

Imagined Communities and Imaginary Plots: Nationalisms, Conspiracies, and Pandemics in the *Longue Durée*

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Abstract

The outbreaks of major pandemics have historically been associated with the proliferation of conspiracy theories. This article explores what role conspiratorial narratives have played in the development of different “imagined communities” in the premodern, modern, and contemporary worlds. I argue that premodern conspiratorial narratives were mostly focused on eschatological and theological images, aiming to blame and delegitimise the religious Other. In these imaginary plots, spread of disease was interpreted as an attack on one’s religious beliefs. The prevalence of religious conspiracies helped reinforce religiously based, yet temporary, “imagined communities.” With the rise of nation-states and the decline of empires and patrimonial kingdoms, the periodic outbursts of epidemics gradually attained more nationalist interpretations. Hence in the modern era, pandemics often triggered the growth of nationalist conspiracies. In these narratives the threatening Other was usually nationalised, and even traditional religious groups became reinterpreted as a threat to one’s national security. In recent times, new technologies and modes of communication have created space for the emergence of global conspiracy theories. The onset of Covid-19 has been associated with the dramatic expansion of such conspiracies. Some scholars have interpreted this as a reliable sign that nation-states and nationalisms have lost their dominance. However, this article shows that many global conspiracies in fact reinforce nationalist ideas and practices and, in this process, foster the perpetuation of national imagined communities.

Keywords: nationalism; pandemics; conspiracy theories; Covid-19; nation-states

Introduction

“Imagined communities” is one of the most quoted, yet most frequently misinterpreted concepts in nationalism studies. Many scholars who deploy Ben Anderson’s (1983) famous phrase often misunderstand its meaning or ignore its wider sociological underpinnings. Firstly, this term is regularly misconstrued to imply that nationhood is simply a form of false consciousness, something invented or completely fabricated. However, as Jenkins (2008) rightly emphasizes, “imagined” should not be misread as “imaginary” (80). The fact that all large-scale group attachments are social constructions, and as such are imagined, does not mean that they are not “real” in their consequences. On the contrary, imaginations have a powerful material resonance. As W.I. Thomas and Dorothy Swain Thomas (1928) made clear almost a century ago, if people “define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (572). For Anderson (1983), the imagining was not a deed of

misrepresentation and invention, but primarily an act of historical creation and collective visualisation (6).

Secondly, although Anderson devotes much of his attention to nationalism, he is clear that the concept of an “imagined community” is not exclusively reserved for nations, a categorical distinction misunderstood by many readers. Instead, Anderson (1983) emphasises that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact . . . are imagined” (6). The focus here is not on the uniqueness or genuineness of the community, but on the style of imagination—while the small face-to-face groups are imagined in a particularist way “as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship,” large-scale groups such as nations, classes, or religious denominations are envisaged as abstract entities. Nations differ from other large-scale abstract communities in the way they are imagined—as political communities that are “inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1983, 7). However, nationhood, religion, and class are all “imagined communities,” and his point is to explore *how* each of these communities is imagined.

Finally, the phrase “imagined community” has often been misused to sharply differentiate nations and nationalism from premodern doctrines and forms of collective attachment such as kinship, mythology, or religion. In this understanding, nationalism is completely detached from traditional social organisations and their normative codes. But Anderson (1983) is unambiguous in his view that nationalism has more in common with kinship and religion than with modern political ideologies. He conceptualises nationalism as a phenomenon that appears in a variety of guises: nationalisms with a small n, not an ideology with big N. In his view, nationalism is to be treated “as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’ rather than ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’ (Anderson 1983, 5). Hence despite offering a distinctly modernist theory of nationalism, Anderson differs from fellow modernists in emphasising the developmental character of organisational and ideological change. In other words, unlike classical scholars such as Gellner (1997) and Hobsbawm (1990) or contemporary modernists such as Breuilly (2016), Wimmer (2017; 2013), or Laitin (2007) who all embrace a rather restricted “revolutionary model” of modernisation, Anderson offers a more nuanced reading of historical change.¹ Instead of sharply differentiating between past and present, this approach emphasises that nationalism is built gradually on the ideological and organisational foundations of previous epochs, a point that I develop further in my work on nationhood (Malešević 2019; 2017a; 2013).

Taking these three points into account, one can work with the concept of “imagined communities” in much wider and sociologically more fruitful ways. In this article, I explore how the discourses and practices of imagined communities change through time. More specifically, I analyse the role that conspiratorial thinking has played in the development and proliferation of different understandings of one’s own community and that of the external and threatening Other. By zooming in on episodes of major pandemics in world history, I aim to examine how different ideological and organisational processes have shaped the popular understandings of conspiracies during times of pandemic outbreaks. The article compares and contrasts three broadly defined historical periods (premodern, modern, and contemporary) and argues that once nationalism becomes the dominant operative ideology, most conspiracy theories about pandemics inevitably embrace nation-centric understandings of social reality. The first part of the article explores the relationship between pandemics and conspiracies before the age of the nation-state, while the second part analyses how conspiracy theories transform in modernity and how nationalism shapes conspiratorial vistas. The final part zeroes in on recent developments and investigates how globalisation and new modes of communication have impacted the proliferation of nationalist conspiracy theories in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Pandemics and Conspiracies before Nation-States

Sudden outbreaks of deadly diseases have historically been linked with the proliferation of conspiratorial beliefs. Epidemics in particular have often been perceived as punishment from gods

or evil spirits. In some cases, the resulting deaths and devastation were interpreted as a sign of one's own sinful behaviour or as an indicator of insufficient commitment to one's religious or mythical beliefs and practices. When Cortez invaded the Aztec empire, the smallpox that accompanied his men completely decimated the Aztec population. This was seen by both sides as a sign of divine intervention: for the Aztecs this was divine wrath for their alleged transgressions and for Cortez's soldiers this was a sign of divine reward for their commitment to Christianity (McNeill 1976, 181–4).²

