ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

The Rationality of Conspiracy Theories: An Approach based on Max Weber and Raymond Boudon

La racionalidad de las teorías conspirativas: una aproximación a partir de Max Weber y Raymond Boudon

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ABSTRACT

Conspiracy theories tend to be perceived as irrational ideological phenomena with the potential to produce harmful effects on those societies in which they are disseminated. This perception, reinforced by the visibility of those historical examples in which discrimination against minorities and even genocide have been legitimised, conditions their sociological analysis and limits their explanatory potential when founded on a presumption of irrationality. This article, in contrast, defends an approach based on a presumption of rationality, broadly interpreted by combining instrumental and value rationality. Such a rational choice approach enables a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon and with it, potentially a more solid basis for intervention with respect to the regulatory objectives that the theory does not renounce. This article presents the two main currents in sociological research of conspiracy theories and shows how both could be reconciled by means of a rational approach that, unlike Pareto's restricted vision of rationality, is based on the views of Weber and Boudon, exploring their applicability to empirical studies that associate conspiracy theories with partisanship and religiosity.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy theories; rational choice; cognitive rationality; Max Weber; Raymond Boudon

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RESUMEN

Las teorías conspirativas suelen ser percibidas como fenómenos ideológicos irracionales con potencial para producir efectos perniciosos en las sociedades donde se propagan. Esta percepción, reforzada por la visibilidad de los ejemplos históricos en que han legitimado la discriminación de minorías o incluso el genocidio, condiciona el análisis sociológico de las mismas y limita su potencial explicativo cuando parte de una presunción de irracionalidad. Este artículo defiende, por el contrario, una aproximación que parte de una presunción de racionalidad, concebida en un sentido amplio en el que se conjugan la racionalidad instrumental y la racionalidad valorativa. Un enfoque de elección racional así planteado permite una comprensión más completa del fenómeno y, con ella, potencialmente una base más sólida para intervenir respecto a los objetivos normativos a los que no renuncia. El artículo presenta las dos corrientes principales en el estudio sociológico de las teorías conspirativas y muestra cómo ambas podrían conciliarse por medio de un enfoque racional que, frente a la visión restringida de la racionalidad de Pareto, se base en las de Weber y Boudon, explorando su aplicabilidad a trabajos empíricos que relacionan teorías conspirativas con partidismo y religiosidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Teorías conspirativas; elección racional; racionalidad cognitiva; Max Weber; Raymond Boudon

> "... for the madman (like the determinist) generally sees too much cause in everything [...]. Indeed, the common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."
>
> G. K. Chesterton (1986[1908]: 221–222).

The vernacular use of terms such as "conspiranoia" and "conspiranoid" in everyday conversations and on social networks, in the media and even, at times, in academic settings speaks volumes about the common perception of conspiracy theories and those who believe in them. Qualified as such, conspiracy theory appears as a pathological phenomenon, similar to mental illness when not directly identified with it (Leveaux et al., 2022), and therefore, opposed to the domain of rationality.

The proliferation of conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic, many linked to misgivings about the vaccines (see, for example, Ullah et al., 2021, and Pummerer et al., 2022) or resistance to complying with the rules (Freeman et al., 2022), has probably intensified this assumption of irrationality, since believers are characterised as being opposed to science, which is, in turn, the epitome of rationality, and resistant to the codes that regulate public life. This appears to justify their prompt exclusion from public discussion, describing them as "flat-earthers", while also tending to explain their adhesion to conspiracy theories, conjuring up mainly emotional causal dynamics that are often related to a range of embarrassing superstitions and preconceptions (Reichstadt, 2019).

Different voices from philosophy (Coady, 2012; Dentith, 2014) and sociology (Husting and Orr, 2007) have criticised its effective use as a tool to exclude certain stances from

conversation, discrediting them in a meta-discursive strategy that avoids having to seriously address the content and the plausible criticisms that may be embedded in them. Chomsky (2004) considers the term a sort of academic four-letter word, closer to insult than rational argument, but from a position of alleged rational superiority. By assuming the irrationality of those who defend such theories, any attempt of rational justification for rejection, the relevance of which is considered self-evident, is dismissed as unnecessary.

