Embracing Paradoxes: a Psychoanalytic and Philosophical Reading of *Plandemic*

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In the last decade, cognitive and social psychologists have increasingly been interested in investigating the psychological mechanisms at the root of conspiracy theories (CT). This article offers an interpretation of current Covid-19 CT by analysing the "documentary" *Plandemic* via political philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. While this philosophical perspective allows the authors to engage with fundamental questions concerning the paradoxical nature of CT, the adopted Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective is employed to examine the psychic motives behind conspiratorial beliefs. The Lacanian concept of *jouissance* is identified as particularly helpful to understand the link between the individual psyche and the collective, socio-political dimensions inherent to CT. Shifting the focus on the unconscious rather than the self-evident, rational mind, the authors offer a philosophical and psychoanalytical reading of CT that is in line with critical psychology's agenda to problematize traditional psychology's assumptions.

KEYWORDS
conspiracy theory, Covid-19, critical psychology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, jouissance, Plandemic

1 | FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO AN INFODEMIC

Since the first news regarding the spread of a new Coronavirus in China (December 2019), events escalated rapidly. In the span of three months, a large majority of governments worldwide were confronted with the choice of taking measures to counter the circulation of this new virus, SARS-CoV-2, also infamously known as Covid-19. While epidemiologists were trying to offer some answers regarding the nature of the virus and the ways in which it transmitted, national lockdowns were put in place around the world. Each evening, news would report the number of daily deaths. Each day, we would get a new, deeply contrasting, opinion on which measures to take. *Wearing face masks is of vital importance, not wearing them is fundamental, disinfecting your food is required, cleaning surfaces is simply useless....* And as we were inundated by a plethora of information, misinformation, and opinions from "experts" and "trolls" alike, this deadly microorganism increasingly infiltrated our bodies and our lives, blurring the borders between known/unknown, inside/outside, friend/enemy (Recalcati, 2021). *Everyone*, from loved ones to strangers, and *everything*, objects, clothes, surfaces, became potential carriers of this new disease.

Limitations imposed to social life alone were difficult to cope with and coupled with an absence of definite answers concerning the virus' origins, its diffusion, and when (or if) our efforts to counteract the threat would actually work, fostered a climate of unprecedented uncertainty. Our anxieties about contagions scattered, with the virus potentially residing everywhere, "in hands, mouths, cash, in doorknobs, clothes, on public transport, in every object of the world" (Recalcati, 2020). Invisibly insinuating the social order, Covid-19 arrived in an era which had already been marked for quite some time by profound insecurities. The momentous uncertainty introduced by Covid-19 made, at least for some time, apparent the void at the root of our knowledge (Svolos, 2020). Such rapture in the symbolic order required a significant restructuring, a need for new coordinates to map our understanding of reality. And "as happens in so many other situations," Svolos (2020) writes, "people fill up this hole with something, often that very thing which defines how they engage with the world". Thus, while for some, Covid-19 created an opening to fight for a brighter, more just post-pandemic future (Mason, 2020; Osserman & Lê, 2020; Solnit, 2020), for others it resulted in the formation of new, and consolidation of old, paralyzing anxieties and fears (Recalcati, 2020; 2021).

Thus, while each of us confronted themselves with their very *own coronavirus* (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2020), the Internet became, for those who could afford a connection, a means to come together with friends, relatives, and the social world more broadly. In an attempt to restore some degree of "normality" to our days, Zoom calls, Facebook chats, Netflix party-watches, streams on Twitch became ways to regain what seemed lost and a connection with a wider community that was in most cases physically inaccessible. Specularly, this increased coming together in virtual spaces fostered new means through which misinformation concerning the pandemic could thrive, laying the foundations for what came to be defined as an *infodemic* (WHO, 2020). It is in this climate that several theories on Covid-19 started to flourish.

2 | CORONAVIRUS CONSPIRACIES: FROM HOAXES TO BIOWEAPONS

Over the course of the past year, several conspiracy theories concerning the nature of the pandemic emerged. Amongst these, a first distinction can be drawn between those theories explicitly denying or downsizing the seriousness of the virus, and those acknowledging its impact. This latter strand includes theories that refer to the human role in either the creation or the spread of the virus. Some of these emphasise the role of human error (Gorman & Barnes, 2021) while others attribute the spread of Covid-19 to a deliberate intention of causing harm (McLaughlin, 2020). Yet, due to the dispersed nature of the Internet and to the constant reworking that every theory undergoes, many of these

conspiracy theories, despite their differences, often overlap. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the impossibility of proposing a clear-cut typologisation and an unambiguous interpretation of each theory. Nonetheless, below we attempt to systematise some of the most well-known Covid-19 conspiracy theories which have appeared at the start of the pandemic.

