



INTRODUCTION: ANTHROPOLOGY AND CONSPIRACY THEORY

Alexander A. Panchenko

European University at St Petersburg
3 Gagarinskaya Str., St Petersburg, Russia
Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House), Russian Academy of Sciences
4 Makarova Emb., St Petersburg, Russia
St Petersburg State University
7–9 Universitetskaya Emb., St Petersburg, Russia
apanchenko2008@gmail.com

Abstract: This introductory essay deals with problems and prospects in the study of conspiracy theories by anthropologists and other social scientists. Epistemologically, conspiracy theories do not in fact differ from any other theories. However, conspiratorial narratives are notable for their particular emotional suggestibility that makes them efficacious tools of socialisation.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, collective imagination, knowledge and power, emotional communities.

To cite: Panchenko A. A., 'Introduction: Anthropology and Conspiracy Theory', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2016, no. 12, pp. 157–160.

URL: <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng012/panchenko1.pdf>

Alexander Panchenko

Introduction: Anthropology and Conspiracy Theory¹

This introductory essay deals with problems and prospects in the study of conspiracy theories by anthropologists and other social scientists. Epistemologically, conspiracy theories do not in fact differ from any other theories. However, conspiratorial narratives are notable for their particular emotional suggestibility that makes them efficacious tools of socialisation.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, collective imagination, knowledge and power, emotional communities.

Judging by the number of ideas, narratives and interpretative models derived from conspiracy theories that modern humanity in general has to deal with, and more particularly the citizens of the successor states of the Soviet Union, this topic should be the subject of constant research debates among anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and specialists in mass culture. In fact things are rather different. It cannot be said that conspiracy theory has not been discussed at all in anthropology or the social sciences: there have been a certain number of monographs and collections published in this subject area over the last few decades (admittedly for the most part by Western scholars and not those from Russia). Overall, however, the status of conspiracy theory and conspiracy narratives as a specific social and cultural phenomenon remains problematic and debatable for researchers. A good example of this sort of debate is the recent article by Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold which argues that epistemologically conspiracy theories are no different from any other theories. As the authors rightly remark, ‘if there are theories of conspiracy that are patently untrue, yet will never

Alexander A. Panchenko

European University
at St Petersburg,
3 Gagarinskaya str.,
St Petersburg, Russia /
Institute of Russian Literature
(Pushkinskiy Dom),
Russian Academy of Science,
4 Makarova emb.,
St Petersburg, Russia /
St Petersburg State University,
7–9 Universitetskaya emb.,
St Petersburg, Russia
apanchenko2008@gmail.com

¹ The introductory article was written with support from the Russian Science Fund, project No. 14-18-02952 (‘Conspirological Narratives in Russian Culture, 1800–2010s: Origins, Evolution, Ideological and Social Contexts’).

obtain the negative label conspiracy theory one may also assume that there are theories of conspiracy that are true, but will never be seen as true due to the negative connotations of their conspiracy theory label' [Pelkmans, Machold 2011: 67]. Pelkmans and Machold see their task as the search for 'an analytical strategy that is capable of capturing both the truth and use value of theories of conspiracy' [ibid.: 68]. Still, the conclusion they reach seems somewhat banal: since the idea of conspiracy theory is in itself a means of stigmatising its proponents that the strong use in their struggle with the weak, what must be studied is not the actual substance of the theory or the logic of conspiracy narratives, but their changing contexts and forms of social use. In this way conspiracy theories may prove true not in a literal sense, but in a metaphorical one: their fantastic or exaggerated premisses often reflect processes of a secret or manifest political struggle that are really taking place.

It must be said that this way of asking a question which in this case is placed in a Marxian and in part Foucauldian setting looks rather old-fashioned to a student of narrative. Specialists in mythology, folklore and the anthropology of religion long since ceased discussing the extent to which the subjects that they study are true or 'related to reality'. It is precisely a question of the 'social trajectory' of texts, of how they transform and multiply our ideas of reality and how their 'fuzzy reliability' is used by particular individuals or groups in their struggle for power and social control. It would thus seem that the prospects for using conspiracy theories in the contemporary social sciences are connected not with their epistemological specifics or even their political significance, but with ethnographic research on their transmission and adaptation in various social and cultural contexts. The reader will find a number of ethnographical examples of this sort in the articles published below.

It is evident that the very concept of a conspiracy theory can hardly be regarded as 'emic', save in those cases where it is used to stigmatise other people's ideas and positions. I suspect that nowadays it would not be so easy to find anyone who would seriously call himself a conspiracy theorist and not see anything dubious, reprehensible or marginal in such an identity.¹ However, even as an external analytical construction the idea of conspiracy theory as a specific form of social imagination has, in my opinion, evident prospects for research. The question is, however, to what extent the social, economic and cultural

¹ It cannot be excluded, however, that the situation may be changing. On 19th September 2015 O. A. Moiseeva, a reader at the Moscow State University of Technology and Management (the former All-Union Food Industry Distance Learning Institute), delivered as part of the 'University Saturdays' educational project a public lecture entitled 'School for Young Conspiracy Theorists'. According to the handout, the lectured aimed 'to give the audience an elementary understanding of activity in the field of conspiracy theory', and it was intended for 'students of general educational organisations, colleges and people in different age-groups' <<http://us.dogm.mos.ru/events-list/48/7032>>.

processes and contexts in which conspiracy theories are engendered and transmitted are similar in nature from a typological and genetic point of view.

