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Enemies of the people: Theorizing dispossession and mirroring conspiracy in the Republic of Georgia

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Abstract: This article connects a specific generational experience of having been dispossessed of former social status and political influence to suspicious theories of conspiracies and hidden connections. Through ethnographic cases from Georgia I argue that while acting as an explanatory framework for the personal experience of being economically and politically dispossessed, conspiracy theorizing may also work as an everyday means of re-appropriating a morally meaningful social identity through the mirroring of a general form of political rhetoric and power. The theories analyzed in the article draw on socially and culturally recognizable registers, and taps into a general atmosphere of suspicion and opacity in which mistrust of official accounts and rhetoric is reasonable and appealing. They thus work as a means of re-packing generational and economical marginality into a broader framework that is of concern to the wider community, and may be seen to represent an effort of re-claiming a moral high-ground and being re-inscribed into wider social and national domains.

Keywords: Conspiracy theory, dispossession, morality, power, Republic of Georgia.

Introduction: Conspiracy and theory

What is a conspiracy?

It's clear that he [Mikhail Saakashvili] is financed by an Armenian group from the USA. As I know – maybe you know too – there is a so-called world government. Have you heard about it? ... What about the “Committee of 300”? That's the world government! ... I say what I know from the books and literature. There are multi-

millionaires and there are rumors that they will reduce the earth's seven billion population to three billion... There is no doubt that it is so. Why are there so many wars with so many victims in the world now? Air is poisoned! Water is poisoned! There are so many infections now. Why didn't this happen in my youth? We are such a small nation. We will disappear very easily... I'm talking about strange things.

These were the words of Otar, a 73 year old man living in the provincial town Gori in the republic of Georgia. His account powerfully connects local faces (as that of former President Saakashvili) and concerns, with global forces in what seems, paradoxically, to be an equally opaque and clear set-up. Opaque in the sense that we hear of powerful people conspiring to control local and global events, and of power and sources of political and economic influence hidden from view. Clear, in the sense that there is a quite precise characterization of what is *really* going on: Otar provides us with a theory of the causal links and relations between people and events. A conspiracy provides the explanation. This article sets out to investigate the elements of this paradox of opacity and clarity – conspiracy and theory.

Much like to suspicious public attitudes to political and economic elites in other post-Soviet settings (see e.g. Nazpary 2001; Ries 2002), speculations about how the rich and powerful have managed to take advantage of unclear and uncertain conditions to gain personal political and economic status, are widespread in Georgia. One frequently encounters public tropes aligning political elites with criminal networks (Pelkmans 2006:181; Frederiksen 2015), narratives of political influence and power largely operating hidden from view (Dunn 2014:303; Manning 2007), and general mistrust of official accounts of national developments and political events (Gotfredsen 2015). In short, political power and the unfolding of events (in the national as well as the global geo-political arena) are often ascribed to the workings of

hidden networks and conspiring actors. Networks and actors that are seen to be founding political decisions on economic gains and alliances rather than moral responsibilities and common goods.

Hence, while the authorities of post-Rose Revolution Georgia were officially committed to transparency and the elimination of corruption, they were continuously the target of public suspicion and conspiracy theories. This article examines how such targeting allowed people, dispossessed of social significance and status in post-Revolution discourse and practice, to mirror political rhetoric as a means of repossessing morally viable subjectivities. By referring to conspiracy theory, then, I do not intend to connote pathological paranoia or illogicality. Rather, I wish to draw attention to quite the opposite and ask: what can accounts such as Otar's tell us of political conspiracy? What does it tell us of conspiracy theory as an epistemological device? And, finally, what may it tell us of experiences of contemporary modes of power and its contestation? In what follows I offer some answers to these questions.

At a more overall level I connect with a body of literature connecting conspiracy theorizing to an increased preoccupation with the workings of power and knowledge in "the new world order" understood as the post-Cold War era (Marcus 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Harding and Stewart 2003; Sanders and West 2003). I follow these scholars in assuming that conspiracy theorizing and suspicious narratives are, at least in part, means to pinning down powers, causalities and moralities in a reality that presents itself as otherwise inexplicable and incomprehensible. However, while I draw on insights on the relationship between the proliferation of conspiracy theorizing as a means of pinning down the workings of power and economic (mis)fortune in the age of late capitalism and neo-liberal politics, I go one step further in exploring what such theories actually *do* in their local contextual settings. That is, how they work in and on social life through socially and culturally recognizable registers.

