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## Show me the money: Conspiracy theories and distant wealth

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the meanings of imagined, secret and hidden wealth that followers of conspiracy theory account for on different sides of the moral compass, as bad and good. Conspiracy theory, a strand of intellectual practice exacerbated by the recent crisis in Greece, calls for exploring hidden wealth assets, while conspiracy's mirror-image, transparency, becomes central in the understanding of wealth in this conundrum. Through three stories, that of Artemis Sorras – a self-proclaimed trillionaire, of an anti-Semitic book and of conspiracist publishers in Greece, I examine the centrality of (un)accountable wealth in imaginations of peoples' presents and pasts. I explore narratives of wealth in conspiracist discourse trajectories, showing how wealth can play a role in imagined allegiances and political practices. A focus on conspiracy theory allows an exegesis of how obscure narratives of wealth are shaping the ways in which people conceptualize economic crisis. Notions of accountability and secrecy are central to their (and our) understandings of wealth – and are laden with contradictions, according to diverse paths of moralizing the past. An anthropology of conspiracy theory allows scaling narratives of wealth from the microhistories of money flows to the political economy of crisis.

### KEYWORDS

Conspiracy theory; wealth; Greece; crisis; anti-Semitism

### Introduction: suspicion, transparency, wealth

The very idea of alternative knowledge seems to be more central in world events than ever. A reign of 'alternative facts' is coupling, as an ideological and aesthetical counterpart, with the ascendance of Donald Trump, the dizzyingly wealthy and controversial US president. Trump's original chief strategist was Steve Bannon, an ex-financier who turned journalist and director of 'anti-establishment' documentaries where conspiracy theory reigns supreme. At the same time, there is a vibrant world debate on hidden wealth (Zucman 2015), exacerbated through cognitive crises of accountability pertaining to the leaked Panama or Paradise Papers. Exploring wealth narratives that coincide with conspiracism and anti-Semitism and compliment the secrecy of modern capitalism's accumulated wealth (Piketty 2013), we might come across some interesting re-conceptualizations of what it means to be accountable for an imagined, yet ostensibly material, wealth.

This essay looks at ways we can assess how followers of 'conspiracy theories' understand histories and futurities of potential wealth. I consider two ethnographic cases of coming to terms with wealth, one contemporary and one historical. Firstly, I explore the

case of a conspiracy theorist who claims he owns ‘distant’ wealth, set aside for the salvation of Greeks; secondly, I examine some Greek perceptions of a classic conspiratorial book, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a ‘leaked’ pseudo-document that ‘exposes’ ‘Jews’ for influencing governments through their assumed wealth. Moreover, I offer the accounts of ‘experts’ in conspiracy theory that complicate this anti-Semitic narrative. I argue that what all these alternative truths have in common is a sense of distance for wealth that is non-accessible and hidden; a sense that resonates with contemporary capitalism’s secrecy and leaked information. This conspiratorial conceptualization of wealth is unsettling of our common, established understanding of the phenomenon – it poses as an alternative reading of hidden wealth.

An analytical trend that began in US political science and still resonates today asserts that conspiracy theories develop within a political culture of paranoia, bred in secrecy (Hofstadter [1952] 2008). Paranoia is here defined as a cultural force forging political personhood through the feeling of persecution – and identified with the ‘emotional animus’ of the Right (Hofstadter [1952] 2008, xxiii). The main undertone proceeds from the premise that conspiracy theory is rooted in irrationality or in tainted accounts of facts, otherwise available to an ‘open society’ (Pigden 1995; Sunstein and Vurmuele 2009, 208). From a cognitive perspective, this implies disassociating knowledge from proven or provable facts; it also implies rearranging causality altogether.

A subject of much debate within sociology in continental Europe, and especially in France due to the influence of sociologist Pierre-Andre Taguieff, conspiracy theory’s chief feature is seen to be its capacity to provide intellectual convenience in an increasingly complex world (Taguieff 2010). As shown below, in coming to terms with history, conspiracy theorists often follow anti-Semitic and anti-Freemason strands, attacking alleged wealth-amassing agents. This way, they provide an anti-establishment response to the complexity of our epoch of globalized capital, where everything, including wealth, is at once transparent and indecipherable (Taguieff 2015). But the fascination with secrecy and hidden treasures, so salient in Greece (Pantazopoulos 2015), opens paths to associating conspiracism with the very opacity of capital itself, in a post-Panama/Paradise papers historical era.

In order to situate this essay within the discussion on the anthropology of wealth (Rakopoulos and Rio 2018), as well as to comment on the narrative, imaginative formations that wealth can take (Gregory 2018), which this special issue addresses, there are two major points which must be discussed. These concern firstly, inquiring into the ramifications of the ‘hidden’ and of secrecy in many Greeks’ perception of history (Stewart 2017b), and secondly, addressing the impact of the financial crisis on peoples’ perception of controversial pasts, and the ways in which crisis teleology reflects narratives on the past (Agelopoulos 2017, 219).