However, in most instances, the blame for a pandemic was firmly associated with specific groups. These scapegoats were regularly depicted as powerful agents who were involved in a secret and sinister plot to harm or destroy one's society. Hence in the premodern context, the prime targets of blame were religious and eschatological Others. In premodern Europe, the outbreaks of plague, cholera, typhoid fever, salmonella, and other pandemic diseases were often linked to the conspiratorial activities of Jews, Muslims, heretics, pagans, and schismatics. For example, during the deadly pandemic of smallpox or viral haemorrhagic fever that spread through the Roman Empire between 249 and 262, Jews and pagans were often blamed for this pestilence and the Christian clergy was adamant that only those who converted could potentially be saved in the afterlife. The bishop of Carthage, Cyprian, was unambiguous in his distinction between Christians and Others: "This mortality is a bane to the Jews and pagans and enemies of Christ; to the servants of God it is a salutary departure" (McNeill 1976, 108–9). Similarly, during the Crusades, Muslims and Byzantines (after 11th century seen as schismatics) were often wrongly accused of conspiring against the Crusaders and in some cases the spread of plagues was attributed to their joint plots (Neocleous 2010; Rosen 2007). For example, several medieval authors make an allegation that the Byzantine emperor Isaac colluded with Saladin to undermine the armies of the Third Crusade: Isaac "entered into a conspiracy with Saladin, the seducer and destroyer of the holy name" whereby Saladin provided "many presents very pleasing to mortals, in order to make a compact and agreement" (Munro 1896, 20–21). The claim is also made in this story that Saladin and Isaac intended to poison the Crusaders (Neocleous 2010, 270).

During the outbreak of the bubonic plague in Europe (1347 to 1351), Christian religious cults such as the Flagellants, Lollards, Beghards, and Cellites accused Jews and those they deemed to be heretics of spreading the plague. Jews were often denounced for the deliberate poisoning of wells where Christians lived. One of the early forms of conspiracy theory that gained ground in the Iberian peninsula was built around a claim that "Jews were working under the orders of a conspiratorial network with its headquarters in Toledo; that the poison, in powdered form, was imported in bulk from the Orient, and that the same organisation also occupied itself in forging currencies and murdering Christian children" (Ziegler 1969, 100). The Jewish population was also held responsible for a variety of imaginary acts, including smearing walls and windows with a balm made from the buboes of plague victims or using the clothes of dead people. Show trials were organised to prove the existence of Jewish plots to poison wells with the plague (Ziegler 1969, 102). The top clergy often initiated such trials, arguing that "Jews deserved to be swallowed up in the flames" (Cohn 2007, 16–7). The Flagellant movement was at the forefront of these accusations and was involved in the persecution and mass killings of Jewish populations throughout Europe. In addition to Jews, Muslims and lepers were also held responsible for spreading pandemics and deliberately poisoning Christians. As Debra Higgs Strickland (2003) shows, sometimes three groups were blamed for plotting these acts together: "Jews, Muslims and lepers working in tandem" and "attempting to destroy Christendom through large-scale poisoning plots" (233).

Muslims and Mongols were also deemed to have brought the Black Death to Europe. In some accounts this was depicted as a sinister military plot of Saracens and Tatars. For example, in the 14th century chronicle of the siege of Caffa (Crimea), Genoese Gabriele de' Mussi identifies Tartars—the name used for Mongol and Turkic populations—as the principal conspirators in the plot to inflict plague on the Christians: "The dying Tartars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realizing that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in

the siege. But they ordered [diseased] corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside. . . . Moreover, one infected man could carry the poison to others, and infect people and places with the disease by look alone. No one knew, or could discover, a means of defense” (Wheelis 2002, 973).

Nevertheless, despite the popularity of these beliefs, these early forms of conspiracy theory were largely undeveloped. The periodic outbursts of hate against Jews, Muslims, pagans, schismatics, and heretics were rarely, if ever, articulated as intelligible narratives aimed at providing convincing and durable interpretations of pandemics. The Other was deemed to be evil and scheming on the simple account that she was not a member of one’s religious community—the Jew, the Muslim, and the heretic were held responsible for the plague because they were considered to be demons, devils, and representatives of the anti-Christ. The outbreaks of pandemics generated dread and fear, which often quickly translated into scapegoating practices.

Premodern social orders lacked robust organizational capacities and social mechanisms for the ideological penetration of entire societies. This was a deeply stratified world where the aristocracy and the top clergy completely dominated the social order and where group attachments were shaped by inherited status categories. In this social environment, group solidarity was determined by one’s birth—while the nobility practiced transnational endogamy and used distinct cultural markers to differentiate themselves from the commoners, the ordinary peasant population was largely geographically and socially immobile and as such developed only a local sense of identification. This was also a world of rampant illiteracy, poor networks of transportation and communication, undifferentiated borders, and overlapping boundaries of political and religious authority (Breuille 2016; Malešević 2017b; Malešević 2006; Mann 1986; Gellner 1983).

Medieval and premodern Europe lacked strong organizational capacities and complex vertical ideological networks that could foster society-wide narratives of belonging. In this organizationally and ideologically inchoate setting, there was no space for the development of coherent and homogenous society-wide conspiracy theories. The spread of pandemics would usually be followed by the waves of blame against the religious Other, but the nature of these accusations tended to be shaped by local superstitions and communal concerns. Each village, town, or county had its own mini-conspiracy, which would ordinarily focus on local concerns—a particular village well was poisoned, a specific Jewish family was blamed, and the sense of fear was confined to one’s locality. For example, in some villages in Spain, Muslims (Moors) were held responsible for the spread of the Black Death, while in other parts of Europe the lepers were the principal culprit in the conspiracies on the passing of the disease. In some regions of France, traveling non-locals were blamed: “in June 1348, a party of Portuguese pilgrims were said to be poisoning wells in Aragon . . . in Narbonne it was the English who were at one time accused,” while in the City of London lepers were banned from entering, and in Languedoc, France “all lepers were burnt on suspicion of poisoning wells” (Ziegler 1969, 97).

