

On the Appropriation of Critique of Ideology by the Conspiracy Discourse

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Abstract

Critique of ideology aims to analyze power relations and mechanisms of domination and questions the emergence and spread of ideologies within our culture. The historical background to this critical reflection includes Marx and Engels, Gramsci, Althusser, Adorno and Horkheimer or Foucault. In the present day, however, this concept has been appropriated by various conspiracy theory media. This article aims to examine how this criticism is constructed within the framework of the conspiracy discourse and what possibilities of deconstruction, e.g. critical discourse analysis in the sense of Foucault, can offer us. The analysis is carried out using the example of texts from the conspiracy-theoretical German-language magazine “Rubikon” from the section “Media and Ideology Criticism” from the years 2022 and 2023. The aim is to show and understand how conspiracy theories attempt to conceal alternative truths through a pseudo-scientific perspective and language.

Keywords: Critical Theory, Conspiracies, Corpus Analysis

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Introduction

This article is based on the analysis of texts from the German online magazine “Rubikon”, published between 2017 and 2023 by “Rubikon-Verlag”. The “Initiative for the Democratization of Opinion Formation”, based in Mainz, is responsible for the content. The publisher's motto is “The future belongs to the brave” and it is justified with the following words: “Because in times of permanent global crises, not only the regular but also the free media have long since sunk into propaganda and one-dimensionality - and we believe that the last remnants of freedom of the press and freedom of opinion as well as decency, morality and democracy must be unconditionally defended” (*Rubikon-Verlag*, n.d.). However, behind these noble goals hides a conspiracy-theory medium and, as the following analyses will show, this description is indeed appropriate. Shortly after the magazine was launched, the experts were still cautious and initially only spoke of a “border crosser” (German: “Grenzgänger”) and even praised its critical analyses of leading media. On the one hand, the takeover of the published texts by other conspiratorial platforms is mentioned, but on the other hand, the distancing of some authors from the conspiracy theorist label is pointed out (Enkeler, 2017). Three years later, the criticism is stronger, and, as Holland-Letz (2020) demonstrates, the image of the serious online magazine crumbles after a closer look. These assumptions are later confirmed by other analyses (Waldmüller, 2022; Müller et al., 2023) and NewsGard Rating also rated the website with 35 points out of 100, which classifies it as unreliable because it severely violates basic journalistic standards. The report also states that the magazine publishes conspiracy myths and false and misleading claims (*DE-Rubikon.news-UPDATED*, 2020). The magazine's reach should not be underestimated, as it already had over one million readers in 2020, according to its editor Jens Wernicke (Holland-Letz 2020). For this reason, it is necessary to take a serious look at the success of this medium and examine the argumentative and rhetorical strategies used to reach the masses of readers.

Empirical Basis and the Corpus-Based Analysis

Above all, it is important to carry out an empirically based analysis. For our study, a text corpus was created consisting of the articles in the “Media and Ideology Criticism” section from the years 2022 and 2023 (*Medien- & Ideologiekritik*, 2017-2024). Dates, authors' names, and information about the authors were filtered out so that the focus of the research could be purely on the actual texts. The analysis was carried out with the help of Sketch Engine; German Web 2020 (deTenTen20) was used as the reference corpus. The empirical basis consists of a total of 464 texts and the corpus contains 954,326 words and 51,232 sentences.

