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## **The Promise of *Ideo-logic*, the Psycho-Epistemic Organization of Socio-Symbolic Systems**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this work is to develop a comparative analysis of the discursive structures that underlie the socialized formation of the interpretative paradigms of reality. We analyse how both political ideologies and the so-called “conspiracy theories” can be understood starting from the structure and functioning of Marc Augè’s *ideo-logic*, namely the systemic-discursive device that defines the field of all possible sentences defining the real.

**Keywords:** Ideology; Conspiracy theories; Epistemic; Psychoanalysis; Semiotics

In his 1977 work, "Pouvoirs de vie, pouvoirs de mort. Introduction à une anthropologie de la repression", Marc Augè (2003) introduces the term *ideo-logic*. He defines it as «the sum of what is conceivable and possible within a given society, a virtual totality that only manifests in partial statements used to interpret, describe, or justify specific events»[1]. While Augè's original intention was to use *ideo-logic* to depict the structure of power dynamics within a society, we propose that it is theoretically significant to explore *ideo-logic* as a syntactic structure that outlines the epistemic field where the subject can symbolize and comprehend the Real[2].

In this paper, we will not primarily focus on *ideo-logic* as a tool of power within a society, as Augè did. Instead, we will concentrate on *ideo-logic* as a psycho-epistemic device. Our analysis will center on the characteristics that enable the structuring and implementation of every *ideo-logic*[3]. By characterizing *ideo-logic* as a device, we aim to emphasize its role as a Foucaultian knowledge-power device, where "knowledge" refers to a psycho-epistemic structure. We are particularly interested in highlighting the simultaneity of psychic and epistemic elements in the formation of *ideo-logic*.

Therefore, we argue 1) the close and intrinsic interconnection that exists between psychic motives and epistemological motives: every epistemic construction is activated as a tactical strategy of resolution of the encounter between the subject and the Real. 2) that *ideo-logic* acts in all respects as a device as originally theorized by Foucault (Crosato 2017). It acts both as a network of definition of the possible and the thinkable within a given society, and as a field of implementation (in relation to the defined psycho-epistemic field) of power. By highlighting how *ideo-logic* coherently and functionally organizes the representation of the real, and emphasizing, following Augè, that every social existence is structurally *ideo-logic*, we will narrow our investigation to the analysis of political ideologies and conspiracy theories. These are two significant examples of *ideo-logic* that have given rise to political movements or constructed a socio-political *weltanschauung*.

We acknowledge that the concept of political ideology could be subject to numerous crucial conceptual specifications. However, for reasons of space and the motivations driving this paper, we will group political ideologies and conspiracy theories together conceptually. We argue that both are cases of *ideo-logic* that are perfectly superimposable in this sense: both are a) the set of statements and symbols through which the real is expressed; b) these orders of representation of

reality are structured through formal properties of symbolization based on specific processes of syntagmatic chaining expressed through partial statements; c) both fulfill the same psycho-social function: on the one hand they function as an “epistemic guarantor” for the subject, to whom is guaranteed access to a specific interpretive logic of the world. This logic not only safeguards the subject from the anguish of an incomprehensible world: is the only access that the subject has to an interpretable experience of the Real. This function resembles that of Symbolic in Jacques Lacan.

Every ideo-logic allows the subject, understood as a monad, to avoid annihilation with respect to the world. It also enables the creation of a social community and intersubjectively meaningful interactions based on a shared interpretive code. Our analyses are not aimed at assessing the truthfulness of ideo-logical systems (whether they are understood as political ideologies or conspiracy theories) but the structure and the conformation of the internal logic that regulates their functioning.

To illustrate this point, consider the common conceptual overlap between conspiracy/plot and conspiracism: anyone who supports or denounces an alleged plot is automatically classified as a conspiracist. However, while plots are a fact of history[4], conspiracism is an ideo-logical system of articulating these "facts" in which the "conspiracy" event becomes a partial statement in relation to a total system of interpretation of the real. This occurs according to specific characteristics of the relationship between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic of the ideo-logic.

Through the distinction between "conspiracy" and "conspiracism" and between "facts" and the articulation of these same facts, therefore, what stands out is what in structuralist linguistics (as in De Saussure) is indicated as the Arbitrariness between meaning and signifier, or the dynamic by which the functioning of a semiotic-linguistic system is not to be attributed to the correspondence between real and sign, which is arbitrary, but to the systemic organization of the signifiers among themselves.

In this paper, we consider the issue of conspiracism, not as the central point of discussion, but as a significant case study. In the socialized systems of interpreting reality, the ideological arbitrariness between fact and signifier is more visible in conspiracism than in historically structured political ideologies. An example can be found in Sunstein & Vermeule (2009), where the "conspiracy" event is meaningful when viewed as a partial statement of an ideo-logic that positions it in relation to a systemic-enunciative totality.

The difference between the statement "the market will find its equilibrium on its own without any external influence or control, like an invisible hand" and a conspiracist ideologic statement like "the earth is flat and it is hidden from us by a group of aliens who rule the world" doesn't hinge, in our opinion, on their alignment with reality or on the truthfulness of the statement itself. Rather, the crucial aspect lies in the logical-syntactic arrangement of these partial statements within the overarching epistemic-interpretative framework, which, in this instance, pertains to socio-political aspects.

We will argue that there is no qualitative difference between "classic" systems of ideologic (such as political ideologies) and conspiracy theories, neither in the systemic elements that organize them nor in the psycho-political causes that activate them. However, their difference lies in the functional aspects of the enunciative logic: how they use and activate the mechanics and dynamics of ideologic; and in the psychic strategies employed to defend the structure, when the function of containing reality fails. From a psychic perspective, we will discuss a neurotic strategy in one case and a paranoid one in the other. This work will not deal with the truthfulness of the statements, but will show that conspiracy theories represent an ideologic structures with low stability both from the point of view of the logical-discursive structures, and from the point of view of the psycho-epistemic organization.

