Magic and Politics: Conspirituality and COVID-19

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Why do people find conspiracy theories attractive, convincing, or useful? In this article, I analyze conspirituality—that is, the relationships between New Age spirituality and conspiracy theories—in Italy during the COVID-19 lockdown. After distinguishing between conspiracy-believing and belief in conspiracies, I claim that conspiracy-believing could be understood as an aesthetic (sensory and artistic) practice. In doing so, I offer a novel interpretation on conspiracism that complements current scholarship while departing from the latter’s focus on the cognitive and emotional weaknesses of those who adopt conspiracy theories. By engaging with the thought of Jacques Rancière, in conversation with studies on contemporary Paganism and Western esotericism, I consider the adoption of conspiracy theories as an expression of dissensus by a community of sense that does not look only for visibility but, rather, wants to be fully acknowledged, recognized, and legitimized in their “participatory”—or “magical”—way of inhabiting the world.

Conspiracy theories are not fringe ideas, tucked neatly away in the dark corners of society. They are politically, economically, and socially relevant to all of us. They are intertwined with our everyday lives in countless ways.

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ways. Just like other ideas, they have consequences which can sometimes be deadly. Conspiracy theories can also encourage good behavior and uncover wrongdoing. Beyond shaping the composition and nature of governments through democratic processes, conspiracy theories exert a profound effect on policy choices. (Uscinski 2018, 1)

IN APRIL 2020, Italy, hit hard by COVID-19, was in quarantine—a very strict one. The quarantine had started around February 21, 2020, in the northern part of the country and gradually spread to all of the peninsula. I was in the US, where I live, at the time. I had been following the official reports from newspapers and other media and the unofficial ones through my Italian contacts: via social media, WhatsApp messages, and Zoom calls. I had been in touch with my Pagan interlocutors and friends daily, and I had been sharing with them thoughts, feelings, prayers, tarot readings, casual conversations, and hopes and visions for the future.

The contemporary Pagans I have been ethnographically following since 2015 comprise approximately forty individuals and many spiritual paths (Parmigiani 2019a and forthcoming). They are primarily based in Salento, in the Apulia region—the southeastern fringe of the Italian peninsula. I am regularly connected with them: they populate my Facebook and Instagram feeds; individually or in group, they animate my smartphone with numerous notifications per day and my computer with weekly Zoom or Skype meetings. Most of them are solitary Pagans (Berger 2019) and eclectic practitioners (Strmiska 2005). Some of them are witches and others New Agers—most of them both, depending on the circumstances. Some follow the Umbanda religion; some others are into neo-shamanism; some define themselves as Catholic; some lean towards theosophy; and others primarily practice energy healing. They are not all part of the same groups or covens; rather, they are connected (virtually or in “real life”) by networks of belonging. The latter include groups of people from different backgrounds, careers, and spiritual paths, for example, working with the same spiritual teacher, attending the same ashram, or having taken a Reiki initiation together. What they all have in common, besides an interest in the environment and in “magic,” is a welcoming and caring attitude towards human and non-human persons and a neo-animist understanding and experience of the world (see, e.g., Harvey 2005). I know many of them quite well, as a result of years of ethnographic research. Some of them are among my closest friends. Although most of my interlocutors

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1 This area was not among the ones most impacted by COVID-19 in the spring of 2020.

2 On the history of the term “magic,” see, among many others, Otto and Strausberg 2012, Hanegraaff 2012, and Meyer and Pels 2003.
are not politically involved in any official form of activism or party politics, they are committed to social justice and environmentalism: they are inclusive and cherish relationships—with humans, non-humans, and more-than-human “copresences” (Beliso-de Jesús 2015).

If I had not known them so well, I would not have been so struck and unsettled by a widespread trend that, I suspect, the COVID-19 lockdown amplified and that my Facebook page recorded with zeal: their apparent “belief” in conspiracy theories and, in particular, in the ones coming from overseas. Every day, for weeks up to the present moment, I have been witnessing many of my Pagan friends and acquaintances sharing, commenting, and posting many articles, YouTube videos, interviews, podcasts, and memes that portray a number of conspiracies. Some of them are related to the virus, some are animated by anti-vax stances, some are against the introduction of the 5G technologies. Some are conspiracy theories based in Italy; others are broadly international. Among the conspiracies that circulate in these Pagan networks of belonging are claims that COVID-19 is the result of genetic engineering and escaped from a lab; Coronavirus is not more lethal than a “simple” flu; the declaration of pandemic (and not, “merely,” of epidemic) was done in the attempt of get us all vaccinated or to install a microchip under our skin so that we can be controlled; COVID-19 was created to financially speculate on the vaccine; and COVID-19 is created or accelerated by 5G technology. Moreover, in the spring of 2020, two videos went viral among my interlocutors and have been extremely influential: Plandemic, featuring Dr. Judy Mikovits, and an interview with Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai by The Next News Network. As a matter of fact, and to my surprise, some of the conspiracies that circulate among my interlocutors include North American ones on the “deep state,” linked to QAnon, and anti-vax theories fostered by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Why do people find these sorts of conspiracy theories attractive, convincing, or useful? Although not all the individuals involved in these networks of belonging appear to follow and adopt conspiracy theories, it is worth noting that the WhatsApp and Facebook groups and posts that I have been following for this research are usually not spaces in which

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3As Michael Butter and Peter Knight point out: “Melley understands conspiracy theories as an expression of ‘agency panic,’ a concern about a loss of autonomy and challenges to traditional notions of identity in the present” (2018, 41).

