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COVID-19 CONSPIRACISM IN THE AGE OF POST-TRUTH

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Introduction

Following the rapid propagation of the pandemic since December 2019, the Covid-19 has become the most important debate in all around the world. Due to the pandemic, the greatest nations applied extreme measures which were heretofore unthinkable in order to mitigate the propagation of the virus having the potential to paralyze the healthcare systems down the line. They stalled the whole global transportation, shut down schools, universities and all social gathering spaces and applied massive lockdown measures for the greatest metropolises and even whole countries. Consequently, people abruptly found themselves in a new reality confined in the limits of their domiciles which became their workplace, online education center and the only space for diversions (Dwivedi et al., 2020). They had to rapidly adapt themselves to the new reality which compelled them to use new technologies which were at experimental level before the pandemic and to shift their social relations onto the social media platforms (Kaya, 2020).

The rapidly changing social structure has led to innumerable debates around the pandemic and its social and political consequences, not only in the academic and scientific circles, but also among all parts of society especially through debates on social media platforms. These debates are not always founded on reasonable or proven arguments insomuch as people can freely participate in any debate simply by just clicking on a button regardless their

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educational or professional backgrounds. Although a large proportion of these allegations which do not generally have any concrete empirical basis are labeled as conspiracy theories, they can still persuade people in large scales, roughly one third of the internet users, to believe that the pandemic is nothing but a hoax to dissimulate the implementation of the 5G telecommunication technology, or that the virus is a bioweapon developed in a laboratory and spread by the wealthy elites to reorganize the new world system and to win power and profit. What is more surprising is, these conspiracy theories of the COVID-19 are not directly propagated by any authority figure combating for the diffusion of the disinformation, but they are mainly diffused by ordinary users of the social media platforms (Ahmed et al., 2020).

These conspiracy theories have remarkably become for certain people even more credible than the authoritative elucidations diffused by the scientific circles. It can be said that even the authoritativeness of science is discredited insomuch as popular allegations circulating through social media platforms progressively persuade people. However, it is not the first triumph of the conspiracism seeing the fact that still half of Americans believe that there is a plot hidden by the government in the 9/11 attacks and four in ten Americans think that the debate around the climate change is a “scientific fraud”. These claims undermining the trust to the authorities led even sometimes people to refuse preventive healthcare services like it was the case in the vaccine boycott trends and massive disinformation trends popularizing unproven and dangerous treatments (Oliver & Wood, 2014). The conspiracy theories speculating about the COVID-19 have a similar potential to constitute an obstacle in front of the struggle against the virus. Recent reactions and protests against mask obligations and social distancing unveil a part of this detrimental potential (Grimes, 2020).

A recent study showed that the use of social media as a source of information has a positive relationship with the tendency to believe in the conspiracy theories concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and a negative relationship with COVID-19 health-protective behaviors (Allington et al., 2020). What is more, although some scholars like Viren Swami and his colleagues (Swami et al., 2014) show that there is a negative relationship between the tendency to believe in such theories and analytical thinking ability, it is also undeniable that the users of social media platforms through which a large portion of the false information is circulating mostly consist of educated people (*Social Media Use by Education*, 2017). Despite the fact that social media has become so influential as an independent source of news in the age of information like in the case of the Arab Spring (Joseph, 2012) insomuch as

the mainstream media tend to manipulate masses by means of hoaxing and propaganda through the commodified information flux (Herman & Chomsky, 2011), today these new platforms contribute to the commodification of information in a greater scale as the use of the social media create ideologically segregated network circles sharing the same common sense, ideas and convictions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Thus, it is obvious that the social media has an important impact on both the discreditation of the authoritativeness of the mainstream information channels and the increasing propensity towards the conspiracy theories.

