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## THE POPULIST MATRIX OF OBSESSIVE-OPPRESSIVE POWER AND ITS PHANTASMATIC NOVELTY: TOWARDS A DELIRIC SAMENESS OF CHANGES

### ABSTRACT

Contemporary changes in favor of the populist matrix thematization involve examination of the signifier-inaugural power of conspiratorial discourses as a symptom and political method of Serbian society democratic structure marginalization. Admittedly, the state's re-dramatization of conspiracists' phantasms of the enemy's horrifying hidden actions is not interpreted exclusively in the light of the political contagion that global, populist mind employs to write contemporary history. It is neither the central epistemic structure of the post-factual world which mandates the state's manipulation of paranoid fear should be exclusively interpreted as part of the competition of multiple discourses for a hegemonic position. This study suggests political effects of creating phantasmatic content are reflected in maintaining the counter-revolutionary fervor of populist rule and traditional affiliation politics. Fully comprehending democratic standards' self discrediting relies on psychoanalytical assumptions about the predetermination of the subject by its phantasms having been placed in the field of the unconscious and the Lacanian anticipation of the permanent impossibility of bearing one's own self and desires. Ensuring proofs that the systemic incitement of irrational suspicion through the regime's media supports the self-establishment of ruling-class credibility, as well as getting to know the way in which the familiar dramaturgy of guilt is applied to ensure new legitimization procedures points to the interpretation of change as a difference in the relationship between social and phantasmatic forces.

### KEYWORDS

conspiratorial  
discourse, populism,  
phantasm, enjoyment,  
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At the beginning of the third millennium, conspiracy theory demonstrates a significant transformative power. It also demonstrates one's ability to survive and spread in different communities, situations and contexts. The prevailing view is that conspiracy theories are narrative webs of paranoid beliefs about

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the existence of powerful groups' hidden plans, which are presented as irrefutable facts (Pipes 1997, Robins and Post 1997, Barkun 2006, Fenster 2008, Byford 2011). Being a specific way of expressing and interpreting the world, conspiracy theories can be understood as the public discourse of global society, whose popularity is based on the linguistic promise of transcending the basic antagonisms of social life. Conspiracy theories are not just sets of individual beliefs. We are talking about formations that are the subject of mass communication and exchange (Byford 2011), based on the kind of specific patterns of thought, social movements, and even political projects being reproduced.

The predominance of irrationality of the conspiratorial discursive epistemological assessments, which at certain analytical levels can be interpreted as Lacan's *non-reflexive knowledge* (Lacan 2004), as well as "objectivization of the unconscious knowledge" (Zupančič 2024:62), suspends neither its biopolitical significance nor cultural influence. On the contrary, manipulating the collective unconscious, and being a phantasm of a paranoid structure with an affective charge to which individuals, states, and cultures are not immune (Robin & Post 1997, Byford 2011), triggers mobilization of strong critical interest (Butter & Knight 2023) on the disturbing connection between totalitarian and authoritarian practices with phantasmatic substances in the current context of the democratic institutions weakening.

At the same time, unacceptable and normalized conspiracy theories (Lukić 2020) belong to the postmodern inventory of regulatory fictions. They do not demonstrate their labeling supremacy exclusively in the sphere of symbolic geography, but also in the sphere of biopolitical appropriation of subjectivity. The intentional alteration of conventional narratives targets at almost all fields of sociality, from banking and finance, through science, media, and sports, to medicine and human health issues. Starting with the law of the inaugural latency of each discourse, we will emphasize that critical discourse on conspiratorial stylistics opens up the possibility of analytically recognizing the current forces that bind the postmodern subject.

Conspiratorial semiotics is not always interpreted through the category of manipulation: the obvious deviation from conventional syllogistic structure, socio-cognitive subordination to intuitive processuality (Prooijen, Klein & Milošević Đorđević 2020), which often takes on the outlines of relentless self-referentiality, is also interpreted as a specific form of epistemic Otherness, "stigmatized knowledge" (Barcun 2006), and does not belong to discursive practices such as science. By defining conspiracy theories as a counter-cultural formation struggling to achieve hegemonic position among multiple discourses, certain perspectives have been detected that do not attribute ideological or political connotations to this way of understanding. In accordance with the "postmodern task" of defending the Otherness of thought itself, a number of theories recognize conspiratorial narrativization as a type of interpretative self-enlightenment. As a specific act of reflection outside the framework of stable knowledge, conspiratorial discourse is (self-)defined (also) as an alternative

understanding of the world that supposedly resolves the epistemological burden of arbitrariness – the main paradox of any signifying practice.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the cultural experience suggests an accelerated dissemination of conspiracy theories is not a matter of intellectual affinities shifting. Although it would be misguided to believe that all conspiracy theories are false (Basham 2018, Hagen 2018, Jolley, Mari & Douglas 2020), conspiratorial logic can often play a constructive political role (Clarke 2002, Fenster 2008). The view that conspiracy theories represent a tool for deconstructing old markers of certainty still cannot be accepted. True, social practices of remediating phantasmatic contents renew the opaque power of obsessive-oppressive structures and, in a populist context, take on the role of an “obscene supplement of ideology” (Žižek 2008). The very problem of these contents being rearticulated does not stem solely from the fact that they are unsuccessful in uncovering any conspiracies (Raikka & Ritola 2020), but rather in the actuality of transfiguration into *new legitimization procedures* of regimes with weakened democratic orientations.

In light of Foucauldian genealogical insights into the life we belong to, the focus of research is “not to distinguish paranoid-conspiratorial from legitimate-factual claims, but rather the question of how... such a discourse (re)-produces the subjects and objects of which it speaks” (Wojczewski 2021:6). The disturbing similarity of paranoid phantasms about the hidden actions of the Other with authoritarian practices (of previous historical sequences) allows us to speak about the persistence of the new millennium subjectivity chained by the semantics of the phantasmatic. Classical sociology argues that mythical, phantasmatic, and/or ideological narratives make up relatively harmless and arbitrary beliefs “only until someone takes them seriously” (Arent 1998:465). Simultaneously, hysterical consumption of conspiratorial narratives provide populist regimes with the opportunity to rearticulate the signifying advantage into linguistically enigmatic schemes of biopolitical determination.

## **Towards Nihilistic Banality: A Conspiratorial-Populist Persecution of the Other**

There has been a relative consensus that the post-pandemic world is dealing with an extremely dynamic proliferation of conspiracy theories. They have gained an increasing number of sympathizers and proactive supporters in the populist environment (Wojczewski 2023, Demata, Zorzi & Zottola 2022, Giry & Gurpinar 2020, Bergmann & Butter 2020, Bergmann 2018, Byford 2011, Fenster 2008). Others believe conspiracy theories are an inevitable element of (right-wing) populism (Priester 2012, Wodak 2015). Moreover, some believe there

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<sup>1</sup> It is indicative that the “conspiracy theorists” thesis, which suggests the very concept of “conspiracy theory,” was created as part of a conspiracy by the American intelligence agency CIA. It aimed at secretly discrediting alternative narratives regarding the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy in 1963, (Uscinski 2020).

would be no populism without this type of explanatory models (Stoica 2017, Vassilou 2017). Populism is the socio-historical context in which conspiracy theories develop, and it is probably wrong just to say that intense dissemination of conspiratorial ideas coincides with the rise of populist practices. However, the simultaneity of these phenomena leads necessarily neither to the conclusion that every populist regime is committed to conspiracy theories, nor every conspiracy theory must be associated with this type of political substance.<sup>2</sup>

