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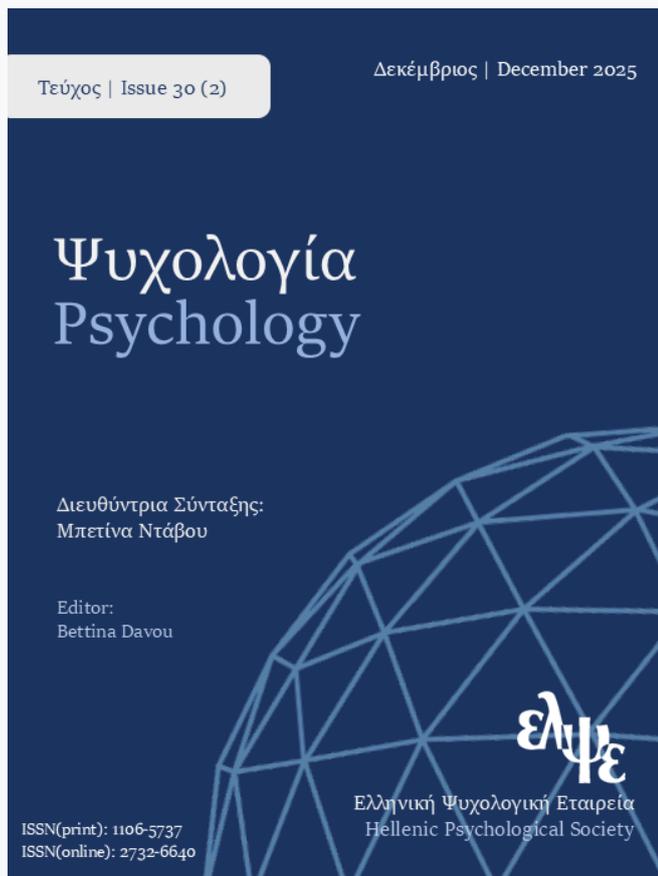
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A qualitative social representations study of conspiracy theories in Greece

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
  CORRESPONDENCE Xenia Chryssochoou Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences Syngrou Ave 136, 17671 Athens, Greece xeniachr@panteion.gr	This qualitative study aims to examine conspiracy theories (CTs) circulating on the internet in Greece during times of crisis (2010-2020). Informed by a social representations approach, we examined the organization of the CTs content, the construction of intergroup conflicts and dichotomies involved, and the factors that organize the representational field. A lexicometrical analysis using the IraMuTeQ software was conducted on a corpus of 140 texts found online. A Descending Hierarchical Analysis revealed four classes of CTs, named a) *Conspiracies of ruling national elites against the Greek nation* b) *New World Order against People*, c) *Science Vs People: denying climate change as human activity outcome*, and d) *Attacking the "essence" of individuals: their body and identity*. The former two classesdescribed intergroup conflicts relating to economic, political, and global power, whereby people are opposed to national and supranational elites. The latter two classes tapped conspiracies against human beings in terms of biopolitics or climate change, whereby people are opposed to scientists. Finally, a Correspondence Analysis revealed two factors structuring the representational field: a) A principle separating conspiracies referring to intergroup conflict Vs conspiracies referring to biopolitics and climate change and b) a principle separating two types of intergroup conflict: within the nation and globally. Results are discussed in relation to SRT and the way CTs contribute to social meaning-making in times of crisis.

In this article we report a qualitative study of Conspiracy Theories (CTs) circulating on-line in Greece during the years of the socioeconomic crisis, based on a social representations approach.

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that in times of societal crises, questions like, 'how did we get here?' and 'where to from here?' seem to preoccupy the minds of those afflicted (van Prooijen, 2018; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). A crisis may seriously increase the urgency to answer these questions, by encouraging explanations that seek to satisfy essential epistemic, existential, and societal needs (Douglas et al., 2019). These explanations, partly based on preconceptions that big events demand huge causes (Leman & Cinnirella, 2007), may be grounded on events that may be threatening. In this case, alternative explanations may arise, making sense of events in a way that diverges from official accounts (Franks et al., 2017). These explanations are based on stories of powerful actors, conspiring to achieve malevolent goals at the expense of society (Uscinski, 2018; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Wagner-Egger, 2022). Such CTs circulate particularly in times of crisis, and in recent years, we have witnessed their proliferation. Research has shown that in Greece, conspiracy was considered an important cause of the economic crisis (Mari et al., 2017).

This construction of an alternative story, explaining the causes of a shocking event, falls within the domain of social representations (Moscovici 1976/2008; Sammut et al., 2015). Indeed, social representations

are constructed when an unfamiliar and perhaps threatening event needs to be socially tamed through sense-making. It is assumed here, as previous research on CTs has indicated (Douglas et al., 2019; Moscovici, 1987, 2006/2020), that conspiratorial representations should tend to increase in salience along with the increase of threat to a group's power, helping its members to cope with difficult situations. CT narratives share certain characteristics, as part of an interpretative mechanism with a historical and social recurrence (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). They form a universe of magical thinking, where seemingly incidental events are in fact manifestations of a complot by the perpetrators. In this universe, all things connect in ways the eye cannot grasp, and events are part of a huge and complex conspiracy puzzle, reaching back to a sole cause (Barkun, 2006; Taguieff, 2015).

CTs can be conceptualized as societal phenomena of sense-making at a group level (Franks et al., 2013). They refute dominant political (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013) or scientific assumptions (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), and produce commonsense knowledge based on a 'conspiracy mentality'. According to Moscovici, (2006/2020, pp. 5-8) conspiracy mentality includes the following principles: a) prohibition of knowledge by powerful elites, b) a duality between an ignorant majority and an enlightened minority, c) a conviction that a singular source connecting and explaining all events is to be found and d) resistance to modernity via valorization of tradition. Conspiracy theories may express antagonistic representations of reality and even challenge dominant representations of social order, by introducing alternative categorizations of social groups and relationships of social conflict, while constructing an adversary, the conspirator (Byford, 2011). They may reflect a general mentality (Imhoff & Bruder 2014; Meuer et al., 2021; Moscovici, 1987, 2006/2020) which focuses on perpetual and historical social conflict.

Usually, CTs present a dichotomizing view of the social world (Barkun, 2006; Bergmann, 2018; van Prooijen, 2018), including a victim and an evil 'other' (Wagner, 2022). In studying their content, it is important to see what adversaries they depict, and whether there are commonalities independently of the issue they address. It is right to argue that CTs engage in identity construction processes (Reicher, 2004). They describe intergroup conflicts between the "Good", on whose behalf those disseminating CTs speak, and the "Bad" who are blamed for all misfortune (Wagner-Egger et al., 2011). This implies a minority seeking to uncover the complotting outgroup in the eyes of a silent majority that is being manipulated. Representing the out-group as a threat and the in-group as sharing a common fate is at the core of the conspiratorial conflict. Such narratives constitute attempts for identity politicization (see Simon & Klandermans, 2001). By introducing the common threat factor, CTs seek to sustain group integrity via intergroup polarization functions, such as homogeneity and exclusion (Hogg, 2014; 2021). In other words, the conspirator may differ, depending on context, but the processes of representing a conflict between the perceived out-group and the in-group remain stable.