After identifying the keywords, we can get a better picture of the thematic orientation of the analyzed journal section. The first 50 keywords (see Figure 1) are dominated by terms related to vaccination against the coronavirus, e.g. “vaccination”, “vaccine”, “vaccination campaign”, “compulsory vaccination”, “unvaccinated”, “vaccinated”, “to vaccinate”, “vaccination opponents”, “vaccination refusers”, “mRNA”, etc. This also includes proper names, such as company names (“Pfizer”, “Biontech”) or personal names (such as the German Federal Minister of Health – “Lauterbach” or the German virologist “Drosten”) and other words associated with the pandemic (“pandemic”, “Covid”, “lockdown”, “PCR test”). The other significant topic is related to the expressions that describe different types of presumed ideologies (“genderism”, “totalitarianism”, “totalitarian”, “transhumanism”, “technocratic”, “technocracy”) represent their narratives and power techniques (“narrative”,

“narratives”, “to cancel”, “lateral thinkers”, “trusted news initiative”, “fact-checkers”) and emphasize the anti-system struggle (“anti-fascism”). Here, too, there are several proper names that on the one hand represent the system and its thinking (“WEF”, “Musk”, “Harari”, “Selenskyj”, “Laschyk”) or on the other hand fall victim to it, criticize it or try to resist its ideology (“Meyen”, “Baab”, “Guérot”).

Lemma		Lemma		Lemma		Lemma	
1 impfpflicht	...	14 baab	...	27 impfstoff	...	40 selenskyj	...
2 ungeimpfte	...	15 pfizer	...	28 technokratisch	...	41 impfkampagne	...
3 ungeimpft	...	16 lauterbach	...	29 technokratie	...	42 antifaschismus	...
4 meyen	...	17 querdenker	...	30 pandemie	...	43 musk	...
5 wef	...	18 lockdowns	...	31 impfverweigerer	...	44 drosten	...
6 leitmedium	...	19 pei	...	32 krone-schmalz	...	45 laschyk	...
7 impfen	...	20 biontech	...	33 pcr-test	...	46 faktenchecker	...
8 geimpfte	...	21 covid	...	34 canceln	...	47 coronamaßnahme	...
9 genderismus	...	22 mrna	...	35 narrativ	...	48 impfnebenwirkung	...
10 totalitarismus	...	23 impfung	...	36 desmet	...	49 harari	...
11 transhumanismus	...	24 totalitär	...	37 narrative	...	50 minnicino	...
12 impfgegner	...	25 guérot	...	38 impfschaden	...		
13 metaversum	...	26 geimpft	...	39 tni	...		

Figure 1: Keywords analysis, single words.¹

If we look at the collocations of the most relevant keywords in both thematic areas, we come to the following results: Terms such as “compulsory vaccination”, “to vaccinate”, “vaccinated” or similar are mainly found in contexts related to pressure or force. Typical are phrases like: “you just have to get vaccinated, or you'll soon have to live like a hermit”, “you just have to get vaccinated, but try to take that very freedom in this damned 'dictatorship’”, “because vaccination refusers [are] criminals who may be subjected to enforcement measures in the event of compulsory vaccination” and so on. The term “unvaccinated” is accompanied by words such as “anger”, “discrimination”, “harassment” or “tyranny”. These and many other examples show that the two topics are closely linked and that they point to the critique of totality against which the texts seek to combat. The totalitarianism to be opposed is described as “technocratic”, “modern”, “contemporary”, “global” and “digital”. Phenomena like genderism or transhumanism are also named as components of the totalitarian system and the leading media are described as supporters and disseminators of these ideologies and totalitarianism. In the texts examined, these phenomena are interpreted as a danger or a

¹ Translation into English: 1 compulsory vaccination, 2 unvaccinated, 3 unvaccinated, 4 Meyen, 5 WEF, 6 conductive medium, 7 vaccinated, 8 vaccinated, 9 genderism, 10 totalitarianism, 11 transhumanism, 12 anti-vaccinationists, 13 Metaverse, 14 Baab, 15 Pfizer, 16 Rubikon, 17 Lauterbach, 18 lateral thinkers, 19 lockdowns, 20 PEI (Paul-Ehrlich-Institut), 21 Biontech, 22 Rottenfusser, 23 Regenauer, 24 Covid, 25 mRNA, 26 vaccination, 27 totalitarian, 28 Wernicke, 29 Guérot, 30 vaccinated, 31 Klöckner, 32 vaccine, 33 technocratic, 34 technocracy, 35 pandemic, 36 vaccine deniers, 37 Rodrian, 38 Krone-Schmalz, 39 Rossum, 40 PCR test, 41 cancel, 42 narrative, 43 Desmet, 44 narratives, 45 vaccine damage, 46 TNI, 47 Selenskyj, 48 vaccination campaign, 49 antifascism, 50 Musk.