Populist contextualizations of cultural-historical situations have played a pioneering role in the initiation of authoritarian and totalitarian machineries. The similarity between populist politics and conspiratorial persecution of the Other is one of the key points in examining the generality of the dialectic of exclusion (post)traumatic effects. Furthermore, the recent rise of the populist matrix represents a crucial condition for which “many individuals and groups occupying positions of power, influence, and leadership, now routinely spread conspiracy theories” (Bangerter, Wagner-Egger & Delouvee 2020:214). One of the dominant interpretative frameworks of the simultaneous rise of both conspiracy theories and populism is based on their common denominator, namely the Manichaeic discourse of permanent, insurmountable, and ideologically fruitful division between “us” and “them”. Taking into consideration role of the anti-Semitic narrative in the development of modern conspiratorial discourse (Byford 2006), it is evident that the former role of the Jews has been taken over by new individuals and groups (migrants, foreign mercenaries, foreign conspirators, internal traitors, and the like). All of it takes place within the framework of populist practices of silent hatred fueling, hence there is no doubt about the validity of a common passion for the exclusion of the Other (“conceptual Jew”) view. Both conspiracy theories and populist programs cherish paranoid beliefs, as well as phantasmatic contents about the existence of powerful people who (secretly) steal our identity, money, or pleasure. Nevertheless, their practical alliance is not only the specificity, nor is it a condition of the current breaking

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2 Not without a reason referred to as “the horizon of the epoch” (Krašev 2011), populism represents a separate framework to begin with new millennium politics, the consequences of which are evident in the field of democratic values marginalization. Even though a group of researchers detects an emancipatory impulse within the populist voice, *strategic aversion to alterity* can be interpreted as a key determinant of populism, Albertazzi & McDonell (2016). Even if it is interpreted as a shifting signifying practice Laclau (2005), loud nationalist and racist campaigns across Europe suggest the nature of populism is on the side of the exclusion, whereas populism itself is burdened with the “problem of excess unification where differences should be realized” (Lošonc 2017:12). Populist favoritism of political rifts and the production of antagonisms between two (imaginary) entities are central reasons why this term becomes – in midst of democratic systems – synonymous with (radical and radicalized) nationalism and racism (Herkman 2022). Populist renewal of the cultural figure of the Enemy is not only a sign of the democratic program self-discrediting, nor is it a harbinger of a long epoch of competitive authoritarianism. After all, old rituals of exclusion reaffirmation encourage creation of a socio-political environment of resentment and, in general, of “*homo homini lupus nihilistic banality*” (Arent 1998:466).

point of democratic totality. The populist conflict between the “alienated elite” and the “people” does not merely resemble a conspiratorial idea of powerful actors secretly working against citizens, but rather reveals a disturbing similarity in the way both discourses speak about the world.

It has been a common view that interpretative practices of populist-conspiratorial orientation emerge from the paranoid premise of the existence of a hidden (sense of) aspect of reality.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the two share the same socio-political goal, namely, public advocacy and political organization of collective enjoyment in imaginary registers.

As one of the current responses to the modern world of grand narratives and conventional regimes of truth, the post-factual paradigm is usually taken as intellectual platform for the social ascent of conspiracy theories (Demata, Zorzi & Zottola 2022). On the other hand, relativization of conventional truth standards is considered to contribute to populist programs’ unhindered functioning. The contemporary “de-potentialization, de-pathetization, abdication of truth figures” (Krstić 2022:127) leads to conditions that make it possible for the “post-political” or “post-democratic” strategies installed, that is, it enables a situation “in which objective facts have less influence on shaping public opinion than appealing to emotions and personal beliefs” (Oxford Languages, cited in: Krstić 2022:97) to be instigated. At present, however, this does not mean that conspiracy theories are exclusively propagated due to the given circumstances. The conspiratorial narrative has marked part of modern European history (Byford 2011) and the fact that today’s conspiracy theories owe their global popularity, among other things, to the populist episteme of post-truth should not be overlooked. This does not mean, however, that populist elites have simply established falsehood as a new type of truth, but rather that falsehood is directly and actively involved in the social truth production.

## Paranoid Suspicion and its Phantasmatic Orthodoxy

Conspiracy theories can be critically analyzed through the lens of mistrust “as the predominant trait of our contemporary political cultures” (Perunović 2024:43). Still, what sets them apart is the persistent presence of phantasmatic substance and, according to Alenka Zupančič, “absolute mistrust, or paranoid mistrust toward all kinds of things” (Perunović 2021:763). Interpretative delirium of the conspiratorial discourse, however, does not deny the existence of conspiracies as political, corporate, and other strategies for achieving particular interests. It would be wrong to claim conspiracy theories are simply lies, just as it would be wrong to present them as truthful or epistemologically enlightening. As much as paranoia can be declared to be a complete absence of reason, a phantasm can be recognized as a simple falsehood. As an offshoot of the post-truth sociocognitive paradigm, in the marginal space of “premodern

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<sup>3</sup> “Nothing is as it seems” is fundamental episteme of both conspiratorial discourse, and a clinical behavioral disorder (paranoia).

superstition and postmodern cynical skepticism” (Žižek 2021:138), conspiracy theories do not negatively refer to the Other by using simple illusions or direct lies. Instead, conspiracy theories are based on the paranoid dramaturgy of unverifiable or hard-to-verify statements, the discursive tendency to “fetishize and totalize, but only parts of its interpretative practices... to find the evidence and meaning of the conspiracy it tracks” (Fenster 2008:109).

The frequent deficiency of material evidence, the dizzying leap over the basic logic tasks, as well as the simplified representations of diverse power structures, together constitute a universal narrative action “of hyperactive semiosis in which history and politics serve as a reservoir of signs that demand over-interpretation, and that signify, for the interpreter, far more than their conventional meaning” (Fenster 2008:95). In this regard, a number of studies recognize in the conspiratorial transgression of common sense the active operation of a *phantasm*<sup>4</sup> that directly enables global popularity of these narratives by restoring coherence to what we call reality (Žižek 1989). Unlike the everyday meaning of the word fantasy, which encompasses daydreams, imaginative content, and subjective projections, phantasm (Fr. *fantasme*) refers to a fundamental unconscious structure that mediates the subject’s relation to desire and the Other. As developed by Lacan in “Seminar XIV – La logique du fantasme” (Lacan 1966-1967), the phantasm operates as the framework through which the subject’s position is constituted in relation to the missing object (*objet petit a*) – a lost, immaterial object that gives rise to desire. The phantasm is not merely an imaginative content, but a structural mechanism that positions the subject within the symbolic order. In other words, “since the lack is an effect of castration,” the phantasm appears “as a defence against castration” (Stavrakakis 2002:42), while the phantasmatic promise – as a “second-order jouissance” (Stavrakakis 2002:44) – seeks to propel the subject beyond their constitutive lack. From a Lacanian perspective, one could argue that the phantasm underlies every political narrative. However, in the case of conspiracy theories, the phantasmatic substance plays a specific role: it enables populist regimes to mask the traumatic dimensions of social reality. This does not imply that democratic discourse is devoid of phantasmatic investments; rather, what distinguishes democracy is its grounding in the recognition of its own constitutive impossibility.

Phantasms of conspiratorial orientation find significant resonance in the populist dynamics of old certainty concepts relativizing. The obvious availability of phantasmatic substances as well as the immanent dialectic of supporting

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4 The very term “phantasm” was chosen as the French equivalent for Freud’s term “fantasy”, which embraced different phantasms, such as “the murder of one’s own father”. Since there were theorists who were dissatisfied with the term, having believed it suggested a childish and playful quality, the term “phantasm” eventually became prevalent in the psychoanalytic theory, particularly after it had been adopted by Lacan. Considering its psychological “kinship” with fantasies, the term was derived from the Greek word “phantasma,” meaning “ghost or apparition,” (Turner 2023, Rudinesko & Plon 2002).

unconscious desire, a characteristic of myths, legends, fairy tales, ideologies, works of art, and the like, testify to a fundamentally impotent society faced with crisis, ontological uncertainty, and political unpredictability. The durability of the narrative weave focused on insufficient empirical arguments, superstitions or prejudices represents an indispensable step towards a typical construction of a conspiratorial representation of the world that is more comforting to the audience – than truthful (Bronner 2015). The conspiratorial expressiveness of systematic resistance towards conventional standards of truth, logic, and meaning ensures latency of phantasmatic identification. The conspiratorial text's discursive positioning in the marginal space between the social facts of brutality and the unconscious desires represents a paradoxical foundation for the interpellative power of discourse. Through substitute satisfactions within the framework of "supplementary institutionalization" (Močnik 2019), it makes the subject dependent on the phantasm.

