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This book presents an important resource for students and scholars from a range of disciplines interested in the societal and political impact of conspiracy theories, including Area Studies, Anthropology, History, Media and Cultural Studies, Political Science, Psychology and Sociology.

**Michael Butter** is professor of American Studies at the University of Tübingen, Germany. He is the author of *Plots, Designs, and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present* (2014) and *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* (2020).

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Together they directed the COST Action COMPACT [Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories].

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# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

*Michael Butter and Peter Knight*

In April 2005, 22-year-old American Dylan Avery released *Loose Change*, a film about the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. He had put the documentary together on his laptop, drawing mainly on material available online. The film was distributed, often for free, on DVD and available for watching and downloading online, first via Google Video, later on YouTube. *Loose Change: Second Edition* was released as early as December 2005, then *Loose Change: Final Cut* about two years later, followed by *An American Coup*, a further update, in September 2009. The films were so successful that *Vanity Fair* called them the ‘first Internet blockbuster’ (Sales 2006). And while the original version cost only a couple of thousand dollars to make, the final one was professionally produced for more than a million. For each new film, Avery deleted some scenes and material, and added new ones in their stead (partly in reaction to copyright infringement lawsuits). The films’ argument thus changed considerably over time. They started from the premise that there were anomalies in the official account that needed explaining. At first, Avery suggested that the planes that had hit the World Trade Center had been remotely controlled, and later he suggested that the Twin Towers were brought down by controlled demolition. All versions, however, make the same central claim: the 9/11 attacks were not committed by Islamist terrorists led by Osama bin Laden, but were orchestrated in secret by the U.S. government in order to infringe on civil liberties at home and wage wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, seemingly with the aim of securing access to oil.

The *Loose Change* films articulate what is commonly called a conspiracy theory. According to historian Geoffrey Cubitt (1989: 13), conspiracy theories are a way of making sense of current events and the grand sweep of history that is characterised by intentionalism, dualism and occultism. They assume that everything has been planned and nothing happens by coincidence; they divide the world strictly into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot; and they claim that the conspiracy works in secret and does not reveal itself even after it has reached its goals. Political scientist Michael Barkun (2013: 3–4) highlights similar characteristics in his influential definition of conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected.

Conspiracy theories are widespread. Recent polls, for example, show that a majority of people believe in at least one conspiracy theory. From Bond to Bourne, conspiracy narratives have been a prominent feature of Hollywood cinema. The imagination of secret plots has also been a significant concern of literary and popular fiction, from Shakespearean drama to the

postmodern metafiction of Thomas Pynchon. President Trump's path to the White House was kick-started by his promotion of the Birther conspiracy theory that alleged that President Obama was not born in the U.S.A., and he appeared on the Alex Jones show, an online conspiracy channel with a following in the millions. In May 2019, the F.B.I., for example, issued an internal intelligence bulletin warning that domestic terrorism (of the kind that led to the El Paso shooting in August 2019) was often underpinned by a particular form of white supremacist conspiracism. Conspiracy theories that circulate globally online such as the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which claims that there is a plan to replace the Christian populations of Western countries with Muslim immigrants, seem to constitute a particularly 'sticky' form of fake news (Lewandowsky, van der Linden, Cook 2018), even if the evidence is not yet clear whether the Internet has in fact led to a proliferation of conspiracy theories, or merely made them more highly visible and easily available. In many countries, the leaders of populist parties and movements frequently draw on conspiracy tropes, and their followers appear to be particularly receptive to them. Conspiracism (a worldview in which conspiracies are seen as central to the unfolding of history; Mintz 1985) plays a significant role in many political contexts around the world, from the disinformation factories of Russia that churn out fake news stories, to the use of conspiracist narratives in the inter-ethnic conflict between the Dayaks and Madurese in Borneo, and from the pronouncements of President Chávez in Venezuela, to the popular rumour in the Middle East that the U.S.A. orchestrated the 2011 Arab uprisings.

