Conspiracy theories and social movements studies: A research agenda

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Abstract
It is surprising to note the scarcity of contributions in social movement literature related to so-called conspiracy theories. A considerable amount of the work on these topics has been produced in political science, history, media studies, social psychology and other disciplines. These accounts have often adopted a stigmatizing approach, looking at conspiracy theories as forms of pathologies (whether psychological, social or political). Moving from such a perspective to a constructivist one, I argue that conspiracy theories should represent an object of interest for social movement scholars: conspiracies supporters go into the streets to highlight their issues, protest against authority, propose alternative lifestyles and often claim to look for a better/different society. Applying the social movements toolkit can allow to better understand this phenomenon and apply critical perspectives in a more effective manner. On the basis of this premise, the first part of this article reviews the existing literature on conspiracy theories, also identifying the main lacunae; the second part outlines some possible research questions and lines of inquiry, moving beyond the classical theories in the field of social movement studies. The paper also introduces a number of new concepts, such as conspiracy mobilizations and conspiracy coalitions.
1 | INTRODUCTION

During the period from 2020 to 2021, the word “conspiracy” became a daily expression for millions of people around the world, mainly as a result of the outbreak and diffusion of the Covid-19 pandemic (Pivetti et al., 2021) and the related debates that spread across social media (Boberg et al., 2020; Fuchs, 2021). Furthermore, the last two years were characterized by a considerable number of protest events that, one could argue, are related to the field of so called conspiracy theories. Here I am referring in particular to the many demonstrations against the policy measures adopted by national governments to contain the diffusion of Sars-CoV-2 (Hornsey et al., 2021; Pivetti et al., 2021): in some cases, these demonstrations have been supported by well-known conspiracy groups – such as QAnon – that claim the existence of a Deep State with the power to direct and control global politics (Drinkwater et al., 2021; Shahsavari et al., 2020). The multiplication of public mobilizations on similar grounds is a “new” phenomenon. What is also “new” is the development of similar “conspiracy coalitions” that bridge different claims, topics and frames. This paper argues that these developments demand social movement studies (SMS) engage in the debate.

Accounts of conspiracy activities date back millennia, and can be found in the writings of authors such as Herodotus, Tacitus or Thucydides (Pipes, 1999). The Middle Ages and the Renaissance were populated by pseudo-secret societies: Templars, Freemasons, Illuminati, Rosicrucians, etc. In recent centuries and decades there have been many famous conspiracies: from The Gunpowder Plot and the subterranean intrigues denounced by the Jacobins during the Reign of Terror, up to more recent cases such as Watergate, Wikileaks or Datagate. The latter are public scandals characterized by State secrets or attempts to modify the public opinion by means of under covered operations; however, their real (and not conspiracy) nature is now accepted by official historiography. On the contrary, other episodes are still the source of divisive debate, due to the range of alternative versions proposed by writers, bloggers, political figures and other sources. Such examples include debates surrounding the 9/11 attacks (Wood & Douglas, 2013), the deaths of John Fitzgerald Kennedy (Knight, 2000) and Lady Diana (Douglas & Sutton, 2008) and the Moon landing (Lewandowsky et al., 2013), to name just a few very well-known examples. The phenomenon is not limited to single events, but also extends to broader issues, such as vaccination (Hornsey et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2020), the existence of unidentified flying objects (Harrison & Thomas, 1997) climate change (Brulle et al., 2012; Douglas & Sutton, 2015; Saunders, 2017), and even to the global control of society and secret power plots (Cosentino, 2020).

Although they currently enjoy a considerable level of visibility, the popularity of conspiracy theories is not a novelty. In an historical analysis of their diffusion in the US, Uscinski and Parent (2014) found that the peak of this phenomenon was reached in the 1950s, during the Cold War and McCarthyism. In recent decades, in particular, mass culture, especially in Hollywood film productions, have played an important role in their amplification (Nelson, 2003). Nowadays, the networking opportunities and the abundance of information provided by the Internet allow (almost) anyone to spread their own self-made truth (Cosentino, 2020; Nichols, 2017) in what has been defined as the post-truth age (Keyes, 2004).

