

# MINDFUL PLEASURES: POPULISM AND PARANOIA IN CONSPIRACY CULTURE

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## Abstract

Psychoanalytic concepts are often used beyond their clinical significance; they become part of ordinary language and of various academic vocabularies. Designating the culture of suspicion that has invariably characterized modern societies, paranoid fantasy also names the libidinal investment in conspiracy narratives, from the unrecorded doxa of people living with (global) media and information systems to the postmodern literature and cinema of the Cold War age. My paper investigates the discourse of paranoid conspiracy while offering a critique of Marxist interpretations of this social phenomenon.

**Keywords:** conspiracy fantasy; neurosis; anxiety; Marxism; postmodern culture; cognitive mapping.

The mythology of conspiracy constitutes the underside of political modernity; according to its stories, the pursuit of freedom is fraught with the dangers of new forms of servitude. Both the socialist modern vision of emancipation and the liberal-democratic vision of a free and fully transparent society have generated thus conspiracy narratives, *as if* to exorcise the demons of rogue politics, of anarchy and chaos or *as if* to cure the polis of mad superstitions. Pick your metaphor! Conspiracy myths loom large over literature and literary studies, Cold War cinema, Marxism, political theory and psychoanalysis. Regardless of their academic affiliation, scholars have given in to the conspiracy game. What is the 'secret' of this mythology that has permeated political speech *urbi et orbi*? In many ways, this is not a secret at all; conspiracy theories are obvious «strateg[ies] of delegitimation». But this answer does not settle the mystery and the fascination with this social phenomenon. Mark Fenster argues that conspiracy beliefs do not simply evoke the infamous «pathological threat to political stability», but also the «skepticism about truth in political order».<sup>2</sup> But can we go as far as to consider the capricious nature of this popular doxa, its radical ambivalence, as the imaginative resources of progressive populism?

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<sup>2</sup> Fenster M. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. P. Xiii.

At first sight, conspiracy theories are only the mirror of social confusion and anxiety derived from the historical transformations of the modern age, attempts to produce the narrative of an impossible object of representation, in Althusser's words, «history ... a process without a telos or a subject». As Fredric Jameson noticed, the modern philosophical vision of History is the opposite of this process, as it develops "allegorical master narratives" that include «providential histories (such as those of Hegel or Marx), catastrophic visions of history (such as that of Spengler)»<sup>3</sup>. In terms of narrative representation, the creators of conspiracy theories are in search of a «plot», of an ordering (i.e. organizing principle) of the world. The historian Daniel Pipes refers, for instance, to «the myth of secret societies» in discussing the fictional genealogy of the Freemasons, traced back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century story of the Temple Knights, frequently quoted as the first example of an underground political/religious group, creating an alternative power structure to that of the sovereign: «As soon as men became Freemasons, they seemed to place themselves in opposition to both Church and State»<sup>4</sup>. In a certain sense, the proliferation of secret societies at the beginning of the modern age, from the Freemasons to the Illuminati, may in fact be a belated effect of a certain mythical horizon incorporating some of the most politically active Western historical anxieties, from the decline of sovereign power originating perhaps in the conflict between monarchies and the Catholic Church, to the threatening force of religious and moral heterogeneity on the distribution of wealth laying the grounds for European anti-semitism.

It is not surprising that conspiratorial beliefs describe 'power' as fully immanent, albeit creating an imagined theologico-political ontological order that does not appear as an identifiable form and, in remaining «invisible», conceals itself in the structure of the world. The immanence of the modern world does not save us from mystification: powerful is the one who is able to remain hidden, as this concealment offers itself as identity beyond identification. The invisible master is power that cannot be localized, simply because it resides nowhere in the public or private space – and consequently it is everywhere, it becomes 'space', in the metaphorical sense of its absolute fulfillment. In Kafka's *The Trial*, we first discover the ambivalent rhetorical dimension of the 'invisible master' – a paradoxical figure that embodies the complete paralysis of the social space and a displacement of power within this social space.<sup>5</sup> Since K. refuses to become 'paranoid', to suspect that 'a conspiracy of power' may have taken place, he starts off in the labyrinth of his trial all by himself, facing the abstract court whose law (principle of organization/system) is not available.

