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'How to read conspiratorially, or the hatred of theory'

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ABSTRACT


The Covid pandemic reaction has made manifest a hidden hatred of theory on the part of the consensual elite, specifically the ability of anyone to make a theory that would tie together loose strands of thought and make sense out of an apparently chaotic world. This article examines how the *Manifeste* exposes how certain concepts dear to the political Left (such as solidarity and mass movements) were complicit in the human rights abuses which began in 2020, while also pointing out the concepts that have endured as powerful tools in the struggle, but which the anonymous author/s of the *Manifeste* did not assign to any one thinker (biopolitics, deconstruction, the metaphysics of 'cool', etc.). The *Manifeste* conspires with the silent texts of French theory from Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida to Rancière and Agamben, and along the way offers a new hermeneutical practice. This new way of reading seeks a commonality of experience, a privileging of the wink over the 'nudge'. The *Manifeste* asks us to find common cause with others who know how to read what is happening, to break with hierarchical institutions and pre-fabricated identities; in short it asks us to love theory again.

RÉSUMÉ

La réaction au Covid a manifesté une haine cachée envers la « théorie » de la part de l'élite consensuelle, en particulier la capacité de n'importe qui d'élaborer une théorie qui donnerait un sens à un monde apparemment chaotique. Cet article examine comment le *Manifeste conspirationniste* expose la façon dont certains concepts chers à la gauche politique étaient complices des atteintes aux droits de l'homme qui ont commencé en 2020, tout en soulignant également les concepts qui sont restés des outils puissants dans la lutte, mais que le/les auteurs anonymes du *Manifeste* n'ont attribué à aucun penseur (biopolitique, déconstruction, métaphysique du « cool », etc.). Le *Manifeste* conspire avec les textes muets de la théorie française de Foucault, Deleuze et Derrida jusqu'à Rancière et Agamben, et offre une nouvelle pratique herméneutique. Cette nouvelle façon de la lecture recherche une expérience commune, préférant le clin d'œil au « nudge ». Le *Manifeste* nous demande de trouver une cause commune avec d'autres qui savent lire ce qui est se passe ; bref, cela nous demande d'aimer à nouveau la théorie.

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In an age where anything we read or anything we write can be constantly monitored, either by algorithms or by employers and even the police, we necessarily take extra care when we interpret texts and especially when we theorise. Within the academy, 'theory', once the proud domain of French departments in the Anglophone world, has now become rather taboo; those who are drawn to 'French theory' are advised to practise safer forms of analysis, preferably some form of cultural studies or perhaps a narrow focus on subjects based on agreed-upon theories, such as climate change, artificial intelligence or identity politics, as long as the final argument aligns with official narratives. Job postings, grant applications and influential publications (such as Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best's (2009) special issue on 'Surface Reading' for the journal *Representations*) all point to a turn away from theory on a disciplinary-wide and professional level. I would like to draw a link—that is to say, to propose a theory—between this aversion to theory in the academic world, specifically within and against French theory, and the broader political phenomenon of the anxiety about 'conspiracy theory'. It seems as though any theory risks being labelled as 'conspiracy' if it goes against a consensus, and that even the most improbable and conspiratorial of official and accepted narratives can avoid ridicule as long as they serve powerful interests. The line between a respectable 'theory' and a 'conspiracy theory' may simply only be drawn according to power structures. As the *Manifeste conspirationniste* shows us, we are surrounded by official totalising conspiracy theories that pervade institutional as well as academic discourses. In many ways theory (and in particular French theory as emblematic of literary theory in general, but also as a target of derision), at least in its more refined iterations, remains so threatening, inside and outside the academy, precisely because it rejects grand narratives and reductive explanations, which is to say because it over- or under-theorises. This article sets out to explore what the hatred of theory (both conspiracy theory and French theory) means for our ways of reading and proposes that an understanding of literature as a practice of taste may be the best strategy for surviving in this new hostile intellectual or rather anti-intellectual *médiarchie*.¹