The objective of this paper is neither to rehabilitate any of these conspiracy theories, nor to propose yet further criticism or to carry out an attempt at debunking them. Nor is it even to deepen the current debate on conspiracy theories related to Covid-19. The goal is rather to take so-called conspiracy theories seriously, and to argue in favor of a more relevant role for SMS when it comes to analyzing these phenomena, especially in light of the recent increase in public protest events and considering the implications that they could have on the study of lifestyle politics and political participation. It is surprising to note that there is an almost total absence of analyses of conspiracy theories emerging from SMS, with a few exceptions (e.g., Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2012; Leenders, 2012; Wepfer, 2021). On
the contrary, numerous works have been published by political scientists, historians, media scholars and social psychologists (for a detailed review, see Douglas et al., 2019).2

In order to articulate a way forward to engage conspiracy theories in SMS, I first outline some of the main reasons that “justify” an underestimation of conspiracy theories/mobilizations within this field of study. I will then offer a concise but broad literature review of scholarship concerning conspiracy theories in other disciplines. I conclude by outlining the range of possible contributions that SMS can provide to our understanding of conspiracy theories/mobilizations, starting from a perspective of classical social movement theories and related questions. I also highlight some of the possible ethical and methodological concerns that sociologists could encounter in carrying out such research.

2 | THE REASONS FOR AN ABSENCE OF RESEARCH

The introduction to a recent special issue of the Journal for Cultural Research edited by Elżbieta Drążkiewicz Grodzicka and Jaron Harambam (2021) was titled: “What should academics do about conspiracy theories?” The purpose of the present article resonates with that special issue and revises the question for the field of political sociology to ask: “What should social movement scholars do about conspiracy theories?”

To answer this question, we should begin by considering why SMS has not taken the topic of conspiracy theories seriously thus far. One could argue that this omission is due to multiple reasons. The most obvious explanation is that most social movement scholars may not consider conspiracy theories to be real social movements, nor may they consider (the majority of) conspiracy theory supporters to be real activists. There has been an ongoing debate within SMS about what constitutes a social movement (for very broad reviews, see e.g., della Porta & Diani, 2015; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Elements that were once considered to be necessary components in defining the boundaries of a social movement have become ever more blurred; furthermore, changes in society at large have had implications for the very “nature” of contemporary mobilizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2015). However, conspiracy groups and conspiracy supporters should at least represent an object of interest for SMS because they do exhibit key aspects of social movements: conspiracy groups engage in collective action in the streets to give voice to their issues, they protest against authority, they propose alternative lifestyles and they often claim to be looking for a better/different future, all of which are typical elements that characterize collective mobilizations.

A second reason for the current underestimation of the phenomenon is due to the historical pattern among social movement scholars to study progressive and left-wing movements (Gillan & Pickerill, 2012). Conspiracy theories are a peculiar subject, as they are often difficult to position on the classic right-left political axis (Moore, 2016). This transversal nature is typical of other types of collective action such as, for example, the animal rights movement; however, the latter has long been embraced by the social movement agenda (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Munro, 2012). What is more, studies on conservative/right-wing/fascist movements as well as on conservative religious movements have flourished in recent years (Blee & Creasap, 2010; Caiani et al., 2012; Gattinara & Pirro, 2019; Koopmans, 1996). There are also a number of ethical/methodological issues that impact the study of conspiracies, which I will address in the concluding remarks regarding a way forward in a SMS approach to conspiracy theories.

3 | EXISTING LITERATURE FROM OTHER FIELDS OF STUDY

In very schematic terms, two macro-approaches can be identified in the academic literature on conspiracy theories: on the one hand, scholars seek to identify the social, psychological and political roots of conspiracy theories, often with the aim of analyzing them as pathologies (Goertzel, 1994); on the other hand, there are those who question why a conspiracy theory is defined as such, thus starting from a constructivist position (Latour, 1987, 2004). While considering elements originating in both of these traditions, I argue that the contribution that can be provided by SMS should
follow the second path, in particular, by analyzing the motivations and frames behind the endorsement of conspiracy theories and participation in conspiracy mobilizations.