In a positivizing empiricist conception, as the problem is diagnosed as a result of the technology's ease to share and diffuse information and thoughts in restricted circles, today the solution is also searched in the tool itself. Consequently, the academic attention is focused on the development of automated tools, machine learning and algorithms detecting the conspiracist social media posts in early stages of their diffusion in order to prevent them becoming viral (Kumar & Shah, 2018; Shahsavari et al., 2020). The effective use of the artificial intelligence which creates the restricted circles of network is then introduced as the possible solution for the detection of the conspiracist posts as well. However, while the attention is on the inner mechanisms of the new communicational technologies, the main common problem is simply lost from the view and the devaluation of the truth through the commodification of information is generally overlooked altogether. The veracity of information has gradually become less important while the objective to maximize the circulation of the commodified information regardless its content and context has become the first concern of all media platforms. Indeed, there is a positive relationship between the propensity towards the conspiracy theories and the feeling of alienation, powerlessness, distrust and being disadvantaged (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). Inasmuch as the truth has become irrelevant in the exploitation and manipulation of information circulation for economic and political agendas, the global trust of the masses towards the authorities has respectively declined and fed sentiments of alienation, powerlessness and distrust. This article aims to investigate the sociopsychological mechanisms of the progressive propensity towards the conspiracy theories in relation with the progressing distrust and skepticism towards the authoritativeness of mainstream information channels in the age of post-truth in which the truth itself has become accessory.

A Natural Tendency towards Conspiracism

Great minds think alike. Max Weber (1864-1920) declared the disenchantment of the world and all its mysteries thanks to the omnipresent triumph of the reason in the beginning of the twentieth century (Jenkins, 2000). It could finally bring forth a universally agreed upon system of knowledge in the ultimate stage of rationalization and establish the modernity in an unrivaled fashion by all means. This triumph had a cost: it would enclose us in an iron cage, an unescapable universal state of a bureaucratically organized society ruled by reason. Apparently, we are not firmly shut down in such an iron cage and it turned out to be that this hope or dystopia was not the actual terminus of the enchantment. Even one century after the declaration of the triumph of reason, science which is supposed to give the elusive but right-minded elucidations and the unbiased remedies is still defied by mystified claims and beliefs.

Conspiracy theories can be counted among these defying claims which present themselves as alternative explanations contending with the generally recognized official statements, especially in political, economic or social debates. According to Bale (2007), these theories attempt to find out in events some sort of alleged secret agreements between a group of actors aiming to attain malevolent goals. They undertake the task to uncover the so-called facts dissimulated in plausible accounts or even in scientific elucidations for corrupt intentions. They put in question the official statements to uncover the conspiracies hidden between the lines.

The allegations of conspiracy theories are generally accused of lacking evidence, being based on superstition or prejudice and not proposing credible arguments (Coady, 2019). Although it is not possible to consider them as being false by definition, they are generally seen as implausible and unreliable allegations far from being scientific since, dealing with secrecies, they cannot be verified or falsified through factual data (Brotherton & French, 2015; Keeley, 1999). In accordance with this bad reputation, the term of conspiracy theory is not neutral in quotidian language as it is coined with an important pejorative connotation widely employed to discredit an argument (Byford, 2011, p. 21).

Conspiracy theories have a wide spectrum of interests and debates they attempt to explain. Still, they all have some common traits arising from the nature of developing suspicious claims without sufficient evidence, sometimes even out of thin air. First of all, these theories presume an interconnectivity between all beings and phenomena. They suppose all events are

deliberately put in place by some actors, and rummage around for an intentionality in the course of all events (Douglas et al., 2016). Thus, these theories ascribe agency to all explanations, and they do not leave room for pure coincidence. Another important aspect of these theories is that they always appeal to a coalition of a group of conspirators working together and they always deal with threats menacing another group as the conspirator's intent to attain some dangerous and deceptive goals (van Prooijen & Lange, 2014). Last but not least, these theories always deal with secrets and therefore are difficult to invalidate. This does not mean that they are by definition false as they can come out to be true; but to obtain the evidence to prove or disprove these theories is extremely difficult due to the confidentiality of their topics (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018).