The challenges in the sociology of conspiracy theories are necessarily linked to the value connotations that surround the term. There are plausible normative reasons for setting aside the automatic disqualification of conspiracy beliefs at least while they are object of sociological analysis. Moreover, it makes sense to study how and why they fluctuate over time, as well as the different social contexts, the demarcations between conspiracy theories and knowledge (or, simply put, legitimate assumptions), which can only be done from a systematic agnosticism that is prevalent, at least, throughout the research process.

This indicates that there are also epistemological reasons for temporarily suspending the condemnation of conspiracy theory in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, as the default attribution of a series of original sins, starting with the presumption of irrationality, effectively limits the fruitfulness of the analysis, resulting in either mechanistic explanations (for example, when the theories are considered to be injected into an entirely defenceless and manipulable population), or the rejection of any kind of explanation (when considering that, by categorising the phenomenon as irrational, nothing more can be said about it).

Some contemporary approaches, following Coady (2012) or Goertzel (1994), are inhibited in relation to the value of truth in conspiracy theories and are limited to characterising them through their content, which suggests the existence of hidden operations by powerful agents. At times, this can be adjusted to the facts, as the large number of real conspiracies in history shows; however, the hypothetical correct answers do not relieve conspiracy theories of the stigma branding them epistemologically damaged goods. Firstly, because drawing true conclusions through incorrect reasoning is entirely feasible; therefore, the fact that there are, effectively, conspiracies and cases in which a conspiracy theory may be the explanation most suited to reality does not necessarily validate the process used to reach it. Secondly, because, despite the neutrality of the definition—often the object of interest for empirical research—there are still certain shortcomings associated with conspiracy theories; for example, Wood, Douglas and Sutton (2012) who, following their perfectly aseptic definition, note that they are explanations that are particularly resistant to refutation, and explore their potential to create monological belief systems from contradictory theories. In other words, although all conspiracy theories are contemplated within the term independently of their truth or falsehood, or the soundness of the logic that underpins them, cases and dynamics are often studied that are

closer to the old valuation definitions (to take another example, the processes of "falling down the rabbit hole", minor in relation to the majority of people who give certain credit to conspiracy theories, in Sutton and Douglas, 2022).

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of conspiracy theories from the vantage point of sociological theory by outlining an approach to them from the assumption of their necessary rationality, which we believe may help clarify, among other things, the relationship between "reasonable" conspiracy theories that come under the neutral definitions of the term and seemingly more irrational conspiracy that, understandably, tends to be the focus of research efforts as a pressing social problem. The rational choice approach outlined here, following Max Weber and Raymond Boudon, produces suppositions assuming that people have reasons for their actions and beliefs, and asking what they are in each case. These reasons are not universally valid, nor would an all-knowing observer deem them adequate, but rather they respond to specific contexts in which they acquire meaning.

Given the generalised perception of conspiracy theories as collective deliriums and of those who believe in them as victims of epistemic alienation, this proposal could seem a boutade or attempt to force a counter-intuitive view to play at provocation. It is not intended to be either. It is motivated by the conviction that, without exhausting a phenomenon that demands multiple perspectives to illustrate its different dimensions, it may give rise to more detailed and qualified explanations and interpretations, and that it is important to aspire to such explanations if, effectively, there is concern about the harmful effects that the most expeditiously pathologising views attribute, not without reason, to conspiracy theories. Therefore, we do not assume it to be a definitive approach to conspiracy theories, but rather a necessary approach.

To defend this perspective, this article will first offer a brief review of the two main traditions that are portrayed with respect to the normative issue in the academic study of conspiracy theories. This is followed by an explanation of how a rational choice approach can bring both positions closer and what the main assumptions would be, before finally offering some examples that illustrate how empirical research on conspiracy theories can benefit from its application.

1. Two Currents in the Academic Study of Conspiracy Theories

In one of the foundational pieces of both the academic study of conspiracy and its stigmatisation at the grassroots level, Hofstadter (1965: 29) defines conspiracy theories as political narratives that steer those who believe in them towards a peculiar mentality from which a gigantic conspiracy is perceived as the driving force behind historic events. In his view, it is, unequivocally, an intrinsically harmful disease that spreads paranoia through incorrect arguments. Despite said

emphatic disqualification and the explicit relationship with paranoia, Hofstadter (1965: 36) understands that conspiracy theories are also explanations that are "if not wholly rational, at least intensely rationalistic" as they "subsume all reality under one all-encompassing and consistent theory". What he terms a "paranoid style" is not so much distinguished by the absence of demonstrable facts to rely on as by the imaginative leap he makes, based on a complex cherry-picking exercise and arbitrary linking of the facts thus selected, and through which he arrives at theories that are biased from the outset.