Anthropologists often see Greek conspiracism as a result of unequal power relations (Sutton 2003), the way they see conspiracy theory more generally (Sanders and West 2003). The Greek evidence discussed below could be indicative of a popular mistrust to instituted ‘reason’ that is grossly exacerbated by the crisis (Kalantzis 2015). After all, mistrust and suspicion have been repeatedly identified as a sort of cultural work invested in Greeks’ perception of history, future and otherness (Herzfeld 2003). What is more, historicity-related speculation on hidden treasures has been a phenomenon that the relevant anthropology has already pointed out, and this article echoes some of these analytical voices through ethnography among ‘experts’ of secrecy.

In Charles Stewart's latest monograph, for instance, we are reminded of the ways in which the selective temporality imbued in people's lifeworlds as well as their historical imagination can correspond with keeping secret the location of religious and other treasured artefacts (Stewart 2017a). This is the makings of an 'uncanny history', associated with myth, oddity and secrecy (Stewart 2017b). At the same time, the imagination and historicity invested in treasure can make the bygone, fossilized past a future treasure, now that crisis has settled in (Knight 2017). Archiving selective pasts has transpired recently as an emic practice invigorated by the austerity-related financial crisis and the ways discourses of blame and morality attached to it came to the fore in Greece (Knight and Stewart 2017). Both 'treasure hunting', in all its imagined forms – religious icons or archaeological treasures, for instance (Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996) – and nationalist conspiracies (for example, Sutton 1997) are topics that anthropologists have explored in Greece before. However, ethnographically combining these themes, as well as generally associating wealth narratives with conspiracy theories analytically, remains unexplored.

This is particularly needed in the context of a situated financial crisis, a much broader phenomenon. In fact, accounting for global processes of wealth-making and blame-taking in austerity regimes is also important (Rakopoulos 2017, forthcoming). After all, hidden treasures and money that are never shown are part of the contemporary makings of global capitalism, with its treasure islands (Shaxson 2015). We need, therefore, to update our anthropological knowledge of conspiracy theory as a way of reading capitalism, a reading which ironically corresponds to current capitalist secretcies, a component of the rich anthropological debate on conspiracism (for example, Aupers 2012; Marcus 2003), that has hitherto gone unaddressed. In fact, the lack of accountability and the consistent moralization of hidden wealth (in the case of Greece, the assumption that the population does not pay their taxes) are often pursued by precisely those who hide massive amounts of wealth away (Chomsky 2017).

'Conspiracist' trends during my fieldwork on alternative narratives and alterity-oriented ways of debating the crisis in Greece included stories<sup>1</sup> as diverse as chem-trail narratives (cf. Bakalaki 2016), UFO abductions, analyses on a presumed 'ancient creed' of Greek blood and the idea that secretive Reptilian human-like monsters control the European Union. They also included 'positive conspiracies', narratives concerned with 'saving Greece' from austerity and crisis, through the usage of material wealth assets. A main narrative concerns the alliance of a secret club, the Epsilon group, which conspires against Greece's enemies, and an associated wealth fund that would invest an invisible €600 billion towards buying off the country's debt. The importance of such public, yet secret and hidden wealth in the Greek imaginary, is central to an anthropology of wealth and of conspiracy. Based on fieldwork in Thessaloniki<sup>2</sup> between 2015 and 2016, I examine here how occluded wealth elicits imaginaries of good and evil, as well as popular moralizations of wealth artefacts. Conspiracies of hidden wealth, cut horizontally across the axes of rationality and imagination, as well as those of past and present, are reinvigorating imaginaries of historical 'facts' – in the case of Thessaloniki, with much anti-Semitism resurfacing.

## Bombs, money and Epsilon

On the 23rd of October 2015, a few days before the anti-fascist OXI ('no') annual national holiday celebrations of Greece, two bombs went off in the Peloponnese. The first caused

damages to the entrance and façade of a central bank of Kalamata, the region's capital, while the second erupted a hundred kilometres from the city, in the archaeological site of Mystras, destroying parts of the statue of Constantine Palaeologus, last emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, more commonly called Byzantium among Greeks. Five men between the ages of 25 and 52, residents of small towns ranging from the Peloponnese in the South of the country to Macedonia, the northernmost Greek region, were arrested under charges rated as felonies: arson, terrorism, possession of firearms, etc. The charges read that the group, whose ideological fermentation had lasted for 6 years, something they immediately confessed, had conspired for these and many more terrorist attacks in order to 'blow up half of Kalamata' and, according to their own view, 'liberate Greece from the New World Order'.

A rich arsenal, comprising AK-47s, grenades, bows and arrows, many guns and massive quantities of TNT were found in the homes of two of those accused of taking part in this conspiracy. The arrested claimed that their organization, called 'Omada Epsilon' (Epsilon Group), aims to 'take down the conspiracy inflicted on Greece by the banks and by Orthodox Christianity'. Writings on the Epsilon group that I was familiar with claimed, among other details, that the group has 'fought against Jews since the dawn of time'. The Kalamata contemporary Epsilons professed themselves as pagans, followers of the ancient Greek gods, and claimed they shall continue their political and military endeavour. Most importantly, they referred to the Epsilon as a way to glorify Hellenic history, as well as a positive conspiracy for the future of a truly free Greece. The sign of the Epsilon group, quite known and recognizable by many Greeks, was sprayed close to the sites of the bombings. That recognizability allegedly led to the arrests of those claiming to serve the Epsilon cause (Figure 1).

