” era (Schlembach, 2012: 234).

Further new manifestations of resistance are shaped by the use of technological innovations. When mainstream media symptomatically refuses to broadcast their revolutions, the latest reports, pictures and slogans were spread by demonstrators on Facebook and Twitter. When

Turkish national television chose to show documentaries about penguins rather than protests<sup>11</sup> during one of the most intense nights on Taksim Square in Istanbul, this was met with appropriate laughter by the masses. However, each of the above-mentioned mass mobilisations had different contexts, and their roots were structural rather than caused by social media. As Karl Marx would have recognised, the youth of the communication age are noted for their modern means of communication, and the global interconnectedness provided by the internet may undermine the relevance of corrupt elites and traditional forms of media.

This chapter will firstly present an historical analysis of the Left, a framework that seeks to historicise the present, which in a broad sense represents the conventional guiding framework for unveiling the flaws of the current capitalist system and attempts to counter ideas of the current neoliberal hegemony. The chapter commences with Marx and then the ideas of Wallerstein, Gramsci and Cox are presented. While the linking of the legacy of the critical theory of Cox to Marxism could be problematised (Leysens, 2008: 5), it is found legitimised on account of the purpose of this study. Cox's approach is an account that gives both structure and agency explanatory power in an analysis where the Gramscian concept of hegemony is transposed to a global context. Cox's understanding of the ways in which hegemonic world orders represent constraints to emancipatory projects provides theoretical depth to a discussion of counter-hegemonic ideas. In sum, this outline of ideas that in a broad sense are included in the framework of historical materialism is meant to demonstrate the strength of this tradition of historicisation of the present.

The above is followed by two sections on the financial crisis and the Occupy movement. These have been included in order to substantiate an understanding of current counter-hegemonic movements as "post-political" and, to a lesser degree, guided by a particular political philosophy (Harvey, 2010: 258). This is to further demonstrate the historical analysis of the Left as indisputably the strongest framework to understand and address the current issues and inform counter-hegemonic movements. However, the diversity of current critiques of the crisis and the fragmented nature of contemporary movements suggest that leftist discourse is not the only framework of preference for those who seek to challenge the common sense of the neoliberal hegemony.

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<sup>11</sup> The Guardian (2013) Retrieved from Guardian comment network  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/09/turkey-mainstream-media-penguins-protests>.

### 3.2 Historical–materialist theoretical framework of counter-politics

*The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre.*

- Karl Marx (as cited in Wallerstein, 1974)

The historical-materialist tradition is the general framework and understanding of historical development that is largely shared by those who have later modified or expanded on the ideas of Karl Marx. Marx was, in turn, deeply influenced by the thoughts of Hegel and his concept of “dialectical idealism”. However, Marx’s materialism not only sought to understand how ideas were shaped, but also the realities of the real world and how the conditions in this could be changed. In other words, Marx’s originality was in the description of how changes in material conditions influenced the way in which society was organised.

The study of classic Marxism falls under three main headings: (i) Dialectical Materialism; (ii) Historical Materialism; and (iii) Marxist Economics (Brooks, 2002). Marx understood that upholding production in all cultures in all eras, of necessity, takes part in material conditions. Production occurs in the context of a certain order and a division of labour in which some are able to capitalise on the labour of others. There are different modes of manufacture or forms of economic organisation, and the mode of production at any given time is what shapes most of the characteristics and social relations within societies (Marx & Engels, 2003).

The *Communist Manifesto* opens by stating, “[T]he history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles” (Marx & Engels, 2003: 7). Marx perceived that a certain historical development had replaced the former exploitive relations. Although in almost every epoch of known history systems of social ranking can be identified, Marx understood how the modern bourgeois, or the capitalist class, was a product of a long historical development of revolutions and changes in modes of production. While the end of the feudal order in Europe

was seen as a liberating stage in history, Marx argued that class antagonisms were preserved. In the historical epoch to follow, however, the bourgeoisie split into two great hostile classes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This division was a result of changes to the modes of production and the political advancement of the bourgeoisie (Marx & Engels, 2003: 7). Although Marx's understanding of historical societal development is perhaps most easily understood within the context of his own time, the reality of his ideas is still striking today. On reading the first part of the *Communist Manifesto* published in 1848 (Marx & Engels, 2003), there is no question about what a powerful document it is even today, with or without the latest financial crisis. Everything from globalisation to downsizing, corporatism and imperial warfare, it is all well described.

What is more interesting than Marx's understanding of the exploitive relations of production throughout history is perhaps his understanding of how various kinds of products changed lifestyles, family relations and other social norms in society. In his view, personal dignity was exchanged for value, occupations that were formerly regarded as worthy became paid wage labour, and family relations became mere monetary relationships. According to Marx, these inevitable changes occurred rapidly and were imposed on the working classes because the bourgeoisie needed to constantly re-invent instruments of production and the relations of production in order to exist (Marx & Engels, 2003: 7). According to this analysis, the impact on the lives of people is summarised by these authors as follows:

*Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.*

(Marx & Engels, 2003: 8).

The need of the bourgeoisie to expand their markets made these developments global issues. This, Marx predicted, would lead to a widespread cosmopolitan character of production and consumption, the destruction of established national and local industries and the end of national seclusion and self-sufficiency. With this followed an understanding of an emerging



global hierarchy, with a core and periphery, in which new industries need to draw raw materials from the remotest zones. Furthermore, all nations and rural, self-sufficient societies were expected to be drawn into civilisation and to adapt to the bourgeois mode of production. The bourgeois (capitalist) class were expected to recreate the world in their own image, and to make the periphery dependent on the newly industrialised countries, as well as the country dependent on the towns (Marx & Engels, 2003: 9).

For Marx, capitalism had to be understood as a disaster because it turned people into commodities. Although history, within this framework, is seen as a class struggle in which the capitalist class always wins and advances its interests through political influence, the design of the capitalist superstructure and workers' dependency and inherent antagonism towards the capitalist system could be expected to drive society to more extensive and destructive crises. This would mean that the fall of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat would be inevitable (Marx & Engels, 2003: 9-13).

One of the central concepts of Marx's theory was "surplus value". Marx goes into great depths concerning this exploitive mechanism but, in essence, the concept of surplus value means the difference between the increase in value the worker adds to a commodity and the salary received by the worker (Marx, 1887: 128). "Base and the superstructure" is another central concept in Marxist theory. The superstructure is everything that happens around the base, for example culture, language and education. The base and the superstructure are in a mutually reinforcing relationship. The superstructure is important to keep the relations of production legitimate for those who profit from the current order at any given time, and a change in the base leads to a change in the superstructure. This notion of structure has been important for the many theory traditions, such as post-structuralism, feminism, critical theory, as well as Gramscian and neo-Gramscian theories, World System theory and other theories within the Marxist traditions.

Marx did not believe in reductionist academic disciplines for the understanding of these subjects. His theories are, therefore, part of what he himself called an "artistic whole" (Marx, 1865). Perhaps because of the complexity of the theories that transcend the disciplines of politics, philosophy, sociology and economics, he left much room for later interpretations and adaptations of the theories.

### 3.3 World-System Theory - Hegemony and World Order

#### 3.3.1 Immanuel Wallerstein

In the New World Order conspiracy narratives described in 2.4 the understanding of the world order is that it is largely constructed by an agenda of secret agents operating behind publicly known institutions. Some of these narratives do have an historical approach, to some extent, and some even describe long historical developments of the same hidden agenda. However, this understanding of the world order is fundamentally different to historical materialist conceptions of social transformation and historical change. Wallerstein (1974)<sup>12</sup> presents a long-term historical perspective on how the modern world system was created. According to his theoretical framework, the current world system, which is essentially a capitalist one, stemmed from a development that replaced the European feudal order. This explains the rise of Western Europe to world supremacy between 1450 and 1670.

The feudal economy subsequently reached its optimum level and began to shrink. After a period of the expansion of both populations and production, feudalism began to stagnate. Production fell, despite the growth of the ruling class, and this increased the burden on the peasant producers. At this time, Europe naturally moved towards a capitalist economy to ensure economic growth. The transformation into a capitalist system created new modes of labour and changed the social relations of production. People no longer worked for the traditional feudal ruling class, but for a system designed to legitimise the position of the bourgeoisie by creating the “ability of some groups within the system to exploit the labor of others, that is, to receive a larger share of the surplus” (Wallerstein, 1974: 230).

In Wallerstein’s World-Systems Theory, there is a certain dialectic that has possibly reached a climax in the current modern capitalist world system (Wallerstein, as cited in Schouten, 2008a: 4). It started with the crisis in the feudal system and proceeded to the establishment of a strong capitalist world economy that provided the world with links and connections to supersede former boundaries and create strong and sophisticated state machineries in Western Europe. It became possible for economic developments within the new world economy to extend beyond the boundaries of former empires (Hobden and Jones, 2001: 206).

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<sup>12</sup> In *The modern world-system: Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European World-Economy in the sixteenth century* (1974)

While former empires depended upon a system, which by the use of force and monopolies in commerce extracted economic goods from the periphery to the center of the empire, the new capitalist world system created a different division of labour. Within Wallerstein's conceptualisation, the new system was based on an international division of labour. With this understanding, the politics and the conditions within each region must be understood in relation to the position of the region in the world economy. This new order was termed by Wallerstein "core and periphery" (Wallerstein, 1974: 231).

The core regions have always benefited most from the capitalist system. North Western Europe developed as the first core region and was the first to develop the kind of modern state administration needed for the local bourgeoisie to control international commerce and extract capital from this trade. The states within this core were characterised by strong central governments, extensive bureaucracies and large mercenary armies. These core areas were also the first to change from feudal obligations to monetary rents and their agricultural production increased with the new predominance of the commercially-orientated, independent farmer. Thus, impoverished peasants moved to the cities to offer their labour to the new manufacturing industries (Wallerstein, 1974: 231).

The periphery has typically lacked a strong central government, or alternatively governments have been controlled by the core to ensure the export of raw materials to the core. Its relationship with the core is best described as an unequal trade association, in which the core expropriates much of the capital surplus generated by the periphery. Today, one recognises this kind of relationship most in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. However, in the early phases of the new capitalist order, Poland, for example, quickly became periphery to the rest of Europe when its wheat resources were exploited by the core states, and the Polish King lost power to the nobility. Workers, who in the feudal order were once loyal to the king, then began to sell their cheap labour to the new commercial entities instead.

Between these main positions in the global hierarchy, there is the semi-periphery, which consists either of core states in decline or peripheral states that seek to strengthen their relative position in the world economic system. Typically, countries within the semi-periphery have limited and declining access to international banking and the production of highly-priced manufacturing goods. In short, the semi-periphery does not dominate and

benefit to the same extent from international trade. However, like the core, the semi-periphery also tends to exploit countries in the periphery in a similar vein (Wallerstein, 1974: 231).

Given this historical approach to the current capitalist world system, the situation in the world today is within Wallerstein's framework and is understood to be a continuation of the historical development of this system. The symptoms of the current crisis and structural problems one repeatedly sees cannot, therefore, be solved by crisis management. According to Wallerstein, the current world-system is at the end of a 500-year-old historical development, and we have already started on the path to its end: "This can't go on forever, because no system goes on forever. All systems are historical - that's true for physical and chemical systems, biological systems, and *a fortiori* for social systems" (Wallerstein, as cited in Schouten, 2008: 4).

Wallerstein further believes that neoliberalism is at an end, and that we are about to enter an era globally in which protectionism again replaces free flow, and ultimately the current capitalist system can be expected to be history within 40 to 50 unpleasant years (Wallerstein, as cited in Schouten, 2008:4). Therefore, to follow Wallerstein's position, a conventional critique of the capitalist system must be understood as a failure of imagination because this structural crisis simply cannot be fixed; "we must first of all comprehend with some clarity the historical development of our present system, appreciate its structural dilemmas today, and open our mind to radical alternatives for the future" (Wallerstein, 2004: 12).

According to Wallerstein (2011b), the global economy will not recover. To him, the conventional, widespread understanding that the economic trouble, seen since 2008, will eventually be fixed and that the current system will continue to exist in its essential features is flawed. In simple terms, the capitalist system is in a crisis because of a growing "profit squeeze", which leads to "chaotic fluctuations of all kinds" that cannot be controlled by public policy. The only thing that is certain is that the current system will not continue. The question for Wallerstein is, therefore, what kind of system will replace it? It is implied that this could be a new system that replicates the current system's features of hierarchy, polarisation and inequality, or one that is relatively democratic and egalitarian (Wallerstein, 2011a). For Wallerstein, the general failure of imagination is the common lack of understanding of the historical system and its inevitable demise, and thus the limited substantial debate on how the new system will be created.

