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SPECIAL ISSUE:
CONSIDERING POLITICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Plausibility Under Duress: Counter-Narrative, Suspicion and Folk Forensic Contra-Plotting

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How would it portend to analytical contextualization as well as specific theorization when instances where narrative kernels, once weaved into alternative epistemologies, make their way into, and become (re-)"plotted" on an inherently political platform, a session of state Parliament? Motivated by such an inquiry, the present multidisciplinary paper develops its theoretical argument by interrogating the notions of "counter-narrating" and "counter-narrative" cast on the intertwined conceptual landscape of forensics, tracking, and suspicion. The theoretical discussion is advanced further by developing the notions of *productive suspicion* and *contra-plotting*. On analytical level, the present chapter maintains that the narrative structure of some parliamentary discourses (presentations, Q&As) may operate much in the same manner as an anonymous forum thread or a reply chain in news' commentaries. In undertaking this multidisciplinary theoretical discussion and analysis, the aim of this paper is to inform and expand the scholarship on counter-narratives and, in particular, to further solidify the conceptual aspects of the act, or practice, of counter-*narrating*.

Keywords:
contra-plotting; productive suspicion; folk forensics; counter-narrating; MV Estonia

INTRODUCTION

Arguably, the dynamics and cross-pollination between "master" and "counter" narratives find its most pronounced expression in conspiracy theorizing discourse. For, ordinarily, those whose interactional strategies insist on resisting and going against the grain of authoritative narrative explanations are aware of being labelled "conspiracy theorists." However, when considering the latter as the arbiters of knowledge below the threshold of falsifiability (cf., Bratich, 2008, p. 3)—how would that portend to the theoretical and analytical contextualization of instances where narrative kernels, once weaved into alternative epistemologies, make their way into, and become (re-)"plotted" on an inherently political platform, a session of state Parliament? Could such knowledge transfer, from the digital commons to the political stage, be juxtaposed with "conspiratorial" spaces wherein such narrational arrangements of "event-traces" originated (cf., Ginzburg, 1989, p. 103)? What possible, wider theoretical implications may arise from such a case of *commons in forensis* or "folk forensics," yet transposed onto political arena? Might this indicate that such type of sense-making may become something distributed and porous, even transcending its locus-specificity (Weizman, 2014; Keeley, 2023; Jones and Chau, 2022; Lieve and Bortoluzzi, 2014)? For, arguably, the shared uncertainty and epistemic anxiety vis-à-vis explanatory misgivings and ambiguity appear to, at the very least, "flatten out" conventional sociocultural roles, leading to "investigative aesthetics" characterizing multiple co-occurring social layers; that is, it results in a joint "exploratory" imagination where various actors—"commons," "political" and "public"—construct a "forensic storyworld" by tracking relevant evidentiary trajectories. (Stauff, 2018; Fuller and Weizman, 2021). However, in following the central themes of this Special Issue, I will concentrate solely on the content of political discourse (for popular discourses, see, Sorokin 2019, 2021, 2022, *under review*). In doing so, my analytical claim is that some structural elements of parliamentary discourse, such as presentations and Q&As—at least in the case of Estonian practice—appear to operate much in the same narrative manner as an anonymous forum thread or a reply chain in news' commentaries (see, *section 2*).

The present article shall not overextend itself and readily acknowledges that proposing sufficiently exhaustive answers to all the above inquires remains beyond the grasp of a single text. Nevertheless, I would envision it possible to at least approximate general outlines of potential rejoinders as well as map terrain for further research. As such, this article is multidisciplinary. It synthesizes narrative theory, conspiracy theory philosophy, microhistory, and related fields. The purpose

of such diverse scholarship is to forge a dialogue between, and shared theoretical vocabulary with, the ongoing discussions on the implications, effects and affects of, in particular, *counter-narrating*; which I presently conceive as *a processual act of subversive*, *narrative creativity* (cf., Lueg et al., 2021, p. 4; Wake, 2008).

Section 1 comprises present chapter's theoretical discussion. I first consider conspiracy theorizing, (folk) forensics and the contested, fluctuating nature of "intelligence," drawing on an interview with the co-author of the controversial 2020 docu-series *Estonia—fyndet som ändrar allt* ("Estonia: The Find that Changes Everything") (1.1). Thereafter, I will elaborate in some detail on the intertwined conceptual histories of *forensics*, *suspicion*, *narration* and *narrative*, with an interceding side-glance on *evidence* (1.2). The intent behind such historical recourse is to suggest how "conspiracy theorizing"—in its operational sense indicating a suspicious tracking activity narrativizing "the unseen"—figures prominently throughout the global human developmental history in general and the Western cultural history in particular, up to and including the engagement with complex narrative representations. Informed by this background, I conclude the theoretical discussion by reflecting on and further develop terminological proposals I have originally proposed elsewhere—*productive suspicion* and *contra-plotting* (Sorokin, 2022, *under review*); as well as suggest some conceptual affinities and potential theoretical advances with the vocabulary of counter-narrative research.

