

# POWER AND KNOWLEDGE: ON THE ROLE OF LIBERAL GOVERNMENTS WITHIN THE SECURITY DISPOSITIVE

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## SUMMARY

This thesis will discuss the question: to what extent do De Graaf and Foucault's reflections on the security dispositive force us to argue that liberal governments should provide more information to their citizens? The term "security dispositive" was coined by historian and terrorism expert Beatrice de Graaf to reference the concepts, available knowledge and emotions that come into play when something is deemed to be a threat to (national) security. The term "dispositive" itself comes from French philosopher Michel Foucault, who used it in a broader sense to mean a network of institutional and administrative mechanisms that maintain the way power is exercised within society. These mechanisms, both physical and metaphysical, rely heavily on knowledge.

The first chapter will go into detail about Foucault's notions of power and how they relate to De Graaf's security theory. The point of this chapter is to lay the theoretical groundwork and explain the role of securitization within a liberal society. Chapter two problematizes the effects of securitization. After explaining the concept of what Judith Shklar calls "the liberalism of fear," I will show how liberal governments use fear as a legitimization tool and how this creates "crippled epistemologies" amongst citizens. Chapter three will demonstrate how these crippled epistemologies contribute to "epistemic injustice" and how an excess of fear and doubt can lead to the popularisation of anti-government conspiracy theories. In chapter four, I will return to Foucault's notion of power to show how a better awareness of the causes and effects of the security dispositive is beneficial to citizens. This, in turn, contributes to a solution for epistemic injustice and a reinforcement of the foundation of liberalism. I conclude that this leads me to argue that governments should provide more information to their citizens.

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## INTRODUCTION

The historical period that started somewhere after the end of the Second World War has been commonly referred to as the Age of Information. Defined by modernization and globalisation, this title exemplifies the advances made in information technology and distribution. Underneath that, however, it also implies the importance of information itself.

People had been actively fighting for political involvement since the Age of Revolution in the 18th and 19th century, and with fascism and communism seemingly defeated in the Western world, the liberal democracy got its time to shine. Citizens were more involved in politics than they had ever been in Western society, which required them to be aware of socio-political issues. A good example of this is the sudden shift in how Americans viewed the Vietnam War: when the actual horrors of the conflict came to light, a war that had been portrayed as righteous by the U.S. government became cruel and inhumane.<sup>1</sup>

This brings me to the main topic of this thesis. In her essay “Historicizing Security,” historian and terrorism expert Beatrice de Graaf, alongside fellow historian Cornel Zwieler, discusses how information can be shaped by a government in the name of securitizing their citizens. In this theory, she introduces the concept of a “security dispositive,” inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. I will be discussing to what extent De Graaf and Foucault’s reflections on the security dispositive force us to argue that liberal governments should provide more information to their citizens.

This thesis centres around three fundamental concepts: *security dispositives*, *crippled epistemologies* and *epistemic injustice*. Chapter one will form the theoretical groundwork in which I will explain what De Graaf’s definition of the security dispositive is. I will also go into more detail about Foucault and his notion of power, and how De Graaf’s theory was influenced by his works. In chapter two, I will point out that the security dispositive poses an inherent problem to the foundation of a liberal society, as defined by political philosopher Judith Shklar. This chapter will introduce the concept of “crippled epistemologies” and how liberal governments can be complicit in creating and upholding them. Chapter three will be a case study. Not only will I demonstrate how crippled epistemologies add to what Miranda Fricker calls “epistemic injustice,” I will also point out how they contribute to the creation and popularisation of anti-government conspiracy theories. This chapter will show the extreme results crippled epistemologies might have. In the fourth and final chapter, I will demonstrate that Foucault’s notion of power, De Graaf’s definition of the security dispositive and Shklar’s idea of liberalism lead to the conclusion that we ought to demand more transparency from our governments.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Mosettig, “The campaign that changed how Americans saw the Vietnam War,” *PBS*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/the-campaign-that-changed-how-americans-saw-the-vietnam-war>.

## CHAPTER ONE: POWER AND SECURITY

One of the central themes of this thesis will be Beatrice de Graaf's concept of the "security dispositive," what it implies and how we can observe the effects it has on society. She understands a security dispositive as a collection of "security concepts, practices, and emotions that are invoked in the name of potential future threat"<sup>2</sup>. These security dispositives play a great part in the dynamics of modern liberal societies. But before I will be able to elaborate on her theory, we have to take a look at Michel Foucault, who originated the term "dispositive," and his concept of power. By doing this, I will lay the theoretical groundwork for the rest of this thesis.

### 1.1 Foucault's original notion of power

Foucault's most well-known work on power is his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), in which he gives a historization of a modern form of power he calls discipline. Over the past few centuries, exerting power through physical force, violence and torture has been replaced, he argues, by "power based on detailed knowledge, routine intervention, and gentle correction"<sup>3</sup>. While punishment before the 1800s was strictly corporal, this changed when the legal system started making attempts at understanding the criminal and his motivations. Instead of punishment aimed at the body, Foucault describes how the focus shifted to the soul, which could potentially be corrected.<sup>4</sup> Its result was the birth of the prison, not as much a form of punishment as a form of control and regulation.<sup>5</sup> Eradicating criminal individuals turned into making attempts to discipline them instead.<sup>6</sup> On physically separating individuals from each other in cells, Foucault says:

Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation; it was a tactic of anti-desertion, anti-vagabondage, anti-concentration. Its aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities of merits. It was a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering and using.<sup>7</sup>

However, *Discipline and Punish* only gives us a part of Foucault's notion of power. To fully understand it, I want to look at one particular criticism of the book. After that, I will further expand on the rest of Foucault's ideas of power and introduce the concept of the dispositive.

