

# World Conspiracy Literature and Antisemitism

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## Introduction

The unthinkable happened on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020: Equipped with banners, flagpoles, and conspiracy theories, thousands of people flooded the steps of the German parliament, trying to force their way across the threshold of democracy. A mere handful of police officers managed to hold back the crowd, preventing the worst. Bearing an uncanny resemblance to the storming of the US capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the scene transpired after a mass demonstration of the right-wing anti-Corona contingent in Berlin. This movement of the so-called “Coronaleugner” emerged in early 2020 as a reaction against the German government’s efforts to stop the spread of the virus. The insurrectionists, recruited from enraged middle-class citizens, esoterists, and fascist activists, were driven by the belief that the Covid-19 pandemic and the government’s lockdown policy followed a covert plot to install a global totalitarian regime.

Neither united by its social base nor led by a monolithic political agenda (although dominated by extreme right organisations), the movement draws on a set of conspiracy narratives, spread by publications such as *Demokratischer Widerstand*, leaflets, blogs, and YouTube videos, as well as by prominent propagators like Ken Jebsen, Attila Hildman, the Afro-German singer Xavier Naidoo and the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who is an ardent supporter of the Coronaleugner-movement and editor-in-chief of *Demokratischer Widerstand*. While they do not present a coherent ideology or story, the comments share the same tenor: Covid-19 is but a pretext used by an obscure, globalist elite to institute an anti-democratic New World Order. (Cf. Agamben 1)

In spite of their anti-globalist agenda, these conspiracy narratives by no means present a particular German phenomenon but embody a global predicament: The core narrative that a global elite plotted Covid-19 appears in the French ‘documentary’ *Hold up* (Cf. Barnérias), features in the infamous US-American *Plandemic* (Cf. Willis), and finds itself repeated by Brazil’s president Jair Bolsonaro (Cf. Muggah). German activists participate in the online *qanon*-community and share its interactive conspiracy theory, which originated on US-American imageboards and fabricated Donald Trump’s presumed struggle against a clandestine communist ‘deep state.’

In the tradition of Carl Popper, for whom every attempt to understand social reality as a totality was tantamount to creating a conspiracy theory (Cf. Popper 110-115), we could understand conspiracy theories as a mere misinterpretation of our lifeworld. Oftentimes, theorists ascribe them to psychopathology or even a supposed ‘human nature,’ as this quote from the introduction to the recent anthology *Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories* (2021) demonstrates:

[C]onspiracy theories offer certainty when science can't keep up – like during a pandemic during which information on best health practice changes almost daily. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, the human appetite for explanations cannot abide there being none forthcoming. (Bodner et al. 36)

Such approaches are highly *functionalist*: Their aim is to explain the phenomenon of conspiratorial movements in order to inform politics and the public discourse. For that reason, the contemporary scientific discussion of conspiracy theory mainly focuses on its social or psychological aspects, leaving aside the fact that conspiracy theories are, above all, narrative texts that circulate around the globe and adapt to local contexts. In this paper, I argue that a dynamic canon of texts, which I call 'world conspiracy literature,' integrates local cultural conditions and national communities in a global sphere of circulating conspiracy narratives. To explore the interrelation of world, literature, and conspiracy theory, I take *The Great Reset* (henceforth TGR), a typical conspiracy narrative, as a point of departure. This narrative has a relatively well-defined plot and showcases the tendencies of contemporary conspiracy theory and its traditions as well as exposing its roots in antisemitism.<sup>1</sup>

My paper will start with a discussion of TGR as it is presented by *The Heartland Institute* and compare it with *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin*, a pamphlet co-authored by Adolf Hitler in the early 1920s. This comparison will reveal general structures of the rhetoric and narrative strategies of conspiracy narratives. In a second step, I will show that the rhetorical devices as used by conspiracy theories are connected to a structurally antisemitic worldview. In the last part of the essay, I will explore the possible interrelation between conspiracy theory and discourses of world literature.

