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A Hypothesis of Conspiracy to Re-Enchant the World

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Abstract: Many scholars have understood conspiracy theories as sense-making mechanisms. Among them, a particular strand further inspected them in parallel with religion and magic. This comparison bears the risk of framing conspiracy theories as irrational interpretations and anachronisms with respect to contemporary ways of explaining reality. This contribution takes off from the reflections of those who have highlighted this risk. It tries to confront the possibility of using the concept of enchantment without implying a normative judgment on the irrationality of conspiracy theories. This paper carries out this effort by closely inspecting Max Weber's texts. I argue that Weber's notion of enchantment and disenchantment allows for a punctual use of both, devoid of normative implications. After setting out this non-normative notion of enchantment, this paper examines the characteristics of the enchanted worldview and its usefulness in reading conspiracy theories. Finally, this paper supports this effort using the identified characteristics to systematise a reading of conspiracy-based accounts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; Enchantment; Disenchantment; Max Weber

1. Introduction: Studies on Conspiracy Theories from the Earliest Days to the Uses of Enchantment

Across the broad spectrum of conspiracy theory studies, there is consensus on a general definition: conspiracy theories are readings that interpret events and historical processes as effects of the scheming of a secret conspiracy. Concerning their argumentative logic, Barkun (2013) identifies three principles always present in conspiracist worldviews: the ideas that nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. These elements point to the idea, also detected by other scholars, that conspiracist accounts put forward a worldview which rejects randomness and envisions historical processes as governed by design. In the following pages, I analyse conspiracy-based interpretations through the lens of the Weberian notions of enchantment and disenchantment. Various authors have already employed these two notions to investigate conspiracy theories, and their analyses have been criticised as being keen to stigmatise (Partridge 2005; Aupers and Houtman 2010; Dyrendal 2013; Asprem 2014). Nonetheless, this paper argues that directly analysing Weber's text can set the ground for the non-normative use of enchantment to study conspiracy theories. This section follows the evolution of conspiracy theory studies to situate the most notable authors who used the comparison with religion.

The expression of conspiracy theories has an articulated and contentious history. It appeared in academic literature in the 1940s in Karl Popper's notion of a 'conspiracy theory of society' (Popper [1945] 2013, p. 306). It came to attention outside the academic field only after the success of Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Hofstadter [1964] 2008). Hofstadter's understanding condenses the contradictions and issues in the expression 'conspiracy theories' until now. On one hand, he considered belief in conspiracy theories as a fringe phenomenon akin to clinical paranoia. On the other, Hofstadter spoke of conspiracist interpretation as an argumentative style.

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Nonetheless, in his argument, he combined these two lines, eventually suggesting an association between psychopathology and the (sometimes broad) areas of the population using the argumentative strategy of conspiracy. A similar combination is present in later studies. For example, psychological research moved toward defining a 'conspiracy mentality' (Goertzel 1994). This concept served to circumscribe specific characteristics (social, psychic, attitudinal) which identify the population of individuals prone to believe in conspiracy theories (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Swami et al. 2010). Through 'conspiracy mentality', conspiracy theories (and, mainly, conspiracy theorists) became a potentially all-encompassing category while still being associated with extremism and psychopathology.

In the 1990s, some literature emerged that either criticised this approach or followed different research paths. The critiques stressed the necessity to acknowledge the heterogeneity of conspiracy theories and their irreducibility to a general—irrational—mentality (Buenting and Taylor 2010; Dentith 2018; Basham and Dentith 2016). The authors espousing this critical approach sustained that the rationality of conspiracy theories can be assessed only by investigating each theory individually. They founded this approach on a minimal definition of conspiracy theories to avoid any inherent qualification concerning their epistemological status. This minimal definition identifies conspiracy theories as explanations of historical events "in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an "official" explanation of the same historical event" (Coady 2006, p. 199).[1]

Other approaches, similarly avoiding references to the general conspiracy mentality, focused less on the definition issue and more on the needs fulfilled by conspiracy theories (Jameson 1988; Fenster 1999; Melley 2000; Knight 2000). These studies focus on the historical and political context. In some instances, they develop this frame to understand which conditions create the ground for conspiracy theories to thrive in this specific age (Jameson 1988; Fenster 1999; Melley 2000; Knight 2000). In this vein, studying conspiracy theories allows us to investigate the state of the art of modern and postmodern politics and thought. Sometimes, the attention is on the roots of specific theories or in trying to discern between different typologies and their development. This narrow focus allows reflecting on the relationship between some theories and specific political ideologies (Fenster 1999; Solinas 2023).

Consequently, these studies can isolate the theories that are more prone to political instrumentalisation: those that reframe long-lasting processes in terms of a conspiracy, adding a demonising function that strengthens a specific political interpretation. Contrarily, the theories stemming from the necessity to make sense of striking events usually present ambiguity regarding their link with political ideals (Solinas 2023). From a historical–political angle, the studies mentioned above observe conspiracy theories as interpretations of historical processes or events, which are themselves imbued with historicity (Olmsted 2009). This approach makes it possible to keep a genealogical focus on the origin of each theory: the historical framework they emerged from, the events they decipher, and the longstanding tropes they draw on.