To strengthen resistance and postpone an encounter with its own traumatic core, a conspiratorial discourse flows in favor of the "passion for ignorance" (Lacan 1983, Salecl 2023). The postmodern subject's fascination with the content of powerful groups threatening to usurp our way of life can be interpreted as a resistance to the very idea of encountering the (Lacanian) Real of our lives. Admittedly, a conspiratorial discourse demonstrates flexibility of ideological matrix that encompasses individuals in the realm of unconsciousness, desires, and needs, where they consider themselves to be most "individualistic".

Unlike the clinical concept of paranoid disorder, critical studies have recognized the conspiratorial mind's paranoid orientation (Hofstadter 1967, Hristov 2019, Bergmann & Butter 2020, Blanuša & Hristov 2020, Zupančič 2024) as a discursive self-organization principle. Starting from Hofstadter's account of the paranoid style in political movements (Hofstadter 1967), the concept of paranoia is not employed in its clinical sense. It is a specific mode of relating to reality, a kind of "political style of alert suspicion... with remarkable capacity to stimulate aggressive behaviour directed against delusional objects" (Robins and Post, 1997:18). The unification of the conspiratorial mind's cognitive features with the paranoid thinking figure fulfills the methodological goal of explaining why conspiracy theories attract individuals who do not suffer from any mental weakness. After all, conspiracy theories have been known to "entice normal subjects, and in that case, the intensity of counterproductive reasoning could not be explained by the severity of the mental disorder" (Hristov 2019:31).

Conspiracy theories manipulate a critical relationship with reality, yet, unlike the critical engagement of Foucauldian yearning for freedom which likewise subjects itself to criticism, given criticism solely takes one direction. Admittedly, it does not tolerate either objection or suggestion. By posing as "collaborative" with the reason (Zoja 2017), the paranoid labeling figure involves the subject in a circular economy of meaning where, for example, the lack of evidence for the claim of the secret plans and conspiracies existence is affirmed as a direct empirical confirmation that such plans and conspiracies have been successfully executed. Although these cannot be conceived in the clinical

language of behavioral disorders, paranoid interpretive practices – like operational schemes of paranoid thinking – generate relatively stable fixations of a projective character (Robins & Post 1997). It means that subjects exposed to hypermedia conspiratorial concepts circulation can be detected through a diminished readiness to recognize life circumstances as a contingency drama. The metanarrative commitment to the paranoid fear of a hidden enemy reveals the potency of self-fulfilling prophecy, whereas conspiratorial hermeneutics follows the lawfulness by which “every violence merely enacts what is already happening in discourse” (Butler 2020:53). On this view, one is a witness to the general compulsion of thought and its consequences can be recognized on the plane of compulsion of practices .

Unlike doubt as a methodological principle, which enables the subject to exercise their right to question and challenge their own findings, suspicion in the paranoid constitution typically omits conditions required to question one’s own premises. At the same time, the conspiratorial narrative-shaping contains traces of fanaticism of self-assurance and cognitive self-importance. Although conspiracy theories often present themselves as performing an enlightening role within society - disturbingly reminiscent of the Nazi belief in their supposed contribution to humanity after ‘uncovering’ the Jewish conspiratorial threat (Arendt 1998) - the interpretative excess inherent in suspicious engagement gives the impression that no epistemological or cognitive transgression is occurring. On the contrary, the conspiratorial habit of transforming the absence of empirical evidence into proof that a conspiracy is being planned, or worse, has already been executed, reveals its monomaniacal, tautological foundation and its paradoxical desire to regain control in a chaotic, rapidly changing world. This control empowerment is to be achieved through empty and “impossible knowledge” (Hristov 2019). Although late-capitalist dynamics of anti-capitalist imaginaries being integrated does solidify their dominance, the conspiratorial integration of paranoid beliefs with seemingly anti-systemic tendencies testifies to the importance of the discursive-narrative effectiveness of the limited scope of practical change. The conspiratorial desire of the paranoid subject for imaginary vengeance (Nietzsche 2014, Hristov 2019) is not a figure that can end the (post)modern contradictions.

## Lacanian Conspiracy Against Conspiracies

Given that “conspiracy theories with its many half-truths... are used political-ly by different groups” (Fenster 2008:160), this raises curiosity about the psychopolitical mechanisms through which a phantasmatic discourse, along with its mythical derivatives, comes to serve as a micro-ideological solution. In short, it is a platform of self-negating identification form that helps a postmodern subject resolve the absence of transcendental signified in favor of formations attractive to populist power.

Just as “the unattainability of revolutionary bourgeois promises represented a structural moment of bourgeois suppression and exploitation” (Močnik

2016:189), the phantasmatic novelty of the populist epoch investigation is expected to illuminate ways in which the proliferation of the conspiracy's omnipresence of irrational content, and the social expropriation of the unconscious, accelerates intolerance transfiguration into a general foundation of public relations. By integrating insights from a Lacanian-oriented social ontology (Austin 2016), analysis offers contextualized and nuanced answers to questions about why a relatively rational subject becomes passionately invested in imaginary contents. Even though certain conspiracy theories' "psychologizing" generates an exclusive range of rhetorical implications (Byford 2006), the Lacanian emphasis on retroactive projection as a collective act does not methodologically endanger interpreting social phenomena via psychological categories. A post-Freudian perspective of the conspiratorial narrative as a phantasm of stolen enjoyment (Turner 2023, Stavrakakis 2002, Hristov 2019) provides a solid ground for explaining social effectiveness of non-emancipatory labeling games. It likewise enables one to understand the extent to which the affirmation of a monocausal schematic deepens social confrontations.

Starting with enduring relevance of the concept of subjectivity split<sup>5</sup> (Spaltung), the Lacanian tradition abstracts Freud's suggestion of the constitutive indeterminacy of a being, arguing that psychoanalysis is, in fact, the "science of specters disappearing in that field" (Lacan 1983:117). Advocating in favor of the scientific dialectics of the impossible, psychoanalytic theory emphasizes that its subject is neither an individual nor a human. As a matter of fact, it is solely what lacks him/her (Stavrakakis 2002). It may be the lack of enjoyment, of a sense of fullness, of certainty. Constitutive absence shaping (La Capra 2001) sublimates ontological positioning of an individual devoid of self-sufficient essence and cultural-historical (pre)determination. A man's fragmented ego is no more than the insufficiency of natural reality effect (Lacan 1983). At the same time, it leads to a radical openness to objectivizing interventions, such as the identification with the Other.

Symbolization, carried out by labeling practices, leads to the only condition for possible desubstantialization regarding paranoid alienation's initial state. A well-known thesis that the world of words creates the world of things emphasizes singularity of the subject's choice to alienate themselves from the castration complex dominance. Stability of the subjective view towards the object as absence (Lacan 1983) implies the entire materiality of experience can be interpreted as the labeling action effect. As a consequence, understanding oneself as an autonomous, unique individual can be achieved by developing illusory representations. Paradoxically enough, subjectivity is produced by its own objectivization. Once language has established its function in the universals, there emerges an uninterrupted dramaturgy of identification with the Other.