Furthermore, since religious denomination was the central dividing line of group membership during this period, local concerns were often mapped onto wider theological narratives, and imaginary conspiracists were depicted in biblical *topoi*—sinners, devils, Satan, anti-Christ, and so on. Hence during the pandemics, these faith-based discourses painted conspiracies as attacks on Christianity. In this sense, the outbreaks of disease temporarily generated imagined communities of Christians who framed the pandemics as the conspiracies of infidels. Nevertheless, such religiously articulated discourses would rarely attain a society-wide appeal. They were not and could not be national in content. Instead they were primarily local and transnational. While local conspiracies targeted non-Christian members of the immediate community, transnational narratives centred on the eschatological imagery deduced from biblical narratives. Thus, in premodern Europe, conspiracies helped forge imagined communities of co-religionists. However, the deeply stratified character of these social orders, combined with the underdeveloped organizational capacities and low levels of ideological penetration of the society, meant that these religiously based imagined communities were temporary phenomena. Once the plague subsided and the conspiracies wore

off, social status trumped religion and the world of lords and the world of serfs resumed their parallel and disjointed existence. In other words, the conspiracies that emerged in the wake of major pandemics could not patch the deep social and ideological divides that characterized premodern Europe. Most conspiratorial discourses emerged and spread locally and remained detached from the state and church structure. In many instances, the political and religious authorities had to intervene to stop the massacres that followed the antisemitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-leper conspiracies. For example, Pope Clement VI issued two Bulls in 1348 condemning massacres and threatening excommunication for those who participated in violence against non-Christians, describing them as “seduced by that liar, the Devil” (Skolnik and Berenbaum 2007, 733). Premodern societies lacked the organizational and ideological mechanisms for the dissemination of coherent and homogenous conspiratorial narratives that would appeal to all social strata. The micro-group solidarities remained horizontal and detached from each other, with each social stratum living in their own moral universe. The strength of status and class divide was clearly visible in situations where the pandemic affected one social group more than others, as was the case with the sweating sickness (*sudor anglicus*) that disproportionately decimated the aristocracy in 15th and early 16th century Europe. Although this pandemic generated several conspiracy theories, such theories had little or no resonance among the ordinary people who had not been affected by this disease (Del Wollert 2017).

These sharp and entrenched social divides prevented the development of cross-class solidarity and cultural homogeneity among the populations of premodern Europe. Even though they largely shared a common religious worldview, the deeply stratified social order generated hierarchical cultural forms with the “high,” mostly Latin-based, culture of nobility and top clergy and the “low,” vernacular, and localised oral cultures that lacked linguistic standardisation (Gellner 1983). The periodic outbreaks of pandemics and other major calamities, bolstered by fear and conspiratorial narratives, forged temporary imagined communities built around shared religion. However, these short-term shared experiences were not enough to transform premodern moments of solidarity into society-wide nationalist attachments. The lack of organizational capacities and the low levels of ideological penetration of society meant that the localized and status-based group solidarities never materialised into shared cross-societal imagined communities that would resemble nationhood (Malešević 2019, 2013). The classical and contemporary modernist accounts of Gellner (1983), Hobsbawm (1990), Breuilly (2016) and Wimmer (2017; 2013) are right in their assessment that there were no structural preconditions for the emergence and development of nationalism in premodern Europe. However, their excessive modernism leaves no analytical space for the transformation of religious into national imagined communities. In contrast, Anderson’s (1998; 1983) restrained modernism points in the right direction: nationalism does not transpire *ex nihilo* but grows gradually from the structural transformations that take place in the premodern and early modern periods. In this context, it is paramount to explore the role pandemic conspiracies have played in the rise and expansion of nationalism in Europe.

Pandemics and Nationalist Conspiracies in the Modern Era

Scholars of conspiracy theories trace their mass appearance to the late 18th century (Billig 1978; Roberts 1974). The shock that the French revolution created among the aristocratic circles throughout Europe gave a birth to the idea that the revolution was an act of conspiracy. Two highly influential books published in 1797, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* by Augustin Barruel, and *Proofs of a Conspiracy: Against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Freemasons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* by John Robinson, inaugurated a new genre of literature—a modern political conspiracy theory (Byford 2011, 40). The revolution was depicted as a planned and sinister undertaking of clandestine societies including the French *Philosophes*, the Freemasons, the Bavarian Illuminati, and the Jacobins, allegedly all working together to establish world domination. The proliferation of secret societies³

in the 18th and 19th centuries contributed to the expanding paranoia among aristocrats and members of government throughout Europe that powerful clandestine forces were hatching plots to take over the world. The chief protagonists in most of these early conspiracy theories were the Illuminati, a small Enlightenment-inspired organisation established in Bavaria in 1776, and the Freemasons, fraternal organisations centred on the improvement of the moral character of their members. Even though the Illuminati were dissolved in 1786, they continued to be linked to a variety of revolutionary and other political plots. The Freemasons have also been an object of numerous conspiracy theories over the past two centuries and have been blamed for the control of various governments (Roberts 1974).

The late 18th and early 19th century was also characterised by several intensive pandemic episodes in Europe and America including a 1778 dengue fever outbreak in Spain, the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic, the 1793–4 United States influenza and typhus epidemic, the 1800–1803 Saint-Domingue yellow fever epidemic which also spread in Spain, the 1812 Typhus epidemic in Russia, Caragea's 1813 plague, the 1817–1819 typhus epidemic in the British Isles, and two large-scale waves of cholera (1817–1824) and (1826–1837) among others (Snowden 2019). These sudden outbreaks of disease coupled with the newly acquired political freedoms and the general democratisation of the public sphere have contributed to emergence of various conspiracies.

