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Conspiratorial narratives as cultural repertoires and methodological tools

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Abstract

This article builds on data and field work notes from two ethnographic studies conducted in two cities: Istanbul and Trabzon, Turkey. It examines the socio-political dynamics behind the prevalence and impact of conspiratorial narratives. We explore the emergence, circulation, and effects of these narratives and how they shape political orientations and mobilisation. We raise methodological questions about these narratives and propose researchers closely scrutinise them rather than dismissing them as illogical or incoherent. Our research reveals three novel relational and methodological insights derived from conspiratorial narratives. First, these narratives serve as sense-making tools during times of uncertainty. They provide accessible explanations for abrupt changes, and they rely and draw upon 'cultural repertoires'. Second, by challenging the mainstream narratives, they shape subjectivities; empowering narrators to act as agents. Third, how conspiratorial narratives circulate has implications for the dynamics of state-public relationships, often following the neoliberal logic, they portray political leaders as central figures in navigating complex decision-making processes. Our case studies demonstrate that actors, even in less powerful positions, may not necessarily antagonise the state. We underscore the methodological significance of these narratives for researchers, to examine actors' agency, group dynamics, and responses to everyday injustices.

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KEYWORDS
agency, cultural repertoires, ethnographic research, everyday politics, Istanbul, subjectivities, Trabzon, Turkey

1 | INTRODUCTION

On a hot summer day, Kurdish women Ayse and Hatun, both in their forties, sat on the pavements in front of time-worn houses in Fener-Balat, a historical Istanbul neighbourhood by the Golden Horn. Fener-Balat is home to the Ecumenical Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate. Ayse and Hatun were observing a growing influx of visitors, including tourists and a television crew shooting a period drama. Puzzled by this sudden surge in popularity and the increasing presence of outsiders, Ayse speculated that these visitors might be descendants of the neighbourhood's former Greek residents, who fled to Greece during the population exchange after the Greco-Turkish War. 'Don't you see those maps in their hands'? Hatun added: 'They are trying to find their grandparents' houses. They want to get them back. They visit that [Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchal] church before they come here. They get those maps there'.

Ayse and Hatun's fears were representative of a widespread, conspiratorial narrative. Many residents claimed that the '[Orthodox] Patriarchate was behind the urban rehabilitation project' in Fener-Balat, that had begun in the early 2000s. Since then, the European Union has been funding the 'rehabilitation' of the neighbourhood, promising to renovate historic houses and repurpose guesthouses, hotels, cafes, and restaurants for local or international tourists. This has been at the expense of local networks and relations among the communities, as well as the livelihood (Soytemel, 2013, 2015). Ayse kept talking: 'The EU is buying out the whole area. They will banish us from here to create a second Vatican and they will ask for a visa if we want to access'.

Conspiratorial speculation is equally present in the countryside. In the Trabzon area, a stronghold of Turkish nationalism and Islamic conservatism, the narratives among local communities in geographically secluded villages centred on imminent threats to their valley. For instance, our interlocutors were convinced that Israel was attempting to steal specimens from local plants and agricultural products to genetically modify them for monopolistic control. To defend the motherland against such malicious threats, locals were urging each other to be vigilant. As time passed, some locals began to confront Israeli tourists visiting the area, calling in the military police to intervene in their 'clandestine' activities. These 'tourists-*cum*-spies' were claimed to be scouring meadows and woods in shorts with 'sticky socks', which were used to collect seeds and specimens.

Scholars of conspiracy theories typically approach this sort of conspiratorial thinking as epistemological watchdogs who investigate accounts with a view to establishing or otherwise commenting on their truthfulness and falsity. Conspiratorial accounts that 'explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of power people' (Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009, p. 205) have become a key element of socio-political landscapes across the world (Sağlam, 2020, 2021a; Strombeck, 2005).[1] While several authors suggest an interrelationship between the prevalence of conspiracy theories and authoritarian governance (see, Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009), most focus on the psychosocial dynamics that sustain and reinforce them (Douglas et al., 2019). They regard conspiratorial narratives as coping strategies and as reflective of a sense of (false) consciousness, one that fails to differentiate between what is 'real', 'correct', and verified and what is 'imaginary', 'false', and unverified. Many expert narratives equally privilege the singular 'truth' of science and aim to establish the falsity and incoherence of conspiracy theories (see, Douglas et al., 2019; Swami et al., 2014), and, as in the case of fact-checking initiatives, have relatively trivial influence on those who subscribe to conspiracy theories.

This emphasis on the inherent falsity of conspiracy theories is also tied to their self-sealing quality, which, in contrast to the testability of scientific claims, neglects rebuttals and perseveres despite these re-revelations of the truth (Locke, 2009; Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009). Most studies on conspiracy theories stress that stubborn

adherence to conspiratorial accounts is maintained by a 'crippled epistemology' (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). The implication is that the prevalence of conspiratorial narratives is linked to poor education, weak socio-scientific literacy, and a wider sense of consciousness about the 'truth', entertained by those who feel persecuted and undermined by 'those above'. They watch the 'grand game' unfold before them, driven by malicious actors who they are impotent to stop (see, Douglas et al., 2019; Jameson, 1992; Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009; Locke, 2009; Stewart, 1999).