This dual nature of conspiracy theories, already recognised in this seminal reference and that is still influential today, has given rise to two major currents of research, later interpreted in synthesis as a product of dilemma inherent in the object: the so-called realist/symbolist divide (Rogin, 1987) or cultural/classical divide (Nefes, 2014). One such current of research is based on the conception of conspiracy theories as political diseases, comprising a paranoid and value-based perspective that necessarily leads to the distortion of reality, and through it, to discrimination, fanaticism and, often, violence (Pipes, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; Aaronovitch, 2009; Cohn, 2010; Ben-Itto, 2020).

In general, this position argues—for example, Byford (2015)—that it is possible to distinguish conspiracy theories from other ways of approaching knowledge of reality by a distinctive explanation style that is flawed at its very origin by fundamental shortfalls. This makes them dangerous as they result in monological belief systems and involve a slippery slope risk, where the acceptance of a conspiracy theory would increase the likelihood of accepting many others (Goertzel, 1994; Swami and Furnham, 2012; Swami et al., 2013), which is consistent with the perception of those who believe in conspiracy theories as "conspiranoid", having fallen down the rabbit hole to an alternative reality that separates them from the rest of society, isolating them in a small marginal community together with other misguided people who have strayed from common sense. This latter dynamic, as Sutton and Douglas observe (2022), is, in fact, minority among those who subscribe to conspiracy beliefs.

The second current is largely in explicit opposition to the first as it considers the merely pathological view of the phenomenon both inadequate and counter-productive, both in cognitive and normative terms. The basis on which they rest is the rational dimension identified by Hofstadter, which manifests itself in examining how people try, by means of conspiracy theories, to provide reasonable explanations for the circumstances in which they find themselves and the events and processes that take place (Melley, 2000; Knight, 2000; Birchall, 2006; Bratich, 2008; Harambam and Aupers, 2021).

It is characteristic of this perspective to consider conspiracy theory somewhat similar to "social science for laypeople", which develops in parallel to the institutionalisation of sociology, responds to similar issues and offers rival explanations (Boltanski, 2012; Nefes and Romero-Reche, 2020). Thus, Knight (2000) considers these theories "vernacular epistemologies", the aim of which is to clarify social reality, while Locke

(2009) upholds that the phenomenon is specifically modern (coinciding with Byford, 2015) and that is an attempt to assign moral responsibility to individuals and groups with regard to human suffering, the problematic reality that is to be explained. However, despite rejecting the pathologising of conspiracy theories, this current does not entirely disregard the biases presented, associated with identifiable value-based positions.

For Fenster (1999), a thorough approach to the phenomenon requires transcending the opposition between the perspective that views them as paranoid narratives skewed by a powerful value load and that which perceives them as a rational, yet distorted, way of knowing. Therefore, he himself criticises the extremely pathological views while examining the symbolic dimension and value load of conspiracy theories.

Rational choice theory could be a viable solution for overcoming the division between the two traditions, as it allows for the analysis of the subjective, specific and localised reasons behind people making use of marginal beliefs. In line with Coleman (1990: 17–18), the theoretical approach of social sciences must seek a notion of the action that rationalises it from the point of view of the actor, which will enable them to understand social organisation based on the individual actions that shape it. If, from a common-sense point of view as well as from some sociological perspectives, we assume certain actions and beliefs to be entirely irrational, it is because we have not yet been able to see them from the actors' point of view, from which they are rational. Expressly searching for the rational dimension of conspiracy theories that the majority tend to consider irrational can contribute to identifying their structure of plausibility and their relationship with other theories and beliefs that have not been stigmatised.