The French and American revolutions fostered the proliferation of conspiratorial discourses on both sides: revolutionaries and the counterrevolutionaries, including the representatives of the *ancien régime*. Many revolutionaries became obsessed with alleged plots to destroy the revolutionary legacy and to re-establish the monarchy.⁴ As Zwierlein and de Graaf (2013) show, many Jacobine conspiracy theories embraced the Manichean view of the world where the revolutionary civil society was pitched against reactionary despotism and traditionalism. The counterrevolutionaries were seen to be the “enemies of liberty” and “conspirators” (“une faction d’ennemis de la liberté,” “une secte de conspirateurs”), led by “an Austrian Committee” (20). Similarly, their aristocratic and clerical enemies nurtured conspiracy theories that depicted the revolutionaries as external imposters financed and supported by foreign powers.

Many of these early conspiracies also reproduced the premodern obsession with the religious Other as the main culprit of the alleged political plots, with Jewish conspirators featuring prominently in many of the 18th and 19th century conspiracy theories. One of the most influential and lasting conspiracies was articulated in a mass distributed pamphlet in 1903, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This fabricated antisemitic document was first published in Russia and contained the alleged plan of Jewish elders to establish world domination through the control of the mass media and global economy. The booklet plagiarised and misconstrued texts from various older sources and was already discredited by the 1920s. However, once the pamphlet was translated into numerous languages, it quickly became the cornerstone of many anti-Semitic conspiracies throughout the 20th century.⁵ This conspiracy theory replicates some of the standard religiously inspired tropes that were common in premodern conspiracies. However, the *Protocols* also articulate a new understanding of anti-Semitism, where the focus shifts from religion to nation. While the premodern anti-Jewish conspiracies combined religious eschatology with the localised and parochial concerns, modern anti-Semitism was built around the idea of popular sovereignty, state borders, and national belonging. Hence unlike the traditional conspiratorial views of local Jews as the poisoners of wells and infidels, the modern conspiracies envisage Jewishness as a threat to one's national project. The popularity of the *Protocols* stemmed in part from the framing of this conspiracy as a plot to abolish nation-states and create a world-state governed by Jews. This is very clear from the statements that are imputed to the imaginary “Jewish Elders:”

we shall be able, straightway, to absorb all powers of governing throughout the whole world, and to form the universal Supergovernment. In the place of existing governments, we will place a monster, which will be called Administration of the Supergovernment. Its hands will

be overstretched like far reaching pinchers, and it will have such an organisation at its disposal, that it will not be possibly be able to fail in subduing all countries. (Nilus 2009, 22)

In this articulation, Jewishness is transformed from the religious Other into the national Other.

Many conspiracy theories were formulated and disseminated in the 19th and 20th centuries focused on alleged plots that strongly feature nationalist themes. For example, the highly influential 19th century anti-Jesuit conspiracies were centered on the question of Jesuits' loyalty to their respective nation-states. The Jesuits were depicted as the remnants of the *ancien régime* but also as spies with transnational allegiances who corrupt the youth and who were bent on creating "a state within a state" (Zwierlein and de Graaf 2013, 23). In the mid-to-late 19th century in France and Germany, Jesuits were often demonised as representatives of a sinister secret organisation that defied the sovereignty of nation-states and was committed to using all methods to establish a world empire ruled by the Papacy. In conspiratorial discourses, the Jesuits were depicted as

both subhuman and superhuman. Jesuits were allegedly so extreme in their submission to their order that they became like machines and, in their determination to achieve their goals, drew on powers unavailable to other men, through witchcraft. The peculiar location of the Jesuit, at the boundaries of humanity, unsettled the producers and consumers of anti-Jesuit discourse. In this sense, the Jesuit spectre haunted imperial Germany. (Healy 2003, 1).

The Jesuits were also blamed for various calamities, from the pandemics of cholera to the sinking of Titanic.

The second cholera pandemic that engulfed Europe in the 1830s gave birth to a plethora of conspiracy theories that identified Jesuits, Jews, Freemasons, and also neighbouring nations as the plotters behind the spread of this deadly disease. The pandemic originated in Asia and then quickly spread from Russia to the rest of Europe, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths (Henze 2010). As the disease proliferated throughout the continent, it generated a variety of conspiracy theories, many of which fuelled riots across Europe. Some of these conspiracies emphasised the class character of the pandemics with the narratives of ruling classes "masterminding a cull of the poor to lessen population pressures, with doctors, pharmacists, nurses, and government officials as the agents of this planned class mass murder" (Cohn 2017, 163). For example, there were seventy-two cholera riots in the British Isles alone (Cohn 2017, 164).

Nevertheless, most conspiratorial discourses targeted specific ethnic groups and nation-states as being involved in plots to deliberately spread cholera. As the pandemic swiftly moved throughout the continent, some countries were instantly accused for plotting to infect the populations of neighbouring countries, with various groups in Prussia and Austria blaming Russia, French political organisations pinpointing the states of the German confederation, representatives of the Italian civil society accusing France, various groups in Britain blaming the continental states, and so on. In addition, ethnic and religious communities were targeted. Hence in Spain, the principal target of cholera conspiracies and subsequent riots were the Jesuits, while in some large Russian and Prussian cities the focus was on Jews (Snowden 2019). In France, the conspiratorial narratives centred on King Louis Philippe's moderate government, with accusations that the rulers had poisoned the water. The government was attacked from both the republican left, who saw the pandemic as a weapon of class politics, and the conservative right, who blamed the reformist king and his allegedly ungodly and treasonous behaviour as a cause of the pandemic. The king was in particular chastised for not occupying Belgium after its declaration of independence from Dutch rule. To counter these accusations and conspiracies, the self-styled "King of the French" and "citizen-king" relied extensively on the nationalist discourse and nationalist policies to delegitimize the conspiratorial discourses (Furet 1995). He presented himself as a man of the people who dressed modestly, was plain spoken, and could be easily approached by any French citizen: "Contemporary

accounts famously describe how the king took walks in the park, umbrella in hand, stopping to have a chat with people of lower social rank” (Mehrkens 2019, 209).