4Julia Carrie Wong (2018) writes: On 28 October 2017, ‘Q’ emerged from the primordial swamp of the internet on the message board 4chan. In a thread called ‘Calm Before the Storm,’ and in subsequent posts, Q established his legend as a government insider with top security clearance who knew the truth about a secret struggle for power involving Donald Trump, the ‘deep state,’ Robert Mueller, the Clintons, pedophile rings, and other stuff. Since then, Q has continued to drop ‘breadcrumbs’ on 4chan and 8chan, fostering a ‘QAnon’ community devoted to decoding Q’s messages and understanding the real truth about, well, everything. See also Argentino 2020; LaFrance 2020.
different opinions on these issues are welcomed, debated, or discussed. Those who do not agree with the conspiracist materials simply do not comment nor participate to those group discussions. In fact, if, on the one hand, in the absence of a formal group “leader,” the relationships among the Pagan individuals I have been following are not structurally hierarchical, on the other hand, on the basis of the exchanges that I have been witnessing online, some personalities have been emerging as particularly charismatic in relation to the divulgation of conspiracy theories. They are more active in the spread of conspiracist worldviews, articles, and YouTube videos within these private WhatsApp and Facebook groups than the other members, whose participation in the online group activity often takes the shape of mere approval, validation, or gratitude for the shared materials (through “likes,” emoticons, or words). None of the “influencers” of the networks of belonging that I have been following, though, to my knowledge, either actively participated in “no-mask” manifestations or took to the streets in other political protests informed by COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Rather, the adoption of conspiracy theories appears to be a feature active and expressed mainly within these private networks of belonging. This is an important element to acknowledge for the sake of my argument, since it supports my claim that conspiracy-believing is not always a synonym of believing in conspiracies. As I will show in more detail below, I argue that conspiracy-believing could be understood as an aesthetic (sensory and artistic) practice with performative effects. In this sense, it might be considered as an expression of dissensus by a community of sense that not only looks for visibility but, rather, wants to feel and be fully acknowledged, recognized, and legitimized in their “participatory”—or “magical”—way of inhabiting the world. Although rooted in my Italian fieldwork, my thesis could be useful in other contexts, too, and could help to explain why some politically moderate Pagans or magic(k) practitioners could find themselves supporting some of the most radical conspiracy theories in circulation.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES: QUESTIONING “BELIEF”

As many scholars have shown, conspiracy theories, in their basic form and rhetorical structure, are not a new phenomenon. They have been around at least since the French Revolution (Byford 2011, 38–94). The study of conspiracism—that is to say a “distinct culture . . . which encompasses a specific system of knowledge, beliefs, values, practices and rituals shared by communities of people around the world” (Byford 2011, 5) that involve conspiracies—therefore, has been engaging
scholars in many fields, including philosophy, psychology, political science, social sciences, and, more recently, religion for a long time (see Robertson et al 2018). In the last twenty years in particular, the number of publications on this topic spiked as a result of the contemporary political climate—one that, with Jacques Rancière, I would define as “postdemocratic” (Rancière 1999, and below). What is a conspiracy theory, then, and what are its characteristics? These questions are not as easy to answer. In its most basic and general definition, a conspiracy theory is “an explanation, either speculative or evidence-based, which attributes the causes of an event to a conspiracy or a plot” (Byford 2011, 20–21; Dentith 2018). Scholars, though, have been struggling to provide a thorough definition of what a conspiracy theory is and what narratives and stories pertain, or not, to the genre. To a certain degree, in fact, the label conspiracy theory works as a “strategy of exclusion” (Husting and Orr 2007), operating as a way to distinguish, validate, and dignify what it is not (see, e.g., Byford 2011, 22). Moreover, as Jesse Walker (2018) points out, everyday usage is “even more slippery,” given that the term very often has evaluative (derogatory) connotations (see also Byford 2011, 17, 21; Räikkä and Basham 2018). In addition, as Walker’s study of the 2015 vaccine debate in the United States shows, not all that is called “conspiracy theory” always include a “conspiracy.”

In this article, similarly to Jovan Byford, I will consider conspiracy theories as a particular “tradition of explanation, characterized by a particular rhetorical style” (Byford 2011, 4; emphasis in the original). Although one cannot avoid a certain degree of theoretical arbitrariness in the absence of an agreed-upon definition of conspiracy theory, my focus on the aesthetic, formal, and sensory dimensions of conspiracism is far from arbitrary: it allows me to concentrate on a specific and understudied dimension of conspiracy theories—one that reads conspiracies, within a Rancièrian understanding of politics, as practices of dissensus enacted by a specific community of sense (see below, and Parmigiani 2019b).

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5For a status quaestionis on the study of conspiracy theories, see, among others, Butter and Knight 2016; 2018; and Silva Castanho et al. 2017.

6In fact, as Byford points out, a “conspiracy theory industry” has been blooming as well, involving authors, publishers, events’ organizers, television programs, documentaries, media news, etc. (2011, 7–8). These depict this knowledge as “counter-knowledge”—an interesting move, given its ubiquity. On conspiracy theories and the “paranoid style” of American politics see Hofstadter 1967.

