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# Conspiracy Theories in the United States and the Middle East

A Comparative Approach

Edited by

Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski

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Christoph Herzog (Bamberg)

## Small and Large Scale Conspiracy Theories and Their Problems: An Example from Turkey

The trouble with conspiracy theories is that they are like an iceberg. The tip is easily visible from afar, but its visible parts conceal its true dimensions. The easily visible part of conspiracy theory is the literary genre that, in its modern form, was invented at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Although the genre had its origin in clerical anti-enlightenment circles, it has been convincingly argued that, as a mode of thinking, it was not limited to what has been traditionally regarded as the political right.<sup>2</sup>

Used mostly in a derogatory way, the term “conspiracy theory” includes a twofold dispraise. Even though Charles Pigden in his reappraisal of Karl Popper’s classical ideas on conspiracy theory allows for a positive use of the term conspiracy, the phenomenon is commonly regarded as a vice. The term “conspiracy theory” is not used as a term of the social sciences like “criminological theory” (for instance, the “Broken Windows Theory”) but as a derogatory expression to express strong epistemological disapproval and moral reprobation. The derogatory use has been legitimized because the term targets some of the more obviously politically dangerous and historiographically absurd literature of the sort of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. However, it might not be superfluous in this context to note that in Great Britain at the time of its publication the *Protocols* was object of a serious public debate as to its authenticity.<sup>3</sup> This points to the fact that what is regarded as plausible is dependent on social context, and that networks of trust

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Johannes Rogalla von Bieberstein, “Zur Geschichte der Verschwörungstheorien”, in: Helmut Reinalter (ed.), *Verschwörungstheorien: Theorie, Geschichte, Wirkung*, Innsbruck 2002, pp. 15–29.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Pierre-André Bois, “Vom ‘Jesuitendolch und -gift’ zum ‘Jakobiner-’ bzw. ‘Aristokratenkomplott’: Das Verschwörungsmotiv als Strukturelement eines neuen politischen Diskurses”, in: Reinalter (ed.), *Verschwörungstheorien*, pp. 121–132; Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2, New York 1995, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Michael Hagemeister, “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Between History and Fiction”, in *New German Critique*, 35/2008, 1, pp. 83–95, p. 89.

rather than immediate verifiability play the central role in assessing the plausibility of data people encounter.<sup>4</sup>

Browsing the increasing academic literature on conspiracy theory one cannot help but notice an interesting paradox. On the one hand, writers seem to be both critical and dismissive of conspiracy theories when referring to those that freely mingle Templars, Zionists, Communists, and Freemasons into stories of large-scale plotting. On the other hand, a considerable amount of the academic research conducted since the last decade or so has raised doubts whether Popper's epistemological verdict against conspiracy theory has done sufficient justice to the complexity of the case. The fact that much of the theoretical effort has focused exclusively on the context of the European and North American dimensions of the phenomenon while much of the research in the Near Eastern context has been more empirically oriented seems to have created an imbalance in the discussion of the phenomenon. I think that on closer inspection the iceberg of conspiracy theory will turn out to be even larger as hitherto believed.

Offering a summary and partial translation of two examples of conspiracy theory from Turkey, this paper discusses some epistemic issues on the basis of these examples and proposes a simple distinction between small- and large-scope conspiracy theories according to their conspiratorial scopes. By "conspiratorial scope" I do not simply mean the either local or global perspectives on the alleged conspiracy that a given conspiracy theory purports to uncover but whether the explanation offered could be verified in principle – even if not necessarily in practice. I will argue that the challenges faced by researchers when assessing the plausibility of certain conspiracy theories may be different in each of the two scopes with large-scope conspiracy theories being typically beyond verifiability.

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In the absence of systematic research about the production and consumption of conspiracy theory in Turkey, any assessment of the spread and importance of the phenomenon there will remain rather speculative. However, there can be no doubt that conspiracy theories occupy an important place in the Turkish mainstream media, and that they are not an exclusive domain of any extremist political camp. Many, but not all of them, seem to belong to the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Michael Baurmann, "Rational Fundamentalism? An Explanatory Model of Fundamentalist Beliefs", in: *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, 4/2007, 2, pp. 150–166.

type of anti-Semitism that mingles anti-Freemasonry and anti-Zionism, claiming that the Jews' ultimate goal is to plot for world domination using both capitalist imperialism and Communism as their tools.<sup>5</sup> A variant of this literary tradition of anti-Semitic conspiracy theory characteristic of Turkey is the preoccupation with the *Dönme*, converted followers of the seventeenth-century rabbi Sabatai Zevi. There is a tendency to describe them as Crypto-Jews – incorrectly so, because they were not accepted by their alleged Jewish co-religionists as Jews, nor did they regard themselves as such<sup>6</sup> – or even to simply conflate Jews and Dönme altogether. The idea that the Republic of Turkey was essentially founded and run by members of the Dönme community has seen broad coverage in the Turkish media during the last decade.<sup>7</sup> It would be misleading, however, to assume that conspiracist thinking in Turkey has been limited to these “classical” themes. There are other – and, epistemologically speaking, perhaps more interesting – examples of what may be termed conspiracy theories in Turkey. In addition to nationalism, anti-imperialism has thus played a tremendously important role in Turkish conspiracy theorizing.