3.1 | The academic predecessors

In spite of the long existence of this phenomenon, academic interest in conspiracy theories only arose in the 1950s. German philosopher Karl Popper argued that individuals need to identify a rationality and, even more importantly, a principle of agency behind social events. When they are disoriented by the complexity of reality, they look for simpler explanations that allow them to evade complexity and make the events appear to be the product of the will and actions of a small number of powerful individuals. This concept, presented by Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), resonates with the elitist theories that were (re)emerging among social and political scientists during the same years. Following from the “classic” elitist theories proposed in the early twentieth century by Michels (1911) or Pareto (1935), elitist explanations began to appear in sociological debates about power from the 1940s and 1950s with scholars such as Burnham (1941), Hunter (1953) or Wright Mills (1956). The intention here is not to compare elitist theories with conspiracy theories; however, (some of) the arguments used by (some) conspiracy supporters actually resonate with elitist arguments (Mudde, 2004). I refer in particular to the emphasis in elitist theories on small groups of power-holders, able to direct complex economic and political processes; in the case of conspiracy theories similar dynamics are hypothesized at a more secret and often global level. Elitist theories have been criticized from several angles and, in particular, challenged by complexity theories in political science and public policy (Cairney, 2012). Contrarily, the interpretation advanced by Popper to explain conspiracy theories has maintained a general consensus. In different ways, many authors have identified the main characteristic of conspiracy theories as the epistemological fallacy connected with an excessive emphasis placed on oligarchist agency (Popper, 1945).

About 10 years after Popper, another cornerstone of conspiracy theory literature emerged when Richard Hofstadter (1964) identified the so-called “paranoid style” in the supporters of conspiracy theories. Hofstadter emphasized in particular the politics of the US at the time, where fervent anti-communism ideologies fostered suspicion towards any opponent to the neo-liberal regime, as exhibiting a paranoid, indeed irrational, approach among less educated people. Similarly, some “classics” of sociological thought viewed the irrationality of the masses as an explanation for popular dissent. Similar accounts, initially proposed by authors such as Le Bon (1895) or Tarde (1892), were adopted by social movement scholars, and in particular by those who identified collective frustration as a reason for mobilization, arguing that those who mobilized were mainly the outcasts of society (Gurr, 1970; Kornhauser, 1962). Such a position, abundantly surpassed in SMS, can arguably be seen to still hold a respectable reputation in social psychology in recent years (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Indeed, numerous fields of scholarship have endorsed Hofstadter’s theory, often identifying conspiracy theories as expressions of a pathology: this has taken the form of an extensive interdisciplinary literature emphasizing psychological/epistemic, social/socio-demographic or political factors as central to conspiracy theories, which I outline below.

3.2 | Psychological/epistemic factors

A considerable number of psychological approaches to conspiracy theories consider them to be a form of deviant behavior (especially so in the past), as they were seen to be in conflict with science (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2018) or even with democracy (Moore, 2016; Sternisko et al., 2020).

While Popper and Hofstadter can be considered as the originators of this literature, the field only began to expand considerably during the 1990s and was particularly influenced by the work of Ted Goertzel (1994), who argued that conspiracy supporters could be characterized by a “monological belief system” that allows people to believe in different conspiracy theories at the same time and to consider such theories as mutually supporting
within a general frame of mistrust of mainstream/official versions. Other scholars have contested the idea of a "monological belief system" proposed by Goertzel, basing their criticism on the argument that actually conspiracy theories often contradict each other (Brotherton et al., 2013; Buentering & Taylor, 2010; Lukić et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2012). Goertzel’s study was followed by numerous works in the following years that further advanced a pathological understanding of conspiracy theories that emphasized paranoia as a key attribute (see, e.g., Butler et al., 1995; Keeley, 1999; McHoskey, 1995). Scholars building on this foundational work have also suggested that those who believe in conspiracy theories not only looked for simple explanations and causal relations, as suggested by Popper, but that they were also heavily influenced by cynicism and narcissistic fallacy (Cichocka et al., 2016), as they tend to overestimate their own explanatory capacities to the detriment of the official scientific explanations (Dagnall et al., 2017; van Prooijen, 2017).