7As Byford reminds us, the etymology of conspiracy comes from the Latin conspiarare, to breath together. In Italian, conspiracy theories are called “teorie del complotto,” where complotto means “plotting together”—etymologically referring to the verb complicare, meaning “to fold together” (Byford 2011, 20).
Jacques Rancière is among the scholars interested in the connections and tensions between the political and the emotional, between power relations and sensory/aesthetic experiences. According to the French philosopher,

Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows (or does not allow) some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking. (Rancière 2004, 10)

This “partition of the sensible,” which might also be referred to as “regimes of perceptions” (Panagia 2009, 7), is also called “common sense.” The aim of politics, as well as of art, is a reconfiguration of the sensible. By sensible, Rancière understands both what makes sense and what can be sensed (Panagia 2009, 3). Following a definition of aesthetics that encompasses both the original and the current meanings, Rancière develops a philosophy that puts the aesthetic and sensory experiences at the center of political action. In particular, his understanding of democracy lies in the phenomenon of dissensus (in Latin, “sensing differently”). Dissensus is the moment in which the experiences “of those who have no part”—those who are not recognized by the majority and are not included in the political “distribution of the sensible”—are inscribed in society (Rancière 1999, 123). In other words, dissensus (which includes both cognitive and affective dimensions) is intrinsically political inasmuch as it challenges common sense by broadening the sensorium at a given time and space.

On a societal level, dissensus enables the emergence of “communities of sense.” The latter is understood as a community that “acknowledges politics to contain a sensuous and aesthetic aspect that is irreducible to ideology and idealization” and that “works toward being-together only through a consistent dismantling of any idealized common ground, form, or figure” (Hinderliter et al. 2009, 2). A community of sense is not just an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991), or an “interpretative community” (Byford 2011, 31), or sub-culture. It does not coalesce primarily around particular ideas, ideological positions, or practices. Rather, it revolves around shared affects and feelings.

My focus on the aesthetic (i.e., artistic and sensory) dimensions of conspiracy-believing (that I distinguish from belief in conspiracies) needs to be understood within such a framework. Thus, it allows for an understanding of the sensory, artistic, and performative aspects of conspiracism beyond individual practices and for a problematization of the use of the
notion of belief in the study of conspiracies. It is important to point out, though, that my interpretation does not intend to substitute but rather to complement other well-studied dimensions of conspiracism.

In her article “Beyond Belief,” Sabina Magliocco addresses the topic of “belief in magic” by putting anthropology and folklore in conversation (2012). Rooting her reflections in one of her fieldwork projects on Italian vernacular healing, she claims that the aphorism, “It is not true, but I believe in it” (in Italian, “Non è vero, ma ci credo”), incorrectly attributed to the ethnologist Ernesto de Martino by Magliocco’s interlocutors, is a good starting point to tackle the question of magic and belief among contemporary Pagans. I argue that the same could be claimed in relation to the notion of belief among other forms of Western Esotericism, whose connections with conspiracism and magic I will address more in detail below. In particular, “Non è vero, ma ci credo” could help to explain some of the features of conspiracy-believing among the Italian Pagans I am working with.

At least three claims made by Magliocco in “Beyond Belief” are important for my analysis of conspiracy theories. Before addressing them, I present a brief vignette that will give ethnographic substance to the theoretical framework that follows it.

It’s April 4, and I receive a WhatsApp message from a Pagan friend, one of the persons that I know best among my interlocutors. I have spent time with them on many occasions: walking in nature, praying, chatting, dancing, sharing our stories, drinking beer, eating taralli, and performing rituals. They are well-read, educated people—a teacher and a spiritual coach. It’s early in the morning for me in the US, and I wake up with the buzz of the WhatsApp notification on my mobile phone. I open the chat and I see a link to a website called “MediterraneiNews.” I open the link and I read the title: “Tunnel di New Y ork sotto assedio contro la rete dei pedo-satanisti. Trump a capo delle forze speciali dei Navy Seals nell’operazione ‘Q-Force.’” (New York Tunnel under siege against the pedo-satanist mob. Trump is in charge of the Navy Seals special units in the operation “Q-force”). I could not believe my eyes, and I found myself...
repeatedly blinking and going over the title several times to make sense of it. Then, I started skimming through the article. I had been reading multiple indignant posts and links about presumed connections between the operation “Q-force” in Europe and the spread of COVID-19 in the previous several weeks: a theory that seemed to catch the interest of many of my Pagan interlocutors and Facebook “friends.” Nonetheless, reading about accusations of pedophilia and Satanism—a sort of cliché in the genre of political defamation—had crossed a line of gullibility, for me, that morning. How could a smart and compassionate individual such as my Pagan friend buy into this? How could they not immediately recognize, if not the absurdity of the content and the partisanship of the sources, at least the rhetorical triviality of that piece?

While I was reading the article, I received another link—to a website now, a YouTube video by David Wilcock (2020)—with an accompanying message by my Pagan friend. In the voice message, they told me, in a particularly formal Italian, that they had sent this to me with a “sociological and mediatic intent,” given my “geographical closeness to the place” and “my competence.” Then, they asked me to give them an opinion on the “veridicità” (reliability) and the “verosimiglianza” (likelihood) of the news that, if true, “would be fantastic! A revolution for the good of the planet!”

At that point, I decided that I had to understand what was going on, and this article, to a certain extent, is the result of my harsh awakening(s) of that day.

