



PLOT AND COMLOT: THE IMPASSE OF NARRATIVIZATION, POOR COGNITIVE MAPPING AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Resumo: Este artigo tenta revelar o significado da disseminação contemporânea das teorias da conspiração, seguindo a sugestão de Frederic Jameson de que as teorias da conspiração são sintomas de um "mapeamento cognitivo" empobrecido. Para isso, transpõe-se o problema do mapeamento cognitivo para uma questão mais ampla de narratividade, em diálogo com o florescente campo da ética narrativa, interpretando-o por meio das lentes da teoria crítica e da psicanálise. Resumidamente, afirma-se que as teorias da conspiração são narrativas substitutivas para lidar com a opacidade das sociedades contemporâneas e a consequente deficiência na narratividade pessoal.

Palavras-chave: Ética Narrativa. Teorias da conspiração. Mapeamento cognitivo deficiente. Teoria crítica. Psicanálise.

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PLOT AND COMLOT: THE IMPASSE OF NARRATIVIZATION, POOR COGNITIVE MAPPING AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Tomás Lima Pimenta¹

Abstract: This paper attempts to disclose the meaning of the contemporary spread of conspiracy theories by pursuing Frederic Jameson's suggestion that conspiracy theories are symptoms of an impoverished "cognitive mapping." For that purpose, I translate the problem of cognitive mapping into a larger question of narrativity, in dialogue with the flourishing field of narrative ethics, and interpret it through the lens of critical theory and psychoanalysis. Briefly, I contend that conspiracy theories are surrogate narratives to cope with the contemporary societies' opacity and the consequent deficiency in self-narrativization.

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INTRODUCTION

We witness in awe the current proliferation of conspiracy theories. An increasing number of people believe that a cabal of satanic pedophiles rules the world, that the COVID-19 pandemic was a stage used by the "global elite" to reset the economy, revoke capitalism and institute a global authoritarian government, or even that the "global elite" attempts to impose the regime of "Globalism", based on political correctness, environmental and human rights policies against national interests.² Such conspiracy theories are narratives that try to make sense of the world and locate the true source of power. They are plots organized around a complot. In fact, there is nothing new about conspiracy theories. For instance, narratives of complots to assassinate politicians played an important role in Ancient Rome's history. The Exclusion Crisis that precipitated the Glorious Revolution in England also involved a conspiracy narrative. But there is something peculiar to contemporary conspiracy theories. They are responses to a specific sort of anxiety.

Building upon urbanist Kevin Lynch's work, Fredric Jameson defined conspiracy theories as the poor person's cognitive mapping. In *The Image of the City* (1964), Lynch investigates how individuals make sense of and produce images of the urban spaces they

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² The latter is found, for example, in a program named "Projeto de Nação" published by the elite of the Brazilian army.

inhabit. Such images are fundamental for orientation, mapping and moving across space. Such orientation requires an individuals' active role, for it is fundamentally based on personal, based on memories and experiences. However, the city itself must also be legible and representable. A legible city would be "[...] one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern" (Lynch, 1964, p. 3). Good orientation and spatial imagination are associated with emotional security, whereas disorientation is experienced as anxiety and terror (Lynch, 1964, p. 4). Jameson expands Lynch's project to convey the idea of imaginary representations of social totality based on which individuals orient themselves in the social space (Jameson, 1988). Jameson is persuaded that meaningful political action requires such locating. The problem of social orientation has been a central topic of sociology as a discipline. It has long been identified as a major source of malaise and psychological suffering in modernity. In that connection, he claims that conspiracy theories are surrogate mental images of the social world that attempt to compensate for the lack of cognitive mapping: they are the poor person's cognitive mapping.

Conspiracy theories are narratives. Narratives have an orienting effect because they weave a plot in which individuals find themselves as characters. To narrate the world imposes the question: in which plot am I a character? My first hypothesis is thus that it is possible to read the impoverishment of cognitive mapping as an *impasse of narrativization*. By *impasse of narrativization*, I mean the effacement of the conditions of possibility for narrativization. In that regard, conspiracy theories are surrogate and impoverished narratives that try to cover our incapacity to produce consistent ones. As Lynch was aware, this involves both the subjective capacity and the objective readability of the *real* social plot, as it were. Thus, the crisis of narrativity should be understood as an articulation of a loss in subjective capacity and the social world's objective transformation.³

To make sense of this predicament, I engage with the recent literature on narrative ethics and narratives of the *self*. I primarily focus on MacIntyre's groundbreaking *After Virtue* (2007). Against the dominant positions in moral philosophy, MacIntyre attempted to construe a virtue ethics in which personal narratives and second-order narratives play a fundamental role. According to him, duties and values cannot be understood out of their context, but only in relation to the roles and norms that regulate the practices they originate. Nonetheless, I contend that this shift toward narrative discloses the underlying predicament of narrativization itself. I read it as both a symptom and an attempt to redress the fact that

³ This paper consciously leaves aside the also important consideration of the role of digital media in the proliferation of conspiracy theories. Though I recognize that the materiality of media is crucial for a complete understanding of the phenomenon, I judge the recent emphasis on digital and social media as the *source* of conspiracy theorizing to be misleading. Conspiracy theories have existed and been politically significant under different conditions and through different media. Therefore, I begin with the conviction that there is a deeper underlying foundation to this phenomenon, on which the notion of the *impasse of narrativization* can shed light.

narratives have lost their intelligibility to a great extent. Thus, MacIntyre's project of rescuing narratives manifests paradoxically the very impasse of narrativization.