A critique of Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power comes from David Garland, in his work "Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*: An Exposition and Critique". According to Garland, the way Foucault portrays the penal system is reductive; it focuses too much on the oppressive and conforming aspects,

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<sup>2</sup> Beatrice de Graaf and Cornel Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive," *Historical Social Research* 38, no. 1 (2013): 51.

<sup>3</sup> David Garland, "Foucault's 'Discipline and Punish' -- An Exposition and Critique," *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 11, no. 4 (Autumn 1986): 851.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 135-138.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 269-270.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 135-138.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 143.

leaving no room for other facets of modern reformatory programs, “such as [...] responsibility, independence, stability, etc.”<sup>8</sup>

While there are enough valid criticisms to be made about the western penal system, like Foucault does in *Discipline and Punish*, this point ties into Garland’s larger critique that Foucault ends up with a rather black and white, simplistic image of conflict between the dominating classes and the classes that are being dominated. There is little to no nuance in his abstractions of those who hold the power and those who don’t.<sup>9</sup>

Foucault does claim that his goal isn’t to develop any sort of theory about punishment or power, but this just makes it harder to apply his ideas to contemporary situations. He refrains from clearly telling the reader who the dominating class is, although Garland points out that he sometimes makes use of terms that Marxist theorists will be familiar with, like “the State” or “the bourgeoisie”<sup>10</sup>. By not committing to move beyond these abstracts, *Discipline and Punish* isn’t able to form a whole-hearted critique of those dominating classes.

I will briefly return to the relevancy of this specific critique in chapter three. In the next part of this chapter, I will elaborate on Foucault’s later ideas on power, his definition of a dispositive and how this connects to De Graaf’s security theory.

### 1.2 Foucault’s notion of power in “Subject and Power”

In his essay “Subject and Power,” published seven years after *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault retraces his steps, returns to his ideas about power and amends them here and there. The following quote reads like a direct response to Garland’s critique:

We shouldn’t consider the ‘modern state’ as an entity which was developed above individuals, ignoring what they are and even their very existence, but, on the contrary, as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault goes on to rectify his abstraction of the state as a faceless, dominating institution. Power isn’t something that is held by an individual or a group, but is rather something that is manifested through a set of relationships where a certain dynamic of domination is created.<sup>12</sup> I will return to this idea later and elaborate on it in more detail.

Foucault then proceeds to sum up the properties of power struggles. Foucault argues that these power struggles are not strictly anti-authority, but exist everywhere power is exercised, and the first four properties are as follows. They are universal and happen not just in one country; their goal is to change the nature of the power relation itself; they oppose the effects of power that result from knowledge; and they aim for immediate results rather than results in some hypothetical future.<sup>13</sup> The final two properties focus on the individual. Power struggles question the status of the individual, what

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<sup>8</sup> Garland, “Foucault’s “Discipline and Punish” -- An Exposition and Critique,” 878.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 879.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 878.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, “Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 783.

<sup>12</sup> Garland, 852.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 780-781.

makes them stand out as such but also what separates them from the rest of a community. Lastly, they all ask one question: who are we?<sup>14</sup>

Historically, Foucault describes, these power struggles can be categorized in three different ways, depending on what they struggle against. The first is any form of social domination; the second is exploitation which alienates the individual from their labour; and the third is anything that would try to take away what Marx called “*Gattungswesen*,” or human nature. Foucault defines it as a struggle against subjection and submission.<sup>15</sup> This third category has become the most prevalent in recent decades. Because while there are still struggles against social domination or labour exploitation, a lot of these cases now also fall under this third form of struggle, which categorizes itself as a struggle of individuals fighting against the way they are subjected to power. And the way they are subjected to power is through the state, which is both individualizing and totalizing, meaning that they try to separate individuals from others yet group them together at the same time.<sup>16</sup>

We shouldn’t, however, imagine the state as a political force, like Foucault was criticized for doing in *Discipline and Punish*. Instead, power depends on and is enforced through relations. The term Foucault uses for this concept is *apparatus* or *dispositif* (dispositive), which he defines as follows in “Confession of the Flesh”:

[...] a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions - in short, the said as much as the unsaid.<sup>17</sup>

Foucault tries to describe a network of knowledge relations between any of these elements at a given moment in time without having to reduce those relations to any fixed structures. They are real, physical and institutional, but simultaneously metaphysical. This is where Foucault’s ideas about power tie into De Graaf’s theory, to which I will return in the next part.

