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Conspiracy Theories, Right-Wing Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of the Alternative for Germany

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Abstract: This article analyses the relationship between conspiracy theories, right-wing populism and foreign policy by shedding light on the affective force of conspiracy theories in mobilising 'the people'. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, it conceptualises conspiracy theories as fantasies that promise to satisfy subjects' desire for a complete identity by accusing 'hidden' forces of blocking this perceived-to-be-lost but ultimately unattainable sense of ontological wholeness. The article argues that conspiracy theories allow populists to appeal to voters through emotive narratives which offer a dualistic outlook on global politics and (1)blame the conspirators for such feelings of lack, (2)transgress the conventions of the mainstream discourse by appealing to the obscene, and (3)valorise the populist actor for uncovering the plot against popular sovereignty and thereby promising to make 'the people' whole again. While conspiracy theories have been studied in other disciplines, International Relations scholarship has paid very little attention to them and, if at all, discussed their role in the context of the United States. This article illustrates its arguments with the case of the populist radical right party Alternative for Germany and examines the role of conspiracy theories and foreign policy in its attempt to stage itself as 'true' representative of the German people.

Keywords: Right-wing Populism; Foreign Policy; Conspiracy Theories; Identity; Lacanian Psychoanalysis; Alternative für Deutschland (AFD)

Introduction

According to a recent survey, 46 percent of Germans believe that 'there are secret organisations which influence political decisions' and more than one-third thinks that 'the government hides the truth from the people' (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2019). The increased salience of such sentiments in the German populace indicates a growing readiness to accept conspiracy theories (CT) – a trend which is not limited to Germany but can also be found in many other countries and is often associated with the rise of populism (cf. Bergmann 2018). Having been largely spared from right-wing populism in the past, Germany lately experienced the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AFD). While CTs have received increasing scholarly and media attention in recent years, they have been around for centuries and generated a huge, interdisciplinary body of research (Knight 2000; Birchall 2006; Fenster 2008; Byford 2011; Barkun 2013; Bergmann 2018; Butter 2018; Douglas et al. 2019).

Though many CTs deal with classical International Relations (IR) themes such as 'global political order, […] power and influence' (Byford 2011: 15) and conspiracies are part of international politics, the IR literature has so far paid very little attention to CTs. This can arguably be attributed to the fact that CTs have typically been associated with paranoia and alienated individuals located at the fringe of society. The main exception is Aistrope's (2016) book *Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy* and his co-authored piece with Bleiker on CTs surrounding 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' (Aistrope and Bleiker 2018). Drawing on Foucault, Aistrope and Bleiker contest this common reading of CTs and conceptualise them as narratives that are closely linked to power relations and the production of foreign policy knowledge. While sharing Aistrope and Bleiker's poststructuralist critique of binaries such as rational/irrational and concern for the politics of knowledge-production, the present article argues that their conceptualisation and discussion of CTs as narratives runs the risk of concept-stretching and neither addresses distinct features of CTs nor their appeal.

In this article, I analyse the relationship between conspiracy theories, right-wing populism and foreign policy and use the AFD as case study. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and its applications in IR, the article seeks to shed light on the affective force of CTs in mobilising 'the people' and examine the extent to which CTs feature in the discourse of the AFD and its foreign policy outlook. The article aims to demonstrate that the added value of adopting a Lacanian approach to CTs lies in its ontology of lack that captures the impossibility of a fully constituted sense of Self and social objectivity and the resulting anxiety-driven desire to overcome this lack (Žižek 1989; Stavrakakis 1999). The subject's affective and constant, albeit

never successful, pursuit of overcoming the incompleteness and contingency of social life is realised through fantasies. It needs to be stressed at the outset that fantasy is here not understood as illusion or misrecognition of reality, rather the Lacanian notion of fantasy is a coping mechanism which covers over the ontological lack and promises a fullness-to-come (e.g. a harmonious society) once a particular obstacle is overcome (Glynos 2008a; Eberle 2019a).
Though Lacanian scholars such as Žižek (1989) have referred to anti-Semitic CTs to illustrate their arguments, they have so far not offered an elaborate conceptual and empirical discussion of CTs. Fenster (2008) indicates the potential contribution of Lacan's psychoanalysis and argues that CTs promise to fulfil the subject's desire for complete knowledge about all social relations. However, Fenster's study is based on a very partial reading of Lacan that fails to consider key analytical categories such as the notion of lack and appreciate it as political theory (Edkins 1999; Stavrakakis 1999), and, as a result, offers a rather individual-based and contradictory analysis of CTs insofar as it criticises but ultimately re-affirms the link between CTs and paranoia.
The article argues that a Lacanian approach can make three contributions to the study of CTs and right-wing populism: first, it offers a theoretical framework that considers the discursive and affective dimensions in the construction of subjectivities such as 'the people' by studying how affect is channelled into discourses and drives identification processes. Right-wing populist and conspirational discourses typically feature highly emotive language, invoking feelings such as betrayal, robbing and coming fulfilment, and accounting for such circuits of affect can explain the appeal of such discourses beyond constructions of Otherness. The fantasy framework can capture the distinct, affect-laden narrative structure of these discourses. Second, it goes beyond common understandings of ideologies as illusions that mask 'the real state of things', often to be found in the mainstream literature on populism and CTs (see Mudde 2007), but retains the notion of ideology by re-conceptualising it as misrecognition of the ontological lack around which the subject and social reality are constituted and analysing it as 'an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself' (Žižek 1989: 30) insofar as we are made to believe that wholeness and closure are possible. Third, Lacanian notions of fantasy and enjoyment understood as 'pleasure in displeasure, satisfaction in dissatisfaction' (Stavrakakis 2007: 78) can illuminate why CTs remain appealing, although the alleged plots are rarely proven, and how right-wing populists can use CTs to sustain the appeal of their political projects.
In approaching the so far unexplored relationship between CTs, right-wing populism and foreign policy through a Lacanian lens, the article shows how right-wing populism can connect CTs and foreign policy and unfolds its affective and ideological force by means of fantasmatic

narratives. By picturing foreign policy, in a dualistic fashion, as practice that can either make 'the people' whole again (once the international conspiracies against 'the people' are uncovered) or result in the irrevocable loss of this identity (if the conspiracies succeed), the fantasy appeals to its audience through a narrative that: (1)blames the conspirators and their puppets for experiences of lack, (2)transgresses the conventions of the mainstream discourse by appealing to the obscene, and (3)stages the populist actor as the only political force which can avert the plot against popular sovereignty.

Informed by the Lacanian framework, the article conducts a discourse analysis and studies how collective meaning-systems such as fantasmatic narratives are constructed via language and images in the AFD discourse.[1] The article uses the case of the AFD for three reasons: first, the AFD has moved to the centre stage of German politics by becoming the main opposition party in the current *Bundestag*. While there are numerous studies that examine the AFD's ideological profile or electoral mobilisation (e.g. Arzheimer 2015; Häusler 2016; Lees 2018), the AFD's foreign policy has so far received hardly any scholarly attention. The sole exception is a book chapter by Lewandowsky (2016) who offers an insightful but also largely descriptive and partially dated account of the AFD's Europe and foreign policy. The present article illuminates not only the role of foreign policy in the AFD's populist right-wing politics but also how it seeks to shape German foreign policy. As such, it contributes to the emerging literature on the nexus between foreign policy and populism which has not yet taken the case of the AFD into account (Chryssogelos 2017; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; Plagemann and Destradi 2019; Stengel, MacDonald and Nabers 2019; Wehner and Thies 2020; Wojczewski 2020a, 2020b).