To summarize, we consider CTs as the outcome of a meaning-making process by which people try to understand political processes that undermine their power. CTs may therefore be a particular kind of social representations, involving a description of conflict and intergroup relations. In this paper we are not aiming to uncover the different variables that might differentiate the acceptance of CTs, in other words the anchoring points of a social representation. Instead, we are seeking to look at the "building blocks" of the representation, namely its objectification. Doise (1990), using Moscovici's work, considers objectification as the reification of social relations. Thus, we aim to look at whether the content of CTs presents specific forms of conflictual intergroup relationships. Moreover, in considering CTs as particular forms of social representations we also aim to investigate what structures this representational field (Doise, 1990). In other words, we aim to see whether the different conspiracy beliefs are organized around particular principles that simultaneously resemble and oppose different contents. These principles, organizing the content of a representation are called "organizing principles" (Doise et al., 1992). Our data were collected online. The internet can be a terrain of uninhibited construction of ingroup and outgroup identities, where possibly antagonistic to

official/specialist knowledge narratives of events are presented under a positively charged spotlight. Lack of gatekeepers and a 'massification of information spreading' (Bronner, 2020; Douglas et al., 2019) may allow otherwise stigmatized or previously forbidden knowledge, like CTs, to go mainstream (Barkun, 2006). It must be noted that conspiracies have pervaded online communication (Wood & Douglas, 2015) and news to a significant degree (Waisbord, 2018). Online environments and the extensive spread of social media platforms have contributed to faster dissemination of conspiracy theories, easier communication of conspiracy narratives, creating polarizing online realities that prompt people to conspiratorial worldview directions (Bronner, 2020; Mahl, et al. 2022). Thus, the internet offers an undifferentiated dissemination of information and opinion due to the degree of accessibility and freedom it offers (Bronner, 2020). It reinforces the feeling that the conspiratorial construction is solid, widely communicated and accepted, and therefore, it validates and polarizes even more those who accept it (Sunstein, 2023).

Moreover, online communication styles may promote community-building mentalities (e.g., Safford et al., 2017; Sharma et al., 2017) and impart a rational and open-minded profile to the advocates of CTs (Wood & Douglas, 2013). Thus, the impact of media is not so much on their top-down communicative practices but on the fact that they provide easily accessible, unmediated information that can trigger reposts and discussions on social media, a new arena for the formation of bottom-up social representations.

The present study

Our aim in this study is to investigate how the content of the CTs circulating online in Greece around specific threats during times of crisis (2010-2020) is organized, whether specific categories of CTs are formed and whether within these categories particular intergroup oppositions are made explicit.

Greece was strongly affected by the global financial crisis of 2008, which originated in the USA. In April 2010, Greece signed its first out of three bailout agreement with the IMF, the ECB, and the European Commission. This ushered in a period of extreme austerity, marked by full-blown unemployment from 7.9% in April 2009 to 27.5% in January 2013 and a collapsing GDP that plunged from 355.9 billion USD in 2008 to 193.2 in 2016 and 188.8 in 2020 and a collapsing GDP. The economic and consequent social and humanitarian crisis led to social turmoil, as the austerity measures were met with massive opposition. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic caused growth to plunge a further -9% in 2020[1]. As a crisis-ridden society, Greece offers an ideal context for studying CTs. To our knowledge, there is no social representations study of internet-circulated CTs in a crisis-ridden country, like Greece.

Moreover, although CTs have received increasing attention in social psychology (see Douglas et al., 2019; Klein & Nera, 2020), existing research is mostly based on quantitative analyses, exploring relationships involving conspiracist thinking, personality traits, affective, cognitive, socio-structural, and political factors (see van Prooijen, 2018). These quantitative analyses are based on pre-formulated notions of CTs, and the various factors expected to correlate with such conspiracy beliefs. On the contrary, we opted for a qualitative analysis, as we were aiming to look at CTs as social knowledge in the making, through online communication. This qualitative [and exploratory] methodology allows for arguments and understandings to emerge that could otherwise be overlooked by a quantitative approach. Moreover, treating CTs as societal phenomena looking at intergroup differentiations is scarce to our knowledge (Franks et al., 2017; Sapountzis & Condor, 2013). This study aims to redress these gaps.

Specifically, we researched CTs circulating on the Greek internet, from late 2010, year of the first MoU, to early 2020, the end of the first lock-down, imposed as a countermeasure to the Covid-19 pandemic. This study had the following aims:

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[1] Data retrieved from the World Bank data center. For more please see here.

1. To investigate the content of the CTs and whether they form constellations of beliefs, namely categories,
2. To examine which are the opposing groups in these categories,
3. To examine the potential principles of the representational field of CTs in Greece.

Method

All source names were pseudonymised. All sites, blog, newspaper articles and text segments used in the analysis procedure and study presentation have been coded accordingly to avoid identification with sources and persons.

Corpus Description

Initial online research indicated keywords that were subsequently introduced in Google search engine. These were, *Islam, immigrants, Turkey, economic crisis, European Union, World Bank, new world order, COVID-19,* and *Macedonia*. The reason we selected these words to initiate our search is that they concern "threats" in the Greek society. *Islam*, *immigrants*, and *Turkey* refer to the refugee emergency that started in 2015. Turkey is also considered as Greece's quintessential enemy, since the modern Greek state was the outcome of a struggle for liberation from the Ottoman Empire. *Economic Crisis*, *EU*, *World bank* and *new world order* referred to the economic crisis in Greece. The new world order, in conjunction to *Covid-19,* concerned the recent pandemic. Finally, *Macedonia* referred to a long dispute over the name of North Macedonia (Formerly FYROM) that was resolved with the Prespes agreement in 2018. This agreement created great animosity in Greece and massive demonstrations took place to oppose it. The keywords chosen here were selected due to their intergroup nature and concern cultural and geopolitical conflicts, as well as the economic crisis. During this period, these events dominated the news, and the Greek population was preoccupied with them (albeit perhaps with different opinions concerning these issues)

Since CTs are considered to emerge in threatful times, we chose to focus on words that specifically refer to meaningful threats the Greek society has faced. We deliberately refrained from using words such as "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory" because believers of CTs do not necessarily consider their beliefs as conspiracies. We also wished to avoid retrieving what others consider to be as CT per se. Our aim was not to map every possible idea that seemed conspiracy inspired but to see whether CTs emerge around threatening issues.

The search outcomes included media sources such as CT sites/blogs, mainstream media outlets, political sites/blogs, and Facebook pages. Based on this search, 140 articles were retained. These texts were published in 55 different sources (91 from different sites, 21 from different blogs, 12 from different newspapers, one social media profile and 15 from one e-magazine). The selection criterion was source popularity, i.e., number of visits/followers/likes, as recorded by each respective source, since circular publication was quite usual. Most CTs articles were circularly published in various sites, blogs and on Facebook, who were communicating vessels. Thus, if a certain text appeared in many sources, the oldest post was opted for. In the case of parallel publications with little time variations (a few days or weeks), the most popular source was opted for. The most popular source had 370.848 likes and 386.450 followers, the least popular source had 588 likes and 661 followers and on average the sources had 34.303 likes and 34.741 followers cumulatively.