### **Current Discussion on Conspiracy Theories**

Conspiracy theories have become an increasing subject of study in scientific literature over the past decade due to their growing spread and impact on politics and society. The recent literature pays great attention to the individual aspects of the psychology of conspiracism and the correlation with the likelihood that certain subjects, with specific psychological settings, may believe in these theories. Analysed are the reasons why a subject might, given an anxious setting, bind to these beliefs (Green & Douglas 2018; Swami et al. 2016). Psychological studies also focus on the personality traits that are prone to adopting conspiracy theories, consistently noting the prevalence of paranoid, narcissistic, or psychologically deviant characteristics among individuals who adhere to such theories (Chicocka et al. 2016; Bruder et al. 2013; Darwin et al. 2011). There appears to be consensus around certain concepts, namely, low agreeableness, high openness to experiences (Swami et al. 2011), and a correlation with political affiliation as motivating factors (Pasek et al.

2015). In addition, there is a strong correlation with poor education (van Prooijen 2017) and poor analytical skills (Swami et al. 2014). On the contrary, another segment of the literature delves into the societal consequences stemming from the dissemination of conspiracy theories. These consequences include reduced engagement in social activities and the political ramifications resulting from the propagation of such theories. (Jolley & Douglas 2013; Jolley and Douglas 2014; Jolley & Douglas 2017). However, there is a scarcity of literature that delves into the internal analysis of the logical and enunciative structure of conspiracy theories, specifically, the mechanisms by which they are constructed. In fact, there is a lack of both a clear theoretical framework (Goreis & Voracek 2019) and a model that precisely defines what constitutes a conspiracy theory and elucidates its functioning. The only attempts in this direction can be found, for instance, in the work of Madisson (2014), who attempts to systematise the semantic logic of conspiracy theories, and in the work of Brian L. Keeley (1999), who develops a Humean interpretation of the theoretical structure of conspiracy theories.

On the psychological analysis front of conspiracy theories, in contrast to the prevailing literature that predominantly focuses on individual aspects influencing adherence or rejection of such theories, our intention is to examine the profound psychological motivations that drive individuals to lean on a theoretical framework of reference (whether it be a conspiracy theory or a political ideology) without establishing a clear link between psychological distress and a proclivity to embrace a mental model. The analysis on paranoia and neurosis will be carried out as an investigation inherent to all interpretive models of reality. The difference between ideological systems and conspiracy theories, from a psychic point of view, will be traced only in the last instance in the tactical modalities of organisation of anguish (paranoia in one case/neurosis in the other). The aim of this paper is, taking as an example conspiracism and political ideologies, to illustrate the systemic functioning of socio-symbolic organisations.

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[1] Since this book has never been translated in English, the excerpt has been translated by the authors

[2] In this work, when the word "real" is written with a lowercase "r," it refers to the common notion of the term. When it appears, as in this case, with an uppercase "R," it refers to the Lacanian notion of the Real, which is what remains outside the subject's capacity for symbolization.

[3] Therefore, this paper does not aim to remain within the framework of Augé's conceptualization, nor does it aim to rehabilitate the concept of "ideo-logic" tout court (a concept abandoned by Augé himself in his later work following the text under examination). Instead, the objective, in revisiting this notion, is to enrich the structuralist reflection on the systemic functioning of socio-symbolic organization through a concept - that of "ideo-logic" - that adds a critical political dimension to the concept of ideology and to the description of the functioning of socialized cognitive systems.

[4] One only needs to consider the Watergate scandal or the Iran-Contra affair, both of which are contemporary examples. For a philosophical analysis of the structure of conspiracy theories, see Keeley (1999).

### **The ideo-logic: syntagm and paradigm.**

In this paper, we embrace the theoretical-conceptual definition of ideo-logic as put forth by Augé to examine interpretative systems of reality. When we refer to ideo-logic, we are referring to a model whose functionality depends on the relationship, as highlighted by the structuralist linguistic tradition (e.g. De Saussure and Hjelmslev), between a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic dimension. While Augé did not delve deeper into the concept of ideo-logique in his subsequent works, we contend that this concept can prove especially valuable, as it implies that socialised discursive structures are construed on specific systemic principles. This proposition, rooted in the concept of ideo-logic, will be further explored in the following pages in conjunction with Lacan's notion of the Real and insights from Bionian psychoanalysis. We believe that this approach can lead to an interpretative framework that goes beyond Augé's original intentions in coining the term ideo-logic. Building upon Augé's insights, it is essential to recognize that every system of ideo-logic possesses a structure that can be defined as syntagmatic—a concatenation of signifiers (events, objects, experiences) imbued with socialised meaning for individuals. These signifiers are organised and interconnected through a paradigmatic structure—a systematic set of statements that coherently manage the significant experiences of the subject (syntagms) within a unitary and shareable narrative.

However, we posit that Augè's definition overlooks a crucial aspect of the relationship between syntagm and paradigm, as elucidated by Lacan (2011) in Seminar VI: structures of meaning, namely paradigmatic structures, can only interpret elements that fall within the symbolic horizon of the subject (or society). Some signifiers, such as certain objects, experiences, or events, exist beyond the structure of possible signification, constituting, from a gnoseological standpoint, what Lacan refers to as the Real—the void, a remnant of the Symbolic. Consequently, the paradigm, or ideo-logic, does not represent a comprehensive structure of signification for all potential events; instead, it can signify only those events that, at least in a virtual sense, can access the symbolic realm of individuals. We shall henceforth refer to as "syntagm" those events capable of entering the Symbolic of the subject, falling within the spectrum of interpretability by the paradigm. The syntagm necessarily manifests itself *in presentia*, activated solely by an event that can actually be interpreted by the ideo-logic. The partial statement, in turn, plays a role in shaping the syntagmatic event by providing a specific sense to it. Following Hjelsmlev (1963), the paradigm is structured *in absentia*, namely constituting the potential horizon of signification, that actualizes itself in the syntagm, when an event is signified. The ideo-logic, ultimately, encompasses the various paradigms that allow an event to become a syntagm, namely significant for the subject.

To further elucidate the distinction between syntagm and partial statement, consider this example: "A haruspex inserts his hand into the belly of a bird and pulls out the liver, which is smooth. He exclaims 'God wants war'." In this example, the syntagm is the extraction of the smooth liver—an event that, for the observer, can assume a meaning. The haruspex, in this case, serves as the agent of choice (and this process aligns with one of the "arbitrariness" elements of Augè's ideo-logic) in selecting the partial statement "God wants war." The selection of this specific statement, far from being exclusively connected to the syntagmatic event at hand, is rooted in the structure *in absentia* of the paradigmatic system. This includes all other possible configurations of meaning that underlie this enunciative decision.