Those scholarly quests fail to account for the ever-increasing prevalence and significance of conspiracy theories in contemporary society. To this end, we suggest re-orienting our attention away from the epistemological shortcomings of these accounts, which requires analysis of the social function they play. The analysis we present throughout this article does not dwell on whether the accounts circulated by our interlocutors are truthful. Rather than subjecting our interlocutors' worldviews to an epistemological litmus test, we emphasise that the falsity, or the absurdity of the narratives circulated does not seem to undermine their primary social function: Conspiratorial narratives serve as socially productive occasions through which subjects come to explain and engage with their social worlds. We also consider our interlocutors as those who fashion and instantiate themselves as political subjects.

Our focus is directed away from the conventional literature on conspiracy theories. We direct our attention to the circulation of these accounts and look at them on their own terms. We use the term 'conspiratorial narratives' to distinguish our approach, which comprehends conspiratorial thinking and exchange as social practices. We work on the premise and seek to explain two characteristics of conspiratorial practices.

First, they rely and draw upon 'cultural repertoires', which are available to people in their cultural settings (Lamont et al., 2016). In this sense, conspiratorial narratives are simply another means—part and parcel—of social relations through which people interact with each other, form connections in social settings, and shape broader social relations. Put another way, circulating conspiratorial narratives serves as a means of fashioning selves while integrating people to their specific socialities.

Second, we emphasise how their reiteration provides people with a stable source of moral codes, which offer relief from uncertainties (Caldeira, 2008). In other words, we do not set out to explore what changes in the neighbourhood have motivated Ayse and Hatun's remark and what circumstances brought the villagers in Trabzon valleys to believe in Israeli spies with sticky socks. This would risk limiting the analysis to investigating the content of these accounts to an exercise of verifying or disproving. In this respect, our attention centres on how conspiratorial narratives take shape in relation to localised experiences, relations, and encounters. Equally important to us is to understand the socio-political reverberations and repercussions of these accounts and their circulation. To this end, we raise methodological questions as to how researchers should deal with the prevalence of conspiratorial narratives that serve as seemingly simplistic explanations for complex socio-cultural transformations.

Field notes from both field sites (Fener-Balat and Trabzon) raise important epistemological, ontological, and methodological research questions: How should researchers deal with the widespread prevalence of conspiratorial narratives? Throughout the research process, should we disregard them as illogical and incoherent narratives that do not fit into our (presumably) logical and coherent categorisations? Or should we engage with and attempt to correct them? If we are to take them seriously, how are we to proceed with the analysis of a social phenomenon that constantly evolves, takes elusive forms, and often contradicts itself?

In this respect, we consider three points to be particularly important: The first concerns the socio-economic context in which conspiratorial narratives flourish. Here we draw attention to how conspiratorial narratives provide accessible sense-making tools which help individuals and communities to process abrupt change during periods of uncertainty, ambiguity, and change (Soytemel, 2017). We encourage researchers to start by paying greater attention to uncertainty and ambiguity in times of socio-economic change. The second point underlines how conspiratorial narratives help to fashion subjectivities and create potent, capable and powerful agents. Conspiratorial narrators used to be simply dismissed as delusional and deranged. Although conspiratorial narratives are typically associated with the marginalised, delusional, and powerless, especially in the West (West and

Sanders, 2003), since the 1980s, we note a shift in the way these narratives operate. Their circulation may now actually fashion narrators as potent, capable, and powerful agents. The third related point is for researchers to pay close attention to how the circulation of conspiratorial narratives generates particular configurations of politicisation and political mobilisation.

This article draws on extensive field research in sites where conspiracy theories are prevalent. Specifically, we seek to address the following questions: Why do conspiratorial narratives persist and become increasingly prevalent across different sites? How do they take shape? How do local socio-cultural, historical, and politico-economic dynamics contribute to their circulation? How does their circulation reshape wider socio-political processes and the political orientations of those involved? Through this exploration, we aim to demonstrate how a shift in emphasis of an accepted methodology can generate new thinking around the temporalities and externalities of social space.

The subsequent section outlines the methodology, providing a discussion on reflexivity and ethics. This is followed by a contextual overview of two distinct field sites and the environments in which our participants are situated. Subsequently, the findings are presented in three distinct sections, followed by a discussion, and concluding remarks.

2 | METHODOLOGY, REFLEXIVITY, & ETHICS

Our analysis draws on two separate ethnographic research projects focussing on urbanisation in urban northwest Turkey and everyday politics in rural northeast Turkey. Neither study originally set out to explain conspiratorial narratives.

Both projects collected data through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The first study, conducted between 2008 and 2018, focussed on the Fener-Balat Neighbourhoods in Istanbul. Gentrification have been threatening the livelihoods of working-class residents inhabiting abandoned houses, remnants state-sponsored attacks on the local Greek, Jewish and Armenian populations in the 1950s. The study utilised participant information, including 50 life history interviews with locals from diverse ethnic backgrounds and tenure statuses, alongside a household survey ($N = 200$) aimed at understanding the socio-economic characteristics of households in the area. The dataset was augmented by follow-up interviews and ethnographic observations in these neighbourhoods in 2011 and 2018.

The second study, conducted between 2015 and 2016, focussed on the everyday practices of nationalist-conservative politics by ordinary actors in a group of villages located in Trabzon, a city located on the Black Sea coast in Turkey. The research investigated how ultra-nationalist communities engaged in everyday politics and examined how conspiratorial narratives led to vigilantism and paramilitary violence against dissidents, minorities, and foreigners. The researcher spent considerable time with rural communities in the area and worked at local establishments and followed his interlocutors across workplaces, coffeehouses, religious gatherings, communal events as well as more private encounters and homes. To complement the ethnographic data compiled through participant observation and in-depth interviews, follow-up visits and a further interview cycle were implemented in 2018, 2019, and 2021.