As pointed out by Pelkmans and Machold, in its most basic definition, "a (political)

conspiracy theory is an explanation which postulates that an event is the (at least partly intended) effect of activities that have been secretly planned and carried out by several actors” (2011: 68). However, while some theories of conspiracy are never labeled as such, others, often those posed by the less powerful, suffer from the illogical and paranoid connotations attached to the label. It is important to note, then, that conspiracy theorizing is by no means a practice confined to the marginal and dispossessed. Rather, it is a central point that they are equally employed by governments and political elites – albeit with differing truth- and use value (Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 67; see also Rigi 2007; Ortman and Heathershaw 2012; Sakwa 2012). As I show below, it is precisely due to the powerful being engaged equally in conspiracy (plotting against opponents and adversaries) and conspiracy theorising (conjuring up the presumed plots of others) that it emerges as a potent mode of explanation and contestation. Conspiracy theorizing offers a means to turn a system based on political and economical dispossession against itself by mirroring a general form of theorizing while subverting the moral content. Before expounding on these points, let me first elaborate on the political and historical context in which theories such as Otar’s take shape.

Post-revolutionary dispossessions

The dispossessed are people who have been deprived of property, work, and entitlements, but we can also understand them as people who are themselves no longer possessed. That is, they are no longer inside the quasi-feudal corporations, the collective “domains,” which confer a social status on their members and which in practice are still the key units disposing of property and people in Russia (Humphrey 2002: 21).

As elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the political and economic developments in Georgia over the past decades have created new patterns of social and political inequality. Transition to market capitalism, the reorganization of property and production, periods of economic decline, and new political and economic influences and alliances have provided opportunity for some, while others have been left out or left behind. Such experiences of having been left behind, while others have managed to “fish in muddy waters,” as one unemployed woman in her fifties expressed it, has contributed to a widespread suspicion towards political and economic elites and the means by which they have attained their riches and power (Manning 2007:177-178; Ries 2002; Nazpary 2001).

Joma Nazpary notes in his study of the *Post-Soviet chaos* in Kazakhstan, that the dispossessed are a heterogeneous category (2001:14). This is also true for Georgia. Several scholars have documented how new economic, social, religious, and ethnic cuts and divides have rendered different segments of the population marginal, or even invisible, after independence, and, later, in the decade following the 2003 Rose Revolution (see e.g. Dudwick 2003; Pelkmans 2006; Frederiksen 2013; Dunn 2014). It is this latter period I attend to in the following, focusing in particular on the experiences of middle-aged and elderly people in the provincial town Gori where I conducted fieldwork in 2010 and 2011. As I shall show, they constitute a group of people that have been deprived of previous social positions, work, and entitlements and who are to a significant extent “created by the specifically post-Soviet political domains of which they are no longer part” (Humphrey 2002: 22).

The Rose Revolution was a massive popular reaction to electoral fraud and years of extensive corruption during the Presidency of the former First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party and Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze who led the country between 1992 and 2003. The revolution brought Mikheil Saakashvili, a young US educated lawyer and former political ally of Shevardnadze, into Georgia’s Presidential office for a ten

year period ending in the fall of 2013. Besides his promise to rid the state apparatus from massive corruption, Saakashvili and his coalition, the United National Movement (UNM), gained support by advocating a more modern, European and democratic path of reform and development in the country. One of the main strategies of the new government to accomplish this final “transition” was that of speeding up privatization and attracting foreign investment through liberalizing economic reforms (Jones 2013).

Alongside such reforms in the economic sphere, political administration saw the replacement of old political, administrative and state personnel that had served under Shevardnadze, with young, “clean” candidates. This approach should be seen in relation to a political agenda officially determined to end corruption and organized crime (see e.g. Frederiksen 2015; Slade 2013). Replacing former officials was in many ways an obvious strategy to disconnect the new state administration from the intertwined components of bribes, favours, and informal networks based on either solidarity, pressure or blackmail (or often a combination thereof), that were seen as remnants of Soviet political practices.¹ Young candidates symbolized a fresh start and a break with the past through their lack of connections with the previous corrupt and network-based system. In sum, a seemingly unquestionable value of youth, reforms, and profound and rapid transformation – in all spheres – became a central element in official discourse and practice in the years that followed (Wheatley 2005: 200; see also Jones 2013). In this political imaginary, Georgia was rapidly progressing towards a brighter future and was constantly increasing the distance to the “dark Soviet past”, and the excessive crime, corruption and lack of basic supplies that had characterized the 1990s.²