What is generally agreed upon by most social psychologists is that conspiracy theories find fertile ground in situations of uncertainty (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013), anxiety (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013) and feelings of powerlessness (Pratt, 2003). This is also the reason why conspiracy theories have been compared to religious or quasi-religious phenomena (Franks et al., 2013; Oliver & Wood, 2014), to the point that conspiracy supporters have been defined as “the last believers in an ordered universe” (Keeley, 1999, p. 123). On the other hand, some conspiracy theories hypothesize the existence of paranormal/supernormal entities (Dagnall et al., 2017; van Prooijen et al., 2018) and numerous conspiracy supporters belong to New Age groups (Newheiser et al., 2011). To describe this mix of conspiracy theories and New Age philosophies, Ward and Voas (2011) coined the term “conspirituality.” According to some scholars dealing with this stream of psychological/epistemic explanation, the religious nature of conspiracy theories should represent a variation of Hofstader’s paranoid style (Darwin et al., 2011; Oliver & Wood, 2014).

More recently, some approaches in psychology have resisted pathologizing accounts of conspiracy theories. For example, Imhoff and Lamberty (2018) call for a more fine-grained understanding of the connection between paranoia and belief in conspiracy theories, while also highlighting the fact that similar patterns exist among the general population (Freeman et al., 2005). Along with other researchers (Meuer & Imhoff, 2021; van Prooijen, 2017), they have emphasized social factors, namely a low level of education, rather than a low level of intelligence, are associated with the belief in conspiracy theories. Furthermore, some psychologists have identified the mobilizing role of conspiracy theories for protests (e.g., Imhoff & Bruder, 2014), an argument that resonates with the topic of this article.

### 3.3 | Social/socio-demographic factors

Moving from strictly individual perspectives, other areas of scholarship have highlighted the role played by social factors, investigating the relationships and social contexts of conspiracy supporters as well as their socio-demographic characteristics (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). It is worth specifying that (some) psychological and social explanations overlap and are mutually sustaining. In fact, some scholars consider the previously mentioned narcissistic attitude and the need to be recognized in specific groups and communities as a social pathology (Cichocka et al., 2016; Lantian et al., 2017), which has been defined as collective narcissism (Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Some have argued that this attitude is more present among individuals belonging to discriminated and disadvantaged groups (Crocker et al., 1999; Simmons & Parsons, 2005) because being in a disadvantaged position in the social fabric, it is argued, predisposes individuals to believe in conspiracy theories (Parsons et al., 1999; van Prooijen, 2017). However, such accounts risk justifying any social and political "problem" as a fault of subaltern classes (de Vries, 2018).

On the other hand, scholars have identified a correlation between conspiracy beliefs and low economic status and/or low levels of education (Freeman & Bentall, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2013; Mancosu et al., 2017; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; van Prooijen, 2017). Low education, in particular, has been considered as an im-
portant predictor of belief in conspiracy theories (Meuer & Imhoff, 2021; van Prooijen, 2017), which also corresponds to low media literacy (Maksl et al., 2017). Low education and literacy levels are particularly significant given the importance of the Internet and social media when it comes to the diffusion of conspiracy theories (Boberg et al., 2020; Featherstone et al., 2019; Uscinski et al., 2018). This dynamic is amplified by the so-called echo-chamber effect (Cinelli et al., 2021; Sunstein, 2001) that polarizes different positions, leading the supporters of conspiracy theories towards homophily (McPherson et al., 2001) and ideological segregation (Dandekar et al., 2013). At the same time, it should be acknowledged that other researchers have found opposing socio-demographic characteristics among conspiracy supporters, who could not be said to belong to disadvantaged or low-educated groups, but on the contrary to educated and high income social strata (Galliford & Furnham, 2017).

3.4 | Political factors

Psychological and social accounts often do not place a sufficient amount of attention on the various political junctures in which conspiracy theories emerge and are diffused. For the sake of brevity, here I am referring to two crucial aspects of contemporary democracies: populism and institutional distrust.