Throughout our research, we were motivated by ethnographic conventions, 'taking seriously' and 'trying to understand how people interpret and act in the world' (MacClancy, 2002, p. 4). This commitment to comprehend meaning-making through long-term participant observation not only underpinned our methodological outlook but has also informed how we analyse the data (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). We paid particular attention to this immersion into the socialities we study (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Lederman, 2009, p. 11). In our efforts to 'work across difference' (Tsing, 2015, p. 29), we soon discovered the 'translation' work this would involve to do justice to the social groups and their practices and positionings in a given context (Scheper-Hughes, 2019, p. 428; Asad, 1979; Kapferer, 2013; MacClancy, 2002; Robbins, 2013).

While participant observation is a relatively straightforward process when researching social groups whose socio-political views align with those of the researcher, socio-political transformations in recent decades have brought up new challenges for ethnographic research. Researchers face ethical dilemmas when witnessing discrimination, racialisation, and societal violence (Pasieka, 2019; Teitelbaum, 2019). There is a close link between conspiratorial worldviews, inchoate violence, and violent mobilisations. A balance between participation and distance needs to be struck, which raises questions about how to define rapport, representation, and complicity—powerfully illustrated in the fierce debates generated by Benjamin Teitelbaum's work on neo-Nazi groups in Scandinavia (see Teitelbaum, 2019 and responses).

Despite this, the fundamental questions motivating social scientists persist. How should we study, analyse, and relate to difference? Should we keep our own counsel when participants express and spread racist, misogynistic or xenophobic views or if they threaten violence against marginalised groups? Should our ethical commitment to collaboration encompass a radical disavowal of progressive ideals and processes? We strive to use our research experience and access to these research sites to comprehend the psychosocial dynamics that generate the socio-political orientations of our interlocutors. We are mindful of our positionality within the field as researchers-at-home as well as semi-insiders (Berger, 2015). There are considerable differences in terms of our socio-economic statuses, educational attainments, and political alignments and those of our interlocutors.

Our relative positions (and privileges) in accessing the field, data, and subsequent analysis were significant factors. Both of us had an intimate knowledge of our research sites. Whilst this constituted a big advantage in some respects, it also created challenges which outsider researchers would have been unlikely to encounter. Our interlocutors were instantly able to comprehend our socio-political orientations. Navigating these hurdles with an open mind, we re-tested how the narratives emerged in our interviews and observation/field diaries were related to the overall research objectives we pursued and whether they had potential for explaining the social processes we focussed on. We explored how our interlocutors are part of a wider social world and their connections to other social practices. Respecting their perspectives meant refraining from solely attributing them to our interlocutors' social marginalisation or dismissing these narratives as nonsensical, socially irrelevant, or illogical.

3 | PARANOIA UNLEASHED: CONSPIRATORIAL NARRATIVES, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND EVERYDAY POLITICS

Conspiratorial narratives have gained prominence in everyday discourses, shaping perceptions of politics and society (Aupers, 2012). In contemporary Turkey, too, conspiratorial narratives have increasingly entered mainstream political rhetoric as they have elsewhere (De Medeiros, 2018; Gürpınar, 2019; Nefes, 2013). During the 2000s, Erdogan-led governments often resorted to conspiratorial narratives to rationalise economic troubles or dissent. For instance, officials attributed the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul to foreign interference, fostering a narrative of external threats to Erdogan's leadership (Rivas Alonso, 2022). Currency fluctuations and infrastructure failures too were accredited to outside interference and foreign plots. These narratives, originating from top-down political rhetoric, set the context for localised conspiratorially based exchanges. However, whilst we can expect local circumstances to condition how these accounts take shape in practice, we observed commonalities across both field sites (in Istanbul and Trabzon), despite being characterised by very different socio-economic contexts, political orientations, and ethnic demographics.

In Fener-Balat, conspiratorial narratives often revolved around the Orthodox Patriarchate, the self-styled Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Particularly, the St George Patriarchal Church (*Aya Yorgi Kilisesi*), the seat of the Patriarch, occupied a significant space within everyday discussions of our interlocutors. They often saw it as a physical testament to a deeper, covert strategy to uproot Turks from Istanbul and revive the old city as the seat of Orthodox Christian nations along the lines of the Vatican in the heart of Rome. The Greeks, associated with Byzantine heritage, were commonly blamed for these alleged schemes. Local youth also echoed similar sentiments

about the neighbourhood's future. Mehmet, a young worker in his twenties, affiliated with the ultranationalist BBP [Great Unity Party], explained how he and his friends has been monitoring potential house buyers near the church and expressed a determination to prevent it from becoming 'another Vatican', even discussing fundraising efforts among Turkish businessmen to purchase nearby properties. 'We will not', he told us, 'Let this [neighbourhood] turn into Vatican! If necessary, we will collect money from Turkish businessmen and we will help them to buy the houses near this church'.