2. Cognitive Rationality and Conspiracy Theories

There are various reasons why conspiracy theories tend to be thought of as irrational. Firstly, because, as anyone who shares the consensus of common sense is expected to perceive, they do not correspond to reality. Also because, given the apparent evidence of their falsehood, we understand that there are no good reasons to believe in them: those who end up embracing them have allowed themselves to be fooled by bogus arguments or have abandoned their emotions, overlooking reason, or making use of it only to subsequently justify prior convictions. Finally, because, to the extent that beliefs and perception of reality guide our action, it will be inconsistent with said reality due to it being based on false representations. Examples include the behaviour of people who believe in conspiracy theories about COVID-19 who are more reluctant than others when it comes to vaccination or social distancing measures, but more receptive to alternative therapies without scientific basis (Bierwiaczonek, Gundersen and Kunst, 2022); and the behaviour of those who do not respect democratic norms because they believe in conspiracy theories about the manipulation of elections (Albertson and Kimberley, 2020).

There are, therefore, two levels: that of action, widely discussed in social science by Weber, Pareto and Parsons, among others, and that of statements about reality. As defined by Boudon and Borricaud (2004: 479), a statement or set of statements is rational "if it is consistent with the knowledge (in the scientific sense of the term) available on the subject, or in line with the canons of 'scientific spirit'". They note, however, that when weighing up cognitive rationality, or lack of it, in myths and beliefs, it makes sense to use the perspective of action theory and understand them as responses to interaction systems (Boudon and Borricaud, 2004: 485).

In Weber, an explicit source of inspiration for Boudon, at least four types of rationality can be identified: formal, theoretical, practical and substantive rationality. Formal rationality clearly appears in law and the economy and is related to the adaptation of measures for purposes through universally applicable rules. Theoretical rationality, on the other hand, is geared towards understanding reality in a consistent way through abstract cognitive processes. As Kalberg observed (1980), these two types of rationality are not seen the most consistently or directly in the everyday actions of people, who tend to base themselves more on practical and substantive rationalities when making decisions. Practical rationalism is "every way of life that views and judges worldly activity in relation to *the individual's* interests" (Weber, 2001 [1905]: 112), and is often behind the motivation for instrumental social actions. Substantive or value rationality is related to the adaptation of values that are considered important in different social contexts.

Weberian distinctions have served as the basis for subsequent rational approaches, that instead of limiting the analysis to instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), also contemplate value rationality (*Wertrationalität*). This is, especially, the case of Boudon's cognitive action theory (2003, 2008), which considers adaptation to both purposes and values in people's decision-making processes. These, Boudon upholds (2003), are not only limited to calculating the most efficient means to achieve predetermined ends, but require that actions maintain a minimum coherence with the values that they consider important and that give them meaning.

On the other hand, a narrow conception of rationality confines it solely to the instrumental aspect, as Pareto does (1964 [1916]: 81–83) in his distinction between logical and illogical actions, whereby only the former make use of the appropriate means to pursue their aims, not just from the point of view of the agent, but also, importantly, from the point of view of those who have the necessary knowledge to value such consistency.

The contrast with Pareto's model is not irrelevant; Boudon considers his work particularly fruitful for the study of ideological phenomena, more so than Marx (Boudon, 1998) and, at the same time, he highlights it as an example of the excessively restricted interpretation of rationality (Boudon, 2000) that results in more limited analyses than those permitted by Weberian theory. However, his

typology of illogical actions (Pareto, 1964 [1916]: 82) according to the existence or not of a logical purpose in subjective and objective terms suggests a path towards Weber's approach: it is precisely the categories of illogical action that have a subjective logical purpose, whether objective (fourth category) or not (second category), which enables them to consider reasons from the actor's point of view, although they do not meet the rationality criteria of economic behaviour.

The concept of residues and derivations, where the former are the emotional motivations for the action and the latter, the justifications that are constructed to produce an appearance of rationality, seems to leave the understanding of the actions outside the scope of sociology, since the residues are not detectable and operate as invisible forces that must be taken for granted underneath the actions themselves, as an irrefutable claim of principle. Some of these residues can be translated into Weberian terms, such as the category relating to the "integrity of the individual and his dependencies" (Pareto, 1964 [1916]: 731), which could be associated with Weber's practical rationalism. However, for the purpose of studying conspiracy theories, it is more relevant that the idea of derivation as rationalisation from residues is more conducive to the analysis of ideas, beliefs and theories (of conspiracy or not) from a perspective of rationality similar to the Weberian perspective. Regardless of how Pareto regards these rationalisations, their persuasive effects are necessarily conditioned by the contexts and systems of action where they unfold.