However, conspiracy theories are not identical with fake news. For one thing, not all fake news claims that a sinister plot is afoot. Moreover, the producers of fake news know that they are spreading lies. They do so intentionally to create confusion, mobilise their audience or smear opponents. By contrast, the majority of those who articulate conspiracy theories genuinely believe in what they are saying (or, at the very least, in an era of relentless scepticism, they don't fully disbelieve the theory, suspecting that it might be true or might as well be true: cf. Knight 2000: 47–8). They are convinced that they are helping to reveal the truth. But there also those who spread conspiracy theories that they do not necessarily believe in themselves to make money or to achieve certain political goals. U.S. radio host Alex Jones, who has built a multi-million-dollar business based on conspiracy theories, would be an example of the former; Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary since 2010, would be an example of the latter, as he regularly uses the Great Replacement conspiracy theory to mobilise Hungarians against refugees and the E.U.

Far from being mere trivia, conspiracy theories have played a significant role in history and they continue to matter in the present, not least with the current rise of populism in many countries. At times they can have serious consequences, prompting some people to commit extremist violence (e.g. 28-year-old Australian Brenton Harrison Tarrant, who, motivated by the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, killed 50 people and injured as many at Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, when he opened fire on the Muslim congregation gathered there for Friday prayers on 15 March 2019) and others to disengage from politics. Research has demonstrated, for example, that people are less likely to take active steps to reduce their carbon footprint if they become convinced that the notion of climate change is a hoax (Douglas, Jolley 2014). Conspiracy theories can also help bolster a sense of individual or group identity, for better or worse. Yet, they can also provide a harmless and vicarious pleasure to many who are attracted to their status as 'alternative' narratives known only to an enlightened few, while the ignorant 'sheeple' believe the orthodox version of events.

The *Loose Change* films, for example, consciously set themselves in opposition to the official version of events, a characteristic that some accounts consider to be another defining feature of conspiracy theories (e.g. Bratich 2008; Räikkä 2018). However, as a number of studies have

shown, conspiracy theories can also constitute the official version endorsed by the authorities. Outside the West, for example in Russia or parts of the Arab world, conspiracy theories are still regularly put forward by government officials and mainstream media (Gray 2010; Yablokov 2018). Instead of grassroots dissent against the status quo (a film school reject living in a small town in upstate New York, putting a film together for loose change on his laptop that accused his own government of lying), conspiracy theories can just as often be deployed by political elites to suppress opposition and to rally support for the regime. Moreover, even in Europe and the U.S.A., conspiracy theories in the past were likewise not confined to the fringes but were an accepted – and even sophisticated – form of knowledge articulated by ordinary people as well as elites (Roisman 2006; Campbell *et al.* 2007; Butter 2014). Consequently, conspiracy theories have not always targeted elites, as they currently tend to in the West. For most of the past, conspiracy theories on both sides of the Atlantic accused enemies from outside, from below or a combination of the two, of plotting against the state and those in power. Blaming those already in power only became the dominant mode of conspiracy theorising in the West during the twentieth century (Campion-Vincent 2005).

In the U.S.A. as well as in Europe, this shift occurred hand in hand with a transition from what Barkun calls ‘event’ and ‘systemic’ conspiracy theories to ‘superconspiracy’ theories (2013: 6). On this schema, the first versions of *Loose Change*, for example, constitute event conspiracy theories because they focus almost exclusively on the 9/11 attacks. The final version, *An American Coup*, counts as a systemic conspiracy theory because it integrates the attacks into the larger narrative of a plot by a specific group – in this case, the U.S. government. Since then, the 9/11 attacks have been inscribed into a number of superconspiracy theories, that is, theories that claim that several groups of powerful conspirators are secretly in cahoots. Some 9/11 conspiracy theories, for instance, claim that the attacks were part of a much larger plot to control the course of history by a superconspiracy involving not only the U.S. government, but also the Jews, the Illuminati and even alien lizard people, all part of a vast, secret plan called the New World Order.

Most commentators, both journalists and academics, tend to take a common-sense approach to defining conspiracy theory that follows Justice Potter Stewart’s much cited definition of pornography in the *Jacobellis v. Ohio* obscenity trial of 1964 (‘I know it when I see it’). However, conspiracy theories have a complex history, and they continue to evolve in unexpected ways in the present. Although the *Loose Change* films would seem to constitute an exemplary case study of a conspiracy theory, we need to consider to what extent the features they exhibit – the historical origins of the claims they make, the social and psychological background of their creator, the medium in which they are disseminated, their rhetorical and visual forms, the political role they play and the effects they have on their audiences – are universal, and to what extent they are specific to the particular context in which they were produced. In Avery’s case, that was a mixture of anti-Bush activism, coupled with a residual legacy of early-Internet-era cyber-libertarianism fuelled by the mantra that all information wants to be free, along with the emergence of a hacktivist aesthetic that found creative potential in recombining existing samples of film, music or facts. Although most conspiracy theories share certain psychological, structural and functional qualities, their particular combination and resonance can vary greatly according to context.