### 1.3 The security dispositive

In their essay “Historicizing Security”, historians Beatrice de Graaf and Cornel Zwierlein elaborate on Foucault’s work by introducing the concept of a security dispositive. This can be understood as a dispositive that includes the concepts, available knowledge and emotions that come into play when something is deemed to be a threat to (national) security.<sup>18</sup> The act with which something is labelled as a threat is a part of securitization, a “discursive process through which ‘an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority [...]’.”<sup>19</sup> Think, for example, of the Red Scare following the Second World War, or the post-9/11 War on Terror. Both communism then and terrorism now are deemed potential dangers to society as a whole, and the act of securitization is supposed to validate the resources that go into fighting said danger.

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 780-781.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 781.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 782.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: The Harvester Press, 1980), 194.

<sup>18</sup> De Graaf and Zwierlein, “Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive,” 51.

<sup>19</sup> Jonna Nyman, “Securitization Theory,” in *Critical Approaches to Security*, ed. Laura J. Shepherd (New York: Routledge, 2013), 53.

Just like securitization, Foucault states that a dispositive's main objective is responding to an "urgent need" at any given moment.<sup>20</sup> When a problem is deemed a security threat, even though this threat could happen at any moment in the future, taking certain measures to prevent this is something that happens in the present. This decision, De Graaf argues, is almost always made by a sector of the state, who then proceeds to dedicate time and money to the thing they consider to be a threat. Once this utterance has been uttered, the thing that is considered a threat is removed from its original context and made into a security problem, which calls for specific treatment by the state. A theory becomes reality; the problem becomes an urgent need.<sup>21</sup>

De Graaf, paraphrasing historian Werner Conze, compares the Middle Ages to the western world after the 17th century and the official creation of nation states. The main objective in the Middle Ages can best be summarized with *pax*, the goal for peace and order. It wasn't until after monarchs started laying claim on geographical areas that *securitas* (security) became more important, protecting their land and the people on it.<sup>22</sup> It became an important aspect in legitimizing wars and other acts of political violence. An example is the naval arms race between Great Britain and Germany leading up to the First World War; Great Britain considered Germany's growing navy an imposing and immediate threat to their control of European waters and acted accordingly. This creates what De Graaf defines as a security paradox in which the security of one actor needs to be sacrificed at the expense of another.<sup>23</sup>

In this chapter, I demonstrated how Foucault's notion of power ties into De Graaf's security theory and explained the concept of a security dispositive. In the next two chapters, I want to take a look at what happens after something has been made into a security problem, the consequences of securitization and what those effects imply for liberal society.

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<sup>20</sup> Foucault, "Confession of the Flesh," 195.

<sup>21</sup> De Graaf and Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive," 52.

<sup>22</sup> Beatrice de Graaf, "De historisering van veiligheid," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 125, no. 3 (2012): 306.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



## CHAPTER TWO: LIBERALISM AND KNOWLEDGE

While there is nothing inherently problematic about the security dispositive within De Graaf's theory, it highlights certain problems if we take a closer look at how its aspects affect a liberal society. In her essay "The Liberalism of Fear," political philosopher Judith Shklar establishes her own theory of what a liberal society should look like while at the same time criticising the form of liberalism applied in most western countries right now. I will use Shklar's criticism of what she calls the liberalism of fear to demonstrate how the elements of the security dispositive pose a problem to the foundations of a liberal society. An essential part of that problem is the concept of crippled epistemologies, which I will elaborate on in the last part of this chapter. Finally, I will show how this can result in epistemic injustice.

### *2.1 Liberalism of fear*

Compared to other political philosophies, liberalism is relatively young. It has its origins in 17th century Europe and only found mainstream popularity in the aftermath of the Second World War<sup>24</sup>, priding itself on its foundation of toleration and freedom. Shklar herself defines liberalism as "[the aim] to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom". As long as it doesn't interfere with the freedom and happiness of others, everyone should have the right to have uninhibited control over their life.<sup>25</sup>

In reality, however, the horrors and atrocities of war instilled a deep seated fear of cruelty within the concept of modern liberalism, creating what Shklar calls the liberalism of fear. According to her, the main goal of this form of liberalism is to prevent cruelty at all costs, and a government must be limited as much as possible to prevent them from inflicting cruelty upon a weaker person or group.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, governments that have based themselves on the liberalism of fear often tend to use fear as a legitimization tool for similar cruelties. Fear of cruelty has been used to justify warfare, torture, and the breach of the private sphere.

To demonstrate how exactly securitization happens, I will look at Jonna Nyman's explanation of the securitization theory in the next part, after which I will explain how this can result in crippled epistemologies. Crippled epistemologies, in turn, contribute to a larger problem of what philosopher Miranda Fricker calls epistemic injustice.

### *2.2 Fear as a tool for legitimization*

When something is securitized, it is taken out of its political sphere into the security sphere by an elite actor.<sup>27</sup> In her essay published in *Critical Approaches to Security*, Jonna Nyman summarizes three important conditions that go into making the process of securitization successful. The speech act securitizing a threat has to follow the "grammar of security," which emphasizes priority and urgency; the threat itself has to have a set of features that show it is indeed a security issue; and the actor is an authority.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 22-23.

<sup>25</sup> Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," 21.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Nyman, "Securitization Theory," 52.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 54.