This is Boudon's proposal. Derivations, that is, ideological phenomena, have both practical functions, legitimising the purposes or means of the action, and cognitive functions, filling the inevitable gaps in the actors' knowledge of the natural and, especially, the social world (Boudon, 1998: 222). However, the cognitive functions are also related to the action, since the need to supplement knowledge frequently depends on the requirements of the action. If one tries to explain why someone upholds a theory or belief to the detriment of other alternatives, Boudon's hypothesis is that he does so because "it seems to him the most adequate and useful way of expressing the meaning" of his situation (Boudon and Borricaud, 2004: 486). In terms of theory of action:

> A belief, a myth, a 'theory' always represent interpretations that have been developed or, as the case may be, accepted by social actors depending on their situation as they perceive or interpret it. These interpretations provide them with effective guides for acting. In this sense, they can be said to be 'rational', although they may seem 'irrational' to the hasty or involved observer (Boudon and Borricaud, 2004: 486).

Understood as such, myths, beliefs and theories, ideological phenomena in general, cannot be entirely explained by residues and deep emotional impulses. These could explain the existence of certain cognitive interest, but cannot alone account for the content of the responses sought for those cognitive interests, that is, collective beliefs (Boudon, 2000: 187).

3. Rational Dimensions of Conspiracy Theory

Assuming that conspiracy theories are not completely irrational, neither in their own right nor due to the diversity of relationships that they can establish with multiple belief systems, there are different levels at which their rationality can be contemplated for sociological analysis. The first is of a fundamental nature and is a condition of possibility for sociological analysis itself and must therefore be accepted even from the narrowest views of rationality. It means considering that, independently of how irrational conspiracy theories may be, it is possible to elaborate rational narratives about them. In the most extreme case, as an example of a particularly narrow conception of rationality, a model similar to the one Pareto advocated for illogical actions would be appropriate (Boudon, 2000: 166–169), postulating emotional forces that were externally imperceptible but whose influence could explain people's irrational behaviour beyond their own rationalisations.

We can contemplate a second level that, without entering into the content of the theories and the hypothetical rational elements that they might present internally, is interested in the more or less strategic rationality of their *use*. This approach could also be accepted from a narrow view of instrumental rationality in line with Pareto, as it would involve analysing how rational agents make use of irrational beliefs to successfully achieve their goals. For example, the belief in the efficacy of homoeopathic "medicines" beyond the placebo effect would not be rational; however, using said belief and promoting it to make a profit selling said "medicines" would be. The same goes for the belief in conspiracy theories, insofar as they can be used as a tool to achieve certain ends desired by those who promote them, such as, for example, to strengthen cohesion after an electoral defeat (Uscinski and Parent, 2014).

Nonetheless, there are two relevant nuances that should be highlighted with regard to the strategic use of conspiracy theories. Admitting that this use exists and analysing it does not imply regarding those who apply it as completely cynical: conspiracy theories can be used rationally as a means to achieve desired ends, in terms of an instrumental rationality perfectly admissible for Pareto and, at the same time, they can be believed in to a certain extent, or even entirely. This can be illustrated with the historic example of the dictator Francisco Franco, who used the Jewish-Masonic-Bolshevik conspiracy theory to justify the coup against the Second Spanish Republic and the subsequent repression following his victory in the Spanish Civil War (Preston, 2021), without detracting from the authenticity of his genuine and continuing concern for the Freemasons (Ferrer Benuimeli, 1982; Southworth, 2002).

On the other hand, the strategic use perspective exposes us to a risk that does not necessarily follow from the assumption of cynicism of rational agents, but is tempting to fall into when its Machiavellian characterisation is exacerbated. Overestimating the capacity of those who strategically use conspiracy theories can lead to explanations that are, in themselves, conspiratorial. A fundamental principle of methodological individualism defended by Popper (1984: 93) for social science, and which is precisely opposed by the conspiracy theory of society, is the study of

the unintended consequences of the action. Conspiracy theories are, in his opinion, incorrect explanations because they overstate the ability of certain actors to produce the realities they desire; hence, they seek to explain any event as a direct result of the will of a very powerful person. The methodological caution that dictates avoiding a direct connection between willpower and social reality must also apply to the sociological study of conspiracy theories, especially in the face of hypodermic views that tend to consider them as pathogens that are injected into a population devoid of agency.