It has been common knowledge since Freud's time that the subject is a creature of substitute satisfactions. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that

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5 It refers to a category that can be reduced neither to an individual, nor to individuality (Lacan 2004, Stavrakakis 2002).

the enjoyment of phantasmatic identifications, which conceal the “true horror of a situation” (Žižek 2008:5), is typically selected as the most favorable option among “enjoyment (in) emptiness” (Lacan 2004). The very essence of psychoanalytic concepts being integrated into explaining the socio-political field surrounding conspiracy theory discourse stems from the fact that political ideology and similar social practices can be identified as the most relevant phantasmatic agents. Even though the symbolic order does not exist on its own, the subject resolves his/her alienation from the substantial actuality by relying on the Other. Like Freud’s observations that happiness is not the ultimate psychotherapeutic goal but rather transformation of pathogenic contents in favor of a tolerable life, Lacanian findings likewise do not instill general optimism. What they do inspire, however, is the idea the aforementioned subjectivity constellation makes such a relevance possible for a nuanced understanding of the phantasmatic constructions social significance, such as conspiratorial “imaginary scenarios that stage the object-cause of our desire in order to answer what the Other wants” (Blanuša & Hristov 2020:76).

A traumatic inability to confront one’s own desires is not merely a matter of subjectivity. The phantasmatic identification repression takes on a transindividual character by relying on the global conspiratorial narratives re-mediation. Since the object of human desire is created at the site of our castration (Lacan 2004, Žižek 1989), a collective defense against the forces of social uncertainty is to be retrieved from uncovering the hidden meanings in conspiratorial methodology.

Put differently, conspiracy theories function as collective defense mechanisms against a psychopolitical castration experience, sociopolitical uncertainty, and ontological emptiness. Moreover, they are not just a cultural tool used to confront the castration complex. Since “different types of mistrust seem to allow the experience of different types of enjoyment” (Perunović 2024:44), conspiracy theories can be viewed as a source of the social body enjoyment. Conspiracy theories’ mass popularity echoes the idea of radical investment in partial political objects believed to represent the missing, almost mythical dimension of life’s wholeness. Following Freud who defines subjectivity as an entity that places the object in place of its ego ideal, as well as in line with Lacan’s teaching desire is a constitutive lack reflection, the key socio-political implication of conspiracy theories normalization turns out to be a narrative mythologization of the exclusivity of a group that directly threatens our current way of life. This alleviates our basic castration anxiety via spreading collective representations of the negative attributes of the Other, hence reaffirming our own omnipotent status.

Thus, it is not surprising conspiracy theories are subject to political-ideological instrumentalization. As a matter of fact, conspiracy theories are approached by the contemporary populist agenda with a specific aim of preserving dominance relationships. In this sense, conspiracy theories should not be dismissed as mere “paranoid fantasies [... Instead, they] should be treated as a serious indicator of the social condition and the changes it provokes” (Diković

2011:338). For the sake of resolving the lack of ontological security, subjectivity is subordinated to phantasmatic operators which, like every utopian construction, “needs a scapegoat in order to constitute itself” (Stavarakakis 2002:87). The problem faced by society regarding conspiratorial discourse circulation can be presented via an imaginary sense of control reaffirmation, a sort of defense against chaos as well as contemporary complex existence. Still, most relevant here is the political effects of phantasmatic promises, which eventually split society into exclusive groups with a right to “appropriate enjoyment” on the one hand, and deprived groups united in a collective resentment on the other hand.

Disturbingly similar to the populist production of antagonism there is the conspiratorial mind configuration which rests upon “the transformation of impossible pleasure into forbidden pleasure, because there is always a phantasmagorical obstacle preventing the subject from grasping its object of desire” (McGowan 2022:22). To abolish individual and social failures, the Other is named as the obstacle to the integrity of enjoyment. Starting with the Lacanian premise that phantasms of enjoyment assume a structural social role by first addressing threats that can potentially jeopardize it, the conspiratorial ideological-cultural entity can be exposed as a condition for the current renewal of the old segregation passion. The absurdity of belief in a narrative that puts emphasis on conspiracies without the material presence of conspirators (Byford 2006) has a pronounced political connotation. It is due to negatively referencing the Other (conspirators), and it establishes connections between members of society by dividing them. Conspiratorial thinking fuels hatred toward the Other and makes it impossible for the subject to break free from their dependence on the Other’s signifying actions, due to the powerful influence of paranoid narratives. Quite the opposite: it has to do with a collective belief that textual-exploratory productivity has exposed an anonymous group of those who have been plotting against us (our lives, our values, our sources of enjoyment). This lays the groundwork for false transcendence.<sup>6</sup>

It is well-known that the subject’s gift of speech rests upon the reality of its actions (Lacan, 2004), while discourse displays inaugurate power. Conspiracy theories encourage negative projection of the Other, who is believed to be secretly working on the deconstruction of social order and stability. It means that current remediation of conspiratorial semiotics through mass communication channels leads to the routinization and normalization of intolerance towards anyone being intentionally placed in the conspiratorial-eccentric role of the Other. Although the conspiratorial impetus is accepted due to the central deficiency sense, phantasmatic interpretation of conspirators as the organization of people secretly appropriating the social totality of enjoyment implies a psychopolitical deprivation being re-experienced.

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<sup>6</sup> Phantasmatic identification provides conditions for subjectivity to transcend its own sense of unfulfillment. The retroactive projection phantasmatic core means one has come closer to the belief that what was (projected as) impossible was actually (only) prohibited, yet it is now possible to attain (Lacan 1984, Stavarakakis 2002).

Given that symbolic violence precedes cultural-historical materialization, the negative projections conspiratorial coercion dramaturgy is a reason why recommendation for a minimum distance from the phantasmatic substance is being renewed. Although we agree “belief and illusions are an indispensable and constitutive dimension of all sociality” (Zupančič, 2024:20), the problem arises when exposure to a paranoid pattern takes on forms of a collective belief, especially when these beliefs lead to a political alienation and “the conscious rejection of the rules of the game of a political system” (Neumann, cited in: Hristov 2019:32). One of the conspiracy theories’ significant implications can be attributed to the persistence of ideological traditions since assigning a political framework to the discursive surrender of the subject to the Other. Phantasmatic radicalism of the Other’s Otherness – is nothing more than a demand for the subject to end up in Deleuze’s revolution of the weak as weak (Deleuze 1983).

### **The Conspiratorial Thinking Continuum as the Serbian Society Castration Anxiety**

It appears the Serbian state apparatus is actively dedicated to launching conspiratorial scenarios which it considers to be the most direct cause of its own regression (Giry & Gurpinar 2020).<sup>7</sup> Behind the new millennium’s “leap of imagination” (Groh 1987, Byford 2006) there is a coherent continuity of conspiratorial thinking, formerly a Serbian right-wing and conservative politics trait (Byford 2006). Compared to this, a series of rhetorical and stylistic distinctions do not indicate any semantic turnaround, but rather confirm the conspiratorial discourse in Serbia is inextricably linked with the non-necessary persistence of the ideological-political tradition. This does not mean, however, other types of conspiratorial narratives do not circulate in the Serbian public sphere. It simply indicates political power reveals a continuous interest in integrating the narratives into the national meta-ideological structure. Put differently, contemporary Serbian society demonstrates “the resistance to being

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7 Regime media resort to promoting narratives that center around a conspiracy against the political leadership. A relatively common motif here is a revealed assassination plot against the President. Depending on the political momentum, opposition groups led by the Serbian politician Dragan Đilas, certain officials, domestic security forces members, mafia clans, and similar entities were depicted as the conspirators. Cf. <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Vucic-zrtva-zavera-i-atentatora-najmanje-jednom-mesecno-u-Informeru-935>, <https://www.dw.com/sr/sve-smrti-aleksandra-vučića/a-44549952>, <https://www.juznevesti.com/Politika/Sotirovski-o-atentatu-na-Vucica-Do-sada-je-pretila-opozicija-sada-za-njih-to-radi-neko-drugi.sr.html>, <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/584814/nebojsa-bakarec-politicka-pozadina-pripreme-atentata-na-predsednika-vucica>, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3783963/zavera-stranci-i-deo-mup-hteli-da-sruse-vlast-vulin-izvestio-vucica-o-pokusaju-drzavnog-udara-planirali-i-da-hapse-andreja>, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/3636117/tajna-mreza-sprega-funkcionera-i-mafije-u-zaveri-protiv-predsednika-vucica-i-njegove-porodice> (Accessed: 7/5/2024).

objects of the Other's satisfaction takes many different forms, including some of the most picturesque conspiracy theories" (Zupančič, 2024:59).