Publishing an article on the *Manifeste conspirationniste* seems like a bit of a miracle in the wake of the last few years, when everyone from politicians to academics was threatened for speaking out against the regime, or even for making private health decisions. Seriousness in politics and academics required hiding behind the impersonal mask of 'science' and keeping one's personal opinions quiet, or at least only shared with close friends in a way that could not be recorded. And yet, a return to a personal form of criticism is warranted as a stand against the pretence of the objectivity of official consensus—personal criticism, as this article will demonstrate (through reference to Stendhal) emphasises the peripatetic, the anecdote and chance encounters in order to push the limits of the theoretical and invite further reflection instead of a pre-given consensus. Since I am applying for my Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK this year, it would seem a good idea to avoid criticising any policy put forward by His Majesty's Government and especially to avoid endorsing a book about conspiracies. Professors of epidemiology and medical ethics in the United States (such as Martin Kulldorff at Harvard and Aaron Kheriarty at University of California Irvine) lost their employment, due to their views on Covid. And I am, after all, only a professor of French literature, as my many acquaintances who disagreed with me about aspects of the Covid era frequently remind me. Even in that domain, I am not really an expert on anything in particular, although the

peer-review process demands that we make a show of it. However, not being an expert on anything, I read a lot and I have a very good memory, especially of the writers I study such as Deleuze, Foucault, Stendhal, Nerval and Proust.²

The necessity not to endorse the *Manifeste conspirationniste* due to my precarious visa status reminds me, notably, of a work that I wrote about in my first book, *The Novel Map* (Bray 2013), and that I have come back to recently, Stendhal's semi-autobiographical text *Vie de Henry Brulard* from the 1830s. The cover pages of Stendhal's manuscript are filled with bizarre sentences such as this one: 'à MM. de la Police. Rien de politique dans ce roman. Le plan est un exalté dans tous les genres qui, dégoûté et éclairé peu à peu, finit par se consacrer au culte des autels' (Stendhal 1955). Later in the text, Stendhal imagines that he is writing to a future reader in 1880 or in 1935: 'Ceci est nouveau pour moi; parler à des gens dont on ignore absolument la tournure d'esprit, le genre d'éducation, les préjugés, la religion! Quel encouragement à être vrai, il n'y a que cela qui tienne' (43). Stendhal as a high-level career functionary knew that censorship is superficial, and that the police rarely make it past the first few pages—as the back cover of the *Manifeste conspirationniste* puts it, 'Nous vaincrons parce que nous sommes plus profonds'. The algorithmic censorship of today still resembles that of Stendhal's police, since the nature of original thought escapes the ability of functionaries and computers to recognise patterns. Alex Berenson's lawsuit against Twitter and the US Federal Government revealed that high-level politicians and bureaucrats, including the head of the CDC, made direct pressure on Twitter to censor specific tweets and that the company's very heavy-handed censorship only hid behind a façade of computer-generated censorship. Stendhal and the *Manifeste* in their different ways both push the limits of their texts in order to force the political power behind the veneer of algorithmic censorship to expose itself.

More to the point, the *Manifeste* echoes Stendhal's concerns about his contemporaries' limited worldview:

[for our neoliberal enemies] il ne leur vient pas à l'idée que le cadre épistémologique dans lequel nous vivons, nos habitudes, nos conduites, nos pensées puissent constituer autre chose que des rails existentiels dont nous ne savons pas sortir, qu'une prison herméneutique dont nous rêvons de nous échapper, qu'un environnement neuro-linguistique qu'il nous suffirait, avec un peu de plasticité, de reprogrammer pour enfin 'réussir'. (Anonymous 2022)

The *Manifeste* argues, along with Stendhal, that well-policed societies function on the idea that ideological frameworks guide all thought and action. Pretending to conform to these frameworks grants a measure of protection against reprisals. In an environment where all that surrounds us is pre-designed and saturated with official discourse (ranging from the UK's Behavioural Nudge Unit's ever-present propaganda to legislation of politically correct language), what counts in the long run is writing in such a way that you evade the prejudices of education and ideology (whether that of 1830 or of 2020) in order to find the truth, even if that truth is simply that reading and writing can evade prejudice.

To do so requires, however, not a truthfulness based on an endless recounting of statistical facts, but rather an attention to aesthetic sensibility, which is to say, along with Giorgio Agamben in his book *Gusto*, the awareness that taste describes how truth and beauty communicate; taste, for Agamben, is at the origins of philosophy, defined as the love of wisdom and the wisdom of love (Agamben 1979). This is a form of knowledge that undoes stable categories of identity and situates itself between bodily sensation and

language, pleasure and science. We might even extend Agamben's argument to say that taste (as rooted in the body) and theory (the reflection on various forms of knowledge) complement each other. More importantly, taste and theory (as 'critique') are the foundations of politics, as Hannah Arendt affirmed in her reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, where she argued that taste constitutes the public realm.³ A denial of taste, of judgement, of critique and of theory, implies the denial of public debate. As Stendhal's mischievous epigraph suggests, someone who is 'dégouté' may very well find themselves on the path towards religion and the political consensus of the police. The last few years have seen a relentless effort to break down everyone (from activists, academics and scientists to workers and political opponents) 'pour leur dégouter de la vie', in order to have them conform to the reigning consensus. As I argue in this article, inspired by the *Manifeste* (which mentions 'goût' and 'dégout' 17 times in its pages), our way of resisting is to keep reading, to develop and affirm our taste, and to communicate with those who have managed, against all odds, to remain unbroken.