In essence, we posit that the syntagm represents the observable event or action that can be interpreted within the symbolic horizon of the subject. The choice of a specific partial statement is not solely determined by the syntagmatic event; it is also influenced by the underlying structure of the paradigmatic system, which encompasses all potential meanings that could be attributed to the event. Consequently, the ideo-logic emerges as the comprehensive system comprising various paradigms that interpret the syntagmatic events.

## **Organization Principles of Ideo-logic**

If we consider ideo-logic as 'the sum of the thinkable and the possible' (Augè 2003), it never becomes tangible except through partial concatenated statements that interpret specific syntagms, ultimately signifying events. But how are ideo-logics structured? What are the systemic-functional characteristics that organise these partial statements, and how do the two totalities, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, interact? In the following discussion, we attempt to elucidate the logical-functional categories that are applicable to ideo-logic systems. To some extent, the systemic properties of ideo-logic that we discuss in this section can be considered a specification of the Kuhnian concept of paradigm.

### **Plasticity**

When we refer to the concept of plasticity within ideo-logical systems, we are addressing their inherent property that allows the statements, primarily situated in the syntagmatic dimension, to be organised in a manner that fosters malleability and adaptability in explaining reality. This underscores the vital notion that for an interpretative system to be effective, it must possess the capability to navigate and make sense of even contradictory manifestations of reality. Specifically, plasticity regulates the dynamic tension between the syntagm and the paradigm. If ideo-logic aspires to elucidate the cumulative complexity of events, it is imperative to recognize the pivotal role played by plasticity in enhancing its effectiveness. Ideo-logic systems do not adhere to rigid, deductively ordered structures; instead, they possess a configuration that necessitates a degree of separation between the paradigm and the syntagm to ensure applicability. Paradigmatic systems are constructed around relatively stable statements tasked with interpreting a constantly evolving, perpetually diverse reality. A paradigmatic system must possess the ability to be repurposed in interpreting various syntagmatic configurations within the same interpretative domain (e.g., economics, international politics). Consequently, the greater the plasticity of a paradigmatic system, the more adaptable it is to a variety of syntagmatic events without requiring extensive modifications, rendering it more functional. This characteristic is often observed in paradigmatic systems that generate statements at a relatively high level of abstraction. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that excessive plasticity carries the risk of over-abstraction, resulting in paradigms becoming hollow interpretative structures, excessively abstract, and consequently non functional. Therefore, the relationship between the syntagm and the paradigm is defined by a certain degree of



independence, and increased plasticity of the paradigm enhances the ability to explain events through ideo-logic.

### **Partialization**

This concept outlines the principle through which a disruptive<sup>1</sup> event, occurring within the ideo-logic system, is integrated. This integration involves shaping the event by contextualising and presenting a partial representation within the paradigmatic structure. The primary objective of this process is to accommodate an event that contradicts the prevailing paradigm without destabilising the entire interpretation system. Through partialization, the disruptive event is constrained and tamed. However, this approach incurs inefficiencies and cognitive costs because it necessitates constant management of internal contradictions and results in the proliferation of statements interpreting a particular set of phenomena.

To illustrate this concept, consider recent statements made by the Head of the Vatican State, who initially asserted that homosexual individuals have the right to form families<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, a Vatican State communication clarified that Pope Francis was specifically referring to certain State provisions, not necessarily altering the Church's doctrine<sup>3</sup>.

### **Economy**

Economy is another fundamental principle within ideo-logical systems. It revolves around the efficient use of interpretative paradigms. The proliferation of these paradigms places a dual demand on individuals to maintain a stable cognitive structure for interpreting reality.

Firstly, the abundance of paradigms necessitates the intellectual and cognitive effort of selecting the appropriate partial statement for a given syntagm encountered in one's experience. When there are too many paradigms to choose from, the original objective of ideo-logic—to spare the subject from

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<sup>1</sup> Per “disruptive” intendiamo un evento sintagmatico inaspettato che ha la potenzialità di destabilizzare e, se non gestito distruggere, la struttura interpretativa del soggetto.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.repubblica.it/vaticano/2020/10/21/news/papa\\_unioni\\_civili\\_gay-271344386/](https://www.repubblica.it/vaticano/2020/10/21/news/papa_unioni_civili_gay-271344386/) (accessed 28/11/2020)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ilpost.it/2020/11/02/segreteria-di-stato-vaticana-papa-francesco-matrimoni-omosessuali/> (accessed 28/11/2020)

the cognitive effort of interpreting reality—can be compromised. This objective is, as we will explore, always partially elusive.

Secondly, the presence of numerous paradigms leads to constant fractures in the interpretation system. Almost every signifier introduced can potentially trigger the applicability of multiple paradigms, exposing the partiality and instability of the interpretative system. Each instance of partiality or breach in the paradigmatic system can rekindle anxiety, revealing the underlying structural instability and arbitrariness of interpretation systems. Nevertheless, ideo-logic, to be an psycho-epistemic guarantor, necessitates that individuals trust it and relieve themselves of the burden of constant interpretative judgement—a need that the multiplication of paradigms jeopardises.

The principle of economy in ideo-logic presupposes that the available set of syntagms should be explained using the fewest possible paradigms to create a readily usable, stable, and reliable representation for interpreting the world. Notably, the principle of economy aligns with that of plasticity: the more flexible a system of paradigms is and the better it can offer a coherent interpretation with fewer statements, the more economical it becomes.

However, issues may arise when the set of meanings proves challenging to adapt to the set of signifiers. For instance, a key belief in the liberal-capitalist system asserts that economic growth is an infinite process. If the set of syntagms makes this partial statement governing the interpretation of significant data too ineffective, the system encounters stress. This leads to the introduction of corrective partial statements aimed at partializing existing ones, increasing the paradigmatic elements, and diminishing economy. Simultaneously, the plasticity of each statement increases, rendering it increasingly abstract.