Italy also experienced cholera-related riots and conspiracies. With Sicily as the epicentre of pandemic activity in 1836–7, conspirators deployed nationalist narratives to delegitimise the French Bourbon ruler. The Bourbons were accused of deliberately spreading the disease. One of the leading resistance leaders and an active member of the nationalist Young Italy, Mario Adorno, was adamant that the cholera epidemics were “a devilish plot bent on poisoning the people” (Cohn 2017, 163). Similarly, in the central Asian regions occupied by the Russian Empire, cholera conspiracies centred on the responsibility of the Russian state. In Tashkent, Uzbekistan, conspiracy theorists organised riots on the belief that “the cholera was the work of Russian doctors” who were bent on poisoning the local population (Cohn 2017, 171).

Other pandemics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries also fostered the development of nationalist conspiracy theories. Even the names of the two largest and deadliest epidemics of this period indicate how nationalist discourses have framed the diseases—the Russian Flu of 1889–90 and the Spanish Flu of 1918–20. The former, the H2N2 influenza, spread quickly from central Asia over Russia through Europe and North America resulting in over one million casualties. The rise of new transport and communication systems contributed to the instant spread of the pandemic, with only five weeks between the first reported case and the peak mortality rate (Ziegler 2011). This unprecedented speed of expansion generated a number of conspiracy theories. Some of the conspiratorial narratives centred on new technology, identifying electricity in telegraph wires, which were often close to train tracks, as the main transmitters of the pandemic. However more influential conspiracies tended to focus on specific nations as the culprits in the creation and dissemination of the disease. Most Europeans and Americans blamed Russia for the pandemic, and some interpreted the disease as a form of biological warfare (Kolata 2011). The Spanish flu, H1N1 influenza, was the largest pandemic of 20th century: it caused over 50 million deaths worldwide and generated an abundance of nationalist conspiracy theories. The pandemic did not originate in Spain but as the Spanish media were the first to report the disease, while most other governments suppressed this information, the pandemic became the “Spanish flu.” Although the nation-centric designation became universal, the name of the flu was different from country to country. Hence in Russia the mass media referred to the disease as “Chinese sickness,” in Germany the pandemic was known as the “Russian plague,” in Spain many referred to “Naples Soldier” (i.e. Italian) disease, while in Japan the public referred to the epidemics as the “American disease” (Kolata 2011). From its detection until the end of the crisis the pandemic was couched in the language of nationalist conspiracies.

For example, in the US the conspiratorial narratives propagated the idea that German U-Boats were responsible for the spread of the disease. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported the widely believed conspiracy theory of German soldiers docking in Boston and flooding the city with tainted vials and releasing the influenza virus in crowded places including the cinemas (Kolata 2011, 3–4). The people were also reluctant to take medicine as some conspiracy theories blamed the German pharmaceutical company Bayer for poisoning their aspirin with the virus. The Spanish media also identified U-Boats and Germans as plotting to disseminate “strange bacilli, which infect people with the disease” (Aderet 2020, 1).

The common pattern in most of these conspiracy theories is the focus on the nation as the object and subject of the pandemics: the disease is conceptualised as being generated by one nation to attack or destroy another nation. In some instances, the minority groups, such as Jews, Jesuits or Freemasons, are identified as the perpetrators of conspiracies, but even in these cases the emphasis is on their threat to the unity, stability, and future of the nation. In this sense, the conspiracy theories reflect the changing dominant narratives of groupness over time: while in the premodern context religion and locality were the principal source of collective attachments, in modernity nationhood becomes the central focus of collective attention. Hence the shift from religious to national imaginary plots reveals the changed structural contexts: instead of the religious imagined

communities that populated the premodern world, one now encounters imagined communities built around the ideas and practices of nationhood.

This transformation was gradual and shaped by many historical factors and only fully crystallized in the 20th century. The key structural processes that made this change possible include the cumulative increase in the coercive organisational capacities of states and many non-state entities, the greater ideological penetration into societies, and the ability of social organisations to envelop the micro-level networks of group solidarity (Malešević 2019; Malešević 2017b; Malešević 2013). The establishment of the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force, taxation, and legislation together with the centralisation of authority and increased growth of transportation and communication networks have allowed states to better control their populations. Furthermore, the creation of state-wide educational systems with standardized vernaculars and dramatically increased literacy rates has played a central role in fostering greater cultural homogenisation of the population. These structural processes also facilitated a greater ideological breach into the micro-world as an abstract entity such that the nation gradually became naturalised and normalised in everyday life. The outbreaks of pandemics contributed substantially to the transformation of the religious into the national imagined communities. The change was both spearheaded and reflected in the conspiracy theories that regularly accompanied major pandemics. The proliferation of nationalist conspiracies was shaped by changing historical contexts. The political and industrial revolutions of the late 18th and 19th century opened the space for the democratization of the public sphere which gave birth to the rise of mass scale nationalist conspiracies (Byford 2011, 38-46).

Nationalist conspiracies were not the only conspiracies that emerged and proliferated in modernity. Conspiratorial discourses permeated many spheres of social life including politics, economy, culture, science, sport, and health. However, as nationalism became better grounded in the organizational and ideological structures and everyday lives of ordinary individuals, it generated more legitimacy and greater appeal for the conspiracies centred on nationhood (Malešević 2019). In some instances, the nationalist conspiracies were state-sponsored projects, while in other cases they were initiated and disseminated by civil society groups which offered only a more radicalised version of already existing nationalist mythologies about the sinister plots of other nations and the eternal heroism and victimhood of one's nation. The onset of deadly pandemics fostered much better reception and popularity of nationalist conspiracies. In times of unprecedented crises, fear, and uncertainty, nationalist conspiracies offered simple cognitive maps of changing realities, and identified scapegoats responsible for all calamities that have beset one's nation. Knowing that there is a specific culprit and concrete political goal behind the deadly disease allowed many people to regain a sense of control over the unpredictable and contingent events. Furthermore, the proliferation of nationalist conspiracies also helped reinforce the boundaries between groups: the expansion of nationally framed imaginary plots helped maintain and strengthen nationally embedded imagined communities.