In what follows, two examples by Erol Mütercimler, a contemporary and relatively well-known self-confessed proponent of conspiracy theory in Turkey, are presented. Erol Mütercimler (b. 1954) is a journalist teaching strategic studies at several private universities in Istanbul (İstanbul Ticaret Üniversitesi, Doğu Üniversitesi, and Yeditepe Üniversitesi). He was the editor of the journal *Komple Teorileri* and produced several TV series about the topic. He approaches conspiracy theories in the framework of strategic studies as a phenomenon of political reality that has to be discussed in order to uncover real conspiracies. It is his contention that the history of Turkey is especially rich in conspiracies.<sup>8</sup> In 2005 he published a book which he declared to be a

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Süleyman Yeşilyurt, *Türkiye'nin Büyük Masonları*, Ankara 2001. In the introduction, the author states flatly that Freemasonry was a “way of Zionist administration” (“Siyonist idare tarzıdır”), that Jews remained Jews pursuing Jewish goals no matter whether they changed religion or not (p. 13). Yeşilyurt also identifies a number of well-known Turks, including Ziya Gökalp, as alleged Freemasons. For a commentary on another book by the same author cf. Murat Belge, “Tonlar’dan Bazıları”, in: *Radikal*, Dec. 13, 2003, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=98691> (accessed Sept. 28, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Marc David Baer, *The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks*, Stanford, CA 2010.

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion of this phenomenon cf. Rıfat N. Bali, *A Scapegoat for all Seasons: The Dönmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey*, Istanbul 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Erol Mütercimler, *Komple Teorileri: Aynanın Ardında Kalan Gerçekler*, Istanbul 2005, p. xiv.

collection of 73 conspiracy theories entitled: *Komplo Teorileri: Aynanın Ardında Kalan Gerçekler*. The title of this book (*Conspiracy Theories: The Reality Behind the Mirror*)<sup>9</sup> also figured prominently on his webpage.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that the conspiracies dealt with in the book are not strictly restricted to alleged conspiracies in and against Turkey, although these are the main focus. The conspiracies discussed also include some of those that are familiar to conspiracy theorists outside Turkey, like the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Oklahoma bombing, the September 11 attacks, or the assassination of Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim in Najaf in 2003. In addition, the book contains some excursions into Ottoman history, for instance the execution of Çandarlı Halil Paşa after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The book's underlying historiographic pattern clearly reveals the author's affiliation with Kemalist ideological positions. Moreover, the overall picture emerging from the volume is that of a global and globalizing conspiracy of western capitalists. At the same time, the book has a certain affinity to the mentioned anti-Freemason, anti-Zionist tradition. At times, this affinity comes close to being explicit, for instance when the author introduces the former Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, looking for the secret force that helped him to attain this position ("Kofi Annan ve arkasındaki gizli güç"), "the son of a freemasonic African clan leader who gained the support of the Jewish lobby and global capitalism through his wife".<sup>11</sup> The reason why Mütercimler takes issue with Kofi Annan is obviously the Annan Plan for Cyprus, and the question he poses at the end of this chapter is a rhetoric one: "Would you entrust the fate of Cyprus and Turkey to the decision of such a man?"<sup>12</sup> It could therefore appear as if Mütercimler's book was just another variant of the "classical" anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. But although the book certainly draws some inspiration from that literary tradition (if one may call it that) I will argue that the wholesale dismissal of all of its conspiracy theorizing could be hardly justified on rational grounds. While his treatment of Annan may convince us that Mütercimler holds an anti-Semitic worldview, it does not automatically disprove other arguments he makes in his book. We still would have to apply the hermeneutic principle to assume the most solid version of argumentation the text we are taking issue with is offering us.

<sup>9</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> As of Feb. 26, 2012 his website is not available anymore (<http://www.crolmütercimler.com/> [accessed Sept. 28, 2010]).

<sup>11</sup> Mütercimler, *Komplo Teorileri*, p. 415.

<sup>12</sup> Mütercimler, *Komplo Teorileri*, pp. 415, 419.

Under the heading “Orgeneral Eşref Bitlis Cinayeti” (“The Crime against Army General Eşref Bitlis”),<sup>13</sup> Erol Mütercimler insinuates that the commander of the Turkish Gendarmerie, Eşref Bitlis, who died in a plane crash in Ankara on February 17, 1993, was killed by an act of sabotage. Bitlis, he claims, was a thoughtful specialist in the Kurdish question who was unpopular with the Americans because he had criticized their politics towards the Kurds as aiming at the creation of an independent Kurdish polity. In support of his thesis Mütercimler claims:

- that the expert opinion by the American manufacturer of the Beechcraft B300 heard in court had ruled out an ordinary technical defect;
- that Turkish military experts used the term “probably” when declaring that the crash had been brought about by wing icing;
- that the weather report of the day in question spoke of “thaw”;
- that a soldier on guard on the airfield reported an unidentified officer who had known the password and visited the location the night before the crash;
- that this incident has not been investigated;
- that a commission of aerial experts from the Technical University of Istanbul had ruled out icing and human failure as possible causes of the crash;
- that two Turkish politicians, Necmettin Erbakan and a member of the CHP, Mahmut Işık, declared that Eşref had been assassinated;
- that the sister of one of the crashed aircraft’s pilots claimed that the judge of the trial had confessed to her that he, together with several witnesses, had been put under pressure by certain “dark forces” (“karanlık güçler”);
- that the son of Eşref Bitlis filed a lawsuit claiming that his father’s death had been the result of an act of sabotage.