That same October day, another interesting arrest occurred. Artemis Sorras<sup>3</sup>, a 55-year-old man that emigrated back to his native Greece from the US, was detained by the Rhodes police. After residing in the US for ages, presumably living in riches, he claimed he returned at the outbreak of the crisis in 2010 in order to 'save the country'. In a visit to the island to promote his political agenda, he was joined by about one hundred supporters and delivered a firebrand speech, 'accusing' a local reporter of being 'a mason and a Jew'.

Sorras was arrested the next day on criminal charges of defamation, although it was not established exactly why these 'accusations' were treated as defamatory. After his release,



**Figure 1.** The Delphic double 'E', sprayed outside the Kalamata bank, is a recognized symbol of the Epsilon group. Source: [www.Mynews.gr](http://www.Mynews.gr).

he continued propagating the idea that he could save the country, and enjoyed quite a bit of visibility. His political rally is premised on one practice, his donation of €600 billion to 'the Greeks' (no mention of the Hellenic Central Bank), 'if allowed by the masonic, Jew-seeded politicians'. This money was the main bulk of the famous *katapistevmata* (trusts), funds that Sorras allegedly credited for free in the name of the Greek people – but not their (over-indebted) sovereign state.

I witnessed an open speech by Sorras, in a square in an Athens suburb when I was doing fieldwork for previous research. In that speech, Sorras, who claims to have a fortune of €2.8 trillion, stated that he and his 'movement' could inspire the solution of the debt problem in Greece. That speech was given before the January 2015 elections (that brought 'left-wing' SYRIZA to power). Back then, Sorras would still claim that the Epsilon group helped him amass this great amount of wealth. He insinuated that his money was raised in part by the Epsilon group conspiring for decades for the nation's well-being in America – and possibly for millennia in other parts of the world. Maintaining these liaisons, Sorras managed to sell the apocryphal technological knowhow of 'the Ancient Greeks' to then-President Obama. His patent on spacecraft technology quite impressed Obama, who ordered the ample pay to Sorras' account. The details of the alleged negotiations and the agreement Sorras and Obama reached remain a secret, which serves as the mystic premise of his hidden, immense wealth.

Sorras' political vision has not changed since 2011, when he first rose to prominence. To this day, he insists that he possesses that tremendous amount of money, and reminds his audience that he wants to donate some of it to his country, when – and if – he is given the opportunity. Since 2011, he has spoken on prime-time TV on several occasions, and has recently – and especially since mid-2016 – organized his movement (*Ellinon Synelefsis*, 'Assembly of the Greeks') across the country. Sorras denies being a member of the Epsilon Group today, but he does occasionally claim he is close to 'those circles' particularly a few years ago, when the Epsilon idea was at its most popular. By now (late 2017), the *Ellinon Synelefsis* operates as a vast network of assemblies, with 200 office branches around Greece, and is anticipated to arise as a political party.

Apart from getting to know Sorras in person, I have also been lucky enough to meet and spend one year of intense and deep talks with the person who created the 'Epsilon' cosmology, Aris Dovlis, a 49-year-old author from Thessaloniki. Dovlis is a prolific writer and visionary with around 40 books to his name, an editor of erstwhile and current magazines and an influential figure in Greek public discourse on 'alternative' or 'strange' knowledge. During fieldwork, he shared insights with me on the makings of both the intellectual genealogy of the Epsilon idea and praxis, as well as on the group that planted the Messina bombs. Dovlis had also met and discussed with Sorras several times over the years (they first met in 2000). Dovlis maintains that Sorras was a self-proclaimed member of the Epsilon Group, and did not think highly of this 'ambitious crook'. He told me that Sorras was a 'paranoid man', who was using his claims to wealth in order to gain access to the individual funds of his group's members. Indeed, all of the 200 branches and the hundreds of new members of Sorras' *Ellinon Synelefsis* movement were operating on member donations that encouraged what can resemble multi-level marketing. The mythical wealth fund of the trillionaire thus ended up operating ostensibly as something resembling a pyramid scheme. Exponents and sympathizers of this scheme that I talked with

generally branded this type of wealth as morally 'good' and positive. Not all ways of conceptualizing wealth, however, were moralized this way.

### Bad wealth, good wealth: anti-Semitism

The anti-Semitism of Sorras' statements alludes to the long history of conspiratory thought regarding 'immoral' wealth and secretive power that conspiracy theorists cognitively struggle and politically engage with. Fascinated with the potential of hidden wealth and suspicious of 'other' bearers of wealth, conspiracy theorists in Greece have often scapegoated marginal groups. Freemasons and Jews are constant targets of their concerns, precisely because of a historical assumption that they had made fortunes out of conspiracy and usury.

Interestingly, associating Jews with debt and indebtedness has formulated much of this imagination, leading to a history of discrimination across most places Jews have ever lived (Graeber 2011, 288–289). In fact, Jews in the late Middle Ages were actually surrogates of usury, abused by their lord bosses (Graeber 2011, 11). This strand of bigotry towards Jews and Freemasons (often two categories collapsing into each other) has historical roots almost everywhere Jews have lived, and certainly was a common phenomenon among Greek conspiracy theorists, although not everyone shared this view.