## All the World's a Conspiracy – The 'Great Reset' Narrative

The World Economic Forum (WEF) held a virtual conference in May 2020 to discuss the current crisis of the pandemic-struck world economy. In the wake of this summit, leading politicians, economists, and public figures called for structural reforms of global capitalism: a "great reset," as Prince Charles phrased it in his address to the WEF (Cf. Inman). TGR soon became a catchphrase for policymakers as well as economists such as Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret, who published a book of the same title months after the Prince's speech, and entered the canon of Covid-19 conspiracy narratives. Based on a short videoclip in which Canadian Prime minister Justin Trudeau explained the outlines of the WEF-program, right-wing Twitter users interpreted the rather limited, corporatist reform-plans as proof of a worldwide, communist cabal that openly declared its goal of abolishing free enterprise capitalism (Cf. De Rosa). This interpretation in turn entered the *qanon*-mythology and became a talking point of the libertarian extreme right.

In philological terms, we could say that a form of re-reading took place: The participants of the conspiracy discourse postulated a deeper meaning of the catchphrase TGR and tried to detach the signifier from the signified, the catchphrase from the WEF-program. In such a reading, there exists a surplus of meaning, a significance that is no

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<sup>1</sup> A remark on spelling: As other theorists in the field, I will spell the subject-matter of this essay without a hyphen. The hyphenated spelling, "anti-Semitism" and "anti-Semites", could, even if not intended, suggest that there is a "Semitism" and thus "legitimize[...] a form of pseudo-scientific racial classification" (IHRA). Therefore, I follow the suggestions of institutions like the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance by avoiding the hyphenated spelling.

longer guaranteed through the immediacy of the sign, as everything signifies more and something other than it says. In order to unveil the meaning hidden within the text, the conspiracy theorist has to work through the text and unsettle the stability of signification.

A podcast episode by *The Heartland Institute* provides an example for such a conspiratorial work of interpretation in the context of the TGR-narrative. *The Heartland Institute* is a libertarian think-tank, founded in 1984 and known for climate change denial (Cf. Holden). Since early 2020, this institution has focused on the Covid-19 pandemic and argued vehemently against all lock-down-measures, spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories – techniques it previously used in lobbying against environmentalism (Ibid.). In order to influence the public, it produces, among other formats, a daily podcast series that is freely available on its website, where ‘researchers’ of the institute present their ‘analyses’ in a popular language. In the podcast episode from October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Justin Haskins, the editorial director and a research fellow at *The Heartland Institute*, and Donald Kendal, research fellow for Heartland's “Stopping Socialism” project, discuss the TGR conspiracy narrative. The plot of this narrative is easily summarized: “The global elites are seizing control.”(21:29-21:31) Driven by collectivist ideals, this elite supposedly seeks to undermine the free market in order to install a world government that is to control economic and eventually all social life on the planet (Cf. 16:20-17:01). TGR is understood as another step towards this final goal of international socialism (Ibid.).

Neither Haskins nor Kendal feel the need to explain the motives of the allegedly socialist elite – it seems beyond question that a consortium of economists and billionaires harbour the desire and political will to institute global bolshevism. In fact, the two understand socialism as neither a political opinion nor a movement or ideology, but make it appear shadowy and incomprehensible, just like its supposed elitist vanguard. What socialism means in the context of the TGR, what comprises a socialist worldview, and what societal transformations socialists envision is not discussed by Kendal and Haskins. They take it for granted that socialism signifies authoritarianism and government control – but even this connection is not made explicit. Instead, they implicitly conceptualize socialism as an opaque transhistorical force, as Haskins and Kendal go on a brief excursion on the constant presence of socialism in the last century (Cf. 4:36-5:10). In consequence, the term ‘socialism’ does not refer to an actual political program or platform, but represents a small elite’s perceived quest for total power that supposedly originates from an innate (and thus naturalised) lust for domination.