In addition, Mütercimler refers to an article in the Turkish mainstream newspaper *Sabah* from September 16, 2002 where a colleague of Eşref Bitlis, Army General Necati Özgen, reported about an incident that had happened in 1992, the year before the deadly plane crash of Bitlis. According to Mütercimler’s summary of the article, Özgen had accompanied Bitlis on a special mission on a flight in a Sikorsky helicopter from Şirnak to the headquarters of Masud Barzani in Northern Iraq. During the flight two American F-15 fighters had approached the helicopter and had twice tried to intercept and bring down the helicopter by risky flight maneuvers. Özgen claimed that, contrary to usual practice, they had not been informed by the American mili-

<sup>13</sup> Mütercimler, *Komple Teorileri*, pp. 16–22.

tary air control for North Iraq about the two fighters. He also added that Bitlis had managed to practically clear the region of PKK fighters killing more than 4,500 of them. It should be noted that Erol Mütercimler's dealing with the issue does not include any investigations of his own but is based on a discussion that forms almost its own small branch within the Turkish conspiracy literature.<sup>14</sup>

Politically motivated assassination, to be sure, is not a rare incident in recent Turkish history. Murders include a considerable number of controversial journalists, writers, and academicians. Until today, most cases have remained unresolved. Among these unresolved murders are also a number of pensioned high-ranking generals,<sup>15</sup> and doubt has been cast on the deaths of some military officers connected to Eşref Bitlis.<sup>16</sup> Conspiracy theories abound in the media and in public discourse. They group around two key notions that are basically incompatible to each other: *dış mibraklar* ("outward factors") and *derin devlet* ("deep state"). While the first reflects the idea of a perpetual colonialist-imperialist threat to Turkey's sovereignty, the second describes the Turkish state as a conglomerate of secretive groups and organizations using every legal and illegal means in pursuit of their ends. The difference between the two basic foci of conspiracy theory in Turkey is also a political one, although its ideological demarcation is not always clear.

The notion of the deep state is symbolized by the famous traffic accident of Susurluk. On November 3, 1996 a Mercedes Benz crashed into a truck in the province of Balıkesir, leaving the four people in the car dead or wounded and exposing a connection between the government, the armed forces, right-wing militias, and organized crime. When a militia leader and a contract

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Cüneyt Özdemir, *Komutanın Şüpheli Ölümü: Eşref Bitlis Olayı*, İstanbul 1998; Adnan Akfırat, *Belgelerle Eşref Bitlis Suikastı*, İstanbul 1997. There are also numerous articles in journals and newspapers on this topic.

<sup>15</sup> In 1991 and 1992, a number of pensioned generals were allegedly killed by the leftist terrorist organization Dev-Sol: Hulusi Sayın, Memduh Ünlütürk, İsmail Selen, and Kemal Kayacan.

<sup>16</sup> In November 1993 Major Ahmed Cem Ersever was found shot in the head in Ankara, his hands bound on his back; he had leaked information to the media. Brigadier-general Bahtiyar Aydın was killed in action in 1993 in Lice; he was allegedly shot by a sniper. Kazım Çillioğlu was found dead in his house in 1994; his death was publicly ruled a suicide. In 1995 Colonel Rıdvan Özden was killed in action while serving in Mardin; his wife and reports in several media doubted the official version (cf. Akfırat, *Eşref Bitlis Suikastı*, pp. 18–19; Özdemir, *Şüpheli Ölümü*, pp. 117–118; "Bitlis'in Kadrosu Öldürüldü", in: *Star*, Aug. 16, 2009, <http://www.stargazete.com/politika/-bitlis-in-kadrosu-olduruldu-haber-207836.htm> [accessed Nov. 4, 2010]).



killer, red-listed by Interpol (Abdullah Çatlı), a member of parliament (Sedat Edip Bucak, who survived), the director of a police academy (Hüseyin Kocadağ), and a former beauty queen (Gonca Us) are found in a car together with forged documents, drugs, and guns there can be little doubt of a conspiracy. The scandal led to the resignation of the minister of the interior, Ahmet Ağar, and several investigations which, however, did not result in uncovering its full scope.

This incident – and some lesser known cases such as the events around the bombing of a Kurdish bookshop in the Turkish town of Şemdinli in 2005 – has convinced many people that the notion of Turkey as a deep state reflects reality. Yet, it does not explain who is ultimately pulling the strings in the background. The book on the NATO's secret “stay-behind” armies by the Swiss historian Daniele Ganser<sup>17</sup> was translated into Turkish in the year of its initial publication in English,<sup>18</sup> opening a new perspective on the NATO involvement in terrorist acts especially in Italy and Turkey. In 2008 the so-called Ergenekon lawsuit began. It comprised the hearings of over one hundred people, among them generals, politicians, and journalists, who were allegedly involved in plotting against the government and preparing a *coup d'état*. Although it remains unclear whether there existed any connection between the “Counter-Guerilla” (as the secret NATO operation Gladio was called in Turkey) and Ergenekon, such a connection seems a natural option for all those trying to combine the deep state with the idea of a colonialist-imperialist threat to Turkey.