### 3.3.2 Gramsci and Hegemony

Anthony Gramsci is another significant contributor to the tradition of historical materialism. Unlike Marx and the classical realist assumptions, Gramsci had a different understanding of the ways in which the masses were kept from rising up against the capitalist class, and how to understand power relations in general. While both Marx and realist theorists focus on coercion and physical abilities, Gramsci propounded the idea of a “third face of power” or an “invisible power” (Heywood, 1996: 100). Gramsci drew on Marx’s concepts of economic determination, history as class struggle and the concept of the base and superstructure, but developed a more subtle theory of power.

The concept of hegemony is most important in this respect - a term that did not originate from Gramsci himself but was used by the Russian socialist movement and was later given a new interpretation by Lenin. Although Lenin did not use the term much himself, he understood that a socialist revolution could not grow out of contradictions within the economy alone; there was also a cultural struggle going on that needed to be taken into consideration. The bourgeoisie was committed to struggling for hegemony, Lenin believed, because he understood it as most important for the capitalist class to lead the working class by controlling their ideas and the institutions in their society (Jones, 2006: 43).

Gramsci’s thoughts on politics and culture were largely written from a prison cell in fascist Italy. His ideas were formed during a period of defeat and the failure of the Italian working class movement’s struggle with factory owners and Mussolini’s fascist state. He further saw the failure of socialist revolutions in Western Europe and the success of the socialist revolution in Russia, and attributed this to the concept of hegemony. Contrary to the economic determinism of Marx, Gramsci gave more explanatory power to the superstructure, ideas and institutions, and thereby suggested that Marx was incorrect in assuming that historical development necessarily originates from economic structures alone (Jones, 2006: 43-48). Gramsci was also more dialectic than deterministic in his approach to politics and culture, and emphasised the importance of ideas and ideology for the revolutionary process. In particular, he stressed the role of human agency in historical change. In other words, whatever happens in the physical world will not create a revolution by itself.

Gramsci believed that the rule of the capitalist class is based on both economic and intellectual domination, and he therefore stressed the importance of how the subordinated groups in society accept the ideas, values and leadership of the ruling class, not by force or by ideological indoctrination, but because they choose this by following their own reasoning (Strinati, 1995: 166). Furthermore, the dominant groups in society secure their continued dominance by manufacturing the consent of subordinate groups through the construction of a political and ideological consensus (Strinati, 1995: 165). In other words, Gramsci understood that a successful ruler must know how to combine control over violent means by an appeal to people's values: "A ruler must know how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means" (Machiavelli, as cited in Jones, 2006: 50).

Leadership involves both coercion and consent, and while consent is organised through civil society, coercion is practiced by what Gramsci calls "political" society. Political society is understood to be the apparatus that disciplines, by means of legitimate violence, those within a society who do not give their consent. Furthermore, this society totally dominates in periods during which consent has broken down. Interestingly, coercive apparatus like the police in modern societies, particularly in the economic core, operate within a high level of consent and it can be noted that often people actually want more rather than less policing. According to Gramsci, the consensus for more policing comes from the construction of a common sense within civil society, which is a prime example of hegemony as a form of intellectual and moral leadership in which people voluntarily assimilate the interests and the ideas of the dominant class (Jones, 2006: 51).

An important point in Gramsci's approach, at least concerning the politics of counter-hegemony, is his insight that hegemony is not a strategy exclusively for the bourgeoisie, but in fact that the working class can develop its own hegemonic project to dominate the state. Within this framework, the distinction between state and civil society is important for the organisation of a counter-hegemonic strategy (Gramsci, 1999: 445). However, the distinction between civil and political society is highly conceptual and differs from state to state. The concepts are therefore used differently in the "Prison notebooks" and sometimes in conflicting senses; "What is true, however, is that Gramsci did not succeed in finding a single, wholly satisfactory conception of 'civil society' or the State (Gramsci, 1999: 447). He understood Italy as a specific case in which fascism represented "passive revolution". Passive revolution is a concept that, in short, means a significant but slow societal transformation that occurs

without the involvement of dramatic social processes. For Gramsci it was, therefore, a central part of the analysis to understand the social forces that produce passive revolution (Gramsci 1999:445).

Any strategy that represents a viable path to counter-hegemonic societal transformation relies on the constitution and the level of sophistication of the state. For example, it was clear for Gramsci that the states in the “East” (meaning Russia) demanded a different strategy than the more sophisticated Western states. Therefore, counter-hegemonic struggle in times of equilibrium between the classes demands a “war of position”, which he sometimes regards as identical to passive revolution. This is reflected in the following lines, “At least does there exist, or can there be conceived, an entire historical period in which the two concepts must be considered identical—until the point at which the war of position again becomes a war of manoeuvre?” (Gramsci, 1999: 446). In other words, during times when political constellations find that a “war of manoeuvre” is impossible, the counter-hegemonic project must take the form of a passive revolution - a process where much importance is given to the role of intellectuals.

Gramsci’s starting point for the role of the intellectuals was, famously, that “all men are intellectuals” (Gramsci, 1999: 131), in the sense of having an intellect and the ability to use it, but that only a few are intellectuals by social function. Gramsci further identifies two groups of intellectuals. Firstly, we have the “traditional intellectuals”, whose function is to produce and reproduce hegemony by means of education and the media. These traditional intellectuals are professionals, such as literary, practical and scientific-minded individuals. Although these intellectuals often have around them a kind of “inter class aura”, one should not be fooled. Their positions derive from specific class relations (Gramsci, 199: 131).

The “organic intellectuals”, on the other hand, represent the different “thinking element” - a particular social class. The organic intellectual is not recognised by profession, but rather by his/her function in directing the ideas of the class to which he/she belongs organically. Therefore, these organic intellectuals do not necessarily describe society in accordance with the established cultural and scientific norms at any given time, but articulate through the language of the cultural setting, the everyday experiences and feelings which the masses cannot express themselves and which the traditional intellectuals do not express (Gramsci, 1999: 131-132). This understanding of the role of the intellectual, and possibly also of



intellectual authority, is revolutionary and has strong implications for the understanding and identification of social forces that might contribute to counter-hegemonic social forces and the formation of a new historical block.

### 3.3.3 Cox and Neo-Gramscian perspectives: Hegemony and world order

*Critical theory is concerned with how the world, that is all the conditions that problem solving theory takes as the given framework, may be changing.*

(Cox, as cited in Schouten, 2009: 5)

Neo-Gramscian perspectives use a critical approach to the study of International Relations (IR) and Global Political Economy (GPE) to show how constellations of social forces, the state and dominant ideas contribute to the creation and sustainability of world orders. In short, these perspectives use the guidelines of critical theory to understand the concept of hegemony in a way that provides an alternative to mainstream IR as well as classical Marxist frameworks. The perspectives further provide a particular critique and historical materialist understanding of the capitalist system by placing the struggle for consensual leadership to the centre of analysis rather than focusing on how some states are dominant over others (Morton, 2003: 171). Neo-Gramscian perspectives challenge the ontological assumptions in IR by focusing on hegemony and the ways in which social forces, social relations of production, forms of state and world order relate to this.

The main ideas of the key contributors to the neo-Gramscian tradition are outlined briefly below. The legacy of Robert W. Cox is of particular importance, although some might contest that it is a misunderstanding of Cox's legacy to categorise him as part of the neo-Gramscian tradition<sup>13</sup>.

Robert Cox developed a particular approach to hegemony with his complex thinking across academic disciplines such as history, philosophy, economics and geo-politics, which demonstrates how politics is always linked to economics, and how "material relations and

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<sup>13</sup> Leysens (2008), in particular, stresses the misunderstanding of Cox's Critical Theory (CCT) as following the tradition of the Frankfurt school of critical theory or the neo-Gramscian tradition. Both assumptions are incorrect, according to Leysens, who further claims that "a more accurate description of CCT would be neo-Vichian" (Leysens, 2008: 43).



ideas are inextricably intertwined to co-produce world orders (Cox, date, as cited in Schouten, 2009: 1). His work is situated within an historical materialist understanding of social development and draws largely on the concepts of Gramsci (although he is not a neo-Gramscian). This is due to his emphasis on the construction of hegemony, which is established by leading social forces within a state, and further projected onto a world scale (Bieler & Morton, 2003). Cox applies the idea of hegemony to the international level in a way that is not dissimilar to Wallerstein's world system concept of core-periphery within which the world must be understood in terms of "nation or social class, of dominance or subordination, of rising or declining power, of a sense of immobility or of present crisis, of past experience, and of hopes and expectations for the future" (Cox, 1987: 207).

Cox first introduced his specific approach in the journal article "Social forces, states and world order: beyond international relations theory" (Cox, 1981), which represented a crucial break with mainstream ideas about hegemony that were based on a static understanding of politics, an a-historical conception of the state and a notion of universal validity (Morton, 2003: 154). Unlike problem-solving theory that is occupied with the maintenance of existing power relations, Cox's Critical Theory of Hegemony does not take any power relations for granted, and instead questions these by bringing their origins into focus as well as the possibility that the world order might be in a constant process of change (Morton, 2003: 154). Various state forms could be expected to develop in response to changes in the ways in which social forces relate to modes of production and changing world orders (Leysens, 2008: 3). A hegemonic structure is understood as a fit between ideas, institutions and material capabilities, and by this understanding of historical structures, Cox offers an explanation in which both material and ideational factors are given explanatory power, and in which agency is incorporated into an understanding of structural change (Berry, 2007: 2).

By upholding the notion that material and ideational factors have equal explanatory weight, Cox's 'historical structures' approach offers IPE an epistemological path by which agency can be incorporated into accounts of structural change. Unlike the tendency of mainstream approaches to give universal validity of sorts to theories, Cox states in the above-mentioned 1981 article that "[t]heory is always for someone and for some purpose. All theories have a perspective and perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically political time and space (Cox, 1981: 128). Furthermore, "[t]here is, accordingly, no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space" (Cox, 1981: 128).

Cox took a new position within the study of IPE by introducing a novel understanding of how global change lies outside conventional ontological assumptions with his focus on how states are formed under pressure from both forces from a world order above, as well as from forces below, the latter being conceptualised as civil society (Sinclair, date, as cited in Cox, 1996: 3). By Cox's central account, structures are always changing and changes in fundamental structures on a world order level have implications for the daily lives of people. This "conjectural" change occurs continuously and affects existing patterns of relations between states, although sometimes faster than others (Sinclair, date, as cited in Cox, 1996: 3). Cox uses the example of the Cold War to show that although the fundamental dynamics of the era went into history, some of the structures from the world order of that period have remained, since structures, according to Cox, are always under construction and maintenance. For Cox, the end of the Cold War was therefore a development in the Cold War (Sinclair, date, as cited in Cox, 1996: 4).

The flexibility of Cox's framework in contrast to neorealist approaches is that it suggests two categories of theories with distinctively different purposes, namely either problem-solving or critical theory. Problem-solving theory assumes that the actors of interest in the international system, mainly the states, are not subject to change. Critical theory, on the other hand, seeks to understand the historical sources of the contradictions and conflicts within the international system. While problem-solving theory deals with *status quo* issues deriving from existing power relations and institutions at a specific point in time in history, Cox's Critical Theory (CCT) problems are understood in the broader context, and not isolated from it (Leysens, 2008: 39). The CCT approach does not ignore events and various forms of social actions but will, at an early point, attempt to understand what happens within the context of the larger structures; it does not address problems by attempting to resolve them so that the system functions more efficiently, but rather asks how the system gave rise to these problems in the first place (Leysens, 2008: 40).

Cox's general understanding of problem-solving theory is that it must be understood as such, and that the treatment of these theories as universal accounts is a misunderstanding of the purpose of theory, since there is no such thing as a "theory of universal validity" (Cox, date, as cited in Schouten, 2009: 5). He recognizes, however, that problem-solving theory might be

most salient in times when fundamental structures are relatively stable, for example during the Cold War (Cox, 1981: 130).

Moreover, it is interesting to look at Cox's historicism not only as a critique of economic determinism<sup>14</sup> and classic realist assumptions that are as well rooted in an "historical mode of thought", but as one that must be seen as an "American version" of realism, that is, "science at the service of big-power management of the international system" (Cox, date, as cited in Leysens, 2008: 41). The problem with positivist perspectives, according to Cox, is that these have to take existing power relations as given, and therefore inevitably contribute to making the existing order hegemonic (Cox, date, as cited in Schouten, 2009: 5). While Cox admits that critical theory contains elements of utopianism, this utopianism is constrained by "its comprehension of historical processes".