Hatred of theory

As a professor of French literature, the one thing I can attest to as a sort of expert is what I would like to call the recent turn towards a hatred of theory, though in truth this hatred, or at least as de Man called it, 'resistance', has always been there and is in fact constituent of theory itself (de Man 1986). Literary studies derives this resistance to theory from its literary object, since fiction that displays too strong a theory starts to resemble something else entirely. Theory always destabilises whatever context it enters, since as Jonathan Culler defined it, 'Theory is work that succeeds in influencing thinking in fields other than those in which it originates' (Culler 2006). Theory, then, is an amateur practice, the domain of the *bricoleur* that would question the authority of experts.

For Proust, famously, putting theory in a novel is like leaving a price tag on a gift, since it devalues the object it attempts to validate.⁴ Yet what has been called 'French theory' or more broadly literary theory since the early 1970s, acknowledges the literary aspects of theorising, even as it also shows the theorising inherent to any literary work. In line with what Jacques Rancière has noticed as 'la haine de la démocratie' and William Marx as 'la haine de la littérature', the hatred of theory stems from an attempt to concentrate power and knowledge by limiting who is allowed to have and even to share theories, with the aim of limiting the circulation of 'dangerous' theories (Marx [2015]; Rancière [2005b]).⁵

The early 2000s saw explosively conspiratorial takes on world events from the leading figures of (French) theory in the wake of 9/11 and the second Gulf War, such as Derrida's *Voyous*, Baudrillard's *Power Inferno*, Virilio's *Ce qui arrive* or Rancière's *Chroniques des temps consensuels*, as well as outrageous interpretations by more popular writers such as Gore Vidal's *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (Baudrillard [2003]; Derrida [2003]; Rancière [2005a]; Vidal [2002]; Virilio [2002]). Some of these books were magnificent, some of them simply shocking, but immediately following 9/11 even the most taboo topic was at least up for discussion. The hatred of theory that followed roughly the crash of 2008, however, can only be understood as a reticence on the part of writers to push against the consensus, rather than an explicit denial of theory itself (resistance to theory is already theory). The Covid pandemic, lockdowns, forced mRNA injections and even the war in Ukraine, have, on the other hand, given us at best complete silence on the part of Left

intellectuals, at worst a grovelling justification for the worst human rights abuses—such as Chomsky (nominally an anarchist) calling for lockdowns and forced separation of the unvaccinated. One of the notable exceptions (along with Laurent Mucchielli, Barbara Stiegler and a few others) is of course Giorgio Agamben, who has received unprecedented amounts of abuse, including a letter signed by hundreds of Italian philosophers (or more precisely academics in philosophy departments) denouncing him, with Donatella di Cesare (2021) saying that we have to ‘save Agamben and philosophy from Agamben’.⁶ Given how many philosophers in Italy and around the world had adopted Agamben’s framework for biopolitics when it was only ‘theoretical’, it is surprising that when his analyses became a matter of immediate and practical concern, so many, such as Roberto Esposito (2020) (who thereby consolidated his earlier critiques of Agamben), abandoned their previous positions in order to espouse the reigning consensus even at the cost of having nothing coherent to say.⁷