Nevertheless, it is insufficient to claim that conspiracy theories are a poor person's cognitive mapping and a symptom of the crisis of narrativization because there are other mechanisms of cognitive mapping, such as religion, astrology, ideologies etc. My second hypothesis is that only the psychoanalytic account of paranoia can elucidate the specific character of contemporary conspiracy theories. A comparison with paranoid delusions illuminates constitutive features of conspiracy theorizing, particularly its relation to external reality – or the social world – and the anxieties it attempts to cope with.

This paper is composed of four sections. Section 1 briefly describes the intersection between cognitive mapping and narrative ethics. In section 2, I list subjective and objective causes of poor cognitive mapping. Section 3 addresses the so-called end of Grand Narratives as a chapter in the impasse of narrativization. In section 4, I describe the impasse of narrativization. Finally, in the last section, I approach the concept of paranoia to disclose the internal structure of conspirational narratives.

1 COGNITIVE MAPPING AND NARRATIVE ETHICS

What does cognitive mapping mean? The basic question for cognitive mapping is “in which plot am I a character?” So, I must be able to make sense of the plot in which I am inserted. In that sense, there is an intimate relationship between cognitive mapping and narrativity. In that connection, the recent turn to personal narratives in social sciences can also be understood as an attempt to tackle the problem of self-orientation and cognitive mapping. The relationship among narrativity, personal identity and cognitive mapping becomes distinctively evident in Schechtman's notion of “person-space,” which she defines as the “[...] social and cultural infrastructure within which persons interact and which supports personhood” (Schechtman, 2014, p. 115).

MacIntyre's virtue ethics project is also an attempt to articulate the narrative form with our social and ethical situatedness. His emphasis on narrativity is an attempt to make explicit that our identity and moral existence can only be intelligible within a series of social practices in which we assume roles. Duties and virtues belong to the internal structure of these practices and roles. They cannot be reduced to preferences nor commanded by pure reason, but are intrinsic to the syllogistic fabric of shared practices; they are inferred from these material relations.⁴ Humans are moral beings *as* sisters, brothers, parents, children, colleagues, professionals, comrades, judges, associates, fellow citizens etc. Moral responsibilities, interrogations, injuries and reparations occur within the normative fabric of such relations.

⁴ Here I follow J. M. Bernstein's articulation of the notion of “material inferences” (Bernstein, 2001).

That requires, in turn, that these practices have a symbolic sturdiness and consistency, as I will insist on below.

MacIntyre is convinced that only the form of narrativization can make our ethical existence intelligible. Virtue ethics is, thus, an attempt to recover through narrative the comprehension of ourselves as participants in social practices and our ethical existence as embedded in these contexts. Consequently, it attempts to do justice to particularity since it rejects the idea that the moral self is “[...] detachable from its social and historical roles and statuses” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 221). His account of virtue has three main elements: the concept of practice, the narrative order of a single human life and the notion of a moral tradition. In the first place, narrative ethics requires a thick conception of practice, understood as

[...] any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187).

Thus, not every kind of human action and interaction can be understood as a practice. Practices have a systematicity and a structure of internal goods that is only fully intelligible to experienced participants and in which examples perform a fundamental role. In that sense, every practice is already articulated through a narrative structure; it has an intrinsic history and tradition. Paraphrasing Ricoeur’s concept of *Mimesis*₁, evaluating and taking part in any practice require a “pre-understanding” of that practical domain and the symbolic resources that grant the readability for that world of practice. Only that pre-understanding allows the mobilization of what Ricoeur calls the “conceptual network of action,” i.e., intentions, motives, actions and responsibility (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 55). Hence, personal narratives can only be intelligible within practices *qua* larger or metanarratives.

The second fundamental requirement for narrativity is the unity of a life. As individuals usually partake in multiple practices, regulated by different values and rules, the idea of a virtuous existence requires that the self retains a unity. The unity of the self recollects, in the narrative form, the multiple moral roles an individual performs. In that follows, however, I set aside the question of the unity of a life to focus on the first condition for self-narrativization, namely the intelligibility of social practices as metanarratives, in articulation with the notion of cognitive mapping.

2 POOR COGNITIVE MAPPING

Narrativization requires the capacity of understanding ourselves as parts of a larger meaningful plot or, in other words, of orienting ourselves in an intelligible social chart. Now, I would like to deeper analyze the underlying causes for what Jameson identifies as our

poor cognitive mapping. That hypothesis echoes an older problematic for modern thought, regarding the individuals' feelings of alienation and disorientation in modern societies. The standard narrative goes as follows: the traditional communities' dissolution and the dense network of ethical relations, the society's atomization through the universalization of market relations, and the predominance of modern scientific formal rationality make atomized individuals incapable of making sense of social totality. The result is a dominant lack of control over one's life as if one is a plaything of alien and unknown forces. I will briefly consider the three principal axes of poor cognitive mapping in modern societies: (a) disenchantment and formal rationality; (b) social atomization and dissolution of *Sittlichkeit*; and (c) alienation and social opaqueness.

2.1 DISENCHANTMENT AND FORMAL RATIONALITY

In Weber's theory of disenchantment, we find fundamental lines for understanding the crisis of self-orientation in modernity. His sociological project was fundamentally concerned with the effects of the advent and generalization of formal rationality across multiple domains of social life. The dominant conception of modern rationality was offered by science. Science begins with identifying regular occurrences and, by induction, attempts to identify universal laws that explain such events. In possession of a law or a general concept, the scientist can predict the behavior of particulars under controlled circumstances. That model presupposes a primacy of the universal concept *vis-à-vis* the (particular) object. The best expression of that concept of the concept is offered in Kant's critical project. For him, cognition is no longer conceived as direct access to what objects are in themselves, but the active construction of the object by the subject. Such a knowledge model only answers the demands of the mastery of nature. As Weber states, in modern epistemology, "[...] concepts are, and can only be, theoretical means for intellectual mastery of the empirically given" (Weber, 2012, p. 134-135).