Pandemics, Nationalisms, and Global Conspiracy Theories

The 21st century has often been described as an era of globalization. The rise of new technologies, the improved and affordable transport and communication networks, and the global expansion of the neo-liberal economy have created a novel social environment where movements and exchanges of capital, goods, services, and people have intensified and have brought different parts of the world closer together. Both critics and supporters of this process argue that globalization has undermined the power of nation-states and the influence of nationalism. Hence Giddens (2007), Bauman (2006), and Beck (2009), among many others, insist that globalization erodes national attachments as rampant consumerism fosters individualist and cosmopolitan identifications. In Beck's (2000) words, "the cosmopolitan project contradicts and replaces the nation-state project" (85).

In this new context, conspiracy theories seem to have also become fully globalized. A number of highly influential conspiratorial narratives have spread throughout the world and have gained

popularity among populations on different continents. For example, the chemtrails conspiracy theory, which alleges that secret government agencies are involved in the water condensation trails of aircrafts and use them to spray toxic materials into the air, has attracted substantial global support, with up to 20% of individuals worldwide believing this to be true or partially true (Tingley and Wagner 2017; Cairns 2016). Other highly popular conspiracies with global resonance include a variety of topics ranging from scepticism about global warming, the 9/11 plots, the New World Order designs, the water fluoridation conspiracy, the Bilderberg Group secret plans, the cultural Marxism conspiracy, and the pharmaceutical companies (Big Pharma) secret plans, to the alleged international plots about vaccination and human microchipping (Butler and Knight 2020).

The sudden global outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020 instantly generated a plethora of new conspiracy theories that have interpreted this pandemic as a secret plot by various governments, private corporations, and influential individuals to infect and then control the world's populations. Thus, in many conspiratorial narratives, the coronavirus was bio-engineered in a lab and was developed as a biological weapon. In some conspiracy theories the main culprit is the Chinese government,⁶ while in others the focus is on the US, Russian, or Israeli governments, respectively. Other conspiracies focus on the role of private corporations—Microsoft, Amazon, or Soros Fund Management, among many others.⁷ One of the early Covid-19 conspiracies, viewed by millions through a video on YouTube, made a claim that the virus was created by the Pirbright Institute in the UK and was financed by Bill Gates. Another influential conspiracy theory popularised on Facebook and Twitter alleged that George Soros was responsible for the spread of the virus as he “owns the WuXi PHARMA LAB located in Wuhan, China where COVID-19 was developed and conveniently Broke Out” (Funke 2020). However, the most popular recent conspiracy propagated on social media is the one identifying 5G mobile networks as playing a central role in the transmission of the disease. This conspiracy, viewed and shared by hundreds of millions of social media users, alleged that the virus was caused by electromagnetic fields and 5G wireless technologies.

Many of the conspiracy theories that spread in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic had a global character. Once a particular conspiracy develops, it is quickly transmitted through social media all over the world, often attracting millions of individuals who believe the narrative and share it with other potential believers. Since the pandemic itself is a global phenomenon, affecting the entire world, it is no surprise that conspiracy theories centered on Covid-19 have attracted a global audience. At first glance, these developments would suggest that the globalization of conspiracy theories is yet another reliable indicator that we live in a fully globalized world. The rapid dissemination of conspiratorial narratives across the world would seem to confirm the views of Giddens, Bauman, Beck, and others, that globalization has dented the power of nation-states and that nationalism has been replaced by new global ideological discourses and practices including individualism, cosmopolitanism, or consumerism. In Andersonian terms, this historical shift would signpost a transition from the national imagined communities to global imagined communities. If nationalist conspiracy theories have given way to global conspiratorial narratives, that would imply that globalism has trumped nationalism as the dominant popular ideological discourse.

Nevertheless, there is no evidence that such a profound shift has taken place. Even though some conspiracy theories have a global audience, that in itself is no proof that nationalism has weakened in any meaningful sense. On the contrary, the outbreak of the deadly virus has in fact reinforced the nation-centric perceptions of the world and corresponding nationalist practices. The first reaction to the pandemic was the centralization of decision-making at the national level, with the governments of individual nation-states introducing very different measures to protect the citizens of their own nation-states. Despite the global character of the disease, most governments closed their borders and stopped all travel to their countries. Even though the pandemic does not differentiate between the holders of different passports, both the governments and the citizens of individual nation-states have clearly demonstrated that they privilege their co-nationals in terms of unhampered travel, medical protection, or economic support. A good example of this behaviour is the

world-wide scramble for ventilators that ensued in the wake of a sudden increase in the number of Covid-19 patients in intensive care units. Even highly cooperative and well-established transnational entities such as the European Union initially proved unable to provide medical aid to the most affected member states in the early days of the crisis, such as Italy or Spain. Instead, the governments of individual nation-states prioritized their own populations (Dettmer 2020).

However, the strength of nationalism was even more visible in the sphere of civil society. All over the world, citizens of individual nation-states have taken part in formal and informal mass scale rituals of national solidarity (Antonsich 2020; Goode et al. 2020). For example, in several European countries, the public was involved in country-wide actions expressing their gratitude to the medical professionals involved in caring for Covid-19 patients. Many of these campaigns were framed through nation-centric discourses such as the weekly “Clap for our Carers” in the UK and Ireland or singing popular national songs from the balconies in Italy and Spain. As Antonsich (2020) shows, in Italy, popular radio stations transmitted “the stories of ordinary and famous Italians who directed their courage and inventiveness towards helping the nation fight the virus, emphasising that ‘the others cannot understand all this because . . . they are not Italians’” (1). Many civil society groups have linked the coronavirus epidemic to previous examples of tragedies and tribulations facing their respective nations throughout history, and in this way frame the medical emergency as a nationalist cause. For example, in Serbia, influential public intellectuals and even some medical professionals have linked the pandemic to the 1999 NATO bombing, while in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina many individuals and organisations have approached the coronavirus crises through the prism of their own traumatic experience of the 1990s wars for independence (Fonet 2020; Kurspahić 2020).