However, when discussing such political developments in Georgia with Maghvala and Nana, two women in their fifties, a contrasting image appeared. Looking intensely at me, Nana said, her head slightly tilted as if checking that I actually listened carefully: “Noone thinks about people anymore. The pensioner, the educated man, the scientist, the professor, the writer – he

should be appreciated!” Maghvala nodded in confirmation and elaborated:

People of the age of 40 or more are no longer needed for jobs. People get experience and practice after the age of 45, but nobody needs these people. Only young people are needed. In this way the country will never be developed.

Maghvala and Nana felt that their generation, their knowledge and achievements, were being neglected. Comments and exchanges like these were common among the middle-aged and elderly people I interviewed and spend time with during fieldwork. A majority of these informants were previously employed in Soviet administrative structures or local state-owned factories that had closed down during the economic decline of the 1990s. This was also the case for Tamar, who echoed Maghvala and Nana’s critique, dryly stating: “Nobody needs my working experience or my knowledge and nobody needs my profession. They say that I am old”. These women, and many others like them, felt socially and politically marginalized. Their life experience, professional knowledge and personal achievements were shaped when Georgia was part of the Soviet Union; a time and space now fiercely renounced in government discourse. Their generation was associated with former corrupt practices, whereas youth was associated with the path towards the future and had become the main priority in public administration as well as private business. Within this context, their formerly achieved knowledge and experience were rendered void as resources for achieving social status and recognition in the present (Gotfredsen 2014: 249).

We may, then, understand the middle-aged and elderly as having been dispossessed in a dual sense. At the general level, and one they share with others experiencing economic, social, and political marginality, they have been affected by overall economic decline and rising inequality that has challenged their livelihoods and social security. In that sense they are not

alone in criticizing the post-Rose Revolution socio-economic developments that they have seen benefit some categories of people over the past decade, but not themselves. The second sense has been less materially tangible, but nevertheless rhetorically powerful. In Humphrey's (2002) terms, this aspect is connected to the experience of no longer being possessed by the wider social domain. It is shaped by the loss of social significance and morally viable subjectivities caused by being cast as living symbols of a dark oppressive soviet past with no place in the present or the future. While my interlocutors repeatedly wove these two aspects of being dispossessed and their effects on their everyday lives together, it is the second aspect (of no longer being possessed) that is explicitly theorized and challenged through accounts of conspiracy and morally suspicious powers. I will attend to these processes in the remaining sections.

Enemies of the people

Otar, whom we met in the opening vignette, has had similar experiences as the women above. He lives with his wife Lali and their two daughters, Eka and Mariam, in one of the coiled streets of Gori's old town. Otar recently retired from working as a chemistry teacher. Lali, who is ten years younger, teaches at one of the local public schools and Eka, the oldest daughter of 39, is working as an office manager. The younger daughter Mariam, who is 35, has a law degree and used to work with the local police department, but, disillusioned with the practices and politics of the judiciary, she decided to quit a couple of years back and has since become a nun. The family often experience difficulties in making ends meet. The salaries of Lali and Eka are low and so is Otar's pension. Nevertheless, the house is frequently busy with visiting neighbors, relatives, and friends stopping by for coffee, chats or small *supras* – feasts centered on elaborate toasting. On such occasions, Lali will rarely miss to point out with a mix of irony and sadness that the servings are poor and that the guests have to bear with them for their meager hosting

abilities. Guests will in such situations object to Lali's self-criticism and point to the fact that these are hard times for most ordinary people.³

One summer afternoon of 2011 I asked Otar to recount his parents and childhood:

My mother and father were declared enemies of the people. How can teachers be enemies of the people? Now, when I'm speaking against them [the Government] am I an enemy of the people? But how can I say that white is black?! Professions and professionalism are not thought of as important things now. If I am not a nationalist [member of the UNM] then I'm their enemy. They think in this way.

I hate what happens now in the schools... I've stopped working this year. As these mandated people were brought to school to check up on us... What do they have to do with teaching? I'm an old man and maybe I made a few mistakes but... They wrote notes about my mistakes several times. Then they told me to write an explanation letter. They were collecting facts against me and I left. My working life finished like that.