The last condition is the most important one for this thesis. A successful securitization act is always done by an authority, whether that be an institution or an individual. Nyman states that whether or not the “threat” is real doesn’t actually matter: because securitization is done by an elite actor it is made to be important.<sup>29</sup> Their position of power gives them the benefit of legitimacy that is usually accepted by the general public. This makes securitization an inherent political process; someone has to make a choice before declaring something to be a security threat, no matter if it is or not.<sup>30</sup>

The securitization process is only successful, Nyman states, when the “audience” (the public, the people who don’t hold a position of power) accept the security problem as it is posed by the authority.<sup>31</sup> One of the conditions for a securitizing move is that it places emphasis on the urgency (and implied danger) of the threat, which could evoke worry and even fear if successful. These emotions are a part of the security dispositive as stated by De Graaf and Zwierlein,<sup>32</sup> and it sets in motion a process of othering.<sup>33</sup> To ensure security and freedom for the so-called “in-group,” the security and freedom of others are sacrificed.<sup>34</sup> At best, this normalizes surveillance technology and other precautions that blur the line between the political and the personal sphere<sup>35</sup> under the guise of keeping people safe. At worst, it results in racial profiling of people in the aftermath of 9/11 for fear of terrorists<sup>36</sup>, and other acts ranging from microaggressions to full on war-fare.<sup>37</sup> This fear-mongering helps legitimize a securitization move and the actions that follow. This also means, however, that it legitimizes acts of political violence that play into the security paradox brought up in the previous chapter.

Even if fear-mongering isn’t the intentional outcome of securitization, it is an outcome nonetheless. For instance, people who “look like Muslims” often get treated with unjustified suspicion just on the grounds that they “look like a terrorist,” a stereotype that came to the foreground of our collective consciousness with the rise of terrorist attacks in Western Europe.<sup>38</sup> But while it results in othering, discrimination and distrust within the public sphere, it can also cause people to lose faith in their governments. “Fake news”<sup>39</sup> and politicians discrediting mainstream media outlets<sup>40</sup> have led to people growing increasingly wary of information presented to them by a political authority. Not all of this can be blamed on limited news media literacy; when it appears that a government isn’t fully transparent, implications that they are hiding something are easily made.

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<sup>29</sup> Nyman, “Securitization Theory,” 53.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> De Graaf and Zwierlein, “Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive,” 51.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” 28.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 24-25.

<sup>36</sup> Lena Kampf and Indra Sen, “History Does Not Repeat Itself, But Ignorance Does: Post 9/11 Treatment of Muslims and the Liberty Security Dilemma,” *Humanity in Action*, accessed July 21, 2021, [https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge\\_detail/history-does-not-repeat-itself-but-ignorance-does-post-9-11-treatment-of-muslims-and-the-liberty-security-dilemma/](https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/history-does-not-repeat-itself-but-ignorance-does-post-9-11-treatment-of-muslims-and-the-liberty-security-dilemma/).

<sup>37</sup> Shklar, 36.

<sup>38</sup> RadarAdvies, “Focusgroepen moslimdiscriminatie,” Research report by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, July 16, 2020, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Menno van Dongen, “NOS boos op WNL over ‘fake news-Journaal’-opmerking van Baudet,” *De Volkskrant*, March 3 2021, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/nos-boos-op-wnl-over-fake-news-journaal-opmerking-van-baudet/>.

<sup>40</sup> Lieven Goes, ““America first, build the wall en fake news”: dit was vier jaar president Trump, samengevat in acht thema’s,” *VRT News*, October 24, 2020, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/10/19/overzicht-4-jaar-trump/>.

### 2.3 Crippled epistemologies

This brings us back to Shklar's theory. Because liberalism of fear rests on the conviction that cruelty is an absolute evil, a government that has built itself on this foundation of liberalism might do everything it can in order to preserve the security of its state. This is how a government can become complicit in creating what legal scholars Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule call "crippled epistemologies".

A crippled epistemology is when a person is limited in their access to information, and becomes unable to form beliefs that rely on truth.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes these epistemological bubbles are self-made; it has been scientifically proven and widely accepted that our earth is round, yet some people wholeheartedly believe that it is flat. Climate denial has been gaining popularity despite scientific evidence that demonstrates global warming. I will discuss what happens inside these bubbles in the next chapter, but first I will show how governments create and uphold these crippled epistemologies. I want to elaborate on this term because it illustrates the problematic results of securitization within a liberal society.

Crippled epistemologies are created because most of the time, what people know is dependent on what the people around them know.<sup>42</sup> They might learn more from reading or watching the news, but when those news outlets are discredited by people around them, their trust in the media might start to falter. As Sunstein and Vermeule state, "members of informationally and socially isolated groups become increasingly distrustful or suspicious of the motives of others or of the larger society [...]."<sup>43</sup> When the people who hold the power have become the out-group, any information that comes from them cannot be trusted.<sup>44</sup> This also means that subsequently, any expert knowledge cited by people in power becomes untrustworthy<sup>45</sup> through guilt by association.