Significatively, for the argument that I am developing here, my Pagan friend did not talk about “truth” (verità), but they mentioned two words that share with verità only part of their etymologies: “veridicità” (veridicality, reliability, understood as “efficacious rendering of truth”) and verosimiglianza (verisimilitude, likelihood, understood as “having the appearance of truth”). These choices indicate, on the one hand, the adoption of a peculiar linguistic register; on the other hand, they gesture towards a particular relationship between content and form.

As for the first element, it is worth mentioning that the Italian language has different variants that work on a continuum: diachronic (depending on time), diatopic (depending on the geographical area), diastratic (depending on social differences), diamesic (depending on the

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12David Wilcock is a best-selling author who writes on New Age and Esoteric topics such as “awakening,” “synchronicities,” and consciousness. In the video my Pagan friend sent me, he was revealing “leaks” he claimed to have received from informed sources (undisclosed) about a plot that was about to take place. This plot involved three days without Internet and phones during which was going to happen the “arrest of the bad guys.”
medium—spoken or written), and diaphasic (depending on domain and function) (see Berruto 2011). My Pagan friend, in their WhatsApp message, used a variant of Italian very infrequent for our regular, informal, interactions. First of all, they spoke only in Italian without using any dialect—which is unusual. Second, they chose a “high” register, characteristic of educated Italians and typical of more formal interactions: a choice that aimed at performing competence and respectability. Clearly, the “imagined public” of this message was not only me but, possibly, an imagined skeptical audience. My Pagan friend’s choice of this particular linguistic register shows that, in our exchange, they were addressing me primarily as an academic and scholar, and not as their friend (with whom they usually interact in dialect or in a more colloquial linguistic register). Moreover, I gathered that their WhatsApp “performance” for me (as an academic and scholar) was taking place in an actual or imagined dialogue with other interlocutors—as my Pagan friend briefly mentioned in their message (“other friends that reason along our lines were asking about this, too”).

As for the second element, although I doubt that my Pagan friend chose the words “verosimiglianza” and “veridicità” to consciously make a point, it is nonetheless worth noting that this verbal selection might indirectly shed some light on how they understand the relationship between content and form in their approach to conspiracy theories—something that Magliocco’s treatment of “belief” could further illuminate. Both the “rendering” and “appearance” of truth, in fact, allude to a specific dimension of experience: the aesthetics of representation.

First, for Magliocco, belief is better understood as a contextual expression—“a response to particular macro-contextual (i.e. historical, social, political, and cultural) and micro-contextual (i.e. unique to one specific performative context) forces” (Magliocco 2012, 7)—rather than as a synonym of “faith.” If this is true for magic and other religious and spiritual experiences, the same could be claimed for conspiracism, whose relationships with religion are at the center of a growing number of studies, including the recent work of Egil Asprem, Asbjørn Dyrendal, and David G. Robertson (Asprem et al. 2018). In this sense, it is possible to argue that my Pagan friend’s citation of the QAnon news could be better understood “beyond belief”: as “entangled” in a macro and micro network of contextual forces, objects, and actors—some of which I intend to describe in this article.

A second important point made by Magliocco is that “multiple seemingly contradictory beliefs systems coexist within the same individual—a situation characteristic of modernity and post modernity” (Magliocco 2012, 7). Following Stanley Tambiah’s (1990) and Susan Greenwood’s
works on magic in the legacy of Lucien Lévi-Bruhl, Magliocco claims that causality (rationality and logic) and participation (mystical thinking) coexist both in all human societies and in the same persons (Magliocco 2020b; see also Hanegraaff 2012). In this perspective, “Belief is not the opposite of reason; it is a state of conviction that is reached in a different way, with different evidence” (Magliocco 2012, 11–12). These claims, which are similar to some contemporary understandings of Western esotericism (see, e.g., Granholm 2008), could also help in analyzing my interaction with my Pagan friends, allowing for a contextual and positional understanding of their adoption of conspiracy theories. In particular, such a perspective could explain not only the fact that educated, sensitive, and inclusive individuals such as my Pagan friend could embrace, in certain contexts and situations, conspiracies. It also allows for a shift in the ways to frame the study of conspiracism in general: moving from psychological, cognitive, and social dynamics of beliefs in conspiracies to the sensory, aesthetic, and performative dimension of conspiracy-believing. The distinction between the two, at this point, should be evident: whereas the first is embedded in a paradigm that equates belief and faith (understood as the “non-rational”), the second, by focusing on the aesthetic (i.e., sensory and artistic) and performative dimensions, problematizes that same binarism. Conspiracy believing, in fact, is not only a cognitive or psychological choice; it is primarily a practice that engages simultaneously different affects, experiences, and “ways of knowing” of individuals and groups. Accordingly, it can only be grasped contextually and, possibly, positionally—that is, in reference to the micro and macro contexts in which they are embedded and to the position of the individuals and groups vis-à-vis other individuals and society at large.