Above, Otar weaves past into present by making associations between his parents being declared "enemies of the people" in 1937, his own former career as a locally renowned teacher and chemist, and contemporary political rhetoric of friends and enemies of the Georgian people. He compares the treatment he feels himself to have been put through by the UNM authorities to the experience of his parents during the purges of the 1930s. That of being prevented from telling the truth and being marginalized – economically, socially and professionally – as a result of diverging political views. This line of reasoning is very similar to that of Nana, Maghvala and Tamar in the previous section: people above a certain age are thought to be old-fashioned professionally and to sympathize with the former regime, and

hence being of no use to society. As they perceive it, they are cast as the new “enemies of the people.” It is interesting, however, to notice the play on form and the implicit moral judgment in Otars reasoning: rather than representing a significant break with the stereotypes of Soviet power and oppression, the contemporary authorities display a continuity of practice with the very modes of governance that they declare Otar and his generation to embody. Similar to the Soviet authorities, they engage in plotting and collecting facts against political opponents in order to hold on to power and privileges.

Later I probed these views further, asking Otar to elaborate on his political views. I quote our exchanges at length below, such as to illustrate the sequence of themes and associations that are gradually evoked as he talked:

I can tell you in brief. I like any political party or situation which is good and profitable for Georgia. According to what I’ve told you, it’s clear that I don’t believe in this government. What would it be like if Georgians could not exist in Georgia? Who is teaching us to be tolerant? The USA consider us as silly people, as less developed people.

What do you think about the government’s relationship with Russia?

I think they are close to each other.

Yes? In secret?

I know what communists are. The situation is no different now. The changes that happened in Russia took place in Georgia too. There is a Russian saying: “He who pays, commands.” It’s clear that he [Saakashvili] is financed by an Armenian group from the USA. As I know – maybe you know too – there is a so-called world government. Have you heard about it?

Otar goes on to unfold the theory we were introduced to in the opening vignette of this article. He describes what he sees as a connection between President Saakashvili, Armenian lobbyist

groups in the United States, a world government, and their conspiracy to reduce the world's population. He substantiates his theory by referring to articles he has read in *Asaval-dasavali* - a tabloid newspaper with a strong traditionalist nationalist bend often featuring comments and articles critical of Saakashvili's government and the influx of Western values. "Some people," he adds, "say that it is a newspaper of gossip. But they don't want to know the truth...!"

Through his associations, Otar links his lack of trust in the government to the fact that its actions are determined by the capital and motives of powerful rich Armenians from the US. These powerful Armenians are linked to a secret world government. And the secret world government is linked to the future eradication of the Georgian nation as well as poor and powerless people across the world in general.

The motif of the Armenian in Otar's account is noticeable, and is connected to the fact that Armenians have historically been seen as playing the role of merchants and moneylenders in Georgia (Suny 1994: 118-119). In that sense, the stereotype of the greedy and deceitful Armenian contributes to explaining why the actions of the powerful are motivated by money and opaque connections, rather than what we might term a "moral good". To Otar present-day Georgia is no different from communist times. Like then, official political ideology and discourse is merely a mask hiding the secret networks and transactions that really matter. "He who pays, commands!" Tamar, Nana, and Maghvala whom we met above, and many others, had similar theories of internal Georgian politics and the threat to the Georgian nation. These threats were seen as essentially being products of secret alliances between domestic and global elites seeking to attain power and resources at the expense of ordinary poor – but moral – people. Today, what counts as right and wrong is perceived as commodified among the powerful and can be bought for highest bid.

The links Otar constructs emphasize how hidden connections and unscrupulous intentions motivate global and national events, and the courses of our lives, much more than

we can imagine and comprehend. We are all puppets in a great game it would seem. In that sense his account theorizes what seems otherwise inexplicable to him: why he has been pushed out of his job – Saakashvili’s government is afraid of the truth and casts opponents as enemies of the people; why a Georgian government would weaken the Georgian nation and prioritize capital over morality – because they are in essence Armenians and hence closely connected to the Armenian lobby in the US, the center of global capital; why people around the world die from natural catastrophes, conflicts and pollution – because the secret world government has decided to reduce the earth’s population.