Both of these defense mechanisms within the ideo-logic system, however, come with their problems, linked to the concept of the aforementioned "cognitive cost" of adapting paradigms to syntagms. Reducing economy and excessive plasticity require more effort from the subject to maintain the credibility and effectiveness of the interpretative system. This cognitive effort, on one hand, undermines the ideo-logical system's intended scope of simplification of reality interpretation. On the other hand, with each modification, partialization, or multiplication of paradigms, the suspicion that the model isn't functioning as expected arises, and the cost for the subject is a return of anxiety. If, in the past, anxiety was triggered by the perception of an inconsistent and ultimately

incomprehensible reality, now it stems from the sensation that the "epistemic guarantor", namely ideo-logic, is much weaker than anticipated.

### **Principle of Homeostasis**

We can introduce another principle, the principle of gnoseological homeostasis concerning the subject's relationship with the ideo-logic system. This concept signifies a state sought by the subject where the interpretative structures do not require constant modification to interpret new syntagms. However, this stable condition is short-lived: the syntagmatic system always extends beyond the paradigm, demanding continuous adjustments to maintain its persuasiveness and coherence.

Each alteration of the system, whether through partialization, plasticization, or economy reduction, incurs a cognitive cost, as we have previously discussed. Typically, the effort required for the subject to adapt the paradigm to unexpected syntagms is minimal compared to the cognitive advantage gained from ideo-logic. When the cognitive cost of upholding faith in ideo-logic outweighs the cognitive advantage, the subject disengages from it, encountering what we can describe as the "event" leading to paradigmatic detachment. This is experienced as a form of trauma.

It's worth noting that the homeostasis of ideo-logic occurs when the paradigmatic representation system aligns as closely as possible with syntagmatic events, minimizing the gaps between these two systems. However, as the real world is constantly changing, ideo-logic must continually adapt by expanding statements, partializing them, and making them more flexible. The homeostasis of ideo-logic is therefore always a work in progress.

So far, we explored ideo-logic's in terms of the relationship between enunciative structures and the world—between paradigm and syntagm. We've elucidated the processes regulating this relationship and the potential challenges faced in certain contexts. However, ideo-logic can also be examined internally, focusing on its operational mechanics within the paradigmatic structures. Every socio-political belief system contains numerous partial statements, some of which can be grouped based on their syntagmatic connections. These statements are designed to analyse significant events closely linked in the subject's experience. In simpler terms, certain groups of statements govern the interpretation of ethical matters for individuals, others interpret issues related to national politics, or concerning the economic system and social issues.

Thematic groups of statements within the ideo-logic system form subsets, the paradigms, that can be somewhat independent but are always interconnected, as they rely on a central enunciative core and a unified system. The examination of how these statements relate vertically within the ideo-logic system will be addressed in the next paragraph. For now, we can preliminarily assert that ideo-logic comprises thematic enunciative groups responsible for ensuring the interpretative coherence of specific syntagmatic events, related to the same domain, in the subject's experience. We'll refer to this as the 'principle of modularity' within ideo-logic.

The presence of interconnected subsets leads us to consider the systematics of ideo-logic and how these subsystems interact within the overall framework. In this analysis, we shift our focus away from the relationship between syntagm and paradigm and instead concentrate on how various paradigmatic subsystems adapt when a syntagmatic event occurs.

Firstly, we emphasise the **principle of multivariance** within ideo-logic: any modification, no matter how slight, made to one of the paradigmatic subsystems modifies the entire systematic structure of ideo-logic. This modification follows the same rules of plasticity, partialization, and economy as the primary paradigm-syntagm system. Consequently, no restructuring event, even if it pertains only to the peripheral aspects of ideo-logic, remains neutral to the rest of the system. Instead, it creates constant fractures and adjustments, necessitating the subject's continuous effort to maintain the overarching system.

Secondly, if we imagine ideo-logic as a system of bubbles centred around a core enunciative structure, the interaction between various subsystems adheres to the **principle of locality**. This principle explains how every syntagm activates the interpretation efforts of multiple ideo-logic subsystems, which then organise themselves around the specific syntagm. Any changes or adjustments to the interpretative system primarily affect the subsystems located closest to the structures interpreting that particular syntagm.

**The principle of multivariance** is a systemic concept that underscores the interconnectedness of belief systems. It specifically gauges how different paradigmatic subsystems are invoked to interpret a specific syntagm, essentially measuring the system's modularity in a negative sense. As the degree of multivariance within the system increases, the repercussions of a partial restructuring of one paradigmatic subsystem extend to affect other subsystems, necessitating ongoing efforts to secure the overall structure.

Conversely, a highly interconnected system encourages paradigmatic systems to intersect and collaborate in the interpretation of syntagmatic structures. Greater plasticity within the ideo-logic system among various paradigmatic nuclei enhances the system's ability to explain events. Essentially, for interpreting any given syntagm, a broad array of paradigmatic elements can be employed, potentially encompassing a wide range of events, even those that may appear contradictory. This approach often involves partialization processes to rationalise the use of different paradigmatic structures for contrasting syntagms.

**The principle of stability** within the ideo-logic system is closely linked to the previous principle and deserves consideration. It refers to the system's ability to maintain coherence in its enunciative subsystems, even in the face of unexpected syntagmatic structures. It also signifies the system's capacity to adopt more stable configurations depending on the paradigm involved in the restructuring process.

A system that is highly impermeable and modular has a greater ability to contain the disruptive nature of a syntagm, its potential to subvert the entire ideo-logic system. Similar to how octopuses self-amputate their tentacles when they are trapped, ideo-logic, in order to preserve its stability, can abandon certain subsystems or at least limit the paradigmatic crisis within them, preventing it from spreading throughout the entire system like a spreading stain of oil. This modularization necessitates that the subsystems are exceptionally well-structured and, most importantly, that they have minimal overlap in their interpretation of syntagmatic structures. In other words, the degree of multivariance should be kept to a minimum. The connections between these subsystems must be governed by highly flexible statements capable of withstanding significant disruptions.

Certainly, a stable system provides a sense of security. However, it entails the presence of numerous intricately structured subsystems, which demands a significant cognitive effort and results in a substantial loss of economy. Consider, for instance, the complexity and the number of statements in scientific paradigms. This complexity sacrifices a portion of the system's explanatory power in favour of stability. Therefore, stability within the system is inversely proportional to multivariance: on one hand, the enunciative subsystems are robust and resistant to localised crises in other subsets, but this comes at the cost of the system's ability to provide comprehensive, and rapid, explanations. On the other hand, in cases of strong multivariance, the system is highly efficient in its

interpretation of syntagms, but it becomes more vulnerable to the entire system collapsing in the event of localised crises.