<sup>3</sup> Jameson F. *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Pipes D. *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From*. New York: Free Press, 1997. P. 59–60.

<sup>5</sup> Kafka F. *The Trial*. Trans. B. Mitchell. New York: Schocken Books, 1998. [*Der Prozess*. Frankfurt am Mein: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977]

In some sense, Kafka's fictional world is without History, without a clear past and without the possibility to look forward to the future. Nothing could be more foreign to the modern paradigm created by *The Trial* than the possibility to see through the mechanism of history, or to believe in history governed by a Universal Plan, a deterministic conception which assumes, in paradoxical nonreligious, though theological terms, the emergence of a pseudo-transcendental Force, acting immanently to manipulate political and social life. The quasi-deistic control implied by this argument is the symptom of the incorporation into theoretical paths of ordinary conversations one of the central ideas of Western thought, that there is a «meaning in history» (to paraphrase the English title of Karl Löwith's famous book)<sup>6</sup>. The task of a philosophy of history, «the systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning»<sup>7</sup> appears to be taken up by conspiracy theorists who establish, according to their ideological biases, the identity of the agency trying to hijack history and make politics a mere useless practice. Yet, in these mythical narratives, history becomes a coherent structure whose limits are met in the fulfillment of the *eschaton*. Löwith's thought illustrates the condemnation of the modern doctrine of 'Progress' in his reading of eighteenth-nineteenth century philosophies of history (Burckhardt, Marx, Hegel or Voltaire). More so, the secularization of eschatology that Löwith proposed suggests that the loss of the master-plot is only apparent in the modern conception of history. As Robert Wallace showed in his account of this argument and of its critique by German philosopher Hans Blumenberg, «Christianity... broke with the rule of ...Hellenistic/Roman world» it introduced the «entirely novel ideas of creation from nothing and total final destruction, of a unique Incarnation, and directed at one absolutely final Judgement». For Löwith, this idea does not belong to the old politico-theological order; it also constitutes «the source of the modern notion of a single, unified, future-directed history of progress despite the irreligious and antireligious postures of many of the modern theorists of progress».<sup>8</sup> The key element in this argument is the projection of historical narrative towards the very limit or end of history, in order to create a sense of "history as whole", of temporality as totality.

The emphasis on the allegorical strategies involved in the representation of History becomes evident in Fredric Jameson's thinking of conspiracy theory in relation to social totality. In the *Political Unconscious* (1981) the Marxist notion of totality, «the dramatic battleground of the confrontation between Hegelian and structural Marxists» had been the central category in his rethinking of «political interpretation of literary

<sup>6</sup> Löwith K. *Meaning in History*. Chicago: Phoenix Books, The University of Chicago Press, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Löwith, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Translator's Introduction // Blumenberg H. *The Legitimacy of Modern Age*. Boston: MIT Press, 1983. P. xv-xvi.

texts» as the «absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation»<sup>9</sup>. Jameson's thinking of the capital as «totalizing or systemic concept» suspiciously follows a theological path as his definition reads as follows: «no one has ever seen or meet the thing itself [i. e. capital]; it is either the result of scientific reduction or the mark of an imaginary and ideological vision».<sup>10</sup> To approach the systemic character of the capital (and its last cultural logic, postmodernism), one needs «a conception of social totality (and a possibility of transforming the whole social system)» (285); without it «no properly socialist politics is possible» (285). As Jameson has claimed elsewhere (*Postmodernism and the Logic of Late Capitalism*), «[a] model of political culture appropriate to our own situation will necessary have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organizing concern»; the «aesthetic of such new (and hypothetical) cultural form» is therefore defined as «*cognitive mapping*»(89).<sup>11</sup> The theme of paranoid conspiracy appears as a «degraded figure of the great multinational space that remains to be mapped»<sup>12</sup>. If space has become the central category to think social totality (the capital being some sort of mythical immanent force on the one hand, the struggle against its hegemonic position on the other) what is the definition of politics that this theoretical perspective tries to bring forward? These «poor person's» cognitive mappings do much as they can (in their paranoid temptations) to grasp a 'system' whose coordinates are not fully representable. When Fredric Jameson speaks of the impossibility to produce a new «vision of the future that grips the masses» what he acknowledges, in fact, is the crisis of the modern political imagination.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, the so-called paranoid fantasies (and their politically ambiguous significance) need to be related to the dominant cultural paradigm of postwar life in the global world: the technology of new media, the proto-computer age, the development of information systems and its transition from the analog to the digital. They also need to be related to socio-political climate of the historical period called the Cold War, but mostly to the specific coordinates of the national security state inaugurated in the 1950s in the context of the arms race and US's loss of Atomic monopoly. If we designate the «information age» as the dominant category of postmodernism, as the new phase in the development of modernity, we also need to analyze the nature of the systems that have become operative scientifically and technologically. For Jameson, conspiracy is the *symptom* of the contemporary confrontation with any sort of impersonal systemic machine: the «'conspiratorial text' ... may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their