The third and fourth level address rationality from the perspective of coherence, internally in one case and externally in the other. Limiting rationality to internal coherence, independently of how far removed conspiracy theory is from external reality, justifies their criticism as fundamentally unscientific or even anti-scientific intellectual products as irrefutable (Byford, 2015). An outright fable can be irreproachably coherent with itself and shield itself, by means of requests of principle, against any contrast with the outside. However, even in such a case, and admitting that the original premise is fundamentally wrong, a logical construction is built on it based on reasons that are unlikely to be fallacious in their entirety, nor do the majority have to be so. Or, at least, not in a proportion greater than that which is found in other theories.

External coherence refers to their relationship to other beliefs, perceptions and ideas held by those who believe in them and, filtered by these beliefs, perceptions and ideas, to the reality they purport to account for. Once again, the fundamentally incorrect or fallacious nature of conspiracy theory does not preclude a rational development of its consequences beyond the theory itself. Moreover, the incontestability that they are usually reproached for manifests itself in regular operations of adaptation to events in an external reality to which they are not usually impervious (Brotherton, 2015; Butter, 2020). As Boudon (2000: 198) observes about Pareto's derivations, the fact that some justifications are more convincing than others implies that these cannot be entirely arbitrary and that, in fact, some are objectively sounder than others. The believers in such and such a conspiracy theory can uphold different ideas that do not perfectly fit with each other, or that are even contradictory and consistent with regard to a deeper belief that justifies them (Wood, Douglas and Sutton, 2012); however, exactly the same occurs with non-believers.

It is also worth contemplating, as Popper indicated, the coherence of the believers' actions with the conspiracy theories they subscribe to, enabling the subjective meaning of these actions to be interpreted and then connected to their unintended effects on a macro-sociological level, in a model explicitly inspired by Weber (Popper, 1984: 97). This latter level of rationality touches on what Boudon (1990: 373) termed "reason with lower case 'r'" which he developed from the subjective rationality of Herbert Simon, crucial to his judgement for the analysis of a very wide variety of social phenomena, but, in particular, those related to beliefs. Highlighting Weber and Popper as rational explanation models that tend to be categorised as irrational from a common-sense point

of view, he observes that this shows a pronounced tendency to overuse "irrational" explanations, for which reason it should come as no surprise that "human sciences that give too narrow a definition of rationality do not work any better than common sense" (Boudon, 1990: 379). Contrary to Pareto, who labels actions inspired by religious beliefs as illogical because they do not meet the criteria of instrumental rationality (Boudon, 2000: 165), Weber's sociology of religion, when he analyses issues such as that of theodicy (Weber, 1993[1922]: 412–417), emphasises the rational and ordered nature of religious beliefs and the functioning of the notion of providence as rationalisation. Recalling the parallels that Popper found between religion and conspiracy theories, these could also be considered a frequently secularised form of theodicy, that also often shows traits of Masonic Eschatology (Weber, 1993[1922]: 413). An eloquent contemporary example is the conspiracy theory known as QAnon, which posits an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of good and evil, with former President Donald Trump as the undisputed messianic figure who will flush out the nation's enemies (Rothschild, 2021).

Pareto's distinction between the logical and illogical required observers other than the agent himself to have the necessary knowledge to properly assess the adaptation between means and ends. However, if it is admitted that this crucial perspective will always be situated in a context that will necessarily impose constraints, rationality itself will also depend on the context unless an impossible absolute perspective, free of all context, can be identified. In the face of such an absolute ambition, analytical approaches that attend to people's contextual and subjective reasons do not necessarily lead to relativism, perhaps more justified by a strictly instrumental rationality that cannot contribute anything to the discussion about purposes, but rather make more complete and rational views of social reality possible.

