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Populism and Conspiracism: Challenging or Preserving the System to Live in a Meaningful World?

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Abstract

The present paper explores the relationships between the meaningfulness of the world, system justification, populist attitudes, and conspiracy beliefs. Associations were investigated on a sample of 768 Italian participants performing a path analysis model. Results highlighted a positive association between the meaningfulness of the world and system-justifying tendencies. System justification in turn related negatively to both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. Meaningfulness of the world was thus associated with both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs in a negative indirect fashion channeled by system-justifying beliefs. This yielded a suppression pattern where system justification overturned the direct positive relationship between the meaningfulness of the world and both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. These findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how individual cognitions, system justification, political ideologies, and conspiracy beliefs intersect, suggesting a potential dual role of the meaningfulness of the world in shaping political attitudes and preferences. The paper concludes with a discussion of limitations and avenues for future research.

Key words: Meaningfulness of The World; System Justification; Populist Attitudes; Conspiracy Beliefs

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Introduction

In the intricate landscape of contemporary society, individuals grapple with the constant flux and complexity of their surroundings, inherently seeking to construct fundamental knowledge frameworks. Knowledge frameworks are rooted in beliefs and rules shaped by real-world experiences and serve as stable cognitions governing our understanding of the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Shattered Assumptions Theory identifies the meaningfulness of the world as a crucial category of assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Three guiding principles – justice, controllability, and (un-)randomness – are indicated as constituting what is termed a “sense of meaning” (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). How individuals perceive and interpret social events may depend on their consistency with these assumptions. The preservation of basic assumptions about the world, especially if they are perceived as threatened, may motivate people to adopt specific ideological belief systems (Jost et al., 2009). System-justifying beliefs, focusing on the acceptance of social inequalities as natural and immutable, may emerge as a potential mechanism to maintain the stability and continuity of established world assumptions (Jost, 2019). With its emphasis on legitimating injustices and disparities (Jost & Banaji, 1994), system justification may align with the principles of controllability, justice, and (un-)randomness inherent in the meaningfulness of the world.

Another viable way to ensure the maintenance of basic world assumptions – or their restoration if they are threatened – may be to subscribe to political ideologies or explanatory theories that promise to fulfill the desire to endow reality with meaning. The rise of populism and the proliferation of conspiracy beliefs have captivated the attention of scholars seeking to unravel the psychological underpinnings of these phenomena (e.g., Ibsen, 2019; Pellegrini, 2023; Salvati et al., 2022; 2024a; Schulz et al., 2018). Both these phenomena are framed as stemming from the suddenly evolving dynamics of sociopolitical landscapes and the related individuals’ psychological responses (Douglas et al., 2019; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Imhoff et al., 2022; Salvati et al., 2024b; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). The nexus between the meaningfulness of the world, populist attitudes, and conspiracy beliefs may lie in the premise that individuals facing societal upheavals may find solace in alternative narratives that promise predictability and controllability. Social distressing events, economic turmoil, and geopolitical uncertainties may pose challenges to internalized world assumptions, prompting individuals to seek refuge in populism or conspiracism, which offer a semblance of order and intelligibility. At the same time, as individuals grapple with the challenges posed by societal changes, the tendency to justify – or not – the system may come into focus. System justification posits that individuals are inclined to view the sociopolitical systems in which they live as legitimate and meaningful, thus supporting the status quo (Jost et al., 2003). System justification stands in stark contrast to the discontent expressed by populist and conspiracism narratives, which challenge the legitimacy of existing systems and the ruling elite (Azevedo et al., 2017; Imhoff et al., 2022; Mao et al., 2023; Vasilopoulos & Jost, 2020).

In investigating this intricate scenery, we explore the possibility that individuals may adopt a dual stance. On

the one hand, there may be a tendency to preserve world assumptions by embracing a deterministic worldview provided by system justification; this would foster a sense of meaning (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). On the other hand, individuals may be inspired by populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs as alternative narratives promising clarity and control. Hence, this study not only seeks to untangle the direct associations between the meaningfulness of the world, populism, and conspiracy beliefs but also investigates the nuanced role of system justification as a potential vehicle of these relationships.