Alongside all other traits, intentionality-seeking and agency attribution is the rationalizing aspect which makes conspiracy theories sound plausible and assures them credibility vis-à-vis statements of authorities. Thanks to this aspect, all components of the phenomenon in question appear interconnected in the context of the intention directed to a malicious goal the agents secretly go after. Accordingly, the subjacent reason of the credibility of these claims lacking sufficient proofs is searched in their tendency to seek for intentionality by scholars. A recent research shows that the origin of believing in conspiracy theories can be found in the human tendency to ascribe agency and intentionality even to purely coincidental events (Douglas et al., 2016). Likewise, Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French defend that a "domain-general intentionality bias", which they introduce as a natural human tendency, makes conspiracy theories seem plausible (Brotherton & French, 2015).

Intention seeking has an important role to understand everyday social interactions with other members of a community. It allows to understand the acts of other members of the community and the position of an individual in the community. Any inadequacy in this process can lead to incapability to grasp the crucial information about the mental states and future acts of others (Baldwin & Baird, 2001). Because of its vital functions, this ability of automatically seeking for intentionality is even considered as an important evolutionary acquisition granting the adaptation in a community in the domain of evolutionary psychology studies (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004). However, all the events surrounding the individual do not happen on an intentional basis. Thus, individual should acquire an ability to distinguish intentional actions from non-intentional events in everyday situations. Otherwise, interpreting all events in the light of intentionality can cause different sorts of comprehension problems as human beings can overwhelm

the intentionality and try to seek for agency even in coincidental situations (Brotherton & French, 2015).

This difficulty can be seen as a by-product of the evolutionary development of human psychological mechanisms. Rosset claims that the ability to distinguish intentioned acts from unintended events is a secondary process and requires additional effort and knowledge to become aware that there can be other reasons of actions (Rosset, 2008). According to this vision, like the mechanism of pattern recognition, intentionality seeking mechanisms are automatic. We interpret all events at first sight as intentional and posteriorly distinguish unintended events by means of higher cognitive processes. Accordingly, intoxicated people fail to recognize unintentional actions more than sober people (Bègue et al., 2010). Thus, it is possible to claim that there is a natural human tendency to interpret events through intentionality if no intellectual effort is done.

According to Brotherton and French, the fact that conspiracy theories are widely received in society despite their being grounded on unverified arguments can be explained on this commonly shared basis which they call “overattributing intent” (Brotherton & French, 2015). Conspiracy theories offer simple explanations that lean on intentionality of an agency for complex and ambiguous events. People do not even take these allegations as alternatives, but statements more plausible than the official ones, insomuch as people are inclined to look for intentionality in explanations of even hazardous events. Thus, conspiracy theories can overwrite official or scientific accounts as human beings can overattribute intention to events they experience.

In philosophy, this propensity is called anthropomorphism which is seen as the basis of the superstitious beliefs and what the disenchantment is supposed to dispel. Philosophers like David Hume (1711-1776) and Feuerbach (1804-1872) considered anthropomorphism, the altitude of reflecting human traits and agency onto everything including natural events, as an archaic step of reason and the basis of myths aimed at explaining, or coping with frightening natural phenomena (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 4). Likewise, Spinoza (1632-1677) thought that superstitious beliefs were based on the natural tendency of men to attribute agency to all phenomena by ignorance of their real causes, and they were linked to the irrational desires and excessive aspirations to superintend these fearful phenomena which were beyond the reach of their control. Thus, men, ignorant of the truth, presupposed that everything in nature acts according to a final cause just like human beings, and they hoped in superstitions, like believes in a divine

plan, creation, immortality, etc., to overcome their fears through the intentional direction of the universe by a supernatural power like a god who could love them above all other things and give whole nature to their service for them to realize “their blind desire and insatiable avarice” (Spinoza, 2018, p. 36). Hence, superstitious believes which are considered to be linked to the natural tendency of agency detection treat even inanimate phenomena as intentional, and provide hope of control through the belief in a logically or empirically unverifiable or falsifiable supernatural order (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Petrican & Burris, 2012).