It would be easy, at this point, to deconstruct this *narrative*: The mere proposition that a global bolshevist elite nurses covert plans to replace capitalism with a collectivist world order necessitates so many presumptions that we could refute this ‘theory’ from a point of common-sense logic. Nonetheless, in doing so, we would fail to examine the inner structures of the conspiracy theory and its rhetoric, and thereby limit our analysis to a description of the factual falseness of the presented claims. Such a critique, albeit necessary, cannot replace a critique of the ideology inherent in the rhetoric and the narrativization of political opinions. Therefore, I propose to take Haskins and Kendal’s conspiracy theory seriously as a narrative and *text*, and to analyse its ideological function from the vantage point of its form.

A point of departure for this task can be found in an outstanding figure of speech that the two ‘researchers’ of the *Heartland Institute* apply time and again: Haskins and Kendal refer to the semantic field of reading and rhetoric in general, emphasizing the necessity to pay attention to the rhetoric of the globalist elite, identify their catchphrases, and close read them (Cf. 10:34-12:20). They demonstrate this procedure

when they interpret the semantics of the ‘reset’ to prove that the secret elite is attempting to introduce socialism. To reset, as they argue, means to depart from the status quo. Consequently, to ask for a great reset of capitalism cannot but signify a call for its abolition (12:58-13:16). According to this *political* philology, a secret masterplan manifests itself within textual documents – in speeches, catchphrases, essays. The interpretation of these documents can reveal the conspiracy as the underlying text in reference to which the other texts have to be understood. In other words, the meticulous philological fieldwork of conspiracy ‘theorists’ can reconstruct an underlying conspiracy text that does not exist in the form of an actual document but as a virtual and omni-present idea, structuring our lifeworld. This reconstruction is at the same time an act of production – the ‘authentic’ text of the conspiracy is retrieved *and* constituted in this act of interpretation. This means that politics becomes a question of rhetoric and philology. On the side of the presumed conspirators (i.e. the socialist elite of Kendal’s and Haskin’s imagination), politics is the transformation of the world according to the conspiracy text and through means of textual practices. On the side of the conspiracy ‘theorists’ like Kendal and Haskins, politics is the interpretation and analysis of the conspiracy in its textual appearance as well as the (re-)construction of the plot beneath the textual surface and beneath the surface of the *worldly con-text*.

Thus, in order to take this conspiracy theory seriously, a reader needs to assume that the world she knows is affected by a large-scale, trans-generational, and global conspiracy, and that it is consequently to be read as a repletion of the authentic conspiracy text or, in other words, a re-reading of that authentic conspiracy text, authored by the conspirators. The conspiracy theory reveals the world as signs, thereby turning it into a textual code that can be read. The rationale of the TGR narrative, which Kendal and Haskins establish here, necessitates the assumption of an original and authentic conspiracy text behind the surface of our social lifeworld: In this logic, the alleged conspiracy text flows through historical events as well as through other texts and accounts, and determines them. The world would be but the context of the ‘authentic’ and ‘original’ conspiracy text. Yet this means that the world may be real insofar as what transpires in the world has effects, but it is not authentic: it is the world of the conspiracy text, a fiction of the conspirators, that attempts to distort an ‘authentic’ reality, the reality of capitalism in danger of being replaced by the world of socialism.

In a slight adaption of our terminology, we might say that the alleged conspirators follow the historical narrative of socialism – a narrative that, as we are informed by Kendal and Haskins, pre-dates Marxism and is to be understood as a trans-historical project that constantly changes its appearance. It is this narrative that structures and informs the conspiracy text. Thus, what appears as social lifeworld is but the ongoing narration of the conspiracy text itself. The world conspiracy has turned its narrative – the conspiracy text – into the structure of society itself. Its aims to fully implement its masterplan (that is: the conspiracy text), and thus transform the world into a representation of this text. By interpreting society as a narrative relation between two texts, the political philology of conspiracy theory does not examine how the connection of these texts works, but in turn re-narrates the conspiracy text. As it uncovers the plot, demonstrating the existence of the secret conspiracy text, it renders history a story and thus the world a narration.