These two principles truly come into focus when we examine the **vertical structure of ideological systems**. By "verticality," we mean the organisation of ideology into subsystems or paradigmatic bubbles, each capable of interpreting a specific set of potential syntagms. This structuring should be envisioned in a three-dimensional space. In this context, we introduce a final distinction in the ideologic system: the degree of vertical structuring. We believe that this is the key differentiator between well-structured systems, like the major ideologies of the 20th century, and conspiracy theories.

To illustrate this concept metaphorically, well-structured and highly vertical systems consist of a foundational paradigmatic core comprising non-substitutable, non-negotiable statements. This core serves as the foundation upon which a pyramid-like structure of other paradigmatic elements is constructed. As you ascend towards the apex of the pyramid, the crises affecting the paradigmatic structures have less impact on the overall stability of the ideologic system. The groups of partial statements forming the base of the pyramid, if destabilised, can trigger a destructive chain reaction affecting every element of the system.

The pyramidal structure requires the fundamental statements to have considerable plasticity (for example, in communism: the world is divided into opposing classes; in liberalism: the economy continually grows, and any crisis is temporary). This plasticity allows for the potential explanation of a wide range of syntagmatic events. Each subsystem then specifies in a hypotactic form, progressively moving further away from the central core, the applicability of the fundamental enunciative system (always through processes like partialization and contextualization). As you move further from the base of the pyramid, the crisis within that subsystem has minimal impact on the central core. For example, think of the well-known opposition to homosexuality exhibited by various political ideologies in the 20th century. The challenge posed by homosexuality mainly concerned the periphery or the upper levels of the pyramid in these systems. Its impact did not necessitate a reevaluation of the fundamental statements at the core of political ideologies but rather initiated adjustments to make the paradigm more adaptable to this new phenomenon.

A central element in maintaining an ideological structure, especially over time, is the quality of being hypotactic. This means having the ability to separate the paradigmatic subsystems as much as

possible from the core of fundamental statements. In the absence of this structure, we encounter a paratactic version of ideo-logic, where every subsystem is directly linked to the fundamental statements, and the core is constantly involved in the process of interpreting syntagms. Consider the example of the flat-earth theory: The fundamental enunciative core asserts that a secretive and powerful group controls the world and keeps us ignorant of certain truths, such as the belief that the Earth is flat. In this case, we have:

- Fundamental enunciative core: "an unknown group of powerful people governs the world."
- Partial statement: "and they hide that the earth is flat," which implies a paradigmatic system critiquing the functioning and credibility of the current interpretation of the world.

It's important to note that many conspiracy theories function similarly to this example. The statement describing a specific event (and therefore having little plasticity) is directly linked to the fundamental enunciative core (which is highly plastic). Consequently, if any of the statements are challenged, it incurs a significant cognitive cost for the subject or necessitates resorting to the fallacy *obscurum per obscurius*, also known as *ignotum per ignotius*.

In cases where a contradicted statement triggers a reaction that involves the entire system, the subject faces two high-cognitive-cost options:

1. Reject the interpretative paradigm, returning to a state of epistemic anxiety, which we will discuss in detail later.
2. Shift and dislocate the epistemic guarantor from a falsifiable enunciative structure to one that is no longer falsifiable. This is where the extreme plasticity of conspiratorial paradigmatic systems becomes evident.

In cases where the crisis of a statement doesn't lead to a collapse, there are multiple strategies that can be adopted. For instance, one might partially disbelieve while maintaining that "there is some truth in it." This process of dislocating the epistemic guarantor is what rhetorically and phenomenologically distinguishes the concept of "conspiracy" from other ideo-logics. It involves the entrenchment of the argument's justification structure within itself. The "guarantor" statement of the system is constantly regressed towards statements that justify the conspiracy thesis in absentia: "It's evident that no one has ever seen the powerful aliens governing the world, or else they wouldn't be very powerful aliens, would they?" Thus, the invisibility of the syntagm (no one has seen these aliens) is used to bolster the validity of the paradigm (that the aliens govern the world). This process

shields the conspiratorial discourse, rendering it non-refutable and unfalsifiable in a Popperian sense.

What we intend to convey with this is that the common characteristic shared by all conspiracy theories is precisely the *in absentia* structure of the guaranteeing statement. Thus, even though conspiracy theories represent a diverse and decentralized universe, what unites them is the structure of the guarantor, rather than the specific content it supports. Each regression of the guarantor statement (which serves as the core enunciative element of ideo-logic) may be followed by further dislocations. However, this process imposes a cognitive cost due to two primary factors.

Firstly, it necessitates the endorsement of a paradigmatic system that primarily relies on the absence of the syntagm, as opposed to its presence. This aspect elucidates why, despite the statements within conspiracy theories being generally inflexible, they tend to behave as if they were adaptable. What becomes "plasticized" in conspiracy theories is not the partial statement interpreting a specific real-world phenomenon, but rather the structure of the guarantor itself. Operating *in absentia*, it can attach itself to any statement without risking the overall structural integrity of the system. Consequently, conspiracy theories often appear as if they lack a clear foundational statement, leading to a perception of being decentralised. In reality, their guarantor operates *in absentia*, making it more adaptable than those of conventional political ideologies.

Secondly, in contrast to political ideologies, which structure their enunciative systems hypotactically, where the crisis of a subsystem does not directly affect the guarantor, conspiracy theories lack this hierarchical structure. Instead, their advantage lies in the *in absentia* structure of the guarantor, which enhances their epistemic efficiency. This obviates the need for extensive paradigm structuring to safeguard the guarantor statement through partialization strategies. However, this advantage comes at a cost: the continuous dislocation of the guaranteeing statement, the fundamental core, is an operation incurring a cognitive toll and resulting in a significant system fragility. This fragility arises from the weak internal cohesion in the relationship between statements and the guarantor. It may lead to doubts regarding the guarantor's capacity to accurately describe reality, given its unverifiable nature, thereby diminishing its reliability.

In this context, the characteristic of operating "in absentia" serves as both an advantage and a disadvantage within the paratactic organisation of conspiracy theories.

