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## Conspiracy Theory as Spatial Practice: The Case of the Sivas Arson Attack, Turkey

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and physical space by focusing on the ways conspiracy theories regarding political violence shape and are shaped by the environments in which it is commemorated. Conspiratorial thinking features space as a significant element, but is taken to do so mainly figuratively. In blaming external powers and foreign actors for social ills, conspiracy theorists employ the spatial metaphor of inside versus outside. In perceiving discourses of transparency as the concealment rather than revelation of mechanisms of governance, conspiracy theorists engage the trope of a façade separating the space of power's formulations from that of its operations. Studying the case of an arson attack dating from 1990s' Turkey and its recent commemorations, this article argues that space mediates conspiracy theory not just figuratively but also physically, and as such serves to catalyze two of its deadliest characteristics: anonymity and non-linear causality. Attending to this mediation requires a shift of focus from what conspiracy theory *is* to what it *does* as a spatial practice.

**Keywords:** conspiracy theory, transparency, commemoration, paranoia, Turkey, violence

## Introduction

On the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *exogenously focused* scenario that constituted the painful events of 2 July 1993, we don't want to see *outsiders* in Sivas. . . . We shall lay flowers in memory of the dead. There's no need for *outsiders* to participate (Haber Merkezi-Anadolu, 2007; italics added).

Thus read the press statement released by a number of NGOs in Sivas, central-eastern Turkey, ahead of the 2007 episode of an annual commemoration the city has hosted since 1994. The commemoration concerns an arson attack that took place on 2 July 1993, when a hotel hosting the participants of a culture festival organized by an association representing followers of the Alevi faith—one of Turkey's demographically minor social groups—was set alight by tens of assailants before an inactive law enforcement, thousands of onlookers, and live TV cameras, resulting in the death of thirty-three festival participants and two hotel workers.

Delivered nearly a decade and a half after the arson attack, the statement epitomizes the conviction that the atrocity has not been fully investigated; only some 30 assailants caught on camera have received sentences, although a crime of such scale most likely involved the backing of a much larger network that has yet to be revealed. While this conviction is widespread across different social groups in Turkey, not as commonly shared is the answer to the question of exactly whom the network in question comprises. For those upholding the legacy of the festival participants killed in the blaze, the answer lies in the inaction of the governing authorities and that of the thousands of onlookers: it is they who encouraged the assailants (Tüleylioğlu, 2010). For mainstream politicians, journalists and various other influential figures in Sivas, however, the arson was but one part of a larger plot orchestrated by foreign powers (Ünsal, 1995; Doğan, 2007). Hence the opening statement's reference to the atrocity as “exogenously focused” (*diş odaklı*): an event whose origins remain outside the field of vision.

As the statement indicates, in the years following the arson attack, allegations regarding “exogenously focused scenarios” turned out to affect new developments in and around the site of arson. First, they engulfed the commemorative procession held annually in Sivas by those upholding the legacy of the festival participants targeted in the arson, an initiative that pioneered various calls by intellectuals in the late 1990s and early 2000s for Turkey to “reckon with” its violent past (Sancar, 2007). More recently, an important implication of such allegations marked a

state-sponsored initiative to commemorate the atrocity on-site. The implication is that, insofar as the arson attack can be blamed on the outside, those inside are all victims, which therefore include not only the festival participants targeted in the arson but also the assailants who were in effect naive pawns. In 2011, the state's transformation of the site of atrocity introduced a victims' list that is inclusive of two individuals who were among the crowd outside the hotel during the blaze and were killed as it was belatedly dispersed by law enforcement. The transformation gave the site unprecedented visibility, evident in high-profile government representatives' visits and mainstream networks' live broadcasts of the annual commemoration held by those upholding the legacy of the festival participants killed in the arson. But it also introduced ever tighter security measures comprising checkpoints and barricades that sought to isolate the procession from Sivas and its inhabitants.

The notions of inside versus outside and visual clarity versus obscurity, which characterize the above-mentioned references to *exogenously focused* scenarios, are among the most prominent tropes employed in both conspiracy theory and its scholarly discussions (Fortun and Fortun, 1999; Stewart, 1999; Dean, 2000; Bastian, 2003; Marcus and Powell, 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003; West and Sanders, 2003; Fenster, 2008). Yet, their significance here transcends mere figuration. The conspiracy theory, which implies that those who started the fire and those killed in it are both victims in their own right, inspires a state-sponsored on-site memorial. Conjointly, a change of attitude among mainstream politicians and media gives the arson attack greater visibility through live broadcasts and high-profile visits. But, on the ground, various law enforcement apparatuses are introduced to isolate the commemoration, physically reinforcing the inside-outside delineation that characterizes related conspiracy theories. If these developments establish conspiracy theory's role in negotiating violent events, they also demonstrate that it hinges on a constant interplay between the figurative and the physical. Understanding this role, therefore, requires that the physical underpinnings and consequences of the visual and spatial tropes involved in conspiracy theory be considered seriously.

How might this consideration contribute to analyses of the work conspiracy theory does with respect to violent events? I explore this question in light of my fieldwork on commemorative practices in Sivas, which I carried out at intervals over the two years following the transformation of the site of atrocity. In rethinking conspiracy theory and spatial

memorialization through one another, I draw on Wagner-Pacifici's recent criticism (2010; 2015) of predominant approaches to analyzing commemoration for their tendency to cast the event being commemorated as complete rather than as continuing to unfold through commemorative practices. I argue that the environments in which the arson attack took place and is commemorated are significant to understanding the atrocity not because they serve as evidence refuting or validating conspiratorial thinking but because they act as catalysts of two of conspiracy theory's deadliest characteristics: indeterminable authorship and non-linear causality.