Therefore, critical theory must reject improbable alternatives just as it rejects the permanency of the existing order. In this way, critical theory can be a guide to strategic action for bringing about an alternative order (Cox, 1981: 130). This implies that an historical critical outlook on current affairs is necessary for a social movement that seeks to challenge the hegemonic order. However, it also implies political agency based on a non-critical understanding of historical development, which must be rejected as a guiding framework for strategic action that aims to bring about an alternative order (Cox, 1981: 130). "Nevertheless, the contemplation of an alternative order must be anchored in a (realistic) understanding of history. Strategies, which are considered for practical action, must be based on changing practice and empirical-historical study, which are a proving ground for concepts and hypotheses. Thus, we need to consider the possibility of an alternative order in a non-utopian<sup>15</sup> manner" (Cox, 1981: 130).

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<sup>14</sup> Cox uses the example of Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" article, which implies that history is a process that occurs within a limited spectrum in time and space, and which moves towards a definite goal. World history is understood to be a deterministic economic process (Cox, as cited in Schouten, 2009: 4).

<sup>15</sup> In this connection, it is interesting that a central feature of conspiracy theorising is precisely utopianism (see, for example, Fenster, 2008; Lewis and Kahn, 2005; and Barkun, 2006). In this sense, CCT serves to both restrict the potential of problem-solving theory to function as a support of hegemonic structures, and suggest theoretical limitations to the idea of conspiracy culture as political agenda.

### 3.4 The Occupy Wall Street Movement

There are many angles from which one can examine the movement that was initiated by the Canadian anti-consumerist Adbusters Foundation that, in mid-2011, proposed an occupation of Wall Street. The occupation was initially meant to be a protest against corporate influence on society, on failing democratic institutions, growing levels of inequality and, not least, the lack of legal repercussions in the aftermath of the financial crisis (Fleming, 2011). However, it is not clear which aspect of the Occupy movement is most descriptive of the nature of the movement and of similar movements that have appeared in the last few years, and for commentators it seems that it has been difficult to find the most accurate label.

Is the Occupy Movement, for example, best described as a post-Cold War/"post-political" movement (Schlembach, 2012: 234)? Or does it fit within a Gramscian framework of a counter-hegemonic movement (Cobbett & Germain, 2012), after all? Others will say that the alleged struggle between "verticalists" and "horizontalists", or Marxists and anarchists, is a more interesting definition (Rehmann, 2013). Still other authors argue that Occupy is best understood as a movement of people who are more connected as individuals than as members of a community group (Stekelenburg, 2012). This approach goes hand in hand with those who emphasise how the use of the internet and new social media is the most interesting point of departure (Vasi & Suh, 2013). Is the Occupy movement better understood as a "moment" rather than a social movement (Gitlin, 2013: 3)? Or is it perhaps better understood as a fundamentally anarchistic movement without realistic perspectives on social change (Epstein, date, as cited in Rehmann, 2013)? Another perspective is to view Occupy as part of an international wave of mobilisation against the common sense acceptance of neoliberal orthodoxy (Calhoun, 2013: 26).

While the Occupy movement is not a subject of this study, this section, together with a brief examination of the financial crises of 2007/2008, is included to substantiate an understanding of the political and cultural climate surrounding current counter-hegemonic discourse.

### 3.4.2 The financial crisis and the protest against neoliberal hegemony

*We are witnessing a transfer of wealth of unfathomable size. It is a transfer of wealth from public hands, from the hands of government collected from regular people in the form of taxes, into the hands of the wealthiest corporations and individuals in the world. Needless to say, the very individuals and corporations that created this crisis.*

Naomi Klein (2007)

The legitimacy of neoliberalism/free-market capitalism was under serious challenge with the crisis of 2007-8. For three decades, this model has generated vast profits for the new global super-rich, while the increasing gap between rich and poor has reached levels not seen since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The crisis of capital, the crash of southern Europe, and new awareness concerning inequality levels in the USA has brought questions of the distribution of wealth into mainstream consciousness in the West. On a global scale, inequality figures have never been harsher. Hickel (2013) presents statistics that show a systematic flow of wealth from poor to rich areas. For example, the richest 200 people on earth have more wealth than the poorest 3.5 billion; the richest 1% has increased its income by 60% in the last 20 years (concerning the richest 0.01%, this percentage increase in income is even higher); the gap between the richest and the poorest countries has grown to almost 80:1 and, as a consequence of neoliberal policies, poor countries have been losing approximately \$500 billion per year in GDP (Hickel, 2013).<sup>16</sup>

In North America and Western Europe, where most of the occupations and other forms of anti-capitalist activism have taken place, the rates of growth are lower than in post-war decades and an overall deep decline in manufacturing and other traditional industries has been seen. In general, there has been a massive shift of power from public to private, from state to market; “the market has become the model of social relations, exchange value the only value (Hall, Massey & Rustin, 2013: 9). The crisis has been used by governments to further entrench the neoliberal project. As a means of solving the crisis, governments have encouraged private capital to hollow out the welfare state while leaving the burden of solving the crisis - and the blame for it - on vulnerable and marginalised groups. In other words, the

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<sup>16</sup> Facts according to economist Robert Pollin of the University of Massachusetts.

crisis was used, as crises have been used before, to reinforce redistribution from poor to rich (Hall et al., 2013: 10).

While the most conventional Marxist understanding of opportunist behaviour in times of crisis sees this as part of the nature of capitalism, Naomi Klein (2007) suggests a more explicit understanding of it in her book<sup>17</sup>. According to Klein, there is more of a philosophy of power and political strategy that lies behind the opportune actions in times of crisis. For Klein, this political strategy implies total integration between corporate and political elites that share the common goal of an ideological crusade that some call neoliberalism (Klein & Smith, 2008: 582). Klein's perspective lies close to the main narrative of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, with a stronger focus on the deliberate strategies of political and economic elites than on the events as a process of global capitalism. According to Klein, a clique of powerful people was able to create a democracy-free zone, a state of emergency not unlike the tactics of fascist Italy<sup>18</sup>, by using the moment of crisis as a catalyst for rapid political change (Klein & Smith 2008: 583).

The economic crisis of 2007-8 put the fundamentals of neoliberalism into question and the crisis was commonly compared to the Great Depression of the 1930s. According to Nilsen, Berdnikovs and Humphrys (2010: 2), the two crises are deeply interrelated. The outbreak of the Great Depression in 1929 was also the beginning of the end of an era of liberal capitalism consolidated under bourgeois hegemony in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The crash of 1929 both undermined the legitimacy of the liberal idea as well as served as a catalyst for class politics and social movements (Nilsen et al., 2010: 2). With reference to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, any economic order needs to maintain the common sense assumptions on which the current societal model is founded. Such common sense means a whole set of ideas that are beyond question, assumptions so deep that "the very fact that they are assumptions is only rarely brought to the light" (Hall et al., 2013: 13). In the case of the neoliberal hegemony, this set of ideas involves the naturalness of the market, the primacy of the competitive individual and the superiority of the private over the public. These ideas are what make up the neoliberal hegemony, the ruling common sense that has guided whole populations towards a financial and market-driven world view (Hall et al., 2013: 13).

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<sup>17</sup> Naomi Klein, *The shock doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007). (please reference properly)

<sup>18</sup> The comparison with fascist Italy is Klein's suggestion. (I don't think you need to say this – it's implied?)

Under similar circumstances, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political and economic elites failed to maintain the consent of the masses, which led to a political mobilisation or a change from political passivity to a certain activity which, in Gramscian terms, is understood as a “crisis of authority” or, more precisely, a “crisis of hegemony” (Gramsci, date, as cited in Nilsen et al., 2010: 1). A crisis of hegemony creates a moment when social movements are able to mobilise forces that were unknown. Arguably, since the 1990s, there has been a development of large-scale social movements and international coordination and alliance building, which has constituted real attempts to challenge global power structures (Gramsci, date, as cited in Nilsen et al., 2010: 1).

One way to understand the current variety of movements is as part of a larger global movement that, in its own way, addresses a system that is not working but that is being defended by the hegemony of neoliberal ideas. The Occupy movement fits naturally into this picture of a contemporary culture of protest that might carry signs that we “are entering an era of significant transformation in the organisation and structure of world order”, and that what Occupy represents “suggests that the inter-subjective mentality at the heart of global capitalism is no longer coherent (Cobbett & Germain, 2012: 110).

### **3.4.3 The Occupy movement**

*[T]he present age is essentially a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence.*

Søren Kirkegaard (date), as cited in Thinker (2010: 110)

The Occupy Wall Street Movement, which began in September 2011 in Zucotti Park in New York City, grew over a few months and spread to hundreds of cities in the USA and around the world. Some claim that as many as 1 600 occupations took place in 80 countries. It all started in Canada with the editors of “Adbusters” calling for a “Tahrir Square moment” in lower Manhattan to protest against corporate rule. This first announcement was on Twitter with the tweet “#OccupyWallStreet” (2011: 6). Although mainstream media neglected to report that the numbers of protesters were growing conspicuously larger, there came a point when this became impossible to ignore and it quickly became a global phenomenon.



David Graeber first proposed the slogan “We are the 99%” (Gandel, 2011: 35). Graeber insists on the Occupy movement as a distinctively anarchistic movement both in terms of the principles it embodies and the nature of its organisation. This was arguably manifested in the refusal of the movement to create internal hierarchy, recognise the legitimacy of existing political institutions, or accept the legitimacy of the existing legal order<sup>19</sup> (Graeber, 2011). The term “horizontalism” has often been seen as one of the main characteristics of the Occupy movement (Sitrin, 2012).

On the other hand, while the general assembly and the horizontalism has been celebrated and seen as one of the main reasons that the movement has been so successful and inclusive, the weaknesses of these same characteristics are just as often pointed out (for example, Wallerstein, 2011b; Zizek, 2011; and Gitlin, 2013) with regard to the containment of transformative potential. Gitlin (2013: 3) argues that the future development of the “movement becoming more than a moment” is undermined by its unwillingness to move beyond its anarchistic/horizontalist core into a “full service movement”.

For Calhoun (2013), the movement is international in character and origin, comes in a variety of shapes and expressions, and is only united in its protests against the symptoms of corporate-dominated globalisation. However, although there are similarities concerning the form of the protests, the movement is arguably best described in terms of its diversity. If one excludes the Arab Spring from the analysis, since these protests are different to what were seen in Western democracies (Zick, 2012), the protesters in the various occupations have shown a striking variety of ideologies, emphases and other expressions of political and spiritual orientation. Arguably, what they all share is a sense of indignation and anger both towards governments and global markets because of the austerity that has been imposed on ordinary citizens (Calhoun, 2013: 26-28).

Counter-hegemonic resistance in the age of globalisation and the internet could possibly suggest two main aspects of interest. Firstly, there is the hegemonic position of neoliberalism, to which “there is no alternative” (Thatcher, date, as cited in Worth, 2013: 32). Secondly, as a result of globalisation, or whatever one labels the processes of the last two post-Cold War decades of neoliberal hegemony, the world has shrunk mostly due to the enhancement of

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<sup>19</sup> With this, Graeber makes a distinction between protest and “direct action”. While protest, according to Graeber, is an appeal to the authorities to govern differently, direct action as an anarchistic principle is a “matter of acting as if the existing structure of power does not even exist” (Graeber, 2011).



technology. In fact, most of the recent attempts of resistance, in both democratic and authoritarian states, have been facilitated by the internet. This is true for Occupy, Istanbul, Teheran or the Zapatistas in Mexico. However, if the new means of communication and expression of ideas has created new possibilities for the organisation of social movements, they have, at the same time, made the movements fragmented and diverse. And just as the process of globalisation is understood in a variety of ways, resistance to the neoliberal hegemony is expressed with similar variety (Worth, 2013: 32).

The Occupy movements made extensive use of social media for networking, including Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr (Gamson and Sifry, date: 159). However, the negative implications of these technological innovations are also pointed out. Rushkoff (2013), for example, warns against “clicktivism” turning into “Slacktivism”. Since the tools of the internet have been so instrumental in the forming of the movement, it is commonly understood that Occupy reflects this in its diversity and fragmented nature. Stekelenburg (2012: 224) argues that current movements are reflections “of this time as people are less committed to political programs and more individually oriented”. Vasi & Suh (2013: 33) similarly argue against the “superficial celebration” of digital protest. Finally, Juris (2012: 260) argues that the structural political aspects of political struggle become lost as new media tools affect the organisation of contemporary movements.

### **3.4.5 Occupy as a counter-hegemonic movement**

The continuation of the financial crisis, to which Occupy was a reaction, arguably not only challenged the ideologies underlying the capitalist system, but also created both an opportunity and some pressure upon counter-hegemonic forces within civil society to gather behind a coherent counter-hegemonic narrative. The most common criticism of critical scholarship engaging with the politics of challenging the hegemonic order is that a critical understanding of the current structures and of world order is not sufficiently connected to the physical actions of social movements. The masses are, in other words, not sufficiently aware of these structures outside of academia.