threat, as the following examples show: “This basically explains the attitude dictatorship implemented via instruments such as genderism and wokeness as inherent in the system.”; “The totalitarian shock troops of genderism, racism and the self-extinction of humanity are closely connected.”; “Transhumanism [...] essentially stands for the abolition of Homo sapiens”.

These examples confirm some important characteristics of the language of conspiracy theorists that have already been described in various studies. Fuchs (2022, pp. 25–31) lists among the important elements of conspiracy theories (1) the thesis of concealment and secret governance, (2) personalization, (3) friend/enemy scheme, (4) violence, (5) rational irrationality and (6) determinism.

Of the keywords and their collocations shown above, the most obvious is the creation of a friend-foe image and rhetoric based on the juxtaposition of “us” and “them”. This constellation also forms the basis for evoking fear of the “others”, of their ideology and their power over “us” as well as violence against “us”. In these points, the language of conspiracy theorists overlaps with the language of populists. Using the example of Slovakian radical populist discourse on the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Štefančík (2022, p. 102–115) shows the same overlap. He also confirms, following Wodak, Ötsch, or Horaczek, that conspiracy theorists and populists spread fear and hatred to mobilize voters before elections. In general, we can speak of an emotionalization strategy that is typical for both conspiracy theories and populism. Fraščíková counts among the linguistic manifestations of emotions (concerning the analysis of populist rhetoric and language) primarily expressions denoting emotions and secondarily specific word choices, “i.e. those expressions that do not denote emotions directly, but at least indicate the speaker's emotional attitudes towards objects of extra-linguistic reality through connotations”, emphasizing that connotations do not necessarily have to be manifested at the lexical level, but that they also occur at the syntactic level (Fraščíková, 2020, p. 100). In the examples we have analyzed, we are mainly dealing with the second group of linguistic manifestations, i.e. indirect expressions or contextual connotations, whereby the corpus-based analysis may reveal rather the lexical than the syntactic level.

In addition to elements such as the friend/enemy scheme and violence (or emotionalization and the associated spread of fear), the following examples can also demonstrate the deterministic way of thinking: “One aspect of this debate that has so far received little attention is the (possible) connection between the ideology of transgender and transhumanism. If humans are increasingly to become just a small mechanical cog in the mega-machine, i.e. more machine than human, it would only be logical to dissolve their gender identity.”; “Eugenics and transhumanism are often cited as ideological motives of a ruling caste [...], in fact, eugenic approaches are likely to play a not insignificant role in the plans of the globalist ‘superclass’”. These examples show that conspiracy theories often make non-existent forced correlations that are typical of conspiracy mindsets - such as the fact that transhumanism is linked to transgender issues or even eugenics. This specific logic is also related to the aspect of rational irrationality. Fuchs (2022, p. 28) speaks of a “negative hyperrationality” that transitions into irrationality. Our research has also shown that, as part of this pseudo-rationality, examples can be found in which familiar terms are redefined and at the same time they are given negative connotations, such as: “After all, bioethics, a field of research that has played a central role during the coronavirus crisis, is nothing more than a euphemistic relabeling of long-forgotten ideas of racial theory, depopulation, and euthanasia.” In this case, bioethics is directly linked to racism, depopulation, and euthanasia

(characteristic of determinism) and is defined as the sum of these phenomena. We may call this argumentation strategy of conspiracy theories as redefinition or relabeling.

