



Is Conspiracism Endogenous to Populism? A Discursive- Theoretical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, in the era of multiple crises, there are many political parties and leaders that use conspiracy theories in their discourse, trying to explain facts and figures on politics, economy, society, environment and space. There is an ongoing debate in populism studies on the possible connection between the populist phenomenon and conspiracy theories, thus creating two main theoretical camps. On the one hand, there are many scholars who recognize a strong correlation between the two phenomena, with some of them believing that they are directly equated. On the other hand, there are several researchers who consider populism as a phenomenon with its own unique essence without predetermined characteristics. Hence, the question that arises here is: Is conspiracism endogenous to populism, or not? In this article, I first look at the definitions of conspiracy theories/conspiracism and populism, attempting to avoid stereotypical readings. After that, I highlight the discussion that takes place in academia around the internal features of the populist phenomenon and its possible connection with conspiracism, with the aim of showing that populism presents a unique logic, without a necessary connection to conspiracism. Finally, I focus on the Greek case of recent years, describing an example where the concept of conspiracy theory became a polemical tool against political rivals, negatively affecting politics and society. My analysis is based on post-structuralist theory and methodological tools of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, taking into account aspects of other approaches to populism.

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Many citizens around the world, in their attempt to provide convincing explanations to questions that the official answers do not satisfy them, follow and embrace conspiracy theories, ignoring the scientific and/or governmental clarifications behind a fact. Conspiracy theory is a diachronic phenomenon that affects the public sphere and seems to flourish within critical periods (Breakwell 2021, 143; Nilan 2021, 46). They have been developed over the centuries for almost everything, for Jews, Masons, communists, vaccines and even toothpastes. For that reason, many scientists have focused on the main characteristics of conspiracy theories (Butter & Knight 2020), the relationship between political ideology and conspirational thinking (Thórisdóttir, Mari & Krouwel 2020), as well as the psychological factors that lead citizens to believe conspiracy theories on secret plots by powerful groups (Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka 2017).

There is an important ongoing debate in populism studies on the possible connection between the populist phenomenon and conspiracy theories, thus creating two main theoretical and methodological camps. On the one hand, many scholars, who usually approach populism as an ideology/ideation or as a political style/rhetoric, recognize a strong direct or indirect correlation between the two phenomena (Hameleers 2020; Hawkins 2010; Pantazopoulos 2016; Pirro & Taggart 2022; Taggart 2000; Taguieff 2013). On the other hand, several researchers, who often embrace discursive/performative approaches, consider populism as a phenomenon with its own unique essence and without predetermined (conspiracist) characteristics (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017; Katsambekis 2020; Stavrakakis 2019).¹ It is true that populism is often associated with conspiracy logic. Populists often denounce the hidden and superior forces that try to take advantage through politics and influence the course of history. But is there an exclusive relationship between the two discourses?

This study engages in the debate around the dynamics between populism and conspiracy theories through a discursive-theoretical perspective, criticizing the idea that conspiracism² is endogenous to populism. First, it defines the notions of conspiracy theories and populism, trying to avoid pejorative connotations and stereotypical readings. After that, it highlights the discussion that takes place in academia on the connection between conspiracy theories and populism, with the aim of showing that populism presents a unique logic, without entailing conspiraciology. Finally, it discusses, through the Greek case of the crisis, an example where the concept of conspiracy theory becomes a polemical tool against political rivals, negatively affecting politics and society. The analysis is based on the theory and methodological tools of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, which examines populism as a reason/a logic. The questions that this article deals with are the following: Is conspiracism endogenous to populism, or not? Are conspiracy theories an exclusive prerogative of populists? What does the Greek case of the crisis show us about the polemical use of the term by parties?

CONSPIRACY THEORIES: NOT A NEW STORY

Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon. For thousands of years, many people believe that nothing happens by chance in the world and that a powerful actor (or

¹ This categorization wants to show that there are two principal theoretical perspectives on populism and conspiracy theories, without implying that there are no scholars who do not fall into these categories. In addition, not all researchers in the same groups have similar positions on all issues.