The genealogical attentiveness of these studies further allows us to contemplate conspiracy theories' epistemological status. For example, some authors reflect on the use and legitimacy of specific theories from a historical perspective and in the moment of their diffusion. This approach fosters awareness of the normative significance of the expression 'conspiracy theories' itself. In the West, for example, conspiracy theories were an unproblematic strategy of argumentation in institutional politics until the mid-twentieth century that only later came under stigmatisation (Butter 2020). In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, conspiracy theories were, in fact, legitimate rhetorical structures in political discourse. For the eighteenth century, the most notable example is Augustin Barruel's book on the Illuminati: *Memoirs illustrating the history of Jacobinism* (Barruel 1978). As for the nineteenth century, Butter (2020) notes that the "founding myth of the Republican

Party, whose 1860 election victory sparked the Civil War, was the conspiracy theory that the so-called Slave Power was seeking to extend slavery to the whole of the USA" (Butter 2020, p. 99). A genealogical approach to the conspiracy theory concept led some authors to observe further how their epistemic status depends on multiple situated contingencies (Birchall 2006; Pelkmans and Machold 2011; Thalmann 2014; Harambam 2020). Considering these latter strands of inquiry, it is possible to appreciate that a genealogical approach applies to conspiracist argumentation and the concept of 'conspiracy theories' itself. Such an approach allows us to investigate the operative rules of conspiracist constructions while considering their historical stratification and timeliness. At the same time, the historical–genealogical attentiveness restrains against normative tendencies when applied to the concept.

This genealogical predisposition also resonates with sociological–religious studies interested in conspiracy theories. As previously mentioned, many of these studies used this comparison with religion in stigmatising terms. This trend was initiated by Popper, who characterised his idea of a 'conspiracy theory of society' as a "result of the secularisation of a religious superstition" (Popper [1945] 2013, p. 306). Aupers and Harambam (2018) reconstruct how other authors used such a comparison (i.e., Pipes 1997; Barkun 2013). They clarify that while helping understand "the elements of religious meaning informing conspiracy theory", these are not value-free analyses (Aupers and Harambam 2018, p. 50). In their opinion, this normative charge results from the load of irrationality implicit in the association with religion. This paper argues that disentangling enchantment from religion, magic, and secularisation effectively limits this trend. The above-mentioned sociological–religious studies retrieve the notion of re-enchantment from Max Weber. And it is precisely in Weber's analyses that disenchantment and secularisation or enchantment and religious/magical beliefs are not synonyms. By inspecting his texts, this paper claims that it is possible to identify the logical characteristics of enchanted and disenchanted worldviews and distinguish them from the historical instances in which each vision of the world appeared. In this way, maintaining an elective affinity between conspiracy theories and enchantment does not imply assuming them as irrational resurgences of religion or magic. Section 2 of this paper argues this possibility in depth.

Nonetheless, many studies trace the affinity between religious belief and conspiracy theories in non-stigmatising terms. Some of these studies focus on the intersection between conspiracy theories and new spiritualities (i.e., Partridge 2005; Aupers and Houtman 2010; Ward and Voas 2011; Dyrendal 2013; Asprem 2014). Some delve into the correspondence between conspiracy theories and mythical discourse (Cubitt 1989; Dyrendal et al. 2018). For example, Cubitt (1989) distinguishes between conspiracy myths and conspiracy theories. The first are stories generally regarded as true and rise to the status of keys to understanding events. They are placed in a datable past as opposed to other forms of myth. The theories are interpretations of new events based on conspiracy myths. This parallel with mythic discourse offers methodological tools to understand the landscape of recurring conspiracist tropes and interpretations of new historical facts. Among sociological–religious studies, these latter examples tend to adopt a genealogical approach. As seen in Cubitt, these lenses help unravel conspiracist tropes' historical stratification. Thanks to this attention, they inspect the affinity with religious or magical ways of understanding the world while conserving the timeliness of contemporary conspiracy theories.

Aupers and Harambam (2018), relying on Weber, sustain that conspiracy theories are a form of social imagination thriving in a disenchanted world. They contend there is no more space for sense[2] in this disenchanted realm, again following Weber's steps. From this perspective, conspiracy theories seek to restore ultimate sense to the world and confer new existential sense to subjects. They do so by envisioning non-ordinary forces behind society, seeking human intention in historical processes and envisioning a network of power within the social world. These three operations present affinity with a religious tendency to see mysterious forces permeating the cosmos, explain the world through the logic of a superior will, and see a connection between nature, men, and these

superior forces. Conspiracy theories thus operate a shift compared to purely religious or spiritual discourses, "relocating mysterious forces from nature to society" (ibid., p. 60). Through Aupers and Harambam's lens, we again see the productivity of the comparison with religion, but only if adequately circumscribed. This parallel serves the purpose of detecting conspiracy theories' sense performance and simultaneously considering them from a historical perspective. The following section of the paper further refines the concepts of enchantment/disenchantment through a reading of Weber, suggesting a non-normative strategy to use them.