The aspect of personalization can also be shown in our text corpus. The analysis of multi-word combinations as keywords (see Figure 2) can display this more clearly than the previous single-word analysis. Concrete names of different personalities are represented here even more than with single words and account for almost 50% of the most frequented keywords.

Term	Term	Term
1 Karl Lauterbach ...	18 George Orwell ...	35 Mitglied des deutschen Bundestages ...
2 Great Reset ...	19 Christian Drosten ...	36 Milosz Matuschek ...
3 allgemeine Impfpflicht ...	20 Annalena Baerbock ...	37 Robert Koch-institut ...
4 Klaus Schwab ...	21 Bill Gates ...	38 Bayerischer Rundfunk ...
5 Rt De ...	22 Mattias Desmet ...	39 World Economic ...
6 maschinelle Intelligenz ...	23 Jens Lehrich ...	40 Markus Lanz ...
7 reaktionäre Kritik ...	24 Peter Thiel ...	41 Strategie der Macht ...
8 normaler Faschist ...	25 Boris Palmer ...	42 rote Linie ...
9 ganz normaler Faschist ...	26 Republik mit dem Finger ...	43 Trusted News ...
10 Wellcome Trust ...	27 gesamte Republik ...	44 Ken Jebsen ...
11 neue Normalität ...	28 Lothar Wieler ...	45 Le Bon ...
12 Elon Musk ...	29 gesamte Republik mit dem Finger ...	46 russisches Staatsgebiet ...
13 deutscher Bundesgesundheitsminister ...	30 freies Medium ...	47 ukrainischer Präsident ...
14 Ulrike Guérot ...	31 News Initiative ...	48 Nine Eleve ...
15 Homo sapiens ...	32 vierte industrielle Revolution ...	49 Winfried Kretschmann ...
16 Hannah Arendt ...	33 Noam Chomsky ...	50 Václav Havel ...
17 Olaf Scholz ...	34 Economic Forum ...	

Figure 2: Keyword analysis, multi-word terms.²

The pattern of “us” and “others” is also evident here. The names of politicians (Karl Lauterbach – Federal Minister of Health; Olaf Scholz – German Chancellor), scientists (Christian Drosten – German virologist), or businessmen and influential people (Klaus Schwab – Chairman of the WEF, Elon Musk, Bill Gates) appear here in a critical, negative perspective. Their mention in the texts is associated with a defamatory tone, generally emphasizing their incompetence or their dangerousness, as the following examples show:

² Translation into English: 1 Karl Lauterbach, 2 Great Reset, 3 general compulsory vaccination, 4 Klaus Schwab, 5 Rt De, 6 machine intelligence, 7 reactionary criticism, 8 normal fascist, 9 normal fascist, 10 Wellcome Trust, 11 new normality, 12 Elon Musk, 13 German Federal Minister of Health, 14 Ulrike Guérot, 15 Homo sapiens, 16 Hannah Arendt, 17 Olaf Scholz, 18 George Orwell, 19 Christian Drosten, 20 Annalena Baerbock, 21 Bill Gates, 22 Mattias Desmet, 23 Jens Lehrich, 24 Peter Thiel, 25 Boris Palmer, 26 republic with the finger, 27 entire republic, 28 Lothar Wieler, 29 entire republic with the finger, 30 free medium, 31 News Initiative, 32 fourth industrial revolution, 33 Noam Chomsky, 34 Economic Forum, 35 Member of the German Bundestag, 36 Milosz Matuschek, 37 Robert Koch Institute, 38 Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation, 39 World Economic, 40 Markus Lanz, 41 Strategy of power, 42 red line, 43 trusted news, 44 Ken Jebsen, 45 Le Bon, 46 Russian territory, 47 Ukrainian president, 48 Nine Eleven, 49 Winfried Kretschmann, 50 Václav Havel.