Instruments and Analysis

A textual corpus was formed for the purpose of the lexicometric analysis. This analysis consists of a computational and statistical processing of texts aiming 'to study the closeness or distance between texts based on the lexicon they mobilize' (Ratinaud, 2018, p. 98).

Analysis was conducted with the IRaMuTeQ, 0.7 (alpha 3 version) free software (Ratinaud, 2009). A Descending Hierarchical Analysis (DHA) was performed on the text corpus (Reinert, 1986), which identified a

cluster organization of the text material. According to Rizzoli et al. (2018), these clusters represent 'lexical worlds', i.e., groups of words referring to classes of meanings. Classification is represented as a dendrogram grouping together words or multi-words into classes, based on similar lexical context. DHA exposes the inner structure of textual material, providing increased reliability, which is demonstrated by recognition of all text units and over 75% percentage of classified text segments retention for analysis. Moreover, use of occurrence and co-occurrence frequencies in automated qualitative analysis increases result reliability by restricting unfounded maneuvering in data analysis and results interpretation. The emerging lexicometric categories (or classes) are based on default frequency analysis of forms (words and phrases) and afterwards presented to the researchers for further interpretation of the results given.

Since the analysis is run on word frequencies, all lexical forms representing the same meaning, name or institution were equated across the corpus by use of acronyms, or unification into multi-words. For the purposes of this article all data presented here was translated in English after the analysis.

Characterization Variables

Five characterization variables were introduced by the researchers, as supplementary, allowing IRaMuTeQ to recognize the separate text units of the corpus (Table 1 below). These variables were a) a 140-modality *text* variable signifying each corpus unit, b) a 12-modality publishing *year* variable c) a five-modality *media* variable for source sub-type, d) a two-modality *age* variable for temporal status and e) a 21-modality *theme* variable. The latter refers to the general narrative of the article and is irrelevant to the DHA, which is based on word occurrence over-representation (Camargo & Justo, 2013)[2]. Between-observer reliability of assigned modalities of the *theme* variable was demonstrated with a kappa coefficient of .74, which indicates high inter-rater agreement (Tang et al., 2015). The themes for which there was disagreement were discussed between raters and then agreed.

Table 1. *Variable and modality clarification of corpus analysis units.*

Variable	Modalities
Text	Source coding and article number drawn (e.g., text_1, text_2, etc.)
Year	2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, no date
Media	site, e-magazine, newspaper , blog, social media
Age	contemporary, timeless
Theme	Soros, New World Order, refugees, Jews, Macedonia, political conspiracy, virus/experiment/vaccine, secret services, Islamization, 5G, mind-control, climate change, chemtrails, geomechanics, economic crisis, mass media, nutrition, financial control, religion, control technologies, population control/extermination

Results

We present a) the classification produced by the DHA and the words over-represented in each class, b) the characterization variables of each class, c) the text-segments (TS), representative of each class (for more on text segments analysis please see Camargo & Justo, 2013). This analysis aimed at describing the content of the classes. In addition, we performed a Correspondence Analysis (CA) to see the structure of the representational field defined by the different classes (see also Doise et al., 1992). This analysis enabled us to investigate the organizing principles of the field.

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[2] Over-representation is defined by a) the percentage of word occurrence in the text segments of each cluster in relation to overall occurrence, b) the χ^2 of association between word and cluster and c) the *p* value, which identifies the significance level of the association between word and cluster. For more on DHA data exploration see Camargo & Justo, 2013, pp.20-21.

The Objectification of Conspiracy Representations

Lexicometric indicators (Table 2 below) validate corpus segmentation process. The DHA recognized and separated all text-units into 4.744 TS, with a retention percentage of 91.44%, well over the 75% boundary (Camargo & Justo, 2013), revealing a four-class structure as shown in Figure 1. Most importantly, the resulting TS, based on similarities and word co-occurrences, are essential for cluster content interpretation.

Table 2. *Lexicometric indicators of the DHA.*

Number of texts	140
Number of text segments	4.744
Number of forms	25.601
Number of occurrences	170.540
Number of active forms	23.716
Number of clusters	4
Classified segments	4.338 on 4.744 (91.44%)

Organization of CTs Clusters

Moving from left to right, Figure 1 shows text corpus initial division into two sub-corpora and the world clusters. A second-phase analysis divided each of the sub-corpora, resulting in Classes 1 (red) and 2 (green) and Classes 3 (blue) and 4 (purple) respectively. The DHA stopped due to cluster stability, producing TS units with similar vocabulary (Camargo & Justo, 2013). Classes 1 and 2, focusing on CT representations of sociopolitical, economic, and geopolitical conflicts, are lexically closer to each other and clearly separated from Classes 3 and 4 indicating CT representations of science and technology.

Class 1: Conspiracies of ruling national elites against the Greek nation. The terms over-represented in Class 1 (17% of classified TS) refer to political and economic figures, e.g., '*George Soros, G. A. Papandreou*[3], *Hitler'*, and to various economic, political, and educational entities, e.g., '*Open Society Foundation* (a George Soros funded NGO), *PASOK*[4], the *American College* (a prestigious private school with several Greek politicians as graduates)*'* and '*Nazis'*. The terms *euro*, *dollar* and *banker* emphasize representations of the economy. Characterization variable modalities are *political conspiracy, financial control, Soros, and economic crisis*. In this class, one observes references to a political and economic elite acting against the Greek nation. As stated in the following excerpt, this elite acted through '[...] the well-known College boys who, respecting the traditions of their College, again served the foreign bosses, their own favorite bosses. The College "chef" who then pretended to be the CEO of the National Bank of Greece, was Papademos[5]' (text_58, 2017, blog, timeless, political conspiracy, χ^2=580.29). This narrative of a powerful economic elite is also displayed elsewhere, personifying the perpetrators:

> *George Soros and the banker Jacob Rothschild are partners [...] and who do you think their partner is? The well-known anti-Greek, who we all cursed for what she did against our country, the former Minister of the USA Madeleine Albright* (text_7, 2017, site, contemporary, Jews, χ^2=459.65).

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[3] Prime minister between 10/2009 and 11/2011, who signed the memorandum with the IMF and the ECB in 2010, resulting in extreme austerity and fiscal reforms.

[4] Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) founded in 1974 right after the Greek Junta by Andreas Papandreou, father of G. A. Papandreou, came into power in 1981 and ruled the country for several years.

[5] Loukas Papademos, former governor of the Central Bank of Greece (1994-2002) and vice-president of the ECB (2002-2010), became PM of a technocratic government of Greece between November 2011 and May 2012 to implement the MoU with the IMF, ECB and EU.