The centrality of nationhood in public discourse was most clearly visible in the popularity of nationalist conspiracy theories. With the outbreak of the pandemic in the USA, the existing nation-centric conspiratorial narratives have gained momentum—the idea of the Deep State and QAnon conspiracy, the White genocide, the Plan de Aztlan, and the North American Union project among many others. All these conspiracies identify a secret global elite which allegedly plots to undermine the national sovereignty of the US government and devises plans to remove Donald Trump from power. The QAnon conspiracy depicts a “worldwide cabal of Satan-worshiping paedophiles who rule the world” and control US politicians, media, Hollywood, and many other sectors of society (Rozsa 2019). The White genocide, the Plan de Aztlan, and the North American Union conspiracies all focus on imaginary plots to change the ethnic composition of the USA. While the White genocide idea targets large-scale non-White immigration, racial integration, and the policies of miscegenation, seeing them as a steps towards the obliteration of white majority in the US, the North American Union and the Plan de Aztlan focus on alleged plots to cede US sovereignty to foreign powers. The Plan de Aztlan centres on a plot where Mexico would reclaim seven southwestern US states, while the North American Union plot is about merging the US, Mexico, and Canada into a continental association that would be ruled by a transnational elite. In Russia and China, the Covid-19 outbreak has often been interpreted through the “Anglo-Saxon Revenge” conspiracy theory, which claims that although the virus originated in China it was manufactured and spread by the US government as a part of its secret bioweapon programme (Turp-Balazs 2020).

In many other countries, the Deep State conspiracy theory has attracted much support. This narrative identifies nonelected conspirators who wield power behind the scenes and who, in collusion with foreign actors, undermine the national interest of their respective states. In the case of the UK, the Deep State conspiracy has also been linked with the opponents of Brexit, who allegedly work in secret with the leaders of EU to undermine the British attempt to regain full national sovereignty and independence. The 5G network conspiracy that links the spread of the pandemic with the mobile phone signals that allegedly transmit the virus has also gained a great deal of popularity in many countries all over the world—from Pakistan and Serbia to Bolivia (Goodman and Carmichael 2020). Similarly, the conspiracies that invoke microchipping through vaccination have attained enormous popularity throughout the globe. This conspiracy is built around the claim

that the Microsoft Corporation is involved in the plot to “inoculate” much of the world population with trackable microchips. The Deep State, 5G network, and microchipping conspiracies are all usually linked with specific individuals held responsible for the pandemics, such as Bill Gates or George Soros. However, despite their global appeal, these conspiracy theories have often been formulated in distinctly nationalist terms as a direct threat to the sovereign powers of individual nation-states. For example, in Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that the virus was deliberately manufactured to genetically target Iranians. In Russia, the leader of the Communist party claimed that “globalists” were involved in “a covert mass chip implantation, which they may in time resort to, under the pretext of a mandatory vaccination against coronavirus” (Goodman and Carmichael 2020). In Serbia many tabloid newspapers have linked the coronavirus with a plot to weaken Serbian resolve in their struggle to regain control over Kosovo. In the US, Trump and his administration regularly refer to Covid-19 as the “China virus” or the “Chinese virus” and portray it as a sinister action on the part of the Chinese government against the US.

All these examples illustrate that nationalism remains a highly potent source of ideological legitimacy in the contemporary world. Globalization has generated new technologies and modes of communication, thus allowing the creation of a global public sphere, but it has not significantly undermined the nation-centric understanding of social reality. While many individuals and groups are now able to disseminate their messages to world-wide audiences, the focus of many of these messages is, for the most part, framed by nation-centric concerns.

Although conspiracy theories are a global phenomenon, their articulations and their popular resonance are often rooted in their nation-centric appeals. Conspiracy theories reveal the strength of nationalist ideologies throughout the world. Not all conspiracies are centered on plots against one’s nation, but even those conspiracies that nominally target science, technology, the economy, or health seem to frame their message in nation-centric terms. Global conspiracies, such as those linking 5G networks or microchipping to Covid-19, are spread rapidly throughout the world, but they are articulated and received differently in different societies. In some cases, these alleged plots are interpreted as a part of already existing political animosities involving threatening neighbouring states or world powers. In other cases, the focus is on preserving national freedoms against evil foreign corporations. In some contexts, conspiratorial discourses target ethnic and religious minorities by linking them to the hostile foreign influence and so on.

There are two main reasons why nationalism often underpins many conspiracy theories. Firstly, conspiratorial discourses often feed off the existing mainstream nation-centric narratives. All nationalist ideologies perpetuate the idea that one’s own nation is unique and, in some ways, superior to other nations. The nationalist mythologies that are reproduced in educational systems, mass media, and the public sphere tend to portray one’s nation through the prism of historical victimhood, sacrifice, and moral superiority. Conspiracy theories just tap into the already existing myths of exceptionalism and radicalise these narratives by identifying the specific culprits of evil who are (yet again) plotting to destroy one’s nation. The established nationalist mythologies depict their respective nations as irreplaceable and immemorial communities of destiny that have experienced immense suffering throughout history and have always survived. Conspiracy theories build on these recognisable and popular tropes and reshape and radicalise the existing nation-centric myths. The conspiratorial narratives attain popularity precisely because they evoke cognitions and emotions that are already there. Despite being presented as a challenge to “normal” perceptions of reality, conspiracy theories reinforce embedded nationalist idioms and practices. They draw upon existing nation-centric imagery and push nationalist messages to their logical conclusions. In this sense, nationalist conspiracies are not the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985) who resist or subvert the dominant perceptions. Instead they only radicalize well-entrenched nationalist narratives and, in this way, reproduce the imagined communities of nationhood.