In Section 2, I will analyze portions of political discourse invoked by the 28th September 2020 premiere of the Swedish Discovery Networks' 5-part docu-series *Estonia—fyndet som ändrar allt*. This series presented a drone-led diving expedition to the wreck of MV Estonia and its revelatory finding—a huge, 4x1.2 meters, gaping hole in the ship's hull—immediately threw into sharp relief the official 1997 JIAC end report, causing sustained public discourse in Estonia. Even though JIAC's findings did not report damage to ship's hull, a "conspiratorial" counterfact (Feldman, 2011) of such damage stubbornly persisted and found, as it were, its crystallization as tangible evidence decades after the catastrophic event. For that matter, my qualitative, micro-analytic discursive analysis (cf., Lueg et al., 2021, pp. 6-7) centers on a parliamentary stenographic record of a session on the MV Estonia shipwreck in the Estonian parliament in November, 2020, at the height of renewed public debate and journalistic analyses. In undertaking this examination and preceding multidisciplinary theoretical discussion, my aim is to inform and expand the scholarship on counter-narratives and, in particular, to further solidify the conceptual aspects of the act, or practice, of counter-*narrating* (cf. Lueg and Lundholt, [Eds.], 2021; Bamberg and Andrews, [Eds.]., 2004).

SECTION 1: THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

1.1 "[T]hey have said that what we have found did not exist": folk forensics, "counter-narrating" and the case of Discovery Network's *Estonia*

In today's highly networked world, the significance and public reach of the arbiters of "osint"—i.e., those who engage with open-source intelligence via 'folk' forensics, i.e., *commons in forensis*—cannot be understated. These volunteer "assembl[ers] of public gathering[s]" (Weizman, 2014, p. 9) can emerge as more or less organized formations of concerned stakeholders (e.g., the artist-investigator collective *Forensic Architecture*), as citizen journalists and "sleuths" (Olmsted, 2009, 2011)—or be conceptualized variously as digital "amateur-," or "improvised" experts (Gies and Bortoluzzi, 2014; Dentith, 2018). What they all share, though, is joint work toward a plausible *evidentia in narratione*—vividness, or "imaginative visualization" of forensic "narrative of fact" (Gr. *energeia*; Hutson, 2012, pp. 64, 66).

Indeed, in present conflicts with horrific, real-time, implications such actors might well foster transfers of (off-mainstream) knowledge into the public sphere in an attempt to sway the scales of balance toward justice; or, at the very least, indirectly lead to scholarly debates (see, e.g., Boyd-Barrett and Marmura, [Eds.], 2023). Similarly, as will be examined in the analysis, whilst key narrative 'kernels' may have been developed into causal narrative chains of varying degrees of complexity in the popular digital space (see, Sorokin 2019, 2021, 2022, *under review*). A likewise evolving "forensic storyworld" can be found when considering parliamentary session's presentations and subsequent Q&As as reminiscent of discursive dynamics in online forums or news items' commentary sections.

In a construction of a forensic narrative, e.g., a jury trial, as Heffer contends, "[t]he participants are not working to a prepared end but to a rough draft plot outline which is constantly being reworked and recontextualized" (2012, p. 271). Therefore, such format can be considered a "narrative-in-interaction," consisting of acts of narration that contribute fragmentary shreds of knowledge yet profess "complex participation frameworks" (p. 283). As such, a forensic story is anything but a "fixed vessel that is steered"—ordinarily, rather, it is "an amorphous phenomenon that is shaped and re-shaped as it meets and bests obstacles along its way" (ibid.; see also, Mittell, 2015, chap. 10, doc. 54ff.).

Envisaged in such a context, forensic story—or narrative—lends significance to the observation that the notion of "conspiracy theory" (CT) carries in some ways shared historical lineage with that of "forensics." As Andrew

McKenzie-McHarg (2018) observes in his discussion of the conceptual history of the notion of "theory" in 19th century criminalistics and journalism that where it was integrated into the scientific vocabulary; the notion of theory was frequently combined "with a possible explanation of the crime"—e.g., a "fraud," or, at times, a "conspiracy" theory. Yet, at the time, the latter combination was not carrying pejorative connotations. Rather, its treatment was neutral, generally in order to "denote [a] suspicion" or "a strand of speculation." (pp. 72-76). As Katherine Thalmann has suggested, drawing on McKenzie-McHarg's unpublished research, the notion of "conspiracy theory" was implemented in late 19th and early 20th centuries' forensic and legal processes, to "describe a hypothesis to account for a possible crime" (2019, p. 10).

