

**CALL FOR PAPERS**  
**International Symposium**

**On Suspicion and the Contemporary**

**1-2 March 2018**

*at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER),  
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg*

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The election of Donald Trump in 2016 (and before him, that of Barack Obama in 2008) was marked by the rise of seemingly new ways of talking about and interpreting contemporary social and political realities. One of the most evocative of these is suspicion. If Trump's own presidency promotes a suspicious orientation toward the media ("fake news" and "alternative facts"), his predecessor's was marked by the conservative fixation on "birtherism" (led by Trump himself) and their multiply-inflected visions of liberal conspiracies. This moment, epitomized by the tone set by the current US presidency, seems to be defined by a hermeneutics of doubt and mistrust, one that hinges critically on that keyword, suspicion. But doubt and mistrust are not and cannot be the monopoly of this American presidency, its affiliated conspiracy theorists, and the alt-right purveyors of rumor and racist innuendo masquerading as uncovered truth.

These suspicious modes of reading the world cannot be confined to the humdrum of American politics and the frenetic character of its 24-hour news cycle. The proliferation and appeal of doubt and mistrust, their evocation of the related notions of fear and anxiety as well as their opposites – faith, trust, confidence, and certainty – also characterize how people everywhere are encountering and engaging with the uncertain character of people, places, and objects today. To understand the world today requires seeking out and recognizing the various ways these notions appear and are instantiated (temporally and spatially) across the different worlds that hold our scholarly attention in these times.

We ask: is suspicion the characteristic *par excellence* of modern subjectivity, or merely its excess, something to be relegated to the realm of irrationality? If so, what does the current global moment tell us about the state of the modern subject, who fears the unknown and is wracked by uncertainty? Furthermore, what does this mean for scholars, as we seek to map the various moods, modes, and practices by which people inhabit and make sense of their worlds?

We propose that this term, suspicion, must be taken seriously as an object of scholarly contemplation and critical engagement. Suspicion might be productively mobilized as one of the ways through which we can think *with* as well as *against* the impulses of the current moment in both the analytic and ethnographic senses of the term. Ethnographically, it can encompass a variety of forms of action typically studied under the rubrics of conspiracy theories, secrecy, witchcraft accusations, rumors, etc. In this sense, the term suspicion seems to connote an aporia of relation and distantiation, a point of entry into how people express doubt, distrust, and make accusations of those they "know" and are in "in relation" with, even as they strive to engage with them in order to make sense of and build viable social worlds. Analytically and epistemologically, suspicion is dynamic: it expands our critical approaches to and engagement with our multiple worlds. It evokes the uncertainty about signs, and about the relationship between signified and signifier. In this second sense, suspicion seems to be a central, even organizing category in literary, social, and cultural theory.

With this focus on both theory, broadly construed, and the ethnographic in mind, we invite papers for a two-day international symposium, to be hosted by WiSER at the University of Witwatersrand on 1-2 March 2018.

The symposium will explore how the notion of suspicion might work in comparable and not-so-comparable ways as a heuristic or diagnostic short-hand for the diversity of human practices of “reading,” “seeing,” or “interpreting” the worlds they inhabit across literary, social, political, cultural, religious, and economic contexts.

Papers may emphasize different aspects, facets and practices of “reading” and “navigating” the world in a suspicious mode. In particular we encourage papers to relate to (one, or more, of) the following questions:

- What is suspicion? Is it a critical mode or disposition? If so, what forms or expressions might it/does it assume as people move from one world to another?
- What role does the media (and social media in particular) play in the creation and/or circulation of suspicion? In other words, is suspicion necessarily a proliferating mode and if so, why?
- Does suspicion have an ethical quality? What is the relationship between suspicion and moral orders? When might suspicion be viewed as the right or wrong disposition within a given social and or political universe, with its attendant moral expectations? And when might it (or not) be generative of moral panics and/or moral outrage?
- What are the personal and public affective responses to suspicion? What are the signs that may evoke or dispel suspicion within both literary and social worlds, with their multiple levels of realities?
- Lastly, to what extent is suspicion the defining feature of contemporary developments in our cultures, politics, and relations of the moment?

Papers presented at the workshop will build toward a special journal issue on suspicion. Selected participants should be able to fund their travel to and accommodation in Johannesburg for the two-day event.

Please send a title and abstract (max. 300 words) by **December 15, 2017** to [Najibha.Deshmukh@wits.ac.za](mailto:Najibha.Deshmukh@wits.ac.za)

As we hope to have discussions on presentations, we wish to circulate all papers prior to the workshop. We therefore ask the accepted participants to send their draft papers by **February 1, 2018** (max. 7000 words).