Although the overattributing agency, or anthropomorphism, which is considered as the source of propensity to believe in superstitious unfalsifiable allegations, ensues from human nature, scholars argue that this situation is not inevitable. Regarding the studies showing a negative correlation between education predicts and tendency to believe in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2016; van Prooijen, 2017), it can be suggested that it is possible to develop faculties to avoid this propensity to seek intentionality and agency in every event. Even though there are some other studies which do not support the findings of these research studies (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004; Parsons et al., 1999), van Prooijen defends that education can help to reduce the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories thanks to its contributions to “cognitive complexity and feeling of control” (van Prooijen, 2017). Especially as education develops children’s cognitive skills and problem-solving capacities, it provides children with the analytical thinking skills and a healthy dose of skepticism leading them to refuse to unquestionably admit conspiracy theories based on anthropomorphist overattributing intent.

This remedy prescribing reason and critical thinking for recovering from the superstitious stage of mind overattributing agency is coherent with the assertions of Enlightenment philosophy. Spinoza considered that only reason and rational thinking could really reveal the truth that would liberate man from fears leading to superstitious beliefs and show that there was no teleological final cause in nature, but only determinism following the laws of nature as real causes of phenomena (De Dijn, 2013). Likewise, Kant (1724-1804) defined Enlightenment as the step out of immaturity resulting from the deficiency of courage to use the guidance of reason in understanding process. Thus, he claimed that Enlightenment is the courageous act to use man’s own reason to understand the truth (Kant, 1992).

A By-Product of Self-Defense

But there is still an important question to be replied in this remedy: what is this healthy dose of skepticism? Conspiracy theories can be seen as skeptic reactions against official authorities and their statements in social, political and economic measures. The allegations of these theories are skeptical of and refuse to comply to the official statements of the authorities they consider as self-professing and instrumental for some malicious goals of the authorities which are considered as the main actors of the conspiracy acts (Brotherton, 2017). Thus, conspiracy theories refuse the unbiasedness of statements that the authorities assert since these theories consider the official statements as deceptive and ill-informing allegations aimed at hiding the truth. Moreover, they are received as credible arguments by their audience insomuch as the latter feels the same insecurity and doubt towards the authorities.

The key concept to understand this aspect of conspiracy theories is fear resulting from insecurity and doubt. For that reason, van Prooijen and van Vugt argue in a study that the evolutionary origin of the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories should not be found in the by-product of the development process of psychological mechanisms evolved for different reasons like pattern recognition, agency detection, etc., but in psychological mechanisms aimed at protecting the individual by detecting the malicious menacing coalitions. Accordingly, the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories is a by-product of the evolutionary development of the “psychological mechanism aimed at detecting dangerous coalitions” which lead people to incessantly seek for specific cues of coalitions potentially menacing and necessitating the prompt reaction for defense (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018).

The study of Ohman, Flykt and Esteves (2001) shows that human beings possess a set of inborn fears allowing them to recognize natural threats, like snakes, spiders, predators, etc., in their environments. This set of fears work like a threat management system which becomes apparent in the responses of human beings face to intimidating stimuli. Accordingly, van Prooijen and van Vugt think that this mechanism is also capable to recognize friendly and hostile alliances of other human beings through their gestures and mimics and can easily identify the “potentially hostile coalitions” as aversive dangerous stimuli (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018). Following Bale’s definition which states that a conspiracy requires the coalition of some actors for a common goal (Bale, 2007), van Prooijen and van Vugt argue that the reason why conspiracy theories are received as credible allegations can be found in

this prehistoric psychological mechanism developed in the course of evolution (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018).