Given this political background – that quite naturally refueled the discussion about the death of Eşref Bitlis –,<sup>19</sup> it seems out of question for the time being to verify or to falsify the claims that the crash of Bitlis' plane in 1993 had been the result of sabotage. Taking the generally confusing and complicated structure of the Turkish political theater into account, both options seem possible. Likewise, the American factor in the incident can be neither confirmed nor ruled out. The problem here is quite simply the lack of reliable sources of information combined with the considerable personal risks that anyone looking into such conspiracy theories is facing (not only) in Turkey.

<sup>17</sup> Daniele Ganser, *NATO's Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe*, London 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Daniele Ganser, *Nato'nun Gizli Orduları Gladio Operasyonları: Terörizm ve Avrupa Güvenlik İlkeleri*, Gülşah Karadağ (trans.), Istanbul 2005.

<sup>19</sup> The official investigation was re-opened in September 2010 by the solicitor general in Ankara (cf. “Eşref Bitlis'in Ölümüne İlişkin Soruşturma Başlatıldı”, in: *Yeni Şafak*, Sept. 30, 2010, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/Gundem/?t=30.09.2010&i=280908> [accessed Oct. 10, 2010]).

Whether the Ergenekon lawsuit and connected lawsuits will bring light to this issue and, if so, whether the insights will be convincing remains to be seen.

However, it is certainly not rare that we find ourselves in a position where it seems impossible to obtain sufficient evidence that allows us to prove or disprove the factuality of a given conspiracy theory. It is obvious that the crucial point in such cases becomes the question of probability which itself hinges on the problem of plausibility. Given the circumstances briefly sketched above, it nevertheless seems not unreasonable to assume that *if* Bitlis' death was the result of a conspiracy, this conspiracy might be part of a larger plot. In other words, while the explanation offered by Mütercimler and others on the reason why the plane crashed is in itself a small-scale conspiracy theory, the plane crash might be part of a larger conspiracy to be uncovered by some kind of medium or large-scale conspiracy theory.

Erol Mütercimler's book offers such a narrative. A chapter entitled "Brüksel Asker İstemiyor!" ("Brussels Doesn't Want the Soldiers!") deals – albeit extremely cursory – with Turkish history and international relations since the 1950s. It offers a useful summary of a conspiratorial trend of thought that is certainly not uncommon in Turkey:

Because of the fear of communism that had spread in the Western world during the Stalin era the Turkish armed forces within the NATO framework were strengthened in order to defend especially Greece and the oil of Mesopotamia against the Soviets. But as soon as Stalin died in 1953, an armistice was achieved in Korea, and Turkey was confronted with not having obtained the loans for industrial development it had hoped to get in exchange for its military support of America in this war and with the fact that Cyprus was given to Greece. When the leaders of the *Demokrat Parti*, who had brought Turkey to the NATO in 1952, did not renounce Cyprus completely and even thought of demanding the credits for industrialization from the Soviet Union, if necessary, they were removed from power by the NATO military *coup d'état* on May 27 [1960]. Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, Foreign Minister Fatih Rüştü Zorlu and Minister of Economy Hasan Polatkan were executed and paid with their lives for having offered resistance [to the designs of the West]. Regardless of this warning of the West which showed what would happen to people who did not march in the prescribed direction, Turkey neither gave up industrialization nor Cyprus. The heads of the armed forces and of the government changed, but the threatening letters sent by President Johnson did not bring about these changes. With the operation of 1974 Turkey solved the question of Cyprus on its own.

To punish this behavior the West brought to stage the [Armenian] terror organization ASALA under the pretext of the 'Armenian Genocide' and paved the way for the murdering of Turkish diplomats. Films like *Midnight Express* appeared. While America imposed an arms embargo on the one hand, the 'Kurdish Question' was set up on the other hand. It was not enough. From May 1, 1977 onwards it was tried to trap Turkey in a conflict that from the outside looked like a clash between leftists and rightists.

While Turkey, despite all the pressure that had been put on it, refused to show the obedience that was expected from it, something unexpected happened in Iran. The black-cloaked women sent to the streets by Khomeini and the apparently Muslim-turned Iranian Communists managed to overturn the Shah and make him flee abroad. When a Mollah regime that declared America “the great Satan” came to power in Iran and entered a fierce war with Saddam Hussein, who had been made to attack them, it was unclear in which direction the domestic disturbances would drag Turkey. However, within a week, anarchy and terror in Turkey were put to an end by the military coup of September 12, 1980. While its neighbors were fighting to death, Turkey came to a state of peace and quietness.

A flow of money began, unprecedented in the history of the Republic of Turkey, especially from the oil-producing Arab countries to Turkey (of course with American consent). With Iran and Iraq having closed down their sea transportation routes, the only windows open to the world were the harbors of Iskenderun and Mersin in Turkey.