“Once you carefully observe the charisma of Olaf Scholz or Robert Habeck during public appearances, you sense a mixture of cold routine, insecurity, the forced reeling off of empty phrases, of sadness and yes, even of creeping fear.” (Rottenfußer & Wernicke, 2022)

“No matter what the voters think With Olaf Scholz and the ‘Golden Generation’ around Karl Lauterbach, Nancy Faeser, and Annalena Baerbock, the political establishment is openly mocking the population by no longer even bothering to give the appearance of competence and integrity.” (Rottenfußer & Wernicke, 2022)

“Now there is the fact that Bill Gates' foundation also gave the Pfizer Group quite a considerable sum of 17.252 million US dollars in September 2016. Anyone who now concludes that the foundation has also made profitable investments in Pfizer, as with Biontech [...] and not just today, is absolutely right. This brings us back to Albert Bourla, [...] one of the directors of Pfizer.” (Frey, 2022)

On the other hand, the personalization also includes names of personalities who demonstrate how the state and the powerful try to stop those who think differently. Again, these are politicians, academics, and well-known people (such as Ulrike Guérot - political scientist, Mattias Desmet - psychologist, Michael Meyen - media researcher, Ken Jebsen - German journalist and political activist and others), who are usually shown as victims of the system, criticism and the media. As in the following examples:

“Public Enemy No. 1: The existence-destroying way in which Ulrike Guérot was torn apart in public reveals a new level of brutalization in the culture of debate.” (Rossum, 2022b)

“Both the psychologist Prof. Mattias Desmet and the media researcher Prof. Michael Meyen describe something typical of secular societies after traditional certainties and offers of meaning have been lost: the exaggeration of scientific authorities.” (Unger, 2022)

“In the Rubikon exclusive interview, Ken Jebsen, Marcus Klöckner, and Roland Rottenfußer expose the strategies of the powerful to overcome even the last remnants of democracy.” (Riedl, 2023)

Furthermore, the names of different institutions correspond to the aspect of the personalization strategy. In the corpus we analyzed, it was primarily those against which the authors oppose themselves (such as the World Economic Forum, the Robert Koch Institute - German public health institute, or state media such as Bayerischer Rundfunk). They are accused of manipulating statistical data and tyranny or of using lying and aggressive rhetoric, as the following passages show:

“Numerical acrobatics of the Robert Koch - Institute and other protagonists of the Corona enforcement system.” (Rottenfußer, 2023)

“The WDR broadcast a podcast with its popular Doc Esser and the MDR sent Professor Alexander Kekulé into the media race [...] Hendrik Streeck was initially allowed to spread confusion about the novel and incredibly dangerous virus on Bavarian radio. But Christian Drost was undeniably the ace up the sleeve of the

pandemic, which owed its triumphant advance largely to its commentators.” (Rossum, 2022a)

Among the frequently mentioned key figures, there are surprising names such as Hannah Arendt, Georg Orwell, or Václav Havel, who do not belong to one side or the other. The significance and context of these names will be explored further in the next section of our article.

We also find personalized institutions from the opposite camp - such as the German-language program of the Russian propaganda channel RT DE. This had to be discontinued in 2022, what the authors interpret as censorship and silencing.

What could not be confirmed by our corpus analysis is the assumption that conspiracy theorists usually speak of secret governance and concealment. Expressions such as secret, secrecy, keep secret, conceal, hide, hidden, etc. are not so frequent in our corpus. Cumulatively, they represent around 0.03 percent of the empirical basis.