In the case of my Pagan friend, then, the issue is not so much whether they “believed” in the QAnon conspiracy. As their word choice shows, the truth of this conspiracy did not appear to be a relevant dimension for them to discuss in the interaction with me. They did not try to convince me or to support that particular conspiracy with claims, data, and quotations. Rather, I argue that it is what the sharing of that conspiracy did in negotiating the relations between me (and what I represent), my Pagan friend, and their community of sense that was particularly meaningful for them. By sending that WhatsApp message to me, they were negotiating their place in the macro and micro network of forces, actors, and power dynamics around them—including the mainstream academic ones that I represent. Therefore, their choice of (formally) addressing me as a scholar

13For a comparison, see also Byford 2011, 121.
(instead of, primarily, as a friend) can be read as an attempt to situate their “belonging” not only within their inner circle of relationships, but, as I will show in more detail below, within an imagined community of people who sense and make sense of the world in a particular—participatory—way.

The last element of Magliocco’s article that may be particularly useful for this specific research also moves in this direction (2012; see also Magliocco 2020a, 2020b). Following the observations of the anthropologist Susan Greenwood on magic and the sensory aspect of participation and those of the folklorist Linda Dégh on legends and narratives, Magliocco stresses how one cannot separate the concept of belief from its sensory, affective, performative (Tambiah 1990), and artistic expressions (Magliocco 2020a; see also Magliocco 2020b). This element that explicitly connects art and magic, belief and aesthetics, emerges also in my Pagan friend’s comments on “verosimiglianza” and “veridicità,” pointing towards a more complex way to understand conspiracy-believing—one that needs to be understood “beyond belief,” and that, in line with my previous work on ethics, aesthetics, and activism (Parmigiani 2019b), I propose to study within a Rancièrean understanding of politics. Similarly to what happens among the followers of Italian vernacular magic that Magliocco studied, in fact, “Non è vero, ma ci credo” exemplifies in the case of conspiracy theories the tensions between beliefs and practices, interiority and exteriority, rationality and non-rationality, and the individual and social dimensions of non-rational, “participatory” forms of knowing. For all of these reasons, I propose to read conspiracy theories in my Italian Pagan ethnographic context in relation to one of the most important existential and hermeneutical dimensions in the life of my interlocutors: magic.14

CONSPIRACY THEORIES, CONSPIRITUALITY, AND MAGIC IN A POST-SECULAR WORLD

In recent years, “post-secularism” became a widely adopted framework to understand the role of religion in the contemporary world. Popularized by scholars such as Jürgen Habermas (e.g., 2006), post-secularism does not imply a “return to religion,” but “rather, an awareness of the continued relevance of religion in secular societies, as well as changing perceptions of what actually counts as religion, what functions it may have and where it can be located” (Granholm 2014, 309). Bringing forward a problematization between the meanings and spaces of what is usually called “secular” and “religious,” this notion has the advantage to favor more

14On magic and politics see, for example, the recent (2020) issue of Nova Religion 23(4), and in particular Magliocco 2020a, 2020b, Asprem 2020, and Berry 2020.
complex understandings of the entanglements between the two and to encourage a more sophisticated study of religions today—including Western esotericism and contemporary Paganism. Recent works on conspiracism and spirituality are an illustration of this. In his analysis of esotericism and conspiracy culture, for example, Asbjørn Dyrendal (2013) explores the connections between history, agency, and knowledge, arguing that there are similarities between the two phenomena. He further stresses this point in his study of Norwegian “conspirituality” (Dyrendal 2015). The latter, in the words of those who first introduced this term, is a politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age: (1) A secret group covertly controls, or is trying to control, the political and social order . . . (2) Humanity is undergoing a “paradigm shift” in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened ‘new paradigm’ worldview. (Ward and Voas 2011, 104)

Asprem and Dyrendal help refine this connection between conspiracism and New Age spirituality: one that I find quite useful for my research. Conspirituality, in fact, helps describe some of the dynamics and one of the “contexts” in which Italian Pagan conspiracy-believing is embedded—one that, at a more general level, is characterized by what Christopher Partridge (e.g., 2004; 2005; 2014) defined as occulture. This term “refers to the environment within which, and the social processes by which particular meanings relating, typically, to spiritual, esoteric, paranormal and conspirational ideas emerge, are disseminated, and become influential in societies and in the lives of individuals. Central to these processes is popular culture” (Partridge 2014, 116). According to Partridge, we have been recently witnessing a progressive popularization of the occult (of which conspirituality is an example), which, he claims, is now

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15 Asprem and Dyrendal point out that the term conspirituality, although descriptively useful, is neither “new” nor “surprising.” Instead, it can be linked to the structure of the “cultic milieu” (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). The concept of cultic milieu is a key one in the study of Western esotericism. Introduced by Colin Campbell in the 1970s, it refers to a counterculture that holds oppositional beliefs and knowledge (Campbell 1972; Barkun 2003). On New Age see e.g. Hanegraaff 1996. On contemporary Western esotericism see Asprem and Granholm 2014.

16 Although Charlotte Ward and David Voas argue that conspirituality is a phenomenon that is primarily unfolding on the Internet (Ward and Voas 2011, 104), by stressing the aesthetic and political dimensions of the phenomenon I am studying, I am inclined to claim that, although the web is central, it is not necessarily the only or primary element in which conspirituality develops. Dyrendal says the following on conspirituality “As an emergent movement or semi-separate trend within contemporary ‘occulture’. . . conspirituality may be construed as fairly recent. As a broader phenomenon, the integration of conspiracy theories and spirituality has a long history in esoteric discourse, with conspiracy theory playing the role of, among other things, theodicy” (2015, 269).
something ordinary and linked to everyday life. Occulture is something, in other words, that characterizes contemporary post-secularism.