In recent years, populist parties have taken advantage of the diffusion of conspiracy theories (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2018), as highlighted by Plenta (2020) for Eastern Europe (Hungary and Slovakia specifically) or by Hellinger (2019) for the US in the age of Trump. However, the politicization of conspiracy theories is a recent phenomenon (Atkinson & DeWitt, 2019; Moore, 2016), and political scientists are just beginning to study the bilateral influence between “populist offer” – the presence of populist parties on the electoral market – and “conspiracy demand” (Bergmann, 2018). Some studies have suggested a relationship between populist attitudes and conspiracy theories, referring especially to right-wing populism (Bergmann, 2018; Galliford & Furnham, 2017; Grzesiak-Feldman, 2013; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Taggart, 2018) and authoritarian/conservative positions (Uscinski et al., 2016). At the same time, people generally tend to place much more credence in what is claimed by their own side (no matter what side that is) with the implicit objective to reinforce their convictions (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Saunders, 2017; Uscinski et al., 2016; Uscinski & Parent, 2014) and to adapt contradictions to their own worldviews (Franks et al., 2013; Sapountzis & Condor, 2013). Furthermore, support for conspiracy theories is especially widespread among those who consider themselves to be “beyond left and right wing” (Uscinski et al., 2016; Uscinski & Parent, 2014), as seen for example in Italy where supporters of the Five Star Movement have been found to have a higher predisposition to consider conspiracy theories in a positive light (Mancosu et al., 2017). It is also important to note that populism is often based on the figure of a strong charismatic leader (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) and, similarly, the role of celebrities (political or not) in the diffusion of conspiracy theories has proved to have a pivotal role in whether people adopt such theories (Atkinson & DeWitt, 2019).

The second political factor that influences conspiracy theories concerns the issue of mistrust in political institutions (Moore, 2016). According to some scholars, mistrust in political institutions poses a high level of danger for democracy (Sternisko et al., 2020). On the contrary, according to others, conspiracy theories can have (more or less voluntary) positive outcomes for democracies, such as keeping democracies more alert, transparent and effective (Basham & Dentith, 2016; Dentith & Orr, 2017). It is worth remembering that many conspiracy supporters, as well as their opponents, consider themselves to be the bearers of the “truth” (Bjerg & Presskorn-Thygesen, 2017; Swami & Coles, 2010), and argue that democracy is imperiled not by themselves but by those who are in power (politicians, economic elites, and also scientists). Given that they regard secrecy as an engine driving the history of humankind (Imhoff et al., 2021), they claim to know “what lies behind it” (Luhmann & Fuchs, 1994) and regularly reject the label of conspiracists (Fassin, 2011; Franks et al., 2013; Harambam & Aupers, 2017; Lantian et al., 2017; Nera et al., 2020).
THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF SMS

Much of the existing scholarship on conspiracy theories is limited to descriptive analyses, often with the objective to debunk such theories. Following a constructivist approach (Latour, 1987, 2004), I suggest that an interpretative perspective on conspiracy theories should be taken in future studies. While such an approach cannot only be adopted in SMS (see, e.g., Harambam, 2020), SMS has often embraced a comprehensive epistemology and employed toolkits that can prove particularly effective in the coming years, when conspiracy mobilizations are likely to assume a collective dimension, to analyze different political claims and societal actors (forming “conspiracy coalitions”). Indeed, until recently, conspiracy theories have often been analyzed as a matter of individual action and electoral choice (Harambam, 2020).

To take as an example an issue that is currently under debate, coalitions between branches of the “anti-vaccination movement” and a number of conspiracy groups have emerged (Fuchs, 2021; Pivetti et al., 2021). Protests against mandatory vaccination are not a new phenomenon (Grignolio, 2018) nor is their politicization (Kennedy, 2019). These protests are not, as they are often labeled by the media and in the political debate, automatically classifiable as conspiracy theories and it would be more appropriate to limit speaking of vaccine hesitancy, vaccine skepticism and/or opposition based on different cultural, political, medical and religious motivations (Bedford et al., 2018; Dubé et al., 2013; Hobson-West, 2007; Ward, 2016). However, these mobilizations have been characterized (and will be in the future) by specific frames, compositions and discourses that need to be analyzed in all of their complexity. The “alliances” with mobilizations more clearly definable as conspiracies (e.g., those targeted towards Bill Gates, the negative effects of 5G technology, the possibility of modifying human DNA, etc) open up the necessity to analyze the motivations and arguments of participants, but also their organizational structures, forms of action, political positions and radicalization processes. These all represent topics of interest for SMS and I outline below a partial agenda and starting point for the potential contributions that this subfield of political sociology can offer.

