

Conspiracy Theories, Populism and the Limits of what can be said

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in polarization in Western societies due to conspiracy thinking and populism. On the one hand, social media such as TikTok or Instagram act as catalysts for this development; on the other hand, we are living in an age of fundamental social crises. If we take a closer look at the historical development of the 21st century, these crises have intensified the discourse towards social polarization. Starting with 9/11, this was followed by the global economic crisis, the so-called migration crisis, the pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the Gaza war. These crises are embedded in the discourse on climate change. Closely linked to the increasingly difficult questions that these crises conjure, populist movements are increasingly gaining political ground. Donald Trump's second presidency in particular shows on the world stage how governments can use populist arguments, build on conspiracy theories and still be successful in elections. The Trump presidency is an impressive example of how populism combined with conspiracy thinking pushes and transcends the limits of what can be said (Ruth Wodak). The more the previously valid social discourse is disrupted by influential political groups, the more radical and extreme ideas will enter the language of the so-called political centre. Terms such as the Great Replacement, the Lying Press or Deep State are becoming socially acceptable. Due to the fast pace of our time and the power of social media, these phenomena appear to be contemporary developments.

In the workshop, we will follow the historical traces of conspiracy thinking, populism and the limits of what can be said. We will work out that conspiracy thinking represented a modern interpretation of the world in the Early Modern period, which evolved into extreme left-wing and right-wing world views in the 18th century at the latest. Several case studies are used to show how the interpretation of events, conditions and developments can change over time through the lenses of conspiracy thinking. Furthermore, the connection to populist discourses up to today's very effective populist conspiracism is shown. The developments in the media using case studies are considered. The aim of the workshop is to find ways and possibilities for how we, as democratic societies, can counteract the discourse about the division of society conjured up by populism and conspiracy theories.