The description about the nature of contemporary movements is, in short, that these should be understood as products of a world that has been greatly transformed over a short period of time. Castells (date), as cited in Worth (2013: 33) views it as a “sudden acceleration of the

historical tempo” and an abstraction of previous power into a network of computers that has dramatically changed and disintegrated the former mechanisms of political representation. The former ideological contestation that used to more clearly define the counter-hegemonic struggle has, therefore, left a vacuum that has led to several new forms of dissent. The confusion around contemporary social movements has to do with this situation in which new social movements are emerging that are rooted in different historical traditions compared to those in the past. This new development has changed how resistance is being organised as networks are different in terms of spatiality, ethnicity and national identity (Worth, 2013: 33).

Throughout this chapter, when the researcher has referred to counter-hegemonic struggle, this is with reference to the Marxist idea of resistance developed by Gramsci; the idea of an ideological movement that seeks to challenge the common sense of hegemony. To be successful in this process, the role of the organic intellectual is crucial in constructing a consciousness around a specific ideology that would have strong support within civil society for a counter-hegemonic project (Worth, 2013: 34). However, in relation to this, a Gramscian understanding of Occupy as a counter-hegemonic movement is problematic. The anarchistic, leaderless horizontalism of Occupy clashes with Gramsci’s idea of educating “organic intellectuals” for a leading role in the movement (Rehmann, 2013: 1). The main problem for Occupy is, perhaps, simply that it is taking place at a time, and in spaces within the economic core, in which revolution is unlikely to happen as it once did in Gramsci’s time when revolutionary transformation still seemed a possibility (Cox & Schechter, 2002). This is because “hegemony is more intense and consistent at the core and more laden with contradictions at the periphery” (Cox, 1983: 171).

With Occupy, and perhaps more generally with most contemporary movements, there is a contestation between, on the one hand, the anarchistic “resistance” with its drama and spectacle and, on the other hand, the Marxist approach on how we are to create a desirable society from where we are at present (Epstein, date, as cited in Rehmann, 2013: 2). According to Cox’s understanding of counter-hegemonic struggle, movements such as Occupy could potentially lead to a change into a post-hegemonic world ruled by more equitable global governance after the weakening of the hegemonic order. In Cox’s (2002) framework, historical change comes from a process in which both social agency and historical structures are important. Within the same framework, the relevance of the Occupy movements can be understood in terms of the declining legitimacy of institutions linked to the organisation of

world order. Furthermore, “it is the agency associated with already structural patterns of social relations that produce (*sic*) the world we live in (Cobbet & Germain, 2012: 111).

As this researcher has endeavoured to explain, it is difficult to see conspiracy narratives as fruitful parts of a counter-hegemonic project given their general lack of understanding of historical structures and their ontological and epistemological weaknesses. It becomes clear, after confrontation with historical materialist perspectives, that conspiracy theories do not give accurate descriptions of historical change. However, if an alternative counter-hegemonic movement is required to develop a new common sense distinctive enough to “challenge all facets of everyday life” (Worth, 2013: 36), conspiracy narratives may be useful despite their obvious weaknesses. If conspiracy narratives could be argued to have a place within contemporary counter-hegemonic movements, then this writer’s argument is that this is a valid comment on what these movements represent.

### **3.5 Counter politics and conspiracy theories**

While Zizek (date), as cited in Reed (2013: 23), states that conspiratorial arguments remain with a “kernel which is reactionary and exclusionary”, Fenster (2008), among many others, argues that conspiracy theories should not be categorically distanced from critical scholarship. Reed (2013: 3) agrees with this, suggesting that since conspiracy theories have become an integral part of politics in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, critical scholarship should not only engage in correcting conspiracy theories and describing them in exclusively pejorative terms, but instead also seek to understand the roles of these theories in the lives of their creators. After all, many believers of these theories follow these flawed resonations motivated either by a longing for a more just global political order or, to some extent, a legitimate scepticism of a political and economic reality that does not give immediate intuitive meaning.

As already argued here, this writer does not intend to claim that the Occupy movement is a conspiracy theory. Neither is it the purpose of this thesis to provide some kind of empirical evidence of such a tendency. However, given the discussion of contemporary movements as post-ideological and highly influenced by the technological developments of our time, and with all that comes with that, one could argue that a broader understanding of conspiracy theories is a valuable addition to the discussion on the various forms, and unfamiliar to the experience of counter-hegemonic expressions towards neoliberal globalisation. As Worth

(2013) argues, a variety of practices and cultures could be expected to appear during a process of resistance that might be visible in everyday life; “all provide potential impetus for the war of position” (Worth, 2013: 50).

It is also interesting to think of conspiracy theorising as a meme, a cultural invention that competes with other memes such as the “scientific-expertise meme” and the “resistance-to-orthodoxy meme”. The central question of the conspiracy meme is arguably to question everything represented by the establishment, although this is often on speculative grounds (Goertzel, 2011). However, given the common understanding of Occupy and other contemporary movements as products of our time - fragmented, lacking ideological coherence and largely products of radically changed conditions for the formation of political agency - the broad appeal of conspiracy theories fits, to some extent, within this picture. Although it is not the aim of this thesis to provide empirical quantitative estimates on the influence and commonality of conspiracy theories in the Occupy movement, there are several credible accounts on this matter.

Greenwald (2011), for example, argues that the language of OWS implies classic anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in the name of progressivism. Sunshine (2001), in a similar way, describes how the OWS movement is more prone than most movements to conspiracy logics with its populist and anti-elitist discourse focusing on finance capital. Aistrophe (2013) reflects the researcher’s argument by describing the conspiracy discourse around Occupy as an interesting angle with which to understand dissent in the liberal context. Aistrophe’s focus is on how conspiracy theory becomes a concern for scholars and commentators in relation to Occupy and discusses implications in general for the understanding of dissent and political awareness.

### 3.6 Conclusions

This chapter has, firstly, provided an overview of the theoretical framework of the traditions of historical materialism. The Occupy movement has been described according to the most common understanding of the movement and in terms of its potential as a catalyst for historical change. Gramsci's and Cox's concepts of counter-hegemonic resistance have been shown to differ from the descriptions of what contemporary movements seem to represent. Yet, as argued by Worth (2013: 9), the changed conditions for the formation of counter-hegemonic movements demand a reconceptualisation of ideological consent and the role of the organic intellectual.

The strength of leftist discourse as an historical analysis, and as a means to historicise the present and address current political and economic issues, is indisputable. It has in this chapter been identified features of the current political environment that suggest that alternative world views should be understood as more a natural part of the character of individuals in movements that by their nature are defined as diversified and inclusive, and whose political project is the product of the "late capitalist culture disconnected from its base" (Jameson 1991: 80). In a situation in which it is difficult to understand the economic and political origins of social reality, and where class consciousness is relatively low compared with earlier movements, it has become increasingly difficult to trace socioeconomic developments back to changes in material conditions.

In such a situation, and despite the theoretical strength of leftist discourse, its relevance as the framework of choice seems not uncontested. It seems that leftist ideology, whilst advantageous in understanding the structures underlying the long lines in historical development, has shown less relevance in grasping the issues of the political economy on a micro level. Furthermore, it is argued for the possibility that other world views have gained popularity and, amongst these, conspiracy theories. The next chapter will therefore discuss how conspiracy theory could be theoretically investigated as a form of alternative counter-knowledge, and how leftist ideology relates or could relate to conspiracy theories.

## **CHAPTER 4: Conspiracy theory and conventional critical approaches to hegemony**

*[I]t is not enlightenment, but totalitarianism which looms at the end of the road of liberal-capitalist development.*

Horkheimer & Adorno (date), as cited in Van der Pijl (2009: 260).

### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter Two of this study presented an overview of theoretical approaches to conspiracy theory, beginning with Hofstadter's (1966) seminal article. It was argued that the dominant pathological understanding of conspiracy theories is flawed. This was argued from the perspective of cultural approaches which view the popularity of conspiracy narratives as a mass reaction within cultures in which a sense of insecurity, distrust and alienation is inherent. These are cultures which are detached from its economic base and where the origins of current affairs are increasingly difficult to understand as a product of changes in material conditions. These cultural approaches undermine the immediate link between conspiracy theories and irrationality, as well as the categorical association of conspiracy theories with right-wing/Fascist extremism, the political right more generally, clinical paranoia and even stupidity.

Then again, it has neither been this study's purpose to argue in favour of the existence of a grand conspiracy, nor to give some sort of critical legitimacy to conspiracy theories that are often reactionary in nature, may carry undertones of racism, and are most commonly based on inaccurate understandings of real historical events and current power relations. This is in addition to a naïve understanding of the capacity of alleged conspirators in succeeding to carry out large scale conspiracies. Rather, this study has attempted to make it clear that it is unwarranted to believe that a grand conspiracy exists, and that although some conspiracies do exist, these are not at the centre of analysis for historical change, at least not at the scale assumed in NWO conspiracy narratives.

In Chapter 3, therefore, this study outlined some of the main contributions to the theory tradition of Historical Materialism, and critical approaches that derive in a broad sense from

Marxist perspectives. It was suggested that this is the most effective way of illuminating the obvious weakness of conspiracy theories as political and historical analysis. This theoretical framework is also necessary for the understanding of counter-hegemonic ideas and movements such as the Occupy movement. Occupy is most commonly understood with an emphasis on its Marxist/anarchistic ideological foundation and its affinity with former social movements solidly rooted on the Left. This is perhaps most prominently exemplified by Wallerstein's (2013) statement about Occupy as "a direct descendant and a continuation of the revolution of 1968". However, the movement is just as commonly understood as one that is distinctively a product of the present time and its new technological developments. It is also both a product of the new social media (Ballinger, 2011) and of a post-Cold War/post-ideological culture (Schlembach, 2012) and, even, arguably what Bratich (2008: 161) describes as a post-9/11 "*culture of fear or panic culture*".

It would be an unacceptable and illogical shortcut to stress that conspiracy theories can theoretically be expected to represent a significant part of counter-hegemonic movements just because the popularity of conspiracy narratives could be argued to be part of the same cultural and technological development. However, the aim of this thesis is to discuss how conspiracy theories theoretically could relate to the more established and credible critical approaches to global political and economic issues.

This discussion involves a theoretical investigation of whether conspiracy theories and conventional critical perspectives often have more in common with each other than their similarities to mainstream accounts. Often, the same fear of a totalitarian development is expressed and there is a shared understanding of the common sense and the mainstream as consensus ideas that have been manufactured by hegemonic forces. In this respect, it is interesting to discuss to which degree the alleged distance between the two, from a Marxist/critical point of view, ought to be understood solely as a valid understanding of conspiracy theories. Is it a reactionary stupidity from its utopian beginnings and in its historical undertones of racism and extremism, or - if the claimed distance can also be understood as partly constructed by a "will to moderation" - is it a certain political rationality that must be understood in relation to bourgeoisie maintenance of hegemonic structures (Bratich, 2008: 166)? Does it then also include a lack of understanding and acceptance of the culture in which these theories have gained mass appeal, and of what they represent for those who believe in them?

To further discuss this, the current chapter will first explore conspiracy theories from a Marxist/critical position. Subsequently, the degree to which much Leftist discourse can be said to be free of conspiracy thinking will be examined. Further discussion will follow on how conspiracy theories are perceived with a sense of “*panic*” within Leftist discourse, and the implications of this “*conspiracy panic*” in the acceptable space of counter-hegemonic thinking (Bratich, 2008: 165). Finally, it is suggested that the works of Kees van der Pijl constitute a balance<sup>20</sup>, or an overarching framework, between grand conspiracy narratives and class analysis.

#### 4.2 Class analysis and conspiracy theory

From a Gramscian perspective the tendency of the capitalist ruling class to produce plots against its enemies is understood to be inherent in the nature of their rule. Arguably, all kinds of ruling classes have, in various forms, adopted this kind of ruling over subordinate classes. The situation in the present global economic order is no exception. The scheming and conspiratorial nature of the global elite is arguably more extensive in the present than what was described by Machiavelli in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The means of social control used by the global modern bourgeoisie in the capitalist system is more sophisticated and represents a form of class exploitation beyond the plotting that we understand as Machiavellianism. Although there is a seemingly strong consensus supporting the neoliberal hegemony, there are signs of popular understanding of power relations that could either be understood as “*emotional discontent*” (Showalter, date, as cited in Heins, 2007: 789) or as a widespread feeling of distrust, fear and alienation within Western cultures (for example, Aupers, 2012; Bratich, 2008; and Fenster, 2008).