Philosopher Abigail Thorn, in a video essay called "Ignorance and Censorship," describes how ignorance marks out the boundaries of a discussion, using the "Veil of Ignorance" as an example.<sup>46</sup> In this Rawlsian thought experiment, the judgments of the people behind the veil are marked by what they don't know, both about themselves and the world they will end up in.<sup>47</sup> While it is just a thought experiment, it shows that what we are able to talk about greatly depends on what we know. Thorn goes on to say that ignorance, the things we don't know, is often implemented through the upper classes of society, linking her analysis to the theories developed by Foucault, Shklar and Nyman.<sup>48</sup> To prevent myself from falling into the same abstractions of power as Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, I would like to clarify that both Thorn and I mean that some ignorance is structural and built into the system that a lot of western societies are founded on, and thus not necessarily enforced but often upheld by a government.<sup>49</sup> They might keep political secrets for the sake of national security - think of the Manhattan Project, which had to be meticulously hidden to keep the plans from falling into the

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<sup>41</sup> Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 204.

<sup>42</sup> Sunstein and Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," 211.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>45</sup> Nic Fleming, "Fighting Coronavirus Misinformation," *Nature*, July 2, 2020, 155-156.

<sup>46</sup> Abigail Thorn, "Ignorance & Censorship | Philosophy Tube," March 21, 2021, 2:31 to 3:25, <https://youtu.be/ATITdJg7bWl>.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Freeman, "Original Position," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Last modified April 3, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/original-position/>.

<sup>48</sup> Thorn, "Ignorance & Censorship," 07:51.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 28:37.

hands of the Nazis.<sup>50</sup> Or they might try to hide or withhold knowledge they don't want the general public to find out about. This could include information that might paint them in a bad light, like the Dutch childcare benefits scandal that came to light in 2018.<sup>51</sup> Another example comes from the U.S., where in several states, conservatives have set up bills that would ban discussion about "divisive concepts" in classrooms, such as America's history of racism.<sup>52</sup>

The term for this is epistemic injustice. Miranda Fricker coined this term in her work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* and defines it as "a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower."<sup>53</sup> Epistemic injustice happens when someone gets denied the knowledge they need to understand and take control of their life, and they are denied it because they are part of a certain group.

Transparency and honesty are the least we should demand from our governments, but when it gets denied, we might not even know it. Through the process of securitization, this epistemic injustice gets legitimized.<sup>54</sup> When it gets uncovered that information is being kept from the public, it sows uncertainty, fear and distrust.<sup>55</sup> People realise they have been kept in the dark, and to make up for their fears they might start to fabricate their own ideas of what else their government might be hiding from them.<sup>56</sup>

Why do people do this? Simply put: to rationalise horrible events or misfortunes they otherwise have little to no explanation for.<sup>57</sup> When personal data gets compromised, when poverty numbers rise, when people get killed, we tend to look for what caused it, preferably with intention; we want something - or someone - to blame. This theory was put forth by Karl Popper, who argued that "most people do not like to believe that significant events were caused by bad (or good) luck, and much prefer simpler causal stories."<sup>58</sup> And sometimes, those simpler causal stories are provided by conspiracy theories.

In this chapter, I problematized the outcomes of securitization to demonstrate how it can result in crippled epistemologies, and, in turn, in epistemic injustice. In chapter three, I will discuss conspiracy theories as an example of the effects of crippled epistemologies.

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<sup>50</sup> Thorn, "Ignorance & Censorship," 16:22 to 16:53.

<sup>51</sup> NOS, "'Chaos en paniek' bij afhandeling compensatie toeslagenaffaire," April 29, 2021, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2378679-chaos-en-paniek-bij-afhandeling-compensatie-toeslagenaffaire>.

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, "The New War on Woke," *Medium*, February 26, 2021, <https://medium.com/arc-digital/the-new-war-on-woke-ced9fd3699b>.

<sup>53</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & The Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>54</sup> De Graaf and Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive," 56.

<sup>55</sup> Sunstein and Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," 209.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> De Graaf & Zwierlein, 54.

<sup>58</sup> Sunstein & Vermeule, 205.

## CHAPTER THREE: CONSPIRACY THEORIES

In the previous chapter, I took a closer look at the role of governments within the security dispositive. Now I will elaborate further on how people might react to securitization. The example I am going to give, that of conspiracy theories, might seem rather extreme and crazy to some, but with certain conspiracy movements coming into the mainstream it is important that we take them seriously.

After explaining what kind of conspiracy theories I'm going to talk about and why they happen, I will discuss how in their article "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," Sunstein and Vermeule propose different ways in which a government should respond to a conspiracy movement. This article also demonstrates that conspiracy theories are the result of epistemic injustice. In the last part of this chapter, I will discuss what conspiracy theories get wrong in their understanding of power relations in order to demonstrate that a better understanding of the foundational problems of the liberalism of fear ought to help us towards a solution for epistemic injustice.

### *3.1 Conspiracy theories: a brief definition*

Sunstein and Vermeule define conspiracy theories as "an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)."<sup>59</sup> Examples given by them are the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, for which the CIA is supposedly responsible<sup>60</sup>; another is the event of 9/11, which would've allegedly been carried out by the U.S. government.<sup>61</sup> Not all conspiracy theories involve powerful people, but for the sake of this thesis I will focus on the ones that do. I will also limit myself to conspiracy theories that involve some form of a potential security threat. The "powerful forces" that usually play a large role within these theories are the aforementioned CIA, the FBI, or, in theories that are less centred on the United States, local governments or even an international cabal that is trying to take over the world<sup>62</sup> (I will return to this example in a moment).