Meaningfulness of the World

In a complex and ever-evolving world, individuals inevitably face the need to develop fundamental conceptual frameworks to navigate and orient themselves. These knowledge systems encapsulate beliefs and rules that have proven effective in the context of lived experiences, giving rise to a set of stable cognitions about how the world operates (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). These frameworks empower individuals to recognize, plan, and take action, thereby influencing various aspects of their lives, such as how they select and interpret new information (Crocker et al., 1984). Individuals’ knowledge systems play a pivotal role in determining the consistency or irrelevance of information. These judgments are based on the expectations set by the individuals’ conceptual frameworks and the underlying principles of how the world functions as derived from them. In this process, agents operate following a criterion of stability and maintenance of their assumptions. They may perceive entities or events as more consistent with expectations than they actually are and mistakenly discard incongruent elements to allow the continuity of their assumptions (van Bruggen et al., 2018). The tendency to guarantee the continuity of cognitions about the world would derive from the need to preserve a sense of security and protection that individuals develop very early during childhood through predictable and stable relationships with caregivers (Bowlby, 1969; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). In these early stages of life, individuals develop a sort of “illusion of invulnerability” that they aim to protect over time through a set of assumptions about how the world should work (Janoff-Bulman, 1989).

In her theory of Shattered Assumptions, Janoff-Bulman (1992) identifies the meaningfulness of the world as a crucial category of assumptions. Meaningfulness of the world refers to the set of principles that regulate the distribution of benevolent or malevolent outcomes to people. According to the author, individuals endow the world with meaning using three guiding principles. First, people may believe that outcomes are distributed following a criterion of justice (Lerner, 1980), where personal merit is a determining factor. The moral aspects of individual character become a primary factor to be considered in evaluations of one’s or others’ destiny. Second, people may refer to a principle of controllability of outcomes. The assumption is that people can directly control their world through their behaviors, determining their circumstances by taking appropriate actions. Lastly, people may believe that outcomes are distributed according to a principle of randomness and therefore determined by chance. In this case, there is no

way to explain the occurrence of events. The world is ruled by chance, leaving space for a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. The three assumptions of justice, controllability, and (un-) randomness comprise what is generally defined as a “sense of meaning” (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Silver et al., 1983). A social event is endowed with meaning to the extent it is consistent with predictable social laws and, therefore, when it respects the abovementioned principles.

System Justification

Previous research has amply shown the tendency to be conservative when individuals must face changing their knowledge systems (Greenwald, 1980; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). They tend to incorporate new elements, even if inconsistent, into the framework of established knowledge systems and persevere in maintaining them rather than developing new ones (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Such “cognitive conservatism” derives from a fundamental need for certainty and coherence (Roets et al., 2015). The tendency to be resistant to change is also reflected in the inclination to preserve basic assumptions about the world to protect the sense of security and protection they offer (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). When people perceive a threat to the stability of their basic world assumptions, they may experience a pervasive sense of fear and uncertainty (Jost et al., 2003). Under these circumstances, people may be motivated to restore their balance by adopting specific ideological belief systems (Jost et al., 2009). Ideological belief systems may prove to be capable of providing stability and continuity to individuals’ world assumptions (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Thus, cognitive conservatism may contribute to the endorsement of particular ideological belief systems (Kossowska & van Hiel, 2003). For instance, a set of ideological beliefs guaranteeing the legitimacy of existing societal arrangements would eliminate the need to question those principles believed to regulate such arrangements.

An ideological belief system apparently capable of responding to the requirements of the meaningfulness of the world’s assumptions is *system justification*. System Justification Theory focuses on the motivated tendency of people to prevent social change by perceiving the established status quo as legitimate and just (Jost, 2019). System justification refers to the psychological process through which injustices and disparities characterizing the social context are accepted since they are determined by nature and, therefore, immutable (Jost, 2020). It is precisely the emphasis on the legitimacy of the status quo that makes system justification compatible with the principles of justice and controllability related to the meaningfulness of the world. Believing that we live in a system where conditions of social, political, and economic inequality are explained and justified simply because they exist may respond to the individual need to endow reality with meaning (Jost & Banaji, 1994). This favors the apparent integrity and rationality of the social world, even at the expense of personal or in-group interest, satisfying the need to predict, control, and explain the distribution of potential positive or negative outcomes. If the social system is naturally and legitimately

determined, persons’ conditions will be determined by their worth, and they will be able to easily predict which behaviors to enact to obtain the desired outcomes – so construed, positive or negative events never happen by chance. The psychological processes involved in system-justifying tendencies thus appear particularly consistent with the assumptions proposed by the meaningfulness of the world, promising a peculiar ability to preserve the principles of justice, controllability, and (un-) randomness.