Such an inherited conceptual landscape for CT; the recent "particularist" school on CTs in applied philosophy (see, e.g., Dentith ed, 2023); as well as perspectives zooming in on creative dimensions of conspiracy theorizing (CTing) afford the scholarly treatment of CT-inspired discourses in neutral, rather than widely criticized top-down pathologizing fashion (e.g., Lafferty, 2014; Hayes, 2017; Bonetto and Araiszlowski, 2021; Hagen, 2022). Graving out such a multidisciplinary theoretical path is further supported by, *inter alia*, cultural historian Katherine Olmsted's definition of CTs. As Olmsted argues, the latter are yet unproven proposals of conspiratorial undertakings—they envelop "future-oriented" narrative dimensions (Carver, 2022, p. 17). Yet, perhaps more importantly, Olmsted further glosses that CTs "are easy ways of telling complicated stories. Official conspiracy theorists [i.e., government and public officials] tell one story about the event; alternative conspiracy theorists doubt the stories told [and to] make sense of the world, [tell] their own" (2009, p. 6). These clashing narratives—alternate perspectives set against possibly "stylized facts" (Hagen, 2011) of "tyranny of [official] truth" (Weizman, 2014, p. 11)—instrumentalized by "conspiracists," as it were, on either side and social standing, labor for an event-perception that would hold public authority and scrutiny, e.g., MV Estonia case. (Olmsted, 2009, pp. 3-7).

It can be argued that previous assertions help to capture the quintessential commonalities between "conspiracy theories" and "counter-narratives"; and in particular, suggest resemblances between their respective operational modes: *theorizing* and *narrating*. Moreover, as I will explain in concluding the present Section (1.3), I would posit my conceptual proposals of *productive suspicion* and *contra-plotting* to further alleviate potential tensions insofar as the internal mechanics of either "narrating" or "theorizing" are concerned.

In general terms, one could perhaps more clearly grasp the latter connection whilst reflecting on the discourses of "fact," "evidence," and "truth" surrounding the case of MV Estonia; especially in the face of 'settled' and still fluctuating *intelligence* (information and its presentation, broadly understood), as recently precipitated by the Swedish docu-series. Indeed, such an intriguing parallel between counter-narratives and (counter-)intelligence has recently been identified by Michael Bamberg and Zachary Wipff, noting that "[a] counter narrative has the illocutionary force to *counter*; i.e., [not] only contras[t] with, but oppos[e], another narrative – just as [c]ounterintelligence counter[s] another intelligence" (2021, p. 72; emphasis in original). As the authors go on to suggest, countering might—e.g., in discursive sense-making contexts, like an interview or a parliamentary session—oftentimes implicate a "same set of facts" wherefrom competing plot-, or "thread," lines are drawn and developed. (pp. 72-80; cf., Hyvärien and Björninen, this volume). However, what of cases where "facts," although officially settled for decades—i.e., codified into an authoritative text of the JIAC report—were never not only universally accepted but whose credibility has eroded in time? Especially so following the 2020 evidence, leaving "truth," too, a vehicle with open-ended content?

For example, consider docu-series' co-author Henrik Evertsson's replies for an interview with *The Guardian*. Evertsson, a Norwegian national who was promptly sued by Sweden and recently lost the court dispute, appears to carefully position as well as rhetorically weigh the conceptual implications inherent to the undertaking of his crew. "We do not speculate," he reports, "and we draw no conclusions." Although perhaps intentionally left open-ended and familiarly cast as "we-" *versus* "they-narratives," it could be argued that Evertsson's assessment corresponds more to the tangible reality of the case at the time than with any "conspiratorial" thinking (taken as an "irrational" pathology). His stance on the matter seems to favor, if not indicate, an impartial, "scientific" approach. Yet, whilst signaling credibility via vocabulary of scientific impartiality (itself, perhaps, prone to be read as a "master narrative"), one simultaneously ought to be hard pressed *not* to read the following as anything but a "countering." For, as he moves on to further detail:

> We are just putting facts on the table. But for 26 years now, they have said that what we have found did not exist [i.e., that the authorities have claimed the Estonia's hull was intact, that no

> external damage had been observed[1]]. … We could have just reported the various theories and left it at that. But we decided the only responsible course of action was go and look. We wanted to see if there was any evidence of a collision – a hole, for example … We decided to see. (Henley, 2020)

Evertsson's rhetoric exerts and attends to the conceptual distinctions between facts, evidence, eye-witness accounts and (public) responsibility, on the one hand; and speculations and theories, on the other; accompanied by the self-distancing in refusing to "draw conclusions" and hence place blame. Conceivably, the purposes of both cases are intertwined and, arguably, affectively motivated. (1) Evertsson gives voice to a fledgling hope—shared by some public sentiments across a few involved nation states—to "facilitat[e] change" (p. 73); i.e., that relevant governing bodies will finally intervene with the full force of exhaustive and investigative justice. Another soundbite from the same *The Guardian* piece, now from the head of the Swedish *Estonia*'s relatives' association (SEA), Lennart Berglund, may further solidify such a suggestion, though from a less impartial angle, for Berglund concurs that "[Stockholm must now] tell us the truth" (Henley, 2020). (2) The finding presented in "Estonia*"* lends evidentiary power, if not credibility, to a wide variety of "conspiratorial," or perhaps now rather, "evidentiary" narratives—spanning almost three decades and recently, reaching across the aisles of multiple social discourses—impinging on an involvement of a submarine in the sinking of MV Estonia, and the potential chains of narrative causality thereby evoked (Sorokin, 2021, 2022, *under review*). Arguably, it is by way of these intertwined purposes of evidence, speculation and theory—considered through the conceptual affinities of forensics and suspicion, narration and narrative—that the scholarship of counter-narratives/narrating and conspiracy theories/theorizing comes to bear.