Approaching conspiracy theories from the perspective of rational choice, therefore, is not reduced to observing the strategic use that pragmatic actors make of them, already present in common-sense perceptions that understand the phenomenon as a process of manipulation of irrational masses by cynical propagandists, but rather can contemplate in its analysis the different levels of rationality detailed previously. Therefore, it must build its perspective on previous proposals to combine practical and subjective rationalities in the analysis of social action. One example is that of Woods (2001), who examines how the two come together dynamically in what he terms value-intuitive rational action. It shows how people qualify, reinforce or revise their moral understanding of the world through instrumental rationality.

Despite Boudon's negative assessment of his sociology (2004: 216–217), it is possible to pick up elements of Erving Goffman's conception of social action, which assumes a similar interrelationship between instrumental rationality and value-oriented rationality when analysing people's representation of morality in the well-known passage where he refers to actors as "merchants of morality" (Goffman, 1959: 162). Such dramatic manoeuvres also highlight the ambivalence

of the action, between the cynicism of the strategic manipulation of impressions and the conviction in relation to the values being staged, which could very well be others.

Boudon's cognitive theory of action (2003), as highlighted previously, aims to overcome the restricted view of the cost-benefit calculation by incorporating value rationality (1996: 146–147). He takes into account the influence of values and norms on individual action (Boudon, 1996, 2001, 2003, 2008), and from there on their aggregation into collective patterns, without considering the actors as "cultural idiots". Hence the particular relevance of this perspective for the analysis of ideas and beliefs considered irrational, such as conspiracy theories.

By looking further into the interrelationship between the two forms of rationality, and relying on the accumulated empirical evidence, a rational choice theory of conspiracy theories should work as an analytically fruitful framework for a wide range of empirical approaches, without the need to commit exclusively to certain technical solutions. By avoiding a priori generalisations, which have limited the explanatory power of previous approaches to the phenomenon, and by considering the specificity of the contexts instead of claiming to enunciate universally valid laws, it must be able to account for the emergence of specific conspiracy theories, their dissemination, their acceptance by people located in identifiable social coordinates, and their relationship with the actions of these people.

Considering normative rationality in dynamic relation to instrumental rationality implies understanding the context not just as a playing field where the actors make moves that are exclusively designed to maximise their gains, nor as a set of monolithic structures that rigidly determine the action. In effect, people are not "cultural idiots", but their creative action develops in the context of cultural codes that, among other things, modulate the desirability of the ends that the *homo economicus* must pursue, and the acceptability of the means that could be used to achieve them. Naturally, however, these codes, and the context itself, are not eternal or unchangeable, nor are they self-generated: they are the dynamic result of the human action they condition (Coleman, 1990).

From this perspective, which connects the micro and macro levels, it is possible to take into account the effective diversity of the phenomenon, already explicit in Popper's definitions (1984, 2002): in different situations, and therefore in different systems of action, conspiracy theories relate to different social and ideological phenomena, establish different relationships with the mainstream and produce different effects. The latter, also from a normative point of view: Coady (2012) reproaches Popper for stigmatising conspiracy theories; however, he recognises that in specific circumstances and at specific times, conspiracy theory of priestly deception has had beneficial effects, even in the short term.

Empirically, a rational choice approach of these characteristics is applicable to a wide variety of research designs, provided that they analytically distinguish

the involved forms of rationality and, where appropriate, the variables that they can be associated with. From classic quantitative research by means of a survey, which attempts to determine, for example, the likelihood of subscribing to the conspiracy theories being investigated in terms of variables that can be related to practical and value rationalities, to qualitative approaches that analyse how the rationalisation of beliefs is articulated in the narrative by appealing to interests and values.

4. Incomplete Explanations: Partisanship and Religiosity in Conspiracy Theories

There are two variables that crop up consistently in sociological research on conspiracy theories that could largely correspond to the forms of rationality that we consider necessary for a comprehensive rational choice approach: partisanship and religiosity. We understand the former as being close to instrumental rationality insofar as, beyond ideological considerations and their associated values, there is an intense identification with a group whose benefit is considered an end in itself. In short, it is a matter of doing, or believing, what is in the party's interest. As far as religiosity is concerned, value rationality is manifested in it, insofar as faith entails a scale of values whose defence can come to take precedence over one's own personal interests, thus displacing practical rationality in decision-making (and, therefore, also in the adoption of beliefs).