<sup>9</sup> Jameson, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Hardt M., Weeks K. (eds.) *The Jameson Reader*, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. P. 284.

<sup>11</sup> Hardt, Weeks, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 285.

concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality».<sup>14</sup> But what if ‘conspiracy’ is not a symptom but what Lacan would call a *sinthome*, not an object that can be deciphered but the cultural body of «some elementary matrix of jouissance, of excessive enjoyment»?<sup>15</sup> As my analysis will demonstrate, the Marxist attempt to redeem conspiracy is posited on the exclusion of such possibility; more dangerously, it assumes that only capitalism (not cognitive mapping) operates according to the logic of surplus-jouissance.

The subtitle of Jameson’s book *Geopolitical Aesthetics* is «Cinema and Space in the World System» a phrase that designates the ‘world’ (understood in the cultural studies perspective of transnational space) as an organized systemic body, and to the capital as its immanent center of power. It is not the social machine itself that is the ‘enemy’, but the systemic structure of communication-transmission that allows the creation of a monstrous totality. The rapid evolution of information technology (from the radio to the internet) makes global networks a structural reality, not simply an abstract totality created by scientific reductionism. The background of this discussion is Marx’s analysis of «the general organization of labor in society» [or, its reversal, the transformation of «the whole society into a factory»], extremely useful to understand the role of the machine in creating a unifying logic of the capital (the production of surplus-value).<sup>16</sup> Marx is interested in the nature of the development of industrial technology from simple tools to complex machines and their mechanisms (transmission/combination) and carefully examines the impact of systemically organized means of production has on social life: «It is questionable if all the mechanical inventions yet made have lightened the day’s toil of any human beings» (writes Marx quoting John Stuart Mill)<sup>17</sup>. The opening sequence of Chaplin’s film about American depression era (*Modern Times*) humorously portrays the assembly line as an automatic, speed driven force of exploitation, the part of a huge machine that is the factory/plant (also, metaphorically the ‘whole’ system of capitalist production). The passion for allegory did not fail, however, to manifest itself in Marx’s work:

«An organized system of machines to which motion is communicated by the transmitting mechanism form an automatic center is the most developed form of production by machinery. Here we have, in the place of the isolated machine, a mechanical monster whose body fills the factories, and whose demonic power, at first hidden by the slow and measured motions of its gigantic members, finally bursts forth in the ... feverish whirl of its countless working organs»<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Jameson F. *The Geopolitical Aesthetics. Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana U. P and London: BFI Publishing, 1992. P. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek S. *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. London: Routledge, 2001. P. 199.

<sup>16</sup> Marx K. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. I. London, New York: Penguin Books, 1990. p. 477.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, op. cit., p. 492.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 503.

Since the 'system' takes the place of the mechanical monster in Marx's text, the relation between the individual subject and the sublime network of power is the central element of Jameson's cultural politics involving the «cognitive and pedagogical dimensions» of an aesthetic mapping of the global system of capitalism. The only way in which this 'global system' can be thought as an already existing entity is to start from an Althusserian 'determination in last instance'. If we question the logic of economic determinism, we realize that *the system* itself is to be constituted as such, through a rhetorical operation. In my view, the role of political allegory is not simply to map out the existing reality, but to actually make evident a possible world. We thus need to break with the epistemological category (cognitive mapping), which misuses the Freudian notion of the unconscious to sustain a utopian way of thinking.