Identifying as Turkish nationalists, many of the locals we spoke to, reiterated a common nationalist belief: the Patriarchate's purported and secretive objective to restore Christian control over the city and expel Muslim Turks had never been abandoned. This assertion persisted despite the Orthodox Church's status as a constellation of autocephalous churches and strict politico-legal control by Turkish authorities. The perception of the Church as a hub of conspiracies was always close to the surface, permeating almost every conversation about gentrification and urban regeneration projects.[2] These narratives, we noted, invariably served as an explanation for phenomena like the rising tourism and demographic changes in the neighbourhood, which sparked concerns and suspicions.

Working-class residents' interest in the Patriarchal Church is set against the risk of displacement because of ongoing gentrification and urban renewal. This process has come at the expense of local networks and relations among the communities (Soytemel, 2013, 2015). Working-class residents, still living in inhospitable housing conditions, see their livelihood threatened, while their new neighbours are mostly monied and middle-class. Interestingly however, concerns about the Church extended to these monied newcomers, but with different inflexions of detail and tone. The conspiracy is like the substrate, but it's adapted/reworked to reflect the different concerns of different socio-economic groups.

Alp, a middle-aged architect, found himself captivated by the transformations occurring in these neighbourhoods. Considering himself fortunate to own a historical house in Balat, Alp emphasised the profound significance of the Patriarchal church to what he perceived to be a unified Christian community: 'Many may not realise, but that church has the bones of Jesus and the pieces of the crucifix. We, as Muslims, may not understand the importance of these objects, but they hold historical significance for Christians. In fact, only the Vatican and a few churches in Jerusalem have these objects'. Similar to observations made by Ayse and Hatun earlier, Alp too acknowledges that the presence of the Patriarchate led to covert operations by actors that were not visible to others. For Alp and many gentrifiers, the neighbourhood is seen as soon to be taken over by Greeks who deeply appreciate the religious significance of the Church for a globalised network of Christians.

Alp, Ayse, and Hatun's narratives extend beyond blaming westerners or non-Muslims/Christians as culprits. More powerful, however, is their explanatory value in terms of the major changes happening right around them. Dwellers like Alp, Ayse and Hatun kept on asking: Why did the EU foot the bill of the restoration and not, for instance, the local municipality? Why has nobody ever reclaimed any money for restorations from anybody, not even the homeowners who benefitted so greatly? What is their actual reason for spending so much money on these old houses? These narratives offer insights into significant local changes, raising questions about the EU's financing of restoration projects instead of the local municipality, lack of accountability for beneficiaries, and suspicions regarding hidden motives behind extensive investments. The presence of security measures, such as iron-barred structures and surveillance cameras on the UNESCO building, along with the frequent accompaniment of architects and planners by individuals of French or Italian descent, further fuelled these suspicions. Suspicion among Fener-Balat residents towards tourists and newcomers tainted everyday life, influencing interactions and relationships between neighbours. Despite years of coexistence between gentrifiers and their low-income neighbours (Soytemel, 2015), distrust persisted, extending even to newcomers like Alp and local estate agents, who were suspected of having affiliations with the church, 'foreigners', and the EU. As gentrification progressed, house prices steadily rose, accompanied by a surge in restoration projects, turning the neighbourhood into a construction zone, with rumours of evictions circulating among residents.

Even individuals deeply rooted in the community, like Hikmet, a local estate agent, born and raised in Balat, faced suspicion. Despite proudly claiming his Black Sea heritage and emphasising his status as a 'true local' with

Balat roots spanning three generations, Hikmet still found himself entangled in conspiratorial narratives. Accompanying outsiders or foreigners on walks through the streets of Fener-Balat and showing them houses often led to accusations, by other locals, of being a spy collaborating with the Orthodox Church, allegedly involved in a clandestine plan to take over the neighbourhood. The rumours surrounding his alleged complicity, as we came to learn, greatly tarnished his family's reputation in the community.

Although similar in its suspicious gaze, conspiratorial narratives among the nationalist community in Trabzon took at different form. The nationalist community we worked with were brought together by political arguments which identified the US, UK, and Israel as malicious powers secretly working to undermine Turkey. The trope was shared by our interlocutors to help understand the opposition to the growing autocratic rule of Erdogan, whom most of our interlocutors in Trabzon revered. The dissent to Erdogan was said to be motivated not by concerns for democracy, but as a result of 'western manipulations to undermine the rise of Turkey under Erdogan's leadership'. Various economic troubles, similarly, were taken to be artificial manipulations initiated deliberately by the secret workings of malicious players of global finance, ranging wildly from Queen Elizabeth II to Jewish bankers, exemplified best by the Rothschilds family.

The underlying logic across these narratives appears to be consistent. Particularly notable is the presumption that there exists a desire to impede Turkey's advancement. This phenomenon was evident during a nationwide power outage in 2015 and in the opposition to hydroelectric power plant projects, which resulted in irreversible environmental damage. Furthermore, our interlocutors in Trabzon found a rationale by suspecting malicious foreign powers, Israel or the US, of sabotage and interference. Similarly, suspected culprits are one day identified as allies of Turkey/Erdogan, the other day as accomplices of a malicious West. While most of our interlocutors in Trabzon mentioned their affection for the Russian President Vladimir Putin, they thought differently of him when Turkish-Russian relations soured in the aftermath of the downing of Russian military aircraft. Conspiratorial narratives that portray Putin as a 'righteous man fighting alongside Erdogan to defeat western hegemony' can convert into Russia/Putin as 'a red arm of the Crusaders'. Such dynamics of conspiratorial narratives indicate how unstable content and the roles/qualities ascribed to actors are. And yet, they have appeal across a wide and diverse socio-political spectrum.