Figure 1. *DHA division path of text corpus and CTs theme clusters. Words ordered by decreasing values of association (χ^2).*
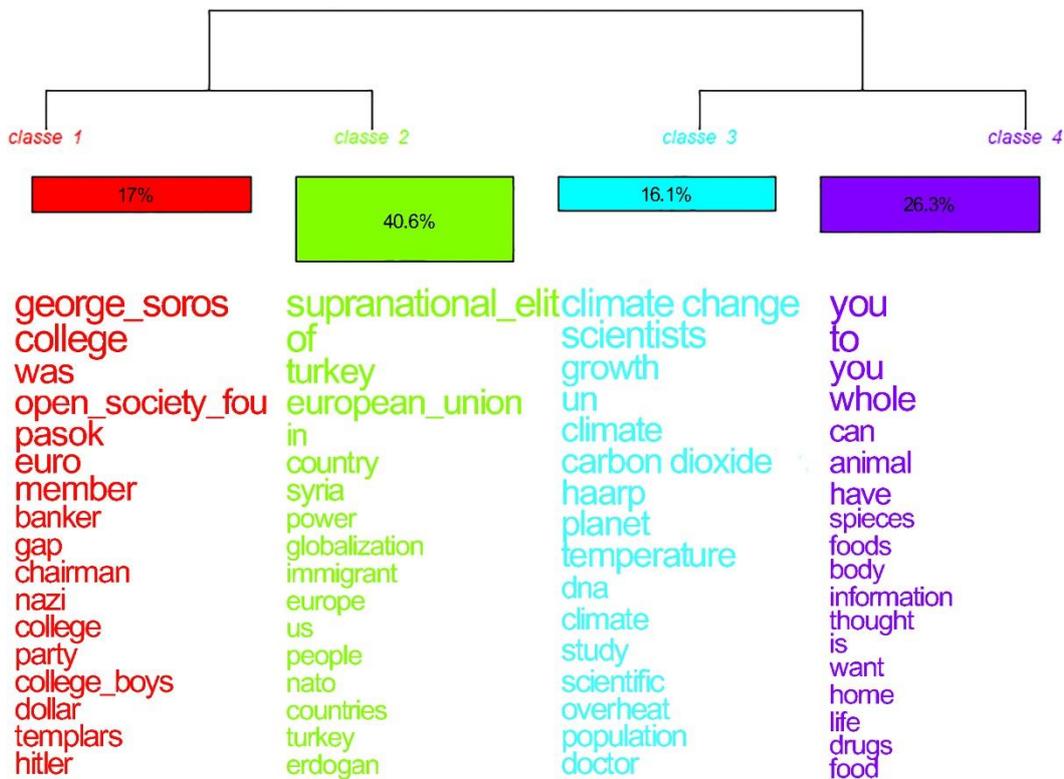
In the Greek political context, references to the US is particularly interesting. In the above extracts, people educated in the American College are purportedly following the will of their foreign bosses (excerpt 1), or economic elites are partnered with prominent American politicians (excerpt 2). Anti-American feelings are traditionally high in the Greek society, following the Junta (1967-1974) for which the USA is widely held responsible in lay thinking.

In that respect, the economic crisis is constructed on purpose by the Greek national elites who operate under the orders of supranational ones. Their plan is thoroughly exposed, since as it is suggested in this extract 'G. A. Papandreou, who in collaboration with Strauss-Kahn and several George Soros-type figures led us into the clamp of the IMF. Papandreou […] conspired to cause the debt crisis to trap us in the nets of his mother's loan-shark friends' (text_58, 2017, blog, timeless, political conspiracy, χ^2=496.05). This narrative about the economic crisis explains in another account why '[…] all those who question the competitiveness of Greeks are members of the College. […] All those who blamed the people for scams, corruption or laziness […]' (text_56, 2017, blog, timeless, financial control, χ^2=597.21).Here, another mention of the mother of G.A. Papandreou (PM that signed the first MoU with the IMF/ECB/EU) shows the anti-American sentiment, since she is a US citizen (*his mother's loan-shark friends*).

Furthermore, constructing "*the Jews*" as anti-Hellenic by nature adds another layer of depth to the conspiracy. This construction is passed onto the national elite, which is delegitimized by its association with an out-group historically portrayed as evil (Bar Tal & Hammack, 2012; Bronner, 2019). Following this example, the national elite is '[…] trained to operate in this way by the professionals of the genre, the Jews of Athens […]. The College students also took from these Jews an instinctive anti-Hellenism […]' (text_57, 2017, blog, timeless, political conspiracy, χ2=550.07)

The opposition described in this class is between the governing elites that undermine Hellenism by obeying foreign orders, and the Greek people. A strong example is the dispute between Greece and the newly formed state referred to as the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" that emerged out of the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991. This was a major source of instability in the Western Balkans for more than 25 years. It was resolved through negotiations between Athens and Skopje, mediated by the United Nations, resulting in the Prespes Agreement, which was signed on June 17, 2018, and ratified by both parliaments, amidst bilateral controversy. The underlying issues involved deeply held and differing views relating to national identity, history, and the future of the region. The North Macedonia name resolution is an example of an elite, personified as Soros, conspiring against the Greek nation, even beyond economic disputes. What is exposed in this example is 'the dark role of George Soros in Skopje and the contribution of NGOs. The Open Society Foundation was actively involved early on in Macedonia. [...] They strangely chose to name the neighboring country Macedonia' (text_94, 2019, newspaper, contemporary, soros, χ^2=475.76).

Understandings of international affairs and justification of unwanted developments are coherent with conspiratorial explanations of power relations perceived as overwhelmingly negative for the ingroup (Sapountzis & Condor, 2013).

Overall, this class presents the conflict between national ruling elites (under the influence of foreign powers) and the Greek people. These elites are accused of undermining "Hellenism" and manufacturing the economic crisis on purpose, under the guidance of foreign economic powers, with a plan to destroy the Greek nation. Identities mobilized here are not only the national ones (Greeks vs. anti-Greeks) but also the division between people and elites that characterizes populist discourse (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Schulz et al. 2018). This last division is more obvious in class two.

Class 2: New World Order against People. It should be noted that class 2 is the "larger" class, representing 40.6% of the segments classified. Over-represented terms are '*supranational elite, European Union*, *NATO*, *Turkey*, *country*, *Syria*' and '*Europe*', *immigrant*, *people*, *power,* and *globalization,* suggesting a dichotomization between an international, or globalized, elite and the people. Variable modalities characterizing this class are *Macedonia, refugees, Jews, Islam, economic crisis and New World Order*, all depicting a conspiratorial prism of geopolitical conflicts. Here we have, as portrayed in the excerpt '[on the one hand] the peoples who fight directly or indirectly for their economic and national sovereignty against neoliberal globalization, and on the other hand the Supranational Elite that fights for [...] the International New Order' (text_131, 2018, site, contemporary, Macedonia, χ^2=590.44).

The conflict, in the following excerpt, is between the people fighting for national sovereignty against an all-consuming New World Order led by a supra-national elite. The latter overpowers national governments. There is also a clear reference to the US government (cowboys) and the Turkish President (the Sultan).