While following the web-links my interlocutors uploaded on social media, I was amazed to find that Giorgos Zinos, one of the main two publishers of Antiquity's Classics in Greece, had a tendency to upload articles on his Facebook page about the Epsilon Group and similar conspiracies. I approached him and, although reluctant, he eventually became an important informant. As the owner of a semi-defunct bookstore in central Thessaloniki, Zinos made a constant income through a subscription arrangement with the city's Aristotle University, which purchased books from his store. The books were bought with state subsidies and distributed to Philosophy and Classics students for free.

Zinos lamented (like most other informants-bookstore owners) that the Internet had negatively impacted 'their field of expertise'. He himself had wanted to expand into conspiracy theory books, but never did due to the proliferation of such information on the internet, which had diminished selling expectations. Departing from a hope he would have some sympathy to the inspiring and tragic story of the Salonica Jewry (see Mazower 2005, esp. 421–442), I explicitly asked him why his Facebook statuses sometimes expressed suspicion towards Jews as a wealth and power-obsessed people. He responded with mention to Sorras and the Epsilon Group, associating their cases to a good kind of wealth, money set out to cater for Greeks. The 'Sorras rescue fund' was geared towards Greeks only, and was accountable expressly and exclusively to the Greek people (rather than the Greek state). He also alluded to a different kind of wealth, the bearers of which, 'especially in the past', had been 'the Jews'. Zinos and other publishers in that trade of alternative facts sympathized with the possibility of a wealth fund geared towards 'liberation', a positive conspiracy, accountable to 'real Greeks'.

Zinos' publishing house is widely considered to be the utmost authority in the Classics genre. If Reason is rooted and stems from the Classics, and the latter's most integrated publication is hosted by exponents of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, then the paranoia of the *Protocols* is well placed within a context of reason, one drawing from the epistemic foundations of Western instituted knowledge. It is rationalized by association. As Zinos



told me, 'truth and reality are as far removed from one another as a book and the world it purports to describe'.

### *Protocolling a history of hate*

*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is a conspiratorial classic. It postulates that Jews are amassing wealth and power and are conspiring towards world domination. It is 'the Bible, or rather, the anti-Bible', as a young reader told me in Aristotelion, another bookstore with an interest in alternative knowledge, in which I spent a fair bit of my fieldwork time. First published in 1903 and now one of the best-selling books of the twentieth century, it could be stated with reason that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is indeed a Bible of anti-Semitism and of classic conspiracy theory. Adolph Hitler loved the book – and so do millions of readers across the contemporary world, as it still sells in plentiful translations, although it is banned in some countries. It is written in somehow prophetic and mystic, conspiratorial language, and poses as a leaked document – one that was meant to only circulate among 'Jews'. It is laden with advice as to how the 'Jewry' can make use of their wealth and influence in order to infiltrate and manipulate governments and institutions across the world, aiming for some sort of international Zionism. It postulates, by association, and as suggested explicitly in one classic introduction, written by a French fascist, that Jews are meant to act as cold bearers of business, keepers of Masonry, believers in a Money-God, and amassing gold to achieve great influence.

The Greek latest edition (2003), as well as almost all editions that preceded it, is based on the classic 1932 translation from the French (Taguieff 2010). That text, in turn, was the translation of a document written in Russian by the Ochrana, the secret police of the Czar, in the late 1890s. Those who wrote it claimed it was written in Hebrew, and this idea stuck – and is still shared by conspiracists across the world.

I first encountered this latest publication of the book at the Aristotelion bookshop. Located 50 m from the centremost square of the city, the defining Aristotle Square, the bookstore is a renowned spot for alternative sources of knowledge or for 'the routes the system would not take' as the owner, Mr Voios, told me once. In his mid-50s, he shared the place's ownership with a friend of his. Aristotelion was located in a huge basement and was privileged with a spacey area for socialization (complete with four chairs, a table with the perpetual frappè coffee on it and most often, a guy or two speaking in low voice over a book). Once a week, I would join them in their weekly event, an invited speech on issues pertaining to alternative paths to Greek nationalism, irredentism or revisions of certain dark corners of Greek history, including tracing lost wealth. Their political affiliation was far removed from the Golden Dawn<sup>4</sup>, and while one central figure (and everyday visitor to the bookstore) would identify his stance with 'conservatism', theirs was a mostly intellectual, even elitist endeavour. They had their own publishing house, with an attention to and a fascination for secret, wealthy and powerful brotherhoods. The Illuminati were surely present, yet the Knights Templar was most definitely their primary focus of interest. The imprint of the Knights in Rhodes and Cyprus was too huge to ignore both for a revived islamophobia among some Greeks and for the immense wealth, allegedly treasured and hidden in those islands.