In a sharp turn towards authoritarian democracy, liberal views are the first to be sacrificed in favor of the "bad collectivism" (Lošonc 2017) of populist sentiment. In an environment where the horizon of common meaning has been destroyed by the negative war legacy dictatorship and nationalism (Podunavac 2021), current populist narrative strengthening stokes old divisions and inspires nationalist fear. In its primordial constructions of ethnonationalist orientation, populism finds "an inexhaustible source of ideas for its seductive and vague concepts, the realization of which is always hindered by someone else" (Bašić 2018:8). Among other elements, the conspiratorial narrative plays a rather significant role. The Serbian autocratic matrix variation includes continuous manipulation through the politics of uncertainty. At the same time, leaders draw their political legitimacy by reviving national myths about territorial rights (Vranić 2019). On the one hand, both political intolerance and populist production of conspiratorial phantasms about the Other have become routine through the leader's cult consolidation; on the other hand, critical thought is suppressed using "tabloid terror" (Biber, 2020). Both act insidiously to take over one's enjoyment, namely, they are a formative factor in the anti-pluralistic spirit re-creation.

Like Slobodan Milošević's nationalist program, the populist spirit relied on the international anti-Serbian conspiracy phantasms, contemporary conspiratorial dramaturgy etatization underlies the reasons for the current Serbian government to also be referred to as the populist movement which attributes its poor results to elites operating "behind the scenes." Prevalence analysis of the conspiratorial narratives which are disseminated by the regime media on the internet, as well as using printed media and television, suggests there is a populist strategy at play that positions partial political objects (Lacanian *objet a*) as the political subjectivity ego-ideal. The only novelty the phantasmatic enemy production brings compared to the former anti-Western conspiratorial concepts is related to the shifting axis of distinction and intolerance turned inwardly. Admittedly, unlike the paradigm employed by the nationalist authorities in the 1990s to blame the entire international community for their own socio-political situation, today's conspiratorial paradigm creates collective paranoia about the existence of domestic traitors and internal enemies. Since the contemporary subject does not possess such beliefs, the state strategically fosters notions of a looming otherness, hand in hand with the unresolved eccentricity of the evil intentions of the Other. The signifying canon of the omnipotent permanence of the powerful group implies a constant production of antagonistic tension. In this sense, conspiracy theories constitute a political capital (Diković 2011) whose ideological utility lies in making opaque social traumas.

State intervention to expose a conspiratorial group which has its evil intentions concealed by the secret plan to assassinate political power holders, and thus endangering stability, can be interpreted as a phantasmatic signification of castration fear masking. Populist reliance on the negative construct

of the Other aims at preserve the political legitimacy primordial core, that is, the national homogeneity foundational myth as well as the socio-political unity ideal. Under the media pressure of the phantasmatic discourse, the subject continuously weighs the hostile Other's attempts to steal his/her enjoyment. After all, it is common knowledge that hostile forces hatch plans to destabilize Serbia, disrupt order and harmony, even to neutralize its leaders (especially the president) as "ordinary people" to whom, in a populist manner, extraordinary political attributes are nevertheless attributed. Since every phantasmatic construct transforms its ontological deficiency into an immanent empirical variable (Laclau 2005, Wojczevski 2023), and since it does it via a hypermedia description of the traitorous subject's work, the current regime engages the figure of the conceptual Jew as a scapegoat sublimation of political fears and uncertainty experiences. Renewing old schemes of the antagonistic relations between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the repressive matrix persists around the entire category antagonism between "the people" and "the traitors." Inherent productivity of fixations on the ungrounded guilt naming successfully fulfills a populist goal that can no longer be explained relying on the power discontinuity category. In Serbia, the conspiracy theories media circulation is not fundamentally about the pursuit of objective truth as an epistemological concern; rather, their significance lies in the way such narratives engender social intolerance, because "fear of the enemy has always exhibited the features of a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Robins and Post, 1997:23).

In line with the conspiratorial urge to impose enjoyment to regain control over meanings and signifying practices, the operational logic of radical investment in partial political objects results in enigmatic enjoyment being subjected to a paternalistic signification. The key problem here is that every attempt to achieve social fullness is attributed to the hegemony action (Laclau 2005). Every ego-ideal compensation with Lacanian object of identification (*objet petit a*) opens, furthermore, possibilities for the direct action of ideology. The contradiction of the entire point is reflected in the fact that conspiratorial phantasm, in confrontation with the reality contradictions, brings no reconciliation nor does it halt everyday life aporias. Disregarding the enigmatic pleasure in enjoying one's own *idee-fixe* (Čosić 2019), the subject under the pressure of enjoyment in imaginary scenarios moves into the psychopolitical field of double negation, that is, an "enhanced" presence of absence. Knowing the Other does not actually possess what the subject lacks, and every imaginary construct is simultaneously a derivative of desire as such, it may be concluded that the phantasmatic signification failure occurs on two critical levels. In other words, the constitutive lack of existential form is followed by the constitutive impossibility of materializing conspiracy theories' utopian ideas, hence the subject's own field of desires and intentions, as a rule, succumb ultimately to further ideological processes. The problem of conspiracy theory circulation does not stem from the fact that it involves "supporters who knew without knowing" (Zupančič 2024:62), but rather in the way that adherence to this mode of paranoid belief renders the subject more susceptible to the

influence of the ideological manipulation. Since the subject remains in search of the elusive Other, and since the constitutive subjectivity gap cannot be resolved even through conspiratorial narratives, the social body in Serbia is subjected to castration anxiety. Following Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's basic clinical categories, this anxiety is understood as a "transcendental-ontological category or what Heidegger called modalities of world-disclosure" (Žižek, 2021). The latter, therefore, does not indicate illness, but rather the primary givenness problem (Fatić & Bulatović 2021). It is not inhibitory for everyday life. Although anxiety emerges in response to *jouissance* - precisely because *jouissance* is prohibited - it may also be argued anxiety can be politically intensified generating fear which may result in a potential loss or withdrawal of existing forms of enjoyment.

In Serbia, participatory practices of enjoying the narratives consumption provide no stable foundation to achieve a self-shaping identity. At the same time, the resentment universality - which unite individuals in the affective-emotional community - does not represent a socio-psychic force through which the subject can reverse either the initial indeterminacy recognition or living which lacks deeper foundations. Moreover, from the current perspective of the Serbian simultaneity in nurturing democratic and authoritarian modes, conspiratorial semiotics can be interpreted as a compensation unproductive practice symptom. Similar to a psychoanalytic situation where the analysand obsessively bombards the analyst with their words, detailing life stories and manically presenting symptoms, yet only with the desire for the things to remain unaltered, that is, wishing that nothing actually changes (Žižek 2008), the psychopolitical effect of state intervention in disseminating paralyzing fear can be explained by the enigmatic category of persevering fixation on trauma. After all, what is the imposition of social harmony imaginary promises, where this harmony can be only achieved by removing the Other, but the enjoyment of the subject's peculiar inclination towards substitute enjoyment? An obsessive dissemination of conspiratorial concepts regarding the internal enemy's deliberate breaking of national and political unity can be interpreted as an organized act of subjecting individuals to the phantasmatic derivatives influences. These, among other things, recreate psychopolitical castration sense as well as the uninterrupted "helpless fascination with the excessiveness of enjoyment of the Other" (Žižek 2012:118). The Serbian regime's production of imaginary horror images awaiting Serbian society if it does not adhere to the anti-conspiratorial state movement echoes the conspiratorial urge to conceal the social situation of real horror.