As outlined above, on the one hand, we have theories that deny the threat itself. According to a theory that gained particular attention in extreme right-wing circles, for example, Covid-19 is nothing more than a normal flu. Those who espouse this theory sustain that the danger of the virus is overstated by governments or members of the elite with the sole purpose to limit personal freedoms (ISD, 2020). This theory is also linked to other forms of denialism, such as the claims that the virus' death toll is inflated (Petersen, 2020).

On the other hand, there are theories that do not explicitly deny the threat of the disease. Contrarily, these propose alternative explanations that all differently point to direct human involvement in the origins and spread of Covid-19 (McLaughlin, 2020). In the difficulties faced to make sense of a virus that seems to affect primarily humans, the idea that it was caused by human intervention can serve as a satisfactory explanation that curbs the uncertainty of the natural mechanisms to which men themselves fall prey. An early example of such a stance is that of the 5G conspiracy theory which spread in the United Kingdom shortly after the announcement of the first national lockdown. According to this theory, 5G technology either affects people's immune system, facilitating the spread of the virus or causing direct harm to individuals – harm that has been covered up addressing it as Covid-19, which, as the conspiracy tells us, does not really exist (Goodman & Carmichael, 2020; Hern, 2020).

Additionally, other theories focus on the coincidental fact that Wuhan – the first known place of cluster of Covid-19 – also hosts a virology institute involved in research on coronaviruses. One of these claims that the virus was engineered by Chinese scientists to serve as a bioweapon. The theory was actively promoted by U.S. politicians – such as Sen. Tom Cotton (Halon, 2020) and the former president Donald Trump (BBC, 2020) – and political commentators. Similarly, other theories emphasize that the virus is man-made, but contend that neither the creation nor the leak were intentional (Gorman & Barnes, 2021; Rincon, 2020).

Regardless of the origin of the virus, one last strand of theories points to a plot orchestrated by "Big Pharma" in order to exploit the disease and profit from vaccine patents (Reuters, 2021). A similar concern on the economic exploitability of vaccines features some theories which individuate Bill Gates as one of the actors responsible for the pandemic. This latter strand of theories was inflamed by the circulation of an old video[1] in which Bill Gates warns of the possibility of an upcoming pandemic (Wakefield, 2020). Consequently, those who espouse this theory argue that the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation owns the patent for the coronavirus responsible for the pandemic and intends to profit from vaccination. Additionally, it is possible to find the claim that this plan also involves the intention to promote – through vaccines – the implantation of microchips that will allow controlling people all over the world (Wakefield, 2020).

3 | CONSPIRATORIAL MENTALITY AND "CRIPPLED EPISTEMOLOGIES"

Concurrently to this diffusion of misinformation, the publication of journal articles concerning Covid-19 has contagiously spread. Over three hundred studies which either briefly mention or extensively focus on Covid-19 related conspiracy theories have been published since September 2020[2] Analogously to previous studies, which in the past

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/technology/bill-gates-virus-conspiracy-theories.html

[2] A quick search for the words "covid" and "conspiracy" on ScienceDirect reported/identified 315 studies containing both words (search run on the 29th of March 2021). Some, which feature in this article, focused precisely on investigating the psychological mechanisms posited to be at the root of belief in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories.

two decades have been exploring individual differences supposed to be responsible for believing in conspiracy theories (Swami & Coles, 2010; van Prooijen, 2018), current research on Covid-19 related conspiracies has attempted to individuate specific psychological factors thought to determine individuals' credulity.

Previous psychological research has generally identified the belief in unrelated conspiracies as one of the most reliable predictors of individuals' gullibility (Swami, et al., 2011). According to this line of inquiry, believing one specific conspiracy is "highly related to beliefs in generic ones" (Goreis & Voracek, 2019, p. 2). Ultimately, the idea that believing one conspiracy predicts belief in others is claimed to form a "closed-off worldview in which belief comes in a mutually supportive network known as a monological belief system" (Wood et al., 2012, p.767)[3] . Despite these papers received critiques concerning their problematic, misleading, and flawed assumptions (Byford, 2011; Basham, 2017; Hagen, 2018), current research on Covid-19 conspiracy theories has continued to uncritically make reference to and use of these (Bertin, et al., 2020; Miller, 2020; Prichard & Christman, 2020).