*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was most ubiquitously prominent among other 'history' books in Aristotelion. The book itself has an interesting history in Greece. It has



had dozens of different publications, a number unprecedented in any other country in Europe, according to the documentation available. At the time of writing, 10 different versions of the book are in circulation in the Greek market, most variations of the 1932 French translation (Psarras 2013, 11). 1932 is the year that Salonica saw the first fascist movement in Greek history, the anti-Semitic terrorist organization EEE (Mazower 2005, 413–414). The organization, importantly, introduced both a modern-type of anti-Semitism in Greece, and at the same time the idea of ‘Epsilon’ as political agency (EEE<sup>5</sup> is pronounced *Three Epsilons*).

During the course of fieldwork, I purchased five different editions of the book from places as diverse as central high-street bookstores to small bazaars of second-hand book markets. I purchased what is most probably the most authoritative one, a 2003 edition from Aktis,<sup>6</sup> at the Thessaloniki book fair of June 2015. While spending much time flipping through the pages at the counter, allegedly – and unwittingly – with a raised eyebrow, a young seller approached me. He stated, with much confidence, that ‘this was the best source that I could find when seeking the truth’.

I recognized a familiar face, Kostas, the 25-year-old younger son of a well-known bookseller of central Thessaloniki who had been involved in both socialist and, afterwards, nationalist politics. The bookstore, located about 150 m from Aristotelion, but literally on Aristotle square, was one of the three most significant in the city throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but had faced bankruptcy and closed down in 2012. Towards the end of their career, the Tellidis bookstore had their own editions and published a series of books very much in line with the Aristotelion bookstore’s interests, including some Epsilon philology.

It came as no surprise, though, that ‘the best’ was the Protocols. I inquired further as to what Kostas meant by ‘best’. We started chatting and he explained with a passion that ‘this book was unrelated to what people conventionally call conspiracy theory as it was most obviously a set of analytical, truthful facts’. I asked about the text’s translation, which puzzled him.

He then referred me to his mother, a classy woman in her 50s, part of the city centre’s distinct bourgeoisie. She took over the conversation and explained that the book was a direct translation ‘from the original Aramaic’. Meeting some degree of doubt on my side, she insisted in pointing out the ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’ of the document, as well as of the translation and of the publication in general. She eventually underlined how this authenticity reverberated its ‘truth’, and urged me to flip the pages and open to a random spot. When I inquired why, she pointed out that the book’s freshness resonates in our current perceptions of the financial crisis, despite its writing in an age gone by. You can find references to any aspect of the current crisis in it, her son added. She repeated similar words when I encountered her again some months after, in a friendly visit she made to Aristotelion; meeting me again, she took the opportunity to inquire as to whether and to what extent I had now ‘understood the truth about the crisis’.

This textuality of intolerance, basing anti-Semitism on an ‘authentic’ text, is not to be taken lightly, especially because of its contextualization in a ritualized accord of authenticity and truthfulness when (purportedly) accounting for a history of wealth-amassing and conspiring Jews. This intolerance confirms the centrality of anti-Semitism in some conspiracy theories (Aaronovitch 2011). But one would doubt an inherent irrationality here. I

would like to call attention to two facts<sup>7</sup> that might point towards a direction of putting the text and its readings in a wider context of paranoia within reason (Marcus 2003).

Firstly, the translation's factuality: Kostas' and his mother's information were, in this case, factually wrong. As we saw, the book was written in Russian and was marketed as a Hebrew text. Thus, in this chain of cultural mis-translation, we encounter a series of factual and mythical linguistic conversions of a faux text: from Greek back to an imagined Aramaic, to French, to Russian and Hebrew. The text which Kostas and his mother claim to be the original is actually five languages removed from the Greek translation, in the 2003 book I am quoting from in this essay. The cultural and imaginative gaps in this genealogy of ideas, however, are consistent with the conspiratorial truth it evokes. This trans-cultural distance does not threaten the internal logic of conspiracism; with the mythical time claimed in this textual dimension, it is perhaps reinforced, putting the text outside of history and its linguistic and social specificities. This distance from the actual fact might be a source of allure for its relevance. This reading of the textual material is important to measure its degree of paranoia; after all, the everyday world is not in the text, but encompasses and yields its force to the text (Kapferer 2012, xvii).

There are different levels of inconsistency-spotting that are not about comparisons across different orders of understanding and appreciating 'reality', but about cracks within the same truth-sphere that conspiracists claim as a field of expertise. While it is redundant to reduce inquiry to spotting incoherencies in conspirational narratives, I find it is important here to underscore the textuality's clashes and convergences with the historical world, precisely to draw attention to their sense of distance of truth from reality, a marked setting of distinction in their mode of thinking (Latour 2004).

This plays out in two horizons. The first is synchronic; it concerns the contemporary, crisis-inflicted perceptions of the Protocols and their anti-establishment, anti-wealth critique, as well as the actual contextualization of the book in the genealogy of rationalism, alongside the Classics. This opens up a prism to the second horizon, a historical one: the text is placed in a combinational, unique and selective temporality that can take factual leaps as well as synchronize past perceptions. In conspiracist accounts, instead of aloof suspicion, we might be facing a similarly selective investigation of processes 'hidden' from us.