It is, therefore, understandable that the idea that whoever is in control is controlling everything is becoming increasingly appealing to many. As 9/11 looms in much popular political thinking, and since media and academia has been disciplined to follow the White House line, individuals are likely to be attempting to make sense of this event. 9/11 was a transformative event. It led to the “global war on terror”, redefined foreign policies, and

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<sup>20</sup> By “balance”, it is not implied that the works of Kees van der Pijl draw on the works of conspiracy theorists, or that his work supports any specific theory. The “balance” lies in van der Pijl’s commitment to study agency in processes of class formation and to name names in a critical study field in which structure is normally given far more explanatory powers.



increased military budgets and restrictions on civil rights. When people start to assume that they are being lied to on a systematic basis, it is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to assume that everything is a lie. This is particularly likely given that reasonable questions regarding 9/11 have been ignored and ridiculed by the press, politicians and academia.

The “Truther” movement thus represented a comprehensive citizen research project that sought to at least “question the fraudulent nature of the official account of 9/11” (MacQueen, date, as cited in Griffin, 2008<sup>21</sup>). A number of books have also been published. Two of the more credible publications are “*The new Pearl Harbour revisited*” (Griffin, 2008) and “*9/11 and American Empire: Intellectuals speak out*” (Griffin and Scott, 2007). More recently, the documentary “*9/11 in the academic community*”<sup>22</sup> addresses academia’s strikingly uncritical response to these events. While a large share of populations believe in conspiracy theories, and as much as a third of the population believes that 9/11 federal officials were involved in 9/11 (Hargrove, 2006), 9/11 conspiracy theories have also gained popularity within leftist discourse.

From a Marxist/critical perspective, however, belief in conspiracy theories is generally understood as based on misconceptions of the functioning of the capitalist system. Even though power and capital are increasingly concentrated in few hands, the world remains far more chaotic than what is assumed in grand conspiracy narratives. Even the 0.01% is constantly regrouping in more or less predictable patterns, in such a way that

*a unified discipline of capital is not given. Class formation is a continuous process which at some point is bound to explode the momentary hegemonic interpretation of the general interest, because this formula derives its content from a prior round of class formation and struggle (Van der Pijl, 2012: xiv).*

Social forces are directed into class formation by following directions given by operations of capital. The capitalist class will continue to struggle for competitive advantage by increasing the rate of exploitation and cost differentials, which will, in turn, entail various new trends in the accumulation process, such as centralisation and a decline in the average profit rate (Van der Pijl, 2012: xiv). Undoubtedly, the capitalist class has the leading role in societal development in the capitalist system, but class formation is a continuous process in which

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<sup>21</sup> Dr MacQueen is cited on the book cover

<sup>22</sup> <http://911inacademia.com/> (please reference Internet source correctly)

factions constantly juggle for position in a conjuncture. Although elites lead the ruling class, one might also talk of an elite class vanguard which, in meeting its many challenges, incorporates as many of its adversaries as possible to undermine any serious opposition.

So in the process of class formation, there is always a conspiratorial element, that is, there are many covert aspects as to how a certain faction, or a class vanguard, uses all means to come out on top, discrediting, neutralising, lying and outmanoeuvring others in the process. This is the central aspect in Kees van der Pijl's (2012) understanding of class formation. Although historical structures are most important for understanding historical development, in the final analysis somebody must consciously act; "people make their own history but not in circumstances of their own choosing" (Cox, 1987: 241; cf. Marx, 1919). Robert Cox's critical theory demonstrates a similar analysis of how ruling elites are, consciously and unconsciously, reinforcing hegemony in the current world order. Therefore, to be able to "have any influence over events, or at least to forestall the worst eventualities", the structures in which one is situated must be understood (Cox, 1987: 241). Furthermore, one must "find the connections between the mental schema through which people conceive action and the material world which constrains both what people can do and how they can think about doing it" (Cox, 1996: 95). However, van der Pijl's particular approach is arguably more interesting as an approach to conspiracy theories in that it attempts more explicitly to identify 'agency' and to name names in a way that, at first glance, treads a fine line between class analysis and grand conspiracy narratives.

More generally, according to Marx and Engels, various understandings of political positions are either determined or voluntary. Either agents are understood to act and make choices freely from economical/structural constraints, or politics is understood to be strictly determined by economic structures. Marx's ideas transcend these two alternatives by combining the idea of a "naturalistic materialism", in which humanity is a force of nature that is tied to this origin, and "historical idealism", which assumes that humanity develops an "historical spiritual world of its own making" (Van der Pijl, 2009: 225). Within this framework, and within theoretical approaches deriving from Marx, there is, therefore, little room for ideas about omnipotent monolithic conspiracies that drive historical development<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Conspiracy theory has, therefore, among other reasons, predominantly been associated with the political right-wing, and only recently, and mostly in relation to the 9/11 "Thruther" Movement, has it been a subject within Leftist discourse.

The role of the capitalist is understood to be limited to extending economic interests by profit maximising and, in a broader context, extending the interest of the capitalist class.

One of the main misconceptions of conspiratorial logic, especially in NWO conspiracy theories, is the assumption that capitalists act in ways that do not fit with their role in society; that the richest capitalists no longer just seek to maximise their profits, but want to create a totalitarian, one-world government. Additional conspiratorial assumptions along the same lines are that behind the scenes plotters are extremely clever, if not super-human, and that seemingly unlimited power rests with just a few dozen families. However, all evidence points towards the opposite view. Powerful people make mistakes all the time, both capitalists and leading politicians, and although power and capital in modern capitalist societies are distributed between a relatively small and disproportionate share of the population, this still constitutes some thousands of families and individuals (Domhoff, 2005).

From a Marxist perspective, the bourgeoisie does not and cannot control everything. Especially in times of instability and crisis in the capitalist system, the rich and powerful can be expected to be in ‘cut throat’ competition with each other. The capitalist class is ridden with factionalism and inner tension, and there is no foundation for acts of solidarity, to say the least, and much less for a large-scale conspiracy. This does not mean, however, that the bourgeoisie is not capable of creating strategies and tactics and implementing control mechanisms through the capitalist state. Although the bourgeoisie operates within a limited framework, in contrast to what is assumed in NWO conspiracy theories, it is a revolutionary task to unveil this kind of class manoeuvring (ICConline, 2012).

When this task is being undertaken, to the meaning of conspiracy theory, or whatever one calls radical criticism of the *status quo*, such as “institutional analysis”, “power structure research” or “class analysis”, may be confusing. William Domhoff (2005) has dedicated his academic career to the study of the American power elite, or in his own words, “how elites strive to develop consensus” through publicly observable organisations and corporate boards (Domhoff, 2005, as cited in Berlet, 2004). Domhoff calls his own approach “power structure research”, and frequently concludes that elites often have to compromise and even lose. It is a tough and mostly open fight within the ruling class, and within this framework the opponents of a just and healthy society are profit-seeking corporate conservatives in the roles as we

know them (Berlet, 2004) In other words, contrary to conspiracy theorising, powerful people are understood more accurately in respect of their roles in society.

A vital role within NWO conspiracy theories is that played by the mainstream media, as exemplified by conspiracy theorist David Icke (2013):

*And the global corporate media is playing its usual part in repeating the lies as fact and in doing so the blood will be on their hands too, as it has been throughout corporate media history and yet they are so stupid, so uninformed, so moronic, that they can't see that they and their families are going to be subject to the same Orwellian fascist society that they are providing the daily propaganda to justify.*

The Frankfurt school of critical theory had arguably a similar take on the media and its potential of forming social consciousness. With fresh experiences of the horrors of fascism in mind, these scholars produced a theory on mass culture in mass societies, and how mass culture ultimately relates to totalitarianism. The Frankfurt school looked with interest at how people in times of crisis supported the preservation of existing property regimes by means of fascism rather than rallying around socialism. They found, however, that the American culture of mass consumption was just as frightening (Van der Pijl, 2009: 260). While “vulgar Marxism”<sup>24</sup> saw culture merely as a reflection of the economic base, the Frankfurt school saw culture as largely autonomous in relation to the base level of production.

Adorno’s understanding of the “culture industry” was therefore quite different to Marx’s anticipated effects of the increased forces of production. Instead of becoming a force conducive to revolution, Adorno predicted that technological expansion would culminate in mass deception and instrumental repression (Andrae, 1979: 35). The rationale was that the “culture industry” was “a seedbed for political totalitarianism” since it was under the monopolistic control of the bourgeoisie (Andrae, 1979: 36). In this situation, it could be predicted that the working class would fail to revolt against the capitalist system since it would be corrupted by consumerist society, and workers would be transformed into consumers (Van der Pijl, 2009: 261).

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<sup>24</sup> Vulgar Marxism refers to an emphasis on economic determinism and inevitable historical laws.

In relation to this, it is suggested that conspiracy theory might be seen as “twisted everyday variants of critical theory that has gone off the rails - or, conversely, to scrutinize critical theory to uncover its share in conspiracy thinking (Heins, 2007: 791). With reference to Horxheimer’s<sup>25</sup> notes on “rackets”, which is discussed below, Heins suggests that critical social philosophers shares some basic assumptions about how the social world works; for example, that nothing happens by chance, that nothing is as it appears and that everything is interconnected (Heins, 2007: 791). While Horxheimer’s rackets at first seem to be a balanced and rational critique of conspiracies in modern capitalism, it seems that he himself was far from immune against conspiracy theorising (Heins, 2007: 792).

Rackets<sup>26</sup> are thought of as the basic form of rule in modern societies, and as such are a sign of historical decay. This dramatic development is further described as a process of the centralisation of power and enhanced coordination between a growing number of rackets, which goes far beyond the bounds of the nation state (Heins, 2007: 792). It has earlier been noted in that conspiracy theorists typically misinterpret the roles of the rich and powerful (Domhoff, as cited in Berlet, 2004). Horxheimer arguably makes the same mistake in that he assumes that professionals are no longer out to capitalise on favourable situations for their own purposes, but are actually “impelled by a deep-seated disposition to enter into collusive agreements to the detriment of society as a whole” (Heins, 2007: 794). While the example of Horxheimer is by no means applicable to leftist discourse in general, it serves to show that no discourse is categorically free of conspiratorial thinking by definition.

While conspiracy narratives understand mainstream media as one of the main tools of the conspiracy to manipulate the masses, the Marxist concept of ideology is understood more broadly as the entire apparatus of ideas that justify a societal order. The class that controls the means of material production similarly controls the mental production of society (Lucker, 2012). This is, however, not a conspiracy but rather a class manoeuvre. For Lukács (1920<sup>27</sup>), ideology was simply a projection of class consciousness from a ruling to a subordinate class. The concept of class consciousness is understood in relation to

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<sup>25</sup> Together with Adorno, Horxheimer was the most prominent member of the Frankfurter school.

<sup>26</sup> “Rackets” refer to cliques or gangs that protect their own interests by speculative means.

<sup>27</sup> Since this reference was sourced from the internet, there are no page numbers. I am, however, referring to the first pages of the chapter “Class Consciousness”.

Engels's assumption that "*nothing in history happens without a conscious purpose*" (Engels, date, as cited in Lukács, 1920). Furthermore, the motives behind social action are of secondary interest to the driving forces behind these motives. Therefore, it is argued that the masses are themselves unconscious of the idea that motivates their actions as a class:

*[D]riving forces ought themselves to be determined in particular those which 'set in motion great masses, whole peoples and again whole classes of the people; and which create a lasting action resulting in a great transformation'. The essence of scientific Marxism consists, then, in the realisation that the real motor forces of history are independent of man's (psychological) consciousness of them (Lukács, 1920).*

For Gramsci, the concept of cultural hegemony entails a similar explanation. According to Gramsci, the working class is prevented from uprising against the ruling class by a false ideological conception of what is in their best interests. The ruling class can be expected to use cultural hegemony by manipulating the ideology in society, and by that gain the capacity to dominate lower classes with their imposed world view (Jones, 2006: 39). On a global level, Gramsci described an historical process of the "*hierarchical*" unification of world civilisation, in which European culture was dominant. Other cultures of the world only played a part in the process of "*European thought*" and were largely assimilated by this (Gramsci, 1971: 765). Again, "*cultural dominance*" is by no means a conspiracy in the way in which a conspiracy is assumed in common NWO narratives. Besides, even European culture was a result of a process of unification (Gramsci, 1971: 765), as American cultural dominance is today.