Defining what counts as a conspiracy theory is thus not as straightforward as the definitions by Cubitt and Barkun we drew on above might imply. After all, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ is anything but neutral in everyday discourse. Often, the label is used in a pejorative sense; it seems to provide a diagnosis of a flawed and delegitimised way of thinking, the aim of which is often simply to end discussion. The term can serve as an insult, implying that one does not need to

take seriously the claims made by an interlocutor, because they are outlandish and absurd, perhaps even wrong by definition (cf. Pipes 1997). Some of the early research on conspiracy theories (and still much journalistic commentary) tends to treat conspiracy theories as merely a curiosity at best, and a sign of fringe, delusional thinking at worst. However, as this handbook makes clear, more recently, scholars have moved away from associating those who believe in conspiracy theories simply with paranoia or other mental problems. This is partly in the light of the scholarship that has shown the prominence of conspiracy thinking among the intellectual and political elites both in previous centuries and in particular regimes in the present; partly as a result of research in social psychology and political science that has gathered evidence that belief in conspiracy theories is widespread among the general population (in the West, at least); but also as a consequence of studies that have shown the close affiliation between conspiracy theories and other more ‘respectable’ ways of making sense of historical causality – the idea that, akin to conspiracy theories, critical research in the humanities and social sciences is often motivated by a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ (Ricoeur 1970 [1965]), a desire to reveal the underlying causal factors hidden beneath the deceptive surface appearance (cf. Boltanski 2014).

The second reason that conspiracy theories are hard to define is that conspiracies do actually happen. We are thus not dealing with a way of thinking that is inherently flawed, even if many examples seem far-fetched and unwarranted. Given the long history of secret machinations, both by and against the established order, it is therefore not *prima facie* unreasonable in particular circumstances for people to develop a theory that current events might be the result of a conspiracy behind the scenes. However, most commentators want to make a distinction between believing in an individual conspiracy and believing that conspiracy provides the ultimate explanation for ‘what is really going on’. (To complicate matters further, what counts as a ‘conspiracy’ itself has a long and fraught history, part philosophical and part legal: where do you draw the boundary between complicity, collusion and conspiracy?) An important question, then, is the relationship between the imagination and the reality of conspiracy. For example, are conspiracy theories about the U.S. government more prominent in the twentieth century precisely because we have learnt more about its clandestine and illegal activities (Olmsted 2009)?

The third reason determining what counts as a conspiracy theory is far from straightforward and is that the very term ‘conspiracy theory’ is a comparatively recent coinage that only entered popular usage to any significant degree in the 1970s. Given that what we now recognise and call ‘conspiracy theory’ is evident in the historical record as far back as classical antiquity (and some scholars, drawing on evolutionary psychology, have even posited that the phenomenon is evident in all human societies: cf. van Prooijen and van Vugt 2018), we need to consider why it has only recently become a recognisable and useful concept. Scholarly engagement with what later became known as conspiracy theories began in the middle decades of the twentieth century, largely motivated by a desire to understand and to challenge what they theorised as the ‘mass hysteria’ of totalitarian movements (cf. Thalmann 2019). ‘Conspiracy theory’ as both an object of knowledge and matter for public concern thus has a complex history, meaning that we can never simply take the phenomenon for granted as a natural and immutable category.

Research into conspiracy theories has only really started to gain momentum in the past two decades. After the first wave of studies from the middle decades of the twentieth century that were rooted in the psycho-historical analysis of mass movements, cultural studies scholars revisited the topic in the 1990s and 2000s. They investigated the varied cultural manifestations of conspiracy theories (primarily in the U.S.A.), and analysed the political uses to which they are put – sometimes surprising and creative, but often reactionary. Since then, social psychologists and political scientists have turned their gaze on conspiracism, conducting experiments and surveys in order to learn more about the underpinning mental dispositions and demographic



traits of conspiracy theorists. It is clear, then, that conspiracy theories are a complex phenomenon, requiring a multi-perspectival approach to fully understand them. The bibliography of research on conspiracy theories is by now extensive, and includes studies of an increasing number of regions, historical periods and political traditions, some of which draw on scholarship in a variety of languages. Given the rapid development of this field of enquiry and the current proliferation of studies in a wide range of disciplines, it has become quite difficult for scholars to gain an overview of what different approaches have found out about conspiracy theories, where they disagree and where research is currently heading.