### **Conspiracy theory, physical space, and the commemoration of violent histories**

Among the most prominent tropes employed in conspiratorial thinking and its scholarly analyses are those that engage the medium of visibility. This is due largely to the preoccupation that both analysts and conspiracy theorists have had with transparency. Whether understood as remedy to conspiracy theory or as its symbiotic other, transparency has loomed large in relevant literature primarily because it captures the sense of sight that conditions much of conspiratorial thinking. A closer look into this literature, however, demonstrates that transparency may have spatial as well as visual implications.

The first way transparency has featured in relevant literature concerns critiques of conspiracy theory's commonplace associations with irrationality. Jamer Hunt suggests that conspiratorial thinking is "a style of interpretation" rather than "wild irrationality or psychosis" (1999: 22). If conspiracy "relies on secrecy and invisibility," conspiracy theorists aim at "making visible the clandestine causal agents" (Hunt, 1999: 25). Mark Fenster posits conspiratorial thinking as a "practice that longs for a perfectly transparent, accessible democracy" (2008: ix). If such Habermasian approaches have treated transparency as an antidote to conspiracy and thus as the ultimate goal of conspiracy theorists, they have increasingly been subjected to criticism in the aftermath of the Cold War (Marcus, 1999), a historical period marked by not only the collapse of a physical wall preventing visual and spatial access to the political Other (West and Sanders, 2003: 2) but also transparency's becoming the mainstay of liberal democracies (Dean, 2000). Consider Harry West and Todd Sanders' understanding of the relationship between transparency and conspiracy in this period. While acknowledging that conspiratorial thinking is preoccupied "with the operation of secret, mysterious, and/or unseen powers," they question the assumption

that this indicates a quest for an abstract idea of transparency (2003: 7). Rather than take transparency at face value “in a world where varied institutions claim to give structure to the ‘rational’ and ‘transparent’ operation of power,” conspiracy theorists maintain that power continues to operate “in realms normally concealed from view” (2003: 7). Michael and Kim Fortun similarly contend that conspiratorial thinking continues to proliferate despite liberal projects of transparency, because it “religiously set[s] up two separate worlds, this one of appearances and that other one of secrets” (1999: 159). For Kathleen Stewart, this indicates that conspiracy theories are driven by “a desire for an Other order of a true US and THEM coming from someplace outside our control” (1999: 13).

At stake in the dynamics between transparency and conspiracy theory, then, is not just visibility but also spatiality: a delineation separating the space of power’s formulations from that of its operations. Moreover, this delineation is physically charged, as the delineator is taken to determine the degree to which the space of formulations is visible from that of operations. Noteworthy in this respect is West and Sanders’ discussion of transparency as the purported characteristic of “a surface to power” that conceals the space from which power operates (2003: 16). If their discussion understands this “surface” to function in a more figurative than physical register, it might operate in the latter, too, especially in contexts characterized by technology’s impact on conspiratorial thinking. This is demonstrated by Jean and John Comaroff’s account of how developments in optic technologies between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries shaped epistemological notions of not only transparency but also its “obverse: a concern with refraction, distortion, concealment, collusion,” accompanied by metaphors such as “the camera obscura” and “the hidden hand” (2003: 292).

Comaroffs’ historical account is brought up to date by Nicholas Holm, who discusses the relation between conspiratorial thinking and surveillance technologies in post-9/11 US and UK. For him, this has implications for the surveillant as well as the surveilled: the latter suffers from a “fear of constant observation of the self,” or from the “paranoia-of-the watched,” while the surveillant feels obliged “to be constantly privy to all information in order to address potential threats,” which Holm calls the “paranoia-of-the watcher” (2009: 37). These two modalities of paranoia interact to produce results diametrically opposed to surveillance’s purported disciplinary motivations, engendering “excessive and aberrant behavior” rather than establish

“bodily and social discipline” (Holm, 2009.: 42). A case in point is presented by Misty Bastian’s discussion of the impact of live television broadcasting on a mid-1990s’ violent episode in the southeastern Nigerian city of Owerri, where conspiracy theories regarding ritual killings triggered a public riot. Rather than result in despair and inertia, broadcast images of a murdered child’s body parts prompted ordinary citizens to take to the streets and perform “a sense of local Owerri values and a local Owerri place at the heart of the globalized, surveilled, and modernized city” (2003: 85).

If these discussions reiterate that sight and space may feature physically as well as figuratively in discourses and practices of transparency and/or conspiracy theory, they also indicate exactly what sort of a role physicality may play in this respect. Consider how optic improvements have engendered a concern with not only a visually enhanced sense of epistemic transparency but also its obverse, how surveillance technologies have in certain cases produced the opposite of their purported aim of social discipline, and how the dissemination of visual information on socially infuriating events has at times fueled rather than quell popular reaction. These instances all show that, far from serving as passive backdrop or conduit to discourses and practices of transparency and/or conspiracy theory, physical spaces and objects may well be shaping these actively.