Endless convoys of commercial transportation units moved from these harbors to the gates of Iran and Iraq. The Southeast [of Turkey] flourished. Moreover, Turkey decided to use its own resources to build the Atatürk Dam for the South-eastern Anatolia Project (GAP) without raising foreign credits. These were developments of a sort which the West would not easily accept, but the fear of Iran preponderated.<sup>20</sup>

In much the same way Mütercimler then goes on to interpret the political role of Turgut Özal, who was Prime Minister of Turkey from 1983 to 1989 and President of Turkey from 1989 until his death in 1993. Özal is characterized as one of the Turkish naifs who believed in the West. As had happened after the Korean War, Turkey was not rewarded for its contributions to the Cold War – on the contrary, western support for the PKK and the assault on the Turkish destroyer *Muavenet* by a ship-to-ship missile during a NATO exercise in 1992 made even Özal become aware of the situation, and shortly before his death he began to re-orient Turkish politics to the East. As to the cause of his death in office in 1993, Mütercimler cites rumors that the President, who had a heart condition, might have been assassinated. He continues:

The leaders who sided with America against the Soviets were vanishing at the moment when it was time to pay them. Who in Turkey remembered the President of Pakistan, Ziya-ul-Haq, who provided the most important support for the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan and died in a mysterious plane crash? Or, let's not think of Zia-ul-Haq. Is it implausible to think of a conspiracy theory that claims a link between the death of the military commander against the PKK, Eşref Bitlis, who died in another crashed plane, and the death of Özal?<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Mütercimler, *Kompla Teorileri*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>21</sup> Mütercimler, *Kompla Teorileri*, pp. 24–25.

It is from this perspective, too, that Mütercimler views the question of Turkey's EU membership as a neo-colonialist enterprise in the spirit of the infamous Treaty of Sèvres and the Turkish armed forces as the last obstacle to a western-dominated Turkey whose social fabric has been ruined and torn apart by neo-liberalism.

Our second example is a conspiracy theory of the rather large-scale, almost global, type, even if its focus on the side of the victims is largely limited to Turkey. An essential characteristic of the second example of conspiracy theory is that it is comprised of a chain of many instances of (comparatively) small-scale conspiracy, our first example of the alleged plane sabotage being just one of them. Thus, we may distinguish here two levels of conspiracy theories: a low, first-order or small-scale level that forms the building material for the other second-order or large-scale level that forms a master narrative out of the narratives of its components. Despite their interdependence the two levels co-exist in relative independence from one another. Above it has been argued that it is difficult to obtain the factual evidence for either proving or disproving the alleged manipulation of Eşref Bitlis's aircraft. The difficulty of proving or disproving would probably be comparable in each single instance of small-scale conspiracy contained in our second example of a large-scale conspiracy theory by Mütercimler. Even if the majority of the small-scale conspiracy theories could be proven wrong, this would still not be enough to disprove the existence of Mütercimler's large-scale conspiracy. Furthermore, it would be difficult to give a percentage of first-order conspiracy theories which have to be disproved in order to finally unmask the second-order conspiracy theory they are part of. We might even argue that the refutation of all first-order claims of conspiracy would be needed for that purpose. It might therefore seem reasonable to begin at the other end and try to deconstruct the master narrative. However, it would be certainly too naïve to argue that Turkey and the U.S. were both members of the NATO and that therefore any undercover action by the U.S. against Turkish individuals or institutions detrimental to perceived western interests was out of question. On the other hand, one could take issue with Mütercimler's contention that it had been long-standing western politics to keep Turkey underdeveloped and weak. In either case, taking issue with Mütercimler's second-order conspiracy theory would not automatically affect all the small-scale conspiracy theories it comprises. The plane crash could still be claimed to have been the outcome of some conspiracy, and to disestablish that contention would require separate work.

In considering these and other possible arguments it becomes evident that the requirements for dealing with the claims of this large-scale conspi-

theory are qualitatively different from those of small-scale theories. While a conspiracy involving a plane crash caused by technical manipulation can be uncovered in principle (although it might not be in practice), a long-term and large-scale conspiracy as presented in our second example cannot, at least not in the same way. This difference in verifiability and falsifiability is the result of the differences in scope and abstraction of the two levels of conspiracy narratives. In itself this difference is not specific to conspiracy theory but can arise in any historiographical context. The question whether Elvis Presley faked his own death in 1977 is basically not different from the questions when Sultan Mehmed II was born and what the original identity of his mother was or whether Martin Luther really nailed his 95 theses on the door of the All-Saints' Church in Wittenberg in 1517 or whether this has been a myth. All these questions are of a nature that requires answers which leave no room for interpretation because they refer to simple facts. If we do not have the answers the reason is simply a lack of data, as is the case with the causes for the crash of Eşref Bitlis' aircraft. On the other hand, Mütercimler's narrative of the role of the West in recent Turkish history evades verifiability, as does any hypothesis that tries to determine the ultimate reasons for the outbreak of World War I in German politics. It is not only that we lack the data to prove or disprove every single conspiracy theory that Mütercimler links together in his historical *tour de force*, but the fact that he weaves them into a master narrative of a scope as large as "the West against Turkey". Ultimately, the master narrative cannot be reduced to the question whether the conspiracies it links together are real.

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But perhaps the master narrative of "the West against Turkey" does not qualify as a conspiracy theory? Let us consider the definition of conspiracy theory given by David Coady that revises formulations proposed by Brian L. Keely and Steve Clarke:

A conspiracy theory is a proposed explanation of an historical event, in which conspiracy (i.e., agents acting secretly in concert) has a significant causal role. Furthermore, the conspiracy postulated by the proposed explanation must be a conspiracy to bring about the historical event which it purports to explain. Finally, the proposed explanation must conflict with an "official" explanation of the same historical event.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David Coady, "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories", in: *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 17/2003, 2, pp. 199–211, p. 201.