Second, as foreign policy and identity are closely intertwined (Campbell 1998; Hansen 2006) and existing research often relates Germany's seemingly puzzling or ambivalent foreign policy to its identity shaped by the Nazi period (Berger 1997; Wittlinger and Larose 2007; Oppermann 2012; Berenskötter and Stritzel 2019; Eberle 2019b), the case of the AFD is particularly interesting as its leaders have repeatedly proclaimed that they want 'to draw a line under the past' and 'normalise' German identity and foreign policy. Third, most contemporary research on CTs focusses on the US. Though the AFD has been accused by politicians, journalists and scholars of propagating CTs (Butter 2018; Tageschau.de 2018), there exists no systematic analysis of the role of CTs in its political discourse. As the present article will show, the AFD discourse features numerous CTs such as the notion of the 'Great Replacement' which underpin the party's right-wing populist politics and foreign policy.

The article proceeds as follows: The first section provides a brief conceptual overview of the existing literature on CTs and populism, before the second section re-conceptualises both

phenomena from a Lacanian perspective. The third section examines the relationship between CTs, right-wing populism and foreign policy in the AFD discourse.

Conspiracy Theories and Populism

At the most general level, a conspiracy can be defined as a secret plot by a powerful group. The secret plan is typically an illegal act that violates rights or established agreements, usurps political or economic power, or withholds or manipulates important information (Douglas et al. 2019: 4). CTs are then attempts to explain a certain social or political event, development or system as the result of secret plots by powerful actors with negative intent (Barkun 2013: 3/6).

Since Richard Hofstadter's foundational study *The Paranoid Style of American Politics*, CTs have generally been associated with paranoia and dangerous fringe elements in modern societies. This conception still informs, at least partially, large parts of contemporary scholarship, including studies that seek to go beyond this reified association between CTs and paranoia. This scholarship highlights, in particular, that conspiracies, deceit and secrecy are part of politics (Fenster 2008; Byford 2011) and that CTs are not a fringe phenomenon but have gone – or, in fact, have always been – mainstream (Knight 2000; Barkun 2013; Bergmann 2018); yet, it still often tends to re-produce this normalcy/paranoia binary.

Against this backdrop, Aistrope and Bleiker have sought to overcome this linkage between pathology and CTs by adopting a Foucauldian perspective to examine why particular explanations are regarded as 'truth' and others as 'paranoid'. They view the label 'conspiracy theory' as a potential instrument of discrediting certain forms of knowledge that run counter to a dominant 'truth regime' (Aistrope 2016; Aistrope and Bleiker 2018). Aistrope and Bleiker offer a very compelling illustration of the power/knowledge nexus through their case study on CTs surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks. While the narrative of the Bush administration, featuring typical elements of a CT (e.g. the collusion between the Iraqi regime and Al-Qaida and a Manichean worldview), was accepted as truthful version of events by large parts of US society, narratives in the Arabic world which questioned the official account of 9/11 and suspected a plot to justify another military intervention into the Middle East were branded as paranoid (ibid.: 172ff.).

Hence, Aistrope and Bleiker argue that 'the links between conspiracy and foreign policy can best be understood if we move beyond the conventional understanding of conspiracy as a secret plan drawn up "by a group to do something unlawful or harmful"'; instead, they conceptualise

CTs as ‘narratives that are intrinsically linked to power relations and the production of foreign policy knowledge’ (ibid.: 166). While the narrative structure of CTs has been highlighted by numerous studies, Aistrope and Bleiker do not offer any further specification of conspirational narratives but follow the common understanding of narratives as meaning-producing devices that draw together phenomena ‘into stories of origin, significance and implication’ (ibid.: 178). Thus, their approach offers no analytical tools for identifying conspirational narratives, studying their style and form or distinguishing conspiratorial from non-conspiratorial narratives, thereby running the risk of concept-stretching.

To be clear, the point is not to distinguish ‘paranoid’/‘conspirational’ from ‘legitimate’/ ‘factual’ claims, but rather the question how we can identify a conspirational discourse and how such a discourse (re-)produces the subjects and objects of which it speaks. This would be fully in keeping with poststructuralism’s premise that there is no objective extra-discursive foundation from which we can judge truth claims. The basic content of all narratives discussed under the label of conspiracy enables us to infer the way in which the content of these narratives is discursively (re-)produced. There is not a single conspirational narrative that tells a story of systemic pressures, structural constraints, contingency and transparency, rather it is their negation, and thus the production of a series of binaries such as transparency/secrecy, that makes possible a conspirational narrative.

CTs are often associated with populism. What complicates the study of the relationship between both phenomena is that populism is itself a very contested and fuzzy concept that is often – both analytically and empirically – conflated with other ideologies or concepts such nationalism and generally has, like CTs, a pejorative connotation. The scholarship on populism generally agrees that populism features ‘some kind of appeal to “the people” and a denunciation of “the elite”’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 2ff.). It is then not difficult to identify some similarities between CTs and populism such as the critique of powerful actors and a dualistic outlook. In fact, according to the very prominent definition of populism as ‘thin ideology’, this people/elite antagonism is rooted in morality, and thus very similar to the Manichean worldview often attributed to CTs (Mudde 2007).

Though populist politics can be organised around a moral divide between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, such a conception of populism misses its political dimension and almost automatically gives populism a bad name by relegating its critique of political power to the moral sphere. A different understanding of populism was formulated by Ernesto Laclau who conceptualises populism as a discursive strategy that links together different frustrated social demands and constructs a collective identity of ‘the people’ by placing them into opposition to a common

Other – the establishment or the elites – that is accused of frustrating the fulfilment of these demands (Laclau 2005). What distinguishes Laclau's discursive conception of populism is the explicit focus on the distinct way in which the socio-political categories which populists claim to represent are constructed and the role of the political in this process. The political refers in this context to the inherent negativity and potential for antagonism as constitutive principle of politics: the institution of every social order involves processes of Othering and exclusion (Mouffe 2005: 95ff.). Populism symbolises, then, the inherent tensions between liberal democracy's promise of popular sovereignty and the reality of elite rule, the structural impossibility of ever articulating or representing 'the will of the people' and thereby realising popular sovereignty. Populism is most likely to emerge in situations in which particular policies, decisions or processes are de-politicised and represented as common-sense, thereby failing to give voice to dissent and rendering visible democracy's inherent tensions (Mouffe 2018: 10ff.).

Laclau's formal discursive understanding of populism also enables us to distinguish populism from other modes of collective identity formation such as nationalism by examining the distinct way of relating Self and Other. As De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) have shown, populism is organised around 'a down/up antagonism' and discursively constructs the people as down-group, as 'underdogs', 'powerless' or 'voiceless', in relation to a small but 'illegitimately powerful elite' as up-group, whereas nationalism is structured around an 'in/out distinction' that (re-)produces the nation by relating it to the nation's out-groups (e.g. other nations or immigrants). Right-wing populism combines these two modes of Othering and discursively constructs the people as both underdogs and nation, with the latter typically defined first and foremost as a cultural-ethnic community. When right-wing populists allude to a conspiracy, they do not merely articulate a critique of aloof, illegitimately powerful or corrupt elites but suggest that there is a hidden Other who is behind and benefits from society's antagonisms and problems. This can, for example, be a foreign power which uses the political elites as 'puppets' to secretly achieve certain political goals.

While the present section offered an overview of the literature on CTs and populism and initial conceptualisations, the following section will turn to Lacanian psychoanalysis to shed light on the affective dimension of CTs and populism and how it plays out via distinct fantasmatic narratives.

Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Subjectivity, Affect and Fantasy

At the heart of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and arguably its most important contribution to IR scholarship, is the conception of the subject as being constituted around an insurmountable ontological lack – a lack of stable and secure identity, a lack of certainty and thus a lack of a full sense of Self and social objectivity as such (Edkins 1999; Epstein 2011; Solomon 2013, 2015; Eberle 2019a, 2019b). The subject encounters this lack for the first time in the so-called 'mirror-stage' in the child's early development, embodying the external and alienating character of the subject's own foundation, that it needs to identify with something different, external and other in order to obtain a sense of personhood (Stavrakakis 1999: 17f.).