Frederic Jameson has proposed to understand conspiracy theory as “the poor person’s cognitive mapping” in the late capitalist age (1988: 356). Leaving aside momentarily the question of whether conspiracy theories are necessarily the preserve of “the poor person,” I would like to reconsider Jameson’s “mapping” in light of the discussion above: as not just a cognitive but also a physical spatial practice. This understanding recalls West and Sanders’ framing of transparency within Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “ideoscapes” (1990), as a keyword that condenses a larger set of ideas and facilitates their export to and superimposition on “geographical landscapes” (West and Sanders 2003: 10). But it differs from the way they place heavy emphasis on the first half of Appadurai’s notion (i.e., ideas) while neglecting its -scape-ness. My methodology here prioritizes the latter. In so doing, I hope to contribute to analyses of conspiracy theory as a “search for the missing plot” rather than “a rigid, all too clear plot”—as “practice” rather than just “theory” or “prefabricated ideology” (Stewart, 1999: 16).

This requires attending not just to the actors involved in conspiracy theory but also to the settings in which it unfolds. As Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold have demonstrated, anthropological work on the topic has often focused sharply on actors that produce, promulgate and/or subscribe to conspiracy theories. Yet, “[w]hat distinguishes conspiracy theories from other theories is the precise manner in which such theories are embedded in sociopolitical fields” and the various and often unforeseeable “use values” they acquire as a result (2011: 68). Pelkmans and Machold’s call to shift focus from actors to fields is significant for two reasons. First, it complicates the notion that conspiratorial thinking is the preserve of one set of actors or another à la Jameson’s “poor person.” Secondly, as any sociopolitical field is constituted not only by humans and their faculties but also by physical environments, it demonstrates the need to take seriously the role of objects and spaces in this constitution.

This combination of an interest in physical environments and an attention to the productive force conspiracy theory becomes—virtually independent of its authors—when embedded in particular fields resonates with the way rumor features in Veena Das’ work on civilian unrest in post-Partition India. In a way that recalls George Marcus and Michael Powell’s argument that post-Cold War conspiracy theorizing is characterized by the reversal of “cause and effect” as it seeks to reckon with “the invisible, unpredictable and incalculable risks of our contemporary world” (2003: 332), Das understands rumor as a practice that is less about representing a preexisting reality than about precipitating a new one. As such, rumor does not merely communicate but produces events “in the very act of telling” by authorizing them (2007: 108). The authorization, suggests Das, involves reanimating particular “regions” of the past, which are the stuff of collective consciousness, and the “regionality” of which is defined not by chronological proximity but by affinity to the “affective qualities of the present moment” (Das, 2007: 100). Rumor produces new events—in this case, violent events—by sociohistorically anchoring them in these regions (Das, 2007: 121). But rumor’s productive capabilities concern space as well as time; its materializations are not uniform across geography. Certain physical environments across which rumor circulates significantly shape its consequences in degree if not in kind (Das, 2007: 135-161). Rumor, therefore, is a means of spatial production as well as a sociopolitical one.



There are glimpses of an understanding of conspiratorial thinking as just such a production in Carol Delaney's ethnography of a village in central Turkey. She discerns the spatial demarcation of an inside from its outside as a trope employed frequently by her interlocutors vis-à-vis adverse events or the likelihood thereof. "Bad and threatening things," they believe, "come from outside ... the body, the family, the village, or the nation" (1991: 206-7). Tangible implications of this trope are discernable in the ways villagers experience the village and their houses. The village's topographical positioning enables a clear view of those approaching it, giving "villagers the sense that they have some control over who enters" (Delaney 1991: 206). New roads connecting the village to the world outside are met with skepticism by the villagers: if roads mean better logistics, they also expose the village "to polluting influences from town" (Delaney 1991: 207). On an architectural level, villagers' perception of their houses as clean and streets as dirty has physical underpinnings: "Houses are swept several times a day," whereas rubbish "is dumped outside the house onto the street" and remains untended except by passing animals that eat the organic bits (Delaney 1991: 237). Unlike Das, however, Delaney's account does not feature a particular event or set of events, and is therefore somewhat historically unspecific.

In this article, I aim to further explore the glimpses Delaney provides into the physical spatial implications of conspiratorial thinking in Turkey. In so doing I understand conspiracy theory in light of the discussion above: as a *practice* whose authors may not always be singularly determinable and whose causality is not always necessarily linear. This, moreover, is a practice that mediates events by operating across specific histories and anchoring the present in parts of the past which are qualitatively linked to it and to one another. In my case these histories center on an arson attack that took place in 1990s' Turkey, and the ways it has recently been commemorated on-site.

Thinking conspiracy theory and spatial commemoration together in such a way has implications for memory studies, whose rapid growth over the past three decades has rendered it something of a natural home for scholarship on commemorative practices. Throughout these decades, memory studies arguably witnessed a gradual but significant shift; collective remembrance has come to be increasingly understood as not "a thing" but rather "a process" with "varieties, contradictions, and dynamism" (Olick 2008: 159), and as productive of not just

“meanings” about the past but also “affects and effects” in the present (Rigney, 2015). While this resonates with my proposal to rethink commemoration and conspiracy theory as interrelated practices, it has left intact a longstanding methodological assumption I aim to overcome—the assumption that the past and present in question each constitutes a discrete and singular event.

In questioning this assumption, I take my cue from Robin Wagner-Pacifci (2010; 2015). For Wagner-Pacifci, memory studies scholars overwhelmingly assume commemorative practices to pertain only to “the aftermath, after-effects, or afterlife of . . . actual events that have, essentially, ended” (Wagner-Pacifci, 2015: 22). For instance, representations of an event deemed complete, such as those produced through memorialization (Wagner-Pacifci, 2010: 1367), are misunderstood as, or mistaken for, “memory” (Wagner-Pacifci, 2015: 23), whereas they are in effect “part and parcel” of its continuing development (Wagner-Pacifci, 2010: 1362; Wagner-Pacifci, 2015: 26). The assumption becomes especially problematic in the case of violent events; while the violence that marks the “past” being commemorated is acknowledged, the violence inherent in the “cultural” work of that past’s being named, appropriated, and displaced in its apparent “aftermath” is often overlooked (Wagner-Pacifci, 2010: 1358; Wagner-Pacifci, 2015: 22).