1.2 Suspicion, narration, and narrative

In order to adequately appreciate and advance the operational linkages between conspiracy theorizing, counter-narrating and forensics, some ideas of historian Carlo Ginzburg might be helpful. In his essay "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" he famously hypothesized about the emergence of an "evidential" or "conjectural" epistemological model in the 19th century. (Peltonen, 2012, pp. 46-48). For historical research, this entailed a willingness to read (history)

[1] "No external damage other than that in the visor and forward ramp area was observed on the wreck" (JIAC, 1997, p.120).

for minute (often assumed) details—for barely noticeable "clues" or traces—as opposed to taking note of grand events and actors. Moreover, as Matti Peltonen comments, being "suspicious of the preconceived high status conferred on official knowledges," Ginzburg contrasted this "microscopic," "individulizing" thinking characteristic to 'low' or popular knowledge with "scientific observations," envisioning both on an equal footing. (pp. 47-48).

Arguably, this inferential diagnostic can be traced to the Neolithic hominid hunter-gatherer societies. In reconstructing prey's movement, Ginzburg asserted, our ancestor learned to simultaneously navigate multimodal fields of significance for interpretative gain, e.g., ground tracks, odors, broken branches, or "trails of spittle." Accordingly, such accumulation of "traces of events," was "characterized by [one's] ability to [re-]construct from apparently insignificant experimental data a complex reality that could not be experienced directly." (Ginzburg, 1989, pp. 102-108). This "language of venetic deduction" rested on probing and parsing "[a] part in relation to the whole, the effect in relation to the cause." Ginzburg juxtaposed such (pre-writing) deductive model with the later Mesopotamian divination texts, suggesting that (i) "the intellectual operations involved [w]ere formally identical"; and (ii) where divination was future-oriented, the interpretation and narrativization of "venatic clues" grounded itself in a retrospective "forecast[ing]." (pp. 103, 117). This "method of clues"—with its origin in ancient hunting and soothsaying—found later continuation in Hippocratic medicine and "speculative" fields like humane sciences, "dealing in [the] vast world of conjectural knowledge"; whilst Platoean and later Galileoan paradigms of knowledge became foregrounded as scientific, or "rational." (pp. 105-106).

Some later interdisciplinary treatments suggest further development of Ginzburg's suggestion on overlapping lineages of sign deciphering, even if indirectly. J. Edward Chamberlin draws on social scientific and anthropological literature in arguing that, in the context of cognitive development, reading—not exclusively as an outcome of modern 'literate societies'—signaled the "actual" change: an "achievement [i]n negotiating [the] move from what is there to what is not there, from the sign to what is behind or before ([i.e.,] caus[ing]) the sign" (2002, p. 75). Consequently, Chamberlin asserts that ancient tracking constituted a functionally comparable form of reading for it "moved beyond the level of seeing," positing "invisible worlds" (*viz*. atoms in science). Hence, detail-oriented tracking meant "carefu[l] read[ing] what's *on* the lines before one can read between or behind them." Similar to engaging with a (narrative) text, the track was endowed with "literariness by the readerly imagination of the hunter." These proposals afford Chamberlin to define "speculative tracking" which conjoins critical and

imaginative faculties, revising and re-drafting "working hypotheses" as a particular "mode of reasoning." (pp. 76-80; emphasis in original).

Indeed, the juxtaposition of tracking and reading helps to undergird Ginzburg's earlier hypothesis of a direct lineage between hominid prey-tracking and contemporary forensic and semiotic analyses; foregrounding hunter-gatherer as the very "inventor" of narrative and narrative thought via conveying coherent narrative sequence of event-traces (Ginzburg, 1989, p. 103; Carver, 2022, pp. 25ff.; Hutson, 2008, pp. 221-222: cf., McKenzie-McHarg, 2018, p. 69). The implications of such "first narration," and reading, move Ginzburg and Chamberlin to enshrine track-reading as the "oldest act in the intellectual history of the human race" (Ginzburg, p. 105).

Whereas previous discussion has indicated an arguably primordial design of narration and narrative vis-à-vis tracking, suspicion's role has remained much more latent (*viz*. preemptive track-reading as a survival strategy). However, moving much forward in (cultural) history enables to supplement and enrich previous argumentation. Not unlike the linkage between narration and hunter-gatherer forensics—or, between prehistoric sense-making and evidentiary trajectories—some authors have considered the concept of suspicion as an outgrowth of and containing mutually reinforcing legal and narrative dimensions. As such, the 16th century English common law emphasized "intense evidentiary inquiry" whereby probable and circumstantial narratives were brought to bear (Hutson, 2012, p. 64).

Notably, this was done via wide constellations of ordinary people, ascribed into customary legal roles (witnesses, victims, jurors, justices). Significantly, at least the early legal process foregrounded evidentiary, with less focus on the testimonial, aspect. The commons, sent to fact-finding missions outside the case trial, converged into a loose formation of "participatory justice." They "decid[ed] what was to count as knowledge" in the face of "evidentiary perplexity." As such, these laypeople were tasked to "wise[ly] sif[t] and examin[e]" contradictory evidence and competing narratives of fact.