2. Escaping the Stigma: Disenchantment and Enchantment as Minimal Concepts

Aupers and Harambam note that comparing religion and conspiracy theories may serve as a "discursive strategy of academics to label conspiracy theory as an irrational primitive Other" (Aupers and Harambam 2018, p. 64). Nonetheless, there are strategies to discuss conspiracy theories as instances of (re-)enchantment without stigmatising them as irrational and anachronistic forms of thought. The following pages argue this possibility. First, it is necessary to distinguish disenchantment from secularisation. In Weber's use they designate two processes that—while sometimes closer—remain fundamentally distinct. Disenchantment describes a vision of reality as devoid of enchanted presences. Secularization indicates the marginalization of religion.[3]

Disenchantment and secularization relate to a third concept, rationalisation, which indicates an effort of systematic interpretation of the world (Rossi 2007, p. 178). In this general connotation, Weber identifies rationalisation with the development of religions of redemption. These religions proposed an explanation of good and evil and a prospect of salvation. Ultimately, religions of redemption had a rational goal: a permanent holy state, "a habitude that assures salvation" (Weber 1946, p. 327). These tendencies lead to a 'material rationality', according to which the purpose of an action has value per se. In the modern West, Weber describes further developments undergone by rationalisation (mainly following the vicissitudes of Christianity), which eventually leads to a kind of 'formal rationality'. In this form of rationality, the purpose of an action has value only under a rational calculation of the means and consequences of its realisation (Rossi 1982).[4] This progressive independence finally led the modern West[5] to a landscape where the various spheres of life are not hierarchically ordered and subordinate to the religious one. It is precisely for this moment that Weber uses the concept of 'secularisation'.

Turning to 'disenchantment', we see that—according to Rossi's reconstruction—Weber identifies with this term a specific conjuncture: the moment the magical vision of the world begins to narrow and religion engages in a rejection of the world. Disenchantment thus designates a mutation in the conception of the world and of man's relation to it. On the one hand, magical religiosity contemplates the world as permeated by the rituality of magic. On the other, religions of redemption oppose a systematic vision of how the world should be. They thus introduce a relation to the world defined by rejection. This attitude deprives the world of sense.[6] Weber identifies different expressions of disenchantment of the world, each being a specific modality by which subjects relate to the world and produce sense. Weber recognises only in Western late modernity an expression of disenchantment accompanied by a marginalisation of the religious sphere. It is only in this extreme form that disenchantment, according to Rossi, is "placed under the banner of secularization" (Rossi 2007, p. 187, my translation).

We can make a preliminary assessment here: given that disenchantment does not mean secularisation, enchantment is not a synonym for religion or magic. Some religions present enchanted means to relate to the world, and others are highly disenchanted. Thus, arguing that conspiracy theories are akin to an enchanted vision of the world does not imply claiming that they constitute religious beliefs. Moreover, it does not suggest that religious beliefs and institutions are reclaiming their preeminent place.

Disenchantment, then, is different from both rationalisation and secularisation. It indicates a particular relationship with the world, first detected when religions of redemption

(and their human–world tension) start to appear. In a disenchanted relationship with the world, resources to confer sense to the world begin to be lacking. Weber captures manifestations of disenchantment only punctually in different systems of meaning in history. Each system that presents some degree of disenchantment also bestows a related sense of the world. Even if the images of the world in the West present increasing disenchantment, their variations cannot be understood as a processual development. This non-processual development is due to the fact that elements of enchanted and disenchanted relations to the world keep coexisting and interacting with each other.

Weber identifies two critical modes of disenchantment in the history of religions of redemption. First, disenchantment is properly religious. Indeed, as we showed, disenchantment per se does not indicate a development in terms of "de-Christianization" (ibid: 187). Thus, in this first instance, disenchantment cannot be subsumed into secularisation but is exemplified by the religiosity of redemption. The most prominent example of religious disenchantment is intermundane asceticism.[7] This form of disenchantment presents a radical denial of the world (seen as irredeemable) while nonetheless being structured on the concept of salvation. Thus, religious disenchantment still sees the world as "God-ordained, and hence somehow meaningfully and ethically oriented" (Weber 1946, p. 351). The second facet of disenchantment presents a sort of inversion: here, the tension with the world is driven by the immanent spheres rather than the religious one. Each sphere of life matures within the world according to its own rules. In this development, each sphere builds some form of tension with the religious postulate—the one according to which a transcendent force endowed the world with objective sense. Consequently, Weber detects the gradual development of "refutations of every intellectual approach which in any way asks for a sense of inner-worldly occurrences" (Weber 1946, p. 351).