Scepticism of one's government can quickly turn into something more serious, and people who are starting to believe in conspiracy theories can suddenly find themselves falling down a rabbit hole, until they get stuck in what Sunstein and Vermeule call "epistemologically isolated groups"<sup>63</sup>. These groups or networks are made up of people who believe the same ideas and are unwilling to accept information from sources that could possibly discredit their beliefs. The rise of social media and personally tailored algorithms have made it incredibly easy for people to find like-minded individuals, create their own epistemological bubble and fill it with conspiracy theories.<sup>64</sup> De Graaf, who also discusses conspiracy movements in "Historicizing Security," states that "[t]hose who feel negated by politics, or consider themselves to be insignificant, powerless and voiceless, find a powerful explanation for their feelings of unease in the rhetoric of conspiracy thinking."<sup>65</sup> To them, it isn't so much about whether their theories are real or not (although they do actually believe that they are)

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<sup>59</sup> Sunstein and Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," 208.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>62</sup> Ethan Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," *Journal of Design and Science*, July 15, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Sunstein & Vermeule, 204.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 210.

<sup>65</sup> De Graaf and Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive," 55.

but that it provides them with clarifications that they think the authorities won't give them, distrusting expert knowledge just as much as they do political institutions.<sup>66</sup>

A conspiracy theory that has been moving into the mainstream and on which I want to focus on as an example is the group QAnon, a movement that started online in 2017 but gained more traction and popularity over the last couple of years.<sup>67</sup> Like with its more well-known predecessor, the Illuminati conspiracy theory, followers of QAnon believe in the existence of "The Cabal," an international underground network of elites secretly working to take over the world. Minor beliefs about who exactly is involved in this cabal and what they're doing vary between individuals, but they all agree that the cabal's main objective is to take away the common man's freedom.<sup>68</sup>

Even though the conspiracy started out in the United States, it has gained a considerable following in a handful of European countries as well, the Netherlands being among the top three as of September 2020.<sup>69</sup> This growth in popularity coincided with the start of the Covid-19 crisis earlier that same year, alongside governments taking measures to prevent the coronavirus from spreading. For people already critical of their governments, it was relatively easy to frame these measures as oppressive tactics forced on the population to keep them in line<sup>70</sup>, some even going as far as to claim that the virus was created in a lab for profit.<sup>71</sup> Here we can once again see the conspiracy theorist's tendencies to disregard expert knowledge<sup>72</sup> while at the same time declaring the authorities in charge to be malicious.

### 3.2 Democracy and epistemic injustice

In the second half of their essay, Sunstein and Vermeule discuss possible governmental responses to conspiracy theories.<sup>73</sup> They state that governments face a catch-22 when asked to deal with conspiracy theories: they can either stay silent on the matter or they can try to refute whatever the conspiracy theory in question claims. Both reactions may result in people accusing them of trying to cover up secrets or hiding the truth.<sup>74</sup> The main reason for this is that conspiracy theories are self-sealing and will use any information given to them to strengthen their argument.<sup>75</sup>

Like with securitization, these conspiracy theories make an attempt at pointing out the enemy - and, if they can't find one, inventing one for themselves. This results in extreme forms of "othering" and in the vilification of an "out-group," and for people who feel disenfranchised, the rich and politically powerful are just as much an out-group as anyone could be.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> De Graaf and Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive," 55.

<sup>67</sup> Rudy Bouma, "Amerikaanse complottheorie QAnon ook in Nederland in opkomst," NOS, September 25, 2020, <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2349814-amerikaanse-complottheorie-qanon-ook-in-nederland-in-opkomst>.

<sup>68</sup> Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal."

<sup>69</sup> Bouma, "Amerikaanse complottheorie QAnon ook in Nederland in opkomst."

<sup>70</sup> Josefin Hoenders, "Waarom protesten tegen de anderhalve meter maar doorgaan, terwijl het aantal coronabesmettingen juist toeneemt," *EenVandaag*, August 1, 2020, <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/waarom-protesten-tegen-de-anderhalve-meter-maar-doorgaan-terwijl-het-aantal-coronabesmettingen-juis/>.

<sup>71</sup> Koert van Rijn, "Covid 19 pandemie: de geperfectioneerde hoax," *Viruswaarheid*, September 7, 2020, <https://viruswaarheid.nl/informer/covid-19-pandemie-de-geperfectioneerde-hoax/>.

<sup>72</sup> Fleming, "Fighting Corona Misinformation," 155-156.

<sup>73</sup> Sunstein & Vermeule, 218.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>76</sup> De Graaf and Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security – Entering the Security Dispositive," 56.

Sunstein and Vermeule state:

In a closed society, secrets are far easier to keep, and distrust of official accounts makes a great deal of sense. In such societies, conspiracy theories are both more likely to be true and harder to show to be false in light of available information. But when the press is free, and when checks and balances are in force, it is harder for government to keep nefarious conspiracies hidden for long. These points do not mean that it is logically impossible, even in free societies, that conspiracy theories are true; sometimes they are. But it does mean that institutional checks make it less likely, in such societies, that powerful groups can keep dark secrets for extended periods, at least if those secrets involve illegal or nefarious conduct.<sup>77</sup>

A government that hides information from the public under the guise of securitization can easily fall into the trap of epistemic injustice, and only feeds into anti-government conspiracy movements. Even though this type of injustice is not yet widely recognized as such, we can still state that it breaches the basic doctrine of liberalism. If an individual does not have access to all the knowledge they need to make an informed decision, they are inhibited from exercising their right of personal freedom.