Robert Cox's legacy, which follows logically from the Gramscian position as well as the broader Marxist tradition, is perhaps even more immune against conspiracy logic with its understanding of both the sources of stability in a world order, as well as the dynamics of instability and transformation. While the various dominant powers in the international system use hegemonic capabilities (both coercion and consent) as a means to shape the world order in ways that suit their system (Hobden & Jones, 2001: 212), their hegemonic manoeuvring in the world system must be understood in contrast to how grand conspiracy narratives understand global power relations in that historical structures, in a Coxian sense, are expressions of particular configurations of force, which does not imply mechanical dynamics in any sense, but represents constraints and opportunities for transformative change (Cox, 1981: 135).

Free trade benefits the hegemony, and therefore the hegemony manufactures a common-sense consensus on the appropriateness of a global free trade regime, although the benefits of such a regime are far from apparent for peripheral and semi-peripheral economies. Opposed to the conspiratorial idea of omnipotent ruling forces, Cox does not expect any world order to remain unchallenged and stable. Systemic crisis will create opportune moments for counter-hegemonic movements, for whom success is possible, although not a given (Hobden & Jones, 2001: 212). Cox's notion of hegemony is one of a confluence of ideas, institutions and material capabilities (Cox, 1981: 136).

On the one hand, it could be argued that Cox's approach could be regarded as a sophisticated version of NWO theories, or rather the other way around. In NWO narratives, the conspiring force clearly controls material capabilities, arms and money, and therefore also controls institutions such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the central banks. The conspiracy is also assumed to control the ideas of the populace through controlling mass media. There is, however, no reason to suggest an exchange of ideas between Cox and conspiracy theorists at any level, but perhaps it could be suggested that simplistic populist narratives may highlight similar societal mechanics, both in terms of sources of power and constraints. The comparison should stop there, but it helps to exemplify what could be connoted by the concept of conspiracy theories as allegorical constructs.

It could also be suggested, given a critical understanding of hegemony and the idea of conspiracy theory as counter-knowledge, that leftist discourse is partly institutionalised and thus subject to hegemonic control, even though there is dissent within the hegemonic structure. Since conspiracy theory is largely disqualified from this, these theories are therefore not subjected to hegemonic rigour (Van der Pijl, 2009: viii). They may thus potentially explore subjects and "truths" that hegemonic institutions may not be able to.

The above-mentioned application of Cox's notion of hegemony may, however, be overreaching Cox's intention. For Cox, the concept was intended to be used differently and referred to a different form of gate-keeping concerning the manner in which the ILO limits acceptable ways in which to think about labour relations. It is therefore not given that Cox would approve of such an application, but it is however a possible strength of conspiracy theories that are discursively disqualified from the acceptable



The above pages have shown that although conspiracy theories might appear to be critical of the *status quo* and of historical structures, even though these theories lack the means to identify such structures, conspiracy theories are historically and theoretically a product of the political Right. The scepticism towards minorities and scapegoating inherent in these theories is, arguably, endemic to a capitalist society and lacks a parallel within Leftist discourse. The extreme distrust of the state and of high finance is also characteristic of the populist Right rather than social movements with Leftist affiliations. The legacies of, for example, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Gramsci, Cox and Foucault, to mention a few, challenge, in different ways, the idea that individuals are in control of their own history. Thus, the personalised view of history that is often portrayed in conspiracy theories is somewhat out-dated.

It is further proposed that there is a correlation between the mass appeal of conspiracy theories and the new popularity of “New Age” sentiments and religious fundamentalism, and even that religious beliefs might serve as a foundation for counter-hegemonic projects in which God takes “*preference over private ownership*” and offers a political alternative “*attractive to subaltern classes in the subaltern world*” (Worth, 2013: 97). In Western culture, it is proposed that an arguably progressive global movement, labelled as the concept of “*conspirituality*” (Ward & Voas, 2011: 103), is a hybrid system of conspiratorial and New Age beliefs. From a Marxist/critical perspective this, however, suggests an example of “*decomposing capitalism; the tendency for bourgeoisie ideology to become more and more openly irrational*” (ICConline, 2013).

To summarise, Leftist discourse seems waterproof and resistant to conspiracy theorising. This is, of course, consistent with the common understanding on the subject (see, for example, Barkun, 2003; and Berlet, 2008). However, the purpose of this research project is to investigate if this broadly accepted rationale could be challenged from alternative theoretical positions. Jack Z. Bratich’s book, *Conspiracy panics: Political rationality and popular culture* (2008), does this by querying under which conditions something comes to be called a conspiracy theory. With this discursive approach, Bratich moves beyond common readings on conspiracy theory, the main task of which is to give an account of why people are susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories.



Bratich's account of "*conspiracy panics*" and what he describes as a "*will to moderation*" (Bratich, 2008: 128) is, therefore, an interesting account of how the fear of conspiracy thinking has been exaggerated and institutionalised in a potentially problematic way. This is problematic in that post-Cold War social and political issues are discussed within the constraints of a certain rationality, a limited acceptable mode of dissent that Leftist discourse has arguably been helpful in defining or narrowing. For Bratich, the popularity of conspiracy theorising and "*conspiracy panics*" are in response to this and are used as a means by which to consider the shifting of the Left after the end of the Cold War.

The next section will outline the main insights of the above-mentioned book, as well as other examples of how Leftist discourse relates (or should relate) to conspiracy theory.

#### **4.3 Theory or conspiracy theory? A matter of disqualification by discursive position**

*The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum - even encourage the more critical and dissident views.*

Noam Chomsky (1998: 43)

*Each age in other words has its own 'truth', a dominant truth against which it is difficult to rebel without coming in to conflict with the power structures of society.*

Michel Foucault (date) cited in van der Pijl (2009: 263)

As discussed in Chapter Two, there are many definitions and theoretical approaches to conspiracy theory. Bratich is particularly interested in the increased scrutiny of conspiracy theory. Questioning the idea of conspiracy theory as a stable object of which the term "*conspiracy theory*" is merely descriptive leads to a discourse analysis approach to conspiracy theories being suggested (Bratich, 2008: 2).

It is further noted that the term conspiracy theory has, to little degree, been subject to deconstructive analysis. For some reason, Bratich argues, the term conspiracy theory has

escaped the “*linguistic turn*”<sup>28</sup>, as if it is clear that conspiracy theories are defined and understood because of their content and their narrative characteristics and not by their discursive position; in other words, how they relate to other theories and the legitimacy accorded to it (Bratich, 2008: 2). Instead of conspiracy theories being descriptive narratives among many in a “*neutral marketplace of ideas*”, these theories exist rather as a category of disqualification.

Therefore, conspiracy theories cannot be true by definition and, more interestingly, cannot be untrue. Since they are not accepted, even to be tested for falsifications, they are beyond the sphere of the credible debate. A theory is defined as a “*conspiracy theory*” by its “*discursive position in relation to a regime of truth*”, rather than necessarily by inherent properties (Bratich, 2008: 3). Arguably, it is thus crucial to be aware of what is meant by the term when it is used since it could be understood as a “*bridge term*” to link pejorative conceptual strategies as we know them, for example, Hofstadter’s (1966) “*paranoid style*” and “*political paranoia*”, from narratives tasked with researching possible conspiracies (“*conspiracy research*” or “*conspiratology*”). The term “conspiracy theory” is thus a Meta concept that signifies the ambiguity of the category (Bratich, 2008: 6).

So why does this matter? For Bratich, conspiracy theories work as doorways into important contemporary political and social issues, and are in some cases the “*defining trope*” in which social phenomena are discussed. They can, therefore, be understood as doorways to a broader understanding of important social and political issues. The key concept in this analysis is “*conspiracy panic*”. As mentioned earlier, many of the main approaches to conspiracy theory tend to have a paranoid view, similar to the “*style*” they describe, on the dangers of conspiracy theories being symptoms of undemocratic tendencies (Berlet, 2009) Bratich takes this further with his understanding of conspiracy panic as a way of disqualifying or, at least, distinguishing between “*official knowledge*” and “*subjugated knowledge*”.

Conspiracy theory as subjugated knowledge is further understood as “*blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematic theory*” (Foucault, as cited in Bratich, 2008: 7). Bratich’s approach relies on Foucault’s

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<sup>28</sup> The ‘linguistic turn’ is, among other developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, associated with post-structuralism and the assumption that language constitutes reality. Michel Foucault advocates that it is the understanding of power as exercised through language and discourse (Van der Pijl, 2009: 254).

concept of governance. It views conspiracy panic, the exaggerated fear and condemnation of conspiracy theory (whatever its narrative content and discursive position), as a hidden tool of governance that relies on a specific political rationality that aims to disqualify a certain discourse from the limited acceptable mode of dissent. It is this “*will to moderation*” (the will to expunge conspiracy discourse as irrational) that Bratich refers to as conspiracy panic:

*My argument is that ‘conspiracy theory’ functions as an intolerable line and an antagonism. While occasionally linked to particular groups (militias, African Americans, political extremists) the panic here is over a particular form of thought (and its potential links to action). The scapegoating of conspiracy theories provides the conditions for social integration and political rationality. Conspiracy panics help to define the normal modes of dissent (Bratich, 2008: 11).*

Conspiracy theories are, therefore, understood as useful (whether intended or not) in that they have a productive power for official apparatus. More broadly, it is argued with reference to the sociological framework of Stanley Cohen and the concept of “*moral panics*”, that “*Western society maintains its identity via the management and expulsion of deviance*” (Cohen, as cited in Bratich, 2008: 8). In the sociological studies referred to by Bratich, “*panics*” are used to crystallise various fears and anxieties in society. Instead of addressing the real issues underlying the sense of fear and anxiety in society, it is rather being displaced onto identifiable social groups (Weeks, date, as cited in Bratich, 2008: 9). Within the Bratich framework, the role of the media as a servant of official apparatus to amplify “*panics*” for strategic reasons has a parallel in sociological studies focusing on the ideological role of journalism in a process of hegemonic maintenance in which “*moral panics*” are used (Soderlund, 2002: 439).

The purpose of the concept of “*conspiracy panics*”, according to this researcher, is to transcend most of the approaches to conspiracy theory discussed in Chapter 2. Arguments across the Left/Right/Liberal political spectrum, and pathological, cultural and allegorical approaches imply that conspiracy theorising is a sign of something else, for example individual paranoia or, more broadly, a cultural/political distortion. Bratich instead attempts to understand the political rationality that lies behind conspiracy panics, a rationality that is not universal as “*reason*” in general, but is a particularly specific type of rationality (Foucault, as cited in Bratich, 2008: 14). In having presented the main concepts in Bratich’s analysis, this

study will now briefly outline the content of *Conspiracy panics: Political rationality and popular culture*.

Bratich firstly outlines an overview of approaches to conspiracy theory with a focus on psychological and sociological arguments for why conspiracy theories should be distinguished from other discourses by linking these to political extremism. It is argued that the “*panicking*” over extremism should be understood as a construction of consent from which certain types of knowledge are being disqualified (Bratich, 2008: 36). It is further discussed how professional journalism and the mainstream media have been an arena where conspiracy theories have been contested, and which has provided “*institutional support*” of “*conspiracy panics*”. Professional journalism in this rationale is understood to be “*a vehicle for dominant ideology and elite interests*” (Bratich, 2008: 51). The analysis of journalism is taken further, with a focus on the response of print-based journalism to new technology and Web 2.0 journalism. The argument seems to be that professional journalistic scepticism towards “*citizen journalism*” is a kind of “*panicking*” that serves to disqualify such activity by questioning the quality of the information flow arising from new technologies (Bratich, 2008: 81).

More original is the suggestion that, by the example of AIDS conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories can actually be helpful and called for new research into various areas of science. Bratich further discusses the Left’s contributions to conspiracy panics as well as its relationship with conspiracy theories in general. Various scholars who have “*weighed in against the pernicious influence of conspiracy theory on the Left*”, for example Noam Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn and Mark Crispin Miller, are discussed (Bratich, 2008: 100). Furthermore, the argued ambivalence of the Left’s relationship with “*conspiracy panics*” is illustrated with Miller’s different positions. More interestingly, with reference to the framework of John Fiske, it is suggested that although particular conspiracy theories might represent serious misconceptions of political and social issues - which they often typically do - these theories may also contain counter-knowledge that can complement the Left’s political platform and even be a “*catalyst for new forms of analysis and activism*” (Fiske, as cited in Bratich, 2008: 119).

The crux of Bratich’s argument speaks directly to the research problem of this thesis. What is suggested is a critique of neoliberal hegemony with the popularity of conspiracy theory as an

entry point, or as a “*doorway*” (to borrow from Bratich’s formulation) in a post-Cold War climate in which the Left is shifting and where, arguably, the room for acceptable dissent has been narrowed. It is further examined the Left’s relationship with conspiracy theory by discussing its ambivalent reaction towards the 9/11 conspiracy accounts and the “*Truther*” movement. It is argued that while NWO conspiracy narratives have understandably been viewed as simplistic populist attempts to understand globalisation, the theorising around 9/11 has complicated this since the Left is arguably in and out of a “*sphere of legitimate dissensus*”. Bratich further questions whether it could be allowed a kind of synthesis across “*different projects of counterglobalization*” (Bratich, 2008: 124).