As conspiracy theories integrate alternative narratives of the parallel power in the fragmented landscape of modernity, they do not simply follow the Kafkian description of a universe dependent on the rule of an invisible master, but point towards a specific group/organization that is involved in a *no-longer-secret* power struggle. Marxist analyses have thus missed the excessive enjoyment correlative to social fantasies about conspiracy, located in the revelation of the group's identity, an act that suggests the 'power' of the very agent who is able to bring the anonymous *They* to the public space. The belief in conspiracy theories is a hyperbolic gesture, as it goes beyond socially accepted narratives and an allegorical practice, as it rewrites these narratives. In this sense, conspiracy beliefs foster the fantasy of betrayal; they all imagine a trespass, an order of action that has been considered the allegorical projection of the indefinite network structure and its libidinal circuit that makes up the global system. What does this expansion of the conspiracy theme tell us about the role of myth in postmodern societies?

Ernesto Laclau has suggested that

«in speaking of 'mythical spaces' and their possible transformation into imaginary horizons ... we are not referring to anything that is essentially 'primitive' and whose re-emergence ... would constitute an outbreak of irrationalism. On the contrary myth is constitutive of any possible society»<sup>19</sup>.

In the world of «advanced capitalism» (media technologies and their network systems), mythology implies a more political (less theological) vision of the capital. For Laclau, there is no capitalism as such and no mythological double of the «thing itself» called «capital» but capitalist relations. The main point in taking up Laclau's notion of «mythical space» is that it overcomes (alternatively to Hegel or Lukacs) the «duality between subject and object»:

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<sup>19</sup> Laclau E. *New Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time*. New York: Verso, 1990. P. 67.



«The classical problem of knowledge as the adequation between knowing in being disappears in that myth constitutes the subject and being of objects at the same time»<sup>20</sup>.

On the one hand conspiracy (as fantasy) is the very attempt to reintroduce objectivity in a contingent universe, in a world whose systematic organization is as mysterious as the Holy Ghost. On the other hand, the loud and chaotic banality of everyday existence, a terrain of encounter of popular culture, paranoid politics/populism and eschatological lament is the space where everything can be challenged: the order of reason, science and rationality, religion and the American government, the landing on the moon and the end of the cold war. In this space of «anything goes» one identifies a free play of paranoia as the most significant metaphor of postmodern life. How does this analysis relate to claims that conspiracy theories are purely a negative category that «paranoid style» should remain a pejorative name as long as it «has a greater affinity for bad causes than good»<sup>21</sup>

Richard Hofstadter's designation of right-wing conspiracy theories of the 1950s as «paranoid» is a rhetorical event. The debates between rhetoricians about the nature of catachresis and metaphor are relevant in discussing this case. Initially, Hofstadter's act of naming (or baptism) of a specific type of 'political style' follows the definition of catachresis, as it tries to unify conceptually a specific rhetorical internalization of the cold war in the American public sphere: «I call it the paranoid style in politics simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggerations, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind». However, at a closer look, the figural usage of a literal name (i. e. paranoia) comes forward:

«In using the expression 'paranoid style,' I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes. ... It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant».

As Hofstadter admits, the evocation of a certain clinical notion of paranoia as «[a] chronic mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions of persecution and of one's own greatness» is restricted, from a psychiatric perspective, to a list of identifiable symptoms.<sup>22</sup> This clinical understanding of individual paranoia (as the extreme fantasy of persecution) metaphorizes the myth of the conspiratorial world, in which the elusive figure of the enemy appears as the very limit of a community's symbolic representation. Is a psychoanalytic examination of conspiracy fantasy worth pursuing? One possible way would be, for instance, to link the Lacanian structural notion of psychosis (i. e. the foreclosure of the Law of the Father) to the political crisis of authority illustrated by Kafka's

<sup>20</sup> Laclau, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Hofstadter R. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. NY: Knopf, 1965. P. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 3–4.