4.1 Politics by other means

Conspiracy supporters are often assumed to be right-wing voters or negatively described as dissatisfied with representative democracy, not voting in elections and not registered to any political party. These characteristics have been interpreted by classical political science as a sign of political disengagement (Putnam, 2001). SMS, on the contrary, also takes into consideration other repertoires for engaging with politics, such as public protests, lifestyle changes or direct action (della Porta & Diani, 2015). In the literature on conspiracy theories, these non-electoral repertoires are often associated with phenomena such as terrorism or extremism – both right and left wing extremism – that only considers institutional or at least non-contentious forms of democratic participation as legitimate (Uschinski & Parent, 2014; van Prooijen et al., 2015). Social movement scholarship, on the other hand, has demonstrated that decreased institutional trust and a dissatisfaction with electoral participation do not necessarily correspond to a decrease in democratic participation or to an endorsement of authoritarian/violent ideologies (Stolle & Hooghe, 2005; Tilly, 2010). Recent studies have confirmed that a belief in secret plots decreases normative political engagement, while at the same time increasing non-normative engagement (Imhoff et al., 2021; Kim, 2019). It is also important to note that right-wing voters engage in non-electoral politics as much as left-wing voters (Pirro & Portos, 2021). Furthermore, the association between health-oriented (and alternative) lifestyles and the diffusion of conspiracy theories has recently been considered by scholars (Allington et al., 2021; Baker, 2021). Moving beyond an individual, pathological framework that emphasizes only formal political engagement as politics, a sociological approach invites a focus on the emergence and (re)definition of collective lifestyles as a form of legitimate politics.
4.2 | Frames

Starting from a constructivist approach in an understudied and still vaguely known phenomenon such as conspiracy theories and mobilizations, primary consideration should be given to the concept of frames – a fundamental element in the toolkit of SMS. The use of frames by social movement activists and organizations is foundational to extending particular understandings of social issues to a wider section of the public and to bridge different groups and individuals around a common issue (Benford & Snow, 2000). Investigating collective action frames makes it possible to highlight shared understandings and the ways in which mobilizations develop (Gamson, 1992; Melucci, 1996). Well-known categorizations of different frames have been proposed in the literature; for example, Gamson (1992) differentiates between the injustice frame (the identification of a problematic and unacceptable question), action frame (the practical collective way to contest an issue) and identity frame (the construction of a shared identity against opponents). Another theoretical approach to framing, employed frequently in empirical studies, is that of Snow and Benford (1988), which articulate three distinctive frame types: diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. Respectively, these frames define a problem, identify its possible solutions and advance arguments to mobilize around a social issue. Similar frameworks, I argue, could very well be applied to the study of conspiracy theories and mobilizations to analyze how meanings are constructed and which kinds of outcomes they produce. Some classic research questions asked in SMS can also be applied to conspiracy mobilizations: How are frames discussed and defined among activists? How are they diffused among the population? How are frames used to build new alliances?

Another key reason why SMS should deal more seriously with conspiracy theories is that an increasing development of what I define as “conspiracy coalitions” can be observed, in which different frames and arguments (at least one of which can be considered to be a conspiracy theory) constitute a common, even temporary, alliance. In this sense, another classic concept developed by social movement literature, that of the master frame (Benford & Snow, 2000), could be a particularly useful concept to employ in studies of conspiracy theories. A widespread master frame is the challenge to authority, an aspect particularly emphasized by David Snow (2004) who invites scholars to extend the study of social movements beyond contentious politics in relationship to the state or polity to institutional, organizational, and cultural domains. Furthermore, the definition of different frames is influenced by the variety of actors that populate a field (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). The study of conspiracy theories/mobilizations is especially a case in which frames are offered by numerous players in the arena (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015), such as bloggers, politicians, journalists, which are in turn influenced by different strategies and discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans & Statham, 1999).

A study of conspiracy theories also underscores a key contention in framing studies that grievances are necessary but insufficient catalysts of social movements because grievances are socially constructed and must be framed and re-framed (Mouffe, 1992), in ways that resonate with potential participants and, in effect, re-draw boundaries in social life (Melucci, 1996). Scholars in other disciplines have already started this important work by outlining how conspiracy theories can be considered as attempts to re-discuss the boundaries of science (Gieryn, 1999; Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Latour, 1987) and even of democracy (Dentith & Orr, 2017; Moore, 2016). This approach resonates with important studies about framing in other kinds of mobilizations (see, e.g., Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Cherry, 2010; Gamson, 1997; Tilly, 2004).