Having failed to acquire a stable identity in the realm of the imaginary, the subject steps into the symbolic order of language to search for a sense of wholeness. In keeping with the discursive turn, Lacanian psychoanalysis understands the symbolic order as 'the mediated realm of inter-subjectively shared meanings and values, that is, the social world' (Epstein 2011: 335). It is in this discursive order in which the subject identifies with particular signifiers (such as 'German', 'Man', 'Father' etc.) that generate identity and structure the social world. While offering a sense of self-understanding and orientation, the entry into the symbolic order is also a deeply traumatic and alienating experience, because for our constitution as subjects we need to rely on resources (e.g. signifiers and social practices) that are literally foreign to us insofar as they predate us and do not belong to us; other people, for example, identify with the same signifiers or follow the same social practices, which moreover articulate particular expectations and thus link 'our' identity implicitly to the adherence to these expectations (Eberle 2019a: 246). As a result, the identification with signifiers in the symbolic system of language reinforces the sense that both individual and collective identities are always dependent on something external or an Other. In this sense, the subject is constituted around a void, an always missing fullness, essence or foundation that the subject seeks through its identification practices, but never ultimately attains due to the inherently instable, incomplete and alien symbolic order (Solomon 2013: 105).

The Lacanian conception of the subject not only sheds light on the ways in which the subject deals with its constitutive lack and the ontological anxieties resulting from it, but also on the role of affect and its relationship to discourse and identity (Solomon 2015; Eberle 2019b). Accordingly, every identity is always already blocked and the Other is ultimately nothing more than a place holder onto which we project this ontological lack in order to avoid a confrontation with our precarious mode of being. This insight also draws attention to the role of affect. Affect

can be understood as a largely subconscious and amorphous bodily intensity which is extra-discursive but unfolds its effects within discourse, when it is, for example, translated into emotions, that is, 'the "feeling[s]" that signifiers "represent" once names are attached to affect' (Solomon 2012: 907). By understanding discourse and affect as two distinct but interconnected domains, Lacanian psychoanalysis conceptualises the subject as split between the discursive and affective. For unfolding its appeal, a discourse must animate affect or bodily enjoyment 'lost' once the subject stepped into the discursive order and transform it into socially constructed desires and other emotions so that the subject enjoys identifying with particular discourses. A central desire of the subject is the desire to obtain a whole identity, thereby overcoming its fundamental lack and re-capturing the 'real' pre-symbolic enjoyment of wholeness (Eberle 2019b).[2]

As such, the Lacanian framework can make an important contribution to the IR literatures on affect, emotions, discourse and identity by theorising the links between these phenomena. By understanding affects as bodily experiences which remain outside of discourse but nevertheless have effects within discourses when they are attached to socially recognizable signifiers such as emotions (Solomon 2012: 907/918), it offers a novel perspective on the relationship between affect and emotions and the methodological question of how to study affect widely debated in the literature (Bleiker and Hutchison 2014; Åhäll 2018) and avoids both the conflation as well as strict separation of both concepts. This distinguishes a Lacanian approach, for example, from Deleuzian-inspired and neuroscientific approaches to affect (Massumi 2002; Meiches 2017), which typically treat affect as a realm separate from cognition and signification, thus drawing a rather rigid distinction between affect, emotions and discourse that runs the risk of introducing a series of problematic binaries such as mind/body and rational/emotional and raises the question of how we can analyse the role of affect. Another aspect escaping this conception of affect is the role of affect in the constitution of the subject, which is at the centre of Lacanian psychoanalysis and goes beyond how prominent IR theories such constructivism and poststructuralism typically study identity (for an overview, see Berenskoetter 2010). Instead of reducing identities to social/discursive constructions and analysing how they shape foreign policy or are the effect of foreign policy's boundary-producing performances respectively, a Lacanian approach shows how affect is interwoven with processes of identification, subjectivation and meaning-making and operates behind the conscious level of discourses and Self/Other constructions.

As populism, CTs and foreign policy are typically articulated in terms of frustrated demands and desires (agency, knowledge, sovereignty, security etc.), the Lacanian conception of the

subject as split between the affective and discursive and characterised by a fundamental lack can shed light on how such discourses unfold their appeal by animating and managing the desires, frustrations and anxieties resulting from the ontological lack. In the following section, the Lacanian concept of fantasy is discussed as such a coping mechanism, offering the illusive promise of a state of ontological wholeness and explaining why this state is never achieved. As such, the fantasy framework enables us, unlike other available approaches, to analyse what generates and sustains the drive to identify with particular discourses despite their regular failure to offer a full and complete sense of Self and social reality.

Fantasy

The notion of fantasy enables us to explain how affect is aroused and channelled into discourse by promising the subject to overcome its ontological lack through the stimulation of desire for particular discursively constructed objects and narrative scenarios telling us how to reach them. Fantasies do not obscure 'the real state of things', but cover over the ontological lack and offer the illusion that wholeness in the form of a complete identity and social order is possible. This is the ideological dimension of fantasies (Žižek 1989: 141; Stavrakakis 1999: 45-46). As such, fantasy is a coping mechanism that enables individuals and collectives to manage the anxieties generated by the ontological lack and contributes to the constitution of social reality.

Fantasies have a distinct narrative structure involving 'an idealized scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness' once a named or implied obstacle is overcome and 'a disaster scenario' which will prevail if the respective obstacle is not surmounted (Glynos 2008a: 283). The affective appeal of fantasies lies in this radical simplification of a particular, often complex and ambiguous, situation by presenting it as a binary choice between excessively idealised and horrific scenarios and thereby driving the identification with a particular discourse (Eberle 2019a: 249). The idealised scenario endows the subject – for example, the nation – with an 'imaginary essence' and 'foundational guarantee of sorts' (Glynos 2008a: 287) by picturing the nation as pure, great, happy and united and thus suggesting that the subject once had a perfect identity and merely lost it. Hence, the ontological lack 'is transformed into an empirical lack, a lack of particular 'objects', whose recapturing promises the restoration of an imaginary full identity' (Eberle 2019a: 246). By channelling the subject's desire for wholeness towards a particular empirical object (e.g. sovereignty or liberty), its ontological lack is thus presented as a mere obstacle on the path to a whole identity and thereby the fantasy offers the subject a course of action that promises completeness.

Often, the obstacle, standing between us and our object of desire, comes in the form of an Other which is accused of blocking this state of completeness, of frustrating our desire, of stealing our enjoyment of a full and stable identity. The Other becomes the scapegoat – a negative projection screen for our individual and collective problems – and thus the impediment that prevents us from reaching the utopia pictured by the fantasmatic narrative. Like the object of desire, the Other stands here for something more than is tangible or recognisable insofar as it is fantasised as an imminent and existential threat and accused of stealing 'our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life)' and having 'access to some secret, pervasive enjoyment' (Žižek 1993: 203), that is, the Other is fantasised as enjoying a kind of fullness at our expense.

This representation of the Other points to the transgressive dimension of fantasies. This transgressive element arouses desire in the audience by alluding to something that is typically marginalised or unacknowledged in the mainstream discourse, since it transgresses established norms and is considered irrational, obscene or politically incorrect (Eberle 2019a: 253). The subject thus 'derives unconscious pleasure from a practice in which the subject's very own ideal is transgressed', since the practice seems to allow the Self 'to "steal back" the enjoyment that the Other' has supposedly stolen from it (Glynos 2008b: 682/694). An example would be populists who stage themselves as decent and law-abiding democrats, but, at the same time, call for the use of violence against the 'corrupt' elite.