It is the intention of this handbook to offer just such an orientation. This volume is the major outcome of the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action ‘Comparative Analysis of Conspiracy Theories’ [COMPACT], which ran from 2016 to 2020. By the time the handbook went into print, the network comprised more than 150 scholars from more than 40 countries and more than a dozen disciplines. The goal of the project was to synthesise research done on conspiracy theories across disciplines and language boundaries, and to open up new research venues for interdisciplinary work. The handbook provides this synthesis; it is by far the most comprehensive account of conspiracy theory research currently available with regard to both the topics that it covers and the disciplines that have contributed to it. Many of the individual chapters were co-written by scholars from different disciplines and/or different countries, precisely in order to promote a comparative analysis. They address the central questions that are raised by the phenomenon of conspiracy theories: What is a conspiracy theory? Who believes in conspiracy theories and why? Have there always been conspiracy theories? How do conspiracy theories spread? Are conspiracy theories dangerous and, if so, what should we do about them?

The handbook is arranged in five sections: ‘Definitions and approaches’, ‘Psychological factors’, ‘Society and politics’, ‘Media and transmission’ and ‘Histories and regions’. The first section opens with a chapter on the history of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ because the phenomenon it describes is old, but the term itself is fairly young and anything but neutral, no matter how hard scholars try to shed the derision and ridicule that characterises the term’s use in everyday discourse. The other contributions to the section survey the research done in a variety of disciplines. They discuss how and from what premises different disciplines define and approach conspiracy theories, what questions they ask and which methods they employ to answer them. With regard to the *Loose Change* films, for instance, philosophers might investigate if the arguments the films put forward are epistemologically plausible or not, if, in other words, the films articulate a warranted conspiracy theory, which could turn out to be true, or an unwarranted one, which is logically impossible. Semioticians, by contrast, usually do not concern themselves with questions of truth. They would be interested, however, in the filmic transmission of the conspiracist ideas, in how different systems of signs – animations, footage of the attacks, interviews, voice-over narration, etc. – are combined to get a specific meaning across. Scholars of cultural studies might also be interested in this question, but they might also focus on those among the film’s audience who believe its claims and the effects of their interpellation as conspiracy theorists for identity. A sociologist – to give one final example – might investigate how the success of the *Loose Change* films as counternarratives that challenge the official version of events is related to a deep-seated crisis of traditional epistemic authorities in the U.S.A. in particular and the Western world in general.

The second section, ‘Psychological factors’, presents the research done in social psychology, currently the most vibrant of the disciplines that contribute to conspiracy theory studies. Social psychologists employ quantitative methods to find out why some people believe in conspiracy theories and others do not, and what effects this might have. For example, a social psychologist

might use a questionnaire to investigate what sets those who find the claims of the *Loose Change* films convincing emotionally and/or cognitively apart from those who do not. But social psychology is also interested in the relation between environmental factors such as social status or education and the belief in specific conspiracy theories or what is often referred to as conspiracy mentality more generally. Moreover, social psychology is also concerned with the consequences of belief in conspiracy theories. In the case of 9/11 conspiracy theories, the distrust of elites might lead to a refusal to participate in elections or a turn to populists who exploit the distrust. But psychologists have also shown that belief in conspiracy theories about vaccines or global warming leads to a refusal to vaccinate oneself or one's children, or an unwillingness to reduce one's carbon dioxide footprint. Finally, since social psychology tends to highlight the dangers of belief in conspiracy theories more than other disciplines, it has also most thoroughly investigated the questions whether and how such theories should and can be debunked.