In religious disenchantment, religion rejected the world with its rationalising drive (thus establishing tension with it). In non-religious disenchantment, the immanent spheres of action engage in conflict with religion and push it back into the irrational. Regarding disenchantment, this pivotal moment triggers the disenchanted relationship with the world that will be proper to Science. After this critical juncture, Weber identifies the following rationalising developments as irreversible, leading to secularisation in the modern West. Weber, however, does not describe this process according to a linear chronology in which religious and non-religious disenchantment succeed each other. His analysis, instead, focuses on the mutual limitations of religion and Science in the modern world (Schluchter 2017, p. 43).[8] The first and second forms of disenchantment do not constitute two subsequent steps in a process. Instead, the relationship with the world that is typical of each is essentially different from the other. Moreover, they are not mutually exclusive but occur partly in parallel, partly in mutual interaction.

In other words, disenchantment refers to a modality of articulation of the human–world relationship. It can be detected in history in different forms and varying degrees of intensity but does not represent an overcoming of historical phases. Similarly, enchantment constitutes an essentially different modality of relation between men and their world. Its most emblematic expression is the magical horizon, which is why we refer to it when discussing enchantment (Weber [1922] 2017). In any case, enchantment, too, can be identified in a spectrum of punctual relations. Given the reconstruction of this section, we now see more clearly that identifying a definite vision of the world, such as the one disclosed by hypotheses of conspiracy, as enchanted, does not entail positioning it in a linear historical progression. Instead, this concept defines a particular relation to the world that can be detected at any time in history. Moreover, each worldview can present enchanted and disenchanted elements at once.

As already stated, interpreting the diffusion of conspiracist argumentation as a form of re-enchantment while not distinguishing disenchantment and secularisation may lead to their stigmatisation. Indeed, juxtaposing these concepts might lead to considering conspiracy theories as anomalies in contemporaneity, as a return to outdated logic. In this way, the analysis might miss their historical timeliness. Instead, the genealogy of

Weber's concepts presented in this paper calls for a narrow connotation of disenchantment. This minimal definition sees disenchantment as a particular form of relationship with the world and of attribution (or, rather, of deprivation) of sense to it. This mode has arisen in history at certain moments but does not indicate a progression of humanity from the point of view of understanding nor the point of view of praxis and institutions (Weber 2002). Simultaneously, this narrow notion allows us to use a similarly circumscribed one of 'enchantment', one that sets free from an idea of progression and therefore restrains from value judgements. To understand conspiracy theories as contemporary enchanted interpretations does not imply that they are a "return" to pure magic.

On the contrary, their enchantment is comprehensible only in its interaction with other forms of attribution of sense that have developed throughout history. Even though they present an overall enchanted sense of the world, they also present some disenchanted and properly contemporaneous traits. The narrow notion of enchantment may help better identify aspects of conspiracy theories that appear perfectly in tune with contemporary inclinations of scientific and political thought. Examples are conspiracist arguments and investigation strategies that mimic scientific and political praxis (Drążkiewicz 2022).

3. Conspiracy Theories' Enchanted Sense Horizon

As discussed so far, a minimal definition of disenchantment (such as the one proposed by Weber) constitutes the basis for studying conspiracy theories as enchanted visions of the world in a non-stigmatising way. On these bases, it is now possible to turn to the second aim of the paper. Namely, in this section, we use Weber's discussion of magic to inspect some of the characteristics of conspiracy theories' sense horizon.

First and foremost, the specificity of an enchanted horizon lies in its disclosure of sense-making strategies that directly endow worldly processes with sense (Weber [1922] 2017). The God(s) reside in each mundane entity in magical forms with a purely naturalistic representation. Every phenomenon is awarded with value by this permeation between the visible and the invisible world (Weber 1946). Aupers and Harambam (2018) refer to this element when they discuss conspiracist ideation of secret social forces that permeate both the hinterworld[9] and the visible world. In accounts of reality based on conspiracy, objects and events are visible consequences of the intention of powerful actors. These actors' identities are sometimes hidden, but their will (usually understood as an evil plan) is considered intelligible. Through this logic of argumentation, conspiracy theories, too, define phenomena as directly endowed with sense as, indeed, the outcome of an intelligible intention.

Second, following Weber's analysis, the same principle of an intelligible intention implies other dynamics of sense-making. In the enchanted regime, the fact that the supramundane presences permeating the world have a will that can be known and interpreted in each circumstance shifts the principle of legitimation of sense. Here, it does not rely on the logic of non-contradiction. Instead, sense pivots on the idea that the knowable intention, while constantly changing, is each time available to be reinterpreted. Such a principle grants strategies for getting along with the chaotic diversity of the mundane and making sense of critical conditions: the continuous reinterpretation of the will of the deities is allowed, each time according to the crisis to confront. This criterion helps understand the tendency of conspiracy theories' adherents to continuously re-signify new events. The guiding code in this continuous reinterpretation is akin to the enchanted one: the ability to understand the causes of events as intelligible intentions. As the conspiracy is revealed, the designs of the conspirators are understood. This interpretation takes the form of a continuous reference to an elsewhere—a time in the future when individuals will defeat the conspiracy. Through reference to elsewhere, conspiracy hypotheses make truth claims about the world here and now that—be they good or bad—can account for crises.