What comes to light here is not limited to the TGR narrative presented by Haskins and Kendall, but constitutes a general structure of conspiracy theory. This becomes evident when we compare TGR to another, prominent example of conspiracy narration: *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin* (1921), a text authored by Adolf Hitler and Dietrich Eckhart that shaped the ideology of the early NSDAP. Both

examples share the notion of the existence of a transhistorical plot to implement an international socialist world-government and consequently use similar rhetorical figures.

In the bestselling book, the esoteric poet Dietrich Eckhart, founding member of the NSDAP, discusses with his mentee Adolf Hitler the alleged Jewish world conspiracy. Years before *Mein Kampf*, which is dedicated to the memory of Dietrich Eckhart, Hitler fabricates the idea that this bolshevism is no new political movement, but an instrument applied by the Jews throughout the ages in order to subjugate the gullible masses (Eckart; Hitler 7). Just like in the *Heartland Institute's* story, Hitler detaches socialism from history and presents it as the ever-present 'world-enemy,' which constantly changes its hues. Allegedly, the Jewish world conspiracy propagates socialism and strives to gain total domination over the world (Cf. 16-19). Just like in the case of Kendall and Haskins, Eckhart and Hitler's text abounds with metaphors of reading. Hitler maintains that the world conspiracy is not incomprehensible but openly exposed and only in need of *interpretation* (Ibid.). He presents himself as the ultimate interpreter, the true philologist of world conspiracy, and thus he frantically collects quotes from myriads of works – from the Bible to economy textbooks – arranging them in an arbitrary order and interpreting them so as to prove the existence of the Jewish-bolshevist world conspiracy.

This is not to say that *The Heartland Institute* or the narrative of the TGR are in any way influenced by Hitler or Nazi-literature; irrespective of any historical interrelation, these parallels indicate a structural similarity between the narratives: In both cases, politics becomes a matter of a political philology that allows one to interpret the world as an enactment of the original conspiracy text. The conspiracy theorists re-narrate this text, uncovering the world as a world-fiction authored by the conspirators. Haskins and Kendall as well as Hitler and Eckart have a shared understanding that the current world order is unnatural, a deception organised by the conspiracy text that suppresses a natural order of things. As our reality is but the narration of the conspiracy text, conspiracy theory reveals it as fictitious, pointing towards another reality beyond the narration.

What is at stake here cannot be reduced to these two examples. Nonetheless, the comparison between the TGR narrative and *Der Bolschewismus von Moses bis Lenin* reveals a structure that is essential to conspiracy theory as *form*: Conspiracy theory functions as a mythologization of world, showing that the world is a narration of an underlying text, and, by revealing this, re-narrates the narration.

## **Regressive Anticapitalism and the Mythologization of the World**

Although it is only one structural element of conspiracy narratives, I claim that the act of mythologization constitutes the political essence of conspiracy thinking. Separated by time, space, and political context, the authors of the TGR narrative as well as the founding fathers of National Socialism react to impositions of the modern world. For *The Heartland Institute* this imposition lies in the obvious failure of neoliberal capitalism and the emergence of an unspecified anti-neoliberal block in contemporary left-wing politics. For Hitler and Eckart, it is the decline of the German Reich and the rise of emancipatory movements that negate traditional society. By presenting the world as narration, they render complex developments such as capitalist crises, societal transformations, and the dissolution of perceived traditional values tangible as

conspiracy. The assumption that society adheres to a narrative structure serves as an explanation of these impositions. In the words of Fredric Jameson:

In the widespread paralysis of the collective or social imaginary, to which “nothing occurs” (Karl Kraus) when confronted with the ambitious program of fantasizing an economic system on the scale of the globe itself, the older motif of conspiracy knows a fresh lease on life as a narrative structure capable of reuniting the minimal basic components: a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility; or, in other words: the collective and the epistemological. (Jameson 9)

The abstract processes of capitalism, resulting in the “the widespread paralysis of the collective or social imaginary,” render the world *incomprehensible*. It is not a closed lifeworld simply there at hand but a place of extraction and the circulation of commodities, bodies, and information, structured by dynamic networks and relations in a global market economy. Under capitalism, ‘world’ is open and processual, and cannot be experienced as a place we fully inhabit. Conspiracy theory does not develop an understanding of world as opening, but reduces these processes to a simple ‘explanation,’ to the interference of obscure entities through means of narration. By narrating world as conspiracy, conspiracy theory negates the world as process and instead constitutes a certain image of the world, or rather: a worldly imaginary that engages the *plot device* of a worldwide complot to intertwine the lifeworld of our experience and the abstract realities that govern it. The world of conspiracy theory is the defined, closed stage upon which the plots and plays of dark agencies, who designed this very space, take place.