Parallelling these articulations around international dealings, conspiratorial narratives were widely circulated to account for everyday experiences in the Trabzon region. Growing tourist presence in the area, where we conducted our research, for instance, was connected to secret plots by malicious forces to steal endemic plant and animal species. Narratives around Israeli spies secretly collecting local seeds with the objective of obtaining monopolistic control over them, were rife and energised local communities to be vigilant against such 'covert' operations. Similar narratives were circulated widely to explain the changes in local agricultural and climatic patterns, the introduction of genetically modified seeds into the local markets, the growing visibility for non-heteronormative sexual orientations and identities, and even the presumed changes to our interlocutors' bodily capacities, which they all linked to malicious operations of foreign powers to undermine the power of Turkish nation.

Crucially, this predominance of conspiratorial worldviews among our research participants was not simply limited to the discursive field. As evidenced by the vigilante alertness of our interlocutors concerning the collection of local seeds by Israeli spies', we observed how the circulation of conspiratorial narratives also fostered a paranoid social milieu, where citizens were expected to be vigilant against covert threats and, if necessary, take action to counter them. Describing themselves first and foremost as nationalist-loyal subjects of the nation-state, our interlocutors in Trabzon have dwelled on these conspiratorial accounts to justify their vigilante endeavours and paramilitary violence.

In addition to numerous violent outbursts targeting minorities and political dissident, our interlocutors denounced researchers whom they accused of secretly working for Greek irredentism (through, for instance, their enquiries into local preservation of an archaic Greek variety), organised armed hunts for terrorists they believed to be infiltrating the region, and even lynched those they deemed to threaten the indivisible unity of the nation.

Recent encounters involved local communities engaging in shootouts with suspected terrorists before security forces arrived and attacking a tourist from the Northern Iraqi Kurdish region simply because he was wearing a scarf with the flag of the autonomous region, perceiving him to be involved in a covert plot to incite Kurdish separatism.

We observed that the impunity enjoyed by our interlocutors in the aftermath of such ostentatious breaches of the law, had been derived not solely from the evident rise of nationalist rhetoric nationwide but also from the very circulation of conspiratorial narratives. These narratives depicted incessant and yet invisible threats confronting the nation. In the context of such socio-political configuration, violent reprisals (against what our interlocutors deemed to be secretive workings of malicious powers) were instantiated as both necessary and legitimate.

4 | HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF WHAT IS THOUGHT TO DEFY COMMON SENSE?

In the following results section, we present three novel relational and methodological insights derived from conspiracy narratives in our case studies: 'Making sense of changing the world,' 'Subjectivation and Groupness,' and 'The socio-political reverberations of conspiratorial narratives'.

4.1 | Making sense of changing the world: Ambiguities, temporalities and remembrance

Conspiratorial narratives offer explanations for uncertainties amid turbulent periods, such as displacement and dispossession (Best, 2012), akin to Caldeira's (2000) idea of 'talk of crime' symbolically reordering society. Through their making-sense functions, conspiratorial narratives establish a before-and-after continuum, which eventually creates a linear narrative between causes and consequences of change. These narratives help individuals interpret sudden changes, with material possessions like old houses or seeds, gaining more value. Understanding these disruptions is vital, as they threaten communities with displacement and deterritorialization. Relatable, everyday accounts make technocratic language of change understandable. A storyline comfortably defines good and bad characters, similar to what Mergen and Ozbilgin discussed when explaining why people follow toxic leaders (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021).

We consider these narratives rely and draw upon 'cultural repertoires' (Lamont et al., 2016), reflecting existing historical, socioeconomic, and cultural narratives, national myths, and ideologies, as well as perceptions of ethnic, class, or cultural hierarchies. They encompass collective memory scripts and shape experiences of inclusivity, exclusion, and belonging, providing insights into the dynamics of 'groupness.'

Residents of Fener-Balat expressed scepticism towards the EU-funded rehabilitation project, which waived homeowners' financial contributions and provided rent compensation for tenants (Soytemel, 2013). This raised questions about the project's motivations and the perceived value of the old buildings. 'Why were these dilapidated houses valuable, and who benefited from their transformation?' Over time, Fener-Balat streets transformed into sites for architects, builders, and affluent homebuyers seeking properties within the rehabilitation area. Locals were puzzled by the sight of the renovated, iron-barred UNESCO building, prominently displaying the EU flag and logo. Observing the influx of tourists, many locals, like Ayse and Hatun, speculated about their intentions. Rumours circulated in the neighbourhood by members of the local BBP branch suggesting that 'the Vatican and the EU were behind the project'; many residents feared potential displacement and worried that 'they will not let us live here, they require visas or passports'.

The conspiracy narratives in Fener-Balat align with existing cultural repertoires, particularly regarding the EU, non-Muslim minorities, and their heritage/property rights in Istanbul. These narratives draw on 'existing narrative templates', that interact with public narratives and meta-narratives (Lamont et al., 2016: p. 21). In Fener-Balat, readily available cultural repertoires were linked to the cultural myths and sensitivities surrounding the non-

Muslim heritage of these neighbourhoods. The EU's rejection of Turkey's membership and UNESCO's preservation efforts further fuelled these discussions (Öncü, 2007).