The interest in environmental factors connects research in social psychology with the third section, which focuses on 'Society and politics'. In this section, the interdisciplinary nature of conspiracy theory research comes to the fore particularly clearly, as the section is concerned with topics that are studied in a broad variety of disciplines. The chapters in this section discuss the social, cultural and political factors that fuel conspiracy theorising and the effects of conspiracy theories on society and politics. For example, why is it usually men who produce conspiracy videos like the *Loose Change* films and occupy the leading positions in communities such as the 9/11 Truth Movement? Are conspiracy theories a remedy for an experienced crisis of masculinity and is that the reason why mostly men put their conspiracist narratives out there, or are there patriarchal structures of oppression at work in conspiracist counter-publics as well so that men automatically gather more attention and are taken more seriously? These are questions that are asked by gender studies and cultural studies as much as by political science, the discipline represented in this section that has most in common with social psychology because it also employs quantitative methods. But questions about demographic and ideological factors that drive belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories in particular and conspiracy theories more generally might also be asked by sociologists or anthropologists who might employ qualitative methods such as participant observation. And, while the *Loose Change* films do not resort to antisemitic tropes, other 9/11 conspiracy narratives do and are therefore of interest to scholars working on that issue. Closely related is the question after the connection between conspiracy theories and radicalisation and what such radicalisation can lead to.

The fourth section, 'Media and transmission', shifts the focus from content to form and from causes and consequences to circulation and distribution. The success of the *Loose Change* films, for example, would have been impossible before the advent of the digital age and the Internet in particular. The possibilities of digital filmmaking allowed Dylan Avery to put his film together at such low costs, and the Internet provided him with the material he sampled. It also enabled him, as an at-that-point completely unknown filmmaker, to reach a global audience. Obviously, then, the Internet has greatly accelerated the circulation of conspiracy theories, but how exactly has it influenced the rhetoric and structure of such theories? How do conspiracy theories circulate as rumours, and how have other media revolutions – for example, the advent of print in the fifteenth century or the emergence of magazine cultures in the eighteenth centuries – shaped conspiracy theorising? And what is the relationship between the allegedly factual accusations that we find in sermons, pamphlets and documentaries and openly fictional renderings of conspiracy scenarios in novels or movies? The chapters in section four, mostly written by scholars from media and literary studies, address these and related questions.

The final section, 'Histories and regions', adopts a more explicitly comparative approach, to consider how conspiracy theories fulfil different functions in variety of historical moments and

regional contexts. Whereas research in psychology and political science often aims to reach generalisable conclusions from specific data, the chapters in this section are concerned with mapping out in detail the political role that conspiracism plays in particular histories and regimes, and the varying cultural forms that these conspiracy theories take. What are the similarities and differences between the conspiracy theories developed in the *Loose Change* films about the plane crashes of 9/11 and, for example, conspiracy theories in Indonesia about the disappearance of flight MH370? What functional role do pro-government, anti-Western conspiracy theories play in deflecting attention away from home-made political and economic failings in Muslim-majority societies in Southeast Asia, and how do they compare to the anti-government conspiracy theories that circulate in the West? How do these forms of conspiracism draw on existing historical accounts of victimisation by the West, and to what extent do these kinds of story defend or challenge the status quo? To what extent are conspiracy theories employed by political elites to justify authoritarian rule and the suppression of dissent? While the underlying psychological mechanisms and rhetorical forms of conspiracy theories might be universal, the historical traditions they draw on and the specific uses to which they are put in local contexts can vary widely. The case studies in this section can thus shed light back on some of the generalised conclusions summarised in the earlier sections of the handbook. Although the chapters in this section map out what we know so far about the complex genealogy of conspiracy culture and some of its contemporary manifestations, it is clear that there is still much research needed, especially in non-Western contexts.

The 48 chapters in this handbook present the current state of the art on each topic, providing a guide to current scholarship along with original research findings. Although much of the research converges on some broad conclusions, there is also still considerable debate between the positions set out in the individual chapters (Butter, Knight 2019). The first section, in particular, is therefore designed to make clear what is at stake in taking different methodological approaches, and where the residual points of tension lie. Although this volume represents a comprehensive overview of current research, these chapters also map out what we still don't know and suggest avenues for future research.

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## SECTION 1

# Definitions and approaches



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## INTRODUCTION

*Todor Hristov, Andrew McKenzie-McHarg and  
Alejandro Romero-Reche*

A glance at the contents of this first section of this handbook will make one thing immediately apparent to the reader: Many disciplines have something to say about conspiracy theory. This observation only seems unremarkable until one is challenged to name another phenomenon whose elucidation can draw upon such disparate research endeavours. Anthropological fieldwork in tribal societies can shed light on conspiracy theory, but this is also true of the data-crunching algorithms applied to digital media by social network analysis. Tests carried out by social psychologists on human subjects can be similarly illuminating, while the deep reading of post-modern novels offered by literary scholars also warrants attention. What other object of study can claim to be a point of convergence for so many researchers coming from so many disciplines? If nothing else, the cursory glance at the chapter headings in this section will suggest to the reader that there are few other phenomena that can hold a candle to conspiracy theory in this respect.