These Renaissance legal developments directly corresponded to theatrical productions. Playwrights, e.g., Shakespeare, underwent thorough teachings in Latin grammar schools of Ancient Greek forensic rhetoric[2] and topics of narrative circumstance (*circumstantiae*, *peristaseis*; i.e., person, thing, time, place, manner, cause, motive)—all paying close attention to *narratio*. Consequently, playwrights incorporated and dramatized judicial vocabulary into

[2] For more on this, see, e.g., Edwards and Spatharas, (Eds.), 2020, esp. Hatzlilambrou, ibid.

inferential 'unseen' plot lines. (Hutson, 2012, pp. 63-64, 68-69). The representations of such "[l]ively evidence" availed audiences to mimetically experience "dramatic uses of evidentiary uncertainty" in mirroring, through dramatis personae, the jurors' real life tasks; and supplemented the sophistication of everyday epistemologies of suspicion and evidence, probability and inquiry. (Hutson, 2007, pp. 4-12, 76; 2012, p. 64; Lyons, 2010, pp. 103ff.). Therefore, as Ben Carver observes, theatre "provid[ed] affordances that train[ed] the audience to understand that the plot exceeds what is seen and heard." Or, if to put it in connected terms, the "clues" the audiences were able to pick up on were "often-unreliable indicators of the plot beyond the visible one," the 'unseen' under the track (Carver, 2022, pp. 21, 25).

1.3 Pulling the tracks together: productive suspicion, contra-plotting and counter-narration

In taking stock of the preceding multidisciplinary discussion, I will conclude this section by further developing two notions originally proposed elsewhere—*productive suspicion* and *contra-plotting* (Sorokin, 2021, 2022, *under review*)—whose conceptual affinities dovetail not only with the themes thus far interrogated, but also enable to clearly explicate the concepts of counter-narrating and –narrative on the backdrop of proposed alignments of vocabulary. As I envision it, suspicion as such—induced, amongst others, by doubt, uncertainty, and hesitancy—is a generic affective state. However, it is one that may bring to bear—if fostered by contexts ripe for "countering" narrations—its capacity to enhance one's creativity. As such, suspicion may evolve into something more purposeful, transitioning into a "motivational" and "directional" state, "invit[ing] us to inquire further [and] point[ing] towards a course of action" (Vazard, 2021, p. 6920; see also, Guffey, 2012, chap. 1, docs. 82-83). This latter suggestion betrays that though affective, a productive flavor of suspicion is invoked by—if to allow an everyday colloquialism—a 'nagging' feeling. Such rudimentary sentiment is thereafter complicated further and a 'simple' suspicion graduates into affective thinking, or, recalling Williams, into a feeling that "thinks."

At this juncture it might become slightly clearer how, given appropriate context and content, such transformation might occur. In some ways, though, further theoretical tinkering is required. One of such aspects might announce itself in terms of "narrativity" attributable to this shift in the experiential register of suspicion. Hence, if to adapt Melley's argument, for a suspicion to be productive, it ordinarily ought to be operating in a double-bind of "interpretative habit [and]

narrative form." From here, arguably, productive suspicion obtains a format of socially networked attention, one rooted in "pervasive hypervigilance." (Melley, 2021, p. 59; Barnwell, 2016, pp. 12, 14; Bratich, 2010, p. 11). At this stage, productive suspicion usually comes to undergird types of "collective narrative verbalization" (Parker, 2020). In a case by case basis, it can manifest as primarily imaginative, including, perhaps, conspiracy theories of the most obscure and "out there" variety. Likewise, it may result in nurturing "reasonable" suspicions—in the sense of and insofar as providing an affective 'motor' for tracing and cohering narratives of fact. Finally, it may be mixture of both, allocation of which I expect the overall MV Estonia discourse, including the portion of it recorded in parliamentary stenograph and examined shortly, to fall into.

Productive suspicion grounds what I envision as *contra-plotting* (Sorokin 2019, 2021, 2022, *under review*). Being an imaginative activity, people endeavor to plot in (retrospectively) 'forecasting' "unrealized (or unfinalized), open and emergent *plot potentialit*[ies]" (Sorokin, 2021, p. 65, emphasis in original); whilst the prefix "contra" emphasizes the inherently subversive nature such an activity entails. Here I follow Paul Wake's rich discussion on the two "planes" of plot, grounded in Peter Brooks' seminal work. In forging a dialogue with Brooks' conceptualizations on the backdrop of the phenomenon of real life conspiracy plotting (e.g., the famous Gunpowder plot), Wake builds on Brooks in differentiating a plot and a "plotting"—the former taken as an "ordering" or a "summation," whilst the latter its opposite which arguably harbors a "subversive potentiality." According to Wake, in a plotting, the "ordered" causal event sequences become 'unhinged,' producing "the plotted." Consequently, the plotted is necessarily the kind of narrative resource that is too disordered and oversaturated, hence not qualifying as a fleshed out plot (a narrative). (Wake, 2008, pp. 296, 299, 301; Brooks, 1992, pp. xi, xiii). In my view, it is here that the notion of contra-plotting enters. For the plotted emerges when contra-plotting—operating liminally and originating from the "preclosure positions" of possible narratives—does its characteristic suspicion work of tracking and interrelating, pinpointing and establishing (Dannenberg, 2008, p. 9; cf., Dannenberg, 2004).