Bertin and colleagues (2020), referring to both Goertzel's (1994) 'monological belief system' and Moscovici's (1987) analogous concept of "conspiracy mentality", set out to investigate the potential link between this generalised predisposition and attitudes towards vaccination. Through various questionnaires – including the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013) – the researchers measured both attitudes and conspiracy beliefs on chloroquine and vaccination. The authors reported evidence in favour of such a conspiratorial generic belief system arguing that "conspiracy mentality" – which is associated by them with a predilection for alternative therapies – was indeed negatively predicting future vaccination intentions.

Similarly, Prichard and Christman (2020) examined the relationship between personality, Covid-19 conspiracies and "negative health behaviours" resulting from such beliefs. They focus on two individual differences (consistency of handedness and gender) and personality variables (authoritarianism and the tendency to endorse Conspiracy Beliefs) that "the authors suspected may be related to how seriously people respond to the various threats" (Prichard & Christman, 2020, p. 2). To access the latter of these four variables, Prichard and Christman resorted to an existing, yet different, measurement scale – i.e. the Generic Conspiracy belief scale (Brotherton et al., 2013) – finding that the presence of Conspiracy Belief was highly correlated with a greater tendency to blame the virus on China. Miller (2020) also explores whether coronavirus conspiracies form such a monological belief system, as conceptualised by Goertzel (1994) and Wood and colleagues (2012), ultimately finding strong evidence in favour of this.

There are several issues at stake here. By creating, via means of theorising and "scientific" inquiry supported by "hard" evidence, a conspiratorial personality type – whose behaviours are often linked with uncooperating and dangerous pandemic conduct – these studies promote a conception of conspiracy theories as a problem exclusively rooted in the individual. It is the individual alone, in fact, who is bestowed with the responsibility of coming to rationally understand its faulty reasoning and the ills produced by its "crippled epistemology" (Swami & Coles, 2010, p.563; Swami et al., 2014; Swami & Barron, 2020). In other words, these investigations, by disavowing the wider sociopolitical context in which these conspiracies circulate, fail to consider important aspects of the phenomenon. By centring their efforts on understanding belief in conspiracy theories as grounded on individual differences, these studies "minimis[e] the influence of the social" thus "foster[ing] a climate where the internal world of the individual is seen as the site where the problems of society are raised and where it is perceived they need to be resolved" (Furedi, 2006, p.1).

Furthermore, our review and critique are not restricted to those studies which solely envisage conspiracy theories as part of a monological belief system. We have also included research by authors who have been less concerned with such generalised conspiratorial mindset and who instead have been investigating other potential personality traits argued to account for people's beliefs in Covid-19 conspiracies. Hughes and Machan (2020), for instance, have researched personality traits – such as trait psychopathy, Machiavellianism and collective narcissism. In their conclusion,

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[3]See also: Swami et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2012; Bruder et al., 2013; van Prooijan, 2018

the authors write that these "dark traits" – all previously linked in some way or another to "heightened conspiracy mentalities in general" (Ibid., 1) – constitute potential contributors to either greater gullibility or active dissemination of coronavirus conspiracies. Likewise, Sternisko and colleagues (2020) researched the role of yet another personality trait, national narcissism, "as a risk factor for the spread of conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Sternisko et al., 2020, p.2). National narcissism – i.e. "an inflated view of the importance and deservedness of one's own nation" (Cai & Gries, 2013) – not only was "associated with stronger belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories" but was further "linked to greater intentions to disseminate COVID-19 conspiracy theories online" (Ibid., 5-6) and to various other disruptive pandemic behaviours such as lower engagement in social distancing.

Once again, these studies, by focusing on singular personality traits, and discounting the sociohistorical contexts conspiracy theories are born and move in, conceptualise individual personality, and not society, as the only site for change (Mills, 2015, p.63). Exemplary here are the concluding remarks of a recently published paper by Biddlestone and colleagues (2020). In it they write that their research 'raises the interesting possibility that during crises, collectivism encourages a powerful response, but individualism removes a sense of power and replaces it with potentially harmful conspiracy beliefs' (Biddlestone, et al., 2020, p.9). Both collectivism and individualism (vertical and horizontal) are, for Biddlestone, strictly conceived as individual traits and thus considered accessible via measurement scales – where collectivism, although defined as a "cultural factor", is in fact understood as either "viewing *the self* as part of a collective whilst accepting inequality" or as "viewing *the self* as part of a collective that emphasizes equality" (Ibid., p.2, our emphasis).