*The Trial* and echoed by postmodern novels such as Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity Rainbow* or Don DeLillo's *Libra*. At a closer look, since the dynamic structure of the conspiratorial fantasy in postwar America does not always correspond to its fictional correlative, our task is not to 'treat' the paranoid conspiracy *as if* it belongs to the condition generally known as psychosis.

A much different view on the status of quasi-clinical mental conditions in contemporary capitalism has been presented by Lacanian sociologist, Renata Salecl, in a recent article:

«Some of the more pessimistic psychoanalysts ...conclude that, as a result of the lack of traditional authorities and changes in the function of the symbolic law, one finds an increase of psychosis»<sup>23</sup>.

Some of the analyses and examples presented in this essay are particularly helpful for my examination of social phenomena triggered by the decline of the nation-state, or the retreat of sovereignty. What is particularly interesting to Salecl's argument is that she does not simply settle for an easy solution [i. e. late capitalism is «producing more and more psychosis», even more soft-core types of this incurable disorder such as 'ordinary psychosis' or 'white psychosis']<sup>24</sup>. Instead, she chooses to make an alternative claim: despite our seemingly unlimited freedom of choice in late capitalism (in technologically advanced nations), we «appear powerless in front of what Baudelaire called 'the figures of Time'», that is to say, «aging, dying, and inscribing oneself into the succession of generations becomes the more and more difficult in this time of the freedom of choice»<sup>25</sup>. The public invasion of private spaces through media technology contributes to 'familiarizing' us to the ever-increasing danger of imminent catastrophes, as DeLillo's *White Noise* suggests with dark humor. The result is an ever-increasing state of anxiety that carries over an apparently psychotic symptom to a potentially fertile terrain for neurosis. Following this logic, from an analyst's point of view 'paranoid conspiracy' could be replaced with a different metaphor, more faithful to psychoanalytic vocabulary and closer to the politico-technological age, namely 'neurotic/obsessional conspiracy'. This new category that does not simply point towards the collapse of traditional forms of authority, but also proves that social forms of delusions about a radical other (either embodied by the figure of the enemy or by an enigmatic secret power) is in reality a defense strategy against falling prey to anxiety:

«Instead of claiming that there is an increase of psychosis in today's society, one can conclude that the insistence on choice in all domains of our lives has given rise to an obsessive need for control and predictability. However, by constantly following advice on how to shape one's body, how to curb one's desires, how to guide one's live, and especially how to prevent

<sup>23</sup> Salecl R. Choice and the Ultimate Incurable // *Umbr(a)*, 2006; special issue *The Incurable*. Ed. Sorin Radu Cucu and Andrew Skomra.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91–92.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.



death, the subject obtains no greater certainty or control over his or her life. The flip side of such obsessive attempts at mastery is an increasing feeling of guilt and anxiety»<sup>26</sup>.

The neurotic conspiracy cannot compete, however, in the post-modern age with 'paranoia', a term which has generated the culture of skepticism so pervasive during the Cold War. Without psychoanalytical input, for instance, Hofstadter's argument is a representative positivist critique of «the paranoid style» in American politics following, in principle, the strict opposition between social rationalism (in its Enlightenment foundation) and the very limit of the symbolic space, i. e. antagonism: «the fact that movements employing the paranoid style are not constant but come in successive episodic waves suggests that the paranoid disposition is mobilized into action chiefly by social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action»<sup>27</sup>. Hofstadter thus integrates postwar political experience of political suspicion (from American right-wing populism to Stalinist mock trials) into a specific political genre. It is significant therefore that his thinking of the "paranoid style" does not follow the geopolitical divisions of the cold war era. This is the point where my theoretical perspective will go in a different direction. As in my presentation of Jameson's Marxist analysis of conspiracy theories, the need for a different conceptualization of the postmodern meaning of conspiracy came from incompatible theoretical perspectives.