Third, strategies to confront the present and its difficulties are available due to the foundation of sense-making on intelligible intention. Given that each event is understandable as the outcome of a specific purpose, it is also possible to interact with the supramundane en-

tities identified as bearers of those intentions in the enchanted horizon. Communities carry out this negotiation through the charismatic figure of the sorcerer. The Weberian notion of negotiation with the Gods of the magical world further yields how this sense horizon offers a means to perceive control in the face of critical events. We recognize similar sense-making performance for conspiracy theories. As seen in the above literature review, contemporary conspiracy theories have been understood to thrive in critical conditions. Some authors saw them as strategies developed to confront longstanding processes of deprivation of the perceived power of subjects in modernity and postmodernity (e.g., Melley 2000). Others saw them as a means to recover a sense of power in the face of specific critical events (e.g., Solinas 2023). In the limited scope of this paper, only this latter strand will be analysed more in-depth through the lens of enchantment. In this respect, recent examples are the theories that envision the COVID-19 pandemic or catastrophic events (such as floods or other events) as the manifestation of a plan to control and limit the world population.

Fourth, Weber's analysis of magic, understood as the most refined form of enchantment, presents another valuable trait for reading contemporary conspiracy theories, more specifically that the enchanted world cannot be systematised. The relationship woven occasionally with the supersensible powers is structured in "practices that retain an exceptional character" (D'Andrea 2005, p. 166, my translation). This notion of asystematicity helps clarify the fragmentary aspect of contemporary conspiracy theories, specifically when we think about conspiracy theories relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some studies interested in theories in the Internet age note that they are a fragmentary collection of statements and partisan affirmations (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019). Such fragmentation is due to structural reasons related to how information circulates and intertwines on the web (Urbano 2019). Other studies underline "that conspiracy followers put together an overarching theory from different snippets of evidence and links, even if there remain internal inconsistencies in the jumble of fragments" (Birchall and Knight 2022, p. 589). This fragmentary nature is apparent in the theories concerning COVID-19 and the climate crisis. In addressing crises that manifest in punctual critical events, these conspiracy theories are both developed into an overarching narrative encompassing punctual (sometimes contradictory) interpretations of specific events. Besides the structural condition, the Weberian reading of magic accounts for the possibility of this fragmented and contradictory aspect. The enchanted horizon is not a totality governed by an inescapable mechanism because it centres on intention rather than mechanical causation and non-contradiction. It is a fragmentary reality that individuals can understand and deal with only by exceptional practices. In this horizon, overlapping and contradictory accounts can coexist as the supramundane intentions that cause events are volatile.

Finally, Weber's analysis helps us understand how an enchanted sense performs in contemporary times. Religious disenchantment maintained the transcendent instance of God and an ethically rational hereafter. Thus, it still offered adequate resources for individuals' subjective sense and acknowledged an objective sense of the world (Schluchter 1989). When related to a worldview, objective sense has several implications: it gives boundaries to individual subjectivities and their interpretations and grants a junction between the acting of several subjects; gives ways to confront failures; and, finally, postulates a compensative plane according to which subject can bear the costs of value-led actions. In his age, Weber recognised the demise of images of the world that guaranteed it objective sense, such as religion. He still thought some surrogates managed to ensure an objective sense for the world (D'Andrea 2005, pp. 305–6). But, he acknowledged, nonetheless, that these present some shortcomings.

The scientific image of the world discussed in *Science as a Vocation* (Weber 2004) is one of these possible surrogates. Causal relations dominate the scientific framework: there is no possibility to refer to anything other than phenomena and the laws that necessarily regulate them. In this radically disenchanted world, there is no room for the idea that all can possess knowledge of phenomena and their laws to the same degree. Holding up the framework of this sense horizon, paradoxically, is an act of faith: the belief that worldly processes

can be studied and explained in scientific terms and thus mastered by rational calculation (Weber 2004). Here, the main principle of sense is progress. Accordingly, in the scientific paradigm, things do not make sense in themselves. Instead, they have sense as they are transitory steps in an endless process. In this world, the absence of an objective—and definitive—end interrupts the succession of means and ends, which would have allowed individuals to think about a sense of life in this world (D'Andrea 2005, p. 228). Therefore, scientific thinking's radical disenchantment also liquidates any possible sense of human life. Progress, somehow, inserts a projection forward that saves from the endless repetition of the same that would decree full senselessness. Nonetheless, this possibility is only allowed in scientific activity and the scientists' lives (D'Andrea 2005, p. 182). Compared to this regime, the enchanted resources of sense-making offer effective means to confer sense to the things of this world and one's own life.