Freud's populist reinterpretation thesis that "in our unconscious impulses we daily and hourly get rid of anyone who stands in our way, of anyone who has offended or injured us" (Freud, cited in: Turner 2023:40) suggests a dense political texture of conspiratorial implications. Internalization of conspiracy theories involves externalization of unacceptable feelings, reasoning, or perspectives (towards the Other), which does not imply the conspiratorial narrative etatization directly, but calls for explicit social action or open political

activism. “These unconscious assumptions cause groups, organizations, and societies not only to behave in a paranoid manner, but also to make them highly susceptible to the leadership, control and manipulation of paranoid individuals” (Robins 1997:84). Conspiratorial stereotypes about the Other evoke old rituals of exclusion and discrimination, generate prejudices and mistrust (Jolley, Mari & Douglas 2020, Goertzel 2010, Bilewicz 2013), and, as a rule, “lead to high supportiveness for in-groupers with complete disregard for out-groupers” (Kofta & Sedek 2005:42), whereas the operational logic of persevering with domestic enemy paranoid phantasms, the enemy itself being in between us and our desires, can be presented as a discursive block of the Serbian ideology of nationalism.

In an extremely emotional-affective tone, fiery rhetoric, and millenarian mode of expression, Serbian conspiracy theories directly join the populist fabrication of antagonisms between “us” (who know the proportions and goals of the conspiracy) and “them” (who plan the conspiracy, to the detriment of us, citizens), obsessively “offering the illusive promise of a state of ontological wholeness, and explaining why this state is never achieved” (Wojczevski 2023:10). This involves a scapegoat seeking, marking pronounced affective shifts to the detriment of rational and sober (political) thinking. The Manichaean dialectics of paranoid fear formats represent an ideological condition for the leader’s omnipotence and attributes of saviorship, as well as manipulation with imaginary scenarios of the law of exclusion of the third option: according to it, Serbia will either be defended from conspiratorial forces or it will be politically subjugated by conspiratorial powers. This is one of the reasons why the regime’s conspiratorial discourse is recognized as an affective apparatus of civil (self)colonization. The conspiratorial thinking integration into the public discourse establishes a signifying defensive projection sequence. It means the collective experience of conspiratorial narratives participation increases the possibilities of awakening the damned nature of envy (Prole 2018), and the predominance of the emotive-intuitive mode of social practices and political operations.

Taking in consideration power which always entails its own transgression and always relies on transideological formations, the inexorable impulse of a certain part of the populist government to deprive current reality of its traumatic substance by maneuvering the phantasmatic field can be presented as limiting the substantializing effects of symptom conversion. As for the subject’s paranoid alienation, it is substituted with the paranoid alienation of the collective. Exposure of Serbian citizens to the conspiratorial matrix does not mean an individual is automatically left to hallucinatory fantasizing, nor does it automatically possess paranoid illusions rather than critical powers of judgment. Instead, by manipulating durability of the subject’s drive to (self)overcome castration fear, the dominant class uses imaginary promises to fulfill social nostalgia for wholeness and harmony. Simultaneously, the propensity development to approve conspiracy theories, that is, a specific “conspiratorial

mentality” (Imhoff & Bruder 2014), directly ensures the participatory groups return to the populist embrace of paternalistic power.

Unlike “traditional” ideological maneuvering, where constitutive emptiness is filled by the “people”, precisely (re)presented in the name and affirmation of the leader (Laclau 2005), the phantasmatic typology of maneuvering with paranoid fear can be understood as a discursive processing of existing resentment, a characteristic of Serbian political thought. A “nihilistic view that history has never rewarded Serbs for their noble idealism, but has punished them with humiliation and suffering” (Đilas, cited in: Byford 2006:69) can be understood as the cultural-historical basis of the nationalist enthusiasm in today’s conspiratorial representations production.<sup>8</sup> Distributed across several media platforms and presented through various narrative-dramaturgical patterns, today’s regime conspiracy theories uniformly narrativize hostile forces omnipresence, their sole aim being a violent power transfer. The etatist imposition of beliefs about the catastrophic scenario imminence, which is achievable only by not exposing and publicly deligitimizing the conspiratorial group, eventually leads to increased social tensions. It likewise breeds noticeable customary negative references to the Other, projected to have secret access to our secrets, whereas the clandestine enjoyment of seizing our enjoyment directly aids in the democratic sentiment’s populist reorganization.

Even though Serbia is not unique in the processes of delegitimizing democratic standards, the unclear boundaries and relationships between partocracy politics, populism, and nationalism (Biber 2020) have inspired us to speak about a political terrain conducive to conspiratorial ideas spread daily. Affective identification in the name of “popular sovereignty” favors national sentiment and directly reproduces disciplinary power. True, those who hate are constantly dependent on the object of their hatred, hence the regime nurtures the archetypal enemy mythical construction, consolidates its rule and subjects its citizens to symbolic violence in the name of its denial. The timeliness of imposing beliefs about the phantom nature of the Other (an internal enemy, that is to say, a(n) (im)migrant, foreigner, member of a minority group, etc.) cannot be fully explained by populist-nationalist domination. It also does not

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8 A particular segment of the political regime has been known to nurture a conspiratorial narrative of allusion to the secrecy and effectiveness of global power structures. Similar to Milošević’s regime nationalist rhetoric, which, following the imposition of international sanctions, mobilized conspiracy theories with the idea to avoid responsibility for the disastrous political consequences (Byford 2006), the current regime’s functionary believes there is a conspiracy against Serbia led by Germany, and the U.S.: <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/3862615-aleksandar-vulin-o-finalizaciji-zavere-protiv-srbije-i-srpske>. Taking into consideration the contents of Milošević’s statement in 1992, when Serbia was exposed to “terrifying pressure from the interests of the powerful, the calculations of the greedy, and the revenge of those defeated in some former wars” (Milošević, from: Byford 2006:114), combined with the contents of Aleksandar Vulin’s statement, it obviously echoes the conspiratorial methodology by which global politics secret plans representations are used either as a negation (of trauma) of reality, or as a methodology to transform the entire social trauma into a political symptom.

self-discredit the Serbian society in its attempts to achieve its signifying potential in terms of the dark pleasure of uninterrupted distancing and the diversity of segregative practices. In our opinion, and speaking in Foucauldian terms, it is inspiring to see how old lyrics of guilt today are used for new legitimization procedures.