The problem is perhaps most evident in the specific body of literature on spatial memorialization. Monuments and memorials are explored in terms of their various processual and relational aspects, including the contestations and controversies surrounding their design and construction (Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, 1991; Linenthal, 2001: 117; Carrier, 2005: 228; Stevens and Franck, 2016: 236; Young, 2016: 16), their relationships to the urban settings in which they are located (Aguilera, 2014: 110), and the myriad ways publics interact with them (Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz, 1991: 416). This multifarious exploration has influentially demonstrated the significance of memorialization as pertaining not only to its representation of the past event but also to the various present-day events involved in its cultural production and reception. But it has left intact the methodological assumption that the event being memorialized, i.e., “violence,” is complete and therefore ontologically distinct from the events surrounding its memorialization, i.e., “culture.”

My focus on conspiracy theory as thus far developed requires that this assumption be dispensed with. For, due to its non-linear causality and violently productive capabilities,

conspiracy theory refuses to perceive events as complete and to settle with only explaining them. Rather, it contributes to their continuing development. What role, then, if any, might the physical environments where events as such take place play in this contribution? And how might an understanding of this role contribute to analyses of the work conspiracy theory does with respect to violent histories?

### **Conspiracy theorizing in Turkey**

Conspiracy theorizing has become increasingly influential over the past three decades in Turkey such that it now has across-the-board resonance. The roots of this influence lie in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which witnessed the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey, and more specifically in two events that marked this transition and over time became the stuff of conspiracy theories. The first is the 1908 constitutional revolution led by the Young Turks, which climaxed in the toppling of Abdülhamid II—the last Ottoman monarch to reign not just on paper but also in practice over the crumbling Empire—and laid the groundwork for the founding of the secular republic in the early 1920s (Baer, 2013). That the Young Turk movement was based in Salonika (today's Thessaloniki), then still a predominantly Jewish-inhabited city and antecedently the headquarters of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century wave of religious conversions from Judaism to Islam, was made by anti-secularists into the stuff of the conspiracy theory that its members were crypto Jews acting in the interests of the global Jewry—a theory later extended to the modern-day republic's Salonika-born founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Baer, 2013).

The second relevant event is the post-World War I Treaty of Sèvres, which partitioned much of today's Turkey into Allied-controlled territories. Although the Turkish National Campaign of 1919-22, which enabled the founding of the modern-day republic, was largely successful in overturning Sèvres, over time the treaty became the stuff of what is now known as the "Sèvres paranoia" (Göçek, 2011: 98-184): "the conviction that the external world is conspiring to weaken and carve up Turkey" (Kirişçi, 1999: 258). Often working in tandem with the above-mentioned anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (Nefes, 2015), the Sèvres paranoia became especially prevalent in the post-Cold War era when the preceding decades' symmetrical political alignments among states began to complexify (Taşpınar, 2005: 214 fn.1). It has continued to

thrive in the new millennium, as previously peripheral conspiracy theories permeated the mainstream. This was possible first because a political movement rooted in religious conservatism, which has historically been among the proponents of the above-mentioned conspiracy theories as it was largely excluded from the secularist republican project for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gürpınar, 2013: 425-426; cf. Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 191), rose to power in the shape of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) and consolidated its grip through consecutive majority governments (Guida, 2008)—an ongoing phenomenon that has just entered its fifteenth year at the time of writing. Secondly, having now found themselves in the margins of the new political mainstream and facing ideological bottleneck, secular nationalists sought to regain influence by resorting to populism, the prime pillars of which in Turkey comprise conspiracy theories of the above-mentioned sort (Baer, 2013: 554-555). Therefore, such theories now find appeal in Turkey among intellectuals, ordinary citizens, and politicians of various and otherwise highly different persuasions (Nefes, 2013).

This background is relevant to the Sivas case in at least two respects. The first concerns the historical context of the arson attack: the immediate aftermath of the Cold War when conspiracy theories began to gain wider popularity especially in geographies like Turkey “where cold-war [sic] disciplines and interventions shaped the experience of civil society” (Marcus, 1999: 3). It was in this context that conspiracy theory began to function increasingly as a practice grounded in “actual experience” rather than as a merely discursive representation of affairs (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 182). The second reason concerns the inaugural decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when, simultaneously with the proliferation of conspiratorial thinking, long-fought campaigns for truth and justice regarding the Sivas arson attack and various other political atrocities in Turkey’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century history gained unprecedented visibility. The decade culminated in a state-sponsored project of what senior figures like the then Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan called “democratization” (*demokratikleşme*) and “transparentization” (*şeffaflaşma*) (Ministry of State for Religious Affairs, 2010: 5). In 2011 these developments yielded results relevant to the site of the Sivas arson attack, whose conversion into a memorial museum had long been the subject of a campaign by those upholding the legacy of the festival participants killed in the blaze. In response to this campaign, and following a series of meetings with the city’s “notables” and representatives of its “civil society” (Ministry of State for

Religious Affairs, 2010: 12-13), the state transformed the site into a commemorative-cum-educational institution (Çaylı, 2014).