For my Italian interlocutors, as the aforementioned vignette shows, conspirituality has both a soteriological function (as in Ward and Voas 2011) and a “counter-hegemonic” one (as in Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). On the one hand, COVID-19 is interpreted as a “revelation” (in line with the etymology of the word “apocalypse”) of the ultimate attempt of “lower vibrational forces” to prevent the “ascension” of humanity. This is evident, for example, in my Pagan friend’s claim that the QAnon news, if true, “would be fantastic! A revolution for the good of the planet!” On the other hand, as I will show in more detail below, conspiracy-believing among Italian Pagans takes the shape of an explicit, populist form of dissensus aimed at challenging the common ways to sense and make sense of the world. The different “imagined publics” of my Pagan friend’s WhatsApp message gesture precisely towards this interpretative direction.

If “post-secularism,” “conspirituality,” and “occulture” are important concepts to understanding key aspects of the religious macro-context of conspiracy-believing among the Pagan communities I am following, I propose to explore here an aspect of its “micro-context” by focusing on the links between magic and conspiracism. The practice of magic, in fact, although differently conceived and carried out, is one of the key features of Pagan spirituality among my interlocutors—and a meaningful one, I claim, to understand their conspiracy-believing. As I already pointed out in my remarks on the aphorism “Non è vero, ma ci credo,” it is my claim that among Southern Italian Pagans not only are there analogies between esotericism and conspiracy culture, but that the adoption of the latter could be better understood if read in relation to magic.

If a number of formal aspects can link conspiracy thinking and traditional features of magic (e.g., the use of analogy, the emphasis on causality, the reference to what is “hidden,” the value of tradition, even scientism), it is the “participatory” dimension of magic, described by Tambiah (1990), Greenwood (e.g., 2009), and Magliocco (e.g., 2004; 2012; 2020b), that I find particularly interesting for my argument. When I asked some of my Pagan interlocutors why they adopted that “filter” (conspiracy thinking) to “read” the current situation (COVID-19) and the contemporary world, they often answered with a variation on the following theme: “because they resonate with my deep feeling, my deep knowledge” (il mio sentire

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17. “This is . . . not to deny that there is, within, occulture, that which is occult, esoteric, oppositional, or countercultural, but rather that occulture per se is largely ordinary and everyday” (Partridge 2004, 119).

18. On scientism, see Hammer 2001.
profondo, il mio sapere profondo). This formula is a very specific one, and I have found it used by many of my Pagan interlocutors in contexts where they refer to “magic” and to its “participatory epistemology.” For example, they might comment, “I know it, because I feel it within” (lo so, perché lo sento nel profondo) when asked to “explain” a “message” that “came through them,” a divination, a channeling experience, an encounter with a particular other-than-human or more-than-human presence, the efficacy of a ritual, the correctness of a tarot reading. “Sentire nel profondo” among the Italian Pagans that I am following, in other words, appears to refer to the “participatory way of knowing” that magic activates and to be central in the unfolding of “alternative epistemologies” so dear to my Pagan interlocutors. Interestingly, the same expression is also used to explain their adoption of conspiracism, making the links between the narratives of conspiracies (in their aesthetic dimension) and magic worth exploring.19

I am not here arguing that conspiracies are a form of magic or that all Italian Pagans are conspiracy-believers: in fact, I read some harsh critiques of conspiracy theories by some Italian Wiccans on media and social media. Moreover, I am not claiming that magic could be better understood in relation to conspiracy thinking. The two are different phenomena, and magic is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to explain the adoption of conspiracy theories. Rather, by analyzing my interactions with some of my Pagan interlocutors in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown, I am suggesting that, for some of them, conspiracy-believing is a participatory experience, one that they link to magic, in virtue of the fact that it engages the aesthetic dimension (sensory and artistic) as a “way of knowing.” As a practice, conspiracy-believing, for my interlocutors, is not primarily a cognitive enterprise; rather, it is an affective, sensory, aesthetic, “participatory” one. Although belief in magic does not necessarily imply the adoption of conspiracies, then, it plays a role in the experience of those who adopt them, especially within the Pagan context that I am studying.

The importance of “participation,” in fact, is not something active only at the “micro” context level of (Italian) Pagans and linked to their experience and understanding of magic. It is also present at a “macro” level, too—to use Magliocco’s words. In particular, the focus on participation that I found ethnographically is in line with some of the remarks of recent scholarship on “post-secularism” and, in particular, on “post-secular esotericism.” One of the features that characterizes post-secularism and,

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19 Being analogy a key component of both conspiracism and magical thinking, it is not surprising that the two are perceived as related by my interlocutors (who adopt analogical thinking).
in particular post-secular esotericism, is precisely its focus on “participation.” As Kennet Granholm claims:

Put simply, participation can be understood as a tendency towards emotive, analogical, non-reasoning thought and action, whereas instrumental causality can be understood as a tendency to seek the reasons for events in the world in terms of material causation. Re-enchantment in post-secular esotericism can be defined as an active effort to acknowledge, embrace and seek affective and analogical thinking and action, while at the same time underscoring the insufficiency of rationality. (Granholm 2008, 62–63)