The more the fantasmatic narrative moves away from the pictured ideal to the obstacle that (seemingly) blocks it, the more the narrative becomes charged with negative emotions such as anxiety, fear or rage. These emotions are further reinforced by the fantasy's 'disaster' storyline which typically confronts the audience with an image of society threatened by decay, corruption, loss of control and disintegration and thereby underlines the urgent and existential need to identify with a particular political project.

To sum up, fantasies are affect-laden, transgressive and simplistic narratives consisting of two interconnected storylines that present the audience an ideal, an impediment to its realisation and an upcoming disaster. Fantasies are not obscuring social reality, but our ontological lack by transforming it into an empirical lack and thereby promising to fulfil our desire for a complete identity and a fully reconciled social order. The analytical purpose of the Lacanian framework is to highlight that the incompleteness of the subject and social reality cannot be overcome and to understand how discourses create the illusion that a state of wholeness can be reached and thereby unfold their affective force.

Fantasy, Conspiracy Theories and Populism

While the basic logic of fantasies outlined in the previous section is always identical, the exact content of the fantasmatic narrative depends on the discourse in which it is articulated. This section looks at CTs as feature of populist discourses and how such discourses are structured around fantasmatic narratives. As every fantasy, the narrative arouses desire by promising to re-capture a perceived-to-be-lost but ultimately never attainable state of wholeness. This desire for completeness and closure is, unlike Fenster (2008) suggests, not restricted to conspirational narratives but a general human desire that is intrinsically connected to subject's ontological lack. Accordingly, the present article understands CTs as *specific* way of coping with this lack and argues that they follow the basic narrative structure of a fantasy.

CTs and populism often emerge in moments of dislocation, in which we are confronted with phenomena that cannot be (fully) domesticated or explained by pre-existing discourses. This encounter with the Real – that is, what resists or remains outside symbolisation (Žižek 1989: 191ff.) – is a traumatic and uncanny experience that at least partially disrupts our mode of being and understanding of socio-political reality. In such situations, populists can construct CTs that offer as fantasmatic narratives an explanation for this 'crisis' by attributing it to a conspiracy and thereby offering clear-cut answers to questions like: 'how could this happen?', 'why are we suffering?' or 'what do they want from us?'. In doing so, the conspirational narrative directs feelings of lack and resulting anxieties away from the subject and pictures a pathway (e.g. the pursuit of a particular foreign policy) to overcome the perceived crisis.

When populist discourses allude to a conspiracy, they articulate a fantasmatic narrative in which domestic and/or foreign elites are accused of conspiring against 'the people' and thus assume the role of the Other onto which the ontological lack is projected. While a purely discursive conception of populism examines how 'the people' are constructed in relation to 'the elite' as antagonistic Other, a Lacanian approach sheds light on the role of affect that generates processes of identification and Othering. While Laclau recognised the importance of affect as force behind the attachment to particular discursive structures and identities (Laclau 2005: 110-111), he reduces affective investment to the process of 'making an object the embodiment of a mythical fullness' (ibid.: 115) and does not further elaborate on the ways in which affect can be studied within discourses. The Lacanian fantasy framework allows us to capture this dynamic and shows that affect is not merely channelled into populist discourses by arousing desire for a whole identity and projecting this desire onto the discursive object of popular sovereignty, but by a dualistic narrative frame and the affective construction of the Other as alleged thief of this enjoyment of wholeness. Accordingly, by transforming the ontological into an

empirical lack – the absence of popular sovereignty as alleged cause of 'our' current crisis, the populist fantasy pictures (1)an ideal scenario, in which 'the people' reclaim their sovereignty, and the enjoyment it entails, (2)'the elite' as thief of enjoyment, (3)an impending disaster if popular sovereignty is not restored. The disaster scenario further reinforces the affective investment in populist discourses by triggering anxieties, fears and despair and by positioning the populist actor as the only political force who can uncover the plot against 'the people'.

This points to the ambiguous nature of enjoyment. While fantasies picture the enjoyment of a state of wholeness and the satisfaction derived from it, it is never an actually experienced satisfaction but always a fullness-to-come blocked or stolen by the Other. Hence, the subject experiences both satisfaction and dissatisfaction by fantasising about the desired object of popular sovereignty and the conspiring elite as thief of enjoyment. Crucially, the function of fantasy is not to satisfy desire and bring full enjoyment, but to ensure that 'enjoyment is kept at a "healthy" distance […]; close enough to support the appeal of an object of identification but far enough from letting us entertain the vision of full satisfaction as an imminent possibility – something that would kill desire, induce anxiety and put identification processes in danger' (Stavrakakis 2007: 198).

What makes CTs appealing and effective fantasies is that they promise the full enjoyment of a state of wholeness once the conspiracy is uncovered *and* explain why full enjoyment remains out-of-reach: due to the powerful, secret agent who has an existential interest in preventing the exposure of the conspiracy, since it is the plot itself that (supposedly) makes the conspirators' full enjoyment possible. This indicates not only why followers of CTs remain invested in them, although the alleged plots are rarely exposed and full enjoyment is never experienced, but also why CTs appeal to populists. While populist promises of fulfilment would ultimately result in frustration and can exacerbate ontological anxieties, as Browning (2019) has shown with respect to Brexit, CTs allow populists to spark and sustain the desire for wholeness, even if they are in power and in the position to restore popular sovereignty, by blaming a hidden agent and plot (e.g. the 'deep state') for the still missing enjoyment. Hence, CTs can animate affective investment from their followers insofar as they offer them the partial enjoyment of a sustained desire and keep anxieties at a manageable distance by obscuring the 'real' horror of the situation, namely that there is no object which could bring us full satisfaction and closure.[3]

This 'smoother' reality pictured by the fantasy is particularly appealing in moments of dislocation, when we experience a crisis of meaning and identity, and populists can seize on such moments by offering a conspirational narrative that reduces the situation to a clear-cut choice between an ideal and a doomsday scenario. The ideal scenario promises wholeness in the form

of a pure human essence and a stable ontological foundation from where we can understand, explain and act in the world; transparency and accountability enabling us to attribute unsettling events to particular actors that can be hold responsible for them (rather than to systemic pressures or randomness); and individual and collective agents who are in control of their destinies. While the ideal scenario scapegoats the conspirators for stealing this full enjoyment of wholeness and reduces ontological anxieties experienced in dislocatory moments, the doomsday scenario triggers anxieties and reinforces the affective investment in the populist discourse by picturing the impending disaster that will materialise if the conspiracy is not exposed.

Hence, conspirational narratives do not mispresent or obscure social reality, but the lack in the subject and social reality – the structural impossibility of ever reaching closure and permanently stabilising the differential play of signifiers in the symbolic order. What makes conspirational narratives so appealing and arouse our desire for a complete and stable identity is their assertion that behind this lack and radical contingency in the symbolic order is a secret, invisible and powerful agent – acting as an 'Other of the Other' in the Lacanian terminology – who prevents this closure or, more precisely, obscures that behind (what seem to us as) the random, unforeseen or systemic effects of social life is the design of a hidden force. As such, conspirational narratives seek to represent the Real, what is behind or outside the symbolic order, what can ultimately not be represented or explained, but what promises to satisfy our desire for certainty, understanding and identity.

This appeal is further reinforced by their transgressive element. By indulging in what is generally considered irrational, inappropriate or obscene, populists who perform transgressive acts such as hinting at an elite conspiracy do not merely seek to distinguish themselves from establishment parties and bolster a status as political outsiders (cf. Moffitt 2016: 58); rather, such performances have, from a Lacanian perspective, a strong affective dimension and develop a resonance in the audience by offering a collective bodily experience of partial enjoyment through violating civic norms (e.g. calling 'the elites' puppets of a foreign power), as this practice promises to 'steal back' the enjoyment from the Other. While transgressions are typically located at the margins of the mainstream discourse, they are central to conspirational narratives and play a crucial role in the constitution of collective meanings and identities. For, if the mainstream discourse is nothing more than a charade kept up by the conspirators and their puppets to fool 'the people', then it is in the realm of the obscene that the desire for re-capturing a state of wholeness can be fulfilled.