In a certain way, Weber operates a similar Copernican Turn in social sciences. Social sciences, as natural sciences, are nothing more than the "[...] intellectual [*denkende*] ordering of empirical reality" (Weber, 2012, p. 102). But there is nothing *real* or *substantive* about society or culture; instead, empirical reality is "[...] 'culture' for us because, and to the extent that, we relate it to value ideas; it comprises those, and only those, elements of reality that acquire significance for us because of that relation" (Weber, 2012, p. 116). Thus, empirical reality is deprived of meaning and value. It plays the same role as blind intuitions in Kant's epistemology. It is, in Weber's words, "chaos" (Weber, 2012, p. 118). Therefore, social sciences amount to one specific regard of reality, under the auspices of formal logic, in which the subject bestows a particular meaning to the world and judges one aspect of it as significant. The use of ideal types supports that intellectual ordering. Ideal types are

ideational constructions, mental images (Weber, 2012, p. 124) or fictions (Weber, 2012, p. 332) employed as heuristic tools to order and understand reality intellectually. These mental images are compared to empirical data to produce a series of relationships that appear objectively possible and “[...] adequate in the light of our nomological knowledge” (Weber, 2012, p. 126). Ideal types, however, have no claim to reality. Instead, they are mere devices to produce “nomological” knowledge in social sciences without realist commitments to strictly nomothetic knowledge, i.e., without admitting the existence of social laws.

That formal conception of science is highly deflated and plain of radical consequences. In a famous passage, Weber explores some of these consequences:

The fate of a cultural epoch that has eaten from the tree of knowledge is that it must realize that we cannot read off [*ablesen*] the *meaning* of events in this world [*den Sinn des Weltgeschehens*] from the results - however complete they may be - of our scrutiny of those events, but that we ourselves must be able to create that meaning. We have to realize that the advance of empirical knowledge can never produce ‘world views’ and that consequently, the most lofty ideals, those that move us most profoundly, will forever only be realized in a struggle against other ideals, [ideals] that are just as holy for others as ours are for us (Weber, 2012, p. 104-105).

The first claim is that no ought can be inferred from what is; in other words, the world is no longer a text that, if well-read, offers us rules of conduct and moral imperatives. Contrarily, the bare reading of events can only produce a meaningless picture, for we are dealing with the inexhaustible “[...] *concrete* irrational reality of life, and its store of *possible* meanings” (Weber, 2012, p. 136-137). Here, Weber is repudiating the natural law tradition, which attempts to ground morality and right on nature.⁵ But it also expresses his belief that science is proscribed from prescribing rules of conduct. It cannot arbitrate between opposing worldviews or political ideals. The grammar of science is formal logic, and the only thing that science can do regarding values is to consider them in a formal way (Weber, 2004, p. 17). For example, science can assess the internal consistency of a set of values; it can describe how the attachment to specific values orients action, how certain convictions affect other aspects of life (e.g., economics), or what are the most efficient means to achieve a given moral ideal (Weber, 2012, p. 102-103). Science cannot and must not replace the previous roles of *physis* or God.

The lack of an ethical substratum – be it natural law, divine law, or syllogistically structured ethical bonds – excludes the possibility of forms of life organized around a shared conception of the good. Weber’s sociology presupposes the thorough dissolution of traditional

⁵ That is the reason why Strauss places Weber at the center of his study about the modern collapse of natural law (Strauss, 1968, p. 37). In the post-Edenic world, the ultimate sin becomes to recast the concept of an ethical substance, be it “nature” or “Idea”. Everyone should be vigilant to not conflate his own subjective representations with reality itself, relapsing back into “naturalistic” prejudice (Weber, 2012, p. 127).

Sittlichkeit and society's atomization as a given. The "social" world is nothing, but a chaotic flux of particular entities deprived of meaning. In that disenchanting world, the sole source of morality and value-making lies in the individual.⁶ Morality is thoroughly privatized. Thus, the actual outcome of Weber's limiting science, which is, in fact, a diagnosis of modernity, is that it opens a vast room for personal belief [*Glauben*].

To conclude, Weber acknowledges that a society, founded upon that pluralism, is inevitably agonistic. The clash of values is not a simple disagreement that democratic institutions can simply mediate. Instead, it is often manifested as a struggle to death "[...] between 'God' and the 'Devil'" in which "[...] no relativization or compromise is possible" (Weber, 2012, p. 314). Weber takes to be a "fundamental fact" that life concerns the never-ending "conflict between these gods" and that life is about "[...] the incompatibility of ultimate *possible* attitudes and hence the inability ever to resolve the conflicts between them" (Weber, 2004, p. 27). In that endless stream of conflicts, the choice among values is left to the individual. Hence, in the core of Weber's formal rationalism, lies the utter irrationality of mere *Entscheidung*.

2.2 SOCIAL ATOMIZATION AND THE EFFACEMENT OF *SITTLICHKEIT*

The dominant form of morality, in such a disenchanting society, is what McIntyre calls "emotivism," namely the conviction that "[...] all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 11-12). Emotivism corresponds to the demands of market relations since it reduces the complex set of ethical relations to the manifestation of preferences. As a result, ethical bonds are replaced by temporary contracts, as society is reduced to a form of a compact. In short, disenchanting societies are ruled by means-ends rationality.