Drawing from Samuel and Thompson's discussion on 'the myths we live by' (1990), we argue that conspiratorial narratives share similarities with myths. They employ symbolism, idealisation, desire, demonisation as well as glorification of their characters. The merger of past and future creates an almost reversed image of the present. Like myths, these narratives feature characters with specific qualities and personalities, revealing underlying group dynamics and interest networks. In the following section, we explore these group dynamics and subjectivation processes.

4.2 | Subjectivation and groupness

What does this circulation *do* to subjects that enunciate conspiratorial narratives? As we mentioned in the earlier section, conspiratorial narratives provide a shortcut to comprehend complex issues. They eliminate ambiguities and are a way out of grey zones. Communities who partake in their circulation perpetuate and stabilise a metanarrative. We ask what this means in terms of the fashioning of subjectivities within social groups.

In the Fener-Balat case, radical socio-economic ruptures in the neighbourhood were attributed to disruptive outsiders with questionable motives, rather than to a state undergoing rapid structural transformation from paternalistic—(one that provided land and welfare services to the urban (ised) poor) to neoliberal (one that appropriates the land and resources of the urban poor). The circulation of conspiratorial narratives generates a community 'in the know' (Stewart, 1999, p. 17) and provides an individual as well as collective sense of being in control. Those who circulate conspiratorial narratives, from this angle, are not powerless because they know what is going on, and not knowing would be a sign of powerlessness and desperation on top of material desperation. Alongside having a sense of what is happening, they have cognitive and socio-political capacity to act upon their knowledge, and they can exercise agency over the social forces that affect their livelihoods.

Conspiratorial narratives that researchers detect in their respective fields could provide insights about groupness and processes of subjectivation. Lamont et al. (2016) define groupness as encompassing self-definition, self-labelling and the 'salience of racial, class, and national identification'. It also includes 'reported network composition and homophily' as well as 'symbolic boundaries towards dominant group and its perceived advantages' (Lamont et al., 2016, p. 22).

We would like to clarify that when we hint the forgings of (various degrees and modalities of) groupness, we do not suggest or presume 'a priori the existence of groups', or essentialise an identity, instead we understand groupness as a shared way of seeing, perception and/or cognitive states (Yans, 2006, p. 122).

Interlocutors at both field sites were 'situating subjects' in the sense of 'us versus them', complemented by the idea of them-against-us. While the idea of 'them attacking us' and 'them stealing from us' is circulating (e.g., 'they're attacking us; they are stealing from us'), the subject's position within 'us' is being constituted through reiterations of conspiratorial narratives. 'Us' is formulated or defined as the unfairly targeted benign in-group who encountered injustices or who found themselves fighting against or attempting to correct the workings of a secretive and malicious others.

Additionally, rather than adhering to the liberal-humanist view around a perennial and immutable subject, we underline the need to attend everyday practices, utterances, orientations, and encounters through which the subject is both moulded by wider social dynamics as well as cultivates capacities to act on such processes (Foucault, 1978, 1982, 1988, 1997). Referring to Foucault's theories on subjectivation as well as Butler's reflections on its contingency and preformative constitution (Butler, 2017), we underline how fashionings of subjectivities always already work across social dynamics and generate 'responses to particular situations [which in turn] contribute to, reinforce, and at times disrupt the political and material rationalities of its own production' (Dawney, 2013, p. 629).

Subjectivities, in this sense, inherently include an agentive capacity to act upon the social processes that engender them.

And yet, as noted by researchers from the Global South, Foucauldian discourses around subjectivities often prioritise this capacity to resist (see Mahmood, 2004), which constricts social analyses in two interrelated domains: First, it reduces agentive capacity of subjects to such instances of resistance (to operations of power) and hence inevitably fails to account for the subjectivities of those who submit—often in greater numbers. Second, due to this very configuration, subjectivities and their agentive capacity are positioned in an antagonistic relation to power, that is selves' opposition to the operations of power is often hinted to be the dawn of their agency (Dyson & Jeffrey, 2022; Mahmood, 2001, 2009; Sağlam, 2018, 2021b). The insights from interlocutors in both Fener-Balat and Trabzon complicate this formulation of agency and underline the need to rethink agency in cases of subordination, compliance, obedience, and normalcy.

Moreover, agency is directly interrelated to the fashioning of subjectivities, which are formed through everyday reiterations of identity influenced by factors such as group affiliation, age, gender, political orientation, social status, and social class. Of significance in subjectivation processes are interruptions in everyday life, followed by participation in the circulation of conspiratorial narratives. Dawney (2013) argues that such interruptions are key to shaping subjectivity, prompting individuals to critically assess their experiences. In both Fener-Balat and Trabzon, where male social networks were dominant, we noted another subtle dynamic that is intricately related to the forgings of agency and subjectivities: when and where demands for citizen rights cannot be articulated collectively, conspiratorial narratives often provided an alternative pathway for politics, sometimes articulated through nationalist utterances. What this means is, in fact, a process where conspiratorial narratives politicise the self.

4.3 | The socio-political reverberations of the circulation of conspiratorial narratives across the politicisation of actors

The politicisation of the self-unfolds in peculiar ways. In both case studies, we observed our interlocutors explicit objective to diagnose and, if possible, to reverse what they deem to be a gross injustice alongside a staggering reluctance to antagonise the state and local actors. Our analysis revealed this as a fundamental aspect of political mobilisation. Many interlocutors recounted that they felt unable to stop or amend the process and expressed their cynicism that politico-juridical processes would hold those responsible to account. They were convinced that the perpetrators of these injustices, such as developers operating across Fener-Balat, were NOT SOLELY driven by capital accumulation. The belief that these perpetrators had hidden political connections exacerbated distrust in the system, reflecting a broader apathy towards political and judicial avenues among the urban poor.