In my opinion, contra-plotting's potency for subversion is clearly something it shares with recent theories of counter-narrating. As such, contra-plotting could be taken as subordinate to the concept of counter-narrating, and, in a way, this would be accurate. However, I would maintain it would be equally valid to contend that contra-plotting might also not be (a subordinate mechanism of) counter-narrating—at least not in the strict sense of "narration." For a narration (or a "narrative verbalization") requires a plotting to even qualify as narration. The

processuality of plotting is—like, say, a river's running water—what keeps narration 'going.' (Contra-)plotting traces and assembles the evidentiary trajectory which could then be molded into, or what can scaffold, a narration (and ultimately, a narrative). Yet, both "narration" and especially "narrative" are more circumscribed, whereas contra-plotting circumnavigates both.

In contexts reliant on disputing dominant narratives, the items involved (as presently availed by the stenographic record) can ordinarily be considered as advancing contra-plotting. Contextual forms of conduct—such as a presentation or a brief Q&A section—afford building on, developing, inquiring about, or challenging either the material explicitly "countered" therein or some disagreeable communal perspectives. As such, contra-plotting may, but must not be, "narration" in its strongest sense—it could very well just articulate preparatory probing into possible lines of evidence or narrative kernels, cast in situationally appropriate linguistic form. Due to being a process, contra-plotting could therefore rarely manifest as a strict "narrative" or "narration." For it is always *a doing*, a "gathering" that cannot be conclusively pinned down. To recall the metaphor of the river: narration is to plotting what river is to water. Conversely, some established discursive forms, formally more 'closed' than 'open'—e.g., a parliamentary presentation—can be anticipated to be (counter-)narrations and presumably also narratives, for their form precedes the narrative development via contra-plotting. The narrative ship has been "steered," to recall Heffer.

The case of questions and observations, directed to presenters, and, by the same token, the answers given, is less obvious vis-à-vis narration and narrative. Insofar as their definitional limitations and open-ended form are concerned, "Q"-s very rarely, if ever, approximate a narration, let alone narrative. But they do indicate and hold, arguably, a processual 'logic' of contra-plotting, in that they may draw on knowledge reservoirs of the commons (e.g., *we all* know that x happened), weave narrative kernels of alternative epistemologies anew by setting them against a given presentation (e.g., so it wasn't a bomb?), or inquire clarifications on specific narrative lines used to contra-plot that particular "countering" presentation. The "A"-s, owing to the same format, are equally limited, but could also be conceived of as valid means for the presenters to supplement their narratives through a 'double retrospective' or retrospective "forecast": presenting the narrative and thereafter refining its elements that originally might have remained somewhat more ambiguous. Consequently, their 'stable' narratives become 'unlocked,' liable to new, 'on the go' contra-plottings.

SECTION 2: WHEN THE "THE WAY IT IS WRITTEN" REMAINS IMPLAUSIBLE: NARRATIVE COUNTERING AND CONTRA-PLOTTING ON THE POLITICAL STAGE

The Estonian Parliament's November 26th session "[o]n the matter of national importance: 'Estonia's shipwreck – will the truth finally surface?'"[3] could be indicative of a reaction to the still sustained public discourse on MV Estonia—following the airing of the docu-series in September. Additionally, at least some weight ought to be given to the fact that the session took place during the governance of a right-wing coalition. Some of whom had been strongly invested in the matter of MV Estonia—even if to cynically utilize it as yet another measure to "counter" the oppositional (liberal) forces, though simultaneously suggesting latter's lack of investment in the matter. The session foregrounded three presentations, each followed by a Q&A section. I will hereby focus on (1) Ain-Alar Juhanson's, a survivor of the shipwreck, which I will, where appropriate, interject with (2) Margus Kurm's, the head of the governmental investigative committee on the matter of MV Estonia (2005-2009) and former Chief Prosecutor.

Juhanson's presentation is a recollection of his lived experience and structurally a narrative. However, some of its iterative elements, especially as supplemented by the following Q&A (e.g., "the bang"), betray "active" contra-plotting; i.e., retrospective forecasting within the plotted, making it a slender resource. Juhanson starts by reminiscing how he—only 17 at the time—and four fellow young athletes, on their way to a sports event in Germany, woke up to a "really loud crash," one followed by "at least one more." (stenographic record, time-stamped 10:04). The companionship heard—and on this point Juhanson later refines his narration, whilst also processually (re-)contra-plotting some of its presumptive elements—"big slams of metal, kind of dinning … some sort of metallic collisions, either originating from the visor or some other things [c]olliding." (Q&A, time-stamped, 10:25, cf., 10:36; subsequently only time is referenced). After the first "bang," Juhanson went to open the cabin's door and looked at the corridor. Whilst there he heard the secondary banging sound as well as observed "water running out of the corridor's walls." Here, Juhanson points out that the corridor next to their cabin was directly below the car deck; and even though not being "acquainted with the technical construction" of ships and,

[3] Translations are mine. The full stenographic record (in Estonian) is available at: https://stenogrammid.riigikogu.ee/et/202011261000. **Further empirical material can be available upon request.**

therefore, not "a specialist to say so"—yet, "according to the best of [his] knowledge"—, once the water reaches the upper car deck, "it should not make it further [but,]let us leave this to the investigators" (10:04).