Kantian morality is, in contrast, the most radical attempt to overcome emotivism and the predominance of instrumental rationality. Yet, Kant is aware that moral subjectivism is an irreversible process. He attempts to figure out the only adequate form of morality, admitting that the social world is atomized and traditional ethical bonds are dissolved. Kant was convinced that only a strictly formal notion of reason could supervene instrumental rationality and provide an interpretative grid capable of replacing the lost ethical substance (Bernstein, 2001, p. 137). The criterium that Kant borrows from formal rationality to

⁶ Nietzsche's influence on Weber's thought is decisive and has been well explored (Fleischmann, 1964). Weber has largely assumed Nietzsche's diagnosis of modernity and tried to come up with a conception of social science that could do justice to it. Although Weber strives for a value-free science, a project that Nietzsche would certainly be skeptical of, he is fully aware that science is no more than knowledge consistent from a logical point-of-view and that it is only meaningful to those individuals that have chosen it as a value. For him, the worth of the scientific profession and results "[...] cannot be proved by scientific method" (Weber, 2004, p. 18).

overcome emotivism is the mere form of the law. The form of the law is the strict principles of universality and non-contradiction. Kant's Copernican Turn in morality comprises the shift from searching for desirable values to searching for a form that grants obligatoriness to the law – the only “good without limitation” is a good will (Kant, 2012, p. 7). In other words, in the absence of empirical ethical bonds and the predominance of self-interests, the individuals' moral implication could only be established through an overarching principle lying above all.

The appeal of Kantian morality consists precisely in its dramatic attempt to rescue morality after adopting a somber diagnosis of capitalist modernity. We can read it as a morality of absolute responsibility in which the atomized individual is convoked to contrive his laws of conduct to avoid being just a tool in the market of mutual instrumentality. In that connection, Žizek argues that the strength of Kant's ethics lies precisely in its formal indeterminacy. Given that, the “[...] moral Law does not tell me what my duty is, it merely tells me that I should accomplish my duty”. This entails that the subject himself has to assume the responsibility of ‘translating’ the abstract injunction of the moral Law into a series of concrete obligations (Žizek, 1998).

Kant seems to miss that, with the demand for a rational foundation of morality, theoretical reason takes over moral reasoning, and the process of social atomization is intensified. Kant replaces previous forms of moral reasoning with a general abstract formula, which is nothing more than stringent logic applied to practical relations. As a result, morality is debased to principles of universalization and non-contradiction. Moreover, when the individual detaches itself from the given social context to carry out the formal procedures to, then, come up with concrete obligations rationally grounded, the individual becomes further separated from the actual connections with others and the ethical substance. The tragic paradox of Kantian philosophy is that it carries social atomization further in its decided struggle against instrumental rationality. In Adorno's words, Kant's philosophy is “[...] an attempt to accomplish the rescue by means of that which menaces what he would save” (Adorno, 1981, p. 66).

Both emotivism and Kantian deontology share a fundamental premise. They share that the factual has wholly lost its normative power to borrow Habermas' formulation (Habermas, 1990, p. 108). Or, borrowing Bernstein's formulation, moral reason has lost the capacity for material inferences as the individual's capacity to infer rules of conduct and moral values from the empirical ethical bonds with others.⁷ Consider two examples. First, an individual faces an injured or starving person lying on the ground. For both emotivism and Kantian morality, that fact *as such* imposes no moral demand on the individual. One can be inclined to aid the injured person because one takes altruism as a noble value. Alternatively, one can experience a rational command to succor despite emotions or inclination. Yet,

⁷ This consideration adumbrates the issue of the effacement of ethical life that will be addressed below.

in both cases, the material fact of someone's injury plays no role in moral reasoning. The second example is a friend asking for help. One can help a friend because one is interested in preserving the friendship or perhaps because reason commands. But, again, taking part in the relationship as such, i.e., one's role as a friend, plays no role in moral reasoning.

2.3 ALIENATION AND SOCIAL OPAQUENESS

By alienation, I mean the fact that social relations and institutions become autonomous *vis-à-vis* the individuals. That idea was central to the 19th century social thought and has found multiple formulations.⁸ Social relations and institutions are the results of the individuals' joint action, and that much can be granted to nominalist theories. However, the dialect of social theory is that these practices are conceptually articulated and assume a reality independent of the individuals, so they appear to them as an alien and uncontrollable force. In Marx's famous allegory, it is like a sorcerer "[...] who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up his spells" (Marx; Engels, 1976, p. 489). Marx notes, in that connection, that, in modern societies, individuals live a double existence. As citizens, individuals belong to a political unity; they are recognized as community members. However, as civil society's members, they only act according to their private interests, regard others as means to private ends and become the plaything of alien powers (Marx; Engels, 1974, p. 153).

Take, for example, a small farmer in Mexico's countryside or a worker in Pittsburg. If the farmer will find demand for his product or if the worker will lose her job or find another one depends on a multiplicity of factors and variables on a global scale that goes way beyond one subject's understanding in his partial standpoint. Hayek famously bases on this predicament the claim that any central planning is useless and harmful, for the knowledge in the market is always scattered and can only be transmitted by prices (Hayek, 1945). The market is, thus, this autonomous institution that determines everyone, but which no one can fully grasp or make sense of. Therefore, with the development of the capitalist economy and the intense process of institutional bureaucratization, society's organizing institutions and laws become increasingly opaque, abstract and incomprehensible. Moreover, the territory with its borders is now permeated by multiple fluxes (capital, finance, communication, science) that completely escape state's control (Boltanski, 2012, p. 47). In short, social relations and their laws become increasingly opaque, undiscernible and illegible.