The following section analyses how the right-wing populist discourse of the AFD appeals to its audience through a conspirational fantasmatic narrative organised around (1)an imaginary

wholeness ‘stolen’ by the conspirators and their puppets, (2)acts of transgression, and (3)an impending disaster that can only be avoided if the AFD uncovers the plot against popular sovereignty and the nation.

The Alternative for Germany, Conspiracy Theories and Foreign Policy

Founded in 2013 as a self-identified national-liberal, conservative Eurosceptic party opposed to the Euro and bailouts for crisis-hit member states of the Eurozone, the Alternative for Germany moved further to the Right in subsequent years and combined, in the context of the high influx of migrants to Germany in 2015/16, its Euroscepticism with a radical anti-immigration stance. The AFD staged itself as fundamental opposition and only ‘real’ alternative to the mainstream political parties in Germany.

The rise of the AFD in the context of perceived crises already indicates how the AFD’s discourse unfolds its appeal and the constituencies in which it finds particular reception. From a Lacanian perspective, a crisis relates to a dislocation, when existing discourses are disrupted by something that exceeds discursive construction – the Real – and exposes a lack in ‘our’ identities and social reality. The so-called Euro and refugee crisis are manifestations of deeper dislocations tied to processes of globalisation that dislocate, for example, nationalist discourses in which the nation-state is represented as stable and natural mode of being and belonging. Dislocations are experienced as crises particularly by those people who are still strongly attached to the dislocated discourses and their sources of identification and therefore feel overwhelmed or threatened by social, political and economic changes. These ontological anxieties, in turn, fuel the desire to re-capture a complete and stable identity that promises to define ‘our’ place in an uncertain world. The AFD discourse invokes this desire by constructing fantasies – narrative scenarios that picture a pathway to a whole identity, an obstacle blocking it and an upcoming disaster if this obstacle is not removed. Crucially, by portraying the current situation through these ideal and horrific scenarios, the AFD does not merely promise to offer a solution to the crisis but simultaneously seeks to dramatise this experience of crisis, thereby staging the AFD as the only political party that can avert the pictured doomsday scenario.

The right-wing populist discourse of the AFD represents ‘the people’ as both nation and underdogs by placing the signifier of the people into an antagonistic relationship to the foreign Other and the elite (cf. also Breeze 2019). What generates the appeal of the discourse and drives identification processes are, however, not these antagonistic modes of Othering but the stimulation of affect that is channelled into the discourse via fantasy. In the following, I show how

the AFD discourse constructs fantasmatic narrative scenarios by means of right-wing populism, CTs and foreign policy and charges foreign policy with affect by presenting it as a practice that can either bring the 'German people' a state of wholeness (by exposing the international conspiracies against 'the people') or lead to the loss of this identity for good (if the conspiracies succeed).

Popular Sovereignty and the Nation as Objects of Desire

The fantasmatic narratives articulated within the AFD discourse are constructed around the signifier of the people and arouse desire for a complete and stable identity by channelling it behind the discursive objects of popular sovereignty and the nation and promising that the recapturing of these objects will bring the enjoyment of a state of wholeness. As such, the discourse combines a populist fantasy of the people-as-sovereign with a nationalist fantasy of the people as harmonious cultural-ethnic community. The fantasies attribute the 'loss' of popular sovereignty and the nation to conspiracies and accuses the elite of conspiring with the foreign Other against the German people. In its 2018 party manifesto, the AFD alludes to this notion of an elite conspiracy, when it states that 'popular sovereignty as foundation of our state has become a fiction' and instead 'a small, powerful political oligarchy within the [establishment] parties' has become Germany's 'secret sovereign' (AFD 2018: 14). Accordingly, this 'political cartel holds all gearshifts of state power, as far as these have not already been given up to the EU, and controls the complete political education as well as large parts of the flow of political information to the population' (ibid.: 14). The affective and ideological force of this fantasy is that it masks over the ontological lack of 'the people' by turning it into an empirical lack – the lack of popular sovereignty – that promises the full enjoyment of a whole identity and holding 'the elite' responsible for this 'theft of enjoyment'. The fantasy seeks to cement meanings and identities by projecting affect onto an ideal and a horrific narrative scenario.

In the ideal scenario, sovereignty resides completely with 'the people' and there is a full congruence between 'people' and 'rulers'[4]: 'The people are the sovereign. The sovereign decides. That's how democracy works' (Weidel 2018a). The notion of a 'theft of enjoyment', of an elite enjoying itself at the expense of 'the people' by depriving them of their sovereignty, then suggests that popular sovereignty is the missing object that promises to satisfy 'our' desires and re-establish the absent identity and unity of 'the people'. By hinting at an elite conspiracy, the fantasy induces an obscene enjoyment into the AFD discourse procured through the collective transgression of civic norms and suggests that what 'we' regard as reality (e.g. the multi-party system and elections) is nothing more than a smokescreen created by the 'cartel of

establishment parties' (Höcke 2017a) to hide the plot and thus the fact that 'the people' are not sovereign anymore. This allows the AFD to stage itself as the political force that can uncover the plot and restore popular sovereignty. The hint at an elite conspiracy and sell-out of popular sovereignty to the EU, at the same time, points to the horrific scenario, which translates affect into anxiety, rage and despair, by conjuring up the notion of Germany as a quasi-dictatorship and the complete and irrevocable loss of popular sovereignty to an international institution.

Alongside this populist fantasy of the people-as-sovereign, the AFD discourse features a nationalist fantasy that articulates the nation as object that promises to fulfill the desire for ontological wholeness and security. In the words of AFD leader Alexander Gauland (2016): 'our people needs a national identity in order to survive. […] [I]t needs footing in history, in traditions, in the native homeland. The sovereignty of the nation-state and national identity provide humans with security and existentially connect them to a community.' For arousing desire in the audience, the fantasy articulates an idealised narrative scenario that locates such a complete and secure identity in Germany's past and pictures a golden period of national grandeur and unity. Through this mythical imaginary of the past, the fantasy triggers emotions such as hope and nostalgia and endows the German nation with a seemingly transcendental essence and stable foundation rooted in culture. In particular, the speeches by AFD politicians at the so-called Kyffhäusertreffen feature frequent references to Germany's glorious past and picture a flourishing cultural nation that reached its heyday in the 18th and 19th century with the gradual formation of a German national movement and the ultimate founding of a German state under *Reichskanzler* Otto von Bismarck in 1871. While German writers such as Schiller and Goethe embodied 'the dominance of German language and culture in Europe', as Gauland (2017) notes, '[t]he Bismarck era […] was the era of innovations, the era of Germany's unity and the era of the great emergence of Germany'.

Following the logic of a fantasy, the narrative promises the full enjoyment of a perfect identity, but it is always a fullness-to-come insofar as the nation as object of desire that could bring about this wholeness is always constructed as a lost or stolen object. The fantasy's ideological function and affective force lies in this retroactive attempt to obscure the subject's constitutive lack by turning it into an empirical lack and thereby animate desire for the elusive enjoyment that the identification with the signifier of the nation promises to offer. By portraying Germany as cultural nation, the AFD discourse postulates that 'our identity is first and foremost culturally determined' (AFD 2018: 91) and represents Germany as an organic community. Culture is thus represented as the Thing that holds the nation together, as the seemingly eternal and stable essence and foundation that defines 'our' mode of being in the world. However, this

Thing that promises 'us' ontological wholeness and security remains always somehow abstract, ambiguous and intangible.[5] There is, in other words, no signifier in the symbolic order that can fully capture what this cultural, and by extension national, essence is and, as a result, our search for ontological wholeness through identification with particular signifiers or discourses will only bring some partial satisfaction but ultimately always result in frustration.