In developing his account further, Juhanson describes how, by that time, the ship was already "palpably tilted." Upon finally reaching the reception area, "it was obvious that there [was] something very wrong with the ship"; that it "kept rotating on the spot," pushing him and his only remaining friend to think how "at one point its bottom would become the upper part and vice versa." From there, the pair of friends had to think and act fast. Making it to the outer, external deck of the ship, they experienced—according to Juhanson—the vessel being so strongly tilted that "it was possible for [them] to walk on the side of the ship." Next, they decided to "head toward the tail of the ship," expecting that an attempt to jump out over there would be less dangerous, possibly involving lower elevation than elsewhere. Significantly, at the time, as Juhanson highlights, they "did not know that it was ship's fore," the prow, instead. Once they arrived at the fore, however, they encountered "a wall with metal grid." Herewith it is worthwhile to quote Juhanson more comprehensively, for he details that:

> [t]his was the [loading] ramp of the ship, which was *closed*. This is a fact that is not expressed in the end report. I have told this to three investigators, I do not know why, but it is not expressed in it [i.e., JIAC, 1997]. The end report says something else – who knows for what reason. (Emphasis added; for the official account, see, JIAC, 1997, chps. 13.2.3, 13.5; cf., Kurm, 10:50)

Here, a popular narrative kernel of the (closed) ramp doubles as an experiential contra-plotting element in developing Juhanson's account, whilst crucial for imbuing Juhanson's counter-narrative with not only witness credibility, but with collective experiential significance. That is, how such state of the ramp, whilst experientially corroborated by some other survivors, has never found official acceptance or credibility.

Juhanson observes that whilst "very few survivors are open to [publicly] share their experiences" (10:04)—and refrain from touching this topic even amongst each other (10:34)—he has made a promise (to himself) to be vocal. He envisions such speaking out, not unlike Evertsson, as his "moral obligation" (10:22): "the least I can do for my [past] companions [as well as for the] victims" (10:04). Juhanson acknowledges that as only one survivor out of a larger group, he "can only speak for [him]self," that—as one parliamentary member puts it—this is

"his story" (Šmigun-Vähi, 10:19). As such, many subsequent inquirers (e.g., Tuus-Laul, 10:21) commend Juhanson's "courage to come forth [and speak,] for there are few who do."

Yet, Juhanson's story—condensed into a 20-minute time limit and deemed courageous by some political actors—is simultaneously one of historical dismissal. It further deepens the rift between official codified narrative and (one of many) personal counter-narrations. As Juhanson observes in his presentation and further specifies during Q&A, his "testimony was not taken into account in the end report." Even though the photo-copy of his testimony was openly accessible online[4], he can "just state the fact" that "[the] specific episodes" accounted therein were excluded—for some unexplained, unknown reason. Hereby it is worthwhile to complement the implications of Juhanson's narration with some of Margus Kurm's later replies. For these indicates both how political contra-plotting could become distributed within its situated setting as well as draw on some popular blueprints.

Namely, Kurm is asked for input as to what had transpired with not only Juhanson's testimony, but also of those of four others (Šmigun-Vähi, 11:20): "are these testimonies destroyed or are they in some files somewhere which are being hidden? What's the deal with this?" (ibid.). Kurm's answer to this is as concise as it is striking: "No … [t]hey have never been hidden, classified, they have always been known. They have just been ignored" (11:21). As he explains a few minutes later, during his time as the lead investigator in the re-examination of the shipwreck, Kurm interviewed only those witnesses whose "testimonies remained as if open-ended," like that of Juhanson. For Kurm, "it was a big surprise"—perhaps more adequately, a cause for suspicion, as Kurm's further replies implicitly corroborate—"that such a testimony had been discarded" (11:27). Adding insult to the injury, as Kurm goes to specify that, having read all the testimonies, "*no one* has said they had seen an open ramp" (ibid.; emphasis added).

Indeed, the aforementioned deficiencies were some of many figuring prominently in Kurm's own presentation. Perhaps most significantly, he began by identifying three "views" on the MV Estonia catastrophe: (1) one "loyal to the official version …[that] the end report [h]olds the final and exhaustive truth"; (2) "diplomatically skeptical," assessing committee's work as insufficient, resulting in an unclear "reason of the shipwreck … with definitive confirmation or disproval of any [other] version disallowed"; and (3) a view according to which the vessel "did not sink the way it is written … the real reason for the catastrophe is known, but it

[4] Although, he adds, only until recently, opening up another 'trail of suspicion.'

has been concealed for 26 years with the intention to continue doing so." The latter is also the view shared by the former Chief Prosecutor (10:50).