⁸ I develop this thought elsewhere through an analysis of the concepts of alienation and fetishism in Marx's work. See Pimenta (2020).

3 THE DECLINE OF GRAND NARRATIVES

Having listed the three dimensions of modern poor cognitive mapping – disenchantment, atomization and social opaqueness –, I move on to reframing it as the question of the decline of grand narratives. First-person narratives are necessarily embedded in second-order or metanarratives. One cannot narrate one's life without reference to the narratives of practices and institutions that are the life's stuff. As McIntyre formulates it, “[...] the history of each of our own lives is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a number of traditions” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 222). So, the consistency of personal narratives is conditional upon the consistency of larger narratives. I will now consider the so-called end of Grand Narratives as another dimension of impasse of narrativization and the poor cognitive mapping.

The advent of modernity was accompanied and sustained by such overarching historical narratives. As Kant famously articulates in his *Idea for a Universal History*, history should be presented as an epic novel systematically organized and guided by a rational telos (Kant, 2011, p. 118).⁹ The Grand Narrative was also fundamental to justify formal scientific rationality, which, as Lyotard shows, was incapable of legitimizing itself (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiii). To some extent, the modern Grand Narrative has performed a legitimizing and organizing role. It has legitimized technological and moral progress and provided some intelligibility to modern state structures. Moreover, it lies at the core of the dominant ideologies of the 20th century. Both liberal capitalist and communist ideologies are legitimate heirs of the *Aufklärung* project.

Furthermore, this narrative was translated and inscribed within particular national narratives (Anderson, 2016). At that level, the state, media, newspapers, novels and institutions played a fundamental role. To that, it should be added the emerging social sciences employed by the state to stabilize, order and narrate (social) reality. During the 19th century, making sense of the social world became a central issue for state management and the emergent social sciences. As a result, there arises a convergence of the state's project based on the emerging sciences, such as economics and sociology, to construe a stable reality understood as a composition of natural laws, techniques, statistics and economic laws, combined with juridical and governmental instruments (Boltanski, 2012, p. 40). That stabilization required the capacity to provide plausible causal relations to explain phenomena and make them intelligible. Sociology, as a discipline, was an attempt to respond to that challenge. It was a science mainly concerned with the need “[...] to make sense of the world, to understand what holds our very peculiar society together despite its peculiarity, to understand the law which rules anonymously over us” (Adorno, 2018a, p. 3). Thus, after the collapse of the

⁹ On the “epic” character of modern grand narratives, see also Koselleck (1989, p. 51).

traditional *Sittlichkeit*, the state apparatus assumed almost entirely the role of providing a general framework for metanarratives.

The success of that stabilization relied, thus, on the trust placed on the validity of the causal explanations and their capacity to define regular causes to events (Boltanski, 2012, p. 23). The modern state finds itself in an intricate position. On the one hand, it is expected to procure stabilization, a task that becomes increasingly troublesome with the development of capital and finance. On the other hand, the trust placed on the state apparatus lies precisely in its capacity to explain and make reality meaningful. It is, at stake here, a foundational concept of trust, which conveys the individuals' ability to construe a meaningful world in which things have their proper place and can orient themselves.

Nonetheless, two fundamental transformations have taken place. On the one hand, we have experienced, in the last decades of the 20th century, the end of grand narratives. That resulted in the collapse of the main ideological narratives that were crucial for political orientation. On the other, globalization and financialization of capital, allied with the development of new media and information fluxes, have weakened the nation-state's capacity to grasp (social) reality. I briefly consider these two points.

Lyotard famously announced, in the mid-1970s, that “[...] most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost (grand) narrative” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 41). The Grand Narrative was a totalizing system that reduced all difference, particularity and contingency to identity, universality and necessity. In that sense, the end of such second-order narratives is announced as a liberatory event, which grants dignity and autonomy to individuals to establish temporary and “flexible networks of language games” against the paralysis of fixed larger narratives and structures. That diagnosis was followed – with the collapse of real communism – by the announcement of a new post-ideological and post-historical era. Ideologies fundamentally are meta-narratives that provide a “comprehensive view of human life” (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 23) and a framework within which individuals anchor their personal stories. Regardless of their differences, Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington agreed that we had entered an era in which ideologies have lost their grip and that the chief conflict turns around cultural differences.¹⁰

The post-ideological was characterized by a pervasive cynical attitude, as described in Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*. The main idea is that there is a fundamental gap between subjects and their social “masks.” As a result, the self is no longer fully identified with its roles and mandates; instead, it preserves a certain ironic distance toward them and

¹⁰ Fukuyama (2006, p. 244) states, for example, that “This suggests that even as ideological differences between states fade into the background, important differences between states will remain, shifted however to the plane of culture and economics.” Along the same lines, Huntington (1996, p. 21) writes: “In the late 1980s the communist world collapsed, and the Cold War international system became history. In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural”.

an attitude of “not taking it too seriously.” Strawson’s ideal of an episodic *self* corresponds precisely to that cynical stance, for the self must not be constrained to form a coherent and unitary narrative about itself; it must not be coerced to be held accountable to its roles. In that sense, the so-called post-ideological world intensifies the narrativization impasse, described above.