Populist Attitudes and Conspiracy Beliefs

Recent lines of research investigating populism have provided a general background for a set of attitudes embodying its key individual-level features (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2018). They are identifiable in an anti-elitist attitude, morally opposing the corrupt elites against the virtuous people (Hawkins, 2010; Mudde, 2004). Elites are framed as perpetrators of selfish acts at the expense of an undifferentiable honest people (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004). This manichean tension between the immoral elite and the pure people animates a mandatory request for popular sovereignty (Schulz et al., 2018).

Conspiracy theories are defined as attempts to explain impactful geopolitical events through plausible narratives implying the presence of a malicious secret plan carried out by small groups of immensely powerful individuals (Zonis & Joseph, 1994). These groups may consist of disparate categories of individuals, such as politicians, scientists, economists, and religious or ethnic minorities, as long as they are attributed with malicious intent and incommensurable power (Douglas et al., 2019). When individuals tend to adhere to one or more conspiracy theories, we refer to the notion of conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff et al., 2022).

The psychological nature of conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes appear exceptionally similar. Research indeed suggests a reciprocity of the two phenomena in fueling each other (Rooduijn et al., 2016). Populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs provide similar simplified accounts dividing the social world into morally delineated segments that oppose a benevolent people to an evil elite (Hawkins, 2010; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). Such a narrative is attractive for individuals who may face psychological uneasiness in coping with uncertainty and fear provoked by sociocultural instability (Forgas & Crano, 2021; Leone et al., 2018; 2019; Marchlewska et al., 2018; Miglietta et al., 2023; Pellegrini et al., 2021; 2022; van Prooijen, 2018; Wojczewski, 2022). Endorsement of populism and conspiracy beliefs may represent a readily available strategy to compensate for emotional upsets and restore psychological balance (Douglas et al., 2019; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Gründl & Aichholzer, 2020). Not surprisingly, the rise of populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs has been respectively — and analogously — associated with the institutional inability to stem feelings of uncertainty fueled by fast social changes (Ibsen, 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Rodrik, 2018), and as a psychological response to uncertainty triggered by upsetting geopolitical events (Douglas et al., 2019; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017).

Overview and Hypotheses

Individuals who endorse populism and conspiracy beliefs are hence framed as people upset by momentous social events that undermine their psychological balance. It could be argued that such people would perceive their sense of meaningfulness as under threat, and thus perceive their assumptions about the world's functioning as shattered. Socioeconomic turmoil and upsetting geopolitical events may represent hints that the assumptions of justice, controllability, and (un-)randomness no longer apply. Populism and conspiracy theories might appear as appealing strategies to face feelings of meaninglessness aroused by such perceived threats. They appear to provide people with seemingly exhaustive accounts of critical situations and would point to simple solutions to solve them and restore a sense of justice (Brandt et al., 2015; Marchlewska et al., 2018; Miglietta et al., 2023; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs may also provide individuals with a renewed sense of control and predictability of reality and foster the perception that events do not happen by chance (Douglas et al., 2019; Newheiser et al., 2011; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). We might thus expect that the meaningfulness of the world relates positively to conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes (H1).