We arrive at the conclusion that the narrative structure of conspiracy theory presupposes, or rather, comprises a reduction of social processes. In this sense, the supposed ‘conspiracy’ of conspiracy theory functions as a lens through which social realities are observed and rendered readable as narrative. The rhetorical figure of conspiracy constitutes a concrete relation with the world and establishes a worldview through modes of representation. In this sense, we could read conspiracy as a form of metonymy, in so far as metonymies “convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible” (Burke 506). The figure of conspiracy reduces the totality of a social formation and makes it tangible as narration; social reality is no longer abstract but appears as the concrete expression of the conspiracy text. Through conspiracy as trope, that which is not representable becomes represented.

Yet a trope is never a harmless thing, as Kenneth Burke shows in his seminal *Four Master Tropes* (1945). Tropes must be read as manifestations of an epistemological and ontological position, a literarization of the ground upon which all discourses informed by this epistemological predetermination can take place: “My primary concern with them here will not be with their purely figurative usage but with their role in the discovery and description of the truth.” (Burke 503) In other words, the epistemological and ontological problematic cannot be separated from the problem of representation. As rhetorical devices, tropes structure epistemological perspectives and scientific discourses (Cf. *Ibid.*). They produce truth in the sense of a specific relation to the world. Through tropes, a text establishes how and what its world is.

Consequently, the metonymical nature of conspiracy narratives is charged with discursive, political meaning. To reduce the abstract totality of the social formation to a corporeal form (the conspiracy text and its authors) constitutes the basic operation of structural antisemitism, as, for example, Moishe Postone explains (100-102).

This necessitates some excursive remarks: Postone, among others, claims that antisemitism in its modern form<sup>2</sup> is not a mere variation of racism:

Anti-Semitic thought is strongly Manichaeic, with the Jews playing the role of the children of darkness. It is not only the degree, but also the quality of power attributed to the Jews that distinguishes anti-Semitism from other forms of racism. Probably all forms of racism attribute potential power to the Other. This power, however, is usually concrete, material, or sexual. It is the potential power of the oppressed (as repressed), of the “Untermenschen.” The power attributed to the Jews is much greater and is perceived as actual rather than as potential. Moreover, it is a different sort of power, one not necessarily concrete. (99)

This actual power attributed to the Jews renders antisemitism a universalist ideology, i.e., within the discourse of antisemitism, the term “Jew” is not confined to the particularities of certain racial traits, but stands in for a dark power, a structure behind the very fabric of society. In consequence, antisemitism figures as the ultimate explanation of everything, for it assumes the ‘international Jewry’ behind every social phenomenon. This means that antisemitism operates completely independent of Jews themselves. Thus, even people who have nothing to do with the Jewish religion or who negate any supposed ‘Jewishness’ can fall victim to antisemitic hate and persecution, as Postone shows. The rationale of modern antisemitism follows the unofficial motto of Karl Lueger, mayor of Vienna and famous proponent of antisemitism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who declared: “Wer Jud’ ist, bestimme ich” (Frauenfeld 85).