For instance, in Fener-Balat, the rehabilitation project was often framed within a cultural repertoire which included narratives of criminality in politics. These narratives depicted a complex network of international actors involved in the renovation process, alongside recounting the injustices and uncertainties arising from their actions. Similarly, in Trabzon conspiratorial accounts centred on foreign agents, frequently of American or Israeli origin, urging local men and women to remain vigilant. These narratives, not only assist locals in comprehending the sudden changes that impact their livelihoods but also establish them as active participants in these ongoing processes of change. And yet, in addition these functions, we also observed that the circulation of such conspiratorial accounts shapes the political subjectivities of our interlocutors by aligning them with a particular political orientation. We observed that conspiratorial narratives almost constrain the development of antagonism towards the state. These narratives, first and foremost, construct a political portrayal alongside the identification of culprits from an out-group without necessarily draughting pathways for political debates within the in-group. Urban renewal initiatives in Istanbul and agricultural reforms in Trabzon steer our interlocutors away from direct criticism of the state, framing the process as unjust and linking abrupt changes to external entities, such as international agencies or corrupt businessmen, with whom they have had little prior contact.

This echoes Bourdieu's articulations, wherein he conceptualises the state as a symbol of logical conformity, describing it as 'a principle of orthodoxy, that is, a hidden principle that can be grasped only in the manifestations of public order, understood simultaneously as physical order, the opposite of disorder, anarchy and civil war' (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 4). Bourdieu further suggests that agents within the social sphere share common categories of thought, perception, and reality construction, and moral conformity entails agreement on shared values (p. 4). These moral and logical conformities extend beyond a mere acknowledgement of common values to encompass association with the state through a language of duty and sentiment, often masking underlying forms of exploitation and forgetting (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 143).

In both cases, conspiratorial narratives concerning state-public relationships and the everydayness of state-craft appear to align with neoliberal logic, wherein the state (or local governments) is no longer primarily responsible for the welfare of its citizens. This redefined relationship with the state becomes naturalised, as seen in works by Harvey (2005), Mondon (2013), Swyngedouw (2010), Greenhalgh et al., 2022, Ozbilgin et al. (2023), and Saglam (2021a). Politics, within this framework, is imagined to be devoid of structural contestations across economic-moral fault lines but reduced to a macro-scale strategy game among international actors (reminiscent of the à la Great Game of the 19th century or cold war politics). Everyday dealings and struggles are incorporated into this inter-state rivalry while any opposition to the state's policies, in turn, is marked as a treasonous act. This is because such opposition goes against the notion of the state as caretaker of its citizens (and/or applying policies which support social justice) but also undermines its authority.

Additionally, policy making that lacks everyday negotiations with local stakeholders implies that politics is not collective contestations targeting the will and actions of the state. Instead, it becomes synonymous with personalised negotiations, concessions, and vigilantism against potential abuses by everyday actors. In these narratives political leaders are often portrayed as independent figures navigating complex decision-making processes and possesses the power to intervene when disputes arise. People attempt to comprehend the intricate processes or to simplify the technocratic language entailed in these complex processes. Narratives surrounding politics and its impact on everyday life often portray political leaders as almost fictional characters or protagonists of a grand story: 'Kadir Topbas (former Mayor of Istanbul) assured Erdogan of their support for homeowners', 'Erdogan Bayraktar (former Minister of Environment and Urban Planning of Turkey) offered technical assistance for the rehabilitation if necessary', 'Putin was angry with Erdogan for the downing of the plane', 'homeowners believed that if they could reach President Erdogan during Friday prayers at a local mosque in Istanbul, he would understand their concerns.' Delays in restorations were attributed primarily to technical complexities rather than the state or structural inequalities. Economic destabilizations and inequality, similarly, were ascribed to be the works of infiltrations of state structure by corrupt actors despite the goodwill of Erdogan. Predicaments were often linked to individual wrongdoings, with solutions narrated through the agency of political actors.

In both case studies, we observe the double meaning of the state. On one hand, it is vulnerable to criminal gangs/groups, while on the other hand, it remains powerful and works to consolidate common good for its subjects, like a benevolent/paternalistic father. For instance, in Fener-Balat, residents who were not supporting urban rehabilitation projects were not necessarily opposing Erdogan. In fact, they continued supporting Erdogan, considering him benign and believing in the benefits of such neoliberal policies that often worked at their expense. Challenges like evictions or rent increases, are perceived as the responsibility of individuals to be vigilant for the potential trickery that these everyday actors might throw at them. The state, local government or municipalities as such were not involved in such everyday applications, encounters, and negotiations. It was depicted as the actor's individual responsibility to be aware of these risks and counter them. Similarly, communities in Trabzon took it as their responsibility to counter what they deemed to be terrorist incursions into the region. The security, then, was not a task to be delegated to the state but was to be implemented by the citizenry.

What we often observed in these conspiratorial narratives was that when the individual considered him/herself within the majority, these narratives aligned with the cultural repertoires of the nationalist sensitivities in Turkey. For instance, they may believe that Turkey has enemies (White, 2018), and there are Christians or Europeans also

Americans who would like to cause damage to the sovereignty or the independence of the nation-state solely as a result of their ideological convictions.