A Conspiratorial Critique of Ideology

As can be seen from our analysis so far, conspiracy theorists aim to criticize the political and social system, which in their eyes is set up and dominated by the elites. According to Michael Barkun, every conspiracy theory is based on three principles: 1) nothing happens by accident, 2) nothing is as it seems and 3) everything is connected (Barkun, 2013, pp. 3-4). This definition is now generally accepted and cited by many researchers internationally (see e.g. Butter, 2023 or Štefančík, 2022). However, the weakness of this definition lies partly in the fact that Barkun speaks of a conspiratorial belief. It is also common to speak of having faith or believing in conspiratorial theories. In this view, conspiracies are shifted into the sphere of religion and irrationality. This could also be the reason why they cannot be understood from the sphere of common sense. But modern conspiracy theories cannot always be seen in the sphere of the transcendental and irrational, as they imply an inner logic that is intelligible within the system itself. At the same time, they are not hermetic, but open and permeable to external influences and are very effective in the instrumentalization of different approaches.

In our analysis of the “us” versus “them” schema, we pointed to three names among the frequented corpus references that do not fit into either of the two categories. The philosopher Hanna Arendt, the novelist George Orwell, and the former president of Czechoslovakia Václav Havel neither belong to the criticized elite nor are they conspiracy theorists. What these authors have in common is their critical analysis of political power, totalitarianism, and the question of human freedom in this system. In the texts of our corpus, the ideas of these thinkers are instrumentalized in specific ways. Let's look at some examples:

“Modern totalitarianism shows no barbaric face, does not bare its teeth, does not need class struggle, does not need nationalism, does not rely on revolution, and yet it behaves as Hannah Arendt already saw it. [...] But of course, there must be an enemy that keeps society in perpetual motion. Movement is everything to the totalitarian system! The virus is ideal for this, not a villain, not a deviant, not a human being who has to be barbarically killed.” (Waltz, 2022)

“Even compulsory vaccination leads to people being vaccinated voluntarily in the end. Note the perfidious differentiation between people who want to be vaccinated

because they are obliged to do so and those who do so ‘entirely voluntarily’. So in Karl Lauterbach's world view, there is genuine voluntariness and enforced voluntariness. What a bizarre understanding of voluntariness [...] Orwell would probably have said: ‘Voluntariness is coercion!’” (Zedler, 2022)

“For him [Havel], ideology is the ‘power interpretation of reality’. In my language and terms of the here and now: the reality of the leading media, which we use not because we want to inform ourselves about reality [...], but because we want to know what others know or think they know (especially those who decide about our lives), and because we need to know the power relations of definition to survive. Who has managed to bring their topics and perspectives to the big stage, to the ‘Tagesschau’, to the ‘Süddeutsche Zeitung’, to the ‘Spiegel’?” (Meyen, 2022)

As we can see, the thoughts of Arendt, Orwell, or Havel are being used in the context of pandemic measures, vaccination, or the battle against the state media. In this way, the present in Western democratic countries is equated with totalitarian systems such as fascism or socialism/communism. At the same time, the conspiracy theorists feel committed to a fight against this supposed oppression and lack of freedom. If we look at the absolute frequency of the keywords in our corpus (i.e. without the reference to the deTenTen20 corpus) (see Figure 3), we can see that words such as “freedom”, “power”, “truth”, “democracy”, “ideology”, “propaganda” or “humanity” appear among the 20 most frequently used keywords. All these terms are also present in the philosophy of Arendt or Havel or the work of Orwell.

Word	Translation into English	Frequency
Freiheit	freedom	835
Macht	power	650
Impfung	to vaccinate	568
impfen	vaccination	508
Wahrheit	truth	482
Russland	Russia	477
Corona	Corona	430
Pandemie	pandemic	418
Ukraine	Ukraine	408
Virus	virus	380
Demokratie	democracy	351
Impfpflicht	compulsory vaccination	348
Maske	mask	328
Ideologie	ideology	311
Journalist	journalist	310
Impfstoff	vaccine	306
Propaganda	propaganda	217
Menschheit	humanity	215
Putin	Putin	212
Lauterbach	Lauterbach	204

Figure 3: The absolute frequency of the keywords in the focus corpus.