> *[...] the New International Order of neoliberal globalization, no country with open and liberal markets can play the cowboy or the sultan today without the permission of the Supranational Elite, which can destroy its economy in a few days, if not hours* (text_138, 2020, site, contemporary, refugees, χ^2=572.08)

This sense of an all-out conflict is amplified on a localized level, since in the example that follows there is reference to '[...] the issue of naming Skopje should have been a concern for the peoples of the two countries rather than of the puppet-governments of the Supranational Elite in Greece and Skopje' (text_131, 2018, site, contemporary, Macedonia, χ^2=571.53). The conflict is also presented on a global scale:

> *A ruthless terrorism by equally ruthless political and media cliques that want to make us forget who the perpetrators of every cycle of violence are today: The international New Order of the neoliberal*

globalization and the brutal and increasing financial and military wars waged by the Supranational Elite against the vast majority of humanity (text_133, 2016, site, contemporary, NWO, χ^2=647.09)

The two excerpts above, coming from sources self-defined as left-wing, seem to embed the opposing groups within the ideological context of a left-wing conspiracism (Imhoff et al. 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2015). Narratives of a worldwide status-quo of dominance promote representations of an illegitimate structural inequality (Staerklé, 2013). Capitalist institutions of international governance are considered vessels of submission, imposed on fragile areas like the Balkans, in an antagonistic context between the West and Russia, building on familiar anti-Western and pro-Russian representations in a post-cold war background (Barkun, 2006):

> [...] *Reproduction of the New International Order in the Balkans so that it can control the peoples of the region much more easily through their accession to the EU and NATO, thus isolating Russia, which is one of the main threats to the Supranational Elite today* (text_131, 2018, site, contemporary, Macedonia, χ^2=638.10)

However, from a seemingly right-wing perspective, there is also the perception of local puppeteers of the left that promote this New World Order as portrayed in the following example 'it is of course not a coincidence that in these countries – Bulgaria, Serbia etc. – political leaders and SYRIZA-type parties[6] have already been elected, crooks of the left, blind organs of the Supranational Elite' (text_131, 2018, site, contemporary, Macedonia, χ^2=633.98).

There are also narratives that approximate a socio-cultural conflict closer to a right-wing ideology promoting a *Eurabia* conspiracy leading up to the Islamization of Europe (Bergmann, 2018) and blaming the left-wing government for the "invasion" of immigrants. The Eurabia conspiracy is explained in the text that follows by the "fact" that 'the attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria were ordered by loan-sharks and they knew quite well that they would provoke a wave of refugees that would easily reach Europe due to the destabilization of these countries' (text_63, no date, site, contemporary, Islam, χ^2=602.95). The "invaders" appear to be sent by Turkey, the "perennial Greek enemy" in collaboration with the domestic enemy – the left-wing government, as described in the next two examples '[...] thousands of immigrants from more than 50 countries invade our country every day from Turkey, the vast majority of whom are young economic immigrants, who are welcomed by the philanthropist "first-time-left" [government]' (text_100, 2016, newspaper, contemporary, Islam, χ^2=572.06). Turkey is to blame '[...] with the continuous evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Muslim immigrants, ostensibly under the pretext of following the compassionate policy of the EU [...]' (text_101, 2016, newspaper, contemporary, Islam, χ^2=657.00).

In this class we observe the opposition between a supranational elite and the people, the latter characterized by their national membership (in socio-cultural accounts) or by their status as dominated groups (in socio-structural accounts). It should be mentioned, though, that there is also a differentiation between those realizing what the New World Order truly is, and those ignorant of or satisfied with it, e.g. some intellectuals:

> [...] *the victims of globalization, the vast majority of the world's population, rather than the people who are comfortable with it and the corresponding intellectuals, who do not even see that there is α*

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[6] SYRIZA (SYnaspismos RIZospastikis Aristeras), a left party coalition, gained momentum in the 2012 national elections in Greece as an alternative to the two-party system of PASOK and Nea Dimokratia (ND). The polarization in the Greek society was politically expressed through a cleavage between ND and SYRIZA and resulted in the latter winning the 2015 February elections. SYRIZA, however, soon accepted the implementation of further measures.

> *New World Order globalization and a Supranational Elite managed mainly by the elites of the G7 countries* (text_139, 2014, site, contemporary, NWO, χ^2=642.44)

In addition, there is a belief described here that '[...] due to the dissatisfaction and hostility of the people internationally towards the international New Order, political forces emerge in each country that are opposed, at least to some degree, against the interests of the international New Order' (text_131, 2018, site, contemporary, Macedonia, χ^2=592.85).

Overall, class 2 employs narratives of a New World Order. To interpret this geopolitical situation, conspiratorial conflicts and threats are described both at a local and a global level. These intergroup conflicts have socioeconomic but also sociocultural implications for the people.

Class 3: Science Vs People: denying climate change as human activity outcome. Terms over-represented in Class 3 (blue, 16.1% of classified TS) are '*climate change, scientists, UN, carbon dioxide, HAARP* (High frequency Active Auroral Research Project)[7], *study, scientific, population, planet',* and '*DNA'*. Characteristic theme modalities of this class are climate*,* geomechanics*,* chemtrails*,* population control/extermination*,* virus/experiment/vaccine*,* secret services and 5G. Class 3 builds on science- and technology-related conspiratorial representations. Scientific authority is re-negotiated, either as concealing or as revealing the truth (Moscovici, 1987). This counter-scientific narrative reveals what is really happening because, as it is described, 'we are facing the biggest scientific fraud ever uncovered [...], with falsified historical temperature data to create a narrative of climate change that defies reality' (text_3, 2019, site, contemporary, climate, χ^2=464.11). In addition, the scientific community is considered as '[...] The cause for the biggest fraud [global warming] of all time considering its scale, unique in history, at least the one that we have been allowed to know so far' (text_67, no date, site, contemporary, climate, χ^2=457.02).

Distrust of scientists and science, specifically regarding climate change, leads to conspiratorial representations of the scientific community, relevant institutions and expert knowledge. As it is explained, in order 'to cover its immoral impact on Earth, the UN has created information that should be made available to the public and [has] paid scientists, who will praise the development of geoengineering' (text_53, 2012, blog, contemporary, geomechanics, χ^2=508.29), and furthermore it is believed that 'historical temperature data for the USA have been deliberately falsified by NASA and NOAA scientists to serve political purposes [...]' (text_3, 2019, site, contemporary, climate, χ^2=563.87).

An "enlightened minority", however, is challenging the results of these studies trying to uncover the hidden truth (Moscovici, 2006/2020). It is revealed that 'another study, entitled Oregon Petition, endorsed by 10,000 distinguished scientists from the USA and other countries, contests the positions of the Kyoto Protocol on which the Paris Agreement on Climate Change was based' (text_88, 2019, site, contemporary, climate, χ^2=429.85). Moreover, it is said that 'at the core of the Oregon Report, it is estimated that carbon dioxide, methane CH_4 and other so-called greenhouse gasses do not cause climate change on the planet and do not lead to catastrophic global warming' (text_88, 2019, site, contemporary, climate, χ^2=578.54).