Therefore, while these studies are allegedly concerned with researching conspiracy theories, we argue that they rarely discuss conspiracy at all. In fact, these researchers conceive these theories in an ahistorical vacuum, emptying them of their socio-political valence. By understanding this phenomenon as a matter of individual personality traits we argue that these studies unquestionably – and inadvertently – (re)produce a type of knowledge which is in line with individualistic and neoliberal ideologies. For several years now, critical psychologists have argued that neoliberalism has permeated much mainstream psychological research (Burge, 1986; Sloan, 1997; Pancer, 1997; Hook, et al., 2004; Nafstad, & Blakar, 2012; Mills, 2015; Sugarman, 2015; Pickren, 2018; Gjorgjioska & Tomicic, 2019; Adams, et al., 2019). By "operating behind a veil of science and value neutrality" (Sugarman, 2015, p.108), psychologists often discount an analysis of the ideology pertaining not only the phenomena under scrutiny but, most importantly, their very own assumptions, beliefs, and ethico-political values. This results in a promotion of individualistic epistemologies and ontologies which profoundly and unavoidably shapes the objects (and subjects) of psychological investigation. In other words, "[f]ar from being a disinterested bystander, hegemonic forms of psychological science provide an epistemic foundation for – and sometimes participate in — the naturalization, legitimation, and institutionalization of neoliberalism and its consequences" (Adams, et al., 2019, p.198).

Completely taken out of their context – i.e. no longer serving as alternative ways of making sense of the world – these studies reduce conspiracy theories to a computational error or the result of undesirable personality traits. We argue here that this is not only a rather simplistic way of conceptualising conspiracy theories, but further, that this relies on an even more problematic conception of the structuring and working of the human psyche. Such theorising of the mind as always fully conscious – i.e. where the unconscious can be quickly bypassed through practice and being "truthful" to oneself – leaves no space for ambiguities, complexities, desires and needs potentially entangled with beliefs in conspiracy theories. Considering the concerns we have outlined so far, a conceptualisation of this phenomenon in these terms risks to be both inaccurate and unproductive. Consequently, we argue that conspiracy theories ought to be considered as a composite set grounded in specific socio-political and historical conditions.

In the sections which follow below, we hope to implement and overturn how conspiracy theories have been researched by mainstream psychological studies in a way which is akin to Parker's definition of critical psychology

(Parker, 2007). Thus, rather than "assum[ing] that there must be a hidden cognitive mechanism doing the work and, hence, search[ing] for what is inside' (Ibid., p.4), we contend that belief in one or multiple conspiracy theories does not necessarily mean that those who engage in them adhere to a specific "thinking strategy" which distinguishes them from the rest of the "normal", "rational" or/and "well-behaved" society.

Aware that it is not possible to provide a complete explanation of conspiracy theories, we decided instead to pay attention to the narratives of some Covid-19 related theories, seeking to understand them as attempts to answer specific questions and to discern some of the issues they tackle. Hence, we attempt to investigate *what can be learned from* conspiracy theories about societal discontents which characterize our current times. In doing so, we hope to capsize traditional psychological readings of conspiracy theories which place all burdens on the individual alone, bringing conspiracy theories back into the social domain. Thus, we propose an analysis of the Covid-19 related conspiracy theory outlined in the "documentary" *Plandemic* as a fruitful area of inquiry and not the result of pathological thinking. To aid us in our critical endeavour we have turned first to political philosophy and then psychoanalysis.

4 | CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THE BEWILDERMENT OF THE POSTMODERN SUBJECT

Exploring the work of Frederic Jameson offers a more comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theories. For Jameson, conspiracy theories are features coessential to postmodern culture. In a broader consideration of the subject's postmodern condition, he interprets conspiracy theories as "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age" (Jameson, 1988). In Jameson's understanding, 'cognitive mapping' is a means through which individuals can locate and structure their perception of social and class relations. In other words, through cognitive mapping individuals attempt to negotiate between the local and the global and represent the totality of multinational capitalism (Jameson, 1988). In this respect, conspiracy theories constitute a "degraded" form of cognitive mapping (Jameson, 1991, p. 38) as they misrepresent the absent cause of late capitalism's power structure, proposing individual or collective agents as the cause of oppression instead of the system itself (Mason, 2020, p. 42).

While proposing a deeper socio-historical analysis of the phenomenon, Jameson's definition of conspiracy theories as the *poor person's cognitive mapping* risks appearing dismissive (Mason, 2020, p.45). This reading is structured on the opposition between conspiracy theories and presumed existing forms of *accurate* cognitive mapping. On the one hand, conspiracy theories are seen as ideologically produced responses to oppression – referring to the systemic causes of oppression only by analogy. On the other, Jameson foresees the possibility of an objective and non-ideological knowledge able to directly refer to these causes. The negotiation of the relation between local and global encompassed by such a functioning cognitive mapping requires subject capable of "critical distance" from the relationship they are trying to map (Jameson, 1991, pp.48-49). Yet, Jameson himself admits that this ability to overcome the gap between existential experience and abstract knowledge is doomed by impossibility due to the complexity of the contemporary world system (Ibid., p.53). Eventually, in Jameson's view, the inadequacy of conspiracy theory's attempt to reconstruct a coherent representation of totality is a symptom of the non-representability of the multinational capitalist system.