The language of modern conspiracy media uses a terminology that is philosophically related to the tradition of critique of ideology. Among the corpus references, the already mentioned and most frequented names Arendt, Orwell, and Havel are followed by names (in order of their frequency) such as Foucault, Chomsky, Adorno, Marx, Horkheimer, Engels, or Gramsci. The critique of ideology is based on the philosophers Marx and Engels, whose concept of

ideology was later taken up and redefined by Horkheimer and Adorno and then by other representatives of the school of critical theory. According to Horkheimer, ideology is “the ‘transfiguring appearance’ [German: Schein] or the ‘appearance necessitated by the specific form of the social process’, an ‘objectively necessary and at the same time false consciousness’” (Rehmann, 2019, p. 668). Our text analysis proves that conspiracy texts frequently use the term “appearance”. The verb “scheinen” occurs more than 2 times more frequently in our corpus than in the general corpus of the German language (analyzed corpus: rank 31; deTenTen20: rank 74). We see similar results for the term “falsch” (wrong), which is almost 2.5 times more frequent in our corpus than in general usage (analyzed corpus: rank 32, deTenTen20: rank 81). This statement also corresponds to the already mentioned thesis by Barkun (2013, p. 4) - nothing is as it seems. This shows that the conspiracy theorists attempt to see through the false consciousness and try to put it right. In doing so, they generally make use of theories and concepts on which there is a general scientific consensus. One of the things they have in common with Critical Theory is the ongoing critique of capitalism. According to Rehmann (2019, p. 676), what „Horkheimer and Adorno describe as the new ideology oscillates between positivist reproduction of the given ‘objective forms of thought’ of capitalist material society and manipulation – ‘business’ and ‘lies’“. It is therefore not surprising that “WEF”, “Klaus Schwab”, “Elon Musk” or “Bill Gates” also appear among the most frequently used keywords. We find a similar source in the critique of the media. Adorno and Horkheimer formulate the thesis that all media are driven to uniformity and that there is no substantial difference between culture and media on the one hand and industry on the other. In their words, freedom “is symbolized in the various media of the culture industry by the arbitrary singling out of average cases. [...] Industry is interested in people merely as its customers and employees and has reduced humanity, as well as each of its elements, to this exhaustive formula. Depending on which aspect is currently decisive, ideology emphasizes plan or chance, technology or life, civilization or nature” (2000, pp. 178-179). This aspect of ideological manipulation is one that conspiracy theorists like to take up repeatedly. Critical Theory also addressed the phenomenon of fascism very intensively. Not only the work of Adorno and Horkheimer but also that of Hana Arendt is exemplary in this respect. The conspiracy theorists speak of the phenomenon of fascism in a completely unreflected way. On the one hand, this is because they are disconnected from the actual historical experience; on the other hand, it is because they redefine this term for their means. In their use of the word, anything that is incompatible with their different way of thinking can be described as fascist. As the following passage demonstrates: “The active fascists are indispensable for an escalation towards dissenters that is necessary for the system. They are therefore often to be found in the propaganda media, where they turn the verbal escalation screw or appear as street fighters in the form of stormtroopers. It does not matter whether these street fighters define themselves as ‘right-wing’ or ‘left-wing’, they are the totalitarian vicarious agents of fascist regimes” (Feistel, 2022). As this example shows, unlike extremists, they do not necessarily have to position themselves on the left or right on the political spectrum. It is interesting, however, that among the analyzed texts we also find those that draw attention to the improper utilization and misinterpretation of Critical Theory. One example is the text *Rektionäre Rebellen* by Daniel Sandmann (2023). In this article, the author deals with the text “The New Dark Age. The Frankfurt School and ‘Political Correctness’”, in which Michael Minnicino creates a conspiracy theory according to which the Frankfurt School (i.e. Critical Theory) aims to destroy the foundations of Western culture. Sandmann critically reads the text and exposes Minnicino's untruths:

“While Preparata, in his search for the reasons for the devastation, believes he has found them in Foucault, in Minnicino's case it is the Frankfurt School - first and

foremost Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, but also Erich Fromm and Hannah Arendt - that is responsible for the civilizational catastrophe of the West. [...] The will to frame content with a certainty of interpretation leads to falsifications [...] From the point of view of the text, 90 percent of all intellectual greats of the 20th century are confused occultists, weirdos, drug addicts, and sexual deviants who are united with the Marxists in their will to destroy Western culture.” (Sandmann, 2023)

But the defense against Minnicino's accusations leads to the instrumentalization of the Frankfurt School's ideas for one's purposes: “A critical attitude towards mass media and, incidentally, towards the instrument of opinion surveys associated with them, for whose development Minnicino also sees the Frankfurt School as responsible via psychoanalysis, is by no means specifically reactionary. The potential of mass media to undermine any autonomy threatens every emancipative project on earth, every independence, kills every movement outside the line - this could be impressively observed in the mass media-controlled Corona attack as well as in the fascist Ukraine show of these days.” (Sandmann, 2023). The media criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer is defended and at the same time linked to the criticism of the current media image of the anti-pandemic measures and the war in Ukraine.

Using the example of media criticism from the side of conspiracy theorists, we also observe that they not only appropriate the language of scientific discourse, but also the language of the media itself. The general vocabulary used to describe conspiracies is integrated and transformed into the criticism of the leading media, as the following example shows: “The 'fact-checkers' in the 'truth media' are almost manically engaged in wiping any suspicion that goes in this direction off the table: 'It's not just on social networks that adventurous conspiracy theories are doing the rounds. Is Bill Gates behind Corona because he wants to force his vaccine on us and implant a chip? Yes, yes, always Bill Gates. Personalization is a very effective way of blurring any unwanted context. Finally, the clever choice of words is used to ridicule the 'conspiracy theory' - let's call it a well-founded suspicion because it is more truthful. This is how pseudo-journalism is practiced” (Frey, 2022). The simplistic language, personalization, and twisting of the facts of which conspiracy theories are accused are held against critics and the media in the same way. The schematic and simplistic representations of conspiracy rhetoric are interpreted as unrealistic and untrue: “Where the leading media scream 'conspiracy theory', we find the presumed reality of tomorrow” (Frey, 2022). They counter this “cry” with very sophisticated language and argumentation, which is underpinned by reading academic texts - as has been shown in the examples above - especially the texts of critical theory, but also Foucault's discourse analysis. The last example is the article by Sandmann (2022), in which the author analyzes the book “Psychopolitik - Neoliberalismus und die neuen Machttechniken” by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han and at the same time links it argumentatively to the conspiratorial debates about Big Data or Corona. Indirectly, the key concepts of Foucault's critical discourse analysis – such as the concept of power and biopower – are thus adopted and instrumentalized.

Conclusion

Our research shows that contemporary conspiracy theories cannot be reduced to simple narration and the dissemination of fabricated facts. Particularly in the more formalized forms of texts, for example in the German online magazine “Rubikon”, a very sophisticated way of expression is used. By adopting the language of scientific texts, by quoting and analyzing texts by proven scientists and theorists (e.g. philosophers of Critical Theory), the authors

embed them in their argumentation patterns. They also adopt the language, terminology, and arguments of their critics or the language of the mass media. It is not uncommon for existing terms to be redefined and corrected or relabeled. We can describe this type of adoption and adaptation of borrowed speech patterns as a kind of language mimicry. For this reason, it is important to take conspiracy theorists more seriously and not to accuse them of a lack of thinking. In particular, the more sophisticated texts, which themselves often come from educated people, journalists, philosophers, or scientists, have a great potential to manipulate and influence many rational people and intellectuals. For this reason, the texts should be subjected to serious critical readings, and discourse analysis in the sense of Foucault could be used as a tool to analyze the language of conspiracies for argumentative gaps and inconsistencies. Further research on this phenomenon could also go in this direction.

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