This narrative aims to contest that human activity is responsible for climate change, a narrative mainly echoed by a website of a far-right neo-Nazi party. Agents responsible for this "deception" are both the ecological movement and the Jewish bankers. It is argued that 'sustainable development has become one of the key buzzwords that those in the radical ecological movement love to use, [...] one of the key elements of sustainable development is population control' (text_25, 2018, site, timeless, population control, χ^2=377.17) and that:

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[7] The HAARP is a scientific program transferred by the US Army to the University of Alaska in 2015, to study the properties of the ionosphere. More on HAARP here.

Both banks belong to the Rothschild Banking Group. The UN World Climate Commission, IPCC, is a lobbying organization of the Rockefeller Fund. The above two Khazar Big Bankers or Big Crooks of Jewish religion, are the main players of the so-called human activity-induced climate change (text_81, 2017, blog, contemporary, climate, χ^2=476.65)

Overall, class 3 includes CTs that deny or challenge the negative consequences of human activity to the environment. Climate change is portrayed as a lie told by the elites to control people. The emerging adversaries here are the global conspirators vs humanity/the people.

Class 4: Attacking the "essence" of individuals: their body and identity. Terms over-represented in Class 4 (26.3% of classified TS) are: '*you* (singular and plural), *animal, species, food, body, thought, information, home, life, drugs, they can, they have*' and '*they want*'. Characteristic variable modalities are: *chemtrails, mass media, nutrition, virus/experiment/vaccine, mind control, population control/ extermination, control technologies, and New World Order*. In this narrative of technological control over the "essence" of a person, it is said that monitoring will be subtly introduced because 'at first the chip will be optional but then, when you go to work, you'll be told that the others work faster with the chip than you without the chip […]' (text_91, no date, site, contemporary, mind control, χ^2=678.39). However, a more straightforward effort to control societies, in the name of protecting them, is also implemented:

Businesses are shut down under the pretext of the virus in order to terrorize people. In this way all people are kept, imprisoned, indoors. So, when the financial system collapses, the reactions will be limited, for if it were not for the virus, people would have torn everything down (text_41, 2020, site, contemporary, virus/experiment/vaccine, χ^2=479.08)

Class 4 involves the manipulation of people either by controlling their behaviour (excerpt 1: use of a microchip) or by preventing their actions and up-rising (excerpt 2). Here, the conspirators are thought to implement biopolitics (Coleman & Grove, 2009) via 'an international decision-making entity, which has central global control of all human activities. What you eat, what you drink, where you live, how hot or cold your home is, how much fuel you are allowed to use' (text_25, 2018, site, timeless, population control, χ^2=551.78).

The Covid-19 pandemic amplifies beliefs based on fear of biopolitics, employed by a state supposedly at war, to manipulate and control people (Debrix & Barder, 2009). The context of bio-warfare is suggested as interpretative of pandemics. For example, it is argued that '[…] the coronavirus pandemic is undoubtedly used to speed up various agendas of the global New Order […]' (text_35, 2020, site, contemporary, virus/experiment/vaccine, χ^2=491.95), and that 'unless all goals are achieved, then another virus in a few years-time will see to fulfill the plan […]' (text_50, 2020, site, contemporary, virus/experiment/vaccine, χ^2=536.81).

Biopolitics and technological advancement aim at compromising individual self-control, by conspirators who seek absolute control of humanity. In this sense the following extracts are characteristic '[…] the body must be guided to attack itself and this is achieved by diet, aerial sprays and vaccines. […] (text_22, 2019, site, contemporary, chemtrails, χ^2=529.28). Ideally 'the greatest [profit] of all is the dominion over the planet and over all the beings that inhabit it […]' (text_24, 2018, site, timeless, NWO, χ^2=501.12).

Bill Gates, combining technological means and financial power, personifies the conspirator, threatening not only the bodies but the people's very identity. As it is explained, in an attempt to expose the true intentions of the conspirators, 'Bill Gates also launched another controversial project […] the human microchip agenda, sold as a credible way to fulfill a fundamental and universal human right, to protect your identity […]' (text_35, 2020, site, contemporary, virus/experiment/vaccine, χ^2=467.61).

However, despite "their" attempts to control people, for example through vaccination, it is argued with confidence that people will rise against these plans. So, on the one hand it is argued that 'they want to vaccinate as many people as they can before the people realize the truth about vaccines [...]' (text_27, 2018, site, contemporary, NWO, χ^2=486.23), but on the other hand '[...] many people are beginning to realize their infernal plans, with the result that the global reaction to all this catastrophic course is increasing' (text_24, 2018, site, timeless, NWO, χ^2=479.61).

In this class we observe a narrative of a global conspiracy aiming at attacking the essence of human beings, namely their body and their identity, with the purpose of controlling the world.

Principles and structure of the Representational Field of CTs in Greece

After analyzing the four classes through the prominent words of each class, the characteristic variables and TS of each one, we performed a CA (see figure 2) to examine the principles organizing the representational field of CTs in the Greek context.

As can be observed in Figure 2, the horizontal axis (total inertia λ^2=41.25%) opposes classes 1(f=-0.83, ca =0.12) and 2 (f =-0.84, ca =0.29) to classes 3 (f =1.46, ca=0.34) and 4 (f =0.99, ca=0.25) in accordance with the initial partition of the classification.