² I use the term of conspiracism to refer to a discourse of conspiracy theories.

a dark elite) controls people's lives from a secret room. Some of the most popular conspiracy theories are the New World Order, the Bilderberg Group and the Masonic lodges. The New World Order conspiracy theory, for instance, is based on the idea that there is a multinational force that aims to rule the planet through an authoritarian world government (Fenster 2008, 54–59). Recently, various conspiracy theories have been developed on the coronavirus pandemic, such as the idea that COVID is part of a malicious Gates-led plot to vaccinate the world's population and COVID-19 doesn't really exist (Lynas 2020), while there are many conspiracy theories on COVID-19 vaccines, such as that the vaccines will alter people's DNA or/and that will implant microchips into the people (McEvoy 2021). All of the above theories have been proven to be wrong. But wait! Who decides which theory is true or false? Is it necessary that a conspiracy theory is always wrong and spreads lies? What is conspiracy theory after all?

The discussion around conspiracy theories is not a simple one but contains many elements that complicate it and form a cloudy landscape. Hence, it is first necessary to provide definitions of the key terms 'conspiracy' and 'conspiracy theories' to clarify as much as we can the scope of our study, recognizing indubitably the problems around the conceptualization of the phenomenon that mention a little below:

1. Conspiracies are often defined as a secret plot by two or more people (Douglas et al. 2019, 4) that plan and carry out actions that can change the flow of events (Knight 2003, 15). These secret actions can achieve the change of political and economic power, the violation of rights, the revealing of important secrets and so on. It is not, however, a given fact that secret plots should be illegal to be a conspiracy or that plotters be fully aware of their conspiracies (Knight 2003, 15).
2. The idea has been established in public discourse that conspiracy theories are an explanation for events and situations that indicates as a main causal factor a small group of people (usually powerful persons or organizations), who act in secret for their own benefit and against the common good (Uscinski 2019b, 48). As Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, 205) argue, a conspiracy theory 'is an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished).' In the definition of conspiracy theory we should not include supernatural and paranormal activities, unless the explanations given argue that there is a hidden powerful factor behind them (Uscinski 2019b, 49). Wood and Gray (2019) identify two subtypes of conspiracy theories, the 'anti-establishment' that challenge the existing social order and the 'pro-establishment' that attempt to justify and reinforce it against external threats.

Conspiracy theories and conspiracism are diachronic phenomena occurring over a long period of time and all over the world. There are political parties and leaders that use conspiracy theories in their discourse, trying to explain facts and figures on politics, economy, society, environment and space through the certainty of the existence of secret plans. This discourse usually comes from the radical and extreme right (see Busbridge, Moffitt & Thorburn 2020; Kalil et al. 2021), while most of the time, it is bogus.³ Conspiracist extreme right politicians call upon 'the people of the nation' against the hidden plans of the elites. Even the 'mildest form' of the far right,

3 With the concept 'bogus' I mean that they reproduce (often classic) conspiracy theories that have not yet been proven to be true.

the radical right, bases its argument on conspiracy theories to highlight the nation's internal and external 'enemies,' arguing that the mass immigration is a conspiracy of left-wing parties, labour unions and big business, that the media is under 'left-wing control,' or that the Jews are involved in many conspiracies (Mudde 2007, 63–84). Nonetheless, there are also many progressive political discourses that sometimes refer to hypothetical conspiracies that happen within the political and economic system.⁴

Recently, social media have played a major role in the dissemination of conspiracism, such as in the case of COVID-19 pandemic (Horvat 2021, 231), without of course being solely responsible for its spread. Conspiracy theories are on the rise when ordinary people feel helpless, fear and uncertainty in the face of a critical event (Van Prooijen & Douglas 2017, 330). They are created and reproduced by people who are not convinced by explanations given by the official bodies and international/supranational organizations for a critical event or situation. For example, many citizens worldwide have rejected the official version of the COVID-19 pandemic and the official WHO's analyses and statistics. Formal institutions, organizations and mainstream media, however, understand this kind of rejection and denial in its entirety as conspiratorial thinking, because it is often based on unsubstantiated arguments or positions based on incomplete evidence (see Ec.europa.eu). According to Joseph Uscinski, the difference between conspiracy and conspiracy theories is that the first 'refers to events that our appropriate institutions have determined to be true,' while 'conspiracy theory refers to an accusatory perception which may or may not be true, and usually conflicts with the appropriate authorities' (Uscinski 2019b, 48).

