

Conspiracy thinking and democracy: a politico-theoretical reading in the light of Catholic Social Teaching

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The “Catholic Social Teaching – Toolbox” program gave me the possibility to achieve the goal I had been aiming at for a long time: to combine the perspective of political science and the moral-theological approach of CST to an understanding of conspiracy theories. It allowed me to open up new research possibilities regarding the impact of the widening gap between politics and morality, understanding the relevance of prudence and discernment in public choice.

First of all, conspiracism – my PhD topic – should not be interpreted exclusively as a pathological deviation¹ but as one of the structural tensions of contemporary democracies². In particular, my work’s focus is on the widening gap between democratic ideals and the practical exercise of political power³. The first part of the CST tripartite method – gained through an intense deepening of a number of disciplines – consisted in an analysis that has shown that conspiracy narratives are often rooted in experiences of institutional opacity, declining trust, communicative polarization, and the perceived exclusion of citizens from meaningful participation in public life. It suggests that conspiracy thinking should ultimately be evaluated as an epistemic problem *and* a moral and social question concerning the values of democratic regimes. From the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching and the normative part of the CST method, the central issue is not only whether specific conspiracy narratives are factually true or false, but whether the relationship between citizens, institutions⁴, and truth remains ordered toward the common good. In this sense, the value of truth emerges as the decisive principle. Since truth is not an instrument of domination or ideological affirmation – as Machiavellian ways of doing politics seem to suggest – but the necessary foundation of justice, freedom, and social trust⁵, public life cannot survive without it. Truth, indeed, is the real antidote to manipulation, propaganda, or to the permanent suspicion⁶ typical of conspiracy theories that, paradoxically,

ground their existence on the search for truth, advocating for transparency and the moral credibility of institutions. When public authority appears opaque, technocratic, or detached from the concrete life of citizens, distrust becomes socially fertile. So conspiracist narratives reveal, at least partially, a broader crisis concerning the credibility of authority and the fragmentation of shared moral references⁷.

The principle of human dignity further clarifies the ethical limits of both conspiracist communication and institutional responses to it. Since every person retains the right and the duty to seek truth, to participate in public life, and to formulate critical judgment, democratic societies cannot respond to conspiracism just with exclusion or censorship, especially when these mechanisms risk deepening the social marginalization of already excluded people, reinforcing their distrust. CST instead calls for forms of dialogue capable of recognizing the moral seriousness of public participation⁸.

Equally relevant is the principle of the common good⁹. Conspiracy thinking becomes socially destructive when it dissolves the possibility of cooperation and reciprocal trust; however, democratic systems themselves weaken the common good whenever they sacrifice participation, accountability, and truthful communication in favour of purely procedural or technocratic governance. The persistence of conspiracism therefore reflects the unresolved moral contradictions of contemporary democracies which rely on the historically and philosophically widening gap between social sciences and morality.

CST shows that political and cultural renewal cannot be achieved *exclusively* through the centralized control of information or through expert authority detached from society, since democratic life requires communities capable of educating persons to critical judgment and discernment. The reflections

of authors we had the possibility to analyse, namely Von Ketteler, Rosmini, Toniolo – the very grounds of Christian Social Thought – showed us the danger of relying on any political attempt to present party-oriented public choices as *necessary* ones, as if accountability, protected by the smokescreen of “technical choices”, represented a danger to the existence of democracy itself, since “no other feasible options” are deemed available. Getting a deeper understanding of their thought made it possible to have a more solid ground for our public discernment toward the common good and for politics in general.

Thomistic reflections on the the a-morality of the object, compared to the inherent responsibility of the agent in using it¹⁰, is surprisingly useful – for a PhD student in political science – if associated with the virtue of prudence, as it emerges from *Centesimus Annus*. In this document, John Paul II clearly warns the West of the danger of banishing morality from the political arena and, above all, he draws attention to the hazardous idea of the perfect recipe for the perfect organization of society. Such an absolute assumption legitimizes “necessary” evil, making violence and deceit a fair price to pay in order to bring that organization into being¹¹. To prevent these substantial risks occurring, due to the separation between politics and morality, CST seems to be one of the best remedies.

I am glad to have taken part in such a precious opportunity, which allowed me to develop new interests in moral theology and political theology, opening new paths of research even in political science. I consider it, without doubt, to have been one of the most educational, enriching and amazing scholarships for which I have applied. Mostly, I would like to stress the generosity of the Angelicum, of Sister Helen Alford O.P., and of all the professors, and to thank them for the availability and humanity they showed us during these amazing months. The effort was intense,



the program at times demanding, but eventually I can affirm – as we say in Italy – that the Toolbox is like Naples: you cry two times, when you get there and when you depart (and this is not a conspiracy theory!).

NOTES

1. Cfr. Hofstadter R., *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Harper's Magazine, 1964.
2. Di Cesare, D., *Il complotto al potere*, Einaudi, 2021, pp. 18, 22.
3. Origgi G., *Caccia alla verità. Persuasione e propaganda ai tempi del virus e della guerra*, Egea, 2022, pp. 37, 50–51.
4. Mancosu, M., Vassallo, S., & Vezzoni, C. (2017). *Believing in Conspiracy Theories: Evidence from an Exploratory Analysis of Italian Survey Data*, in *South European Society and Politics*, 22(3), 327–344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2017.1359894>
5. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, no. 198; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 109, a. 3.
6. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), nos. 1–3.
7. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), nos. 32, 35.
8. United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. 10 December 1948, art. 21; John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), no. 26; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), nos. 75
9. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), nos. 35, 63.
10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 18, a. 2 ad 2, I–II, q. 18, a. 7, <https://carimo.it/somma-teologica/somma.htm>
11. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), no. 25.