Figure 2. *DHA word-clusters diagram corresponding to corpus classes.*
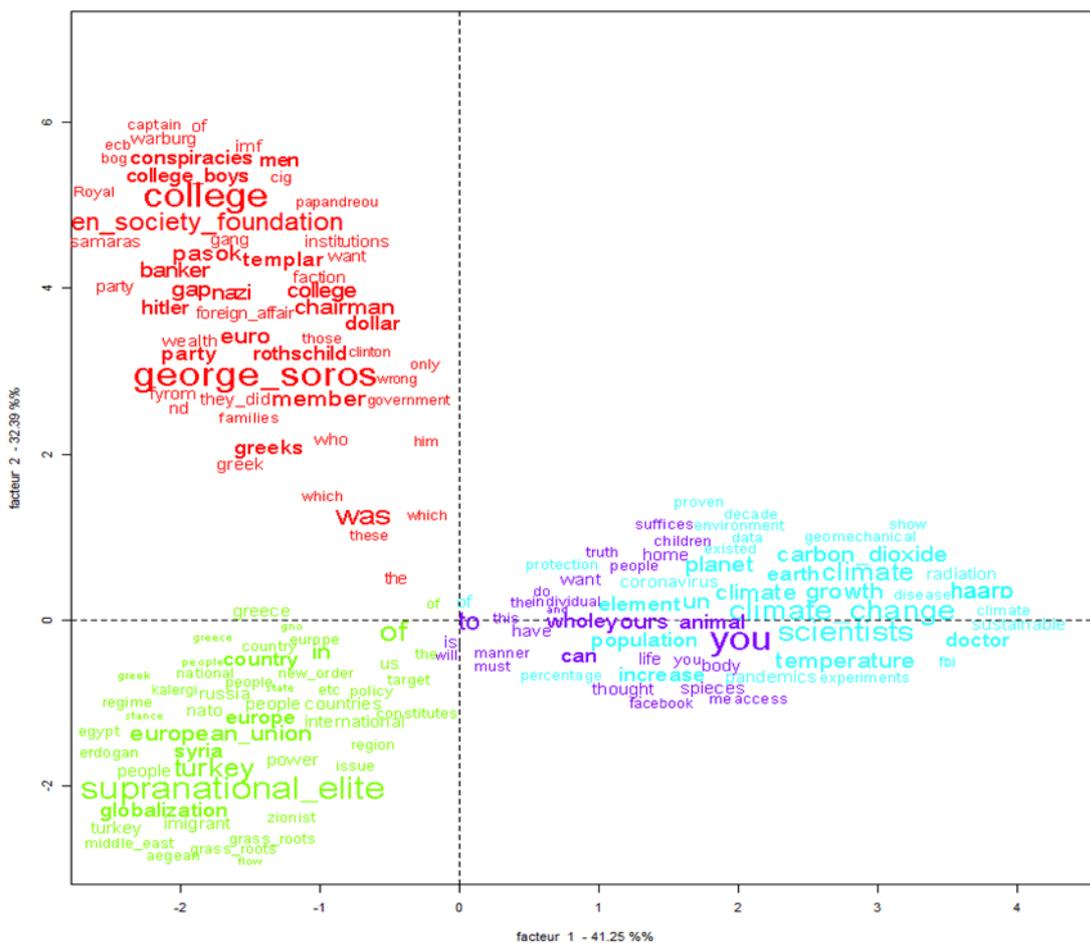
It appears that this partition separates geopolitical conflicts from biopolitics and climate change. It can also be argued that this axis differentiates an intergroup worldview from an individually focused worldview. The first two classes involve intergroup conflicts, while the others involve a globalized/supranational group of conspirators against humanity or against individuals (Nera et al. 2021). Perhaps this partition denotes a differentiation between a conspiracy view of conflicts vs a conspiracy view of control via reified knowledge. It must be noted that classes 3 and 4 appear in a large part intertwined showing great lexical proximity.

On the contrary, the vertical axis (total inertia λ^2=32.99%) differentiates classes 1 (f =2.05, ca=0.71) and 2 (f =-0.83, ca=0.28) whereas classes 3 and 4[8] do not contribute to it. The preceding analysis suggests that the vertical axis differentiates a nation-focused conspiracism (class 1) from a more global-oriented one (class 2).

Discussion

In this study we analyze CTs circulated in Greece, aiming at exploring how their content in times of crisis and threating events objectifies intergroup relations, by looking at the principles that organize the representational field. Our approach draws from an intergroup perspective of the theory of social representations (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Clemence, 2001). We suggest that CTs may be viewed as social knowledge produced by the public aiming to familiarize with new, unknown, and threatening events. To do so, conspiratorial narratives may amend for a threatened or disrupted social fabric, where people may feel powerless. An important contribution of this qualitative study is the insights it provides on CTs as meaning-making mechanisms of this threatening social world. Contrary to the abundant quantitative literature on CTs, our qualitative study allows for an in-depth examination of arguments, identities and conflicts involved in each CT.

A lexicometric qualitative analysis using DHA revealed four classes of CTs, based on the lexical proximity of the words. A semantic presentation of the corresponding text segments for each class offered an understanding of their meaning and content.

The first two classes, namely *Conspiracies of ruling national elites against the Greek nation* and *New World Order against People,* concern CTs of political and economic nature, in both national and international contexts of conflict. In essence, they may be considered to narrate that the Greek nation, or nations in general, are ruled by elites at a national and supra-national level; these elites are viewed as promoting a New World Order.

The next two clusters, namely *Science Vs People: denying climate change as human activity outcome* and *attacking the "essence" of individuals: their body and identity* present conspiratorial representations of science and technology. These representations depict an opposition between scientific experts and people within a context of dystopic biopolitics and post-modern warfare. These narratives, that convey a distrust against contemporary authority (Byford, 2011), are communicated by sources of a radical right-wing origin. Adoption of such beliefs may affect identity politicization, leading to protests such as the ones we were witnessing against Covid-19 vaccination.

It is important to note that all narratives observed here build upon existing social issues and claim their validity either by invocation of alleged scientific studies and renegade scientists (Class 3 and 4), or by disclosure of quasi-conspiratorial narratives in high circulation newspapers (Classes 1 and 2), especially on the issues of the Macedonia name resolution and the immigration emergency in Greece. Apart from that, validity of CTs was generally claimed through a massification of available (dis-)information as a proclamation of the freedom of choice that the internet provides (Bronner, 2020). The knowledge produced socially via the

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[8] Class 3 (f=0.07, ca<0.001) was opposed to Class 4 (f=-0.07, ca<0 .001), albeit their contribution to the axis is minimal and their opposition very small.

internet supports the idea that CTs are consensual constructs of knowledge, contesting scientific, i.e., reified, truths (Moscovici, 1988). Correspondence analysis revealed that these classes are organized according to two principles.

The first principle opposes CTs depicting intergroup conflicts to CTs of climate change denial and biopolitics. This seems to be a principle based on who is the target of the conspiracy: national group(s) or individuals. A second principle differentiates the conspirators: national or supranational elites opposing people within nations. It can be argued that there is a differentiation of the representational field between intergroup conspiracies putting forward the issue of conflict between people and elites, and conspiracies that highlight an attack on individuals and their way of life (that is supposed to provoke climate change), in order to control them. This control is even targeted to their very essence: their body and identity. In classes 2 and 4, in which more segments are classified (in total 66.9% of the sample), the cause behind the conspiracy is considered the New World Order (in both classes this is a characterizing variable). In the other two classes this cause is implied. National politicians and scientists act as agents of the few conspirators that aim to impose this global world order. What seems to be the case here is one of the principles of conspiracy proposed by Moscovici (2006/2020): report to a singular cause.

In addition, in all classes, as it appears from their typical segments, the speaker implies that the conspirators act in secrecy, but people are becoming aware of what is happening and start to react. The speaker seems to position him/herself in the enlightened group. Besides the building of group identities such as the national one, a self-proclaimed avant-garde who reveals secret knowledge is also constructed (Moscovici, 2006/2020). Thus, we observed two more principles regarding conspiracies: prohibition of knowledge and enlightened minorities revealing the truth. The fourth principle of resistance to modernity seems to appear mainly in class 4 regarding resistance towards vaccines, but also in narratives with historical roots (Jews and Turkey) which refer to a premodern past.

We argue that the representational field produces representations of intergroup relations. The conspiratorial narratives describe power relations within a context of socioeconomic or sociocultural threat, where sinister and powerful opponents seek total control of society. Believers of CTs may be considered to convey a politicized collective identity, trying to mobilize the broader population against a powerful opponent. This process of politicization (Simon & Klandermans, 2001) is sustained by the categorization of "evil elites" and the "benevolent people" under threat, whose support an enlightened avant-garde aims to gain. In that respect, our study can complement research looking at how collective disadvantage mediated by emotions, such as anger, directed either against the system or against politicians, can lead to different actions (Petkanopoulou et al., 2021). Thus, we could gain a clearer picture of what an anti-system (anti-capitalist) or anti-establishment (anti-government, anti-regime) protest might involve.