The idea that stems from readings of the book, according to my interlocutors, is that this assumed past wealth circulating among 'Jews' (wealth that is now distant and lost, although present among some 'Jews', such as the Rothschilds) could play a fundamental role in shaping world government. In this way, the text stands between a self-fulfilling prophecy on an eerie globalization and an implicit anti-establishment critique of it. The idea that wealth can buy out governments and that circulating wealth, mystic and secretive, distant from the masses, can shape a 'world government' is something that one can stumble upon on YouTube, social media or online newspaper commentary. It is a *vox populi* with quite some currency, the way that, as rationalist Christopher Hitchens put it, conspiracy theories are 'the exhaust fumes of democracy'.

The internal logic of conspiracist takes on wealth lies precisely there. Their worldview ascribes coherence on the fragmentation of the practical world (Ingold 2007; Kapferer 2012, xxx). We can approach this by drawing on precisely the 'common sense' mythologies (Kapferer 2012, 17) of modernity, currently rampant in crisis-ridden, financially damaged Greece. It is the mythologic yet cohesive 'truth', rather than the inconveniently

fragmented 'reality', that inspires conspiracists – which is why I choose to call their endeavour 'truth activism'. As Geertz notes, the only narratives that are fully coherent are those of the mentally impaired (1973). At this distance, money that seems to be distant is reinforced as wealth – in a sense of hidden treasure. Sorras' money, like truth<sup>8</sup>, acquires a mystical and mythical allure, as it is situated afar from reality.

While publishers make some money disseminating conspiracy theories, however, the flow of wealth on the other side of the conspiracy canon is less impressive – and could be associated with shame over the way people (have to) make a living through associating themselves with conspiracism. Maria, for instance, is a 32-year-old woman who worked for Edros publishers, one of the most successful houses of the genre. Coming from a left-wing background (her father, who had passed away recently, was a committed unionist), she found herself in need of employment. She now enjoys the fact that she can have maternity leave from Edros ('as well as a steady pay'), but often thinks 'what my father would say' with degrees of shame. 'Just to think of his struggles, as well as those of my grandad, who was in the Resistance, you know ... it is really weird that I work in this environment here, alongside such ideas'.

Maria works as a salesperson, managing internet and phone orders, as well as house delivery of Edros books. She stressed that the vast majority of readers are pensioned men, often very old, that have had a rightist background and, in most cases, live in precarity and poverty. The books they order praise Putin, glorify the 'prophecies' of Orthodox monks with jingoist rhetoric and insinuate a history of ancient creed for Greeks. Some of these books claim hidden wealth and power, associated with Epsilons. Maria, unconvinced and even inimical towards these ideas, underlined to me an almost ontological distance she feels from this world: 'Cos they live in their own world. There is a thing they live in, which is their reality. And then there is their obsession with the truth. How they reconcile that truth and that reality, I don't know'.

She described the readership of these books as people living in a materially difficult condition, lacking any kind of social privilege. 'These people are incredibly uneducated', she notes; on one occasion, she related to me with a mixture of contempt and compassion, an old man called her to complain about how he had not ordered a book called 'Delivery Charges', although it was stated (and charged €3) in his receipt. Stamos, the delivery person, explained to me how he had encountered people literally counting their payment coin-by-coin on their doorstep with a sense of shame. 'That guy literally did not have those €3 – and of course had no idea about what this charge meant'.

Seeking out the distance between truth and reality for conspiracists, as well as their relation to material assets and especially with wealth, I looked out for Edros' owner, the well-known Vasilis Vaiopoulos, a man with a rich biography, which included 4 years in Parliament with a (now quasi-defunct) right-wing party. I met him at his office at Energy radio, where Vasilis was busy and, after a wait of an hour and a half, only met me for 45 minutes. He apologized when he said 'I have to chuck you out as I need to make payments'. I told him about the good conditions of Edros' employees. He boasted that it is the same for his Radio staff, as 'I have 25 people working here – I feed the mouths of many young people'. Sat in front of a caricature of himself as well as an 'original' emblem from the Greek Revolution of 1821, about to launch a new (Putinist) political party, he was in high spirits.

There is a difference between reality and truth. When I read and write history, I register (*kata-grafo*) *reality, not truth*. My truth might be different from yours. But reality is reality. The sun is the sun. A table is a table. The truth is that you can say 'this table is nice, but I don't like it very much' [...] There exist many, different truths. While reality is one. And it's not only factual but also theoretical; that is, you cannot prove that the Earth is rotating; it's just scientific reality. (Vaiopoulos, italics added to denote emphasis in speech)

The idea of truth is central here. It figures as the constitutive element in structuring conspiratorial pursuits. It also is different, in the words of conspirators, from 'reality'. In another interview close to that date, he said:

An author mainly writes from his soul, while a researcher mainly from the mind. I write mainly from the soul, from the heart, but with facts. I am doing the research and expose the facts in order to demonstrate and prove that those things I believe in are indeed how things are. And the other, the reader, has the burden of proof. *When I have a sense of the truth, I go out in books to find it, until I've found it.* (Vaiopoulos, italics added)

The dazzling point on finding the truth here is unwittingly repeated as a resonance of a classic quote from Mein Kampf, where the truth-tamed reality is set up on a reversed burden of proof (see Psarras 2013, 53–54). That is, 'it is not I who need to explain and prove; the plain fact that power is afraid of what I am saying and tries to disapprove it, implies I am right'.