The case of Jacques Rancière is even more intriguing, given his insights and silences. In Rancière’s 2005 book *Chroniques des temps consensuels*, he argues that the dominant narrative among French politicians was that only a profound malaise or sickness in the French, or in democracy itself, could supposedly explain the rejection of expert consensus on the Constitution of the European Union. Rancière denounced the idea put forth by an elitist press that the French were, in short, sick, and that the cure was to listen to the ‘doctors’ of the state, who know best. Symptoms, themselves constructions, call for the expertise of doctors—something Rancière is also sceptical about when he talks about hermeneutics. Rancière was particularly prescient in his critique of the consensus around the famous heatwave (*canicule*) of 2003; safetyism creates an incentive on the part of the state to exaggerate its responsibility to keep the population safe, even when, in the case of the weather, this borders on the absurd. Rancière shows that it is precisely in the extremism of the state’s *mea culpa*—claiming responsibility and failure for something it could not conceivably have prevented—that we can see this new source of biopower. When even the heat is a source of danger, the bio-political consensus becomes absolute, and the ‘necessity’ of state power, and consensus, only grows with the body count. During Covid, exactly the same rhetoric was used by states and institutions to justify lockdowns, masks and the mRNA injections; given the traditional perception that the centre-right rejects state intervention (which is not in fact always the case), the new extreme state interventions triggered an automatic response on the part of the Left to call for even more of the same in order not to let the poor fall behind. When (predictable) iatrogenic deaths due to ventilators, lockdowns and vaccines became impossible to ignore, those calling for an equal distribution of what turned out to be deadly interventions went silent.

And yet, Rancière saw in the Covid crisis an impossibility to form an effective dissensus, since for him resistance to lockdown was only ‘la paranoïa complotiste’ and the very notion of bio-politics as (Rancière imagines it) articulated by Agamben is just the sort of totalising conspiracy theory that has crippled the Left for ages.⁸ For Rancière (2021), it was self-evident that Covid was always extremely deadly and therefore popular consensus about Covid policy is one that arises spontaneously without a need for an underlying political consensus. Rancière can then hypothesise that anyone questioning official policy is a Trump supporter or a conspiracy theorist on a spectrum ranging from ‘Agamben à QAnon’, even as his own theory postulates the equality of intelligence and the dangers of consensus. Rancière’s reticence to pronounce on this new medico-political matrix stems perhaps from the fact

that he refuses to make a prefabricated concept fit into a present situation without adequate reflection; in other words, he resists becoming himself yet another 'doctor' in the service of state reason, though his rhetorical gymnastics and quickness to diagnose the situation belie his own justifications. Better to stay quiet, perhaps, than to have your words made into tools against you. Still, as we saw with Agamben, those who will use your ideas as tools are more than happy to throw away the tools and turn on you in an instant. This has less to do with the usefulness of the tools, and everything to do with how the social configures consensus as a simulacrum of the intellectual sphere. Rancière warns us that any resistance can be transformed by the political consensus into 'expertise' and that conspiracy theorists are those who want to gain power by proving that they are more intelligent than the masses by themselves becoming experts. During times of intense social intimidation and censorship, a frontal attack can backfire as theorists and philosophers risk losing their credibility by claiming an expertise that increasingly looks more like conspiracy than theory.

I argue, therefore, that the Covid pandemic reaction has made manifest, therefore, a limit to how far Left intellectuals will push against consensus and a not-so-hidden hatred of theory on the part of the consensual elite, specifically their questioning of the ability of anyone to make a theory that would tie together loose strands of thought and make sense out of an apparently chaotic world. The *Manifeste conspirationniste* shows that in fact it is the state, with the help of social science experts, who have monopolised the power to interpret the world, while rejecting any competing claims on truth as 'disinformation' (see especially the section entitled 'L'enfer présent n'est que la réalisation du vieux projet positiviste', 283). Worse, it is one of the aims of the state since at least the First World War to use social science and statistics to target those who do form groups around competing theories and then to disband or coopt them.

It is no accident that this 'coup du monde' as the *Manifeste* aptly calls our current political situation, came by way of epidemiology, or the science of the 'diseases of the demos'; one might go so far as to say that epidemiology is the political science of protecting the state from the demos configured as a disease. Marcel Proust's father, Dr Adrien Proust, was an epidemiologist who reintroduced the notion of the *cordon sanitaire* and once wrote an article in the *Revue des deux mondes* that worried about the free circulation of populations brought about by the first globalisation, colonialism; no wonder, then, that the germaphobe Proust and his narrator seldom left their bedrooms.⁹ Lockdowns, social distancing, masks and forced injections were not primarily a scientific response to a medical issue, but had to do with crowd control and mastery over political narratives.¹⁰ The release of the Fauci emails in 2021 (and his testimony to Congress in 2024) as well as of the internal records of the Robert Koch Institute (the German equivalent of the CDC) in 2024 give ample evidence that the collective wisdom of infectious disease experts and epidemiologists was massaged to fit a political strategy, since never before had nation or continent-wide lockdowns been tried, ventilators had only been used as a last resort, and masks were known to be completely ineffective against airborne respiratory viruses.¹¹ When even *Saturday Night Live* ridiculed the Covid response in February 2022 by portraying a group of friends who are aware exactly what is happening but know they can't share it in public, then the disconnect between public health officials and the health of the public is apparent to everyone.