Further research should focus on the actions that conspiracy worldviews generate, since the distinction between "benevolent people" and "evil elites" could be a claim of "betrayed believers" of the system who do not wish to change its core values (Chryssochoou, 2018) and could coincide with a populist worldview (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The construction of an 'us' against an 'all powerful' mentality, alike a 'siege mentality' (Butter, 2020), interprets all disasters and conflicts as an episode in an ever-developing confrontation between us and the enemy. This could lead to an increase of non-targeted violence, directed against all those considered as traitors of the system leaving out possibilities of constructive social change (Chryssochoou, 2018).

Many contemporary mobilizations are prone to conspiratorial influence and sometimes participants even embrace such narratives in an organized rather than an opportunistic fashion. Narratives referred to political leaders perceived as moral, fighting against a distrusted, immoral establishment, have been known to increase conspiratorial thinking (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). If the buildup of a conspiratorial worldview is subtle and gradual (Franks et al., 2017), the absence of potential political alternatives and the failure of

mainstream politics in a social context of deepening crisis and rising populisms could allow for conspiratorial politics to override critical thought in the public sphere, as part of an accelerating process of radicalization (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). This radicalization should not be underestimated or easily discredited because of its conspiratorial characteristics. On the contrary, conspiracy beliefs, as reified truths demonizing modernity (Moscovici, 2006/2020), have and will continue to demonstrate their power as one of the mobilizing factors of lone wolves, populist movements, and politicians, in the name of an arbitrary *volonté générale* (Bergmann, 2018).

On a theoretical level our approach to studying CTs as social thinking contributes to our understanding of how the process of objectification reifies social relations. Doise (1990) refers to Touraine's principles structuring social movements as examples of how social relations are objectified in the representation of a movement that leads to action. These principles are identity, opposition, and totality. The analysis presented here, considering CTs as particular social representations of conflict in times of crisis, made evident similar organizing principles. The content of CTs is organized around an opposition between group vs. individual threats, and an opposition between the types of conspirators (national vs. international). These oppositions foster identities that go beyond the existing memberships to construct a category of the majority as victims of complots by elites. The relations depicted by CTs as social representations are conflictual and characterized by intergroup opposition between the people and elites or by an opposition between individuals and elites that want to control them. Thus, CTs can be viewed as common sense theories that describe social relations in a world in crisis, where there is a need for making sense of the collapse of certainties about the social order. Further research should be done, in order to understand how perceptions of social order may lead to different actions and the role that CTs play in this relationship.

Having argued about the importance of the contribution of a qualitative study on CTs as social representations in times of crisis, we will finish with words of caution. The CTs examined in this study were promoted also by non-mainstream sources, seeking to influence the population as an enlightened minority. This, along with the localized character of the research, has some implications for the interpretation of the results. Without underestimating the importance of having an insight in peripheral and crisis-ridden societies such as Greece, further research on more prominent sources and figures disseminating CTs in other parts of the globe (e.g., Barkun, 2006; Bergmann, 2018; Bronner, 2019) would give the opportunity for comparative conclusions. Moreover, we have not performed an analysis in line with the source's ideological orientation which could be thought of as a limitation of the study. As far as we can tell, two thirds of the articles regarding the sources' ideological alignment were towards the center-right to far-right and one third could be classified as center-left to far-left. Besides the domination of right-wing sources our purpose was not to look at the anchoring of CTs. Undoubtably, further research could bring more information on the ideological aspects of CTs.

We have also restricted ourselves to the analysis of cultural, geopolitical and economic conflicts through our selection of keywords which can be seen as a limitation. However, these keywords led to findings beyond these conflicts, such as climate change and biopolitics. Our aim was not to be exhaustive in relation to CTs in Greece but to see how CTs are organized around tensional objects. Our research indicates the presence of a common representational field differentiated by the salience put on the conspirators and the issues of conflict and control. Despite its limitations, we wish that this study's qualitative nature contributes to a further understanding of what CTs are, as well as their social function.

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Μια ποιοτική μελέτη των θεωριών συνωμοσίας στην Ελλάδα ως κοινωνικών αναπαραστάσεων

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ABSTRACT IN GREEK

Η ποιοτική αυτή μελέτη επιχειρεί να εξετάσει τις θεωρίες συνωμοσίας (ΘΣ) που διακινούνται στο διαδίκτυο στην Ελλάδα σε μια περίοδο κρίσης (2010-2020). Αντλώντας από την προσέγγιση των κοινωνικών αναπαραστάσεων , εξετάσαμε την οργάνωση του περιεχομένου των ΘΣ, την κατασκευή των διομαδικών συγκρούσεων και των διχοτομήσεων που αυτή περιλαμβάνει, καθώς και τους παράγοντες που οργανώνουν το αναπαραστασιακό πεδίο. Πραγματοποιήθηκε μια λεξικομετρική ανάλυση με τη χρήση του λογισμικού IraMuTeQ σε ένα σώμα κειμένων από 140 διαδικτυακά άρθρα. Η Ιεραρχική Αυτόματη Ταξινόμηση έδωσε τέσσερις τάξεις ΘΣ, οι οποίες ονομάστηκαν α) *Συνωμοσίες των κυβερνωσών εθνικών ελίτ ενάντια στον ελληνικό λαό,* β) *Νέα παγκόσμια τάξη ενάντια στο λαό,* γ) *Επιστήμη εναντίον λαού: άρνηση της ανθρωπογενούς κλιματικής αλλαγής,* και δ) *Επίθεση στην 'ουσία' των ατόμων: σώμα και ταυτότητα.* Οι πρώτες δύο τάξεις περιγράφουν διομαδικές συγκρούσεις σχετικές με την οικονομική, πολιτική και παγκόσμια εξουσία, όπου οι άνθρωποι αντιπαρατίθενται σε εθνικές και διεθνείς ελίτ. Οι δύο τελευταίες τάξεις περιγράφουν συνωμοσίες ενάντια στα ανθρώπινα όντα με όρους βιοπολιτικής ή κλιματικής αλλαγής, όπου οι άνθρωποι αντιπαρατίθενται στους επιστήμονες. Τέλος, μια Ανάλυση Αντιστοιχιών αποκάλυψε δύο παράγοντες που δομούν το αναπαραστασιακό πεδίο: α) ο πρώτος διαχωρίζει συνωμοσίες σχετικά με διομαδικές συγκρούσεις απέναντι σε συνωμοσίες που αναφέρονται στη βιοπολιτική και την κλιματική αλλαγή και β) ο δεύτερος διαχωρίζει δύο είδη διομαδικών συγκρούσεων: εντός του έθνους και σε παγκόσμιο επίπεδο. Τα αποτελέσματα συζητιούνται σε σχέση με τη Θεωρία Κοινωνικών Αναπαραστάσεων και τον τρόπο που οι ΘΣ συμβάλλουν στην κοινωνική νοηματοδότηση σε καιρούς κρίσης.