### *3.3 Misconceptions about power relations within conspiracy movements*

In the following paragraph, I want to briefly point out some flaws in the way that conspiracy movements think about power relations. Before that, however, I would like to emphasize that I do not think that people who believe in conspiracy theories are inherently unintelligent or unable to think critically. It is crucial to stay critical of one's government, especially in times where liberal democracy is being threatened by a new wave of right-wing nationalism.<sup>78</sup> Still, there is a misunderstanding of power at the core of conspiracies like QAnon that prevent them from bringing about real socio-political progress.

Believers in the QAnon conspiracy made the same mistake that Garland criticized Foucault for in *Discipline and Punish*, namely that their concept of power relies on viewing it as something that exists outside of interpersonal relations.<sup>79</sup> "Power is not a thing in itself," Garland states, "despite Foucault's tendency to use the term 'power' as if it were a proper noun."<sup>80</sup> According to the later Foucault, it is not something that lands in the hands of just any individual.<sup>81</sup> He elaborates that when a power relation needs to be challenged, it isn't the goal to challenge "so much 'such or such' an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but rather a technique, a form of power."<sup>82</sup> Because the beliefs of QAnon are focused on an invisible, intangible cabal, their power struggle against submission is fruitless; after all, that is not where the real problems lie.

Conspiracy theories, specifically anti-government conspiracy movements like QAnon, are a direct result of crippled epistemologies and epistemic injustice. In the next chapter, I will return to the works of Foucault, De Graaf and Shklar to show that a better understanding of power is the first step towards a solution for epistemic injustice.

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<sup>77</sup> Sunstein & Vermeule, "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," 209.

<sup>78</sup> Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal."

<sup>79</sup> Garland, "Foucault's 'Discipline and Punish' -- An Exposition and Critique," 877.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Foucault, "Subject and Power," 781.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CHANGE

In this final chapter, I want to look at a solution for the problems that have been posed in this thesis. We have seen that governments can cause feelings of doubt and fear in the name of security, which can lead to unwanted outcomes like conspiracy theories becoming more popular. The main point that I will argue is that governments ought to be more transparent. To demonstrate this, I will return to Foucault's notion of power to show how a better awareness of the causes and effects of the security dispositive is beneficial to citizens. Then, I will look at how this contributes to a solution for epistemic injustice, in that citizens may demand more information from their governments.

### 4.1 Power-knowledge

On the surface, Foucault's notion of power does not say much about how to overcome tendencies of fear and doubt in the face of securitization. This is understandable; one of the properties of power struggles listed by Foucault is that they are all different.<sup>83</sup> While I don't think the exact definition of these struggles is clear enough for a helpful normative guideline, I believe that it can help us take a step towards further clarity.

Within *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault introduces the term "power-knowledge" as a reference to the important role of knowledge within power relations.<sup>84</sup> Knowledge, Foucault states, can be used by institutions to discipline and control the public; it can be reshaped and recontextualised to fit a certain narrative. De Graaf states that "security threats are conceptualized as objective conditions of danger"<sup>85</sup> by the state, which relies on the public's trust in them to turn the supposed "threat" into a security problem. Like I stated in the second chapter, it does not matter whether or not the "threat" to security is real. What matters, according to Nyman, is that it becomes real through this process of securitization.<sup>86</sup>

Epistemic injustice stemming from securitization creates a constant societal doubt. I have demonstrated how extreme this doubt can become with believers of QAnon, who live in a state of constant scepticism about the world around them<sup>87</sup>, looking for connections and deeper meanings where often there are none. Media scholar Ethan Zuckerman, in his essay "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," states that doubt makes it difficult to create change<sup>88</sup>; it prevents people from agreeing on a course of action while it benefits those who are content with the current state of affairs. That is why right-wing, populist politicians like Donald Trump<sup>89</sup> and Thierry Baudet<sup>90</sup> like to feed the flame of conspiracy theorists, the people who vote for them and keep them in power; doubt is their product.<sup>91</sup>

Still, some doubt can be helpful; I will further elaborate on this in the next part. But to find a solution to an excess of doubt I want to return to two properties of power struggles as defined by Foucault, namely that they oppose the effects of power that result from knowledge, and that all power

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<sup>83</sup> Foucault, "Subject and Power," 780-781.

<sup>84</sup> Garland, "Foucault's 'Discipline and Punish' -- An Exposition and Critique," 853.

<sup>85</sup> De Graaf and Zwierlein, "Historicizing Security - Entering the Conspiracy Dispositive," 47.

<sup>86</sup> Nyman, "Securitization Theory," 53.

<sup>87</sup> Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal."

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> NOS, "Brief over Baudet vol ruzie en complottheorieën," Last modified November 26, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2358110-brief-over-baudet-vol-ruzie-en-complottheorieen>.