At another level, the supremacy of neoliberal capitalism coincided with an intense process of globalization and financialization that profoundly affected the state’s structure and capacity to control reality. We observe this transformation both in peripheral countries, in which the projects of national development were interrupted to be integrated within the new international of labor, but also in the core of global capitalism with the welfare states’ disintegration, in which the national state played a crucial part in the mediation of the labor-capital conflict. Within the new constellation of global capitalism, the nation-state has considerably lost control over the territory and the capacity to safeguard the regularity of attributing events to predefined causes.

That insecurity about the territory manifests in multiple figures, such as the enigma, complot and investigation (Boltanski, 2012). The best cultural expression of that process is the appearance and popularity of crime fiction, detective stories and spy fiction. Boltanski argues, thus, that these figures of distrust and suspicion are the collateral faces of the state’s failure to stabilize reality. He notes that this becomes particularly acute in spy fiction, where the state is depicted amid a permanent and often secret war. In these novels, society or the state is consciously or unconsciously threatened by subversive elements, so the state needs to defend itself against these threats, or society needs to defend itself despite the state (Boltanski, 2012, p. 181-182). What is essential is that an underlying war shows the state’s fragility and its incapacity to fulfill its purpose. The consequence of that failure is the predominance of political distrust.

In short, the collapse of grand narratives and the propagation of financial and informational fluxes, beyond the state’s control, amplify that typically modern experience of social disorientation. Individuals experience their lives as being shaped and determined by powers that cannot be clearly identified, represented or narrated. Against this background, there is increasing anxiety about the *locus* of power: who detains power? Where lies the ultimate decision? The anxiety about the non-localizability of power springs from the fact that power assumes a progressively abstract form (Boltanski, 2012, p. 198). Moreover, the individual feels absolutely impotent and helpless in the social world’s face. The abyss between the subjective illusion of being the writer of one’s self-narrative or owner of one’s destiny and the objective condition of unfreedom can only be experienced as psychic suffering. As I argue below, narratives of conspiracy emerge as endeavors to cover this gap.

4 THE IMPASSE OF NARRATIVIZATION

When we consider the three dimensions mentioned above – disenchantment, social atomization and social opaqueness – in articulation with the collapse of Grand Narratives, we see that the contemporary recourse to narrativization is not as smooth as it seems. Narratives require, as MacIntyre insists, a consistent conception of practice and the possibility of construing a unified narrative of one's life. In the last section, I have shown how the idea of practice thinned out. Weber articulates how social reality appears to be brute facticity devoid of significance to individuals. In ethical terms, this corresponds to the dissolution of substantial ethical bonds, the disarticulation of consistent practices regulated by strong norms. The result is that individuals either operate exclusively according to egoistic interests or assume an individualist moral stance to cope with this disarticulation. Additionally, individuals can no longer read the social world because social relations have become alien and opaque. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to map the plot in which they are a character.

Furthermore, the unity requirement discloses an even more profound impasse concerning the relationship between self and role. On the one hand, the sociological consideration of social roles has an essentially functional character. Each subject contributes to social reproduction by performing a function. But in reducing the self to a role, functionalism annihilates the self. That is intensified by the fact that most modern practices and institutions tend to become subordinated to economic demands that are external to them. In Adorno's words, the concept of the role “[...] sanctions the bad, perverted depersonalization of today” (Adorno, 1981, p. 278). The role is the sign of unfreedom and can only appear as antithetic to the self in its congealed selfhood.

On the other hand, the modern principle of subjectivity lies precisely in the subject's capacity to detach itself from its roles. The subject is free to the extent that it is not fixed to any determination. MacIntyre stresses that his account of roles should not be understood as functional or conservative. Although the subject cannot be reduced to its roles nor be locked in them, moral reasoning must always begin with particular contexts: “[...] it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists,” yet particularity “[...] can never be simply left behind or obliterated” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 221). Thus, the critique of existing practices, demands for recognition, reparation etc. can only be articulated within the normative structure available to the participants.

But there is yet a more fundamental tension. As subjective freedom becomes understood as the dissolution of fixed determinations, the attachment of the self to roles can only be temporary and contractual, so morality is reduced to the arbitrariness of choice among different practices and roles. The upshot of modern subjective freedom is the dispersion of the *self* into a multiplicity of practices and roles, as Lyotard consequently draws in his idea of a decentered *self* scattered in multiple language games or, even more radically, as Strawson

vindicates the notion of the episodic *self* (Strawson, 2004). Against that reversal, MacIntyre vindicates the concept of a unitary life whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 205). The same requirement appears, for instance, in Schechtman's concept of a person's life view (Schechtman, 2014, p. 110). That unity alone can avoid the liquidation of the self and form a coherent picture of a moral life split into multiple roles.¹¹ Therefore, there is a leap from emphasizing social practices and roles to the much stronger requirement of a personal narrative as a unified and teleological story of one's life.

Nonetheless, MacIntyre confesses that, within the culture of bureaucratic individualism, "[...] conceptions of the virtues become marginal, and the tradition of the virtues remains central only in the lives of social groups whose existence is on the margins of the central culture" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 225). The institutions that have previously provided some grounding for an individual's ethical life, such as the family, corporations, trade unions and associations, tended to lose their moral fabric and become subordinated to the requirements of social reproduction. However, MacIntyre does not take traditional social groups as the model for his account of virtues; instead, he identifies it with Jane Austen's works, in which marriage figures as "[...] the last space of the older *polis*" (Jameson, 2008, p. 192).¹² Consequently, the moral dimension needs to be projected almost entirely onto the individual as removed from social practices and, consequently, on personal narratives. In that sense, his efforts to overcome the modern moral dilemma and bring ethics back to the particular contexts of ethical substance culminate in returning the universal superordinate concept within the individual. The unity of a life – with its tokens: person, self and character – is the logic of the concept applied to personal existence: "It is the ancient spell of the universal, entrenched in the particular" (Adorno, 1981, p. 276-277). But, in that sense, MacIntyre's project also shares a tragic fate: it is an attempt to rescue the ethical substance by fixating it on the person. The personal narrative must now bear the total weight of the lost *Sittlichkeit* (Bernstein, 2015, p. 122).