The radical disenchantment of the scientific image of the world defines contemporaneity in an even more totalising way than Weber's time. According to his analysis of this image's sense resources, this condition fosters the full senselessness Aupers and Harambam identify in contemporaneity. Moreover, the same notion of progress—already showing fractures in Weber's age and earlier (Rossi 2011)—is now in a deep crisis. Contemporary conspiracy theories develop in contrast with this official narrative, and this conflict has already been identified as an element favouring conspiracy hypothesis diffusion (Bratich 2008; Harambam and Aupers 2015). Following Weber's analysis, it is possible to see that this conflict does not solely lie in the crisis of scientific authority or forms of scepticism toward scientific methods. Instead, one of its reasons lies in the dynamic that links the erasure of a plane exceeding reality to a condition of senselessness. Contemporary conspiracy theories' enchantment, thus, flourishes in the deprivation of sense-making resources that characterise radical disenchantment.

4. A Hypothesis of Conspiracy to Save the World from the Pandemic

The inspection of Weber's analysis of the enchanted horizon led us to isolate some characteristics useful for reading the sense disclosed by conspiracist accounts of reality. First, the principle of a reality permeated by supramundane entities directly confers sense to this world. Events and phenomena are the effects of these entities' intelligible intention. In conspiracy-based accounts, such entities are the powerful hidden forces that master the conspiratorial plan. Second, this principle of sense legitimizes the reconfiguration of new events in the conspiratorial account, based on the idea that the volatile intentions of the powerful are always available to be reinterpreted. Third, this possibility of reinterpretation discloses to subjects a renewed sense of power, unveiling the possibility of negotiation and confrontation with such powerful entities. Through hypotheses of conspiracy, the conspiratorial plan can be revealed, denounced, and consequently confronted. Fourth, the a-systematic nature of the enchanted horizon offers a lens to capture the coexistence of contradictive conspiratorial accounts under the banner of overarching narratives. Finally, this paper argues that a comparison with the radically disenchanted horizon conspiracy theories concur with in contemporaneity helps better understand all these enchanted sense performances.

Conspiratorial accounts that spread after the break of the COVID-19 pandemic addressed the health consequences of the virus. Some accounts explicitly denied the existence of the virus and its gravity, while others acknowledged it but identified its causes in human designs (or, according to some, in human error). The other crisis these theories tried to deal with more directly concerned societal and political issues. It consisted of the restraints on individual freedom brought about by governmental strategies dealing with the pandemic. The overarching narrative developed to account for such limitations was either the idea that some countries created it for geopolitical gains[10] or that the ruling classes (independently from their origin) were implementing plans to control the world population.[11] Both strands pointed to the idea that the pandemic had been planned. Regardless of the precise interpretation, the different hypotheses linked the plan to a motive common to all the

conspirators: the intent to accumulate power at the expense of ordinary citizens. This underlying principle identified a concrete anthropomorphised drive that could be easily applied to different concrete representatives of power (even organisations). Thus, in each context, the figures chosen materialised specific fears of interference. Several contradicting accounts developed in different parts of the world in the chaos succeeding the first outbreak. These spread on social media but were often echoed and inflated by political personalities trying to gain from scepticism.

It is not in the interest of this paper to assess the truth of these claims. Instead, it is to uncover the sense-making mechanisms they disclosed—compared with the rationale underlying the governmental policies dealing with the pandemic. We can unpack these sense resources using the characteristics of the enchanted horizons summarised at the beginning of this section. First, we can turn to the above-sketched sense disclosed by conspiratorial accounts. In this respect, conspiracy hypotheses concerning the pandemic offer an emblematic example. The related theories addressed both critical conditions as processes approachable by individual knowledge, thus as events to which sense could be attributed. Instead, they were seen as the consequence of evil human plans. As seen in the enchanted horizon, positing a power unleashed from any causal constraints, a force that is something more than just human (or than an ordinary citizen, in this case) constitutes a plane above reality, which nonetheless permeates it. Superpowers define the directions of historicity, i.e., the pandemic as experienced precisely by ordinary citizens.

Nonetheless, they are not totally above this plane because they are given names and motives in the enchanted horizon of the conspiracy. Thus, their designs can be revealed and understood. This possibility of knowledge of the sense—the direction—of processes and one's life allowed subjects to endow them with sense directly.

Second, a tangible, personified enemy is the bearer of intentions and plans that can change (just like the deities of the magical world). In virtue of this volatile intention, conspiracy hypotheses reconfigure each new event within the shifting boundaries of the conspiratorial plan. In the narrow span of the pandemic, these latest events were, for example, the different waves of increasing cases, virus variants discovered from time to time discovered, or the introduction of stringent vaccination policies. We can also observe this operation of re-signification of the plan in merging hypotheses on the nature of the virus and already existing theories. Examples are theories about chemtrails (i.e., theories interpreting through hypotheses of conspiracy the debates over cloudseeding) and 5G technology (Langguth et al. 2023). Even if stemming from more specific scepticism toward technologies and their use, these theories were integrated into the conspiratorial hypotheses regarding the pandemic to account for the spread of the virus. In this respect, hypotheses that identified chemtrails as a means to propagate the virus were used to report the presence of clouds or planes as causes for new peaks in cases. On other occasions, some hypotheses pointed at hefty rains as proof that chemtrails were used to infect people to provide a rationale for vaccination policies. When the effects of the pandemic began to decline, this principle of resignification allowed some to redraw the plan to include other events, e.g., the outbreak of war in Ukraine (Loguercio and Canetta 2022).[12]