Mütercimler's narrative of "the West against Turkey" seems to miss already the first part of Coady's definition. *Prima facie*, it appears to be difficult to reduce "the West" to a group of actors. The second part of the definition is equally problematic: a conspiracy theory is expected to deal with successful conspiracies; failed conspiracies do not qualify for conspiracy theories. While in the case of ours the sub-conspiracies are claimed to have been successful, the course of history is not determined entirely by them. The West is depicted as acting under the conditions of the Cold War, and at least the Iranian Revolution is presented as an unforeseen and unplanned event that forced the West to modify its policy towards Turkey. But is this policy a conspiracy? Do many small conspiracies add up to a big one? The conflict between the West and Turkey depicted in Mütercimler's second-order narrative could also be read as a long-standing conflict of interests with one party being considerably more powerful. In the last instance this problem is again related to our first, the question of authorship or, more exactly, whether a reification of the West as an actor meets the definition of conspiracy theory. Consider the footnote that Popper put in the context of his own discussion of conspiracy theory:

In the discussion which followed the lecture, I was criticized for rejecting the conspiracy theory, and it was asserted that Karl Marx had revealed the tremendous importance of the capitalist conspiracy for the understanding of society. In my reply I said that I should have mentioned my indebtedness to Marx, *who was one of the first critics of the conspiracy theory*, and one of the first to analyze the unintended consequences of the voluntary actions of people acting in certain social situations. Marx said quite definitely and clearly that the capitalist is as much caught in the network of the social situation (or the 'social system') as is the worker; that the capitalist cannot help acting in the way he does: he is as unfree as the worker, and the results of his actions are largely unintended. But the truly scientific (though in my opinion too deterministic) approach of Marx has been forgotten by his latter-day followers, the Vulgar Marxists, who have put forward a popular conspiracy theory of society which is no better than the myth of the Learned Elders of Zion.<sup>23</sup>

I believe that a similar argument can be used regarding Mütercimler's view of history. It may be considered a nationalist vulgarization that is ultimately derived from the Marxist theoretical debate on imperialism and reinforced by the popularization of the Huntington thesis of "the clash of civilizations". Ultimately, it may be categorized as a leftist Kemalist position. It should be noted, however, that this position is not without academic acclaim in Turkey

<sup>23</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, London 2002, p. 167, n. 3; italics in the original. Cf. also Popper, *Open Society*, p. 111.

and that the notion of contemporary western imperialism is an essential part of it.<sup>24</sup>

In Mütercimler's narrative, regardless of the Turkish debate on the "deep state", it is only the more powerful western side that uses conspiracy as a regular tool of politics. Also, his rhetoric points to a dichotomy of good and evil, or at least of justified and unjustified claims. As is well known, Popper was not only critical of Vulgar Marxists but also of Marx himself, yet for different reasons. He accused him of having subscribed in his views on history to the theoretical fallacies of what Popper characterized as "historicism". It is interesting to note, however, that Popper seems to have believed that historicism was closely related to conspiracy theory.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, for all practical political purposes it seems irrelevant whether the actions of the capitalist and, for that matter, of the western imperialist are determined by class affiliation or by psychology (as Popper claimed Vulgar Marxists believed).<sup>26</sup> The Marxist political application of the theory of class consciousness was to blame individuals because, ultimately, individual people form the only tangible targets for political action. The idea of class consciousness, an abstract concept which holds that the political action of individuals is determined by their class status, could only be concretized by being translated into an ethical categorization of individual intent that formed the basis of political orientation and action. In other words, the moment Marxist theory was put into political practice (which was its explicit philosophical program), it became irrelevant whether undesired political attitudes had emerged from class consciousness or from bad intentions. At least from the perspective of the victims of this politics who were liquidated or put in the Gulags this differentiation was of limited interest.

For the question of plausibility of conspiracy theories the differentiation between structural or systemic forces and personal agency may therefore be of less relevance than the definition by David Coady, providing for "agents acting secretly in concert", seems to suggest. The element of secrecy in the definition is equally of less significance than one may surmise at a first glance. Any concerted action taken in situations of perceived antagonistic group interests (in a zero-sum situation) will probably not be announced – and therefore secret.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Faruk Alpkaya, "Bir 20: Yüzyıl Akımı: 'Sol Kemalizm'", in: Murat Belge (ed.), *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasî Düşünce*, vol. 2, Istanbul 2001, pp. 477–500.

<sup>25</sup> Popper, *Open Society*, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> Popper, *Open Society*, p. 122.

As we have seen, the notion of the “imperialist West” does not necessarily rely on the presupposition of an omnipotent group of evil actors, although it easily may degenerate into that depiction. In a way, Mütercimler’s narrative leaves a lacuna at this point that is open to further specification. His opaque version of “the West” might easily be developed into a vision where the West is directed by, for instance, a conspiratorial group of Zionists or Freemasons. His depiction of Kofi Annan’s relation to the “Jewish lobby” demonstrates that Mütercimler elsewhere in his book moves closer to this type of conspiracist thinking than in the two chapters discussed here.