Thus, Postone proposes to read antisemitism as an autonomous structure that constitutes its own other, whom it seeks to exterminate. It does not depend on any Jewish reality but on a metonymical reduction and naturalization of social relations, which constructs the figure of ‘the Jew’ as an internal enemy and a personalization of capitalist social relations and the capitalist abstraction of social life; antisemitism therefore has to be understood as effect and affect of the capitalist formation. The figure of ‘the Jew’ stands in as a metonymy for abstract social relations. Seeking to abolish it means to exterminate the corporeal reality of its originator:

The “anticapitalist” attack, however, did not remain limited to the attack against abstraction. On the level of the capital fetish, it is not only the concrete side of the antinomy which can be naturalized and biologized. The manifest abstract dimension was also biologized—as the Jews. The fetishized opposition of the concrete material and the abstract, of the “natural” and the “artificial,” became translated as the world-historically significant racial opposition of the Aryans and the Jews. Modern anti-Semitism involves a biologization of capitalism—which itself is only understood in terms of its manifest abstract dimension—as International Jewry. (Postone 105)

The core of this structure is a fetishistic understanding of capitalism, which *reduces* social relation under capitalism to a corporeal form. Thrown into the sphere of commodity production and capital accumulation, the individual experiences alienation

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<sup>2</sup> That is: an ideology rooted in biologizing social relations that differs distinctly from the mere religious prejudice of anti-Judaism. (Cf. Weinberg 18)

(102-105). The individual is reduced to her labor power, which in turn is commodified. She does not control her labor, nor her product, but she has to sell commodities (her labor power), thus entering into the sphere of abstract commodity exchange (Ibid.). The progressive, emancipatory position, as exemplified by Marxism, is to not simply to negate this abstraction but to realize that the abstract reality of capitalism already contains the moment of its sublation. In contrast, the *regressive* anti-capitalism of antisemitism consists in a simple negation of the abstraction of the capitalist lifeworld. Inspired by a desire to return to the bonds of a pre-modern, hierarchical society, abstraction is understood as an invasive force disturbing the idyll of the imagined pre-modern (e)utopia. In consequence, antisemitism understands the commodified lifeworld of the capitalist formation not as a historical structure but as a monolithic force that cannot be explained but needs to be retraced to an originator.

For this reason, antisemitism is always 'structural:' It is not bound to Jews, but defined by its metonymical structure. Therefore, it can replace 'Jews' with terms like 'the elite,' 'the East Coast' (referring to New York as financial capital) or even 'the state of Israel,' as long as it integrates these 'entities' in its metonymical reduction of the capitalist lifeworld (Ibid.). From here, we can return to the notion of metonymy: The displacement of the abstract into the corporeal is the basic structure of antisemitism. In other words, antisemitism is a worldview organized by metonymy.

To turn this around: We can say that a political discourse emerged with modernity that used the trope of metonymy to explain the world. Within this metonymical worldview, modernity is understood as a distortion for which concrete entities are responsible; thus, capitalism is not seen as a self-contained system, but as a machination following a certain plan of dark agencies. This discourse of regressive anti-capitalism that underlies antisemitism, as Postone shows, therefore not only rejects the existing, capitalist world order as unnatural deviation from a harmonious pre-modern society, but also seeks to exterminate the originators of this plan.

This metonymical rationale is the basic structure behind conspiracy theories. Even if the figure of 'the Jew' is not mentioned at all, the very operation of reducing a social totality to a concrete instance, follows the same structure as antisemitism. And it is this structure that distinguishes modern from pre-modern conspiracy theories: Pre-modern conspiracy theories (e.g. the conspiracy narrative around the Roman senator Catilina (108-62 BC) of the late Republic) tend to deal with specific intrigues and ascribe the conspiracy to specific socio-political contexts (Cf. Cubitt 2-5).<sup>3</sup> After the French Revolution, i.e. with the emergence of the modern social formation, a new form of conspiracy theory arose that, delivers explanations for the totality of social affairs.<sup>4</sup> Instead of focussing on concrete intrigues, these *modern* conspiracy narratives are universalist in essence; they establish worldviews that explain social transformations as governed by the machinations of a secret and global cabal (Ibid.). They rely on the metonymical structure, we discussed in the case of antisemitism.

