

Let's get to Work – Against Anti-Semitism! #2

CONNECT

Antisemitism in the rabbit hole: About conspiracy narratives

In the spring of 2025, an online event series took place as part of the "Connect - Diversity through Participation" project at the DGB-Bildungswerk Thüringen e.V. The lectures from the series were transcribed and published in several languages.

Since the lecture on antisemitism and conspiracy narratives unfortunately had to be cancelled, this text is based on information from the [Amadeu Antonio Foundation](#). You can find more information here: www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/publikationen/

There are many conspiracy narratives - and almost all of them contain antisemitic codes. But why is that, even if it's not about Jewish people at first glance? The following text provides answers and shows that the overlaps are no coincidence, as antisemitism and conspiracy narratives are historically, structurally, and functionally connected. This means that their historical development is linked, that they are structured similarly in terms of content, and that they both fulfill certain social functions.

Conspiracy Narratives and Antisemitism - Explanation and Development

The term "conspiracy theory" is most commonly used. It refers to the fictional idea

that certain past and present social events (or all of them, i.e., our entire history) are the result of a conspiracy: it is claimed that a particular group pulls the strings in the background and implements a secret plan. Because these are imaginary stories that have little or nothing to do with reality, and not theories in the scientific sense, this text uses the word conspiracy narrative. (When people dive deeper into the belief in increasingly larger conspiracy narratives, e.g., by always following the next link on the internet, it is said that they go "down the rabbit hole".)

Antisemitism is a specific perception of Jewish people that can express itself as hatred towards them or towards Jewish institutions and organizations. Social hostility towards Jewish people has always included the motive of attributing hidden, evil machinations to them as a group. This reveals a fundamental overlap with conspiracy narratives, in which responsibility for individual events or entire social structures is attributed to an invented group.

At the latest since the late Middle Ages, conspiracy narratives about "the Jews" have been widespread in Christian majority societies in Europe.

When the text mentions "the Jew" / "the Jews" in quotation marks, it does not refer to real Jewish people, but to the antisemitic notion of them.

Historically, Christianity originated in the Near East as a split from Judaism, so both religions share common roots - and competed for followers. To convince people to follow the new religion of Christianity, one had to find a reason why Judaism was allegedly bad. With the increasing spread of the Christian faith, Jewish people formed a visible minority against which accusations were repeatedly made. They were accused of wanting to harm or even destroy society through secret rituals or criminal acts. Thus, the accusation that "the Jews" would poison wells and thereby trigger illnesses that were otherwise inexplicable was repeated regularly throughout history. Religious interpretations laid the foundation for these legends: Jewish people were allegedly responsible for the murder of Jesus and have been trying to symbolically repeat the act ever since. They are seen as agents of the Antichrist and thus as motivated by evil. This view has always led to antisemitic exclusion, violence, and pogroms.

The word "**pogrom**" refers to violent attacks collectively carried out by the majority society against minorities, where state or other authorities intentionally do not intervene. The term is mostly used for riots against Jewish people.

From individual accusations, the myth of a "Jewish world conspiracy" emerged over centuries. From the 18th century onwards, the conspiratorial intentions attributed to Jewish people moved away from purely religious motives. In the wake of major social upheavals such as the French Revolution or industrialization, new conspiracy narratives emerged, for example about secret societies like the Illuminati and Freemasons, or about socialists. However, these stories were also attributed to "the Jews". This led to a racist form of antisemitism. Jewish people were no longer seen only as members of another religion, but as members of another "race".

This made it even less possible for them to avoid antisemitic hatred through social adaptation or religious conversion. In the modern age, Jewish people were identified with various negatively perceived global phenomena, such as capitalism or communism. The myth of the "Jewish world conspiracy" united these partly contradictory attributions: "The Jews" appeared as a personified, secret power to which all evil in the modern world is attributed. Accordingly, conspiracy narratives and antisemitism are historically and currently inseparable.