Third, understanding the pandemic event as the effect of evil intentions and claiming knowledge of the means through which the conspirators set to spread the virus further allowed subjects to envision ways to confront it. For example, theories using the frame of chemtrails fostered some practices as rituals of salvation. If the virus (or other agents that weaken the organism) is spread through planes, closing the windows, washing after exposure to the open air, or drinking certain beverages could effectively protect from infection. Similarly, the hypothesis of malicious intent of control behind the pandemic and its government led some to challenge the conspiratorial plan. Claiming margins to understand the original causes of the pandemic paved the way for identifying the proximate and approachable ones. For example, hypotheses that claimed that 5G had been used to spread the virus or weaken the immune system constituted the rationale for a series of

conflictual actions: in some instances against telecom workers (Hern 2020) or directly against telecommunication structures (BBC 2020; Cerulus 2020).

Fourth, as sketched above, the actors identified as responsible for the pandemic or its management changed according to the context. But these different narratives could coexist in specific milieus. Furthermore, in the same context, conspirators were identified in figures with contradictory aims. For example, in the same milieu, we see coexisting theories about a purported implication of the U.S. military and others blaming Chinese institutions. Precisely Chinese institutions are sometimes regarded as the blueprint of the controlling policies Western countries want to impose on the whole world and other times as a geopolitical force opposed to Western governments. These contradicting accounts do not necessitate a systemic explanation of their connection to coexist. The principle of the evil intention of the powerful is the only underlying logic that allows for their juxtaposition. The asystematic nature of the enchanted horizon helps us understand how these accounts coexisted beyond the principle of non-contradiction. In an enchanted framework, there are no general laws or interconnected causes but a superposition of individual intentions. All are united by the underlying intent to enhance one's power, but each is distinctive and personified, responding only to its own will.

Finally, in contemporaneity, all these enchanted performances spread in a context where the preeminent world images are disenchanted. Thus, as seen with the Weberian analysis of the scientific image of the world, the performances develop in a context with particular (and few) sense resources. For example, objective sense is lost in a disenchanted world with all its implications. The teleological view these explanations introduce restores a compensative plan that is not present in the scientific image of the world. Thus, the objective sense fostered by conspiracy-based accounts appears particularly attractive. In the case of the pandemic, these explanations framed the disease and its consequences as not being an inexplicable event to be accepted based on an act of trust, that is, on the trust that no one could stop the various impersonal concatenations of events that had caused it, but at most, some might partially understand it. With a personified enemy, responsibilities could be identified. Moreover, this created the condition for the perception of grasping reality in all its complexities.

Furthermore, personification leads, in contrast to the resources of the scientific image of the world, to not having to mitigate one's scepticism of power through a systemic reading of it. A world defined through impersonal causation is a mechanism too complex and interconnected to be even scratched. On the other hand, by identifying personified accountabilities, conspiracy hypotheses offered a point of entrance to confront the critical condition, i.e., the pandemic.

5. Conclusions

This paper rests on the tradition of studies investigating conspiracy theories as examples of (re)enchantment. As observed in the brief account of such studies, they interestingly frame conspiracy theories as mechanisms to restore sense to the world. By comparing conspiracy theories with religious and magical worldviews, this tradition can simultaneously account for their stratification of mythological tropes and their historical timeliness. Nonetheless, this comparison with religiosity bears the risk of stigmatising conspiracy theories, as Aupers and Harambam warn. In Section 2 the paper argues that it is possible to overcome the risk of stigmatisation using Weber's narrow definition of disenchantment and (re)enchantment. Weber's use of these concepts does not envision a linear succession of enchanted and disenchanted forms. Instead, they identify peculiar traits of complex visions of reality. These traits appear in history with no identifiable progressive succession, and Weber underlines that enchanted and disenchanted forms of understanding and relating with the world can coexist. The paper claims that by using enchantment in this narrow definition, it is possible to avoid framing enchanted worldviews as outdated and irrational.

In this perspective, enchantment identifies a vision of the world permeated by invisible forces. Disenchanted worldviews, instead, present a progressive tightening of the

boundaries between visible and invisible and, in radical forms, a total erasure of any plane exceeding the visible world. The enchanted founding principle of sense is that worldly processes and events are the effects of the intentions of the invisible presences permeating the world. Consequently, the enchanted worldview has fruitful characteristics when reading conspiracy theories. Section 3 described such characteristics in-depth. First, an enchanted worldview offers resources to endow the world with sense per se (contrarily to properly disenchanted worldviews). Second, it envisions a set of intentions for the invisible powers that are constantly changing, in whose shifting boundaries new events can always find an explanation. Third, the enchanted worldview offers resources to confront critical conditions by depicting an accountable enemy. Fourth, the enchanted anthropomorphised view of history can account for the coexistence of contradictory explanations. Finally, these characteristics gain renewed attractiveness in the contemporary, radically disenchanted reality. The worldview of Science is the epitome of such disenchantment. It is defined by the absence of any transcendent principle and by a radical deprivation of resources for objective and subjective sense. Conspiracy theories conflict with the scientific image of the world, and their enchantment can fill some of the gaps of sense resources left by its inescapable immanence.