As it currently stands, a few studies have attempted to engage in these kinds of theoretical discussions (Smallpage et al., 2020) and have been useful in developing a broad description. However, there is still need sustained study of conspiracy theories to understand the different motivations (and frames) behind such a wide-ranging phenomenon. Qualitative investigations are necessary, and SMS has a long track record of this type of analysis, particularly in relation to contentious, alternative, or undercover groups. It is especially thanks to qualitative investigation of so-called “new social movements” that a focus has been placed on dynamics of institutional boundaries and horizons of meanings (Offe, 1985), which followed from the diffusion of so called post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1977), the increasing importance assumed by lifestyle politics (Giddens, 1991) and the fluidity in the belonging to social movement organizations (Benford & Snow, 2000). Such elements, which had already emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, subsequently
became key aspects of most collective mobilizations from the year 2000 onwards (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2015; Haenfler et al., 2012; Stolle et al., 2005; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). These approaches, alongside that of the framing literature, could also be particularly suited for the study of conspiracy mobilizations, in which the disparate backgrounds, multi-memberships, socio-demographic characteristics, motivations and ethical values of activists make the phenomenon variegated and multifaceted.

4.3 | Mobilizers and protests

Beyond the diffusion of framing activities, boundary shifts and post-materialist claims, also economic and material arguments remained pivotal in many contemporary mobilizations (della Porta, 2015; Klein, 2005, 2015; Kousis, 2004; Pickerrill & Krinsky, 2012; Rovisco, 2016). Classical forms of protest have continued to be conducted in recent years across the world and by different types of social movements, especially during the anti-austerity wave of protest that followed the Great Recession (della Porta, 2017; Giugni & Grasso, 2019; Walgrave et al., 2010). Protests that are defined as that of conspiracy theories are also likely to concern economic grievances and materialist complaints in the near future: the most obvious and contemporary example is provided by mobilizations related to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated economic crisis.

Understanding who the main mobilizers are, how people are mobilized in terms of information and networks, and why they take to the streets, is something that the classic paradigms (and empirical tools) of SMS can help to effectively analyze. To name but a few well-known theoretical approaches, political opportunity structures (Jasper & Goodwin, 2011), resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) and contentious politics (Tarrow, 2011) can be effectively used to investigate conspiracy mobilizations and coalitions. On a methodological level, these types of protest events could also be investigated by conducting protest surveys (Walgrave et al., 2010, 2016) or by means of participatory observation, as some scholars have already done during major events (see, e.g., Robertson, 2016 on David Icke’s conference in Wembley). Of course the relationship between online and offline protest is also a central aspect in contemporary social movement scholarship, however, the role of the online dimension in conspiracy theories has been studied especially on an individual-level by looking at the characteristics of individual conspiracy supporters (Uscinski et al., 2018; Wood & Douglas, 2013). Looking at the online collective dimension as well as at the online/offline “contentious branding” (Beraldo, 2020) of conspiracy issues and conspiracy groups would represent another important contribution.

This combination of different approaches can prove fundamental in the study of conspiracy theories and mobilizations. Empirically-based and theoretically-driven research must be developed to apply to conspiracy theories some classical questions that have emerged in social movement literature, such as: what are the motivations that push people to protest? What are the motivations for expending time, energy and money on a cause? What are the “political careers” of the activists/supporters? Are they first-time protesters or do they come from other social movement milieus? Do they currently belong to other social movements? What are the other main issues (beyond a belief in so-called conspiracy theories) to which they give most relevance? Who do they perceive to be their main enemy/opponent? What are their positions on classic economic and social issues used to measure the progressive/authoritarian axis? Considering conspiracy theories and mobilizations as a suitable subject to study in the social movement arena can be beneficial to better understanding them, while at the same time offering social movement scholars important insights more generally about contemporary (mis)trust in governments, science, the role of experts and the issue of lifestyle politics, to name just a few topics.
While it is clear that a host of research questions from the field of SMS can be asked to advance the investigation of conspiracy theories and mobilizations, I am aware that ethical issues and methodological difficulties still play an important role in the current underdevelopment of this stream of research. In terms of research ethics, I reiterate the need to study conspiracy theories because their complexity and popularity offer the potential to enrich theoretical debates while at the same time acknowledging that some limits must be maintained. Namely, sociological study of the phenomena does not necessitate the acceptance of fascist or violent positions. It is necessary (at least in the descriptive phase) to try to maintain an impartial view; in the analytical phase, on the contrary, scholars may take stances that have an epistemological validity (Greenwood et al., 1993; McIntyre, 2008), but should be explicitly acknowledged and clarified by the researcher (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). However, these are epistemological questions that apply to all mobilizations related to political and/or social issues, and are not specific or unique to the investigation of conspiracy theories.