Conspiracy theories have acquired pejorative and negative connotation over the years (Knight 2003, 16). Thalmann (2019) underlines the significant shift of the term in the mid-20th century, which has become highly visible as an object of concern in public debates. It is true that public discourse and academic works often connect political paranoid thought and belief with conspiracy theories. According to Swami and Furnham (2014, 222), Richard Hofstadter's work on 'paranoid style in American politics' has influenced many scholars to view conspiracy theorists as paranoid and delusional. However, it is not indisputable that a person who advocates a conspiracy theory necessarily has mental health problems, especially since conspiracy theories are so prevalent around the world (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009, 211). In fact, for many people, conspiracy theories seem to be an attempt to explain a dystopian and a stressful situation that causes uncertainty, in which they feel unsafe and trapped by the current structures of power (see Green & Douglas 2018, 30–37; Swami et al. 2016, 72–76). According to Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, 204), the belief in unjustified conspiracy theories by isolated groups is not 'a result of a mental illness of any kind, or of simple irrationality, but a result of a "crippled epistemology", in the form of a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources.' Hence, they argue that 'when civil rights and civil liberties are absent, people lack multiple information sources, and they are more likely to have reason to accept conspiracy theories' (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009, 204).

Moreover, it is not certain that conspiracy theories are always totally wrong (Knight 2003, 16). Despite that there are scholars who equate conspiracy theories with lies, recognizing a 'paranoid style' in them, often following the ideas of Hofstadter (Di Grazia 2017, 1–9), in fact conspiracy theories can be both true and false.

⁴ Despite that conspiracy theories flourish on the right, they can be found everywhere (see Uscinski 2019a, 1).

Dentith reminds us of the existence of conspiracy theories that eventually turned to be true. As he states:

Take, for example, the conspiracy theories about the Moscow Show Trials in the 1930s, or the Gulf of Tonkin incident in the 1960s. These are cases of cover-ups where members of influential institutions really did conspire to keep the truth of their actions secret from the public. Not just that, they unjustly and insincerely labelled their detractors as conspiracy theorists. (Dentith 2019, 96)

Of course, many conspiracy theories present problematic and empty arguments that blur reality and create obstacles in democratic dialogue, but that does not mean it is always like that. For instance, there are reasons that refer to possible conspiracies that happen over time and/or that contain true facts and features and present a distrust towards official explanations that is not accepted by the official reason. Thus, Ginzburg (2012, 164) rightly asks, 'is it possible to trace a dividing line between a healthy skepticism toward certain official versions and a conspiratorial obsession?'

It seems very difficult to decide what a conspiracy theory is and what is not due to the fuzziness of the term (Bratich 2008, 12), which is able to equate simple reflections that involve the recognition of conspiracies with conspiracism itself. For example, there are political parties that accuse their political rivals and political and economic establishment of corruption. In some cases, the accusation of corruption involves conspiracist logic, as it refers to a secret and illegal act that is not always clearly established, and/or has not been punished by justice. However, on many occasions political attacks against corruption are usually based on specific facts, situations and personalities. In many countries and regions around the world corruption is a common phenomenon and governmental parties have been involved in corruption scandals many times in the past.⁵ In addition, there are politicians and parties that often highlight the opaque and paradoxical transactions and cooperations between parties and economic elites. Is a politician conspiracist when he/she refers to a smell of corruption scandal? Where are the boundaries of the term? What does political science gain by extending the term to a wide range of political overtones where left and right parties are equated under the same label? Is this helpful? What if we define conspiracy theories without specific facts and arguments as 'bogus'?

Finally, it is significant to underline that the difficulty of drawing a dividing line between a 'healthy skepticism' and conspiracism, as well as the pejorative characterization that has acquired the notion in public discourse, leads often to the utilization of the label 'conspiracy theories' as a polemical tool. There are politicians who characterize negatively and underestimate rival leaders and parties that do not agree with the dominant narrative, regardless of whether they refer to factual facts and data. Conspiracism has become a concept that is often used in political discourse to underestimate the position of the interlocutor and make it less credible and believable (Wood 2016, 695–696). According to Husting and Orr (2007, 128), the phrase of 'conspiracy theories' in public discourse can be a dangerous machinery of an exclusionary transpersonal strategy, as it 'reframes certain claims and claimants, separating them from the sphere of reasonable public interaction.' Something similar happened with the notion of populism, which was wrongly turned into a pejorative

⁵ In Latin America public and private corruption is a common phenomenon (see Rotberg 2019).

concept with pathological and dangerous elements (both in public and academic discourse), and is often expressed to underestimate a political opponent (Stavrakakis 2017a). But, what is populism?