Dovlis, far from a fascist, called this sense of reality 'the elephant and the poppy', in an interview to me. 'There is an elephant hiding behind every poppy, runs the syllogism, do you see it? -No. -Well, see how well he's hiding?' However, when I questioned the tactics of people like Vaiopoulos or Liakopoulos, another conspiracist of the extreme far-right, Dovlis claimed: 'they are just selling books, not guns; it's a peaceful way to make some money'.

## Conclusion: conspiracy theory and hidden wealth

Contemporary conspiracy theory has shaped a logos over history and contemporaneity that is akin to the current conditions of the world's wealth status. The conspiracist belief in secrecy alludes to the mystic, hidden wealth foreclosed away from the public eye (Zucman 2015). This essay has aimed to elucidate the connections between global crisis-capitalism and conspiracy theories that negotiate past and present, by reflecting on historicities and imaginaries of wealth for conspiratorial thinkers in a Greek context. To that avail, I have provided the historical biography of a key conspiracy theory text and of anti-Semitism in the erstwhile most Jewish of Balkan cities, Thessaloniki (Salonica), as well as the current cultural history of new wealth-related trends in contemporary conspiratorial thinking in Greece.

I am uninterested in 'exposing' factual lapses, as to whether the Epsilon group or Sorras' wealth 'exists or not', as the pragmatics of anthropological interlocation are scrutinized in terms of the interlocutor's cosmos itself. The selective nature of historical consciousness can take factual leaps as well as synchronize perceptions past, especially when imagining historical wealth and envisioning future wealth in contexts of crisis. What is more, it is important to underscore that while most conspiracists adhere to some fundamentals, including 'International Zionism' for instance, their views about the cosmological ramifications of this 'reality' are not only different, but also richly diverse.

One might expect that Sorras' promise could – in theory – operate more convincingly by showing some proof for the existence of such wealth. Actually, it is, in fact, proving to be efficient precisely *because* the money is described as hidden and secret, distant from a reality that conspiracy theorists deem obscured in the first place. This is particularly pertinent in a global era of hidden wealth (Shaxson 2015) and of European money's centrality to discourses of transparency in marginalized European regions (Gkintidis 2014) – like wealth-object Greece.

Anthropological works on conspiracy theory stress the idea of 'a culture of suspicion', although the discipline is also cautious to draw a line on the idea of paranoia. At once ahistorical and anti-historical, conspiracy theory is rooted in an organized sense of resisting the capitalist 'New World Order' (Sanders and West 2003). Not reducing conspiracy to paranoia, anthropologists often raise the point that creative and imaginative suspicion is indeed an outcome of Enlightened modern thought (Aupers 2012), or that conspiracy itself as a cognitive category is the offspring of power-knowledge relations (Pelkmans and Machold 2011). The very situated-ness of that 'paranoia' sits comfortably in our broader structures of reason<sup>9</sup> (Marcus 2003) and thus the mainstream capitalist trends, including hiding money away, beyond the taxing gaze of the state. In the light of a breach in historical understanding, as the crisis has been for Greeks (Rakopoulos 2015), conspiracists are willing to engage with critical readings of the past regarding wealth 'agents', while one, Sorras, poses as an agent of hidden wealth himself.

In fact, claims to transparency in an era of actual opaqueness of power can breed conspiracism. Transparency must be framed in terms of rationalization within democracy and its morality – but secrecy and conspiracy follow from it (Marcus and Powell 2003, 330). This way, conspiracy theory rises as a doubting mechanism, the offspring of contemporary 'clean', audited political regimes, based on accountability and of political debunking of secrecy – in the case shown above, in terms of anti-Semitism. Everything is in the open, the liberal consensus argument goes. But conspiracy theorists in Greece, while tapping into anti-Semitic historical narratives about the hidden wealth of 'Jews', sometimes argue that positive wealth can be hidden as well – and there is no reason to account for it. The historical 'reality' of contemporary capitalism, mediated through the leaked information on the hidden wealth of global elites in offshore and faraway lands, seems ironical to confirm that conspiratorial take on wealth.

Marcus' notion of 'paranoia within reason' partly implies that paranoia emerges, at times, within practices and constructions of reason and rationality themselves (Marcus and Powell 2003, 331). Comparing conspiracism (associated with political 'paranoia') and global capitalist markets wealth (associated with economic 'rationality') bears surprising results. The magic of markets in crisis, that siphon wealth into the hidden realms of the exotic, calls for seeing the inner rationale in the conspiratorial doubt towards any attempt to transparently historicize wealth. After all, the world of economic rationality appears less based on evidence and accountability, and more driven by numerically shaped, magic and divine-inspired speculation (Zaloom 2016).

The democratic, liberal consensus is presented with challenges over the Panama or Paradise papers leaks. But if liberal capitalism has embedded offshore hoarding in its legal apparatus, allowing for secrecy to be central in the global life of wealth, then conspiracists seem allowed to thrive. Their discursive pursuits, when it comes to accounting

for wealth, can construct 'truth' by being selective about its opaqueness or accountability. Sorras is a systemic outcome – the toxic waste of a structural problem of hidden wealth.