Within these “magic-related” micro and macro contexts, then, it is possible to claim that within the Pagan environment I am studying, “participation,” triggered by the aesthetic dimensions of conspiracy-believing, has a special role in the adoption of conspiracy theories. In line with the aphorism “Non è vero, ma ci credo,” conspiracies’ “truth” does not lie primarily in what conspiracies say, but in what they do. “Veridicità” and “verosimiglianza”—that is, the aesthetic of representation in conspiracy thinking—are indeed enough, on a “rational” basis, to “justify” conspiracies for my interlocutors (“Non è vero…”, It is not true…). Nonetheless, it is what conspiracy-believing does—that is, the performative and perlocutionary effects of engaging “participation”—that justifies conspiracies (“…ma ci credo”, …but I believe in it). 20 What appears to be central, then, in the approach of my Pagan interlocutors to conspiracies is not the descriptive “objectivity” of facts but the “magical” power of the stories (see Magliocco 2012; Greenwood 2009) that conspiracy-narratives, with their repetitive and formulaic structures, enact and the effects they have on their lives. This is what “participatory knowledge”—one in which the contingent protagonists of individual conspiracies have only a secondary role—is capable of triggering. Such a reading can help explain why some moderate Pagans could adopt extreme conspiracy theories while oblivious to their practical and political consequences, to the reliability of the sources quoted, and to the formulaic rhetoric. My Pagan interlocutors do not “believe in” conspiracies, in fact, their adoption of conspiracies should be considered as a form of conspiracy-believing, one that is contextual and

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20 They appear to be less concerned with what a conspiracy is (verosimiglianza, veridicità) than with what conspiracy-believing does: as a performance, the latter, in fact, has performative effects (see Lowell Lewis 2013)—and, notably, performativity is beyond “truth” and “falseness.” The philosopher Cavell notably defines the illocutionary and perlocutionary statements as follows: the former refers to what is done with words and the latter to what is done by words (see Cavell and Goodman 2005; Lambek 2010; Parmigiani 2019b).
positional and that is adopted since it enhances “participation.” In doing
so, it allows for the political emergence of a community of sense.

As in my Pagan friend’s example, conspiracy theories are always a
“conjoint affair” for my interlocutors. They do not pertain to the realm
of private opinions. Rather, when the Southern Italian Pagans with whom
I am working speak about or share a conspiracy theory, they always insert
it in a community-based framework—either visually or with words. This
process can take the shape of sharing images of groups of people pro-
testing in support of a specific conspiracy—validating the idea that these
theories are not the result of the reflections of some lunatic, but a shared
feeling among many. Moreover, they often share a conspiracy theory while
making an appeal to their readers to “open their eyes” and to join a con-
spicuous group of other “intelligent and sensitive” individuals. In other
words, the validation of a conspiracy theory, quite explicitly in the case of
my interlocutors, does not come mainly from the logic of its internal ar-
gument nor by the “academic reliability” aura that surrounds it. Rather, it
comes from the fact that it is adopted and accepted by a wide community
of especially sensible people, “people who reason along the same lines,” as
my Pagan friend put it. This community is understood as a community
of open-minded and perceptive individuals who share a common way to
feel, participate, and be in the world.

This attention to a community-based aspect of conspiracy-believing is
also evident in many of the private conversations that I had with some
Pagan friends. The “deep feelings” of truth they feel about some con-
spiracy theories are said to match the “deep feelings” of truth of other
Pagan friends vis-à-vis the same conspiracy frameworks. This common-
ality of feeling works as a validation of the “truth” of the conspiracies
themselves and strengthens a bond between members of a similar com-
munity of sense.

BETWEEN MARGINALITY AND MAINSTREAM:
CONSPIRITUALITY, POPULISM, AND COMMUNITIES
OF SENSE

If “post-secularism,” “occulture,” “conspirituality,” and “magic” are
some of the religious macro and micro contexts that allow for the emer-
gence of conspiracy-believing among Italian Pagans, there are also other
political ones that play an important role in this process (see, e.g., Moore
2016; Moore 2018; Butter and Knight 2018). To grasp some of these macro
and micro political contexts, I will refer again to the work of the French
philosopher Jacques Rancière. According to him, today we are facing a
paradox in consensus democracy that he calls “postdemocracy.” This is
not “a concept of democracy in the postmodern age” (Rancière 1999, 101). Rather, it is a word used to “denote the paradox that, in the name of democracy, emphasizes the consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action” (Rancière 1999, 102). Consensus democracy, according to him, is first of all a “certain regime of perception” that “has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interest” (Rancière 1999, 102). This statement needs to be understood in relation to both the emergence and diffusion of populist attitudes—in Italy, linked, in particular, to the Five Star Movement (M5S)21—and with Rancière’s aforementioned definition of politics. The latter is particularly useful in my argument since it focuses on the sensory and the aesthetic.