At the same time, populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs seem to challenge the sociopolitical system and its ruling classes. The leading elites are identified as responsible for cultural, geopolitical, and economic turbulences, which threaten the stability of individuals' world assumptions. Thus, system justification would appear to be at odds with worldviews proposed by populism and conspiracy. System justification theory posits that individuals are generally motivated to consider the social, economic, and political systems where they live as legitimate and meaningful (Jost et al., 2003). These elements contrast with the core accounts of populism, which instead express dissatisfaction with the status quo and challenge its legitimacy (Azevedo et al., 2017; Vasilopoulos & Jost, 2020). Similarly, recent research has found that conspiracy beliefs may question the legitimacy of existing institutions and political systems (Imhoff et al., 2022; Mao et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, we would expect that general system justification could relate negatively to conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes (H2).

However, in the context of sudden changes and socially impactful events, people might also tend to preventively defend their assumptions about the world by adopting an acquiescent attitude toward their reference sociopolitical system. Individuals may operate following a criterion of preservation of their world assumptions – the system may be thus perceived as oriented to maintain them. The deterministic worldview provided by system justification could foster a sense of continuity of assumptions, allowing the endowment of meaning to the world (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Hence, we may also expect that the meaningfulness of the world is positively related to system-justifying tendencies (H3).

Overall, the pattern of associations outlined above might suggest the potential presence of indirect associations between investigated constructs. Specifically, it may be anticipated that the tendency to preserve world assumptions would

incentivize adherence to system justification, which in turn would discourage support for populism and endorsement of conspiracy theories. In other words, we could expect an indirect negative association of the meaningfulness of the world with populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, which is conveyed by increased system-justifying tendencies (H4).

Method

Participants

The sample size was defined through a power analysis for mediation models with one single mediator (Schoemann et al., 2017). We opted for conservative expected effect sizes and number of replications to achieve robust power ($r = 0.15$, $1-\beta = 0.90$, replication = 5000, draws = 20000, Monte Carlo confidence level = 95%). The analysis suggested a minimal sample size of 700 observations for reaching a statistical power of 0.90 (95%CI = 0.89; 0.91). Thus, we recruited a sample of 768 Italian respondents (461 female, M age = 48.3, SD age = 18.3) who completed an online survey. Data were collected by psychology students who, in exchange for course credit, were asked to recruit up to five individuals (i.e., snowball sampling), prioritizing non-student adult respondents. In terms of educational level, participants were distributed as follows: 4.4% had a lower secondary school diploma, 45.2% a high school diploma, 39.5% a degree, and 9.4% had a post-graduate qualification. As for employment conditions, a majority (78.8%) of the sample were non-student adults. Among them, 68.5% were employed, 5.1% were retired or houseworker, and 3.2% were unemployed. The remaining 22.2% of the sample were college students.

Measures

Meaningfulness of the World. This scale investigates individuals' beliefs about the principles that regulate the distribution of benevolent or malevolent outcomes to people (van Bruggen et al., 2018). Specifically, the items tap into three general principles of justice (e.g., "Misfortune is least likely to strike worthy, decent people"), controllability (e.g., "People's misfortunes result from mistakes they have made"), and chance (e.g., "Life is too full of uncertainties that are determined by chance"). Responses were provided on a 6-point Likert scale. Items related to the principle of chance were reversed and then averaged with items of other principles to obtain an overall score reflecting the meaningfulness of the world ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.55$, $\alpha = 0.70$).

System Justification. Participants answered Kay and Jost's (2003) 8-item general system justification scale which assesses the tendency to perceive the status quo as legitimate, fair, and immutable. Participants rated the items (e.g., "In general, the Italian political system operates as it should"; "Italy is the best country in the world to live in") on a 7-point scale. High scores correspond to high system-justifying tendencies ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.90$, $\alpha = 0.76$).

Populist Attitudes. We administered the 12-item scale by Schulz et al. (2018) which investigates populist attitudes tapping into the three main populist narratives of anti-elitism (e.g., “Politicians talk too much and take too little action”), demand for people’s sovereignty (e.g., “The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people”), and belief in a homogeneous and virtuous people (e.g., “Ordinary people are of good and honest character”). Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale. Responses were averaged to obtain an overall score reflecting endorsement of populist attitudes ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 0.81$, $\alpha = 0.81$).