French theory's silence

We can say that 'conspiracy theory', in its paranoid attempt to blame all malfeasance and disorder on a secret group of bad actors, is therefore only the popularised version of a progressivist, sociological rationality of order, technological progress and transparency that seeks to control behaviour in the name of solidarity. As Barbara Stiegler shows in her book *Il faut s'adapter*, from 2019, neoliberalism from Walter Lippmann on has argued that humans need to adapt to ever-increasing technological change or else be left behind—from the Right or the Left, politicians use the same rhetoric in a distorted version of techno-Darwinism in order to justify pre-arranged political and economic decisions by the elite, who claim to understand where technology is leading us (Stiegler 2019).¹²

Given the impossibility of siding either with the neoliberal Covid state or its conspiratory mirror image, we perhaps shouldn't be surprised by the silence of Left intellectuals in the realm of theory around the world over the past few years. How can we know with any certainty that the threads we are pulling together, that the dots we are connecting, are the right ones? The very act of publishing a book with the pretence of explaining a theory of current events can put you in bad company. Moreover, given the power of consensus and the invention of new ways of censorship, especially online, we might suppose that the Left has been silenced. At first, we might imagine that it was the editors who were reticent to publish something scandalous, but a closer look shows that it is not the case, as it is authors themselves who seem unwilling to take risks. Gallimard's 'Tracts' series and Seuil publishing the *Manifeste conspirationniste* prove that at least on the publishing end, those who want to share their research in France could find outlets. Agamben's blog 'Una Voce' and Robert F. Kennedy Jr's (2021) enormously successful book *The Real Anthony Fauci* prove that distribution was also not a problem, though perhaps will be in the years ahead.

Worse than being silenced, or being merely silent, the *Manifeste* exposes how certain concepts dear to the political Left (such as solidarity and mass movements) were actively complicit in the human rights abuses which began in 2020. The *Manifeste* suggests that any critique of what is happening will have to be thought according to completely new categories in political terms that go beyond the traditional Left/Right divide. Champions of core leftist values such as Bernard Harcourt, Étienne Balibar or Alain Badiou seem to be spinning their intellectual wheels in regards to Covid, and continually shift the focus onto reliably leftist topics such as racism, capitalism or the never-ending Trump psychodrama.¹³ The *Manifeste's* author/s put it more bluntly: 'Mais que la gauche ait, au fond, toujours été du côté des vainqueurs, dont elle n'était que la mauvaise conscience hystérique, voilà qui n'était apparu aux yeux de tous, dans l'histoire, que par éclats vite oubliés. Depuis deux ans, c'est un spectacle quotidien, interminable, immanquable' (49). At the same time, this systemic critique of the Left by the author/s of the *Manifeste* might be better categorised as a critique of the Left as systemic, a political faction or identity grouping that attempts to gain power and reshape the world we live in, for better and for worse. Just like so many other conspiratorial groups, the Left saw Covid as an opportunity to impose its policies by any means necessary.

However, it is worth pointing out that the concepts that have endured as powerful tools in the struggle against hegemony, but which the anonymous author/s of the

Manifeste does not assign to any one thinker (biopolitics, micropolitics, deconstruction, democracy, the metaphysics of 'cool', etc), come precisely from those philosophers most prized by the Left: as they write, 'Tous les auteurs que la gauche adule, elle les détesterait vivants' (48). The *Manifeste* conspires with the silent/silenced texts of French theory from Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Virilio, Baudrillard and others.

These silences, contradictions and betrayals on the Left and by philosophy were revealed and amplified by the global coup d'état (*coup du monde*) itself, which finally managed to expose the contradictions inherent in Left movements for the past 200 years. Without the more radical *maîtres à penser*, Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, we were left with commentators who struggled to find a new way to reorient their thought in the face of a society that rejects ever more violently the idea of theorising. Ideas not accredited by experts can only be met with distrust, and thus within consensual thinking, theories make unnecessary connections between facts with the result that they cannot be accepted unless approved by qualified authorities. Conspiracy theorists are those of the *demos* who take it upon themselves to connect the dots by rearranging facts in a different order than that taught by the state. They zealously claim the right to interpret and then reimagine the 'real' world in their own manner, defining the truth idiosyncratically.