Discrimination against new enemies follows the traditional dialectic madness of maintaining the Other at a “sacred distance” (Foucault 2013). Discursive encouragement to enjoy imaginary fullness is a type of social identification with one’s own symptoms. The promotion of a “phantasmagorical return to a pre-conflict societal state” (Stavrakakis 2002:99) means denying democratic rules under the disguise of ending the political indeterminacy that democracy *eo ipso* brings. Public advocacy for an anti-pluralistic order is revealed by the state spreading an imaginary situation of fear, with conspirators taking power and citizens losing (a sense of) security and certainty. On this view, all citizens will favor clear leadership and there will be no conflicts due to the lack of opposing sides. Conspiratorial encouragement to demobilize the entire conspiratorial class in modern Serbia encourages the idea to abolish democratic plurality institutions, the importance of every vote and opinion, as well as the significance of the democratic concept of periodic redistribution of power. Phantasmatic discourse of the current government representatives’ overthrowing follows in the footsteps of ideological structuring populist methods. It implies that a national and political unity is established through division and differentiation practices, while stability and permanence are ensured by the cultural enemy figure. Unlike democracy, which recognizes deficiency as “a possibility of mediation between universalism and particularism in order to achieve social unity,” where deficiency “does not refer to an external unifying principle of meaning” (Stavrakakis 2002:117), the autocratic order, based on the deficiency concept and difference categories, enables the effective functioning of ideology. A paranoid suspicion conspiratorial demonstration, which never examines only itself, bears certain similarities to the nationalist-populist program of public suspicion of anyone who does not express their loud agreement with the political unity concept. It does not mean, however, that conspiracy theories consumers are inevitably inclined towards authoritarian political options. Nor does it mean that these theorists are directly engaged in stifling democracy and introducing authoritarian practices into the democratic system. After all, a disturbing similarity between authoritarian and conspiratorial segregate passions is just one of the reasons why conspiratorial imagination is more commonly associated with authoritarian political sentiment than with the open society pluralistic arrangement.

As the entire history of tyranny illuminates things that happen when there are attempts to suppress the truth (Lacan 2011), the conspiratorial obsession with veracity possibly being crushed reveals a striking similarity with authoritarian practices of incorporating phantasmatic into political imagination.

## Ideological Efficiency of Substitute Phantasms: On the Populist Opacity of the Traumatic

A strategic commitment to the liberal paradigm and its formal EU membership does not hinder current Serbian government from entering phantasmatic signifying arrangements. Shortly after Kennedy's assassination, conspiratorial thinking did not remain the sole privilege of "the obsessive mind of paranoid right-wing lunatics" (Knight, cited in: Byford 2006:41). On the contrary, conspiratorial thinking prevailed in the mass media, culture industry, and political public sphere (Zupančič 2024). Judging from the Serbian experience, conspiratorial thinking cannot be viewed as a marginal phenomenon in contemporary democracy either.

Building on the conspiratorial tradition, that is to say, starting with early right-wing anti-Semitic ideas, through the post-communist leaders' nationalist ideas, all the way to the populist concepts of the contemporary nationalist regime, trans-historical attributes are revealed in the form of the Serbian elites' "sober drunkenness." It makes them rationalize cultural-historical conditioning via imaginary narratives. In general, an enduring obsession with conspiratorial discourse takes on features of a neurotic subject's typical behavior, the subject doing everything in their power to avoid confrontations with their own traumatic core. Recent narratives about imminent battles with state enemies, reveal striking similarities with previously described patterns. These bring one closer to the idea of fully understanding conspiracy theories as rarely being created *de novo*, with their "authors" "as a rule rely[ing] on the existing tradition of explanation" (Byford 2006:18).

Evolving from the Lacanian perspective that humans are illusion-driven to seek reality beyond language, one gets the impression the conspiratorial concepts semantic concealment is an element of the populist logic organization, its ideological efficiency being measured by its imperceptibility. Since the Otherness of the Other does not exist, and since the subject depends on the signifier and the certain impotence of human thought (Lacan 1983), the cause of a passionate self-subjugation to repressive axes can be sought, among elsewhere, in the signifying structures dominance. Through imaginary efforts these bring us closer the Otherness of the Other, simultaneously distancing us from confronting the contradictory truth unity. Still, it does not mean contemporary ideology is reproduced through unexpectedly creative and original social solutions. The synthesis that power can disperse effectively through the simultaneity of Foucauldian topology of social networks, flows, and interstations and Lacanian fields of castration fears and relentless desire for enjoyment is by far more influential. Contrary to those who regard conspiracy theories as a postmodern affectation, the Serbian experience indicates that we are dealing with the "ideological naivety of conspiracy theory" (Byford 2006:43). The etatization of conspiracy theories in the Serbian context affirms a methodological orientation that approaches them not merely from an epistemological perspective, but directs attention toward the "real material configurations

that include and necessitate such fictions” (Zupančič 2024:62). Put another way, here post-factual delegitimization of epistemic canons serves as a condition for reproduction.<sup>9</sup> The remediated distinction of the current discourse is nothing but the delirious sameness of the actions of old repressive axes: our experience of conspiratorial expressiveness change limitations is, in fact, part of the ideological continuum.

Conspiracy ideas of various profiles have been known to have flooded the Serbian media scene following the Covid pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the current regime’s conspiracy obsession is a significant indicator of a persistent mistrust towards the constitutive Other. It is not only a matter that, through these narratives, a paranoia is cultivated and that “through projection, the paranoid externalize all bad aggressive self and assign these feelings to other individuals or groups” (Robins and Poster, 1997:14). Being aware that paranoid mistrust is causing “transgressive jouissance of Unglauben” (Perunović, 2024:52), we must underscore the insight that, within this type of discursive formation, the collective locates the obscene enjoyment source. It also provides evidence for a stable discursive framework underlying the social organization of enjoyment. Although conspiracy theories address contemporary sociopolitical paradigms, we dare say their subject is the old specter of the Jew as “the fetishistic embodiment of a certain fundamental blockage” (Žižek 1989). The regime’s conspiracy motifs re-dramatization demonstrates social organization relies not only on the articulation of collective enjoyments but, perhaps to a greater extent, also on the resentment articulation, resentment itself having arisen from the blockage of access to enjoyment. The Lacanian standpoint, according to which

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9 Following a dramatic announcement of the discovery of conspiracies against political leaders, the public has been presented neither with its material evidence, nor there have been disclosed any specific and verifiable detailed information about the actors, circumstances, causes, and characteristics of the conspiratorial plans. On the other hand, the political leadership has not publicly distanced itself from the conspiratorial narratives of the media outlets: <https://nova.rs/vesti/hronika/svi-pokusaji-atentata-na-vucica-ostali-bez-epiloga/> (Accessed: 5/5/2024).

10 Like elsewhere in the world during and after the pandemic, in Serbia the most prevalent set of conspiracy theories has been associated with the coronavirus, led by anti-vaccine movements: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/covid-19-i-teorije-zavere-na-zapadnom-balkanu/30994279.html> (Accessed: 7/5/2024). Moreover, not losing their media appeal there has been a steady number of those who believe in well-known conspiracy theories which relate to Freemasons, Illuminati, NATO, intelligence services (primarily the CIA), the Bilderberg Group, and similar. Various versions of conspiracy theories about the danger of the New World Order, anti-scientific HAARP theories, the 5G network, flat-Earth theory, and similar also have a steady number of followers. Another curiosity is the incoherent and fragmentary theory proposed by the medical worker and popular Serbian politician Professor Dr. Branimir Nestorović, who suggests a conspiracy of the world’s rulers attempting to transfer minds into new bodies, as well as the idea that a certain number of people are direct alien descendants: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Kad-vrag-odnese-salu-Pet-bizarnih-tvrdnji-potencijal-nog-poslanika-Branimira-Nestorovica-1261>, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/branimir-nestorovic-skupstina-izbori-srbija/32735869.html> (Accessed: 7/5/2024)

the social order can survive only if it takes a leading role in the division, distribution, and reattribution of enjoyment, should be supplemented with the perspective of social structures persisting due to the subject's ability and possibility to achieve enjoyment "in the sacrifice of enjoyment" (McGowan 2004:13). From this perspective, one can explain the readiness of the Serbian subject to find enjoyment in the collective sharing of beliefs that bypass common sense logic. Participatory communities organized around the conspiratorial narratives of the ruling classes are established by common "bonds of deficiency... and gathered around the disappointments they bring" (McGowan 2004:17). At the same time, the self-producing disposition of the subject to enjoy hatred towards domestic traitors is recognized as the psychosocial foundation of the populist project of nationalist enjoyment.