A historical anthropology of conspiracy theory should then be done not only in the light of a critique to modern rationality, as it has been done before (Latour 2004; Marcus 2003; Pelkmans and Machold 2011; Sanders and West 2003). It should *also* take place in light of a critique to the centrality of secrecy and conspiracy for modern capitalism's hidden wealth – a thread of anthropological critique currently in need of expansion. In this process, not only is our historical archive undergoing revision, in relation to emergent events on local and national levels but also the discipline becomes attentive to the global processes our interlocutors seem very aware of.

## Notes

1. These were stories told by my main interlocutors, often experts in the field, but also tropes that some other Greeks would share when debating the austerity-related crisis. Conspiracy theories have been circulated and popularized in the public domain long before the crisis, not least through TV shows by pundit 'experts' such as Nikos Konstantinidis and Stefanos Chios. Such theories are mostly associated with, and have led to the escalation of, aspects of the far-right.
2. Fieldwork took place for 20 months in Thessaloniki, the country's second largest city, one of the oldest settlements of continuous urban activity in Europe, and the only major city in the continent with a Jewish majority for centuries. The research leading to this essay was partly carried out in relation to and supported by the ERC Advanced Grant project 'Egalitarianism: Forms, Processes, Comparisons' (project code 340673) running from 2014 to 2019 and led by Bruce Kapferer at the University of Bergen. Fieldwork was also partly funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (fund no 8856).
3. All names and toponyms in this essay are pseudonyms, apart from that of Artemis Sorras, who is a public figure.
4. The Golden Dawn is the renowned organization turned political party that since the 1980s has been operating as a neo-Nazi formation in Greece. Their appeal since 2010 has been phenomenal: they have skyrocketed to occupying the third place in the country's parliament twice, after the elections of 2012 and 2015, averaging a 6.5% of the national vote and somehow ostensibly toning down their Nazism onto more conventionally far-right discourses.
5. EEE stands for *Ethniki Enosis Ellas*, National Union Hellas.
6. Aktis has the widest array of publications of Classic Greek texts (more than 700 books in its list) in the world. Like Zitros, the publishing house is widely considered to be the utmost authority in the genre. The house was led, until his death in 2014, by an inspiring yet reclusive man who was a fervent conspiracy theorist: he chose to publish, outside the list of the Classics, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, as well as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.
7. Using the term 'facts' or 'factual history' might not sound entirely in vogue with much contemporary anthropological debate. However, and as Latour himself admitted in an article that touches on conspiracy theory (2004), resituating historical discourse in different places is laudable, but it can also be potentially slippery and indeed dangerous. We live in such dangerous times. The Latour article was published quite early – long before the idea of 'alternative facts' became hegemonic and found a seat in the White House and other spaces of power. Importantly, Latour's concern should reach a cross-over audience in the discipline, as he is the anti-positivist scholar par excellence, considered the mastermind of rethinking and debunking any attempt towards taking facts at face value. It might be time to listen to his concern about dangerous slippage, and, most importantly, to start listening to our informants' own distinctions between historical reality and personal truth. This is particularly important when among some of these informants, there are people – like those selling the Protocols book – willing to suspend the factual reality they recognize as *existing*, in order to engage in

alternative historicities. Such alternative narratives, in this case, negate the killing of millions of people in Nazi extermination camps, including 45,000 Jews from Salonica, the erstwhile Jerusalem of the Balkans. Paying historical tribute to that non-negotiable fact, I cannot but insist in using the term ‘facts’, albeit making careful usage of it.

8. Pelkmans and Machold are concerned principally with how truth and untruth are produced in such asymmetrical fields of power: for them, while some conspiracy theories are nonsense, others correctly identify secretly colluding powers (2011, 73). We need to interrogate systematically the links between power and truth (2011, 68) in this process, as the classificatory mechanisms of valid knowledge are certainly, to a good extent, products of asymmetrical power plays. The power of labeling has specific normative effects that can render a valid theory obsolete by the classificatory mark of ‘conspiracy’ (Pelkmans and Machold 2011, 74–75). In effect, conspiracy theories are distinguished from ‘valid’, scholarly theories, by mechanisms of epistemic power. This is the source of Pelkmans and Machold’s critique to Sanders and West’s (2003) generally relativist position that recognizes an inner truthfulness to both the epistemic and the conspiratorial worlds. This is done through a partial recognition of conspiracy as a form of magical thinking, akin to Evans-Pritchard’s witchcraft (Sanders and West 2003, 12 and 16; Marcus 2003, 327).
9. As noted, pondering on the phenomenon, Latour points out that as social scientists we have struggled to make knowledge situated – and now it is situated in places we feel uncomfortable with (2004). The idea of hyperrationality (Sampson 2010) is rooted in conspiratorial claims to – and juxtapositions with – epistemic knowledge. Mixing legend and myth, conspiracists over-rationalize symbols and over-think actual reality (Fritze 2009, 15).

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