In the next paragraph, the causes and implications of ideo-logic will be analysed from a psycho-epistemic point of view



## **The Psycho-Epistemics of Ideo-logic: Anxiety and the Guarantor**

We define an epistemic trauma as any event or set of events that abruptly and dramatically confronts the individual, leaving them without the opportunity to process and interpret the traumatic or disruptive occurrence within their existing interpretative framework. The event-trauma has a disruptive effect on the subject's gnoseological structure: what was once a syntagm, is now pure eventfulness; it prevents the ordering of the logical causality of phenomena, as the event interrupts the chain of interpretation. It therefore prevents, ultimately, the provision of a systematic and coherent interpretation of reality. As previously discussed in the introduction of this work, the fundamental difference between the syntagm and the event lies in the fact that the syntagm represents a symbolised event, while the pure event is the sudden, unexpected, and uncontrollable emergence of the Real (the yet-to-be-symbolized). The Symbolic always falls short in its inherent task of neutralising the disruptive potential of the Real toward the paradigmatic structure. The domestication of the event into a syntagm represents an ongoing and only partially successful process. Consequently, the continual resurgence of unrepresentable events, the excess of stimuli and occurrences to which the subject is inherently exposed (the Real), culminate in the development of a profound and pervasive anxiety. This anxiety stems from the apprehension of the potential dissolution of the Self within the world and the fear of the futility of communicating and sharing the world with the Other. This generates what we can define as an original epistemic-existential trauma constitutive of subjectivity. This fundamental trauma continually steers the individual in their ongoing endeavour to assimilate the Real into the Symbolic, as described by Lacan (2011). The subject's incapacity to simultaneously differentiate themselves as an individual entity within the phenomenal world and the inability to ascribe a logical explanation and interpretation to reality can result in the psycho-epistemic collapse of the subject. This implies the recognition of the subject's incapacity to structure reality in accordance with a coherent and socially shared logic. The subject's anxiety, therefore, stems from being trapped within a state of direct exposure to the Real, where all processes of symbolization, interpretation, and articulation concerning both the world and the Self become unattainable. The emergence of the Self is, indeed, feasible only within the context of a structured Symbolic, as outlined by Lacan (2015).

The inherent anxiety of the subject arises from the inherent inadequacy of the Symbolic in containing the subversive and destructive force of the Real. This continually generates new events,

akin to molten material, which the paradigm must incorporate into the syntagm. The point of imbalance, to which anxiety directs its focus, exists at the juncture between the possibility of symbolising the ensemble of enunciative structures and the Real. It is a unique point for each ideo-logic, where the system's adaptability in assimilating new events and incorporating them into the paradigm consistently reveals its limitations.

The primary and central function of every ideo-logic lies in activating an interpretative process in the fault situated between the Real and the syntagm. This interpretative boundary serves to immerse the subject in a process of symbolization of the Real, enabling the subject to attain an intelligibility that shields them from anxiety. Furthermore, it establishes the potential for social and interpersonal interaction. It is exclusively through ideo-logic that the subject can regain what, in the 'pre-ideo-logic' phase (undeniably hypothetical), might have seemed unattainable: the connection with objectuality. In this context, objectuality refers to the fundamental and essential condition for shaping the Self (Winnicott 2001).

Hence, according to Žižek, ideo-logic should not be perceived as «a dream-like illusion crafted to evade an intolerable reality. In its fundamental essence, it operates as a constructed fantasy that underpins our tangible reality—a mirage that shapes our actual and meaningful social interactions» (Žižek 2000).

To enhance the elucidation of ideo-logic's roles in both its epistemic and psychological dimensions, we will draw upon the Bionian notion of the "Content-Container" function (Bion 1994). This concept echoes Winnicott's idea of holding, but we employ Bion's framework due to its wider applicability in comprehending the relational dynamics between immediate content, i.e., the pre-symbolized psychological event, and symbolically mediated content. With this model, Bion intends to designate the simultaneity of psychic and mental/gnoseological organisation in the development of the subject. What the "C-C" model primarily signifies is the transition from "nameless terror" (Bion 1994), i.e., the annihilating anxiety of the Lacanian Real already mentioned here, to Knowledge, i.e., to signification, hence to the entry into a syntagmatic structure of the event. This passage is inherently both psychological and gnoseological, made feasible by the containment function. This function does not eliminate conflict or trauma but rather handles them through distinct organisational methods at both the psychological and gnoseological tiers. In the context of a child's development, the crucial dynamic is assured by the mother's reverie function (Bion 1962). This function involves the mother's ability to receive the child's ambivalent psychic

projections, mould them, and return them in a symbolised form. We propose that ideo-logic plays a similar role in the psycho-epistemic structuring of the socialised subject. What the Bion C-C paradigm allows us to see is the ability of the Container to symbolically transform the content transmitted in pre-symbolized form. Initially, an intolerable content is transmitted from the child to the mother, who, following Bion's terminology, transforms beta elements into alpha elements. In other words, she receives and restructures the psychic event, making it symbolizable, hence understandable and manageable for the child. Similarly, ideo-logics, through the functional structures we've previously examined, fulfil the same function for individuals, both individually and collectively. As per the Bion C-C model, psychic content requires a container capable of mentalization. Therefore, we contend that ideo-logic, in its primary function, mirrors the role of the mother in the Bionian model: it accepts, restructures, assigns meaning, and returns the chaotic Real in an intelligible manner, which was initially beyond the individual's reach.

Thus, ideo-logic serves a dual role, functioning both as the subject's epistemic guarantor and a source of psychological protection for individuals and communities. It enables individuation exclusively through an ideologically constructed process of symbolization, effectively embedding the traumatised subject within a coherent and well-structured narrative of the world. As an epistemic guarantor, ideo-logic also performs a crucial psychological function: containing anxiety. It stands as the sole structure capable of preventing the subject's psychological collapse, safeguarding them from annihilation. The assaults of the Real on the subject's psychological stability are, therefore, redirected towards the epistemic guarantor, which is expected to provide a coherent and authoritative interpretative framework. However, we must not understand ideo-logic as a static system for ordering reality but as a psycho-epistemic device that arises and evolves on the fault line of the Real. Given the continuous overlap between the Symbolic and the Real, the surplus of the unassimilable Real by the process of ideo-logic's symbolization dictates the direction it must take to continue fulfilling its functions. The fault is therefore that space where events can manifest to the subject, can destabilise the paradigm or not: be defused and reduced to syntagms. It serves as the birthplace of the syntagmatic chain, within which the paradigm either incorporates or excludes specific signifiers from the interpretative landscape—welcoming some into the Symbolic while banishing others. This concept relates to the Lacanian residue of the Real, representing structural surplus in relation to paradigmatic structures. This is the residue of the object for which ideo-logic assumes guardianship, promising the perpetual reabsorption of this surplus. In this context, we can comprehend ideo-logic's psychological relationship with the subject through Bion's