However, stories implying a moral critique of the links between money, power and national, as well as global, politics were not confined to exchanges between contemporaries or one-to-one conversations like the one I had with Otar. Apart from being recaptured and disseminated through a number of public newspapers and magazines such as *Asaval Dasavali*, they would emerge in a range of social situations and conversations: Spontaneously as commentaries on a range of political events reported in news, in *supras* as contrasts to the ideals of cultural and national coherence communicated in the toasts, or even when mundanely gossiping about the fortunes and misfortunes of others around coffee tables. Akin to Otar’s efforts above, people would often put quite some work into detecting and explaining the causal links affecting and determining their socio-political surroundings and personal positions within these. The question is, then, why such theories seem to have a broad appeal in Georgia?

Theorizing dispossession and power

The plot that Otar outlines above localizes global forces and personalizes impersonal ones. In that sense we may see conspiracy theory is a mode of theorizing a locally situated problem – from the viewpoint of specific personal and social positions. As theories, they order disorder,

provide explanation, and, in this case, may be seen as means of pinning down and clarifying political powers and influences that seem otherwise obscure: hard to detect and perceived as impossible to engage and master. What is of interest here, then, is not primarily the truth value of Otter's theory, but rather what it *does* as a theory – what kinds of knowledge and understanding it produces and why, and how, this knowledge is equally perceived as crucial and appealing.

In the volume *Transparency and Conspiracy*, conspiracy theorizing is conceptualized as a means of addressing uncertainties of power and knowledge in “the new world order” understood as late capitalism and modernity in the post-Cold War era (Sanders and West 2003). That is, it is an approach to the world as it emerges in the aftermath of Cold War politics and the increased globalisation of local economies and relations of production and consumption. In an afterword to the volume Jean and John Comaroff conclude:

Conspiracy, in short, has come to fill the explanatory void, the epistemic black hole, that is increasingly said to have been left behind by the unsettling of moral communities, by the so-called crisis of representation, by the erosion of received modernist connections between means and ends, subjects and objects, ways and means (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 287)

Conspiracy theories, they continue, bridge the gap between ideal and real, and seek to reveal the hidden workings of power (2003: 288). The main argument of the volume as a whole is that conspiracy theorising is employed as a means of achieving transparency, explicability, and moral certainty in a world increasingly experienced as fragmented and opaque. Hence, within this framework, conspiracy theorizing is connected to late modern anxieties and uncertainties about the complex causalities linking human action and social events; its controlling

preoccupation is “with human agency and political knowledge in a world of social influences” (Harding and Stewart 2003: 259). These insights help us understand Otar’s need to make sense of the complex of powers and people influencing his life, and why theories of conspiracy are compelling vehicles for doing so. However, the theories’ importance lay not only in this overall global trend but even more so in their locally feasible reasoning. That is, in their resonance with, and mirroring of, a particular historical and political context.

Like the abovementioned scholars, George Marcus (1999) convincingly couples conspiracy theorizing, or as he coins it, “paranoid reasoning”, with specifics of the post-Cold War era. He directs our attention to the way in which the Cold War era was in itself a “massive project of paranoid social thought and action” and that “the legacies and residues of that era make the persistence, and even increasing intensity, of its signature paranoid style [...] an expectable response to certain *social facts*” (Marcus 1999: 2). In other words, in former “client states,” such as Georgia, the perception of being at the mercy of the conspiratorial politics of superpowers or invisible enemies within, is an idea firmly based in previous political and popular discourse as well as experience and reality. In that sense, Otar’s evocation of the purges of the 30s is not a coincidence. During this period, as well in later Soviet eras, the “enemies of the people” were continuously produced by a mix of actual plotting against political rivals and a general atmosphere of alert suspicion, or “conspirativity” (Verdery 2014), causing Soviet citizens and authorities alike to be on a constant lookout for conspiracies and unseen enemies (see also Borenstein 2014; Ortman and Heathershaw 2012). Moreover, in the light of nationalist politics, ethnic conflicts and civil war in the 90s, as well as official post-revolution rhetoric, the reasoning of Otar is cast within a context in which the influence of foreign powers, the possibility of betrayal from within, and a persistent threat against the Georgian nation and everyday peaceful livelihoods is by no means extraneous. While, ideally, independence in the early 90s and later the democratic and economic reforms of the post-Rose Revolution decade

should have brought national and personal prosperity and self-determination, this is far from the everyday experience of a large part of the population.