The next remarkable point, not so obvious from the chapter headings themselves but clear from a perusal of their contents, is that this research is all of relatively recent origin. Throughout the twentieth century, scholars occasionally asked questions and pursued lines of inquiry that in retrospect can be assimilated into the prehistory of research on this phenomenon (Thalmann 2019). And yet it was only in the 1990s, and more particularly under the auspices of cultural studies, that research into conspiracy theories established itself as an ongoing concern. The mysterious workings of the *Zeitgeist* were in play here; Fenster (1999), Knight (2000) and Melley (2000) assure us that they all alighted upon the theme of conspiracy theory independently of each other. With the appearance of their works in close succession at the end of the previous millennium, the field of research spluttered into life. Since then it has been picking up momentum and drawing more researchers from different fields into its orbit. Today, new work is being produced at such a rate that, even for an academic who is committed to research on this topic, it has become a challenge in its own right to keep up.

So why did it take so long? If a historical perspective can identify the presence of conspiracy theories at far earlier stages of the historical record, why was it only in the twentieth century that people started to notice the existence of a generic phenomenon? And why was it only at the end of that century that people started to engage in a sustained conversation about them? And, finally, why was it only in the first decades of this new century that a burgeoning research field began to manifest itself in the form of a flurry of publications and grants awarded to projects devoted to this topic?

The answer has at least in part to do with the conflicted nature of our relationship to conspiracy theories. On the one hand, they are an object of study like any other phenomenon that engages the attention of social scientists and scholars in the humanities. On the other hand, conspiracy theory is a competitor of sorts. In parallel to academic research, it also is equipped to observe political events, cultural trends and economic forces. Likewise, to account for these observations, it fashions and submits explanations, often in accordance with a logic that can seem unnervingly similar to that of accredited scholarship and that at times generates discussion about a common ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. The result is a situation in which explanations seeking the imprimatur of legitimate academic research are compelled to distance themselves from conspiracy theory. This naturally results in a negative default setting, evident already in the pejorative connotations associated with the concept ‘conspiracy theory’ and its morphological variations (‘conspiracy theories’, ‘conspiracy theorist’, etc.).

A description of this situation can be refined by enlisting the notion of boundary-work outlined in the well-known essay by the sociologist of science Thomas Gieryn (1983) and elaborating upon his conception of scientific activity by adding a complementary notion of object-work. Boundary-work, according to Gieryn, entailed the deployment of a historically and situationally variable ideology of science to justify the preferential treatment of one form of investigatory and interpretative activity over another. Consequently, this kind of work justifies its recognition of certain kinds of research and certain kinds of explanation as *bona fide* science by denying this recognition to other kinds of ‘non-scientific’ research and explanation. Yet scientists do not just do boundary-work. To denote the other kind of work they conduct, once they have secured research funds and built up institutional infrastructure by dint of boundary-work, one might speak of ‘object-work’. It comprises of activities such as observation, experimentation, description and theorisation. This pairing of object-work and boundary-work captures (some of) the complexities of intellectual inquiry into conspiracy theory: dealing with conspiracy theory requires researchers to multi-task by engaging simultaneously, or at least in short alternation, in both object-work and boundary-work. Juggling these dual demands is not an easy task. It requires us, for example, to approach conspiracy theories in a spirit of open-minded neutrality, just as other researchers approach their objects of study, while insisting at the same time that conspiracy theories are not to be taken seriously or seen as legitimate alternatives to our own explanations; after all, boundary-work is never neutral.

Different disciplines manage these dual demands in different ways. Because conspiracy theories often submit alternative explanations for sociological phenomena, sociologists are, for example, subjected to the demands of boundary-work to a greater degree than, say, psychologists, whose explanations do not generally stand in such a competitive relationship to those of conspiracy theory – though, even here, conspiracy theory can offer itself as a mode of explanation to account for certain kinds of mental impairment and trauma for which psychologists devise distinct explanations (Showalter 1997). In this first section of the handbook, we gather together contributions from a multitude of disciplines that have, each in their own way, embraced the dual challenge of object-work and boundary-work on conspiracy theories. The contributors describe the specific understanding of conspiracy theory developed by their discipline, the methods their discipline has developed and the track record it has to show in terms of research activity and output.