Content-Container (C-C) model. The fundamental purpose of ideo-logic is containment, addressing not only emotional concerns (as it must serve as a vessel for containing anxiety) but also psycho-epistemic ones. The subject must be able to confide in the 'Ideo-logic' Container their inexpressible and anxious experiences, and the 'ideo-logic' Container must be adept at transforming, adapting, modulating, symbolising, and returning them in the form of a paradigm that can be shared with others. Bion's model isn't confined solely to the mother-child relationship; he envisions its applicability to all relationships involving internal and external objects, such as the connection between words and their meanings (Hafsi 2011). The containment role of ideo-logic and the dynamics of adjustment and management in the interactions between content and container are never definitively resolved. They must continually adapt and settle in response to the ongoing emergence of the Real.

Therefore, we establish what we shall refer to as the **tactical process of ideological actualization**. The anxiety stemming from the unintelligibility of the Real persistently returns to the subject, and the resilience of the ideo-logic structure is most pronounced when it adaptively responds to the 'earthquakes' induced by the re-emergence of the Real within the subject's experiential realm. This adaptability of the structure is neither arbitrary nor excessive; it consistently adheres to the principle governing the relationship between psycho-cognitive costs and the principle of efficiency. The ideo-logic structure will only modify itself when the Real takes on an anxiety-inducing significance of intolerable destabilisation for the subject, and any adjustments remain minimal in relation to the fundamental structural framework. The process of actualization, therefore, represents the overarching systemic strategy of ideo-logic, consolidating all the principles discussed in prior chapters. To illustrate the processes of actualization, we can refer to the example analysed by Todorov (1999) concerning the historical event of Europeans arriving in the Americas. When Europeans encounter "unexpected" populations that deviate from their established understanding of the world's configuration, the event is profoundly disruptive for the entire European ideo-logic structure, necessitating adaptation but not collapse. The ideo-logic in question is safeguarded from structural collapse by recalibrating the entire system through the organisational principles of disruptive events previously described, thus modifying itself.

The discovery of America triggers the renowned debate between Bartolomeo de Las Casas and De Sepulveda concerning the human nature of these populations within the Christian ideo-logic. In this particular instance, we observe that the principle of homeostasis is reconfigured through an extensive use of paradigm flexibility solutions. All the mechanisms we have elucidated from a

logical-structural perspective (plasticity, multistability, multivariance) can also be explored as tactical strategies for containing the anxiety of the Real through symbolization and integration into the ideo-logic system.

### **Neurotic and Paranoid Organisations**

As we have argued, ideo-logic operates on the boundary between the unprocessed Real and the already-symbolised, to transform events in syntagms. At the psychological level, ideo-logic employs the same strategies that we have observed at the logical-structural level. We contend that during moments when the containment function of ideo-logic experiences a crisis, two fundamental strategies are employed to manage the mobilisation of this fault line: one is the neurotic strategy, and the other is the strategy of paranoid withdrawal. The latter essentially involves resorting heavily to the classic fallacy of *obscurum per obscurius*. Although the strategies (in psychology, we might refer to them as coping mechanisms) can vary, the tactics employed by ideo-logic remain consistent.

The concepts of "neurotic" and "paranoid" pertain to how these strategies are organised by the subject when confronted with a disruptive event that challenges the symbolic order, all in an effort to safeguard the guarantor structure. This difference in the organisation of ideo-logic's strategies allows us to elucidate and emphasise the most conspicuous functional disparities between ideologics characterised by a hypotactic structure and those characterised by a paratactic structure.

In the former case, the defence of the epistemic guarantor occurs in a neurotic manner, where the subject's objective is to avert a crisis from affecting the guarantor. This involves a series of rituals and practices aimed at absorbing the subversive impact of the syntagma. We refer to this structure as "neurotic" because the subject's attention continually revolves around the fundamental statements without ever directly engaging with them. It constantly circles around them, attempting to divert any gnoseological crisis towards the peripheral aspects of the belief system. The ceremonial structures constructed to defend the paradigm often resemble those highlighted by Foucault in "The Order of Discourse" (2014). These structures regulate public access to certain discourses or the ability to name specific paradigms, resembling a symbolic type of contact neurosis. Only individuals with a certain status (as indicated in Freud's "Totem and Taboo" concerning the deadly charge of mana) can touch certain paradigmatic structures without facing symbolic "death" (referred to as "madness" by Foucault).

The second strategy is that of exegesis, which reinterprets and typically contextualises the paradigm in time and place, often involving partialization (as seen in the exegetical interpretations of Marx, or the constant exegetical references to the “intentions of the founding fathers” rather than the literal text of the Italian constitution). Foucault identifies other discourse regulation structures, which align with the systemic principles of ideo-logic previously elucidated.

The hallmark of the neurotic defence structures of ideo-logic is to redirect, diverge, and channel the crisis's energy from the centre to the periphery. This is managed through well-structured discursive ceremonies, often institutionalised, much like how neurotics defend against the object of their neurosis with pathological compromise formations – ceremonies designed to discharge the energy generated by what is repressed. In this context, the concept of the "guarantor of last resort" represents the repressed element within ideology: its rationale for existence, its untouchable object protected from excessive and potentially deadly mana. Accessing its core without permission leads to symbolic "death" (being labelled "mad"). Conversely, if the guarantor is touched without consequences, the system collapses, revealing its vulnerability.

This type of structuring is characteristic of well-organised and pyramidal ideo-logic systems. To effectively divert the explosiveness of critical syntagmas and defuse them, a complex, highly modular system is required, balanced between multistability and multivariance. In contrast, a paratactic system lacks the necessary complexity in its ceremonies, making it unable to absorb the magnitude of a syntagmatic crisis neurotically.