### **Conspiracy theories regarding the Sivas arson attack and their spatial underpinnings**

It is against this background that the mainstream press in Sivas and the city's "notables" have espoused the sort of conspiratorial thinking that marks this article's opening quote, implying that the culture festival in 1993 whose guests were attacked in the arson, the arson attack itself, and subsequent initiatives of commemorating it on site are all the work of outside forces. This raises the question: outside of what or of where? To explore this question, consider, alongside the opening quote, the below excerpt also from the local press in Sivas, which is especially significant in this respect as its coverage of the culture festival in late June and early July 1993 is known to have aggravated the atmosphere that culminated in the arson attack (Coşkun, 1995: 355 fn. 1). Written by the long-time chair of the Sivas journalists association, who also authored a monograph on the arson attack (Ünsal, 1995), the excerpt was published as the editorial of one of the city's best-selling newspapers a couple of days before the atrocity's tenth anniversary when the commemorations had begun to draw thousands of participants instead of the hundreds they had until then managed to attract.

Neither the murderers of ASALA [the Beirut-based Armenian militant organization active between the late 1970s and the early 1990s], who were behind the events [the arson attack], nor the festival participants were invited to Sivas by its people. ... These plotters are the same hitmen of ASALA who insist on keeping the events on the agenda. Let's all be level-headed and vigilant tomorrow [during the commemoration], and avoid falling into ASALA's trap. ... Tomorrow, the perpetrators will likely mourn alongside them [those who claim the legacy of the festival participants]. ... They first kill, and then weep at graves (Ünsal, 2003).

As epitomized by both the editorial and the quote that opened this article, conspiratorial readings of the arson attack blame it on actors from outside Turkey. While in the above quote these actors are said to consist of ASALA, this has proven interchangeable with any other group considered "exogenous" at a given time, as evident in the blaming of the pro-Kurdish armed organization

PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in this respect by indeed the same writer cited above (AA, 2011). Such readings of the affair therefore imagine Turkey as an immaculate and peaceful inside threatened by a hostile and polluted outside.

It is this sociospatial imagination that has been mapped onto the physical space of central Sivas, as indicated in the above quote's emphases on the city and its people. These emphases originally implicated two sets of actors. The first were the alleged ringleaders of the arsonist crowd, on the basis that they were entirely unbeknownst to the people of Sivas and have not reappeared ever since, whether as suspects in court or as inhabitants of the city (Ministry of State for Religious Affairs, 2010: 52). Secondly, the organizers of the culture festival whose participants died in the blaze were labeled as outsiders, accused of both conducting an event many of whose aspects were allegedly foreign to the city's way of life and refusing to cancel it despite being reputedly given the opportunity to do so vis-à-vis the likelihood of a violent backlash which became increasingly apparent in the run-up to the arson (Ministry of State for Religious Affairs, 2010: 67). But, over time, such accusations began to also engulf the organizers and participants of the commemorations held annually in Sivas, arguably to the effect of amplifying, by association, the earlier insinuations leveled at the organizers of the culture festival in July 1993.

Unpacking this effect requires first revisiting certain organizational and historical aspects of the 1993 culture festival. Organized in central Sivas by an Alevi association headquartered in Ankara, the festival was not the first but fourth of its kind. The inaugural festival had taken place in summer 1978 in Banaz in provincial Sivas, which is famously the native village of a 16<sup>th</sup>-century minstrel revered in Alevism (Koerbin, 2011: 191 ft. 3). Although the festival had been intended as an annual event, it was interrupted due to sociopolitical unrest across late 1970s' Turkey, which partly also targeted Alevis in the country's central and eastern cities such as Malatya, Çorum, Sivas and Maraş and led many to flee for metropolises like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, or even beyond, for Europe (Eral, 1995). Then followed the 1980 military coup, whose drastic restrictions on social rights precluded events like this festival. Therefore, the organizers had to wait another decade to repeat the event. Like the inaugural festival, its second and third episodes in 1991 and 1992, respectively, were held in Banaz and appealed mainly to Alevis. But in 1993, the festival board took the unprecedented decision of partly relocating to

central Sivas and composing a two-day program that was not only Alevism-related. They thus facilitated what was for many an organizer and participant a return to the center of the geography that they or their parents had been forced to flee in the 1970s and 1980s. Part of a wider phenomenon called the “Alevi Revival” (van Bruinessen, 1996; Çamuroğlu, 1998), it is this aspect of an outreach or return to the city that has led to the perception that the festival was the work of outsiders infiltrating Sivas (Deliktaş, 2000; Akbulut, 2006; Haber Merkezi-Anadolu, 2007).

A similar perception began in the 2000s to color the way the commemorations held in Sivas were featured in the media, as the decade saw the annual event attract increasing numbers of participants each year. Evidence to back this perception has been derived from the significant role of the Cologne-based European Alevi Unions Confederation in organizing these events and drawing large crowds to them—an example of the financial and ideological support Alevis in Europe have provided to those in Turkey (Özyürek, 2009: 240). To be sure, the main reason why such an organization exists in Germany in the first place is that, insofar as 1970s’, 1980s’ and 1990s’ migration from Turkey by members of marginalized social groups like Alevis is concerned, fleeing political violence was as significant a motivation as were better economic prospects (Ögelman et al., 2002). Indeed, several individuals with such a migration background were among the Sivas arson attack victims (Aksoy, 2014: 13). That Europe-based Alevis, many of whom are indeed originally from Sivas, may continue to engage with Turkey is implicated by conspiracy theorists as an intervention by the EU and specifically by Germany, where they were given in the 1980s the opportunity for the first time to legally organize under their ethnic and religious identities and where many of them continue to reside (Wilpert, 1990). So mainstream has this perception become as to repeatedly feature in statements made by the long-time Prime Minister and current President of Republic Tayyip Erdoğan (Taştekin, 2014).