The AFD discourse unfolds its affective pull through fantasmatic narratives that conceal this lack – the ultimately unbridgeable gap between the imaginary and symbolic order and the resulting traumatic force of the Real – by representing the German nation and popular sovereignty as lost objects that were stolen by the Other. By naming the causes of this 'loss', the narrative projects the ontological lack onto a series of Others that are scapegoated for stealing the enjoyment of a state of wholeness from the German people. These Others are, apart from the German elites, the US and the Allies, the globalists, Eurocrats, migrants and Muslims/Islam.

The Elites and Foreign Others as Conspiratorial 'Thieves of Enjoyment'

In the AFD discourse, the Nazi era and World War II. mark the beginning of the 'loss' of national identity and popular sovereignty. While Nazi Germany serves as main negative reference point – or temporal Other – for the self-constitution of post-war German identity in the mainstream discourse, the AFD discourse reverses this process of Othering and represents Germans as victims of Nazism in that they 'lost' their national identity and are prevented from restoring it, thereby also relativising German guilt for the crimes of the Nazis. In the words of Gauland (2018a): 'We have a glorious history, which is longer than these 12 years. […] Yes, we acknowledge our responsibility for the 12 years. But […] Hitler and the Nazis are nothing more than a piece of bird shit in more than 1000 years of German history. And the great figures of our past, ranging from Karl the Great and Karl V. to Bismarck are the benchmark for our mode of being'. By calling the Nazi period 'a piece of bird shit', Gauland arouses desire in his audience through a transgressive act that violates the norms of Germany's mainstream discourse and promises the Self to steal back the enjoyment from the Other. Through the transgressive act, Gauland can claim that the AFD speaks out what the 'corrupt' political class does not dare to say but what most Germans (allegedly) think. The act of transgression thus plays an important role in constructing 'the people' as collective source of identification and the AFD as its representative by creating a shared affective experience of (at least partial) enjoyment. It is this joint pleasure through violating societal norms and the related joint arousal of desire for

re-capturing a whole identity through these transgressive acts that bind the party and its supporters together.

In addition to the 'corrupt' German establishment that propagates this 'politics of guilt', intending 'to break the Germans' will to exist as a people' (AFD 2019c), the fantasies articulated in the AFD discourse also accuse the United States and the other Allied Forces of depriving Germans of their identity and sovereignty. In a speech at a gathering of the AFD's youth organisation, Björn Höcke (2017b) asserted: 'The bombing of Dresden and other German cities was intended to rob our collective identity. They wanted to destroy us with root and branch, they wanted to stub our roots. In conjunction with the systematic re-education in the post-1945 era they have almost succeeded.'

This lack of identity and self-certitude has, as the AFD claims, also negative effects on German foreign policy, precluding German decision-makers from articulating, promoting and defending German's national interests towards its partners and foes: 'The Federal Republic pursues a disoriented foreign policy. As a result, other states and institutions are increasingly influencing and steering German foreign and security policy' (AFD 2018: 56). This statement hints, again, at a conspiracy in that the German people are not sovereign and that the 'true' sovereign, which directs German foreign policy, is located elsewhere. On the one hand, the AFD frequently claims that joint agreements and policies with German allies such as France or the US do not serve German interests (Höcke 2017a; AFD 2019d). On the other hand, the AFD demands, in light of 'German sovereignty' and 'the end of the Second World War 70 years ago', a 'renegotiation of the status of allied troops in Germany' and 'a withdrawal of all Allied Forces and their nuclear weapons stationed on German soil' (AFD 2018: 60).

From a Lacanian perspective, this representation of German foreign policy and German allies points to the affective role of desire and enjoyment in constructions of Self and Other. In one of his most well-known maxims, Lacan noted: 'Man's desire is the desire of the Other' (Lacan 1987: 235). The AFD discourse does not merely construct German allies as antagonistic Others insofar as they are portrayed as physical and/or ontological security threats to the German Self, but also displays a fascination with the Other, with the enjoyment that the Other is seemingly deriving from its actions, and the sense that the Other is enjoying a fullness by having access to something that the Self is missing or is denied: full sovereignty. Sovereignty thus becomes an object of desire in the AFD discourse, because it is supposedly the object that the Other desires and that is the source of its enjoyment. What drives the affective investment in the discourse is this very notion of 'theft of enjoyment', that the Other enjoys a whole identity at the expense of the German people by meddling into Germany's sovereignty or imposing its

interests on Germany. By scapegoating the Allies for Germany's lack of identity, the fantasmatic narrative thus channels affect into the discourse in the form of socially constructed desire for re-capturing a whole identity and emotions such as anger and envy directed at the Other for stealing it. In doing so, it drives the identification with the AFD's discourse and channels support behind its proposed foreign policy, since it purports to offer a course of action to reclaim German sovereignty and the full enjoyment it supposedly entails.

The AFD discourses intertwines nationalist and populist fantasies by suggesting that the German elites are conspiring with the foreign Other against the German people and are as puppets of the Allies complicit in the 'theft of enjoyment'. During the Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) leadership campaign in 2018, Höcke, for example, posted on Twitter a picture of Friedrich Merz, who was the most promising contender for succeeding Angela Merkel as CDU chairperson, as puppet of Uncle Sam, claiming that Merz 'does not have the interests of Germans in mind' and that 'his interests lie arguably elsewhere' (Höcke 2018a).

Image 1: CDU politician Friedrich Merz as puppet of Uncle Sam

Image 1 visualises the 'theft of enjoyment' and transgressive dimension of the fantasmatic narrative, unfolding its affective force via politically incorrect tropes that violate the conventions of the mainstream political discourse and represent the US – a close ally of Germany – as powerful and ruthless puppet master that enjoys itself excessively in dominating other states and stealing Germany's sovereignty. The populist dimension of this transgression lies in the representation of the potential leader of the ruling Christian Democrats as stooge of the US and corrupt and aloof politician who is complicit in this 'theft of enjoyment'. The fantasy presents the future as a stark binary choice between a doomsday and idealised scenario which both invite affective investment and transform it into antithetical emotions of despair/angst and hope: either a puppet of the US becomes Germany's next chancellor and will hand over the last bits of German sovereignty to the United States or the AFD stops this 'theft of enjoyment'.
In a talk entitled 'Geostrategy behind mass migration', the AFD member of parliament, Udo Hemmelgarn, articulated a CT that follows a similar pattern (AFD 2019e): Accordingly, 'the great flows of refugees into Europe' are an intended result of 'the long-term geostrategy of the US' which seeks to 'invade and destabilise the countries in the Arabic and African world' in order to 'install pro-Western regimes', realise 'pipeline projects' in the Middle East, 'encircle Russia' and 'significantly reduce Russian gas supplies to Europe', thereby making Europe dependent on the US. According to Hemmelgarn, 'the mass migration has become a weapon in service of the US financial capital' which aims to 'dissolve the nation-state' and thereby promote 'its economic interests more effectively without disruptive democratic participation and rule of law'.
The fantasmatic dimension of this CT lies in its dualistic outlook on global politics oscillating between an affect-laden ideal scenario and doomsday scenario: the full enjoyment of an imaginary international system, in which sovereign nation-states live in peaceful co-existence and Germany obtains a whole identity, prevented by the hideous plot of the imperialist US, and a horrific vision of wars, domination and the ultimate destruction of popular sovereignty and the nation. What makes such CTs ideal fantasies is that they mask over the constitutive lack of the subject and social reality and form a screen through which a direct confrontation with the Real is avoided – with everything that escapes discursive representation and triggers ontological anxieties – by projecting it onto a hidden, powerful force and explaining traumatic encounters with the Real as the result of a secret masterplan – or, in the words of Hemmelgarn: 'in politics nothing happens by chance. If something happens, one can be sure that it was planned that way' (ibid.).