The contradictions between narrow and personalised NWO conspiracy theories and Leftist discourse are obvious, not to mention the idea of the UN as a puppet body for secret international forces. The reaction of the Left has therefore understandably been to describe NWO narratives as racist and nationalistic, as well as with socio-cultural explanations, such as a “*culture of hysteria*” (Showalter, 1997), “*poor person’s cognitive mapping*” (Mason, 2002) or “*a will to believe in a disenchanted world*” (Aupers, 2012: 22). However, although the historical origin of NWO theories in the right-wing climate of the 1960s should not be contested, Bratich argues that the categorical disqualification of these theories excludes the “*counterhegemonic aspects of NWO theories in general*” (Bratich, 2008: 126). According to Bratich, NWO conspiracy theories bring social, political and economic inequality to the fore and often focus on explicit class inequities. NWO theories identify the powerful against the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed, and this seems to be both the object of conspiracy research and the very motivation for conspiratorial research.

Although one must be careful about arguing the fruitfulness of any particular conspiracy narrative as a platform for a counter-hegemonic movement, these are nevertheless articulations of a counter-hegemonic bloc in the sense of countering common sense about the process of globalisation and its desirable effects. In addition, although these accounts cannot be expected to have any appeal for the Left, they cannot be said to be fundamentally conservative and reactionary, and if that is argued, it is at least to some degree a matter of articulation (Bratich, 2008: 128).

Bratich’s approach is arguably more original than controversial. However, it becomes more controversial in arguments about common ground between Leftist ideology and conspiracy

theory. Bratich borrows from Bonobo's article *Plan Wellstone: Conspiracy, complicity, and the Left*<sup>29</sup> (Bonobo, as cited in Bratich, 2008: 150), in which it is claimed that since conspiracy theories “*have a potent radical tendency that traces all evil to a power-obsessed elite of corporate and government criminals hell-bent on global, imperial domination*”, the lines between leftist ideology, investigative radical journalism and conspiracy theory are blurred (Bonobo, as cited in Bratich, 2008: 150).

The commonly alleged antagonism between institutional analysis and conspiracy theory (Chomsky, 2004) is further suggestively dissolved in the claim that since “[*c*]onspiracy itself is a necessary norm for the state and capital ... we should hold despotic perpetrators accountable at the same time we dismantle the institutional underpinnings that prop them up” (Bonobo, as cited in Bratich, 2008: 150). It is also argued that institutional and conspiracy analyses are complementary methods rather than antagonisms. Both methods “[*a*]re working on contexts—the issue is which context is to be fought for and against. This struggle is not unique to conspiracy versus institutional analyses—it permeates oppositional political cultures in general” (Bratich, 2008: 151). Therefore it is argued that rather than being two fundamentally different practices, the two should rather be in contending positions within a common “*articulatory project*” that can become advantageous within activism instead of being a source of division.

It could be tempting to use such insights as some sort of proof of a common ground between conspiracy theory and Leftist discourse, or even to argue that NWO discourse theoretically could represent a valuable complement to conventional ideology that counters neoliberal hegemony. However, the weakness of this argument, according to this researcher, is the high degree of relativism consistent throughout the argumentation. Bratich arguably defends “*the cult of the amateur*”<sup>30</sup> and questions intellectual authority, research institutions and the printed press to a striking degree.

Bruno Latour addressed this problem in his article *Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern* (2004). Latour, whose intellectual legacy has been about showing how “*facts*” are socially constructed, and that “*there is no such thing as natural,*

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<sup>29</sup> Bonobo's article was published in the story anarchist magazine *Fifth Estat*, so Bonobo argues from an anarchist perspective.

<sup>30</sup> This is a reference to Andrew Keen's book that sees Web 2.0 and new internet technology as profoundly destructive to modern societies.

*unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint*” (Latour, 2004: 227), now expresses uneasiness over how the same tools of social constructivism are used by reactionary forces to “*destroy hard earned evidence*” of scientific work. What has become of critique, he asks, when university professors are perceived as naïve for believing terrorists were behind 9/11, and when a whole industry denies that the Apollo programme ever landed on the moon? (Latour, 2004: 228). Latour’s concern is that the weapons of social critique, or at least “*absurd deformations*” of the weapons of social critique that he had helped create, are now being used to feed unwanted sorts of critique, such as conspiracy theories (Latour, 2004: 230).

The argument is, moreover, that “*you know critique has run out of steam*” when it has become available to the masses in naïve frameworks and as a form of pseudo-critical thinking. The once sophisticated tools of deconstruction and discourse analysis are, according to Latour, taken over for use by the enemy. Both the reactionary bourgeoisie and the populist conspiracy theorists have begun using the critical equipment that was invented to get closer to facts and not away from them, to renew empiricism and not to fight it (Latour, 2004: 231). This does not mean that Bratich’s approach is invalid, but perhaps that it needs to be balanced.

The next subsection will present Kees van der Pijl’s holistic approach to Global Political Economy, which, according to Cox (as cited in Schouten, 2009: 5) has an historical outlook in which “*everything must be understood*”. While parts of his approach, at first glance, have much in common with conspiracy narratives, this is by no means the case. It is class analysis with a specific focus on the international dimension of class formation, both in a specific spatial and historical context<sup>i</sup> as well as more generally. Van der Pijl’s work is closely aligned to other critical theorists such as Robert W. Cox and Stephen Gill, although he claims to have developed his ideas largely in isolation from these scholars (Van der Pijl, as cited in Schouten, 2008: 2).

Among other critical approaches in this study, this researcher chose to emphasise Van der Pijl’s work on account of its appropriate perspectives on conspiracy theories by doing what conspiracy theorists do, but better, and by combining it with a broad structural approach in which small groups of elites, and even individuals, play out minor but important roles in transnational class formation. A brief outline of these ideas follows in the next subsection.



#### 4.4 The role of secret agents in class formation in the works of Kees van der Pijl

*“At the very top sit the elite of the elite, who control wealth and power for a time – until they are unseated through revolution or upheaval by a new aristocratic class. There is no progress in human history. Democracy is a fraud.”*

Vilfredo Pareto, as cited in Boccara (2012: 372)

With the *The making of an Atlantic ruling class* (2012), Kees van der Pijl puts transnational class formation at the centre of the analysis of the global political economy. The book is an analysis of capitalist fractions on both sides of the Atlantic, which have formed a ruling class of multinational banks and corporations and which, in turn, have culminated in the hegemonic project we know as neoliberalism. The argument is further that transnational capital, and the class associated with it, has developed in what van der Pijl terms the “Lockean heartland”, which refers to a certain “transnational constellation that occupies the commanding heights of the global political economy” (Van der Pijl, as cited in Schouten, 2008: 1-2). In other words, the Lockean heartland represents a specific spatial dimension of transnational class formation in which capital and the “liberal heartland”, which is merely a metaphor for states with a clear neoliberal agenda, have “crystallised in close association” and therefore will arguably decline together as well (Van der Pijl, 2012: xviii).

The Lockean heartland identifies a problematisation of the relationship between capitalism and the state system in relation to a trans-Atlantic capitalist class that holds power in an “English speaking, liberal Atlantic core” (Van der Pijl, 2007: 619). This heartland has been confronted with contender states. While historically France, Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union are identified as such contender states, China is identified as the main contender today (Van der Pijl, 2007: 619). The metaphor “Lockean heartland” also represents a specific understanding of the structure of the global political economy, which lies close to the main assumptions of Robert Cox<sup>31</sup>, with an understanding of the existence of a plurality of forms of state representing different configurations of state/society complexes (Cox, 1981: 127).

With this non-state-centric understanding, Van der Pijl follows in the tradition of Cox’s (1981) seminal article, which challenged mainstream understandings of the structure of the

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<sup>31</sup> In the preface to the second edition of *The making of an Atlantic ruling class*, van der Pijl admitted that his understanding of the inter-state dimension of the global political economy was informed by Cox’s understanding of a “pluarilty of forms of state” (Van der Pijl, 2012, xxii).



global political economy, which contains of state-centric approaches that arguably serves to overshadow an understanding of a transnational capitalist class seeking expansion of capital beyond the liberal West. Capital is, in this sense, understood as something that cannot be internalised by states, and is thus extra-territorial. The liberal West remains “the pivot of a global ruling class” (Van der Pijl, 2012: xxii). While Cox was instrumental in the establishment of critical IPE by introducing a synthetic understanding of structural and agential explanations, the issue of how agency could be successfully incorporated into understandings of structural change is still debated within the field of critical IPE (Berry, 2007: 1).

Since an historical structure, by Cox’s account, is understood as a particular form of fit of configurations of forces, material capabilities, ideas and institutions (Cox, 1981: 135), it is interesting to regard academic disciplines as functions of historical structures. Van der Pijl (2013: 5) suggests, in this connection, a view of International Relations Theory (IR) as a “vehicle for Western hegemony”; “that academic discipline functions as an extension of the class/state discipline on the population” (Van der Pijl, 2013: 5). In this respect, it argued that a liberal Anglo-Saxon heartland during the course of the 20th century produced certain idealist conceptions of world order as part of a class strategy of the bourgeoisie. The argument is further that a concept of control was developed as a means by which a fraction of the ruling class would attract the following of the masses. Such a concept of control is understood as a hegemonic historical structure in that it combines conduct of labour relations with conduct of relations between fractions of capital (Van der Pijl, 2012: 31). As such, van der Pijl’s analysis of the Atlantic ruling class is an exemplification of the formation of an historical structure, which is seen to have been guided by the agency of particular class interests.

While Marx’s concept of the ruling class, or the “bourgeoisie”, characterises this class as being large in number, van der Pijl talks about a much smaller international elite, such as the Trilateral Commission<sup>32</sup>. With such conceptualisations, one is at risk of walking a thin line between class analysis and conspiracy theory. In attempts to locate power in the international system, and the possible intentions of power, “the danger of conspiratorial approaches always lurks and looms” (Van der Pijl, date, as cited in Schouten, 2008: 3). However, it is further

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen Gill’s *American hegemony and the Trilateral Commission* (1991) takes a similar approach to show how organisations such as the Trilateral Commission have been instrumental in the efforts of elite elements to extend powers of capital and to undermine state formations that refuse compliance with the interest of the capitalist class.

argued that “a social science which cannot identify who in the final analysis act to have their way against others resisting them, remains abstract” (Van der Pijl, 2012: xvi). And while one should remain cautious about articulating a personalised view of historical development, which is largely how conspiracy theories are understood, van der Pijl upholds that small groups or even individual agency within arenas such as corporate boards, think tanks and government commissions, are influential in the building of operational configurations that guide society as a whole, and which affect millions of people (Van der Pijl, 2012: xvii).

*The making of an Atlantic ruling class* investigates the processes of transnational class formation in the North Atlantic area between 1917 and the economic crisis in the 1970s. This represented a specific configuration of Atlantic integration, in which the internationalisation of capital allowed the ruling class in the Atlantic area to develop new concepts of control to reinforce a hegemonic position within the international system (Van der Pijl, 2012: xxx). This concept of control is further seen as the result of the crystallisation of a configuration of trans-Atlantic interests. On the one hand, this includes the “liberal-institutionalist” bourgeoisie associated with money capital, and on the other hand, a bourgeoisie protective of industrial interests. The strategy of this synthetic ruling class is understood as “corporate liberalism”, an ideological/economic paradigm created under particular conditions under the New Deal, and which became the theoretical expression of the US-led internationalisation of finance capital in the Atlantic area” (Van der Pijl, 2012: xxxi).

Van der Pijl (2005: 499) also identifies the “managerial cadre”, a class of organic intellectuals in a Gramscian sense, which is understood as an inherent aspect of advanced capitalism. The managerial cadre is understood to be a class of functionaries whose function is to undertake the task of running the economy and the state. These cadres in executive positions implement ideas that are understood as mediated in an intellectual sphere that is best described in terms of its demand for ideological conformity, and in which “not truth, but performance becomes the criterion of its effectiveness” (Van der Pijl, 2005: 507). Modern universities in this perspective are understood to primarily have the function of producing the class of the managerial cadre, and students must therefore be prepared for roles as functionaries “who must take the existing distribution of wealth and power for granted—and yet, within these limits, be creative” (Van der Pijl, 2009: x). The managerial cadre, as a kind of class vanguard of the ruling class, is expected to come to the fore at times of crisis, as we have seen examples

of recently, with the appointments of economic managerial functionaries as prime ministers in Italy and Greece.