In sum, conspiratorial readings of the arson attack have made two interrelated inside-outside delineations. The first delineation has featured the sociospatial imaginary of Turkey as inside, and has blamed the arson attack on its outside. The second has treated central Sivas as inside and, in so doing, has helped concretize the first delineation. In the next section, I unpack the ways these delineations have come to shape and be shaped by on-site commemorations of the

atrocities, which assumed new significance in the early 2010s when discourses of “reckoning with the past” culminated in tangible developments.

### **Conspiracy theory and spatial commemoration in Sivas**

My fieldwork in Sivas consisted of two components. The first was an ethnography of the site of atrocity within the daily life of Sivas. This involved spending entire workdays inside the building, whose recent state-sponsored transformation has opened it to free-of-charge visits between 8.30am and 5pm during the workweek, and in-depth conversations with a group of Sivas residents. The second component was to participant observe the site’s significance within the annual commemoration, which I attended twice (in 2011 and 2012) with groups coming from outside central Sivas.

The site’s recent transformation has introduced a “Memory Corner,” a 70-squaremeter room whose centerpiece is a 3-by-4.5-meter stainless-steel structure complete with a victims’ name list, an electrically operated set of thirty-seven fountains, and a couple of statements. There are as many fountains as there are names commemorated: thirty-seven. As previously mentioned, the number includes not only the thirty-three participants of the culture festival and the two hotel workers killed inside the hotel but also the two members of the crowd outside, a decision state authorities have defended as “a human-centric” refusal “to discriminate between the dead” (Yalçinkaya and Ceylan, 2011). Of the two statements, one is more relevant to this article than the other (a purported Mustafa Kemal Atatürk quote emphasizing “national unity and togetherness”) and so will be explored at greater length. This statement is unsigned and reads “In the painful incident that took place on 2 July 1993, thirty-seven of our people have lost their lives. With the wish that such pains do not recur...” It is in effect a synopsis of the following speech that Minister of State Faruk Çelik delivered in 2010 when he became the first government representative to visit the site:

2 July 1993 is one of the painful days in our history ... On this day, insidious foci sought to stage their dark scenarios. ... [This] is the pain of the whole of Turkey. There can be no sides in this incident; to take a side in this incident means to not extinguish the fire. ... The screen of fog surrounding this incident has not yet been lifted. ... It is no other



person than yet again us, the people of Sivas, who have the remedy for our problems. ... I remember with grace and respect our thirty-seven citizens who lost their lives on 2 July 1993 (Aytekin et al., 2010).

These emphases on “the people of Sivas” and/or “the whole of Turkey” as sufferers, on “our thirty-seven citizens” as victims, on the “dark scenarios” that constituted the arson, and on the “screen of fog” surrounding it echo conspiracy theories that have placed the blame on “exogenous foci” (*dış odaklar* or *dış mihraklar*). The echo is discernible not only textually, i.e., in the statements, but also numerically, i.e., in the thirty-seven names and fountains. This has led those upholding the legacy of the thirty-three festival participants to refuse to enter the building that now hosts the Memory Corner, as they believe doing so would be to legitimize it.

But there are also various others who pass by the building without ever setting foot inside, and do so due to certain assumptions they have about it. As some of these assumptions concern the building’s exterior, it merits further exploration. The recent transformation preserved the façade’s structural composition but reclad it entirely. The fenestration now consists of one-way mirror windows that render interiors invisible from the outside. The rest of the façade is clad in composite panels in the pastel shades of dark red and beige characteristic of state buildings. There are no signs outside the building regarding the services provided or the working hours. The only sign, except that which bears the institution’s name, is a plaque that reads, “this building is monitored twenty-four hours by CCTV.” Made of glossy brass, the plaque looks much more ostentatious than the usual CCTV disclaimer; I observed that it misled potential visitors who were confusedly drawn to it in the absence of any other sign. The confusion was most evident during lunch breaks when the institution closes its doors for an hour. Potential visitors would come, see the closed doors, search for a sign, only to notice the CCTV disclaimer, turn away perplexedly and leave. All these features led the building to exude an appearance that potential visitors found inaccessible at best and intimidating at worst.

In 2011 and 2012 these issues were compounded due to the way the institution was staffed. In fall 2011, four people—a director, a kindergarten teacher and two primary school teachers—were employed here by the Ministry of National Education. When I returned next summer, the time of year when the building’s visitor numbers are at their highest due to visits to the city by people with migration background who originally hail from Sivas, the director was

still in place but the teachers had left—each visiting class was now asked to bring along its own teacher, I was told. In their stead, there were four new staff members: two men in their late twenties, a man in his mid-thirties, and a woman in her early twenties. They were all unskilled workers hired through the state’s employment agency on contracts ranging from six to twelve months. There was no training scheme in place regarding the site’s historical significance or anything else for that matter. Not much was expected of the employees except, in the words of the man in his mid-thirties, “to keep this place clean, tidy and orderly, as the director likes it that way.” The director’s occasional admonitions also included, according to the man in his late twenties, reminders about how “we should never speak with any visitors about the incident.”