Towards the end of the essay, Hofstadter wraps up the historical study of the entire tradition of the American «paranoid style» (and its conservative usage), as it was created by the «paranoid spokesman in politics» through the development of specific rhetoric dominated by the «fear of catastrophe». The whole grammar of the political internalization of the cold war conflict is presented here. The first issue concerns the populist shift in American politics from a traditional Leftist strategy to a conservative (of Christian fundamentalist base) – Michael Kazin in *The Populist Persuasion* describes in detail the historical circumstances of this shift. The second issue is the politico-theological horizon opened up by the atomic age and its apocalyptic scenarios. Both these issues need to be related to the national security state specific to the cold war situation. It is here that I find Hofstadter's essay most useful, in identifying the specific allegorical structure that, at the height of the cold war, allowed the state of necessity to endanger the democratic idea. As Hofstadter's analysis of the first decade of intense paranoid articulation of populist messages goes on, his liberal definition of politics becomes obvious:

«In American experience, ethnic and religious conflicts, with their threat of submergence of whole systems of values, have plainly been the focus for militant and suspicious minds of this sort, but elsewhere class con-

<sup>26</sup> Salecl, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 39.

licts have also mobilized such energies. The paranoid tendency is aroused by a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise. The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular political interest – perhaps because of the very unrealizable nature of their demands – cannot make themselves felt in the political process. Feeling that they have no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their conception of the world of power as omnipotent, sinister, and malicious fully confirmed. They see only the consequences of power – and these through distorting lenses – and have little chances to observe its actual machinery».<sup>28</sup>

According to Hofstadter, any kind of political confrontation that does not follow the rules of the market (bargaining and compromise) is in some way deviant, as it no longer follows the civilized rules of a non-antagonistic politics. In this case, the social actors who believe in fictional conspiracies become victims of their ‘delusions’ as they fail to understand the sense of their own role in the historical process. If society were a fully rational terrain, Hofstadter’s claim would make a better case. As previously argued, the social cannot be understood according to terms such as objectivity or rationality, as it also cannot be reduced to an opposite structure – the contemporary version of the ‘state of nature’. The middle path between these two theoretical positions, between liberalism and conservatism, can only be conceived in relation to a rhetorical construction of society that leads, despite rationalism and technological progress, to mythological thinking.

The critique of a liberal conception of politics does not solve the initial problem of my argument, namely the possibility to reconsider, from a postmodern perspective the ‘politics of paranoia’. As we have seen in this short essay, there are two ways to address this matter:

a.) In a Marxist key, Fredric Jameson views conspiracy fantasy as desire to cognitively map the new systemic totality of capitalism; to put it in Lacanian terms, following this path, one never moves from desire to the drive.

b.) In a liberal key, Richard Hofstadter describes a “paranoid style” of political militancy at the height of the cold war (following this path, we can only overcome the right-wing revolution by canceling out political mythology, i.e. by conceptualizing liberal consensus as the *ideal* of politics).

In order to offer an alternative argument, two questions are necessary: As conspiracy fantasies point towards the failure of objectivity, do they also expose or cover up antagonistic relations? If postmodern texts engage and alter, at the same time the paranoid genre, what is the hegemonic image they reproduce aesthetically?

The political mythology of conspiracy constitutes a mirror image of the hegemonic relations studied by Ernesto Laclau. Conspiracy beliefs are entities belonging to the un-stable space of ever-conflicting doxas;

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<sup>28</sup> Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 40.

they are permanently involved however in processes of articulation that involve the type of differential relation analyzed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. This idea is evident in the case of the Kennedy assassination as a media event and as an event that redefines the power of the media. The only possible way in which conspiracy theories can define their particular identity is by differentiating themselves from *The Warren Commission Report* (their radical other) and from each other. One can recognize here the presence of a frontier between the official government position (one that tries to establish the social as an objective space) and all other different voices trying to recreate allegorically the event by contesting the legitimacy of the former. Conspiracy theories point towards a potential crisis or failure of *the political* without contesting the political language that enables society to appear in a particular form (for instance, as parliamentary democracy). In this sense, these allegorical narratives fall back in the same trap as the official government position in their clear-cut plot structures; they are unable to produce a properly empty signifier (i. e. one that does not need allegorical structures as a supplement) that would allow a 'genuine' antagonism to perform «the negation of a given [political] order» (Laclau, *HSS* 126).