The section opens with two chapters that lay some of the essential foundations for the contemporary study of conspiracy theory: the chapter by McKenzie-McHarg (1.1) outlines the genealogy of the concept ‘conspiracy theory’ and uncovers the origins of the ambivalence it tends to elicit, while the chapter by Butter and Knight (1.2) summarises the field-defining work carried out in cultural, literary and historical studies, has provided key insights informing the recent surge in scholarly research on conspiracy theory.



After a chapter by Leone, Madisson and Ventsel (1.3), which focuses on the semiotics of conspiracy theory as systems for the production of meaning, two chapters follow that tack between the contrasting approaches of analytical and continental philosophy: Rääkkä and Rõtola (1.4) examine philosophical debates on the definition, epistemic justification and ethical status of conspiracy theory, while, by focusing on psychoanalysis and critical theory, Blanuša and Hristov (1.5) delve into the pathologisation of conspiracism, the role that desire plays in conspiracist thinking and the interpretation of conspiracy theory as a symptom of late capitalism.

The next chapters explore the approaches developed by three classical social sciences. Rabo (1.6) focuses on the cultural dimension of conspiracy theory and explains how anthropological research methods (particularly participant observation) can be used in its study. The chapter by Nefes and Romero-Reche (1.7) on sociology and social theory discusses how conspiracy theory is associated with modernity and the processes it sets in motion (rationalisation and secularisation, emergence of the nation-state, etc.). The chapter by Giry and Tika (1.8) highlights the political dimension of conspiracy theory, focusing on its relations to political institutions and actors.

The final two chapters look forward. The chapter by Klein and Nera (1.9) succinctly outlines the history and methods of research conducted by social psychologists on conspiracy theory and thus functions as a bridge to section 2 of this handbook. The chapter by Gualda Caballero (1.10) explores the possibilities afforded by social media analysis for large-scale research on the dissemination of conspiracy theories.

This brief overview of this section's contents prompts two general comments. First, while relatively comprehensive, the range of contributions is not exhaustive. Although we have aimed to solicit contributions from as many fields as possible, gaps remain, leaving us to speculate about what chapters from those disciplines absent from this section might have hypothetically added to the conversation. Thus, it will be noticed that there is no chapter written by economists. Is there an economics of conspiracy theorising? And, if so, in what sense? Claire Birchall's essay about 'the commodification of conspiracy theory' (2002) would represent one possible point of departure in initiating object-work in this direction. And it would certainly seem that economists might have something to say about the aspect of boundary-work. After all, the experiences of depression, inflation, displacement, lay-offs and economic hardship in general have long been grist to the mill of conspiracy theorising. It would be interesting to consider the practices of demarcation with which economists seek to ensure that their explanations are not confused or conflated with those submitted by conspiracy theorists.

And, as one further example, what about gender studies? The seminal contributions of Fenster, Knight and Melley identified rich material and submitted stimulating analysis, amply demonstrating the relevance of this perspective. Thus, Knight examined the efforts of American feminists to draw upon conspiracy theory and at the same time disavow it in accounting for the disappointments and disillusionment experienced by the feminist cause. In doing so, he detailed the ambivalences of boundary-work as performed in popular, non-academic feminist writings. More recently, an essay by Birte Christ (2014) offered an example of the insights to be derived from the particular kind of object-work that gender studies was uniquely positioned to perform – and supplemented this analysis with the added bonus of suggestive reflection on why research into conspiracy theory is marked by a conspicuous male bias (of which the team of sub-editors for this section of the handbook must, somewhat sheepishly, admit itself as a further exhibit).

The second comment pertains to the order of the contributions. The section begins with a contribution on conceptual history, based on the notion that any inquiry should clarify the concepts and terms it employs at the outset. The order of the rest of the chapters is not based on a simple chronology of how different academic disciplines came to address the issue of conspiracy theories, because much of the work emerged more or less simultaneously and was often

interdisciplinary in outlook. Instead, the chapters are arranged thematically, suggesting the links – but also the tensions – between the differing approaches.