An investigation of the rhetoric of conspiracy theory reveals that this form is intrinsically connected to modernity and to antisemitism. *Modern* conspiracy theories reproduce motifs and figurations present within the antisemitic imaginary (Cf. Byford 94-97), and assume the existence of a global conspiracy that controls all aspects of social life. Thus, we arrive at the conclusion that we cannot separate the narrative form of conspiracy theory from its political horizon. Through conspiracy as a trope, world becomes comprehensible as narration; conspiracy narratives constitute world through

<sup>3</sup> E.g. the quest for financial gains or for control over the state or local community.

<sup>4</sup> The most notable example is Augustin Barruel's infamous *Memoirs pour servir a l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (1797).

mythologization. But this act, whatever its content may be, always reduces abstract societal processes to imaginary originators of the conspiracy text and the state of the world. The narrative structure refutes abstraction in favor of a reductionist, metonymical logic, which bears resemblance to the structural logic of antisemitism.

Conspiracy theory, we could say, presents world as narration. This operation of narrativization of social relation is connected to a rhetoric of reductionism. It is, we can now say, an expression of regressive anti-capitalism. Thus, even if conspiracy theories do not focus on Jews or use antisemitic stereotypes, they *structurally* repeat this central logic of antisemitism.

## Conspiracy Theory as Undercurrent of World Literature

As we have seen, conspiracy theories in our modern sense coemerge with capitalism. While there were conspiracy narratives before, the form we examined here, i.e. a universalist albeit regressive, antisemitic ideology that reduces and mythologizes social relations, is a result of capitalism. It is the very process of global capital circulation that also gave rise to the concept of world literature: Already Goethe conceived *Weltliteratur* as literature in circulation on a world (read: European) scale, which rendered literary works from different cultures available to the middle-European reader (Eckermann 132). In their re-reading of Goethe in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels connect the term to the emerging, world-wide sphere of capitalist production: *Weltliteratur* here means the hope for an emerging global culture beyond the narrowmindedness of nation states (Marx, Engels 478). Both Goethe as well as Marx and Engels understand world literature in the context of (worldwide) exchange and circulation; a point contemporary scholars, though divided by different approaches, agree on.<sup>5</sup> World literature is an expression of the expansive forces that integrate the whole globe into the sphere of its *world* market, transgressing the boundaries of national cultures. Thus, the very same forces of abstraction gave rise to modern antisemitism and opened up the spaces of an emerging world literature. Both complexes share, in this sense, a common origin; they are to be read (and are only readable) on the horizon of global capitalism.

Of course, this is but a superficial correlation. Yet beneath the surface, an immanent connection between world literature and conspiracy theory becomes tangible if we think through the position of 'world' in world literature and conspiracy theory respectively. The 'world' in world literature is conceived by literature and constituted through cultural practices such as translation, reading, and interpretation, i.e. through philology, as Erich Auerbach famously noted in his *Philologie der Weltliteratur* (1952):

Jedenfalls aber ist unsere philologische Heimat die Erde; die Nation kann es nicht mehr sein. [...] Wir müssen, unter veränderten Umständen, zurückkehren zu dem, was die vornationale, was die mittelalterliche Bildung schon besaß: zu der Erkenntnis, daß der Geist nicht national ist. (Auerbach 456)

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<sup>5</sup> David Damrosch, for instance, holds that works of world literature are texts that gain meaning through their circulation, translation, and global reception (Damrosch 16-19). Pascal Casanova likewise explores the preconditions of circulation of literary texts and their integration into the context of literary practices of the metropolitan centre while, to name only a few theorists, Franco Moretti proposes that emerging world literature renders methods of distant reading necessary to grasp the forms of circulation (Moretti 4-9; Cf. Cassanova 3-4).

In any case, earth is now our philological home, for the nation can no longer be our home. [...] Under different circumstances, we have to return to the notion that pre-national, medieval education already possessed: *spirit* is not national. (translation my own)

These lines reflect Auerbach's experience during his long, forced exile in Istanbul and his persecution by the Nazi regime: Bereft of his homeland, literature and philology provided him with a second home – a cosmopolitan motherland neither bound by national borders nor national languages. According to Auerbach, world literature provides an opening through which humanity can realise its connectedness against the foreclosure of nationalism (and in consequence of national philology). It is the obligation of philology to maintain this opening, to institute and realise the inherent cosmopolitan potential of literature, and to establish a post-national order, for "Geist [ist] nicht national." Thus, world literature becomes an exercise of practical cosmopolitanism, and reading or translating world literature means to partake in constituting world through literature.