Amongst Jameson's critics, Mason (2008) stresses that in conspiracy theories' inherent failure to provide an accurate cognitive mapping resides epistemic power. Indeed, according to Mason, the logic of these theories allows us to understand the impasse encountered by Jameson. Conspiracy theories mirror Jameson's postulation of the subject of cognitive mapping as simultaneously in and outside of the social order and history. In virtue of this similarity, the way in which conspiracy theories fail to develop a functioning cognitive mapping provides a metaphor of the instability

of postmodern subjects and of their impossibility of mapping reality. Ultimately, Mason's critique creates an opening to read under a different light the failure at stake in conspiracy theories, allowing us to consider the possibility that their failure to provide a coherent explanation of the social system is a shared problem in the hyper-complex structure of today's society. While in postmodern times the subject is doomed to fail, conspiracy theories find a way to recast this failure into success. To explore this further facet of conspiracy theories' failure, we argue that it is necessary at this stage to introduce the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*.

5 | ENJOY YOUR CONSPIRACY!

The word jouissance has often, and reductively, been translated with the term *enjoyment*. Although this English trans- lation paints a partial picture of what is meant by the French term "jouissance" (Braunstein, 2003), it nonetheless does capture an aspect of this intricate and multifaceted concept, i.e. its pleasurable side. Yet, jouissance cannot be merely equated with enjoyment as pleasure. Rather, in the Lacanian tradition, this term is often understood as "a pleasure that is *excessive*, leading to a sense of being *overwhelmed* or *disgusted*, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination" (Fink, 1997, p.xxi, our emphasis). Jouissance should thus be understood as an orgasmic immixture of pleasure and pain, which is transgressive and repetitive (Lacan, 1977; 1992). Nonetheless, the too-muchness which typifies jouissance, especially from Seminar VII onwards, should not be understood as knowing no boundaries. Rather, jouissance is premised on the existence of a limit to be transgressed.

Furthermore, in Lacanian theory, the notion of jouissance is also inextricably related to that of the *drive*. More specifically, jouissance is understood as the "satisfaction of the drive" (Lacan, 1992, p.209). Once again, the term satisfaction should be interpreted with care (Zupančič, 2017, p.102). Since "every drive is virtually a death drive" (Lacan, 2006/1964, p. 719E848) - meaning that each drive is built around fundamental negativity, a *minus one* (Zupančič, 2017, p.42) - it is impossible to find an object capable of covering up this lack and thus quench a drive's thirst. Moreover, while in the drive the object is "strictly speaking, of no importance" (Lacan, p.168), its *pursuit* is what really matters. The search for the lost object of desire, this incessant and repetitive circling around drives constitutive negativity, around every object that attempts at filling this void, is what constitutes jouissance. As Žižek writes (1991 p.5):

> Lacan's point is that the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: the drive's ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal. The real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movement of this closed circuit.

This is most evident when instead of succeeding we rather *fail*. It is in failing to obtain the object which we believe will once and for all make us whole again, that we can enjoy. Through failure, satisfaction is prolonged, extended, successfully postponed. Quoting McGowan (20162016) at length here:

> No one sets out consciously to fail, and, even if one did, the act of making failure a goal would immediately transform it into a different form of success. Within consciousness the subject cannot give failure primacy. Consciousness is oriented around projects in which the subject aims at succeeding, and the failures of these projects, from the perspective of consciousness, are only contingent failures the subject can attempt to remedy by trying again or trying harder. Unconsciously, however, **the subject depends on failure to satisfy itself**. Failure and loss produce the object as absent, and it is only the absence of the object that

renders it satisfying. Absence animates the subject, driving it to act, in a way that presence cannot (pp. 28-29, our emphasis)

The relationship between the subject's satisfaction, repetition and failure that is delineated by jouissance gives a rationale to investigate conspiracy theories. Indeed, it is precisely through this logic that it is possible to interact with Jameson's reading of conspiracy theories and understand its critiques. Conspiracy theorists, in Jameson's view, fail in their attempt to create successful cognitive mappings. Yet, while Jameson dismisses this failure, it is in the way conspiracy theories fail - i.e., the specific narrative they produce to explain a given phenomenon and society as a whole - that they reveal something about the sociohistorical climate in which they develop. Here, we further argue that it is precisely through failing that conspiracy theories are so successful.