I believe that the apparent similarities between (Vulgar) Marxist theory and conspiracy theory can also be viewed from a hermeneutic perspective. Paul Ricœur differentiates two basic approaches to hermeneutics. The “hermeneutics of trust”, that aims at the reconstruction of meaning, and the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, that attempts to decode meaning that is hidden or disguised. He famously counted Marx along with Freud and Nietzsche as one of the “three masters of suspicion” and emphasized that suspicion in this context did not mean skepticism.<sup>27</sup>

If the hermeneutics of suspicion is chosen as the fundamental strategy of historical interpretation, conspiracy theory (in the widest sense) becomes a valid option as a tool of explanation. As such, it is neither irrational nor reproachable but an indispensable and powerful tool for social and cultural critique. It is, however, metaphorically speaking, a rather dangerous tool, much like a sharp knife that can easily cause thinking to lapse into irresponsibility or absurdism. In other words, striving to uncover the hidden meaning behind what seems to be the obvious is a shared concern of both conspiracy theory and the hermeneutics of suspicion. The difference between them is that conspiracy theory seeks for “the truth” while the hermeneutics of suspicion in Ricœur’s reading needs to remain conscious of the ambivalent and provisional character of any attempt to understand. But as in the cases of Vulgar Marxism and Marxism the difference may be less important in hermeneutic practice than in hermeneutic theory. Thus, Marx’s contention in what may be described as his application of the hermeneutics of suspicion was that he had discovered the law of motion of the capitalist society.

Looking at the examples of conspiracy theory that I have presented, I would argue that while it may be useful to classify some historical texts as “conspiracy theories” this classification by itself does not help to assess the validity of the explanations offered. Even Brian Keeley in his noted article of

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Die Interpretation: Ein Versuch über Freud*, Eva Moldenhauer (trans.), Frankfurt 1999, pp. 45–47.



1999, in which he set out to establish a catalog of distinctions between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories (of which he abbreviated the latter to UCT), admits that it is difficult to give a definition of conspiracy theories and to carve out a class of unwarranted conspiracy theories one would be able to exclude from assent by definition.<sup>28</sup>

Although Keeley emphasizes that his essay is epistemological, not sociological,<sup>29</sup> his notion of “errant data”, which he believes to be the key tool of conspiracy theories, is based on a sociological approach. Errant data, according to Keeley’s definition, is evidence that is either contradictory or neglected in the received or official accounts.<sup>30</sup> Relying on errant data, UCT offer a surplus amount of explanation in contrast to the official or received explanation. This strength, however, comes at the cost of a hidden weakness that lies in the underlying assumption that the official explanation is purposely hiding something. Therefore, errant data is implicitly more important than the data given by the official explanation. Nevertheless, the existence of errant data, as Keeley argues, does not necessarily indicate that a theory is wrong: “the existence of errant data alone is not a significant problem with a theory. Given the imperfect nature of our human understanding of the world, we should expect even the best possible theory would not explain *all* the available data”.<sup>31</sup>

Although Keeley does not draw on this parallel, his argument seems to reflect the concept of paradigm shift offered by Thomas S. Kuhn in the context of scientific revolutions. Kuhn claims that “anomalies” and “discrepancies” (which would be his equivalents to Keeley’s “errant data”) always occur and do not necessarily lead to a shift of paradigms.<sup>32</sup> It can be easily seen that Keeley’s notion of “errant data” is wholly dependent on another characteristic he believes to be typical of a UCT: “[a] UCT is an explanation that runs

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<sup>28</sup> Brian L. Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories”, in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96/1999, 3, pp. 109–126, p. 111: “The definition conspiracy theory poses unexpected difficulties. There seems to exist a strong, common intuition that it is possible to delineate a set of explanations – let us call them unwarranted (UCTs). It is thought that this class of explanation can be distinguished analytically from those theories which deserve our assent. The idea is that we can do with conspiracy theories what David Hume did with miracles: show that there is a class of explanations to which we should not assent, *by definition*. One clear moral of the present essay is that this task is not as simple as we might have heretofore imagined.”

<sup>29</sup> Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories”, p. 110.

<sup>30</sup> Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories”, p. 118.

<sup>31</sup> Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories”, p. 120.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1996, p. 81.

counter to some received, official, or ‘obvious’ account”.<sup>33</sup> In that context, Coady’s contention that Keeley’s definition is missing “the requirement that a conspiracy theory conflict with an official explanation of the event in question” seems somewhat unfounded.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the dichotomy of official explanation and conspiracy theory is not very helpful in transnational or intercultural contexts. As Coady rightly observes, “quite often the official version of events is just as conspiratorial as its rivals”.<sup>35</sup> There are cases like the question of the Armenian Genocide in 1915 where there might be even two “official” versions. Also, as in the Turkish case, an official version might be heavily contested so that its characteristic of “being official” is of less value for epistemological considerations. To put it more bluntly: in a political culture where the notion of “deep state” is common coin, and is so not without solid reason, the idea that a conspiracy theory should be defined by opposing an official explanation would appear rather problematic. In a scenario of information warfare it would seem extremely difficult even to distinguish “official” and “officially leaked” information. It is thus illustrative that some of the leading cadres of the leftist-nationalist Turkish Worker’s Party (*İşçi Partisi*) have been arrested in the context of the Ergenekon lawsuit. The party’s journal *Aydınlık* has been among the foremost print media uncovering alleged conspiracies, blaming them generally on western imperialists and their Turkish collaborators.<sup>36</sup> *Aydınlık* has frequently made use of allegedly leaked state documents.<sup>37</sup>

From a general perspective, conspiracy theories account for the fact that conspiracies do exist. Moreover, they tend to assume that conspiracies rarely come alone. Mostly, they seem to link a whole series of conspiracies and explain them in a master narrative. The differentiation of conspiracy theories according to their scale accounts for this fact. It does not, however, solve the problem that the labeling of an explanation as a conspiracy theory on whatever grounds does not say anything about its plausibility or its factuality.