Populism has been a catchword in the last twenty years to describe a “disease of democracy,” something caused by a “deficit of representation,” by “the feeling of not being represented” (Revelli 2017). As a consequence, “Populism is recognized as having at least two identifiable core characteristics: it emphasizes the central role of ‘the people’ in politics, and is heavily critical of ‘the élite’” (Silva Castanho et al. 2017, 424). This framework, Silva Castanho et al. point out, links populism and conspiracy theories.22 Populism and, in particular, the Italian M5S—which, as Ida Dominijanni points out, is “beyond left and right” (2014)—play an important role in depicting the context of adoption of conspiracy-believing among the Italian Pagans with whom I am working, both in the imagination of what a “people” is (the meaning of this term, in fact, as Rancière points out, is not a “given”) and in the contestation of the élites.23 This latter point, in particular, is an important one in the study of conspirituality, since it strongly resonates with a well-researched aspect of Western esotericism: the tension between mainstream and marginality. This, a feature of the studies on magic and Western esotericism, emerges, for example, in the study of “conspirituality,” “stigmatized knowledge,” (Barkun 2003) and “occulture.” I here maintain that adopting a Rancièrian understanding of politics could add another dimension to this literature and could be useful to better understand the

21Most of my Pagan interlocutors, while not politically active in the movement, could be considered close to the Movimento5Stelle (M5S) that won the last 2018 National Elections. Many members of M5S have been adopting conspiracy thinking. Recently, a now independent deputee named Sara Cunial, elected with the M5S, has been the protagonist of a conspirational speech in the Parliament and has been celebrated by many of my Pagan interlocutors. On M5S, see, for example, Dominijanni 2014; Miconi 2015; Ventura 2018.

22Using a musical metaphor, they claim that “if populism is the theme, then many conspiracy theories are variations on the theme” (Silva Castanho et al. 2017, 425).

23Huw 2013; Rancière 2017a, 2017b.
Italian context that I am studying. Understood as a way of both knowing and sensing, what Rancière calls “common sense” belongs to the élites, to use a populist trope, and, in its hegemonic dimension, it marginalizes “participatory” epistemologies of magic. Thus, *dissensus* (or “sensing/making sense differently”) represents, for the Italian conspiritualists, a way to challenge, expand, and redefine what is considered and sensed as hegemonic, mainstream, or common sense. Therefore, my interlocutors’ adoption of *conspiracy-believing* practices appears to be primarily linked to the emergence and nurturing of a *community of sense* of individuals who feel, sense, and participate in the world in a similar—“magical”—way.

In other words, by adopting a Rancièrian understanding of politics, I here propose to read *conspiracy-believing* among the Italian Pagans as a practice of *dissensus*, where the tensions between mainstream and marginality, and between “stigmatized knowledge” and hegemony, are played out as an aesthetic (sensory and artistic) enterprise. In the context of Italian conspirituality *vis-à-vis* the challenges of COVID-19 and of the populism of M5S, *conspiracy-believing* is conceived, felt, and experienced among Italian Pagans as a form “participatory” knowledge. Therefore, what *conspiracy-believing* does, regarding a perceived marginalization of Pagan ways to be in the world, is giving life to a *community of sense* of Pagans who share common, magical ways to experience and know the world (through participation). Through *conspiracy-believing* practices, these Pagans want to have their sensorium acknowledged, recognized, and legitimized by the mainstream. *Conspiracy-believing* here becomes a political act and a performative one, one that seeks sensory and artistic recognition and that—provocatively, maybe—pursues inclusion. In this way, the Italian Pagans with whom I am working, besides reclaiming their place in society, make a claim about the legitimacy of other “magical” ways of knowledge. Moreover, they build and feed a *community of sense* of persons who “sense” and “make sense” of existence in ways that challenge mainstream understandings of knowledge. It is worth noting that the latter—mainstream or stigmatized, occult or hegemonic—is always also an aesthetic (sensory and artistic) experience.

The *community of sense* that emerges through *conspiracy-believing* goes beyond what is usually referred to by “cultic milieu” or “occulture,” since “visibility” does not necessarily grant recognition (or “appearance,” as Rancière would say,).[^24] “Occulture,” in fact, while giving visibility, does not necessarily imply appearance—and the difference between the two

[^24]: In talking about postdemocracy, Rancière warns that “Postdemocracy,” or “the regime of the all-visible, of the endless presentation to each and every one of us of a real indissociable from its image, is not the liberation of appearance. It is, on the contrary, its loss” (*1999*, 104).
is paramount. Although appearance, or recognition, is the result of an inclusion, visibility refers to “being in society without being of society,” (Rancière 1999, 116) to being among those who are “included as excluded,” and “counted as uncounted” (Rancière 1999, 118). Conspiracy-believing, then, understood as an aesthetic practice, is an expression of dissensus by a community of sense that does not look only for visibility but, rather, wants to be fully acknowledged, recognized, legitimized in their “participatory” way to inhabit the world.

In conclusion, while I do not want to underplay both the possibly dangerous effects of some conspiracy theories and the responsibility of conspiracy-spreaders in divulging potentially disruptive and dangerous worldviews, even in private contexts, I also believe that focusing on the performative aspects of conspiracism as a “community builder,” beyond the pathologization paradigm that has been characterizing the majority of the scholarship on this topic, could be beneficial in discussions around conspirituality. Such an approach could shift the conversation from the faults and possible pathologies of conspiracy-believers to the analysis of the performative effects of the adoption of specific conspiracy theories—beyond particular “networks of belonging.” Moreover, and more importantly, such an approach could shift the conversation on the efficacy of conspiracy-believing as a political practice, allowing for a more productive dialogue between conspiracy-believers and non-conspiracy-believers. Are conspiracy theories really a necessary step in reclaiming “magical epistemologies”? Are they really an effective practice to gain not only visibility but also acknowledgement and recognition? Are they really fostering the legitimation of “participatory” ways to inhabit the world? A “performative” approach to conspiracy-believing might hold space for these, and other, productive questions and exchanges.

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