Bernstein concludes, from this predicament, that the ethically significant narratives today can only be narratives of suffering and trauma. The centrality of Susan Brison's *Aftermath* to the literature on narratives witnesses this fact. In the same vein, Adorno replaced Aristotle's *Magna Moralia* with a *Minima Moralia*, a reflection from damaged life. In that sense, MacIntyre's representation of the private sphere, as the last refuge of ethicality not yet entirely subordinated to the logic of social reproduction and rationalization, echoes Adorno's

¹¹ The form of that life corresponds to Ricoeur's *Mimesis*₂, namely the placing of dispersed events into a synthetic, followable, and teleological plot. Therefore, the "unity" is a requirement of the very form of the plot, not an exterior requirement (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 66-67).

¹² For MacIntyre, Cobbett "[...] crusaded to changed society as a whole", whereas Jane Austen tried to "[...] discover enclaves for the life of the virtues within it" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 238).

thesis that “[...] what philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence” (Adorno, 2018b, p. 15).

The turn to personal narratives as an attempt to rescue ethicality ends up disclosing an impasse of narrativity itself. On the one hand, it is proclaimed that the subject holds all the power to constitute and give meaning to reality, as Weber put it; however, the empirical subject is divested of the actual powers for meaning-making. Adorno also expresses that paradox when he claims that “[t]he surplus of the transcendental subject is the deficit of the utterly reduced empirical subject” (Adorno, 1981, p. 178). This is not to claim that individuals no longer narrate their lives or are entirely unable to make sense of reality, but instead that there has been a thinning out of the self and its powers to narrate.¹³

5 CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND POLITICAL PARANOIA

Conspiracy theories are narratives that explain social phenomena and processes against accepted narratives issued by scientific or state authorities. As forms of narrativization, conspiracy theories are devices for cognitive mapping and social orientation (Mason, 2002, p. 43). They provide a framework to read the social and political world and make sense of reality when trust conditions have collapsed. Hence, they perform, in a precarious and often paranoid way, what narrative ethics promised as the proper foundation of ethical life. These representations allow individuals to interpret and narrate the world, and this orienting effect is an important psychological accomplishment (Adorno, 1977, p. 580). In that regard, Jameson has some reason to state that conspiracy theories are a poor person’s cognitive mapping or “[...] a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system” (Jameson, 1988, p. 356). To say that conspiracy theories are a poor way of cognitive mapping is not to say much since there are other poor ways of cognitive mapping, such as religion, astrology and new age cults (Adorno, 2001). What matters now is to provide an account of the specificity of conspiracy theories as orienting narratives. That, I claim, can only be carried out with the aid of psychoanalytic categories.

As Žižek insists, every fantasy has a fundamentally intersubjective character since the desire staged in fantasy is not the subject’s desire, but the *other’s* desire. In the question “in which plot am I a character?” is also implied the questions “What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?” (Žižek, 2009, p. 10). For that reason, conspiracy theories cannot be reduced to what the conspirator disavows in himself and projects to the exterior world; they must also account for the fact that “[...] fantasy (the social fantasy of the Jewish plot) is an attempt to provide an answer to ‘What does society want

¹³ Commenting on this, Bernstein states: “[...] while we still narrate our lives and identities, the forms of narration adopted bespeak a thinning out of identity as a consequence of the disintegration of experiential meaning we might have supposed (or hoped) our mini-narratives salvaged” (Bernstein, 2001, p. 119).

from me?’, to unearth the meaning of the murky events in which I am forced to participate” (Zizek, 2009, p. 9-10). In that sense, the very structure of the conspirational fantasy speaks to the fact that the subject is “decentered” and entangled in an “opaque network”, which eludes his control. In that sense, conspiracy narratives can be understood as fantasies that attempt to reconstruct a world that completely eludes the subject’s control.

Narratives of complot are, thus, an attempt to rationalize the existing society’s irrationality through the identification of the locus of power underneath the veil of reality. The abstractness and opaqueness of social laws are reduced to a focal point, the conspiracy, from which it is possible to interpret the whole. As Hofstadter noted in his classical essay, such a reconstruction of reality resembles paranoiac delusion (Hofstadter, 2012). Here, a recourse to psychoanalysis is illuminating. According to Freud, paranoia’s primary mechanism is foreclosure [*Verwerfung*]. Freud also identified paranoia with projection, but we should follow Lacan and establish a rigorous distinction between *Projektion* and *Verwerfung*: Projection occurs in different psychic structures, while *Verwerfung* is the mechanism typical of psychosis (Lacan, 2013, p. 47). This distinction is crucial because it marks a difference in the relationship to the external world that is important to our theme.