This explanation supports the findings of the studies showing that the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories among African Americans in the USA or Muslim countries do not demonstrate correlation with social backgrounds and education levels. Likewise, van Prooijen explains this deviation between the findings of studies on the basis of “group-based oppression and marginalization” inasmuch as while a big proportion of African Americans feel marginalized in the American society, people of Muslim countries discern their being oppressed and relegated face to the European countries and the USA (van Prooijen, 2017). The feeling of being oppressed and marginalized leads to a sentiment of fear and distrust against the statements of the authorities of the groups face to which people find themselves in danger. Consequently, these groups become more inclined to receive conspiracy theories as the facts hidden behind the malicious dissimulative statements of authorities. In short, conspiracy theories are received as reactions of menace detection mechanisms for self-defense by these groups that lost their faith in the statements of the authorities.

However, it is not only the oppressed or marginalized social groups which receive conspiracy theories as plausible. For instance, a study of Zogby International conducted in 2004 showed that 49% of the residents of New York City believed that the government of the USA was informed in advance about the 9/11 attacks and deliberately failed to react (Wood, 1997). Likewise, 36% of participants of a Scripps-Howard Pool research held in 2006 agreed that federal officials either participated or took no action in the attacks on the World Trade Center (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). In another research which studied the credibility of conspiracy theories in health debates, 37% of respondents agreed with the statement that “Food and Drug Administration is intentionally suppressing natural cures for cancer because of drug company pressure” and 20% of them agreed “either that corporations were preventing public health officials from releasing data linking cell phones to cancer or that physicians still want to vaccinate children even though they know such vaccines to be dangerous” (Oliver & Wood, 2014).

These claims which are clearly in contradiction with the official statements are received not only as alternatives, but truths by a considerably large proportion of society. Moreover, despite scholars like Hofstadter (Hofstadter, 2008), it is not possible to simply label believing in such allegations as result of a pathological paranoid seeing the fact that they are supported by

large groups in society. On the contrary, there must be a socially common motive which leads people to this mutual propensity to be persuaded by conspiracy theories.

Lost Faith in Truth and Re-enchantment

Like any superstitious belief, the propensity towards conspiracy theories can be suppressed only by way of an additional intellectual effort. This effort is required in order to attain reasonable judgments, for lack of which the events are judged in a biased fashion for self-defense. It is also obvious that the dominant sentiment in this stage of mind preceding reasonable judgments is fear because the mechanism uses the inborn fears in order to avoid the dangerous coalitions. However, the very same fear is supposed to disappear with the progress of the scientific knowledge which is supposed to disenchant the world through the intellectual effort to attain the objective truth.

Truth was the key factor to relinquish fear. One of the chief determinations of the Enlightenment project was to attain the undeniable universal truth by means of reason and science, and, thus, to overcome fear which leads us to fancy tales. Accordingly, Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) underlined that the Enlightenment and its project's aim was to liberate men from fear and establish men's sovereignty through "the disenchantment of the world" and dissolution of the myths and fantasies with knowledge and science (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 1). West and Sanders reinforced this opinion by arguing that Enlightenment underlined the importance of science as the latter could empower man to "gain mastery over himself and his environment" (West & Sanders, 2003, p. 7).

Since the beginning of the Enlightenment project, humanity awaited the disenchantment and the eradication of the false beliefs. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Centuries after the initiation of the Enlightenment project, man is still not liberated from fear seeing the fact that conspiracy theories do not lose their popularity and become more and more sound and credible for the masses. Why is reason incapable to overcome fear and to attain truth by means of intellectual effort?

The answer must be searched in the key factor which was supposed to relinquish fear: the truth itself, which is discredited and mystified for political and economic ends today while it is commodified. Jonathan Rose underlines the suspicions towards politicians who do not hesitate to use fake news for their political campaigns (Rose, 2017). According to Ralph Keyes, the world has eventually arrived at a post-truth era in which the criteria of truth di-

sappeared, facts are ignored and replaced by lies and emotional discourses (Keyes, 2004). Nick Rochlin points out the general distrust of all news and information as the real reason why conspiracy theories are so persuasive these days (Rochlin, 2017). Likewise, Peter Aps of Reuters buttresses this claim in his column by underscoring truth's growing deficiency of reliability leading to the trend of instrumentalization of conspiracy theories for political ends (Aps, 2019). In short, in the age of information, information itself is commodified and manipulated for dissimulated ends through the controlled media (Chomsky, 2011).