Regarding the "neurotic" structuring of hypotactic ideo-logics, the primary issue revolves around how the epistemic guarantor engages with the activation of the fault line. In contrast, for paratactic ideo-logics, the problem isn't just related to coping with the seismic shocks experienced by the ideo-logic system but also concerns the very nature of the guarantor itself. In a paratactic structure, characterised by a high degree of proximity between the syntagmatic structure and the core fundamental statements, any attempt at a "neurotic" resolution would prove inadequate. The fundamental enunciative core is constantly brought into question with every emergence of an event that necessitates a remodulation of the ideo-logic structure.

Paratactic structures, in order to safeguard the epistemic guarantor, employ a different approach that distinctly characterises all conspiracy systems, as we've already discussed: regressing the guarantor *per obscurius*. Unlike the neurotic organisation, where preserving the functionality and effectiveness of the guarantor is paramount, in the paranoid perspective the guarantor faces threats

not only to its effectiveness but also to its reliability. As discussed earlier, the *in absentia* structure of the guarantor, while shielding it from direct crises related to partial statements in close proximity, renders it ethereal in its capacity to explain events. Consequently, the compromised functionality of the psycho-epistemic guarantor also erodes trust in it. The subject may enter a state of persecutory delirium, typical of conspiracies, wherein the excessive proximity between the syntagmatic structure and the fundamental statements translates into a direct existential threat to the guarantor itself.

Trust in the guarantor's containment and protective abilities collapses because it is structured in *absentia*, making it ineffective for explaining the real. Naturally, the paranoia stemming from the fragility of the guarantor is externally directed by the subject. It isn't directed towards the statements or the guarantor itself, but rather towards the external world, which is held responsible for this fragility. Hence, most conspiracy theories are characterized by a profound mistrust of other ideologic organizations. Typically, the conveyed narrative suggests that a truth about the Real is being concealed – a truth that, if revealed, would validate the legitimacy of the subject's statements and protect the epistemic guarantor.

Since this validation isn't found in the Real, the withdrawal *in absentia* becomes itself the safeguard shielding the guarantor from systemic crises. To protect the guarantor, it must be perpetually regressed from a gnoseological justification standpoint ("If we could see the aliens, what kind of conspiracy would it be? It's precisely the fact that we can't see them that should make us consider that they are governing us!"). This process, as discussed earlier, often occurs *in absentia*, meaning that the absence of a specific syntagma supports its own paradigm. Consequently, the crisis is absorbed at the structural level, as the lack of alignment between the Real and the Symbolic is integrated into the symbolic's own explanation.

However, as we've previously emphasized, the paranoid organization is not exclusively confined to poorly structured systems like conspiracy theories. The procedure of regressing the epistemic guarantor is the ultimate recourse for all ideologics. The process of shifting the salvific aspect of the ideologic towards an eschatological perspective typically accompanies the regression of the epistemic guarantor. Drawing from Erich Fromm's work in "The Dogma of Christ" (2001), the transformation of the second coming of Christ from an expectation "in a few years" to "at the end of history" exemplifies this shift. It serves to protect the guarantor structure of Christianity (where the

righteous will ultimately fare better than the unjust), which operates in *absentia* due to the absence of the arrival of Christ, and ultimately the kingdom of heaven.

Every ideo-logic system thus harbors a paranoid structure at its core. However, employing this structure to defend the guarantor comes at the cost of significant psychic energy expenditure, as the guarantor must be continually relocated, manipulated, and redefined, frequently and blatantly violating the principle of homeostasis. Nonetheless, this tactic offers an advantage in terms of system economy since the relationship between statements explaining the real and the guarantor doesn't necessitate mediation through an extensive array of paradigmatic subsystems.

Consequently, the initial defenses against the emergence of critical and subversive syntagmas are usually neurotic structures. This applies to varying degrees, both to well-structured ideo-logics, which seldom resort to the regression of the guarantor, and to conspiracy theories. The latter, in their pursuit of increased economy, tend to expose themselves more readily to the need for regressing the epistemic guarantor. Nevertheless, we contend that the paranoid organization fundamentally underlies the subject's relationship with gnoseology: the paranoia that the Real has the potential to annihilate the Symbolic, and along with it, the subject itself.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study is to examine the structures that govern the workings of ideologics. As previously discussed, the distinctions observed among different frameworks are primarily quantitative. The complexity of the paradigmatic structure and the ensuing neurotic defense mechanisms are characteristic of hypotactic ideological systems, where the relationship between subsystems of statements is formalized and organized in a pyramidal form. Additionally, these systems typically support the multistability of subsystems and their modularity. Conversely, immediate recourse to paranoid processes is typical of the defense structures within conspiracy theories, often employing the fallacious method of '*obscurum per obscurius*' and the defense of the paradigm *in absentia*.

The concept of the ultimate epistemic guarantor, defined as the fundamental core of statements within the ideological system, bears a significant resemblance to Lacan's notion of the 'Big Other.'

This work possesses three methodological limitations. First, it is inherent in its objectives, which focus on analyzing logical-enunciative structures. No evaluation of the truthfulness of paradigmatic



statements has been conducted. This isn't to suggest that all types of statements are considered equal in depicting reality, but for the purpose of this work, evaluating the truth value of the statements was not deemed relevant.

The second limitation arises from not taking into account the historically and culturally specific nature of ideologics. Nonetheless, the aim of this work is to explore the invariant logical-discursive structures within the backdrop of their historical variability.

The third limitation lies in the absence of an internal analysis of differences within both conspiracy theories and political ideologies. This text derives insights from conspiracy theories to construct an analysis that broadly encompasses organizational mechanisms within human discursive structures. A detailed examination of conspiracy theories and political ideologies would undoubtedly delineate the specific tactics employed by each, but we believe this wouldn't stray from the overarching insight of this work, which perceives human discursive systems as polarized along two axes: verticality/horizontality and neurotic organization/paranoid organization.

In any case, this work does not intend to provide a definitive elucidation of the mechanisms underpinning conspiracy theories. Our objective was to present two examples of ideologics, namely political ideologies and conspiracy theories, in order to clearly illustrate the distinctions in the systemic organization of interpretive paradigms concerning reality.

The question, which we have not yet addressed and will steer our future research, is: what process governs the selection of a particular partial statement to interpret a specific syntagma? This process, tentatively referred to as the "collapse of the signifier's function," will be the focus of our upcoming work.

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