If in its institutional inconspicuousness the building sought to downplay the contested legacy of the arson attack, this in effect exacerbated speculations regarding on whose side its occupants might be vis-à-vis the atrocity. Consider the case of a couple of women (one in her mid-twenties, and the other, early fifties), who in summer 2012 passed by the entrance back and forth several times without entering inside. The female employee noticed them and went out to welcome them in. The younger woman explained that “we were here last year, too, but hesitated to enter. You see; my mom is covered, and although I’m not, we thought her headscarf could cause eyebrows to raise.”<sup>1</sup> The employee replied that they welcome all members of the public indiscriminately. Standing at the doorstep, the women explained why they had second thoughts about entering the building. The mother said:

I chair the AKP women’s branch in my hometown. Plus, I am covered. Hence my belonging to the opposite camp. Nevertheless, I condemn this terrible atrocity. Being human is enough to condemn it, although you and I might not be of the same opinion.

The staff member interrupted the woman’s comments: “What do you mean by the opposite camp? To whom did you think this place belongs? The Alevis?” The women both nodded in affirmation. The employee corrected them: “No, no, no; not at all. This place belongs to the state.” Only after having received this clarification did the women go inside.

Many residents of Sivas have also yet to visit the revamped building. I observed this not only during my research inside the building, when I found out that only about one in ten visitors was a resident of Sivas, but also during the regular and lengthy evening conversations I had with

men in their late twenties and early thirties at what is one of the oldest and most popular coffeehouses in the city.<sup>2</sup> Described by my interlocutors as “the local intellectual hangout,” this is an alcohol-free establishment whose clientele consists virtually only of men. My interlocutors here included several outspoken supporters of the BBP (Great Union Party), whose ideology synthesizes Sunni Islamism and Turkish nationalism (Tapia, 2011: 309). Sivas is famously the BBP stronghold and, at the time of my fieldwork, was the only municipality governed by one of its members. The party is immensely pertinent to the arson attack, owing to how some thirty survivors fled the blaze: through the air well to an adjacent building then occupied by the BBP. BBP supporters take pride in this story and present it as proof that they have done their utmost to mitigate the consequences of what was a dark plot orchestrated by external powers (Doğan, 2007: 189-192). The survivors, however, have recounted that they had to force their way into the building; at first, they were cursed at and chased away by those inside the party’s offices (Günbulut, 1994: 205-206). BBP supporters believe that such claims have unjustly stigmatized them as perpetrators, and caused innocent onlookers to receive heavy court sentences (Öztürk et al., 2011).

Hence the interest my research stimulated among the members of my coffeehouse circle, whose numbers ranged from five to twelve per night. Many of them not only openly condemned the arson attack as the work of “exogenous foci” but also maintained that the AKP “government do not want 2 July to be elucidated,” as evinced by the continuing lack of a comprehensive investigation that could “reveal the actual plotters.” Regarding the recent transformation of the site of the blaze, my interlocutors were unanimous that it is not a project that speaks, or would be of interest, to “the people of Sivas:”

The ordinary resident of Sivas will never go there. He/she would say “what’s going on behind those mirrored windows?” and think that they are sacralizing that place and that the Culture Center is the penultimate stage before it becomes a *cemevi* [place of Alevi worship; literally: house of gathering]. Yes; many think that the place will soon become a house of worship where they will start performing *semah* [an Alevi ritual]. I personally have not been there to this day, and neither have any of the people I know.

This range of reactions demonstrates that the architectural banality and institutional ambiguity resulting from the site’s recent transformation has led to its being disowned by not just those

upholding the legacy of the thirty-three festival participants but also various others. This banality and ambiguity, therefore, are not merely a consequence of conspiracy theory—the theory that the arson attack was an “exogenously focused” event—but also its instigator. If the project’s implicit subscription to the conspiratorial reading of the arson attack as the work of “exogenous foci” is packaged in a refusal “to discriminate between the dead,” the architectural banality and ambiguity embodying it have caused conspiracy theories to ramify rather than subside. The extent of this ramification is such that the project itself has triggered new conspiratorial rumors regarding how certain Alevis are collaborating with the authorities to hijack the building.

The physical implications of conspiracy theories involving the building extend beyond its walls. Consider the commemorative procession held in Sivas annually by those upholding the legacy of the festival participants killed in the arson. Over the past decade this event has drawn increasingly larger crowds to Sivas from across Turkey and beyond. Following the hotel’s commemorative-cum-educational transformation in 2011 amid state-endorsed discourses of reckoning with the past, the commemoration was unprecedentedly broadcast live by a popular nationwide TV channel. The event proceeds along a two-kilometer route starting in Alibaba, the reputed “Alevi neighborhood” of central Sivas and one of the scenes of the late 1970s’ wave of violence against Alevis and leftists. It ends at the site of the blaze with the laying of flowers. Most commemoration participants then return to Alibaba in groups albeit not in the shape of a single collective, which they take during the procession.

There are numerous ways this annual event shapes and is shaped by the insinuation that it is the work of outside forces. In both 2011 and 2012 the police conducted checkpoints at the border of central Sivas to stop and search those travelling to the city for the commemoration. Police officers invariably greeted people here by saying, “good morning our guests, welcome to Sivas.” One of my interlocutors, a civil servant in his mid-fifties who indeed originally hails from Sivas but moved to Ankara in the early 1980s for sociopolitical as well as economic reasons, challenged the police: “Guests? Who says we’re guests? I’m from Sivas. You may now be stationed here but who knows where you’re originally from!” He later told me that, while these checkpoints have always been conducted, they used to be more technical than social affairs of the sort the officers’ remarks sought to render them. My interlocutor therefore exposed the

function implicit in what otherwise seemed a benign gesture of hospitality: to demarcate the space of the commemorations as the outside of Sivas.