In the current situation, with growing dissatisfaction with the effects of neoliberal capitalism on both societies and the biosphere, social movements are appearing as manifestations of such dissatisfaction. It is, however, the managerial class's role to restore social cohesion as a reaction to these manifestations (Van der Pijl, 2001: 381). In such a situation, a critical mind-set requires a break with both mainstream media and mainstream academia (Van der Pijl, date, as cited in Schouten, 2008: 2). While students and scholars have the time and resources to engage with complex theoretical frameworks, it is understandable that simplistic explanations of these frameworks is embraced as an alternative to mainstream interpretations, as well as to leftist discourse.

#### **4.5 Conclusions**

In this chapter, the relationship between conspiracy theory and leftist discourse has been discussed. Firstly, it has been made clear why the historical analysis of the left in one sense must be understood in complete isolation from conspiracy discourse, and that conspiracy theory largely represents the opposite of this historical analysis. Marx's understanding of the ruling class is, that it is consisting of numerous individuals, defined first and foremost by their relation to modes of production, is understood as largely immune against conspiratorial thinking. Furthermore, although conspiracy theory has been suggested to be simplistic attempts at theorising issues of political economy, it is shown in comparison to Cox's critical understanding of historical structures that conspiracy theories are inappropriate as guiding frameworks for historical change since they fail to grasp the structures of which one is situated.

However, it has been suggested with Bratich that conspiracy theories might serve as what he calls a portal concept, namely a doorway into major political and social questions that define post-Cold War cultures, for example regarding inequality, globalisation and the shifting position within the Left. Perhaps more interestingly, it has been argued that a certain "panic" reaction on the Left towards conspiracy narratives might contribute to narrowing the acceptable room for dissent. Finally, the ideas of Kees van der Pijl were offered as a balance between conspiracy theory and leftist discourse and as means to demonstrate that although

certain conspiracy narratives might identify agency that explain historical change, historical materialist analysis could be applied to identify agency in a more systematic way.

The next chapter will conclude on this study by establishing the degree to which conspiracy theory could be said to represent valuable counter-knowledge, or at least be understood as understandable expressions of discontent in a situation in which the Left do not offer a clear narrative, appealing to the masses, to oppose hegemonic structures.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In chapter two we were introduced to Mary Midgley and her comments on the contradictions between mythical and scientific belief systems, and that these are, by Midgley's account, not so very different except that perhaps one is only more "nutritious" than the other. We were also reminded of D. H. Lawrence's statement that "the human heart must have an absolute". For the Left, there is no longer an absolute, and the theoretical stances that traditionally have served to counter hegemonic structures seem to have lost some immediate appeal as the nutrition of choice. Thus, it is not surprising that counter-hegemonic forces struggle to create a consistent and broadly appealing narrative. The historical materialist tradition, which originally derived from an understanding of how ideas change through a dialectical development throughout history, has perhaps to some degree got stuck in a moment, unable to grasp the last shift or synthetical ideational product.

This thesis has undertaken the task of investigating alternative ideas that counter the hegemony of liberal capitalist democracy at a time when this model is at a systemic crisis. This has been done by using the popularity of conspiracy narratives as a doorway as well as a subject of investigation. While there have been a number of manifestations of discontent globally, of which the Occupy movement is most notable, none of the current counter-hegemonic movements are believed to be likely to result in transformative action or the formation of new historical blocs. By critical accounts, this could first and foremost be understood as a reflection of the fact that contradictions within the economic core are limited, as opposed to peripheral and semi-peripheral areas, and thus that strong counter-hegemonic movements within the economic core could not be expected; "[H]egemony is more intense and consistent in the core and more laden with contradictions in the periphery" (Cox, 1996: 137).

However, it is commonly understood that although the current crisis represents an opportune moment to challenge neoliberal hegemony, the Left is divided and the shared ideological platform internationally is of limited strength. Critical academic discourses also do not appear to have a coherent, progressive platform. In this situation, ordinary people are seeking answers as the effects of the on-going crisis are increasingly being materialised in daily life. In relation to this, this thesis has undertaken a theoretical discussion of whether conspiracy theories, to some extent, represents alternative frameworks with which discontent is

addressed. While conspiratorial world views traditionally have been seen as pathological political paranoia, it is suggested that this understanding is too reductionist, and to a large degree a reflection of a specific historical political climate in the USA with limited universal applicability.

Cultural approaches to the subject suggest that, although conspiracy narratives have historically been a product of the political right, the situation today is more nuanced. It has been argued that conspiracy theories are cultural expressions of a post-modern/post-political condition in which fear and distrust are inherent features. It is further suggested that conspiracy theories could be understood as allegorical constructs that should not necessarily be taken literally. It is thus discussed whether the categorical link between conspiracy theory and fascist ideology and irrationality is undermined. This, in turn, opens up a discussion on whether conspiracy theories, which in spite of their theoretical weaknesses address issues of social inequality, systemic failures and the questionable agency of elite elements, could complement the ideas of conventional counter-hegemonic discourse.

This suggestion is consistently countered by the framework of historical materialism, the Left's historical analysis, which is understood as the polar opposite of conspiracy theorising in many senses. While conspiracy accounts often represent a personification of history, most accounts of class analysis regard the importance of such agency to the margins of historical analysis. Robert Cox's critical theory represents a nuanced way in which to understand the possibilities of and constraints to historical change. While it is suggested that conspiracy theory often represents a will to trace sources of power and address many of the same structural problems as various strands of critical theory, although not through the use of a structural analysis, conspiracy theories are found to be generally inappropriate as historical analysis. This is because these theories do not entail an understanding of the historical structure within which the subjects described by conspiracy theories operate.

However, by approaching conspiracy theories on account of their discursive position against a certain political rationality, which is alleged used instrumentally to forward hegemonic ideas, it has been argued that a "panic" reaction towards these narratives within leftist discourse has contributed to narrowing the acceptable mode of dissent. While historical materialist perspectives have been shown to be superior to the flawed logic and theoretical weaknesses of conspiracy accounts, it is suggested that the categorical dismissal of conspiratorial world

views should be problematised. Firstly, this is on account of such reactions possibly being guided by a certain rationality that could be understood as part of hegemonic maintenance. This is argued with reliance on Bratich's (2008: 160) concept of "conspiracy panics" on the Left, which is seen as an exaggerated fear of conspiracy theories. This attitude seems to be shared by liberals, leftists and the mainstream media, and it is argued that this shared "will to moderation" has contributed to a narrowing of the public debate in the interest of hegemonic ideas.

Secondly, categorical condemnation of conspiracy theories might rely on premature accounts of what they represent for those who believe in them. Many conspiracy theories do, in fact, despite their flaws, address real structural issues such as global inequality, climate change and the undesirable effects of globalisation. As such, they counter general hegemonic ideas about the desirable effects of the current order. Although traditional counter-hegemonic ideas are demonstrated as being more constructive paths to understanding and possibly changing historical structures, it is maintained that the popularity of alternative world views is understandable, and that these may even potentially complement leftist discourse.

While Cox (1987: 241) stated that "to have any influence over events, or at least to forestall the worst eventualities, it is necessary to begin with an understanding of the conditions not chosen by oneself in which action is possible", it is suggested that the pluralist critical approach of Kees van der Pijl, as an attempt to "take everything into consideration" (Cox, date, as cited in Schouten, 2008: 4), might constitute a balance between conspiracy and leftist discourse. While van der Pijl is by no means a conspiracy theorist, his original understanding of the international nature of class formation and the acknowledgement of small group agency in this process allows for the identification of those who, in the final turn, act against the forces that resist them.

Such identification should, however, be done with much caution, although agents in a class analysis perspective cannot be understood in isolation from the structures in which they are situated, and thus simplistic scapegoating should generally be avoided. Or, as Cox (1981: 130), notes, "critical theory thus contains an element of utopianism in the sense that it can represent a coherent picture of an alternative order, but its utopianism is constrained by its comprehension of historical processes. On account of this, it is argued by this researcher that, on the one hand, such critical approaches serve well to illuminate the flaws of conspiratorial

thinking in its lack of such comprehension. On the other hand, it is argued that a focus on small groups or even individual agency in approaches to global political economy is not, by definition, a blind path.

While class analysis in Gramscian terms might identify a class of organic intellectuals, a managerial cadre that typically comes to the fore in times of crisis, a simplistic conspiratorial response to the sense of insecurity and alienation in such a crisis would be to identify the mysterious ways of the ruling class as conspiratorial activity. When conspiracy theorists assume small group agency with transformative effects on political economy, this is no more irrational than mainstream approaches that largely take the existing distribution of wealth and power for given.

The introduction to this study began with a remark on Marx's ability to communicate the exploitative nature of the capitalist system in comprehensible narratives to the working class. Then, again, it should be added that the systemic contradictions in Marx's time were more pressing than current contradictions in the core areas of the capitalist system. That said, over the last few years, an increasing number of manifestations of discontent with the effects of neoliberal capitalism have been seen, of which the Occupy movement is most notable.

Although counter-hegemonic movements do not show signs of transformative potential, they nevertheless represent signs of growing systemic contradictions. By Marxist elementary logic, the gap between rich and poor can be expected to continue to grow as long as the forces of capital are not countered by other social forces. In this study, an account of the Occupy movement and the financial crisis of 2007/2008, was included to substantiate the claim that although contemporary movements have been successful in changing public discourse, they have not come close to challenging the structures from which the crisis was created. Furthermore, it was argued that contemporary counter-hegemonic movements are not guided by a particular coherent political philosophy.

If one is to think of revolutionary heroes in the present day, it is difficult to avoid mentioning Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning. As the NSA revelations have shown the cynicism of the representatives of the existing global order, whistle-blowers have become our new representatives of hope. They are hackers, activists and guardians of the free internet. Besides the will to reveal secret documents, they have no



ideological affiliations. They carry no message of class struggle, only a deep mistrust of configurations of power, including corporations, government, the military and intelligence agencies that carry out extensive covert operations and surveillance. This suggests to this researcher that much attention of critical engagement in the present times is directed towards secretive political conduct, and to a lesser degree than in earlier decades towards structural class exploitation.

This study has aimed at investigating conspiracy theories as a way in which to address discontent with the current hegemonic order, and how leftist discourse could relate to this. It has been argued that conspiracy theories can be seen as understandable allegorical constructs in a time when traditional counter-hegemonic ideology does not have the self-evident relevance and mass appeal one could assume it to have, given that Marxist/critical analysis is most apt at describing the current crisis. It has however not been maintained that conspiracy theories therefore necessarily have replaced leftist discourse or that conspiracy theory could serve as guiding narratives for progressive change. Conspiracy theories and similar world views do not contain ways in which to historicise the present, or to understand the constraints and opportunities for transformative change represented by historical structures. Conspiracy theories demonstrate a limited understanding of the present as history and therefore also the capability of foreseeing future developments.

This study has on the one hand confirmed the conventional wisdom that a materialist view of history and conspiracy/meta-theory are incompatible theoretical approaches. They are divided by epistemology, method and historical analysis, and further they derive from distinctively different historical political traditions. In essence, materialism with its understanding of changes in material conditions as the primary determinant for how society is organised, is in essence different from the common conspiratorial world outlook. On the other hand the theoretical discussion in this thesis has suggested a more inclusive understanding of how conspiracy theory might be understood as alternative counter knowledge. First and foremost this is argued on the basis of cultural allegorical understandings of conspiracy theory which regard the epistemology and the narrative content of these theories of lesser importance. Secondly it has been argued that many conspiracy theories address similar societal mechanics and forms of structural exploitations as Marxist/critical approaches, although with a different approach and language.

Thirdly conspiracy theory has been suggested understood as a form of popular simplistic political discourse free of hegemonic control for better and for worse. A remark on the latter point is that an exaggerated “panic” towards conspiracy culture might contribute to limit the acceptable room for dissent, which would be in the interest of the current hegemonic order; “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum - even encourage the more critical and dissident views” (Chomsky 1998: 43). The latter view is substantiated by an understanding of conspiracy theory as commonly defined as such first and foremost by its discursive position towards a regime of a particular “rationality”.

The aim of this research project has been to investigate a theoretical possibility of conspiracy theory as alternative counter hegemonic constructs, as well as a discussion on how Marxist/critical stances could relate to conspiracy theory. While conspiracy theories and Marxist/critical approaches must be understood in isolation from each other, this thesis has suggested, from a theoretical point of view, that conspiracy theories might serve as alternative approaches to the crisis of the capitalist system.

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