On his part, Juhanson concludes by pointing out that already for 26 years on every September, the press keeps asking him "why did it [i.e., the shipwreck] happen like this?" Every time, however, Juhanson "[does not] have an answer." In now linking his presentation with *Estonia*'s revelatory finding, Juhanson remarks: "[the] new facts that have emerged by today show that we have yet to thoroughly clarify what happened during that night." In that regard, Juhanson expresses hope that "the final truth finally comes to light," for it is something that everyone involved rightfully deserve.

A number of significant ways of how contra-plotting may operate emerge not only within the bounds of both presentations, but especially as facilitated by the dialogue with parliamentary members. Perhaps the densest Q&A sequence, thus corroborating a number of hypotheses implied in 1.3, involves former army general-now-politician Ants Laaneots (10:24). In a wealth of minute inquiries put to Juhanson, he begins by first contra-plotting partial elaborations—intertwining these with popular kernels such as "submarine" and "visor"–on what Juhanson told about the ship's ramp. "According to your words, was it so that ramp was upright? [A]s if displaced? Or was it instead the visor which opened up the ship from the front so the water pressed in?" In instrumentalizing the "submarine" kernel, Laaneots contra-plots about the "version that some submarine, possibly Swedish, ploughed into the broadside … upon waking up, were there any blows, jolts, some sounds, that would indicate [this]?" Juhanson's reply is at once simple statement of experiential fact and a result of 'unlocking' and revising his preceding narration. Hence, he first replies that "[o]nce we made it to the prow of the ship, there was no visor anymore," to then explicitly 'retrofit' earlier narration. Hence, Juhanson contra-plots anew that he and his friend had mistaken the prow for the tail: "only later we realized that we had seen the same grid that's behind the ramp, one that strengthens the ramp, so that we could climb downwards and jump into the water." Moreover, responding to the potentiality of collision (with submarine), Juhanson contra-plots the presumptive kernels of "bomb" and "explosion" in a latent manner[5]: "The sounds we heard … [they] were rather great slams of metal … not akin to an explosion, rather similar to a collision or called forth by that same visor" (10:25; cf., 10:36).

Upon being inquired whether he has ever been somehow "pressured [not] to speak" or been required to give a "oath of silence" (Tuus-Laul, 10:21); as well as probed for his supposed knowledge of the "survival of [Estonian] captain

[5] Or, indeed, his reply could also be read as a preemption of such topics altogether.

[Avo] Pihl" (ibid.; cf., Rimmel, 11:21), both kernels with considerable popular purchase—Juhanson provides a critical meta-commentary on the discourse of "conspiracy theories," responding that "such theories" can emerge only "when there is no clear and [completely] *unambiguously understood result of the investigation* … [a] report or explanation given to what had transpired … *that everyone agrees on*" (10:22; emphases added). Juhanson might be taken here, in some ways, to outline not only how the contra-plotting discourse of MV Estonia cannot be simply conflated with a "conspiracy theory," in a strict sense; but even more importantly, how such a countering sense-making sees and seeks as its fundamental basis *rational*, if not scientific, evidentiary explanation, or narrative. As Juhanson puts it (10:43): "[I] probably will not quit until it has been very clearly and concretely *proved* what happened on that night" (emphasis added).

Later on, Margus Kurm concurs, emphasizing that various assessments of the 1997 joint committee—such as the damage to visor and ramp—have been, in the years that followed, "challenged by other experts." Kurm denotes that such development does not mean as if "these other experts are smarter … [t]he issue is, rather, that oftentimes different experts do hold dissenting opinions." Therefore, Kurm surmises, "it is important to examine alternative versions" (10:50).

CONCLUSION

Whilst the conceptual intricacies of suspicion (and tracking) certainly do not exhaust the means to tie together counter-narrating, -narrative and contra-plotting, they do afford a novel lens through which to ascertain their aspects of cross-pollination, as hopefully the preceding discussion and analysis demonstrated. Naturally, though, suspicion does not hold a singular dominance in these matters. At least as important are "ambiguity" and "closure," whose role I have discussed in some detail elsewhere (see, Sorokin, 2022, sec. 1). What those particular concepts bring to the table is their mutually reinforced facilitation of the argument that—characteristically for 'forensic commons,' but perhaps also for its political counterpart—suspicious contra-plotting also entails plotting *of suspicion*. That is, of sustaining 'loops' of ambiguities, indicating those involved to be always "in the middle," narratively speaking, grasping for an 'deficiency-free' end result that may never, and usually does not seem to, emerge. Similarly, the conceptual leanings of contra-plotting and, I would argue, also of counter-narrating could be further layered through dialogues with relevant, more specified, scholarship (e.g., Richardson, on "narrative middles"). Finally, in empirical terms it should go

without saying that a number of options for making this initial, limited entrance into "political" contra-plotting and counter-narrating more robust can be undertaken in the future iterations of the topic. One (international) way to achieve that could be through the integration of matching data, if applicable, from Finland and Sweden.

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