The impossibility of postmodern subjects to form successful cognitive mapping generally, and of making sense of the pandemic in a coherent fashion currently, requires each of us to find our way of coping with such impossibility. While we develop our very own, private, coronavirus, conspiracy theories offer solace by constructing a concrete physical enemy such as Bill Gates, Antony Fauci, China, etc. and not an invisible floating microorganism. Yet, as we argue, in their attempt to reveal the real culprits behind a heinous plot, conspiracy theories fail to address the systemic causes of a given phenomenon. Further, while priding themselves to have unveiled the evil Others responsible for a given conspiracy, these theories continuously defer the possibility of successfully establishing themselves as the ultimate Truth. Indeed, by definition, conspiracy theories are concerned with statements that remain both unproven (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 6) and irrefutable (Byford, 2011, p.36). It is in virtue of this twofold failure - i.e., that of addressing systemic causes and of "becoming mainstream" - that conspiracy theories unconsciously mobilise a certain kind of enjoyment. Constantly failing to unveil the ultimate "Truth" behind the evil deeds of a restricted group of people, those who engage with conspiracy theories find some source of enjoyment. Furthermore, referring to paranoia, McGowan (2013) writes that "[r]ather than trying to wrestle with the problem of the gap in authority, the paranoid subject eliminates it by positing an other existing in this gap, an other behind the scenes pulling the strings. [...] Paranoia simultaneously allows the subject to sense its own superiority in recognizing the conspiracy and to *avoid confronting the horror of an inconsistent social authority*" (p.46, our emphasis). While we do not ascribe belief in conspiracy theories to any specific clinical structure, we believe that what McGowan writes here is of importance.

In giving a tangible body to an invisible threat, Covid-19 conspiracy theories render the pandemic somehow manageable and consequently somewhat more enjoyable. The reality that gets constructed to deal with the gap of "an inconsistent social authority" offers more "comforting" solutions in which, especially in those conspiracy theories of a xenophobic nature, the world returns to its pre-pandemic guise. By collectively mapping, creating infographics, and connecting dots, those endorsing and participating in conspiracies theories attempt to form a coherent, unified understanding of what is happening today. When following a conspiracy theory, we can get a nugget of enjoyment each time we find a hidden clue: connecting dot after dot, we jolt in our excitement that each piece falls into place (Hook, 2017).

Additionally, this collective production of evidence surrounding Covid-19 conspiracy theories is consistent with Jodi Dean's (2010) reading of communicative capitalism. According to Dean, under communicative capitalism everyone is invited to participate in the production and reproduction of information and misinformation alike, with the ultimate imperative to enjoy (Ibid., p.92). Furthermore, due to this overproduction of (mis)information, under communicative capitalism the possibilities of knowledge are undercut. As Dean writes:

In the setting of communicative capitalism, another name for the impossibility of expertise, for falsification without limit, is the decline of symbolic efficiency. How do we know whom to believe or trust? Suspicion

or even uncertainty toward expertise goes all the way down: scepticism toward politicians and the media,
scientists and academics, extends to local knowledges, knowledges rooted in experience, and anything at
all appearing on the internet. [...] The ability to falsify is unlimited. The lack of a capacity to know is the
other side of the abundance of knowledge.' (Ibid., p.111)

Thus, in their going against the "agreed upon narrative" on Covid-19, these conspiracy theories present themselves as valid, rebellious alternatives. Yet, most of the time, these theories fall back into tropes which are far from being transgressive. Let's take for example *Plandemic*. This "documentary" is particularly interesting both because of its quixotic quest of "awakening" people worldwide, and further since in revealing such *controversial*, *shocking*, and *deadly* secrets it instead offers a very "comforting" and quite unoriginal reading of the current pandemic. Merging most, if not all, the conspiracy theories on coronavirus we have discussed so far, *Plandemic* constitutes an emblematic example of how to "enjoy your conspiracy theory".

6 | PLANDEMIC

Plandemic was released in May 2020 and features a long interview with Judy Mikovits[4] , conducted by Mikki Willis. The whole interview is structured around the life and career of Mikovits. While discussing her studies, the remote causes for the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic are addressed. In offering her own insights, based on her research, on retroviruses and vaccines she sustains several claims on the current, but also past pandemics (i.e. HIV). While claiming that the virus was accelerated by human engineering and its seriousness inflated by flu-vaccines, Mikovits explains how the death toll has been magnified in order to spread fear and promote vaccination. Ultimately, a small group of powerful individuals (amongst whom, Dr Anthony Fauci and more broadly Big Pharma), is silencing all "dissident voices" who propose natural or already available cures for Covid-19, with the aim of securing vaccinations as the sole cure and thus profit from such patents.