And yet, while this alignment with the state is the predominant pathway for politicisation, two points must still be underlined. Firstly, when state policies impact minorities or ethnic groups, suspicion often targets state institutions and bureaucrats. For instance, in the case of urban transformation projects targeting neighbourhoods with diverse ethnic or political demographics (such as leftist groups or Kurdish neighbourhoods), conspiratorial narratives alleged discrimination, ethnic cleansing, or institutional racism, casting even non-state actors like local mukhtars or imams as corrupt or state collaborators. It's crucial to note that we don't assert these narratives around Kurdish communities or leftist groups are unfounded conspiracies. On the contrary, political events, historical state policies, and past societal and political processes significantly influence their generation (Yonucu, 2022). Additionally, we must consider the role of media, especially those tied to hegemonic state and nationalist discourses or specific interest groups, in co-creating and perpetuating nationalistic narratives. This shouldn't be overlooked, given media entities' substantial contribution to generating and sustaining these narratives.

Secondly, in both studies, we observed that, although our interlocutors do not antagonise the state in everyday discourse or public spaces, actors in these two regions engage in struggles against the injustices resulting from policies tacitly condoned or actively implemented by the state—albeit targeting mainly conspiratorial 'others'. These struggles are conducted either through legal processes via neighbourhood associations or through local party patronage relationships. For example, in the cases of the Fener and Balat neighbourhoods, homeowners have filed lawsuits against the designation of their neighbourhoods as renewal areas and have petitioned the court, arguing that the decisions violate urban planning principles. Local communities in Trabzon, similarly, launched a series of protests and lawsuits to hinder the construction of hydroelectric dams across their valleys. Not antagonising the state does not equate to fully accepting all state policies; rather, interlocutors have been observed attempting to navigate and influence the process through lawsuits and legal proceedings all the while seeing the secretive manipulations of the sinister outsiders as the ultimate cause of their predicaments. In line with our arguments around agency and subjectivities, we frame this particular configurations of politics still agentivizing, for it cultivates a capacity for those involved to affect their social networks.

5 | DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION: CONSPIRATORIAL NARRATIVES AS METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS

We do not consider conspiratorial narratives as indicative of 'the dissolution of truth' or stemming from social ignorance and false consciousness (Sağlam, 2020, 2024). Instead, we observe them as providing valuable ethnographic insights methodologically, revealing existing cultural repertoires and 'groupness' dynamics within social milieus. By examining the socio-political role and circulation of such narratives across different field sites, we propose that these narratives provide three novel relational and methodological insights for researchers:

Firstly, conspiratorial narratives are not about discovering the truth or seeking logical solutions. Despite their inconsistencies or their failure to provide logical or productive understandings, they shed light on 'available cultural repertoires' shaped by historical, socio-economic, and institutional factors (Lamont et al., 1990). By revealing these connections, they may reveal previously hidden insights into accumulated inequalities, norms, inconspicuous forms of discrimination or exclusion.

Secondly, these narratives delve into the subjectification and agency of the actors, as well as the dynamics of groupness and their connection to existing cultural repertoires. They develop a sense of 'we', 'us', or 'the deserving ones', portraying the storyteller as active subjects conveying desires, fantasies, demonisation of characters (Samuel and Thompson, 2021, p. 7), hopes, hidden fears, myths, or rumours. These narratives offer insights into group membership, the sense of groupness, symbolic boundaries among different groups and the role of groupness in shaping people's experiences. Similar to other cultural repertoires, conspiratorial narratives reveal how outgroups

are perceived and highlight the size and visibility of different social groups (Lamont et al., 2016). These narratives can also indicate who might agree or disagree with certain views, who might take action, and importantly, identify moments and places where interruptions occur in everyday life, societal norms, or our understanding of power dynamics and institutions. Furthermore, they shed light on how different dynamics of 'groupness' enable or impede responses to discrimination, challenging preconceptions about the impact of class, gender, ethnicity, and educational divides.

Thirdly, conspiratorial narratives challenge our understanding of everyday politics. We often assume actors have demands and a desire to be informed or participate, and these processes serve as indicators of lack of participation or exclusion from formal decision-making processes. However, our case studies indicate that, even when actors are in less powerful positions or if they are dispossessed, or demobilised, they do not necessarily antagonise the state. This complexity echoes discussions on post-truth. Scholars underline the risk of oversimplification for social scientists, suggesting that keeping in mind the self-reflexivity of the social realm and just as societies do not exist in a steady state, we need to remind ourselves that values and aspirations of people also change (Lockie, 2017). Addressing uncertainty and social ignorance and acknowledging the democratisation of knowledge are key challenges. Additionally, as social scientists, we should consider how our dedication to truth-finding might lead us to overlook the fact that in some cases truth-seeking could not be the main goal (Mill, 1975). Through discursive strategies, actors fashion their political subjectivities and cultivate agency-a capacity to exert change across their social worlds (Mahmood, 2005).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Conspiracies can best be characterised by the infamous plan organised and enacted by the *Liberatores* against the Roman Emperor Caesar while conspiracy theories may best be represented by antisemitic accounts around the fantasied control of Jewish groups, that is, Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

[2] The Turkish state does not recognise the church's ecumenical authority but acknowledges it as the religious body for Orthodox Christians in Turkey. Regulations mandate the patriarch to hold Turkish citizenship, limiting prospects due to the declining Greek Orthodox community in modern Turkey.

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