“The disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism” resulting from the anthropomorphist tendency to attribute agency to all events, through replacing the words bearing the “stamp of impressions” with impartial formula (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, pp. 3–4). The impartiality is the important aspect which has the potential to attain the objective truth by means of veracity. Nevertheless, Weber focused all his attention on the disenchantment of the world with an insight, ensuing from the Enlightenment project, that presumes the impartiality granted to attain truth. Thus, he failed to foresee such a re-enchantment process of the disenchanted world would be possible since he believed, in an evolutionist fashion, in the overthrow of corruption, which he saw as a primitive stage of society, with the progress from traditional phase to modernity (Rubinstein & von Maravic, 2010, p. 21).

Despite the hope to eradicate the last residues of the primitive stage of society, corruption still persists, truth is still manipulated for political and economic ends, and falseness is everywhere. In this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer claimed the failure of the Enlightenment was due to the subjacent political aspirations of its project insomuch as vanquishing nature was insinuating subordination of the human being as a member of the subjugated nature. The Enlightenment project's advancements obtained through technological progress were not only used to dominate nature but also to subjugate people and to gain political power which created a new source of fear and a “triumphant calamity” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 1). Today, knowledge and power are synonymous as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) claimed in “*Novum Organum*” (Bacon, 1905). Insomuch as knowledge was employed as an instrument of power, statements of authorities which were supposed to be impartial were progressively received as biased. Thus, the modernization's aspiration for impartiality and the objective truth has not been achieved because the power which comes from knowledge is not only aimed at subjugating the nature of things but also the human beings.

Following a similar argumentation, West and Sanders underlined in their Post-Cold War political analyses the fact that modernity could not eliminate traditional and irrational convictions in both socialist and neoliberal camps of the project. On the contrary, the authors suggested that, with “a proliferation of modern situations and conditions” advancing since the Cold War period, today modernity is received as a “multiplicity of modernities” (West & Sanders, 2003, pp. 8–9). Accordingly, people have become doubtful and reluctant to believe in the transparency and unbiasedness promises of the authorities, and, thus, in the apparent claims of the truth insomuch as the power circles holding the rational institutions in their hands like state, political parties, banks, media, etc. can manipulate the truth for their benefits according to their own modernity project (West & Sanders, 2003, pp. 11–12).

Even the global “ideoscapes” like democracy, human-rights, welfare, etc. lost their trustworthiness today (West & Sanders, 2003, p. 11). The global discourse of “transparency” has progressively been discredited and replaced by an opacity with the political hoax for power, and the truth of these ideoscapes is received as a new form of mythology, the “globalization mythology” (West & Sanders, 2003, p. 9), because of the absence of trust in the impartiality of the authorities supposed to work for the good of all. People gradually become skeptic of authorities’ political ends which may try to subjugate them. It is then not surprising to see that not only the groups feeling the doubt of subjugation more profoundly like African Americans in the US society or the Muslim societies in front of the West, but people from different social backgrounds and strata have progressively lost confidence in the claims of the authorities they perceive as malicious coalitions subjugating and deceiving them. As a result of this skepticism, masses are more inclined to be persuaded by conspiracy theories. Thus, despite the modernity’s hope to disenchant and dispel myths, insomuch as truth is commodified and progressively hidden behind the curtains, and as masses have progressively lost their trust in the authorities’ good will to bring them the truth, the Enlightenment project has become even more unattainable, and myths and superstitions anathematize once again reason with multiplicity of truths.