Admittedly, castration anxiety dictates the subject's engagement in the transgression of their own situatedness. The problem, however, stems from the fact that constitutive indeterminacy can neither be assimilated by the phantasmagorical identifications of surplus in the Other, nor can it be overcome by ideological consciousness. As it has been explained by Freud, subjects derive their enjoyment not from mastery experiences, but rather from repeating moments when mastery fails (McGowan 2021). The subject of the Serbian political cartography resorts to the enjoyment of sacrificing enjoyment, and, contrary to the possibility of enjoying identification, the subject is left to drown in the resentment of their identification with other community members who themselves also believe the Other has stolen their imagined enjoyment.<sup>11</sup> If we place Lacan's thesis that anxiety is, as a rule, "related to loss" (Lacan 1956:273) into the current context of state actions proliferating conspiracy narratives about the potential loss of community, we are speaking of the phenomenology of castration anxiety as a central component of the neurotic structure (Evans 2006). Since the state apparatus introduces, into public communication, the "obsession with the enjoyment and machinations of the Other... to its powerful emergence in the form of an Other who is, as it were, obsessed with us" (Zupančič 2024:59). And since these actions, from a psychoanalytic perspective, can be interpreted as a "confrontation by the desire of the Other" (Evans 2006:12), the price that the Serbian collective pays for obscene enjoyment (second order jouissance) in phantasmatic narratives can be seen through the lens of heightened castration anxiety. Furthermore, as is revealed by the example of conspiratorial discourse, enjoyment in social structure can be recognized as both an organizational principle and a purpose of discrimination. True, phantasmatic substances actively participate in the unfolding of our everyday life,

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<sup>11</sup> Theoretical and investigative focus on decoding democratic sentiment do not reveal a hidden matrix of intelligibility similar to the conspiratorial notion. It is actually a pre-political mechanism through which political elites organize enjoyment in such a way that it is reduced to hatred towards those whom they believe have threatened the enjoyment. Considering our present does not rely on deep intentions (Fuko 1995), phantasmatic constructions provide specific platforms of meaning that populist-nationalist elites rearrange according to their ideological goals.

and the research point can be observed precisely in defining social change as *a difference in the power relations between the social and the phantasmatic* – as fundamental blocks of reality. It comes as no surprise that collective phantasms have always reshaped human reality. It is likewise a well-known fact that the propensity for enjoyment is a constant power behind individual and collective actions, to establish specific social relations. It is essential to note that open surrender to enjoyment phantasms makes subjects susceptible to the ideology (and manipulation) influence. As such, the current enjoyment in treating the Other can be interpreted as evidence of anti-democratic thinking and action.

Lacanian perspective on the meta-discursive quality of enjoyment ultimately offers a possible meaningful response to the puzzle of the rational subject's passionate preoccupation with imaginary schemes. Taking part in conspiratorial concepts does not automatically lead to one's resolving the castration complex enjoyment. After all, inhibitory silences are replaced by a scapegoat-seeking enjoyment, whereby nationalist enjoyment embodied in celebrating the mythical fullness of Unity is established as a new social obligation. Since conspiracy theories generate imaginary enjoyment formats, which in turn generate collective beliefs of a paranoid structure, it is true to say that given theories negatively impact political perception universality as well as cultural rationality inheritance, both of which are essential to make free, democratic choices. The fundamental reason behind the contemporary subject's succumbing to the self-destructiveness of their own desire stems from finding populist enjoyment in imaginary revenge scenarios as well as ostracism of the Other, who is blamed for stealing our original enjoyment. Given its power to assume the function of "another power operating beneath the apparent predominance of self-interest" (McGowan 2004:4), there is no surprise about transformative dynamics by which the conspiratorial impulse establishes the field of enjoyment as the basis for micro ideological repression formations.

An emerging cultural epoch of enjoyment (McGowan 2004) has been known to encourage the phantasmatic ideas circulation. The process, however, does not necessarily imply positive changes regarding social freedoms. The social axis shifting in favor of phantasmatic presentations contributes to the rise of disciplinary power amidst democratic regimes. Therefore, to accept populist call for the restoration of tribal enjoyment (McGowan 2021) speaks in favor of the well-known thesis that manipulation of enjoyment lies at the very core of every social power discourse. At the same time, growing influence of enduring conspiracies universality is the result of the work of an opaque dialectic of power. Its symbolic efficiency is ensured by an immanent trans ideological format. The element which makes the operational logic of populist power deployment through phantasmatic networks surprisingly effective can be explained by the attractive Foucauldian irony of the ruling post-truth dispositive, which convinces us that destabilizing established meanings is working for our "liberation." In other words, interpretation of the ways gnostic enjoyment of conspiratorial "discoveries" has been transformed into a political tool is an inspiring introduction to the interpretation of a global post-democratic society.

The de-substantialized subjectivity of the Serbian political being reveals a desire for phantasmatic identifications, which, neither signifies a freedom to surrender to auto-orientalist pathos, nor defines Serbian political space as a field where conspiracy theories permeate life and sublimate everyday reality. The Serbian dedication to produce antagonistic struggle, furthermore, does not reveal the outlines of a teleological linearity. The fact that the contemporary subject lacks substantial actuality and does not disclose valid methods to suspend paranoid alienation does not suggest they must continue to produce them through resentment mobilization. Following in the Hegelian tradition of the key role of contingency in embodying universality and necessity (Dolar 2017), democratic openness to recognizing the truth about the impossibility of perfect structuration takes on the contours of a lasting goal. This remains significant even under conditions of a paternalistic-nostalgic fanaticism of self-assurance. What conspiracy theorists recoil from, yet what remains crucial for defining the emerging era of obsessive enjoyment, is the imperative of confronting the contemporary subject's traumatic core: their anxiety is revealed in fear of what might go wrong, and their misery stems from not knowing that it is precisely happening.

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## Fantazmatski novum populističke matrice opsesivno-opresivne moći: ka deliričnoj istosti promena

### Apstrakt

Tematizacija savremenih promena u korist populističke matrice obuhvata ispitivanje označiteljsko-inaugurativne moći konspirativnih diskursa kao simptoma i političkog metoda marginalizacije demokratskog ustrojstva srpskog društva. Državna redramatizacija zavereničkih fantazama užasavajuće skrivenog delovanja neprijatelja ne tumači se isključivo u svetlu političke zaraze kojom populistički um globalnog sveta ispisuje istoriju savremenosti, niti središnja epistemička struktura postčinjeničnog sveta nalaže da se državna manipulacija paranoidnim strahom isključivo tumači kao deo nadmetanja više diskursa za hegemonom pozicijom. Studija ukazuje kako se je jedan od političkih učinaka namicanja fantazmatskih sadržaja ogleda u održavanju kontrarevolucionarnog žara populističkog vladanja i vatrenosti tradicionalnih politika pripadnosti. Razumevanje samodiskreditacije demokratskih standarda se oslanja na psihoanalitičke pretpostavke o predodređenosti subjekta njegovim fantazmima smeštenim u polje nesvesnog i lakanovskom anticipacijom o trajnoj nemogućnosti podnošenja vlastitog sopstva i želja. Dokazujući da sistemsko raspirivanje iracionalne sumnje kroz režimske medije potpomaže samoupostavljanju kredibiliteta vladajuće klase, istraživanje načina na koji poznatu dramaturgiju krivice primenjujemo za nove legitimizacijske procedure poentira u tumačenju promene kao razlike odnosa snaga fundamentalnih blokova stvarnosti – društvenog i fantazmatskog.

Ključne reči: konspirativni diskurs, populizam, fantazam, uživanje, paranoja