Section 4 tried to see how these lenses help systematise a reading of conspiracy-based accounts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper explored this set of conspiracy-based accounts starting from the idea that the evil actors (pharmaceutical industries, politicians, institutions) identified as masters of the pandemic had a status comparable to the deities of the enchanted horizon: more than human and yet permeating the human world. Consequently, the paper inspected this principle of explanation. It served as a resource to claim knowledge of the events of the pandemic, thus endowing these events with a sense (i.e., a direction, a purpose). Moreover, it gave individuals margins to reshape the overall explanation to account for new developments in the pandemic and government measures (e.g., the introduction of vaccination policies). This same principle also served as a rationale to identify the means of diffusion of the virus in proximate instances that individuals could practically confront. The evil forces were bearers of a personified drive. They could coexist, each one with its agenda, in a fragmented and contradictory overarching narrative of the master plan about the causes of the pandemic. These sense resources filled, at that moment, the shortcomings of systematic accounts of the pandemic that shaped a horizon too complex to be understood or dealt with.

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Notes

1 This paper refers to this definition of conspiracy theory.

2 Throughout the following discussion, sense will refer to the German word Sinn and meaning to the German word Bedeutung.

3 This is just one of Weber's uses for the term 'secularisation'.

4 Each one pivots on its own formal principles of rationality and undertakes further developments that are not traceable to rationalization.

5 This expression denotes Europe and The United States' development from the modern age to Weber's contemporaneity.

6 In Weberian terms, sense usually denotes the framework related to a set of meanings, a setting in virtue of which actions gain a direction. Objective sense indicates the objective property of an entity by its conformity to a principle or value. On the other hand, the subjective sense is the product of "the relation of something to the conscious intentionality of an acting subject" (D'Andrea 2020, my translation). This kind of subjective attribution defines the sense of individuals' social actions: actions can conform to a principle of rationality relative to purpose or a principle informed by value. For Weber, a quest for sense does not constitute an essential feature of humankind. Instead, specific conditions of possibility configure the chances for the definition of a given subjectively intended sense. These conditions are the beliefs and images of the world. According to Alagna (2017), the concept of images of the world—determinations in which the answers to questions about man's relationship to the world (starting with the question about which evil to turn away from) find their place, as in a constellation—are used by Weber to circumvent references to human nature. Both constructions mediate the human–world relationship within which individuals find a direction for their

actions and life trajectories. In this perspective, conspiracy theories appear as specific forms of sense-making: constructions that disclose a particular horizon of chances for objective and subjective sense attribution.

[7] This religiosity is the disenchanted posture par excellence and simultaneously the highest expression of the relationship with the world typical of the religiosity of redemption.

[8] The same is true for secularization: while he considers an eventual marginalization of religion an irreversible outcome, he does not frame the steps leading toward it in terms of progress. "[T]he process of rationalization does not mark the path of history, it does not give us its 'sense'; it constitutes only the peculiar sense of the development of the modern West" (Rossi 1982, p. 11, my translation).

[9] A world existing beyond the visible one.

[10] Nie (2020) recalls how just a "few days after the lockdown of Wuhan in late January 2020, a U.S. newspaper prone to circulating conspiracy theories", the Washington Times (Gertz 2020), linked the origins of SARS-CoV-2 to China's biological weapons programme. Another example cited by Nie is an article from the Indian Institute of Technology, later retracted, reporting findings that were commented by the authors as "unlikely to be fortuitous in nature" (Pradhan et al. 2020). Other studies and investigations analysed how conspiracy theories developed on social media in different countries (e.g., Erokhin et al. 2022). In China, for example, such claims that the virus was manufactured (and that the U.S. was responsible) were allowed to spread on social media. In this context, these statements became object objects of discussion but were also subjected to criticism (Liu et al. 2020).

[11] This idea resonated in the spread on social media of the neologism 'plandemic', effectively weaponised by the authors of the documentary Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind COVID-19, who espoused the idea that actors in the pharmaceutical industry created the virus to gain from the production of vaccines. (Kearney et al. 2020).
The idea of a planned pandemic was further linked to other longstanding theories of conspiracy, such as the New World order (Bodner et al. 2021), traditionally fostered by Right Wing Militias in the 1990s and identifying a "dedicated 'globalist' conspiracy which works ceaselessly to overthrow American liberties" (Spark 2000), but also used on the Left to describe, instead, an excess in U.S. sovereignty (ibid.).

[12] It is not the scope of this paper to assess the significance in terms of diffusion of these interpretations. Instead, it illustrates how the hypothesis of a hidden power behind the break of the pandemic disclosed the possibility of signifying old theories and adapting them to this new event. The examples here illustrated come from two Italian Telegram channels, which I have been monitoring as part of my Ph.D. research.

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