POPULISM AS POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The various populist experiences that have been developed over the years around the world, as well as the several ideological–political horizons within the academic community, led to the development of many different theories and methodologies on populism (see Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Much of the literature examines populism through a liberal perspective, considering it as a threat for (liberal) democracy (Pappas 2019; Rummens 2017). Theories that consider populism as a danger to democracy — and usually an irrational phenomenon — have a long history. One of the most famous works is that of Richard Hofstadter who criticized the American populism of his age, connecting it with nativism, traditionalism and ‘moral absolutism’ (Hofstadter 1955). The image of a ‘dangerous and irrational populism’ has passed into public discourse, with many scholars trying to clear up the murky landscape around the concept, criticizing stereotypical approaches and focusing on both populism and anti-populism (Stavrakakis 2017a). It is extremely interesting that both conspiracy theories and populism present a negative connotation in public and academic discourse, while they are associated with Hofstadter’s work.

In this article, I keep a distance from approaches that examine populism as pathology of politics,⁶ attempting to emphasize the central core of populism, without predetermining its internal features.⁷ Following the theoretical and methodological tradition of the Essex School of Discourse Analysis (Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis 2019), I perceive populism as a discourse that separates society into two opposing camps, the ‘people’ and the ‘elites/establishment.’ According to Laclau (2005, 38–39), populism is ‘the dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier’ and ‘the discursive construction of an enemy.’ Utilizing Laclauian methodological tools, Stavrakakis argues that the signifier ‘the people’ functions as a *nodal point* of populist discourse (people-centrism), while its anti-elitism creates an antagonistic division/dichotomic representation of the social-political field between ‘us’ (the marginalized, the underprivileged, the people) and ‘them’ (the establishment, the 1%, the elite; Stavrakakis 2017b, 528; Stavrakakis 2019, 94). Nodal points are of particular importance in discourse analysis, because they operate as ‘privileged discursive points that partially fix meaning within signifying chains’ (Torfing 1999, 98). According to De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 306), nodal points ‘overdetermine the meaning of a whole structuration of meaning’ and their position ‘can best be understood through a spatial figuration: the nodal point at the centre of a certain discourse with the various moments located at the periphery of the articulation.’ Nodal points acquire meaning through the chains of equivalence and the relationship that they develop with other signs. As Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, 50) mention, ‘liberal democracy becomes liberal democracy through its combination with others carriers of meaning such as “free

⁶ Margaret Canovan notes that ‘populism [...] should not be dismissed as a pathological form of politics of no interest to the political theorist, for its democratic pretensions raise important issues’ (Canovan 1999).

⁷ A principal problem is that the pathological approach predetermines and prejudices the populist reason as a necessarily anti-democratic and anti-pluralist ideology, rejecting the possibility of developing a democratic and progressive populist force. However, there are several scholars who recognize that there are also democratic, progressive and/or inclusionary types of populism (Filic 2015; Kaidatzis 2022; Markou 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013).

elections” and “freedom of speech”.⁷ Thus, populism is not predetermined as a discourse and is defined through the relationship between key signifiers and the other signifiers. According to Laclauian discursive logic, populist cases can present more or less populist features at different times and contexts, having a gradual and flexible character.