Conspiracy Beliefs. We measured conspiracy beliefs through Leone et al.’s (2019) 14-item scale assessing adherence to conspiratorial explanations of a multiplicity of impactful geopolitical events such as economic crises (e.g., “The financial crises of the last decade have been deliberately caused by political and financial authorities”). Responses were provided on a 7-point Likert scale with high scores reflecting support for conspiratorial explanations ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 0.75$, $\alpha = 0.91$).

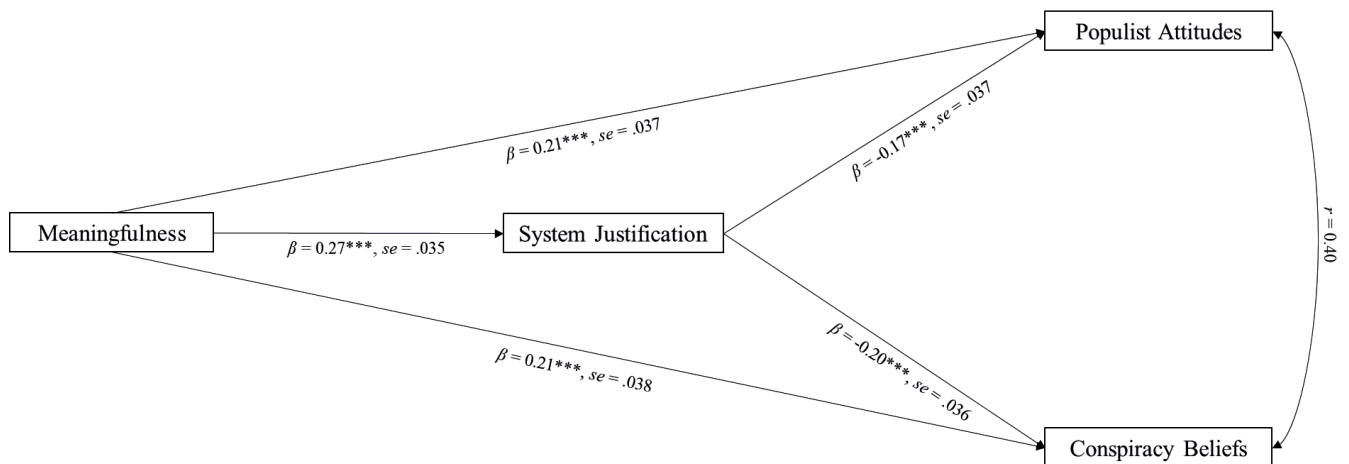
Results

As a preliminary data overview, we computed zero-order associations among the investigated variables (Table 1). Meaningfulness of the world was positively associated with system justification ($r = .27$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .21; .34$), populist attitudes ($r = .16$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .09; .23$), and conspiracy beliefs ($r = .15$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .08; .22$). System justification was instead negatively related to populist attitudes

($r = -.12$, $p = .001$, $95\% CI = -.19; -.05$) and conspiracy beliefs ($r = -.15$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = -.21; -.08$). Populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs were strongly and positively associated ($r = .44$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .38; .49$). Correlations analysis suggested that the emerged associations could be profitably probed by employing an analysis model testing the presence of potential indirect effects. Thus, we implemented a perfectly-identified path analysis model where we examined the indirect association of the meaningfulness of the world with populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs passing through system-justifying beliefs. The model was tested by a robust maximum likelihood method with the Huber-White correction since indirect associations are conventionally not normally distributed. Analysis was conducted with the R package *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012) in the RStudio environment (2023).

Figure 1 shows the results of the tested path analysis model. We found that meaningfulness of the world was positively associated with system justification ($\beta = .27$, $se = .035$, $z = 7.80$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .205; .342$), which in turn was negatively related to populist attitudes ($\beta = -.17$, $se = .037$, $z = -4.73$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = -.245; -.101$) and conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = -.20$, $se = .036$, $z = -5.60$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = -.273; -.131$). Thus, the analysis revealed the presence of a negative indirect association of the meaningfulness of the world with populist attitudes ($\beta = -.05$, $se = .012$, $z = -3.87$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = -.071; -.023$) and conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = -.06$, $se = .012$, $z = -4.57$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = -.079; -.032$). Results highlighted that the greater the participants’ tendencies to view the world functioning as regulated by principles of justice, controllability, and (un-) randomness, the more they were inclined to perceive their reference system as legitimate, fair, and immutable. In turn,

Fig. 1. Graphical representation of the path analysis model



Tab. 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations of Meaningfulness of the World (MW), System Justification (SJ), Populist Attitudes (PA), and Conspiracy Beliefs (CB).