<sup>33</sup> Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories”, pp. 116–117.

<sup>34</sup> Coady, “Conspiracy Theories”, p. 201.

<sup>35</sup> Coady, “Conspiracy Theories”, p. 208.

<sup>36</sup> Among the arrested was Adnan Akfırat who had contributed several articles in *Aydınlık* and the book mentioned above on the subject of the alleged murder of General Bitlis (cf. “Perinçek tutuklandı, ‘Ergenekon terör örgütü’ yöneticiliği ile suçlanıyor”, in: *Zaman*, Mar. 24, 2008, <http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haberno=668504> [accessed Nov. 4, 2010]).

<sup>37</sup> For a more recent example of a document that, according to *Aydınlık*, was classified as “very secret” (“çok gizli”), cf. Nusret Senem, “Eşraf Bitlis ‘Ergenekon’ Lideri”, in: *Aydınlık*, Oct. 10, 2010, p. 7.

Both have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Large-scale conspiracy theories pose basically different epistemological problems than small-scale ones do. Small-scale conspiracy theories can be verified or falsified in principle, even if in practice they may not. In the latter case, however, the reason is not of an epistemological nature but is based on the unavailability of reliable data.

It appears that Popper would have agreed that conspiracies happen and that trying to uncover them is an epistemologically legitimate undertaking. Nevertheless, he would have objected against large-scale conspiracy theories which bind together many “individual” conspiracies into a master narrative of grand conspiracy. He argued that large-scale conspiracy theories seem to assume that a small group of conspirators is able to control almost everything, which he deemed to be impossible. One might re-phrase his argument of scale by saying that the problem with large-scale conspiracy theory is the two implausible underlying assumptions that (1) small-scale conspiracies are part of large-scale conspiracies and that (2) large-scale conspiracies function exactly like small-scale ones.

However, looking at the Turkish experience and the two examples taken from Erol Mütercimler’s book demonstrates that both objections, although not totally unfounded, are too vague to be useful. For example, the cases of politically motivated murder in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s were so frequent and pointed into such a direction that it would be rather implausible *not* to assume they were part of one larger-scale conspiracy – in other words, the existence of the “deep state” suggested itself. On the other hand, the assumption of the existence and historical effectuality of “western imperialism” that has impregnated the leftist Kemalist discourse inherits the hermeneutics of suspicion with its Marxist theoretical roots. In addition, Turkey’s peculiar political position vis-à-vis the West and the fact that there is no “official” western politics of imperialism against Turkey contributes to the transformation of this explanatory concept into conspiracy theory. In a sense, the concept of western imperialism in the leftist Kemalist discourse is very close to what Popper criticized as “Vulgar Marxism”. This however, should not lead critics of vulgarization to believe that by refuting the vulgarized theory one can also tackle the original. Reading Mütercimler’s large-scale conspiracy theory as a vulgarized interpretation of western hegemony over Turkey, therefore, does not refute the assumption of the existence of western imperialism nor does it disprove the suspicion that elements of the deep state in Turkey were being controlled from outside and serving foreign interests.

Whether a plane crashes accidentally or for reasons of technical sabotage

is a historical question of a different epistemological quality than the historical question of western imperialism. Both, I have argued, qualify for conspiracy theories, yet on different levels of scope. While their factuality may be difficult or even impossible to establish, a certain plausibility of small-scale conspiracies like the alleged sabotage of General Eşref Bitlis' plane cannot be denied out of hand. As this type of alleged small-scale conspiracies forms part of the large-scale conspiracy theory of western imperialism in Turkey both cannot be treated independently from one another. Approaching the large-scale conspiracy theory of western imperialism from this side makes it look different – and arguably more plausible – than approaching it without paying attention to the many examples of potential small-scale conspiracies that have happened during the past few decades of Turkish history. We may still disagree with Mütercimler's explanation and we may still conclude that western imperialism did not play a significant role in Turkish politics. But it seems reasonable to admit that the frequency and the circumstances of political murder and similar incidents in Turkey were pointing towards the existence of a larger conspiracy and that the question of foreign involvement was a natural one to ask in this context.

Again, that does not prove Mütercimler's vision of grand conspiracy to be correct but approaching it from the side of small-scale conspiracy theories adds to its plausibility even if one may conclude it to contain exaggeration and trivialization or even myth making. As with rumors, the production costs of conspiracy theories tend to be much lower than the efforts required to prove or disprove them in a, scholarly speaking, satisfactory manner. It seems that there is no way to avoid these efforts.

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