Against this background conspiracy and suspicion continues to provide a very reasonable and appealing public framework for addressing discrepancies between ideals and experience. That is, conspiracy theory is an effective genre in the sense that it speaks to a more general mode of political discourse and draws on readily recognizable and accessible social and cultural registers. For one, the suspicious genre is highly detectible in official political discourse, and idioms of constantly lurking dangers - enemies to the Georgian people and the national future – is by no means restricted to stories told by the dispossessed and marginalized. For instance, the previous government, including Saakashvili himself, would repeatedly point to Russian schemes and infiltrations aiming to destabilize domestic Georgian politics and prevent the consolidation of national prosperity and international alliances. One prominent example of the calling of such plots, was the assertion that the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, had been long planned by Russia to destabilize the country and prevent Georgian NATO membership (Sakwa 2012: 592). Secondly, at the popular level, conspiracy theories build on a general popular suspicion towards public politics that is most often framed as dirty and immoral in its egocentric quest for power and personal gain at the expense of the greater social good. In other words, post-Rose Revolution political rhetoric on transparency and good governance has not changed the general public perception – based in historical and contemporary experience – that power is *out there* operated by elites that keep their real intentions hidden from view. Otar's reasoning in that sense feeds into a wider public experience and belief that there is more to the political reality than what meets the eye (Gotfredsen 2015; Frederiksen 2015; see also Verdery 2014).

As epistemological devices, then, conspiracy theories offer explanatory links between ideal and real, between official representations and experience, and thereby construct order out

of disorder. As Jamer Hunt writes of paranoid reasoning, it is “confirmation in need of a hypothesis” (1999: 23). The facts are given but the causalities behind them are in need of being figured out. The explanation for an ostensibly absurd situation or position – being without a job in spite of extensive professional experience, the Georgian government undermining the Orthodox Church and the Georgian nation, and a rising number of people around the world dying from natural disasters and war – is found in hidden connections and actions of powerful and well-connected people: people masking the real motives for their actions and decisions. But just as importantly: as it resonates with historical and contemporary experience across Georgian society at large, a significant part of the people confronted with conspiracy theories through everyday conversations as well as various news- and social media, do not deem it unrealistic that this may very well be the case.

Externalising and repacking influence and power

To my interlocutors, conspiracy theories act as explanatory frameworks for the experience of being dispossessed of socio-economic status and political influence through the narrative externalization of those objects. Power and influence resides *out there*, hidden from view. Moreover, through the externalization of political power and influence, and most importantly, through its repackaging as essentially opaque, dirty, and morally dubious, the theories produce an alternative moral subjectivity seemingly disconnected from the impurities of local as well as global political relations and alliances.

In characterizing what he terms the “paranoid style” in American politics during the early years of the Cold War, Richard Hofstadter notes that while a sense of perception is central to paranoid political thought, it may be distinguished from clinical paranoia in the sense that

the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others... His sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation (Hofstadter 1965: 4).

As a political mode of reasoning, the “paranoid style” is very similar to the reasoning of Otar and others we have met in the previous sections. However, whereas Hofstadter’s essay displays little sympathy with this mode of reasoning and his use of paranoia connotes a pathological condition, my pointing to the similarities between the paranoid style and Otar’s theory has a different purpose. Against widespread experiences of dispossession, pursuits of plausible explanations and causes, and a general political atmosphere of suspicion, it is moral righteousness and indignation on behalf of the larger affected community that holds sociopolitical potential. Through the repacking of a generation-specific sense of dispossession into more general social concerns and political forms, conspiracy theory becomes a narrative means of re-appropriating a sense of moral worth and belonging within society at large in the absence of economic and political standing.

The case of the “Armenian threat” will provide an example of how Otar’s reasoning taps in with a wider audience than people sharing his generation-specific experience of being cast as the new enemies of the people. Besides the stereotype of greed and deceit rooted in the historical association of Armenians with merchants and moneylenders, the motif of the Armenian is also connected to present-day political concerns. The Armenian minority in Georgia amounts around 5.7 % of the population (2002 census) and is primarily concentrated in Tbilisi and the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, which borders Armenia to the south and where