Though the AFD discourse features anti-American sentiments and accuses the Allies of stealing German sovereignty, the AFD principally supports Germany's NATO membership and partnerships with France, the United Kingdom and the US. However, it demands a more independent and self-confident foreign policy and questions Germany's *Westbindung*, which has informed the foreign and security policy of the Federal Republic since the end of World War II., in favour of a more balanced relationship with its Western partners and Russia (AFD 2017a: 18-19). This re-definition of Germany's relations with the major powers is not merely a 'strategic' foreign policy issue but charged with affect insofar as the postulated policy promises to bring 'us' closer to re-capturing 'our' nation and sovereignty – the objects of desire that purport to offer the (ultimately unattainable) full enjoyment of a complete identity. In this context, the AFD discourse turns to the past and identifies the Concert of Europe and Bismarck's balance-of-power politics in the 19th century as a more suitable international order. 'When it comes to foreign policy', as Gauland (2018d) noted, 'our current government could learn from Prince von Metternich and Bismarck. […] Oscillating between hegemony and balance-of-power it was ultimately always the European balance-of-power that has been the engine of European progress and not a central power, regardless if this power is located in Madrid, Paris, Berlin or now in Brussels'.

The desire to recreate Europe's past order points to the reactionary dimension of the AFD's foreign policy. 'Reactionary international relations' is, according to MacKay and LaRoche (2018: 234), centred around the nostalgic notion that 'the world was once better: a past political order, now lost, shows us retrospectively how things should be but no longer are.' A Lacanian approach can shed light on the distinct narrative structure and appeal of reactionary international relations, which inform most right-wing populist discourses. Accordingly, it is the interplay of excessively idealised and horrific narrative scenarios that animates the affective force of reactionary politics and sustains it by directing the subject's desire for wholeness to an imaginary past that cannot be restored and naming a fantasmatic Other as obstacle that prevents its restoration, thereby concealing the subject's lack and promising a route back to the full enjoyment supposedly experienced in the 'good old times'. In the AFD discourse, the horrific scenario are 'the United States of Europe' as an attempt to 'dissolve nation-states', 'disempower Europe's sovereigns' and 'force Europe under the paralyzing rule of a hegemon' in the same way as Napoleon in the 19th and Germany in the 20th century with 'fatal' consequences (Gauland 2019), thus conjuring up a disaster scenario of a return of wars to Europe.

The Conspiracy Theories of the 'New World Order' and the 'Great Replacement'

The AFD discourse represents the attempted creation of the 'United States of Europe' as part of a globalist conspiracy that aims at secretly dissolving the nation-state and popular sovereignty into a 'New World Order'. It constructs an antagonistic divide between an uprooted 'globalised class', who can be found in 'transnational corporations, organisations like the UN, the media, universities, NGOs, in parties and their apparatuses' and 'controls' the political, economic and cultural discourse (Gauland 2018b), and 'an alliance of the national working class and middle class, who still attach great value to the native homeland […] and democracy as a national institution' (AFD 2019a). The AFD's right-wing populist rant against globalism is also a symptom of the de-politicised and technocratic character of global governance, which invites CTs due to its limited accountability and transparency:

> Globalists agree that nation-states must be overcome. They fight against national sovereignty by all means, with permanent propaganda, with NGOs and with the strengthening of supranational organisations. […] Regardless if it is the World Bank and IMF, UNO and EU, Wallstreet and Londoner City, Washington and Brussels, TTIP and TPP, Bilderberger and the Council on Foreign Relations – all these institutions are echo chambers of the ideas and plans, which a globalist establishment has developed in the back rooms of politics and economics and pursued for years (Freiewelt.net 2017, 2018).

The CT of globalism pictures, in keeping with the structure of a fantasy, a secret ideal space in which the globalists are fantasised as enjoying everything that the subject desires: a complete identity, knowledge, control, autonomy and agency by transgressing established norms and stealing the objects of the nation and popular sovereignty that would supposedly satisfy these desires. This CT is an appealing coping mechanism for dealing with dislocatory effects of political, economic and social changes and anxieties triggered by them. The fantasy of a globalist conspiracy makes sense of this traumatic, complex and ambiguous situation by reducing it to a secret masterplan and thereby directing experiences of lack away from the subject. The fantasy further reinforces the affective investment in the AFD discourse by conjuring up the doomsday scenario of a 'New World Order', in which the nation and popular sovereignty are lost for good and individuals are under the complete control of a secret, non-accountable globalist elite.

While offering the audience partial enjoyment through the 'revelation' that experiences of lack (e.g. lack of social justice or political representation) are the result of the insidious plot by the

globalists, the fantasy can sustain its affective force by hinting at the prospect of the full enjoyment of wholeness once the conspiracy is uncovered. At the same time, it keeps enjoyment at a 'healthy' distance by portraying the Other as an omnipotent, hidden force who can hardly ever be fully exposed and who has an existential interest in preventing this exposure. This makes the globalist conspiracy an ideal fantasy: On the one hand, it allows right-wing populists to arouse desire for a whole identity by promising to 'steal back' the enjoyment from the globalists once in power. On the other hand, it offers right-wing populists a scapegoat and explanation why the promised fulfilment is never actually reached, even if they are in power.

The AFD discourse links the notion of a globalist conspiracy to the CT of the 'Great Replacement'. The fantasy of the 'Great Replacement' creates an imaginary ideal of the nation as harmonious cultural-ethnic community, but ultimately projects affect more onto the disaster storyline and triggers emotions such as despair and angst by accusing the globalist elites of dissolving the German people into a multicultural society through mass migration and by linking migrants to violence, crime and usurpation. It conjures up existential dangers to the German people, threatening its very being, its very survival, and urges the German people to take immediate action before it is too late and Germany's decline and disappearance will be unstoppable and 'Germans will be aliens in their own country' (AFD 2017b):

> We are in a battle against those forces which sell their globalist programme of the dissolution of the nation-state […] as humanity and charity. We are supposed to become replaced in the name of human progress. We are supposed to dissolve our people and nation in a greater common good. However, we have no interest in becoming humanity. We want to remain Germans (Gauland 2018c).

In particular, the AFD has agitated against the UN Global Compact for Migration and represented it as 'a global replacement programme' (Frohnmaier 2018a) and 'an assault against the democratic right to self-determination of the German people and the sovereignty of Germany' (Storch 2018a). The AFD repeatedly accused the German political establishment of misleading the 'sovereign' about the implications of the Global Compact and of secretly 'creating precedents' with regard to immigration (Weidel 2018b). This allowed the AFD to position itself as righteous defender of popular sovereignty, accountability and transparency who exposes what was 'really' agreed upon 'in secrecy and behind closed doors' (AFD 2019b).

This construction of a CT shows how the AFD appeals to its audience by means of a fantasy that turns a rather technical, legalistic and abstract international negotiation and agreement into

a highly emotional, personalised and simplistic narrative of lack, treason and existential dangers. It animates the audience to project personal experiences of loss, anxieties, fears and despair (e.g. job insecurity and crime) onto this global policy issue and accept the colluding globalist elite and migrants as scapegoats. This scapegoating is interwoven with transgressive acts which further drive the affective investment in the AFD's political project through the partial enjoyment derived from violating social norms by calling, for example, the political establishment 'open-border fascists' (Storch 2018b) who 'betray their own people' (Höcke 2017a) or by referring to refugees as 'deathly knife migrants' (Frohnmaier 2018b). Image 2 illustrates how the fantasy visualises this transgressive enjoyment by picturing Angela Merkel as diabolic liar who enjoys herself in deceiving the German people (AFD 2019b). By claiming to uncover Merkel's alleged plot against the German people, the AFD can justify its own transgressive acts, which unite the AFD and its supporters in an affective community, as means to steal back the full enjoyment of a complete identity from the Other.