Freud believes that paranoiac delusions always begin with a profound deidentification with the world. The individual partially or totally disinvests the libido from the world so that the world perishes to him. Put differently, there is a renouncement of desire in reality, and this causes the external world’s collapse to the individual (Freud, 1982, p. 335). Such detachment is not exclusive to paranoia – it also happens in intense pain, mourning and melancholia cases. Specific to paranoia, the displacement of libido to the ego (narcissistic inflation) is succeeded by reconstructing the world through the mechanism of foreclosure. The delusion is, thus, already a reconstruction attempt. As Freud elegantly states, “[...] delusion is found applied like a patch [*Fleck*] over the place where originally a rent [*Einriss*] had appeared in the ego’s relation to the external world” (Freud, 1961, p. 151; 1982, p. 335).

Every narrative, indeed, has a projective dimension, in that something from the subject is projected onto reality (Adorno, 1977, p. 579). So, what is particular to the paranoiac reconstruction? Freud explains: “An internal perception is suppressed, and, instead [*zum Ersatz*], its content, after undergoing a certain kind of distortion, enters consciousness in the form of an external [*von außen*] perception” (Freud, 1958, p. 66; 1997, p. 154). First, it is crucial to notice that the paranoiac delusion is not the projection of conscious representations onto the world; instead, it is the fact that a repressed perception is deformed and reappears to the individual as an own world’s feature. Along these lines, Freud exemplifies a typical delusion of persecution: my love for a person is foreclosed and appears as that person’s hate toward me. Along these lines, a narrative of complot could be, thus, described as follows:

the loss of the loved object – the world – is foreclosed and reconstructed as a hostile external object – the “Jew,” the “Free Masons,” or “The Cabal.”

Therefore, what characterizes paranoia is not projection, but the fact that something from the unconscious re-appears as being part of the world itself, of the *real*. That the foreclosed content appears, in the real, explains the lack of reflexivity in paranoid narratives. As Lacan insists, psychoses are marked by a radical certainty absent in neurosis (Lacan, 2013, p. 73 ff). They tend to be systematic and complete. That explains why, for a conspiracy theory, all evidence that contradicts it becomes proof of its validity (Keeley, 1999). To that effect, they must remain essentially abstract. Terms, such as “the Jew”, “global elite”, “Globalism”, “The Cabal” and “communist” are so abstract that they can be applied to anyone anywhere. The narrative of complot can absorb everything, and its rigidity explains its psychological power.

What is unbearable to the conspiracy theorist is not only the incapacity to account for contingency, as Mandik claims, when he suggests that, sometimes, “shit happens” (Mandik, 2007). From that perspective, the paranoid character of conspiracy theories would be nothing, but the upshot of the rationalist principle of sufficient reason. If something exists, then, it must have been posited. The question, then, becomes: posited by whom? Someone *wills* the social order. Therefore, what conspiracy fantasies try to repress is not only contingency, but what Zizek calls the “machine in the ghost”, namely the idea that “[...] there is *no* plotting agent behind it, the machine just runs by itself, as a blind contingent device” (Zizek, 2009, p. 6). Zizek, here, points to the autonomization of social phenomena unconsciously following its logic, an idea expressed by Marx’s notion of capital as an *automatisches Subjekt*.

A detour in Lacanian terminology may be now instructive. The big Other is the symbolic machinery or the field of language – social rules and interdictions – to which the subject must relate to constitute itself as a subject. The Other must be a fiction, in the very basic sense that it is a convention only operative to the extent that we all trust it. For instance, a police officer is a police officer only because he occupies that place in the symbolic order and is considered so. Lacan adds the qualification that this Other is barred [*barré*] in that it is fractured and represented by signifiers as all subjects. The fact that the Other is barred, that the Other doesn’t know all, is what allows some room for individual freedom, or as Zizek puts it, allows us to confer upon our actions a supplementary meaning beyond their socially acknowledged impact (Zizek, 1990).

Paranoia, in contrast, establishes an entirely different relation to the symbolic order. It involves the belief that the big Other is fully consistent and does *really* exist. For that reason, the big Other is always experienced as something hostile and intrusive. What disappears in paranoia is precisely the distinction between projection, as subjective “hallucination”, and reality. Paranoia abolishes this gap, for what is at stake is not reality, but certainty. The paranoid does not err when he *distrusts* the symbolic order and unveils its fictional character;

on the contrary, he errs in “[...] being too easy of belief and supposing the existence of a hidden agency manipulating this deception” (Žižek, 1990, p. 12). For the paranoid, *there is* an Other of the Other, an Other, behind the veil of deceptions, pulling the strings. When the paranoid takes the Other to be consistent and without gaps, what he abolishes is precisely that void that creates the conditions for freedom.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In brief, I hold that the concept of paranoia helps understand the specific character of complot narratives for three main reasons. First, as I have argued throughout this paper, the impasse of narrativization and the move to conspiracy theorizing also involve, to a certain extent, the deidentification with the world. Conspiracy theories are surrogate narratives that try to cover the tear [*Einriss*], to use Freud’s term, with the external world. They grant strong consistency to the social as if it is *willed* by an Other that is beyond the Other. Moreover, that representation of the social is *not* incompatible with pervasive distrust. Finally, that consistency of the other abolishes all the room for freedom. In that sense, I contend that conspiracy theories are essentially conservative, in that the realm of social fictions is reduced to the will of malign powers. Marasco is, thus, correct to claim that conspiracy theory is “[...] a love affair with power that poses as its critique” (Marasco, 2016, p. 238). The first requirement for political actions is the understanding that, no matter how reified the symbolic order and social relations are, they are still fundamentally convention, fictive and open to change. We are all entangled in that blind machinery, and there is *no* innocent or non-duped Other, behind the big Other, pulling the strings.

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