Plandemic presents several core features that typify conspiracy theories. Firstly, due to its structure and its focus on the person of Mikovits, the theory outlined in the film rests on the insightful information revealed by a source, who is or has been close to the centre of action/power (Lee, 2020). Mikovits is portrayed as a "whistle-blower" whose credibility is enhanced by her rejection from the "corrupted" scientific community. Despite Mikovits' "bravery" in "naming names", which has put herself and her family at risk, in the film she decides to "speak up". She confides to Willis that there is a small yet powerful group of people who, because of their evil and greedy intentions, have been profiting from the suffering of others.

In her going against the scientific and governmental advice, Mikovits presents herself as a valid, *transgressive*, "critical" alternative to those narratives promoted by "mainstream" media on Covid-19. The theory outlined in *Plandemic* offers to all who adhere to it the possibility of "thinking for one selves"[5] , and of being against mainstream media, scientific advice, lockdown rules and ultimately the *Law*. Consequently, this theory provides a preliminary enjoyment in this transgression from the pandemic agreed-upon narrative. This action of "[o]verstepping a boundary, the fact that something illicit is involved, a *contravention*," Hook (2017, p. 609, original emphasis) writes, "increases both the subject's enjoyment of such behaviours and the bonding potential of such behaviors enormously." A "special libidinal gain" (Ibid, p, 610) is thus offered by the transgression which is at stake in such theory. Furthermore, once again as

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[4] Mikovits is now a discredited scientist who in 1991 obtained a Ph.D. in biochemistry and biology from George Washington University with a thesis titled: "Negative Regulation of HIV Expression in Monocytes" (Enserink & Cohen, 2020). She also co-authored the book Plague of Corruption: Restoring Faith in the Promise of Science.

[5] From Dr. Scott Jensen's interview aired on in April 2020 by Valley News Live

Hooks writes, enjoyment "is most intensely experienced' either when "[i]t is seen to be in the possession of others, or when it is perceived as endangered, about to be snatched away." Consistently, the contravening of the Law incited by *Plandemic* is further fuelled by the shadow of anOther who has dishonestly stolen something from us. In Mikowitz's case it is "her good name, career, and personal life"; in the case of her listeners, it is the freedom of living one's life as before the p(l)*andemic*.

Mikowitz's theory manages to successfully unmask the evil others responsible for the loss of our freedom and the theft of our enjoyment. Consequently, the theory sets out for itself another goal – i.e., that of "awakening" the largest number of people. Towards the end of her interview, Mikowitz says (our emphasis):

> *Hopefully this is the wakeup call of all America to realise that this makes no sense, and we win because we will take down the whole program with information like this. And for me this is the great news that the doctors are waking up and saying "wait a minute".*

Through the words of Mikowitz, the aim to successfully reach the sheepish majority is set as the conscious aim of the theory proposed in *Plandemic*. Nonetheless, as we already discussed, it is in failure that conspiracy theories thrive on. Unconsciously aspiring to fail, conspiracy theories constantly postpone success, simultaneously enabling to savour their conscious aim while enjoying a privileged condition of enlightenment. As we see in *Plandemic*, the promised awakening and cessation of all sufferings is projected in the future, as a battle that will be won. In virtue of the possibility of regaining a lost, phantasmatic enjoyment, the figure Mikowitz is reconfigured around what has been stolen from her. It is her loss of status within the scientific community that boosts Mikowitz's credibility and the potency of her statements, eventually elevating her to a unique, enlightened position. The listeners who are made complicit of such exclusive enlightenment, specularly acquire means to regain what has been stolen, not only from Mikowitz, but from all. Namely, the real Truth about the pandemic and the freedom we would consequently acquire by recognising such truth.

Furthermore, if the theory were to succeed in such conscious aim, it would become instead yet another "agreed upon narrative" and thus cease to provide that enjoyment that is obtained through its being transgressive. This latter point leads us to a final consideration that concerns the jouissance which typifies *Plandemic*, i.e., the illusory nature of its transgression. An instance of this is to be found in those discourses pertaining to patents and vaccinations. While raising important issues on the profiting from patent's royalties, the theory fails to address the systemic causes at the root of this problem. Instead of questioning the power relations that enable such profiting, *Plandemic* offers a way out by pointing the finger at singular entities who are seen to profit by the withholding of valid alternative cures ranging from 'hydroxychloroquine' to the 'sun'.