Conclusion

Enlightenment has not achieved its goal to disarm the multiplicity of the discourse by replacing it with formula in order to attain the objective truth. It seems like the Enlightenment project has failed to fulfill its promise to attain the universal truth dispelling myths and disarming fears. The discourses take back their places insomuch as the formula appears to be a biased

instrument of the power and the uniformity of the truth appears to regress in front of the multiplexity of the interactions on the social media for which it only signifies a means to maximize its chief objective, profit. The increasing propensity of divergence from the mainstream truth that we observe in conspiracy theories can be searched in this failure of modernity in the quest for the universal truth accessible for all by way of reason.

Kant underlined that the Enlightenment project to attain the truth would be feasible only if “freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters” was assured despite all the restrictions of political authorities (Kant, 1992). In this sense, the subjugation of reason and truth to political ends can be seen as an obstacle hampering the freedom precondition of the project. What we experience today is a return to animism, or at least a regression to an archaic stage of mind, awash with uncertainties and fancies insomuch as truth is commodified and devaluated. In this new suspicious perspective, all things must have a kind of final end and there is no room for pure coincidence as everything can be utilized for a malicious plan in secrecy.

The loss of trust in the good or at least the impartial will, and thus, the objective rule of the authorities is responsible of the regression. As Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) highlighted with the concept of “deliberate falsehood” (Arendt, 1972), while truth progressively loses its value, people can embrace falsehood without hesitation for self-protection insomuch as truth is at stake in political controversies. This brings forth the dismantlement of veracity and the emergence of multiplicity of truths in relation with the multiple possible modernity projects subject to the power circles in question. Thus, it is not surprising to see the increasing number of conspiracy theories spread around about the Covid-19 pandemic as the trust towards truth has already been lost long time ago. Accordingly, people have difficulties to imagine that a virus can hazardously emerge from evolution process, as they believe that there must be again a hidden plot to exert power and profit. These claims do not necessitate anymore proofs as they allege to deal with secrecies.

This new epoch, which is sometimes called also as “postmodernity”, is not merely a new fact as its motivations are inherited from the modernity’s roots seeing the fact that modernity and postmodernity represent two different phases of the same mode of production, capitalism (Harvey, 1991). With the emergence of postmodernity, the world did not pass to some sort of a postcapitalist or postindustrial era as the capital accumulation still remained as the driving force and the basic motivation. On the contrary, while postmodernity is supposed to react against modernity, its quest for the

absolute universal truths and grand narratives with skepticism (which it inherited from modernity project), we live in the age of information with the multiplicity of information sources and point of views not because of an intellectual appetite but since information itself has become the key commodity of the market in the capital accumulation process following the structural crisis of 1970s, first within the mainstream media, then through social media (Adair, 2010).

Although truth is discredited with the commodification process of information in the era of post-truth, the Enlightenment project may still have a chance and the enchantment which encourages the conspiracism can still be dispelled. As Ellen M. Wood underlines the problem is not about the Enlightenment or the modernity but its interpretation under a capitalist perspective which claims itself to be almost the natural result of “the universal laws of history” (Wood, 1997). Even the anti-positivist sociologist Max Weber who defends the disenchantment and the triumph of reason reveal the same tendency to naturalize the capitalist history and intertwine modernity and capitalism as he insinuates the development of bureaucracy and capitalism as “natural extensions of the progress of reason and freedom” (Wood, 1997, p. 543). However, if this distinction between capitalism as a specific social form of history and the Enlightenment project to attain universal truths and values for the human emancipation can be fully grasped, the lost faith in reason and universalism through science can be restored and the disenchantment can avert overwhelming and socially detriment conspiracism.

Truth is not discredited because the source of information is multiplied, but because trust towards authorities is lost due to the exploitation of information and knowledge for political and economic agendas of capitalism while multiplicity of information sources facilitates the dissemination of conspiracy theories as the main motivation is to exploit this distrust in the commodification process of information to diffuse any narrative regardless its veracity for interaction and profit maximization. Thus, the debate around the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories in the post-truth era should be enlarged with another research study problematizing the commodification process of information and the consequent distrust against authorities.