					MW				SJ				PA			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>U</i>		
MW	3.20	0.55	0.31	0.88	.70	-										
SJ	2.90	0.90	0.22	-0.28	.76	.27	.21	.34	-							
PA	4.50	0.81	-0.14	0.11	.81	.16	.09	.23	-0.12	-.19	-.05	-				
CB	2.39	0.75	0.21	-0.18	.91	0.15	.08	.22	-0.15	-.21	-.80	0.44	.38	.49		

Note; *L* = Lower bound; *U* = Upper bound

however, such inclinations to legitimate the reference status quo were at odds with the endorsement of populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. These negative indirect associations were particularly interesting because they were opposite to the positive direct associations of meaningfulness of the world with populist attitudes ($\beta = .21$, $se = .037$, $z = 5.56$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .135; .282$) and conspiracy beliefs ($\beta = .21$, $se = .038$, $z = 5.40$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .131; .281$). Results thus suggested the presence of a suppression pattern of effects where the indirect association through system justification completely overturned the direct association of meaningfulness of the world with both criteria. In other words, the tendency to endow the world with meaning by adhering to regulatory principles of outcome distribution was directly and positively associated with support for populism and endorsement of conspiracy theories. Notwithstanding, the same tendency of world-meaning attribution appeared to be related to the endorsement of a legitimizing view of the status quo, which in turn reduced populist support and the endorsement of conspiracy beliefs.

Discussion

The present work aimed to provide a comprehensive examination of the relationships among the meaningfulness of the world, system justification, populist attitudes, and conspiracy beliefs. Data analysis delved deeper into the dynamics of these relationships, revealing intriguing patterns of associations. Consistent with our expectations, they first highlighted a positive association between the meaningfulness of the world and system justification. This result seems to suggest that individuals may tend to attribute legitimacy to the status quo to preserve their assumptions about how the world functions. Specifically, the individual tendency to attribute meaning to the world through adherence to criteria of justice, controllability, and (un-)randomness was related to the perception of the reference sociopolitical system as legitimate, fair, and right (Jost, 2019; Jost & Banaji, 1994). The set of ideological beliefs guaranteeing the legitimacy of existing societal arrangements inherent to system justification appeared able to preserve the assumptions on how positive and negative outcomes are distributed: by deserve and demerit.

In turn, system justification emerged as opposed to core narratives provided by populism and conspiracy theories. The inclination to legitimize the status quo was at odds with the endorsement of populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, highlighting negative association with both constructs. Such associations were consistent with the notion that populist and conspiracist individuals claim for a radical restructuring of the established sociopolitical system. The demand for radical changes translates into openly and explicitly delegitimizing the elites, which play an evil role within most conspiracist and populist narratives (Imhoff et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2023; Vasilopoulos & Jost, 2020).

The aforementioned pathways laid the groundwork for a fascinating pattern of negative indirect associations. In this context, system justification played a key role in linking the

meaningfulness of the world to both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. Individuals who perceived the world as governed by principles of meaningfulness were more likely to endorse system justification. At the same time, such an inclination to justify the system was associated with decreased support for populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. In essence, the desire to uphold criteria that attribute meaning to reality sustained the legitimization of the reference sociopolitical system. In turn, this alignment favored a reduction in support for a political ideology and conspiracy theories that challenge the legitimacy of the established system.

These negative indirect associations were particularly intriguing as they ran counter to the emerged positive direct associations. The meaningfulness of the world was found to relate directly and positively to conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes. This finding appears to support the idea that populism and conspiracy beliefs might serve as appealing strategies for individuals grappling with a sense of meaninglessness arising from the potential erosion of principles of justice, controllability, and (un-)randomness. By offering simple solutions to intricate problems and seemingly comprehensive explanations for distressing events, both conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes may buttress people's perception of control of their reality (Douglas et al., 2019; Marchlewska et al., 2018; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Similarly, it may allow them to predict and define the appropriate actions to take to live in a just world (Lerner, 1980).