Image 2: Merkel 'exposed' as a diabolic liar

Understanding CTs such as the 'Great Replacement' or the 'New World Order' as fantasies thus shows how they unfold and sustain their affective appeal through the interplay of an idealised narrative of a fullness-to-come once the German nation and popular sovereignty are restored and a horrific narrative of a besieged German people betrayed by their own political elites and facing extinction. As such, the fantasy reduces the current situation to a clear-cut, binary choice, tapping into the subjects' desire for full and stable identities and meanings:

> The AFD […] is the last peaceful chance for our fatherland. Therefore, […] it must understand itself as fundamental opposition, as the only political force of conservation, against all those collective forces of the dissolution propagated by the One-World ideologists. […] It cannot be ruled out that, in fifty years, foreign peoples will be roaming through our deserted libraries, concert halls, universities and parliaments and will be asking themselves: how was it possible that such a great culture could be simply swept away (Höcke 2018b).

By picturing the current situation in these black-and-white terms, the AFD can stage itself as the only political force which can avert this doomsday scenario: 'We want our country back. And we will recapture it bit by bit' (Höcke 2017a). However, while Höcke sparks desire for a complete identity by re-capturing the German nation and popular sovereignty from the Other, this desire can only be sustained as long as it remains unfulfilled and thus the AFD and its supporters 'enjoy' this frustration and the emotional outbursts against the elite and migrants, since it preserves the imaginary notion of a whole and harmonious German people.

Conclusion

This article provided a framework through which we can examine the relationship between conspiracy theories, right-wing populism and foreign policy and showed how populists can use CTs and foreign policy for mobilising 'the people'. It made the case that IR scholarship should take CTs seriously as objects of study not only because right-wing populists like Donald Trump or the AFD propagate CTs, but also because CTs are means through which many 'ordinary' citizens make sense of the often complex issues, distant institutions and unsettling events of global politics and are also symptoms of its often de-politicised, non-democratic and technocratic character.

Approaching populism and CTs through Lacanian psychoanalysis enables us to better understand the style, function and force of conspirational narratives in populist discourses: first, it accounts for the role of affect in constituting subjectivities such as 'the people' and how affect is brought into discourse via the interplay of an excessively idealised narrative scenario of wholeness, harmony and closure (once the conspiring elite is exposed and disempowered) and a horrific scenario of impending disasters (if the conspirators are not stopped). Instead of treating 'the people' merely as discursive construction, the article argued that we cannot understand the appeal and force of populist conspirational narratives without considering the bodily arousal or obscene enjoyment experienced when, for example, right-wing populists agitate against 'the elite' as 'traitors' and 'puppets of a foreign power' which robs 'our' sovereignty. It is this animation of affect that is projected onto discursively constructed objects like sovereignty and policies, showing us how we can re-capture this object of desire or lose it for good, that explains why individuals become so emotionally overinvested in the signifier of popular sovereignty and how populist actors can use foreign policy for their populist politics by charging it with affect. When populists allude to international conspiracies, they hint at a gap between the official foreign policy discourse relating to, for example, multilateral institutions and the 'actual' intention behind them by assuming the workings of a hidden agent or interest and blaming it for societal problems and antagonisms.

Second, problematising binaries such as ideology/reality, a Lacanian approach views the ideological dimension of populist CTs not in the misrepresentation of reality but in this concealment of the lack around which democracy, the people, the nation etc. are constituted by scapegoating a hidden Other for the absent and unattainable fullness of our identities and social orders. As ideological fantasies, CTs are distinct coping mechanisms for dealing with the lack and resulting anxieties, which can manifest in feelings of political marginalisation or loss of control, by rationalising everything that exceeds discursive representation and contradicts, for example, the imaginary ideal of a harmonious people as the result of a plot.

Third, by conceptualising CTs as fantasies, it can explain why individuals remain invested in CTs, although the alleged conspiracies are rarely proven, and why CTs are so appealing for populists. From a Lacanian perspective, CTs are fantasies par excellence insofar as they promise to fulfil our desires for identity, knowledge, control, autonomy, agency etc. and take their own failure into account in advance by blaming a hidden, powerful force for the regular frustration of this desire. Though the believers of CTs experience dissatisfaction due to this failure, they simultaneously experience partial satisfaction, since the CT hints at the possibility of the full enjoyment of a state of wholeness and obscures the 'real' horror of the situation, namely

that there is nothing that could give us full satisfaction and closure. As the desire to identify with the populist signifier of 'the people' can only be sustained as long as this desire remains unfulfilled, CTs allow populists to animate the desire for wholeness and explain why the promised fulfilment is never actually achieved, thereby ensuring the continued popular support for their political projects, even when in government.

Empirically, the article offered the first systematic analysis of the role of CTs in the discourse of the Alternative for Germany and how they relate to its right-wing populism and foreign policy. Following the narrative structure of fantasies, the AFD discourse pictures an imaginary reactionary ideal of a harmonious, united and secure German people who rules itself and a peaceful international system embodied by the German *Reich* and the European balance-of-power in the Bismarck era, before identifying those conspiring forces – the German elites and foreign Others – that have (allegedly) stolen the objects – popular sovereignty and the nation – which could make the German people whole (again). While the AFD discourse arouses desire for re-capturing this state of wholeness by uncovering the conspirational 'theft of enjoyment', it simultaneously conjures up excessively horrific scenarios if the conspirators and their puppets are not stopped.

Though the AFD's conspiratorial narrative transgresses the norms of Germany's foreign policy discourse and has a clear revisionist dimension, its foreign policy positions also endorse more established tenets of German foreign policy such as a preference for strategic restraint and a more accommodative policy towards Russia. However, unlike Germany's mainstream discourse, the AFD relates these policy preferences less to Germany's troubled past but regards them as expression of a more inward-looking, sovereignty-oriented foreign policy guided by a narrower definition of Germany's national interest and a desire to jettison the burden of the past and position Germany as a 'normal' power. From a Lacanian perspective, this desire for "normalcy" and reclaiming sovereignty is, however, illusive insofar as it pictures an Other which supposedly enjoys such a 'normal' identity and an object which can never deliver what it promises. For, sovereignty only remains a desirable object as long as it is presented as stolen or blocked and can then serve as projection screen for popular feelings of lack. After all, German allies such as the US, France and the UK, which supposedly enjoy a 'normal' identity at the expense of the German people, have also experienced the rise of right-wing populists who accuse, like the AFD, 'the elites' of selling out the nation and popular sovereignty.

[1] The data-set for the analysis consists of the AFD's party programme and election manifestos, speeches and tweets by leading AFD politicians, statements published on the AFD's website, the AFD's twitter account, and articles published on the news website *freiewelt.net*, which is run by the AFD politician Beatrix von Storch and her husband. The period of investigation stretches from the beginning of the AFD's election campaign in 2017 till June 2019.

[2] This conception of the subject involves a rejection of methodological individualism, since the subject can only constitute itself in the intersubjective discursive order and its desires and emotions are never purely personal but belong to the social world.

[3] This, in turn, can explain how discourses can sustain their appeal, although they ultimately never succeed in filling the lack in 'our' identities and social orders – an aspect missing in Laclau's discourse theoretical approach to populism.

[4] This resembles the fantasy of the nation/state congruence, see Mandelbaum 2016.

[5] In the German context, this can be illustrated with the debate on a German *Leitkultur*, in which conservative politicians were ultimately unable to pin down what exactly these unique cultural features are beyond platitudes.

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