The above approach and concepts explain why populism cannot always be the same. Various types of populism have been underlined in the international literature over the years (see [Canovan 1982](#); [Taguieff 1997](#)), but the most generally accepted categorization seems to be that of ‘inclusionary’ and ‘exclusionary’ populism ([Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013](#)). Inclusionary populism promotes the political integration of marginalized people, while exclusionary populism excludes people and social groups for racist/nativist reasons, seeking an ethnically or culturally homogeneity in its people ([Filoc 2015](#), 265–266). Inclusionary populism is often associated with left-wing populism ([Font, Graziano & Tsakatika 2021](#); [Markou 2017](#)), while exclusionary populism with radical right parties ([Betz 2005](#); [Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013](#)). As [Stavrakakis \(2017b, 529–530\)](#) notes, there are two important differences between populist cases: (a) In inclusionary populism ‘the people’ is an ‘empty signifier,’ while in exclusionary populism ‘the people’ refers to the nation; (b) Inclusionary populism presents a vertical structure (down/up, high/low) that is connected with power and socio-cultural and/or socio-economic position, while exclusionary populism is structured in a horizontal axis (inside/outside). From the moment that ‘the people’ appear as a nation in exclusionary populism and is directed horizontally (inside and out), then nationalism is the protagonist of a discourse and populism follows as a secondary phenomenon ([Stavrakakis 2017b, 529–530](#)).

Finally, it is important to underline that the ‘anti-elitist’ feature of populism does not necessarily equate it with other discourses and phenomena such as nationalism, racism and conspirational thinking, as neither the people nor the establishment are always the same. For instance, [Stavrakakis \(2005, 246\)](#) has attempted to separate the populist and the nationalist discourse, stating that any connection between them is usually an unstable construction, as populism can sometimes be combined with nationalism only as a relation of articulation and not a necessary fusion. In a more recent article, [De Cleen and Stavrakakis \(2017\)](#), who draw on the post-structuralist discourse theory by Laclau and Mouffe, extend this idea by arguing that populism and nationalism follow distinct ways in the construction of ‘the people’ (as underdog and as nation, respectively), a fact that can be identified by looking at the architectonics of populism and nationalism as revolving around a down/up (vertical) and an in/out (horizontal) axis, respectively. Therefore, this approach rejects the exclusive interconnection between populism and nationalism, especially since they present different features and articulate the popular classes in different ways.

POSSIBLE CONNECTION OR COMPLETE COEXISTENCE?

There are many scholars who focus on the relationship between populism and conspiracy theories, attempting to examine if there are any points of fusion.⁸ Several of them recognize a compatible condition between the two phenomena, especially

⁸ Most of them examine mainly right-wing populism ([Sawyer 2021](#); [Wojczewski 2022](#)), leaving aside left-wing populism that is a strong and very popular case of populism ([Markou 2017](#)). This is not a coincidence, as many of these studies recognize a possible connective link between right-wing populism and conspiracy theories. For instance, [Bergmann \(2018, 3\)](#) underlines this close relationship by arguing that while ‘right-wing populists have proved to be especially prone to create and promote CTs.’

due to their common dichotomic nature (Taggart 2000, 105) and Manichaeism (Hameleers 2020, 107). For instance, Pirro and Taggart (2022) underline a number of strong commonalities in populism and conspiracy theories, such as ‘Manichaeism, a sense of victimhood, and an ambivalence towards representative politics,’ thus rejecting the distinct course and core of the two phenomena.

Some studies go a step further, equating populism and conspiracy theories.⁹ Pantazopoulos, who understands populism as ‘national-populism’ (2016), states that the radical populist identities ‘we’ (people) versus ‘others’ (elites) include the same dichotomic logic as conspiracy theories, while a conspiracy theory is a machine for creating the imaginary ‘enemy’ (Pantazopoulos 2018). One of the main representatives of this view, Taguieff (2013, 99–100), argues that every populist leader, who calls upon the people, claims that he/she reveals the real enemies of the people, such as the ‘elites,’ the ‘system’ or the ‘foreigners,’ and especially the domestic hidden enemies. This results in conspiracist logic within populist discourse. According to the French philosopher, ‘the passion for the unveiling and denunciation of occult powers is common to conspiratorial minds and individuals who are sensitive to this modern and contemporary form of demagoguery that is rightly or wrongly called populism’ (Lacroix 2018).

The attempt of equation of populism and conspiracy theories has also come through a psychoanalytical perspective. Vassiliou (2017, 135–136), who mentions Taguieff’s work, has argued ‘that conspiracy thinking is an in-extricable feature of populist movements, since both come about as interrelated manifestations of a defensive psychological response intertwined with a preexisting political mythology that resonates in times of institutional crisis and radicalization tendencies, whenever personal and collective identities are at stake.’