Reading as solidarity

The danger of the conspiracy theorist, such as it is, lies in isolation from established groups, but this isolation can produce idiosyncratic ideas that can later be picked up by other isolated people to form a new bloc as a sort of contagious insanity. For the conspirators plotting against conspiracy theorists, according to the *Manifeste* everyone from Karl Popper to the CIA, the best way to prevent the association of threatening people is to impose isolation. Yet from this isolation, the conspiracy theorist starts to hallucinate a vision of the truth based on guilt by association—the very thing that institutions seem to fear most. A long concatenation of otherwise unrelated characters, ideas and events is held together by contingent relationships in order to project a 'conspiracy', a hidden plot that must be read or deduced after the fact. The conspiracy theorist needs a single truth to connect disparate unpleasant events.

For the author/s of the *Manifeste*, the categorical error is in thinking that there is only one conspiracy at a time: 'L'aberration n'est pas le complotisme, mais le sous-complotisme: le fait de ne discerner qu'un grand complot, alors qu'il y en a d'innombrables qui se trament dans toutes les directions, partout et tout le temps' (55). What 2020–22 revealed was at least twofold: both academic theory and state power have a tendency to think along the totalising lines of conspiracy theories, even and sometimes especially when they claim to avoid totalisation. Guilt by association is the hallmark of a police state, reinforced by identity politics with the help of statistics (which is to say the science of the state) and official institutions. A facet of theory is a similar concatenation of facts, texts and associations that assumes at least the identity of an author, a text and a system of thought, in order to espouse or denounce it. Conspiracy theory, state conspirators and theoreticians share much more than they want to admit.

Stylistically, the *Manifeste conspirationniste* is a strange text that begins as a classic conspiracy theory, with exaggerated (and perhaps not always convincing) claims of bad guys scheming to take over the world, and a genealogy of evil stretching from Bonald to

Bill Gates. It reads like a slightly less paranoid version of Paul Virilio, as if it needed to get through as many unsettling claims as possible. Virilio's ([1976] 1993) *Essai sur l'insécurité du territoire*, with its diagnostic of what Agamben would later call 'bare life' and the neo-liberal strategy of imposing 'total peace' (echoing the *coup du monde*), could have been a blueprint for the Covid pandemic response.

A timeline consisting of popular revolts around the world in 2019 and of 'preparedness' contingency exercises on the part of states gives plausibility to the conspiracy that the pandemic was planned, or at least convenient for people in power. Still, as a reader of conspiracies dating back at least to the French Revolution, the *Manifeste* strikes me as more literary, or theoretical in the French theory sense, in its lack of argumentation. The overwhelming number of quotations on the part of engineers, politicians, neoliberal intellectuals and techno-capitalists makes the case, without having to go into detail, that our current political and economic discourse is itself conspiratorial—this book only renders these conspiracies 'manifestes'. There is consequently no point in figuring out exactly who did what and when, and even less so if any one single event was planned or an accident, because, as Virilio has shown, the accident merely reveals the unconscious disaster fantasised at the moment of invention (Bray 2008).

Instead of proving that a nebulous 'they' knew of a secret plan, and that the masses were ignorant, the *Manifeste* argues the opposite: that we all knew what was happening all along and there was therefore no secret since we were all in on the conspiracy. With instant access to all the knowledge of the world on our cell phones, and under lockdown endless amounts of time to do research, ignorance was no excuse. As the author/s say in the introduction:

Le débat n'est pas entre conspirationnisme et anticonspirationnisme, mais à l'intérieur du conspirationnisme. Notre désaccord avec les défenseurs de l'ordre existant ne porte pas sur l'interprétation du monde, mais sur le monde lui-même. [...] Nous n'écrivons pas pour convaincre. Il est bien trop tard pour cela. (10)

To propose that everyone is a conspiracist, or that there are infinite conspiracies, is certainly outside the realm of traditional conspiracy theory, which imagines a hidden plot to take over the world, which can only be stopped if we reveal this secret to the masses. Here, the masses could see quite plainly what was going on, but somehow the very obviousness of the disaster prevented any action to stop it. The question then is, what are we to make of this collective conspiracy and subsequent inaction? Why do so many people find comfort in playing along with the pandemic farce? Perhaps there is a Girardian joy in casting out the scapegoat, and like Manzoni's *Storia della Colonna infame*, the mechanism of paranoia and social contagion is stronger than that of rationalism or solidarity.