Abstract

Covid-19 Conspiracism in The Age of Post-Truth

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered one of the most important structural crises of the world as the pandemic has not just had a great impact on the healthcare systems, but it has overwhelmed the world economically, politically and socially due to the extreme measures applied to mitigate the propagation of the virus. This situation has led to numerous debates around the effects of the pandemic and the methods that states applied to deal with it, not only in academic circles but in all levels of society merely throughout social media discussions to which participation does not require any educational or professional background. Consequently, this period has also witnessed the diffusion of conspiracy theories varying from accusations which consider the rapid propagation of the virus as a plot of states and big pharmaceutical companies to allegations which presume the pandemic as a hoax to implement new communication technologies like 5G. It is obvious that this situation misleads people and endangers the struggle against the propagation of the virus. At first glance, it can be thought that the use of new communication technologies is to blame for the diffusion of false news, and a solution can be found in developing new tools to detect hoaxes beforehand. However, although social media facilitates the diffusion of conspiracism, it cannot be taken as the major reason seeing the fact that people have chosen to use social media platforms as their information sources because of their distrust against the mainstream media insomuch as information itself has been commodified in the age of information. Thus, this article aims to investigate within a philosophical perspective the sociopsychological mechanisms of the propensity towards conspiracy theories in the post-truth era in relation with the lost faith in the Enlightenment project's quest for universal truths due to the commodification and exploitation of information.

Keywords: Covid-19, Conspiracy Theories, Post-Truth, Enlightenment, Social psychology.

Öz

Hakikat-Sonrası Çağda Covid-19 Komplo Teorileri

Covid-19 pandemisi, virüsün yayılmasını engellemek amacıyla devreye sokulan radikal uygulamalarla yalnız sağlık sistemi üzerinde değil ekonomik, politik ve sosyal anlamda önemli sonuçlar doğurarak dünya genelinde en önemli yapısal krizlerden birini tetikledi. Bu durum, pandeminin etkileri ve devletlerin baş etmek için uyguladığı yöntemler etrafında yalnız akademik çevrelerde değil, katılım için hiçbir eğitim veya profesyonel birikim istemeyen sosyal medya mecraları yoluyla toplumun her kesiminde çok sayıda tartışmaya neden oldu. Sonuç olarak bu dönem, virüsün hızlı yayılmasını devletlerin ve büyük ilaç şirketlerinin bir komplosu olduğu suçlamalarından pandeminin 5G gibi yeni iletişim teknolojilerini uygulamaya almak için ortaya atılmış bir aldatmaca olduğu iddialarına kadar çeşitli komplo teorilerine şahitlik etti. Bu durumun insanları yanlış yönlendirdiği ve virüsün yayılmasına karşı mücadeleyi tehlikeye attığı ortadadır. İlk bakışta yanlış bilginin yayılmasında suçlanması gerekenin yeni iletişim teknolojilerinin kullanımı olduğu ve çözümün de aldatmacaları önceden tespit edecek yeni aletler geliştirmekte bulunabileceği düşünülebilir. Her ne kadar sosyal medya komplo teorilerinin yayılımını kolaylaştırırsa da insanların sosyal medya platformlarını bilginin bilgi çağında metalaşması süreciyle beraber gelişen ana akım medyaya olan güvensizlik nedeniyle ilk bilgi kaynağı olarak seçilmesi gerçeği göz önünde tutulursa sosyal medya asıl sebep olarak ele alınamaz. Bu makale, felsefenin bakış açısından hakikat sonrası dönemde komplo teorilerine yönelik eğilimin sosyopsikolojik mekanizmalarını Aydınlanma projesinin evrensel doğruları arayışına olan güvenin bilginin metalaşması ve sömürülmesine bağlı kaybedilmesi ile ilişkilili incelemeyi amaçlıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Covid-19, Komplo Teorileri, Hakikat Sonrası, Aydınlanma, Sosyal Psikoloji.

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