Methodological problems are closely connected to ethical ones. Firstly, in the case of conspiracy theories and mobilizations, the precise definition of the subject of the study is of fundamental relevance. Researchers must articulate why they are considering a particular mobilization to be a “conspiracy theory mobilization” and studies must operationalize the meaning of a “conspiracy theory”. Furthermore these are, almost always, hard-to-reach or at least hard-to-sample populations (Marpsat & Razafindratsima, 2010), namely fluid and usually unstructured networks, without a list of subscribers. Supporters have varying degrees of involvement, but it is unthinkable to conduct real, statistically representative surveys on conspiracy groups and mobilizations. Furthermore, different types of populations are involved: supporters, members, experts, “gurus,” influencers.

In some cases, access to the field could be complicated, precisely because of the distrust of science that many participants in such events – or in any case the members of these groups and mobilizations – might have. At the same time, shadow investigations could have the side effect of increasing such distrust towards academia and raising additional ethical concerns. Even more than in other cases, it is useful to have key informants, who can facilitate access to the field and contact with other members and activists: as anticipated, qualitative research is necessary and therefore snowball or even reasoned sampling might be adopted.

Finally, an important contribution to the literature as well as knowledge relating to these phenomena could be brought about by comparative approaches. I refer in particular to two kinds of comparison: transnational comparisons, in order to investigate the role of “political cultures” in influencing adherence to conspiracy theories, and comparisons between conspiracy supporters and the rest of the population, in order to analyze the peculiarities or, on the contrary, bring out any similarities in the two groups. It must be said, however, that such research would require a significant amount of time and money, and to date funding for these topics has been underdeveloped.

A (provocative?) question was posed by Bruno Latour when he asked “what’s the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized version of social critique, inspired by, let’s say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu?” (Latour, 2004, p. 230). It is true that the history of sociological thought is full of theories that, when first proposed, were considered as types of conspiracy theories by large sectors of civil society, but also, and most importantly, by scholars from other academic fields and policy makers. One need only think of Marx, Weber or the Frankfurt School as examples. The same argument could be made for many of the “good struggles” that progressive social movements have supported in recent decades; to name only one example, anti-globalization claims were often labeled as conspiracies, antidemocratic, violent views and over-negative visions of future scenarios.

This is not to propose a comparison between those theories/movements and so-called conspiracy theories, but to reaffirm the fact that each historical event or period may be viewed differently in retrospect. At the same time, social
phenomena should be studied as they develop, by taking them seriously and rigorously analyzing their characteristics:
in the case of any (collective) mobilization, this means at the very least investigating the frames, composition and mo-
tivations behind them. Accordingly, this article serves as a call for a deeper study of conspiracy theories/mobilizations,
which can particularly benefit from the approaches of social movement frameworks. Hopefully, it can contribute to
opening up a debate on this topic and especially to stimulating new research on so-called conspiracy theories in the
field of SMS.

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ENDNOTES
1 In this paper the term "conspiracy theories" is used for the sake of simplicity while being aware of its problematic nature,
which is partially discussed in Sections 2 and 3.
2 There is also an evident disproportion between US scholars and European (or more generally non-US) scholars writing
about conspiracy theories (Mancosu et al., 2017).
3 The Five Star Movement is a political party founded by the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo in 2009. It uses an anti-political
rhetoric but has progressively moved towards moderate positions and became the first national party, garnering 32% of the
votes, during the 2018 elections.
4 This point is valid especially for physical research, more than for online methods.

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