The above perspective recognizes a Manichaeism within populism, namely a strong moral conflict between good and evil forces that defines populism as a conspiratorial phenomenon by nature. Specifically, it supports that the antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ is close to the core features of a conspiracy theory that creates a Manichean stance on socio-political reality (Hameleers 2021, 39). Moreover, there are scholars who make a connection between populism and conspiracy theories, due to their common suspicion of global elites and distrust in official organizations (Lynch 2022, 43) and established knowledge and truths (Hameleers 2021, 39). As a result, the slightest suspicion of the elites and institutions of power can be seen as part of conspirational logic. Of course, in this context, populism, having an inherent conspirational aspect, is usually recognized as a threat to (liberal) democracy (see Pantazopoulos 2016).

The question that arises here is: Are conspiracy theories endogenous to populism? Following a discursive perspective, this article understands populism as a phenomenon with its own unique essence and without predetermined characteristics. In fact, the recognition of significant commonalities in populism and conspirational thinking, and/or the equation of them, does not really help the study of political discourse and ideologies, creating greater problems in understanding the complex phenomena that political science deals with. I have two main criticisms to analyze here.

⁹ According to this perspective, conspiracism is always considered bogus and dangerous for democracy.

THE FIRST POINT OF MY CRITICISM: THE POPULIST CORE

According to the ‘equational’ approach, populist discourse involves a conspiraciologist logic, as conspiracism is considered inherent to populism. Notwithstanding, populism is a discourse that is based on the concept of popular sovereignty and has two main features, ‘people-centrism’ and ‘anti-elitism’ (Stavrakakis 2017b, 528). Specifically, discourse theory that I use in this article, focuses on political architectonics of discourse, namely in the way in which the signifiers are related to each other to produce particular structures of meaning. This means that the discursive populist core does not have predetermined and solid inside features, but its meaning is defined by the peripheral and often antithetical signifiers of the discourse (Stavrakakis 2018). As a result, populism can take on different forms depending on the signifiers around its key signifier of ‘the people,’ embracing different kind of arguments and ideas, whether they are conspirational or not. To find its internal features, we must examine the whole produced meaning of a position in a certain time, through its linguistic and non-linguistic practices, such as the nodal point, the signifiers (e.g. conspiracy and conspirators) and the chains of equivalences. Moreover, in populist discourse, the enemy of the people, that is, the elites or the establishment, is not necessarily the ‘hidden domestic or foreign forces’ but often the political and economic forces that create obstacles to the prosperity of the popular classes through policies and plans that are clear and do not need any special ‘revelation.’

The discourse theory and its methodological tools also show us that there is even the possibility of the development a strong conspiracist discourse to set aside populist elements. For example, in the context of a powerful conspiracist discourse that fantasizes microchips into people’s arms through COVID-19 vaccines (anti-vaccine discourse), the key signifier is ‘the opposition to vaccination,’ while the signifiers that define the meaning of the discourse are often associated with nation, religion and liberty (as it perceives it). In addition, the political subject that called upon is not always ‘the people.’ Moreover, most of the time, the political subject (e.g. the people, the citizens) who appear in the anti-vaccine discourse take on the character of an ‘awakened or enlightened national people’ and, as a result, the populist character is set aside even more.

THE SECOND POINT OF MY CRITICISM: THE SO-CALLED ‘COMMON’ DICHOTOMIC MANICHAEAN LOGIC OF BOTH POPULISM AND CONSPIRACISM

According to this view, the two phenomena are developed through a common Manichaeism/moralistic logic between ‘the forces of light’ and ‘the forces of darkness,’ between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elites.’¹⁰

Conspiracy theories may often develop a Manichaeism logic, but this is not necessarily the case with populism. As far as populist phenomenon is concerned, it does not seem useful to utilize Manichaeism and moralization (purity) as key tools in understanding of the phenomenon, as this predetermines the character of any populist movement, underestimating other powerful dimensions on which it may embrace. Katsambekis (2020, 54) argues that ‘the divide between “the people” and the “establishment” is not necessarily a moral one, premised on establishing a “Good versus Evil” polarity, but is often also (if not mainly) a political one, premised on advancing distinct ideologico-political readings of social divisions or the representation of contrasting social and economic