Auerbach's firm belief in world literature as a driving force of cosmopolitanism is rooted in the European tradition, especially in the thinking of Goethe and Kant, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak mentions in discussion with David Damrosch (Spivak, "Comparative Literature/World Literature" 371). Yet even though Spivak criticizes this notion of liberal cosmopolitanism, she repeats this operation in conceptualizing world literature and the discipline of comparative literature. Drawing on Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*, Spivak introduces the concept of *teleopoiesis* as a form of imaginative and textual practice of reading, that keeps the spatial and temporal distance between text, reader, and context open, allowing for a self-reflexive yet indeterminate relationship between them (Cf. Toth 460). To quote Spivak, literature means "looking for our definition in the eyes of the other, as figured in the text" (Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 25). Stressing the singularity of the literary text (cf. Longxi 520), Spivak holds that the experience of literariness can denaturalize national or other identities and open up spaces of collective (even planetary) interaction and transformation (Cf. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 33-37): Toth understands Spivak as saying:

To put it crudely, this means suspending the clamour of our existing world to listen to texts – particularly from 'peripheral' literatures – and their alternative world-formations. It means allowing ourselves to see our world anew through the defamiliarizing lens of 'peripheral' literatures so that we may think and act differently in the service of a better world. (Toth 461)

In other words: Even while her concept of world literature differs from Auerbach's *Philologie der Weltliteratur*, Spivak nonetheless claims that literature gives rise to a world of political practices and cultural discourses.

Goethe, Marx, Damrosch and others share the following account: 'World literature,' refers to the constitution of world through literary practices. This is to say that while the emergence of a shared, global lifeworld is a pre-condition of world literature, this world is simultaneously pre-determined by literature itself. It is realised through the literary practices of world literature. Traveling forms engender forms of philological theory, which themselves have "a tendency to travel [...]" so that linkages and comparisons can be made" (Longxi 521), resulting in the construction of new, worldly contexts. World is a literary effect of narrating world, so to speak.

This structural dimension of world literature applies to conspiracy theories as well: Conspiracy theories are narrative texts – sometimes in book-form, sometimes published on digital platforms – that travel, just like world literature. And just like world literature, these narratives are connected to philological practices that render world readable as a text, albeit under a completely different horizon: antisemitism. In conspiracy literature, the narration of world as well as the integration of abstract social formations into narrative structures and philological practices – the very processes that determine what is ‘worldly’ in world literature – imply a tendency toward reduction that is inseparably connected to the structure of antisemitism.

Thus, Auerbach’s liberal, cosmopolitan hope for world literature becomes questionable: Conspiracy theory could be understood as a clandestine undercurrent of the discourse of world literature, which, albeit upholding progressive values, is charged with its regressive other. World literature and conspiracy theory emerged in reaction to the formation of capitalism and provide ways to render world comprehensible through mythologization. While world literature restricts its narratives to the diegetic world, conspiracy literature turns narration into the building plan of its world, transgressing the literary in order to establish a worldview. Yet in both cases, world is a literary effect, constituted as and through literature. Conspiracy theory represents an alternative form of world literature and the literary practices of each are not immanently different as both world literature and world conspiracy literature constitute world as narration and are forms of cultural production determined by capitalist society. The cosmopolitanism of world literature and the antisemitism of world conspiracy literature are not completely opposed, but aspects of the very same field.

In order to assess the political dimension of conspiracy theory without pathologizing the phenomenon or affirming the existing liberal order, we have to read it from the vantage point of literature. Such a reading, informed by philological discourses of world literature, yields a new, critical understanding of this complex. For this reason, the analysis and critique of conspiracy theory should not be restricted to sociology alone but constitutes philology’s task at hand. Times in which traveling conspiracy texts determine our political landscape necessitate a political philology that focuses on these texts as political narratives.

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