The Happy Few

From this anti-conspiracy-theory theory, the *Manifeste* leads us out of the aporia of conspiracy, disinformation and paranoia. It manages not only to teach us about the paradoxes of conspiracy, the ravages of the social sciences and the disappointments of leftist progressive thought, but it also suggests a way to read conspiratorially, which would mean to read for the experience of reading, for a shared outlook, for a liberation from identitarian and social constraints, and for the covert signs of friendship and complicity:

Le schisme est donc entre deux types de 'nous'. Le 'nous' *représentatif* de ceux qui partagent un attribut—être Suisse, policier, chasseur, LGBTQIA+, etc.—en vertu duquel ils peuvent avoir représentants, députés, porte-parole, icônes, droits ou syndicats, et le 'nous' *expérientiel* de ceux qui partagent un vécu et se retrouvent dans la prise de parole, le geste ou l'histoire de quelqu'un. (364)

The book draws on the experience we all had during the last two years, an experience in common which both Balibar (2020) and Rancière feared that lockdown would render apolitical, and calls on us to find common ground with others in secret, away from the mediatised political sphere per se, in ways that remind us of 1789, 1848, 1940 and 1968. In the final, almost poetic chapter, the author/s write, 'C'est à une intonation, à l'usage d'un mot, à une moue fugace que l'on devine celui à qui l'on peut encore parler. Celui à qui l'on peut encore confier nos "doutes"' (359). Only by using our most subtle perceptions, only by exercising our capacity for taste, in Agamben's formulation, can we begin to create a network of people with whom we can speak, communicate and 'conspire' (etymologically 'breathe together').

This new way of interacting with others, of reading, seeks a commonality of experience, a privileging of the wink over the 'nudge', that rejects the systematising and levelling of identity politics or movement building and asks us to find common cause with people we would never have imagined talking with before, just as we lost many friends and family unexpectedly over the schism of Covid. The *Manifeste* gives a particularly poignant example of the power of taste to bring different people together, and also the fear this brings out among the Covid faithful:

Au printemps 2020, une vieille amie—une vieille *terroriste* à coup sûr—passait le temps suspendu du confinement avec quelques-unes de ses voisines, se lisant des poèmes de leur goût, de leur *cœur*, depuis leurs fenêtres respectives. Elles ne tardèrent pas à recevoir une lettre de la copropriété leur intimant de cesser ce scandale: prendre du bon temps 'pendant que d'autres meurent' ! (17)

The *Manifeste* asks us to share our experience, our taste, with others who know how to read what is happening, to break with hierarchical institutions and prefabricated identities; in short it asks us to love theory again in the original sense of philosophy as a tasteful knowledge rooted in the love of the search for wisdom and the wisdom of love.

By way of conclusion, a brief look back at Stendhal can point to a way forward for theory after the *Manifeste*. If Mérimée quoted Stendhal correctly, and 'le mauvais goût mène au crime', then perhaps this article may be a sign that theory is a criminal endeavour. Consensual thinking relies on imposing a uniform taste in order to dissuade dangerous thoughts. And yet, for Stendhal's character Mathilde in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, her lower-class love interest, Julien Sorel, is worthy of respect precisely because, 'il n'a pas peur d'être de mauvais goût, lui'. What then are we to do, as professional readers of theory, as thinkers, scholars and writers who are caught in the delicate balance between our own aesthetic and intellectual tastes and a political regime that, according to the *Manifeste*, prizes modelling the future over opening up the past? Stendhal, stuck in the bourgeois hell of the 1820s and 1830s, asked himself similar questions. One answer he had was to write for those readers in the future who resembled the people he loved in the present. Indeed, he predicted that by 1880 or 1935 his work would finally find its public, and in fact those are the years that

Nietzsche and Léon Blum among countless others made of Stendhal a major literary figure. And yet, the prediction is only made tongue in cheek, as he knew that his works created their own readership. More mysterious omens appear in his novels, such as the scrap of paper Julien finds in a church that suggests to him that he will be guillotined. Far from indicating to the reader that omens exist or that society is conspiring against Julien, it is one more reminder that we are reading a novel, constructed to simulate meaning but not to circumscribe it. Literary taste allows us to see a model for the future, a sign of the times, a slogan or an injunction, and savour it, think it over, and accept or reject it.