¹⁰ We have previously highlighted the view of ‘Manichaeism’ and mentioned some studies (see [Hameleers 2021, 39](#)).

interests.' Stavrakakis and Jäger (2018, 560) believe that it is difficult to substantiate an exclusive link of exaggerated or pathological types of moralization to populism, while they can be found in a plethora of discourses. Furthermore, Ostiguy (2017) mentions that the notion of 'purity may work well for European populisms, but does not travel well to other regions.' For instance, in Latin America the plebs are not viewed as morally pure whether by themselves or by populists, as the people are 'the world of petty thieves, of street smarts, lazzaroni, patoters, arrabeleros' (Ostiguy 2017, 91). Not only that, but there is no problem if the populist leadership is also quite corrupt, as long as it does its job and stands on the side of the people (Ostiguy 2017, 91). Ostiguy (2017, 92) mentions that it is closer to reality to talk about an antagonism between 'an authentic people' and 'a nefarious elite.' Nonetheless, even this typification is still debatable. In addition, there are some progressive populist paradigms in Europe that don't use a moralizing call to the people, but they construct their performance through the concept of 'dignity' (Fanoulis & Guerra 2021, 9–12). As Ostiguy, Panizza and Moffitt (2021, 3) underline 'normatively, what distinguishes populism is not the expression of certain moralism (present in fact in all ideologies), but the performative staging of a wrong.'

Yet, even if we choose to use 'the dichotomic Manichean' approach to study a populist performance, we would have trouble separating it from other reasons. The dichotomic and — to some extent — moralistic logic is more or less inherent in all political discourses and ideologies, whether they are populist, anti-populist, conspiracist or nationalist. For example, anti-populism calls upon 'rational' citizens to oppose 'dangerous populism,' while nationalism calls upon 'authentic patriots' to resist those who plot against 'the good of the nation.' Even Margaret Thatcher, once said: 'I am in politics because of the conflict between good and evil, and I believe that in the end the good will triumph' (Robson 2013). All of the above contains a simplistic and dichotomic logic of 'good-evil,' which is not necessarily 'the greatest threat' without the existence of deeper moral dimensions and other important elements. After all, what reason or ideology does not create a kind of division between the forces that try to help the people, the citizens or a certain part of the citizens against other ideologies, reasons and logics that create obstacles to the prosperity of the former? As Katsambekis (2020, 60–61) wonders, 'are not moral framings a constant in political life, whether one looks at populist, non-populist or anti-populist discourses?' Stavrakakis and Jäger (2018, 559) recently commented on the moral dimension that populism takes in some texts (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016), considering that it is normal to observe such idealizations in almost all identities, especially given the same identity and difference, love and hate, play such an important role in any political identification. So why should conspiracy theories be associated exclusively with populism? Is a dichotomic (and moralistic) logic enough to equate two reasons? We cannot give an affirmative answer.

THE NOTION OF 'CONSPIRACY THEORIES' AS A POLEMICAL TOOL: THE GREEK CASE

In crisis-ridden Greece (2009-), different kinds of conspiracist views on economy, Memorandums, EU and Germany have been raised in the Greek public and media discourse, while they have been associated with an extreme nationalist and anti-German rhetoric. According to Tsotsou (2021), Germany after 2010 was represented in the Greek press negatively. A part of the press presented Germans as Nazis, accusing Germany and its politicians (e.g. the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel and the Minister of Finance of that period, Wolfgang Schäuble) that want to conquer Europe by means of the financial discipline because it failed to do so in the Second World War (Tsotsou 2021).

The fact that conspiracism has been developed to a great extent in the political and media discourse does not mean that all the political parties express such a reason during the crisis to explain facts or situations. Conspiracist views are mainly expressed by a portion of the radical and extreme right in the country. For instance, the populist leader of ANEL (government partner of SYRIZA between 2015 and 2019) stated in 2012, referring to the EU: ‘This is not the European Union of the nations we believed in, this is the European Union of the 4th German Reich’ ([Newsbomb.gr 2012](#)). However, several parties and leaders accuse their rivals of expressing conspiracy theories, even if it is not certain that they use such a reason. The notion of conspiracy theory has been frequently used as a polemical rhetorical tool in political conflicts to undermine political rivals who are critical of some political decisions, without explaining in depth the reasons behind this kind of characterization.