Secondly, global conspiracy theories cannot generate sustainable global imagined communities for the simple reason that they lack organizational capacities, ideological legitimacy, and the micro-interactional grounding that only nation-states possess in the contemporary world. The strength of

nationalism in modernity is rooted in the hegemony of the nation-state model of social organization. Globalization has not removed nation-states from their organizational pedestal and ideological dominance. There is no global organizational equivalent of the nation-state model. Although human beings are now capable of communicating and traveling huge distances and consuming a variety of services from all over the world at a much faster rate than ever before in history, this change has not undermined the potency of nation-states. On the contrary, the continuous growth of new technologies, science, and industry have all reinforced the organizational capacities of nation-states and have fostered greater ideological penetration of nationalist discourses and practices in everyday life (Malešević 2019, 5–16). Since the end of WWII, the nation-state model of territorial and political organisation has become hegemonic and almost uncontested. It is also regarded as the only legitimate mode of territorial rule in the contemporary world. Moreover, the principal underlying ideology of nation-states, nationalism, has also established itself as the most influential doctrine of political legitimacy. Hence, we live in the world where nation-states shape social reality both internally (within their own societies) and externally (in international relations). Consequently, the citizens of such polities are constantly exposed to nation-centric interpretations of reality. These nationalist ideas and practices underpin our educational systems, our mass media, our public sphere, and all other institutions. Furthermore, nation-centric idioms are also generated and reproduced in the civil society and intimacies of micro-world—friendships, kinships, and comradeships (Malešević 2013, 13–16).

Conspiracy theories utilize these existing organizational capacities, means of ideological legitimacy, and the micro-interactional groundings to disseminate images of clandestine plots and everlasting dangers. Such narratives emerge in the context of crises and times of uncertainty and fear. Drawing on the existing nationalist tropes they offer certainty, control, and security that is couched in simple explanations and crude politics of scapegoating and blame. The sudden outbreak of pandemics has historically proved to be an ideal environment for the proliferation of conspiracies. Conspiratorial narratives have played a central role in forging imagined communities. With the formation and development of nation-states, nationalism has regularly shaped the content of most influential conspiracy theories. The organizational, ideological, and micro-interactional omnipotence of nationhood in modernity has contributed the nation-centric imaginary plots that work to sustain national imagined communities.

Conclusion

Anderson (1983) emphasises that one of the defining features of all imagined communities is their abstract character (6). These imaginings project communities that are outside one's direct experience and beyond face-to-face interaction. Hence class, religion, and nation are all forms of imagined communities. However, not all imagined communities exist in the same way. In this article, I analyzed the differences between these collective imaginings in the premodern, modern, and contemporary world through the prism of conspiracy theories. The article traces the long-term transformation of conspiratorial discourses in times of major pandemics and their impact on the formation of different types of imagined communities. I show that premodern conspiracies center on theological and eschatological themes and depict the imaginary plots and plotters in religious terms. The focus on the religious Other (infidels, heretics, schismatics, and pagans) and the onset of epidemics is regularly associated with attacks on one's faith. In contrast, the modern period is characterised by the dominance of nation-centric discourses and practices, where conspiracy theories often reinforce and radicalize the existing nationalist narratives. In modernity, sudden outbreaks of pandemics regularly foster the proliferation of nationalist conspiracies. In these conspiratorial narratives the Other is usually portrayed as a threat to one's national sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, and territorial integrity. Globalization has added another layer of complexity to these collective imaginings, but it has not undermined the power of nation-states nor the potency of nationalism in the contemporary world. New technologies and new modes of communication

have given rise to global conspiracy theories and global conspiracy communities, but these global conspiratorial narratives have a distinctly national resonance. Hence rather than creating global imagined communities many of these conspiracy theories only reinforce nation-centric collective imaginings. The response to the Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated quite well how central nation-states are to framing, understating, and managing pandemics in the contemporary world. Despite the global reach and the world-wide ramifications of this pandemic, its spread has been marked by very different national responses. Moreover, despite the prevalence of some common global conspiratorial narratives about the origins and responsibility for the pandemic, the principal culprits are usually framed as recognizable national enemies. Although the imaginary plots and imaginary plotters may be global, the imagined communities they face remain conspicuously national.

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Notes

- 1 However, this emphasis on gradual change does not make this perspective any less modernist or closer to ethno-symbolism, perennialism, and other non-modernist approaches in the study of nationalism. On the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere, modernism is fully compatible with a *longue durée* analysis (Malešević 2018: 292–299).
- 2 The devastating impact of smallpox on the Native Americans was still noticeable in 1699 when a German missionary commented that “The Indians die so easily that the bare look and smell of a Spaniard causes them to give up the ghost” (McNeill 1976, 186).
- 3 It is important to emphasize that most of these societies were not secret at all. Instead the term “secret society” was used to describe the voluntary associations of people with similar interests which were not connected or funded by the state or the church (Byford 2011, 41).
- 4 Obviously, such conspiracies were in part built on the genuinely existing threats of counterrevolutionaries, royalists, and clergy to restore the monarchical order.
- 5 Many influential and wealthy antisemitic individuals contributed to popularization of this pamphlet, including Henry Ford, who financed publishing of more than half a million copies of *Protocols* in the US in the 1920s (Byford 2011, 54).
- 6 According to Pew Research Centre surveys, 29 percent of the US population believes in this conspiracy theory, while 25 percent believe that “the coronavirus outbreak was intentionally planned by powerful people” (Pew Research Centre 2020).
- 7 This response is very similar to other recent events, such as the 2015 Zika pandemic, when conspiracy theorists claimed that the virus was bioengineered by the Monsanto corporation.

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