Stendhal's 'Happy Few' aren't the privileged elite who were given the gift of good taste and eternal wisdom, but rather those who know how to make time for taste, for the literary taste of reading and sharing the pleasure of knowledge with others. The *Manifeste* calls on us to find the 'Happy Few' we can breathe together with in the stifling atmosphere of the neoliberal *coup du monde*.

Notes

1. See Citton (2017), which discusses how the reign of media conditions our political life by providing the illusion of democracy.
2. As the *Manifeste* notes, these writers were all conspiracy theorists: 'Et Deleuze, avec sa "société de contrôle". Guattari, avec son "capitalisme mondial intégré" et sa "révolution moléculaire". Sans parler de tous les "grands poètes" nationaux—Nerval et Rimbaud, Baudelaire et Lautréamont, Artaud et Michaux: tous conspirationnistes jusqu'à la moelle!' (41). Anticonformism leads to innumerable difficulties in the present, but after one's death it can be appropriated by the state and the academy as a symbol of collective greatness (the Panthéon's inscription is emblematic here, 'Aux grands hommes, la patrie reconnaissante'). One of the strengths of literary theory has been to emphasise the inappropriable quality of thought and to resist its instrumentalisation.
3. 'We must overcome our special subjective conditions for the sake of others. In other words, the nonsubjective element in the non-objective senses is intersubjectivity. [...] judgment, and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgments into account' (Arendt 1992, 67–68). See also Ronald Beiner's interpretive essay in the same volume, which shows how Arendt came to see Kant's *Critique of Judgement* as the source of his political philosophy, since taste, as the most private sense, implies imagination.
4. 'Une œuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix' (Proust 1989). See also Bray (2019).
5. See also Davis and Dean (2022).
6. See <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/10/15/non-solo-agamben-oltre-100-filosofi-contestano-il-loro-collega-e-firmano-un-documento-a-favore-di-green-pass-e-vaccini-il-testo/6356547/> and <https://lespresso.it/c/opinioni/2021/12/20/caro-agamben-ora-dobbiamo-salvare-te-e-la-filosofia-dal-tuo-complotismo/29402>
7. See this interview with Esposito in the summer of 2020, where he puts forth a half-hearted critique of Agamben along with a misguided analysis of herd immunity. <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/06/16/interview-with-roberto-esposito/>
8. <https://www.lesinrocks.com/cheek/rencontre-avec-jacques-ranciere-lenjeu-est-de-parvenir-a-maintenir-du-dissensus-157314-15-02-2021/>
9. See my chapter 'Pandémie paternelle' in *Retours proustiens: qu'est-ce qu'un événement littéraire?* Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2022, 103–111 (Bray 2022).
10. While of course doctors, nurses and local officials followed protocols and believed firmly in the efficacy of these interventions, it is revealing that the field of epidemiology had rejected

all of these with regards to airborne respiratory viruses as ineffective, or worse, prior to 2019, as shown in the World Health Organization's (2019) recommendations (<https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/329438/9789241516839-eng.pdf?ua=1>). The *New England Journal of Medicine*, as late as April 2020, conclusively stated that masks outside the medical environment (and even there) were of little to no use.

11. While thousands of Anthony Fauci's emails were released in 2021 through FOIA requests, the US Congress's House Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic released a report in May 2024 detailing additional emails that showed Fauci was aware of credible evidence of a lab leak which he sought to conceal. The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) is the prestigious German equivalent of the CDC—the small German online magazine *Multipolar* sued to have its thousands of pages of Covid protocols released in May 2024, and another journalist, Aya Velázquez, published a 10Gb cache of unredacted files in July 2024. Internal documents show that there was no evidence to support the use of masks, lockdowns or other measures, but that the RKI was pressured by politicians. There has been speculation, but little evidence, that some of the files are forgeries that cover up more than they reveal, or that the release of the documents was a 'limited hangout' (an admission of the truth on the part of the elite in order to make it go away faster). Regardless, both conspiracy theory and the paranoia around disinformation erode the ability to discuss political issues.
12. See also Razac (2023).
13. See notably '2020-The Year of the Virus.Sars2/Covid 19', *Crisis & Critique*, vol. 7, Issue 3, 2020 (https://monoskop.org/images/f/ff/Crisis_and_Critique_7_3_2020_The_Year_of_the_Virus_SARS_2_COVID_19_2020.pdf); 'Posts from the Pandemic' in *Critical Inquiry* (https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/posts_from_the_pandemic/); and Badiou (2022).

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