Partisanship appears in association with belief in conspiracy theories in a wide range of recent research (Abertson and Kimberley, 2020; Enders, Smallpage and Lupton, 2020; van der Linden, Panagopoulos, Azevedo and Jost, 2021), all of which show a clear relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and identification with specific political parties. Likewise, other studies show a clear influence of religiosity (Mancosu, Vassallo and Vezzoni, 2017), or related values (mainly, anti-Semitism; Nyhan and Zeitzoff, 2018).

Of course, none of this research claims to have isolated the causal factor that exclusively and comprehensively explains the belief in conspiracy theories, and in this sense, the explanations offered are necessarily as incomplete as any others (including those that may be proposed from the rational choice approach argued here). What is significant is that they often record phenomena or tendencies that seem unrelated or even contradictory to the identified factors. For example, Enders and Smallpage (2018) note that as much as partisanship is unequivocally relevant to the belief in conspiracy theories, there are other factors that are conducive to conspiracy beliefs, even when they are directly contrary to people's partisan interests. Furthermore, they note that these factors do not seem to produce similar effects in those who identify with different parties (in this case, what works for Republicans does not work for Democrats, even if it leads them to believe in conspiracy theories involving Republican Party figures).

In such cases, a value rationality approach could complement the instrumental rationality approach, as values (for example, related to religion) that may be more common among people who identify as Republican may come into play.

Other studies showing the combined effect of partisanship and values in the belief of conspiracy theories support this possibility: for example, in the case of the theories about Barack Obama's birthplace (Pasek et al., 2015), or the distrust of the authorities (van der Linden, Panagopoulos, Azevedo, and Jost, 2021). In a similar vein, Prooijen and Jostmann (2013) have shown how people's perception of the morality of the authorities is related to the way in which conspiracy theories are seen. The ultimate beliefs that, in the case of each individual believer, underpin the entire structure of conspiracy theories, at times contradictory to the nature of the hard core of Lakatos' research programmes (Clarke, 2007), are often related to deeply held values or intensely felt valuations.

If one were to restrict him or herself to instrumental rationality, a rational choice analysis would not consider the context beyond the incentive structure of conspiracy theorists who, even for analytical purposes, should be regarded as fundamentally cynical. This approach would allow us to explain, to a certain extent, the action of those who disseminate conspiracy theories by virtue of identifiable practical interests, and would, in that respect, produce predictive hypotheses that could be tested. However, a substantial part of the phenomenon, concerning people who genuinely believe in them even when doing so does not directly correspond to their practical interests, would remain an unknown. To resolve it within the restricted model would mean either postulating motivations of instrumental rationality undetectable by empirical research and, likely, falling into tautological circularity, or postulating the existence of extensive irrational mechanisms, such as Pareto's residues, that are also undetectable but the existence of which manifests itself in actions and ideas that could not be rationally explained otherwise. Furthermore, it would be difficult to account for the manifest diversity of the phenomenon and its relationships with other ideological and social phenomena, unless it were simply denied.

5. Conclusions

Over the course of the previous pages we have tried to sketch the broad outlines of a possible rational choice approach that aims, on the one hand, to integrate the two main strands in the academic literature on conspiracy theories and, on the other, to signal a direction to clarify some of the unknowns of current empirical research.

With regard to the first question, we argue that a view of cognitive rationality as postulated by Boudon bridges the gap between the pathological view of conspiracy theories (the effects of which can, and often do, have an outright pathological character) and those closer to the ideal of value neutrality, also when they incorporate in the concept any theory that postulates a conspiracy regardless of its truth value or logical soundness. The possible explanation for all of them can be traced back to

the reasons people find for believing them within specific contexts and systems of action, where practical interests and value preferences, not always compatible with the demands of theoretical rationality, are combined.

In terms of the second question, and assuming the risk of cherry-picking, which is difficult to avoid when it comes to illustrating a theoretical proposal, the gaps and occasional inconsistencies found in the research on the relationships of partisanship, on the one hand, and religiosity, on the other, with the belief in conspiracy theories make plausible a perspective that considers both the instrumental rationality associated with one and the value rationality manifested in the other.

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