Two Phenomena, One Structure, Common Functions

But why are these two phenomena so intertwined and persisting to this day? One reason lies in their similar structure. Both conspiracy narratives and antisemitism are based on simple, dualistic patterns of interpretation: the world is divided into a good-evil scheme, contradictions and complexity disappear. Conspiracy narratives seek a personified "who?" - tangible culprits, puppet masters, and beneficiaries. As a result, negatively perceived social developments are projected onto an allegedly guilty group. Antisemitism has always made Jewish people the target of this projection. The construction of conspiracy narratives and their historical roots make them structurally antisemitic: even if no Jewish person is mentioned by name, codes like "the elite", "financial powers", or "globalists" are often used. And even

The word "**globalism**" is often used by right-wing extremists instead of "globalization" to show that they reject it because international connections allegedly weaken "natural" units like nations, peoples, and cultures. The concept of "globalism" also includes the assumption that there is an internationally operating elite that controls all aspects of international networking and profits from it. This refers to Jewish people.

without explicitly assigning blame, conspiracy narratives are always open to antisemitic interpretations - and their dissemination thus poses a real danger to Jewish people.

Antisemitic and conspiratorial worldviews also fulfill "positive" functions on a psycho-emotional and identity-creating level. Conspiracy narratives compensate psychologically for experiences of loss of control, powerlessness, and uncertainty. They help people interpret complex social developments in a simple way. Instead of having to endure contradictions or uncertainties, clear enemy images are created that provide guidance: once the "puppet master" has been identified, one no longer feels powerless.

Furthermore, conspiracy beliefs and antisemitism offer an exclusive and attractive identity offer. Followers see themselves as part of an enlightened minority that "knows the truth". Moreover, they stand on the side of "good" in a divided worldview, as they distance themselves from "evil" or the "secret threat". Often (and especially in antisemitism), this is experienced as a strong sense of belonging to a people. One's own people become a homogeneous community of fate and an identity-based collective. This notion assumes that people have unchanging commonalities due to their group membership. The own group is thus free from contradictions, and individual followers can completely merge with the community. However, this also means that no one may dissent, and there are no divergent interests of minorities. The consequence is an anti-democratic dynamic: those who see themselves as being in the right and on the side of good, and who view others as "manipulated" or part of a conspiracy, can only reject central foundations of democracy like diversity of opinions and political compromises. This also legitimizes political violence as supposed "self-defense" when the political opponent is made an enemy through extreme categorization.

Conjuncture in Times of Crisis

Correspondingly, conspiracy ideologies and antisemitism also share a deep rejection of modernity in the form of democratic and diverse societies. Since they themselves long for a return to a "natural order" where groups have clear, unchanging places, antisemites and conspiracy believers perceive social emancipation developments as a threat. At the same time, modern societies are objectively changing faster and becoming increasingly complex. This creates many opportunities to process difficult-to-understand phenomena through "simple explanations", such as those offered by conspiracy narratives. However, regularly believing in such narratives and developing a conspiratorial mentality does not happen simply by chance, but is linked to existing predispositions - which are, however, widespread. The so-called Mitte-Studie, which examines right-wing extremist attitudes in German society, has already found that 38% of respondents tend towards conspiracy beliefs for 2022/23 - and the trend is rising.

Conspiracy ideologies often emerge as a reaction to a perceived loss of control. They can serve to mitigate feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, and fear. Complex or threatening events can be classified using such narratives and integrated into a coherent worldview. That's why conspiracy ideologies appear particularly in times of global crises and influential developments. Examples include the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the Corona pandemic. The pandemic in particular has once again made it clear how closely conspiracy narratives are linked to antisemitic notions. Many people who denied the existence of Corona wore a "Jewish star" on demonstrations, which was used in Nazi Germany to forcibly identify Jewish people, in order to stage themselves as victims. This is a trivialization of the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jewish people and hundreds of thousands of other people were murdered. Another example is the claim by Hungarian President Viktor Orbán that Corona was financed as a biological weapon by the Jewish billionaire George Soros.

The relevance of the connection between antisemitism and conspiracy narratives is therefore undisputed. Since they are inseparable as anti-democratic phenomena, they must also be combated together. This includes not only knowing their potential dangers but also understanding what makes them attractive to their followers.

Further multilingual texts on the topic of antisemitism

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www.dgb-bwt.de/wissen-fuer-alle

All texts are available in the **following languages**: Arabic, Dari, German, English, French, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese.

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October 2025