Such attempts at delineation continued throughout the day and became much more overtly physical, as streets leading to the route of the procession were double-barricaded. An interlocutor in his early thirties, who is a non-Alevi resident of central Sivas and lives in a building situated about halfway through the route, remarked that in 2011 he left home wanting to participate in the commemoration only to run right into barricades. Police officers told him that if he wants to join the procession he ought to go up to Alibaba, the reputed “Alevi neighborhood” where the procession starts. My interlocutor “didn’t feel like doing so, as I don’t know anyone there,” and gave up the idea.

Nearer the site of the blaze, the distance between the double barricades expanded to constitute a buffer zone across which commemorations participants and residents of Sivas gazed at one another. At times this spatial separation took forms less peaceful than the exchange of gazes. Disapproving gestures coming from some balconies along the route were met with a group of young commemoration participants who chanted “Sivas’ arsonists—watching from balconies.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, the procession itself became subject to an obstacle in what was perhaps the least technically justifiable “security” measure by the police. Whereas commemoration participants would formerly be able to walk right up to the doorstep of the hotel and lay flowers, from 2011 onwards—following the site’s transformation—the authorities began to try and obstruct the procession nearer the building. In 2011 they mounted barricades about fifteen meters ahead of the building, blocking off the street where it is located. When the participants insisted on laying flowers at the building’s doorstep as per tradition, the scuffle between them and the police resulted in the latter’s use of teargas. The following year, the police moved the barricades about 400 meters further up along the route, only to pull it back to where they were in 2011 after an hour-long sit-in by commemoration participants. Even then, once the procession reached the street of the building targeted in the blaze, it emerged that the barricades had morphed from simple police shields into a steel wall, which has since then become a standard architectural feature of the site on commemoration day.

Rather than serve their purported purpose of providing safety and security for the commemoration, the barricades therefore functioned as an instigator of aggression. They did so

not only by isolating the procession and thus rendering it the outside of downtown Sivas, but also by enabling the conditions for the portrayal of commemoration participants as troublemakers aiming to provoke the city's residents. The portrayal continued to reverberate after the procession, as teargassed scenes captured by the press and especially by the mainstream TV channel that live broadcast the event circulated in news reports and national dailies the following day under such headlines as "18 years on, and yet another provocation" (*Türkiye*, 2011).

### **Concluding remarks**

I have argued that conspiracy theories dwelling on "exogenous foci" did not only continue unabated but also ramified in Sivas throughout the early 2010s when the state-sponsored project of "democratization" and "transparentization" was in full swing. Contrary to what has been rightly suggested with respect to various other cases (Fortun and Fortun, 1999; Stewart, 1999; West and Sanders, 2003), however, this was not due to an adverse reaction to the project. Indeed, many of those who subscribed to conspiracy theories did not so much categorically disbelieve the promises of "democratization" and "transparentization" as they expected these to translate into tangible, judicial results in the shape of a comprehensive investigation into the full range of culprits.

Conspiracy theories dwelling on "exogenous foci" ramified in early 2010s' Sivas because their central trope found physical expression in practices of spatial commemoration concomitant with the state's project of "democratization" and "transparentization." These practices included the annual procession, where checkpoints and barricades blurred the lines separating security from provocation, hospitality from hostility, and aggressee from aggressor. They also included the site of the blaze, whose architectural transformation resulted in an aura of bureaucratic anonymity and a sweeping approach to remembrance that echoed understandings of the arson attack as outsiders infiltrating the inside. If these developments may appear to have aimed at curbing the contestation surrounding the atrocity, they produced the exact opposite effect. And they did so not only among those upholding the legacy of the thirty-three festival participants but also among the adherents of conspiratorial thinking, who for instance began to embroil the

architectural transformation of the site of atrocity itself, and those behind it, in the ways they theorized the arson attack as conspiracy.

Conspiracy theory, then, seeps through the “state” as well “society,” reiterating that these categories are empirically much less distinct from each other than often assumed (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 152). That is, it serves less as a challenge posed by “society” to the “state” than as a prominent mechanism through which to forge the former as distinct from, and at times even antagonistic to, the latter. This, moreover, is a spatial mechanism, and one which becomes especially pernicious in the case of violent events. By conceptualizing “society” as “inside,” conspiracy theory flattens various other, empirically grounded distinctions produced by violence (e.g., those between victim, perpetrator, bystander, and survivor). By seeking physical evidence for this conceptualization in environments that have in effect been shaped—partly, if not wholly—by violent events, it naturalizes violence’s spatial legacy. It is this flattening and this naturalization that a close and nuanced attention to conspiracy theory’s spatiality might help unravel.

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1. The 1920s' secular reforms that inaugurated the Republic of Turkey prevented state employees from wearing headscarves at work. In the 1990s this culminated in a full-fledged ban affecting the recipients as well as providers of state services (Elver, 2012). The ban was lifted gradually in the late 2000s and early 2010s except for judges, prosecutors and military personnel (Asimovic-Akyol, 2016).
  2. Coffeehouses have held immense sociopolitical significance in Turkey throughout the late Ottoman (Kırlı, 2004), early republican (Özkoçak, 2007), and Cold War (Beeley, 1970) periods.
  3. "Sivas'ı yakanlar: balkonlardan bakanlar." For accounts of similar instances from past commemorations, see Başkaya, 2006, and Kaçmaz, 2009.