Finally, the contrasting findings about direct and indirect associations suggested the presence of a suppression pattern. While the direct associations indicated a positive relationship between the meaningfulness of the world and both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, the indirect associations through system justification were negative. The endorsement of system justification overturned the positive associations of perceiving the world as meaningful with both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. System justification thus suppressed the positive effects of the meaningfulness of the world on populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. This pattern of suppression seems to suggest that the meaningfulness of the world may represent a double-edged sword. Faced with the desire to maintain the stability of their assumptions about the world, individuals could opt to endorse a set of ideological beliefs capable of preserving such continuity. However, if the reference system is deemed to be malfunctioning, it may lose its legitimization and be perceived as unable to fulfill its function as custodian of the world's assumptions. In this case, individuals might denounce the system and lean toward narratives of populist ideology and conspiracy theories that promise to defend them from the threatening and dysfunctional system and to restructure it to restore perceptions of controllability, justice, and (un-)randomness.

Limitations and Conclusion

Some limitations should be acknowledged. First, given the cross-sectional nature of our research design, it is not possible to establish causal relationships between the

variables of interest. Future studies could focus their efforts on investigating potential causal links through experimental research designs. For instance, procedures aimed at increasing or decreasing the subjective sense of controllability, justice, and (un-)randomness might be adopted to manipulate the level of perceived meaningfulness of the world experimentally.

We also argued that endorsement of populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs may represent a strategy to deal with the potential frustration of the world's principles of meaningfulness which are threatened by socioeconomic turmoil and specific impactful geopolitical events. However, this statement is frankly speculative. Future studies, both correlational and experimental, could investigate whether upsetting sociopolitical scenarios may represent a perceived threat to the meaningfulness of the world and whether this may have repercussions on adherence to system justification, populism, and conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, populism is herein framed exclusively in terms of an individual attitude. Recent studies though highlighted that it is possible to embed populism within the classical left-right political spectrum and that left-right ideological measures and voting preferences may show more nuanced associations with our variables of interest. For instance, Langer et al. (2020) underlined that, in France, system justification relates positively to voting for the left-wing variant of populism and negatively to voting for the right-wing populist parties. These results are explained by considering the peculiar reference status quo that individuals may adhere to in the specific sociocultural context. At the same time, and in line with our results, Langer et al. (2022) showed that system-justifying tendencies may attenuate support for anti-establishment (populist) parties across various national contexts. Future research could take into account the ideological nuances (progressive vs. conservative-reactionary) that characterize populist support when investigating its psychosocial correlates.

Finally, our findings highlighted the intricate interplay between cognitive processes that lead individuals to perceive the world as meaningful while simultaneously influencing their political attitudes. The suppression pattern we found seems to suggest that the meaningfulness of the world might play a dual role. On the one hand, it appears to favor support for populism and conspiracy theories, while on the other hand, it appears to discourage it by motivating system justification. This seems to suggest a potential distinction that conspiracist and populist individuals may operate between deontic and ontic criteria about how the world should be and how the world appears to be. The assumptions implied by the meaningfulness of the world could embody the cognitive representation of how reality *should be*. The endorsement of populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, as well as system justification, seems to preserve such deontic assumptions. However, as instantiated by the demand for radical change that the negative association of system justification with populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs reflects, how the world should be seemed at odds with how the reality is actually perceived to be. These latter associations overturned the positive direct relationship of world assumptions with populism and conspiracism. Understanding further the dynamics of the suppression effect through system justification could provide insights into how deontic and ontic

criteria may impact political attitudes and preferences. Future research could investigate potential factors that could clarify the interplay among these two criteria.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the findings of this article will be made available by the authors without undue reservation.

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Authors' contribution

Conceptualization and methodology: VP, LL, and MG. Formal analysis: VP. Investigation and supervision and project administration: VP, LL, and MG. Resources and data curation: VP. Writing—original draft: VP. Writing—review and editing: VP, LL, VDC, MS, and MG. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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