<sup>91</sup> The Life Institute, "Doubt is our Product," Accessed June 5, 2021, <http://dev.thelifeinstitute.net/blog/2017/doubt-is-our-product>.



struggles revolve around the question of who we are as individuals.<sup>92</sup> These two properties will serve as part of the solution as established in the next part of this chapter.

#### 4.2 Transparency

The goal of this thesis was to discuss to what extent De Graaf and Foucault's reflections on the security dispositive force us to argue that liberal governments should provide more information to their citizens. Through Foucault's work, it has been made clear that it is imperative that we challenge power relations, especially when they are unbalanced. If we want to overcome epistemic injustice, we need to challenge the institutions that uphold this systemic problem, whether they do so unknowingly or not. That is what Foucault's penultimate property of power struggles states: they are "an opposition against secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people."<sup>93</sup>

Shklar states that "the governments of this world [...] are not to be trusted unconditionally, and that any confidence that we might develop in their agents must rest firmly on deep suspicion."<sup>94</sup> I agree that a certain amount of doubt and criticism is useful and in fact even necessary to sustain a working democracy. According to Shklar, liberalism borrows from democratic institutions to secure freedom and security, but only out of convenience.<sup>95</sup> Liberalist governments are still capable of cruelty and injustice and legitimize it through bureaucratic means and the process of securitization. Shklar evokes Locke, often called the "Father of Liberalism":

Locke was not, and neither should his heirs be, in favor of weak governments that cannot frame or carry out public policies and decisions made in conformity to requirements of publicity, deliberation, and fair procedures. What is to be feared is every extralegal, secret, and unauthorized act by public agents or their deputies. And to prevent such conduct requires a constant division and subdivision of political power.<sup>96</sup>

It is vital that we uphold the checks and balances of our democracies to hold those who have more advantageous positions accountable. Ethan Zuckerman has a variety of ideas about how change can be brought about, namely through organisation and drawing attention to problems like social inequalities and systemic oppression.<sup>97</sup> The least we can demand of our governments is that they be more transparent. Like I discussed briefly, Sunstein and Vermeule state that a government is far more likely to be trusted within an open society.

The final property Foucault gives for power struggles is that "they are a refusal of [...] abstractions, [...] which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is."<sup>98</sup> I want to parallel this definition with another quote from Shklar:

If citizens are to act individually and in associations, especially in a democracy, to protest and block any sign of governmental illegality and abuse, they must have a fair share of moral courage, self-reliance,

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<sup>92</sup> Foucault, "Subject and Power," 781.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," 30.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>97</sup> Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal."

<sup>98</sup> Foucault, "Subject and Power," 781.

and stubbornness to assert themselves effectively. To foster well informed and self-directed adults must be the aim of every effort to educate the citizens of a liberal society.<sup>99</sup>

An excess of doubt and mistrust hinders change. They prevent people from coming together and forming a solution to the problems they face together. To sustain a just and democratic system, we must turn these feelings into the driving force behind keeping unbalanced power relations in check.

In summary, liberal governments should provide more information to their citizens in order to combat epistemic injustice. Within De Graaf's security dispositive, Foucault's notion of power and Shklar's idea of liberalism demonstrate that citizens ought to demand more transparency to reinforce the foundation of a liberal society.

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<sup>99</sup> Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," 33.

## CONCLUSION

In 2013, a group of activists published a pamphlet titled “How to overthrow the Illuminati,” which they put online and distributed amongst black teenagers, with whom the conspiracy theory was very popular at the time.<sup>100</sup> They explain the origins of the theory and its beliefs, very similar to those of QAnon, and how those beliefs can provide people an easy explanation for the horrible things that happen to them in a society where they are systemically disadvantaged.<sup>101</sup> Even though the terms “crippled epistemologies” or “epistemic injustice” are never mentioned, they can easily be applied to the problems the targeted communities faced. A line in the sixth chapter, titled “Liberation beyond Illuminati Theory,” reflects how the authors think they can reach a solution for this type of injustice: “[B]y organizing with each other to stop the process of exploitation and oppression. By defeating the forces that stand in our way. By [...] living together with dignity, peace and with all of our needs met.”<sup>102</sup>

Over the course of this thesis, I have pointed out the ways in which liberal governments contribute to the creation of crippled epistemologies in the name of security. The emotions that are invoked through the process of securitization, namely fear and doubt, are part of what De Graaf calls a security dispositive. These emotions, combined with crippled epistemologies, lead to a systemic problem of epistemic injustice. While Foucault’s concept of power struggles alone wasn’t enough to provide a solution to this problem, it was helpful in my attempt to illustrate what can be done to oppose the continuation of epistemic injustice. Shklar’s analysis of liberalism demonstrates that our trust in our governments must rely on scepticism and that a democratic society requires an open and transparent government. When secrets are harder to keep and checks and balances are enforced, it becomes harder for crippled epistemologies to form. Although this will not completely eradicate the formation of conspiracy theories, citizens will be less likely to grow epistemologically isolated while remaining sceptical.

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<sup>100</sup> “About this site,” Overthrowing the Illuminati, accessed May 22, 2021, <https://overthrowingilluminati.wordpress.com/about/>.

<sup>101</sup> Will et al., *How To Overthrow The Illuminati* (New York, 2013), 16-20.

<sup>102</sup> Will, 23.

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