Specifically, the right-wing anti-populist rhetoric in crisis-ridden Greece often equates the left with conspiracy theories (as well as with the ‘destructive’ populism).¹¹ In the context of an intense political confrontation, the right-wing ND, a party that claims to represent rationalism and opposes populism ([Markou 2021](#)), has many times accused left-wing SYRIZA of expressing a conspiratorial discourse ([Kathimerini.gr 2019](#); [Naftemporiki.gr 2013](#); [Naftemporiki.gr 2020](#); [Tovima.gr 2021](#)). It is very interesting the fact that ND tries to infuse a negative view on SYRIZA in public opinion through two popular concepts, conspiracism and populism, which are equated in its rhetoric with lies. Nevertheless, at the same time, many parties and leaders of the Greek political scene have also used (rather to a lesser extent) the label of conspiracy theories to negatively characterize their political opponents’ arguments, such as SYRIZA and MeRA25 that in some cases describe ND’s rhetoric as conspiratorial ([Avgi.gr 2018](#); [Thepressproject.gr 2021](#)).

It is not crucial to examine here who is a conspiracist and who is not. The crux of the matter is that the constant use of the label against any opposing or ‘annoying’ rhetoric creates even greater problems in political life, while the concept loses any of its usefulness and analytical value. The political discourse becomes even vaguer, helping neither politics nor society. How the people can engage in a political debate that takes place in terms that are not substantially explained? Furthermore, the devaluation of the political opponent leads the political dialogue to a deadlock, creating conditions of intense polarization that does not allow the consensus to important issues that plague society.¹² Finally, it is very easy for a powerful political party or leader to use the concept to his/her advantage and, in some cases, exclude (non-mainstream) political (usually populist) forces from the political dialogue, even if these parties are not conspiracist. As Husting and Orr ([2007, 127](#)) emphasized, labelling someone with ‘conspiracy theories,’ a person can strategically exclude others from the public sphere and debates, ‘no matter how true, false, or conspiracy-related your utterance is.’

CONCLUSION

In this article, after the initial conceptualization of the notions of populism and conspiracy theories, I focused on the relationship between them, underling the discussion that takes place in the academic community on their possible connection. Through the Essex

¹¹ For anti-populism in Greece (see [Markou 2021](#)).

¹² For many scholars, populism creates conditions of polarization ([Pappas 2012](#); [Roberts 2022](#)). I will not disagree with that. But anti-populism (and other discourses) does exactly the same thing, as does the devaluation of the political opponent within a democratic political context.

School Discourse Analysis, I analyzed the particular character of populism and examined the reasons why the phenomenon cannot be exclusively equated with conspiracism. The methodological tools of the post-structuralist approach stressed the central elements of the populist core, emphasizing its distinct character but also the possibility (or not) of its connection with other phenomena. Hence, it is clear that populism can act independently of conspiracism (and other reasons), following different paths.

The acceptance of conspiracist logic at the core of populism is certainly problematic as conspiracy theories can be found — more or less — everywhere. There are countless parties, organizations and leaders in the world who use conspiracy theories. It does not matter if you are a populist, an anti-populist or a non-populist. It does not matter if you are a liberal, a conservative or a communist. Whatever ideology you embrace or whatever reason you express, there is always the possibility of developing conspiracy theories. They are everywhere (Uscinski 2019a, 1).

Finally, I focused on the case of crisis-ridden Greece, emphasizing the fact that the term ‘conspiracy theories’ is very often used as a polemical tool by different parties in the context of political controversy, something that results in the problematic functioning of the political dialogue and democratic system. The indefiniteness of the term seems to play an important role in the polemical use of the notion of ‘conspiracy theories,’ since it is easy to be placed everywhere. As Bratich underlines:

By never having final criteria for what counts as a conspiracy theory, the term can be wielded in a free-floating way to apply to a variety of accounts. It is no wonder then, that the genealogy of conspiracy theory so closely approximates that of the terrorist (as a ‘whatever enemy’). (Bratich 2008, 12)

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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