The first thing that strikes a student of conspiracy theories is the multiplicity of such contexts and the extraordinary ease with which conspiracy narratives overcome language, geographical, social and economic barriers and frontiers. At the same time we are often justified in speaking of communities that are specially orientated towards the production, consumption and distribution of conspiracy narratives and of the peculiar semantic or thematic fields to which the latter gravitate. The set of ideas, motifs and practices that make up these fields may be described as 'popular knowledge' specific to modern culture, which combines 'conspiracy theory, alien abduction narratives, astrology, urban legends, self-help rhetoric, gossip, new age practices' [Birchall 2006: 1]. The significance of this kind of knowledge is evidently not only that it makes the 'official' powers of the authorities problematic, challenging legitimate specialists and social structures, but equally its emotional suggestiveness. For their adherents, the meaning of both conspiracy narratives and, say, alternative medicine is not abstract, but entirely practical: they do not so much expect them to be logical as to provide immediate emotional experience. This is why it makes sense to analyse conspiracy theories in the context of the anthropology of emotion – as an effective means of forming 'emotional communities' (which is discussed in greater detail in Anna Razuvalova's article, and also in my own).

The selection of articles published here is devoted to the peculiarities of conspiracy theories in the late USSR and post-Soviet Russia. This material is particularly interesting because it allows a closer look at those socio-historical contexts in which conspiracy narratives are born and disseminated. Often specific features of conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia are explained with a backward glance at the historical and socio-economic 'traumas' that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet system and the dissolution of the USSR [Oushakine 2009]. We can see, however, that many of the conspiracy theories that became very popular in the 1990s and the following decade were already in existence by the end of the Soviet Union. This is so, for example, in the case of the 'Masonic conspiracy' studied in Anna Razuvalova's article. The idea itself appeared quite a long time ago, and not in Russia, and by the second half of the twentieth century had lost a lot of its influence, but in the 1970s it was revived by the Soviet secret services and soon occupied an important place in the conspiracy discourse of Russian nationalists. It is not only the socio-political circumstances in which the Soviet version of the story of the Masonic conspiracy appeared and spread that are remarkable here, but also the emotional contexts of its representation in the historical writings, literature and cinema of the late USSR. In his article Sergei

Shtyrkov goes as far as to suggest that the conspiracy theory ideas and attitudes of contemporary Russian citizens are a sort of legacy of the Soviet meta-narratives which presupposed a perception 'of reality as a secret war between us and them'. It is, nevertheless, hard to say whether the appeal to the peculiarities of Soviet social experience and collective imagination is much help in this case. The material studied in my article and by Jeanne Kormina rather provide a basis for speaking of international and global factors conducive to the formation of modern conspiracy narratives. Signs of 'the risk society', which brings to life a culture of mistrust and suspicion, may be found as much in the USA and Western Europe as in Russia and in many other parts of the modern world. As for the conspiracy narratives which the 'communities of mistrust' consume and transmit, they cross national and social borders with ease, as we have said.

The correlation and connection between the ideas and narratives of conspiracy theory and those of religion is discussed in one way or another in all the articles published below. Without considering this in detail at present (there are some ideas in my article on the 'Brussels computer'), I will risk the suggestion that modern conspiracy theories do to a certain extent duplicate the functions of religious ideas and narratives, at least in the context of social solidarity and disjunction. It may again be a question of the particular emotional suggestiveness of conspiracy theory which makes it easy to divide the world into us and them, the wicked and the righteous, persecutors and martyrs. It is noteworthy that, as Sergei Shtyrkov points out, the idea of a conspiracy may not only serve as a stimulus to 'moral panics', but also as the guarantor of imaginary stability. Moreover, conspiracy theory has, so to speak, its positive side, which presumes not only the search for and identification of secret enemies, but also 'a genealogy of hidden powers that are on the side of good and are capable of dealing with the agents of the conspiracy that threatens to destroy the country and society.' It may therefore be that conspiracy theory, as a specific type of 'popular knowledge', will in the near future become if not the normal form of social imagination, at least an extremely influential one in the most diverse societies and cultures.

References

- Birchall C., *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2006, XV + 185 pp.
- Oushakine S., *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009, 312 pp.
- Pelkmans M., Machold R., 'Conspiracy Theories and Their Truth Trajectories', *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, 2011, vol. 59, pp. 66–80.

Alexander Panchenko
Translated by Ralph Cleminson