To answer the second question a brief detour is necessary. Fredric Jameson does not mention Adorno's notes on paranoid thinking from the *Stars Down to Earth* (the famous analysis of the Los Angeles Times horoscope column), a relevant Marxist critique of conspiracy thinking.<sup>29</sup> At the center of Adorno's text, we find a passive individual: the victim of superstitious beliefs and ready-made determinist scripts (astrology), in one word, irrationalism. The essay describes the «obviousness of [individual] dependence» (114) as the cause for all sorts of irrational behaviors from astrology to «totalitarian creeds». How does one come to terms with one's dependence to the social field? Adorno explains the belief in astrology as the result of mediation. Instead of accepting «their dependence on man-made conditions» and, at the same time, take «responsibilities which today are extremely hard to take», people «project their dependence on something else» (114).<sup>30</sup> This *ideology of dependence* (i. e. astrology) allows the translation of complexity (in a sense that borders its current scientific usage) into a prescriptive language. Rejected by Voltaire in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* as «universal extravagance that has infected the human spirit for so long» [my translation], astrology is, among divinatory practices, probably the Traditional discipline with the best adaptation to modern life. Adorno does not pay too much attention to this aspect, the specific genre that newspapers have invented in order to transform the horoscope into a commodity. There are two points in this text where the discussion of astrology is echoed by Jameson's ideas about the cultural logic of late capitalism:

«...the world appears to most people today more as a 'system' than ever before, covered by an all-comprising net of organization with no loop-

<sup>29</sup> Adorno T. *Stars Down to Earth*. London: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, op. cit., p. 114.

holes where the individual could 'hide' in face of the ever-present demands and tests of a society ruled by a hierarchical business set-up and coming pretty close to what we called 'verwaltete Welt', a world caught by administration»<sup>31</sup>.

The increasing bureaucratization of contemporary life is the site of a conceptual detour in the last section of *The Stars Down to Earth*. Adorno emphasizes the «obvious similarities» between the organization principles of contemporary social space and «paranoid systems of thinking». Inasmuch as the former possesses «an irrational aspect itself», [people] «feel that everything is linked up with everything else and that they have no way out, but at the same time the whole mechanism is so complicated that they fail to understand its *raison d'être*»<sup>32</sup>.

Does this paragraph unintentionally evoke the Kafkaesque experience? Joseph K. seems to be in the situation described above; he is, however, the antithesis of the generic paranoid, like the one described by Adorno – for K. belief is not the problem, but curiosity. Undoubtedly, K. suffers from this 'incurable' modern malady in his enterprise to figure out the 'coordinates' of his experience. He does not fall «to accept systems of delusions» and does not incarnate Adorno's abstract figure of the conspiracy theorist. Unlike postmodern heroes, Joseph K. does not become an undercover Sherlock Holmes whose drive to investigate, to transform the world into a field of research constitutes the central motifs of American conspiracy narratives from Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* to the political thrillers analyzed by Jameson in *The Geopolitical Aesthetics* such as *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974) or *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1976). A similar mutation occurs from the modernist metaphysical fable of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up* to the postmodern examination of surveillance and political intrigue in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) and Brian DePalma's *Blow Out* (1982). In these narratives, the conspiracy theorist has become the protagonist of an allegorical fable (i. e. a journey); she/he starts off attracted by a strange pattern of coincidences or by clues (signs) possibly disclosing an underground network or an 'invisible master'. Adorno described the paranoid thinker as a passive victim, as an individual subordinated to the bureaucratic machine; Jameson's portrayal of the conspiracy theorist is a reversal of this position. However, no Marxism can turn the aesthetic of conspiracy born in Pynchon's novels or Pakula's films in political action, without taking into account the surplus-jouissance generated by the reactivation of its myth. In this sense, what seems to me critical is not simply cognitive mapping of various systems or social totalities, as a form of heroism, but the way these political allegories are involved in a constantly failed process of articulation of potential meanings of the name, 'conspiracy'.

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<sup>31</sup> Adorno, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.