Presenting itself as incredibly revolutionary and transgressive, *Plandemic* fails to direct its revolutionary pulsion at the system, proposing instead to solely focus on the symptom such a system produces (McGowan & Engley, 2019). In their alleged transgression, conspiracy theories like the plandemic, not only offer a more comfortable and enjoyable version of the current times but can further be considered consistent with the production of knowledge proper of communicative capitalism. Indeed, the explanation proposed in *Plandemic* joins the chorus of misinformation concerning the pandemic, incessantly (re)producing and reshuffling quite unoriginal conspiratorial tropes. It is within communicative capitalism, that the documentary shifts the focus from systemic causes to more tangible enemies, bypassing overarching issues such as climate change. If at the onset of the pandemic we saw an opportunity to radically restructure our lives and dismantle the capitalist production system in which we live in, plandemic and other conspiracy theories contribute to weaken such efforts. Presenting itself as a new and revolutionary take on the real evils of the world, the newly assembled bricolage of anxieties and fears proposed in *Plandemic*, effaces its repetitive

and trite nature.

As Dean (2010) writes, the politics of montage which typifies communicative capitalism "is a politics released from burdens of coherence and consistency. It needs neither theme nor message but can rely on questions and *repetitions*", (p.104, our emphasis) repetitions which we have seen fuel enjoyment. Of course, conspiracy theories are not the sole responsible for the undermining of such liberative programs of restructuring. Though, theories such as the plandemic stand as an example, because of their capacity to appeal and mobilize many through the logic of enjoyment outlined above.

7 | CONCLUSION

As we have discussed in the course of this article, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was characterized by a climate of unprecedented uncertainty which fostered the diffusion of conspiracy theories attempting to make sense of this new virus. Concurrently, we have been witnessing a continuous effort by psychologists to identify the causes of the spread of such theories. In the first section of our paper, we sought to reflect on the underlying assumptions of these studies, whose focus on individual differences alone disavows the relevance of the wider socio-political and historical context these theories move in. As we argued, mainstream psychological research reduces the phenomenon of coronavirus conspiracy theories either to a computational error or to undesirable personality traits. In doing so, these studies do not consider the social aspect of these theories which we instead sought to recentre in our analysis.

By engaging with the work of philosophers such as Jameson and Mason, we explored how current conspiracy theories on Covid-19 are better understood within a broader discussion of the postmodern subjects' difficulty in mapping their social reality. Consistently, conspiracy theories' failure to address systemic causes proves useful in highlighting anxieties and fears typifying current times. Stressing the epistemic value of failure, we argued how conspiracy theories, by reconfiguring failure into success, manage to circumvent the subject's impasse in representing reality. We argued at this stage that the Lacanian notion of jouissance can aid us in our understanding of the logic of this circumvention, its implications, and more specifically of its ability of coalescing and mobilizing communities.

Therefore, we offered a reading of the 2020 "documentary" *Plandemic* by focusing on the two different levels present in its narrative. On the one hand, we argued that *Plandemic* presents itself as a subversive and transgressive theory that consciously aims at unmasking those responsible for the current pandemic and thus "awaken" the largest number of people. On the other, we contend that the success it seeks and the transgression it performs are only apparent. Unconsciously striving to fail, *Plandemic* sets a goal that is unattainable, thus indefinitely deferring the moment in which it would gain the promised status of ultimate "Truth" shared by a large majority. In so doing, it secures perpetual enjoyment for its adherents, both elated by their enlightened status and thrilled by their transgression. This paradoxical short-circuit underlying the logic of the film secures its appeal and further its very own existence as a conspiracy theory. Most problematically, the ability of *Plandemic* to mobilize the enjoyment of those who believe in it produces a shift of concerns from the systemic causes of the pandemic to more symptomatic issues.

This final point leads us back to the main critique we made against current mainstream psychological research investigating Covid-19 conspiracy theories. Analogously to the conspiracy theories they investigate, these studies ascribe the causes of theories solely to the individual sphere. Thus, they overlook more comprehensive and complex accounts of popularity of the belief in Covid-19 related conspiracy theories. Turning to authors who have engaged with both philosophical and psychoanalytical readings of conspiracy theories, we sought to provide an analysis of the pandemic that focuses on the unconscious rather than the self-evident, logic, rational mind as conceived by cognitive and social psychologists. We therefore offered a philosophical/psychoanalytical reading of coronavirus conspiracy

theories that is in line with critical psychology's agenda to problematize traditional psychology's assumptions.

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