Armenians make up the regional majority. Calling on the Armenian state for support, parts of the Armenian community in Georgia are demanding greater cultural, political and religious rights. For these reasons they are among some Georgians perceived as a “fifth column” threatening Georgian national identity and territorial integrity from within. When discussing matters of the Armenian minority as well as the nature of decisions made in parliament concerning foreign investment, national heritage, and the position of the Georgian Orthodox vis-à-vis other religious communities, people would often refer to the quite widespread suspicion (in particular among his opponents) that Saakashvili and his top ministers were actually of Armenian origin. During these days in June 2011 Otari and my other informants felt confirmed in their suspicions, when an amendment to the law on religious freedom was passed in parliament. Otari’s fears that eventually Georgians will not be able to “exist in Georgia” bears a reference to this amendment as well as the general suspicion of an Armenian infiltration of the Georgian government. The amendment granted other religious communities than the Georgian Orthodox Church – such as the Armenian Church – the right to be registered and own property. The law was fiercely protested by the Georgian Orthodox Church and a vast majority of the population because it was seen as a threat to Georgian Orthodoxy and, in effect, the Georgian nation (Latatia 2011). By associating his personal misfortune and concerns with this issue, Otari evoked more general feelings and fears of hidden agendas and political betrayal that are widely shared among the national community and thus placed himself *within* that community rather than in opposition to it. It is not he and his kind that are the enemies of the people – it is the authorities themselves.

In short, we may see the theories as constituting an outward projected moral critique of the rich, powerful, and influential that simultaneously reverses personal and collective doubts as to their own subjective worth and rightful place within the wider community. The theories carry the potential to replace the feeling of being cast as an enemy of the people with

the sense of being united with other ordinary people against the real enemies: rich politicians and world governments nurturing their personal privileges and alliances and, in effect, commodifying what should ideally be morally informed decisions and actions.

Conclusion: Mirroring conspiracy and appropriating morality

Conspiracy theorizing, then, is more than merely a means of theorizing the opacity of power, dispossession and misfortune. In a political and historical context in which the search for “enemies of the people” and plotting adversaries has been widespread, and their existence oftentimes confirmed, conspiracy theorizing has the potential of turning a politically and economically dispossessing system against itself by mirroring a general form of theorizing while subverting the moral content. Through mirroring and externalizing, what he sees as the dispossessing political powers, Otar taps into a general atmosphere of suspicion and opacity in which mistrust of official accounts and rhetoric is reasonable and appealing. The potential political efficiency of his theory lies in its capacity of re-appropriating a morally viable identity that resonances with a broader experience than that of himself and people like Maghvala, Nana and Tamar.

As Silverstein suggests, “practices of conspiracy theorizing constitutes [*sic*] an important element in the dialectical processes of hegemony, as it attests to the incompleteness of the dominant power's universalization of its truth regime and articulates the possibility of new oppositional political formations” (Silverstein 2002: 648). The truth regime contested by Otar is the dominant government rhetoric and practice that frame him and his generation as the new enemies of the people and that of the UNM conducting transparent good governance to the benefit of the Georgian people and nation. Contrary to this image, in his construction of events, the UNM and their powerful political and economic allies bore close resemblance to

former political regimes and are in themselves what constitute the enemies of the people. Conspiracy theorizing, then, gives dispossession a face by creating new enemies of the people. Through their references to more general and inclusive categories such as the Orthodox Church, the national community, and the general grievances of the unemployed, poor and politically marginalized, my interlocutors repacked their generation-specific marginality into something that is of concern to a broader audience. In contrasting the present to their personal pasts, these pasts – including the moral practices and social significances embedded in these – themselves come to signify a purified alternative to the present-day immoral influence of global capital and consumer culture. Rumors and conspiracy theories work as a means of re-ordering generational and economic marginality into a broader framework of a moral national and religious community to which they can then see themselves as meaningfully belonging. However fantastic these stories may seem to others, they constitute a means to reclaim a moral high-ground and, simultaneously, they represent an effort of re-inscribing those who tell them into the wider social and national narrative while excluding the politically and economically powerful.

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Notes:

1. For a thorough analysis of the intertwined phenomena of *blat* (the use of networks and contacts to obtain favors), *kompromat* (the use of compromising material), and *krugovaia poruka* (joint responsibility) in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia, see Ledeneva (2006).
2. As an example of this rhetoric, when commenting on a series of protest rallies in Tbilisi in May 2011, Saakashvili implied that protesters were controlled by Moscow (with Vladimir Putin essentially representing continuity with the Soviet system). He concluded that while there may be a “minority” of people identifying with Soviet times “We are adjusted to the future and they are oriented towards the past... Good is on the future’s side and evil on the side of the past.”
3. See Dudwick (2003) for a discussion of post-Soviet poverty in Georgia and the social consequences and embarrassments of not being able to live up to cultural norms of hosting.

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