This absence of a rigid ordering principle in this opening section has a wider significance. Today, we no longer have a *trivium* (logic, grammar, rhetoric) that grounds a *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music), both of which are then encyclopaedically rounded by a universalistic conception of stable knowledge. We are similarly no longer beholden to a scheme of cognitive faculties, made up of memory, reason and imagination, just as we have also abandoned the notion of a hierarchy of academic faculties whose order can potentially be called into question by a ‘conflict of the faculties’. Of course, the demise of such overarching epistemic taxonomies and architectures occasioned its own bouts of conspiracy theorising, which tended to implicate Enlightenment *philosophes* as the culprits guilty of subversion. Yet, leaving aside these flights of conspiracist fantasy, the service rendered in the past by these taxonomies and architectures is instructive: They regulated the relationship between the disciplines. Now that this regulative function is left unattended, the question about these relationships poses itself with an unprecedented urgency and generates calls for interdisciplinarity. Suddenly, we are forced to consider how autonomous disciplines should not only regard external reality but the other neighbouring disciplines with which they share building space on university campuses and with which they compete for student enrolments, funds, grants and public recognition, but from which they can also potentially learn and be inspired and stimulated. Gieryn has suggested that disciplines also engage in boundary-work vis-à-vis neighbouring disciplines – indeed, disciplines *are* disciplines because they have the ‘discipline’ to remain loyal to their own distinct perspectives – and yet this boundary-work would seemingly occur according to slightly different rules than those that apply to non-scientific knowledge (such as conspiracy theory). The call for interdisciplinarity might equate to a demand to re-evaluate these rules. Be that as it may, the first section of the handbook does not itself perform the (hard) work of interdisciplinarity but, by gathering its individual contributions and placing them in close proximity, creates conditions conducive to its occurrence. Subsequent sections of this handbook will then rise to the challenge of this work.

A second service of traditional epistemic taxonomies lay in their assurance that the field of knowledge was limited and, with sufficient diligence and adequate resources, could be mastered. That is no longer the case, and even a sub-field such as that devoted to the phenomenon of conspiracy theory demonstrates how our knowledge has become dynamic and ever-expanding. If, as noted above, that now makes it hard to keep up, the following chapters and this handbook in general might be thought to merely exacerbate the problem: yet more reading material to process! The aim of this section, however, is to provide vantage points from which to survey this rapidly expanding field of inquiry, and a map of how different disciplines make sense of conspiracy theories.

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## *Introduction*

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indicates, he was ready to concede that the conspiracy theory was not without ‘considerable substance’. Formulating robust refutations of the conspiracy theory of government, of society, of history, of politics and of events would continue to present a challenge to social scientists and historians. The challenge would intensify once the unwieldy abstraction (government, society, history, etc.) was dropped (as already occurs in the passage from Dimock’s 1937 book reproduced above). As a consequence, one was left with a polyvalent term in which the difference between the term as produced by the discourse of forensics on the one hand and the concept as generated by the discourse of social science on the other was elided.

The end result was a concept troubled by the inadequacy of the dismissal of conspiracy theories as practised by the discourse of social science, given that conspiracies really did occur (as the discourse of forensics knew full well). The source of much of the ambivalence that we feel towards conspiracy theories becomes thus comprehensible when we use conceptual history to reconstruct the genealogy of the corresponding concept. It lays bare a ‘conflicted’ concept that has absorbed two distinct semantics, corresponding to two distinct attitudes towards conspiracy theory. In one semantic, ‘conspiracy theory’ was a neutral term employed to do ‘object-work’ in the field of criminal forensics; in the other, *conspiracy theory* was a negatively connoted concept that performed ‘boundary-work’ in the social sciences. (For the distinction between ‘object-work’ and ‘boundary-work’, see the introduction to this section). This insight has admittedly not brought us any closer to a definition – and certainly not to one that satisfies the strict criteria that philosophers since Aristotle have specified as preconditions for grasping the essence of a phenomenon. It has, however, hopefully sharpened our appreciation for conspiracy theory as a historically variable, epistemically complex phenomenon.

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they emerge in Europe at a certain point in the past and were then ‘exported’ to the rest of the world (Zwierlein 2013)?

Literary and especially cultural studies need to overcome their predominant focus on the U.S.A. Such a shift of perspective might finally do away with the remnants of American exceptionalism that still linger in conspiracy theory research. Moreover, increased attention to the literary and filmic engagements with plots and schemes in Europe and beyond might in turn pave the way for a truly transnational and comparative turn in the engagement with conspiracy theory. Books such as Griffin’s monograph (2004) on anti-Catholic conspiracy theories in both England and the U.S.A. should be the rule and not an exception.

Finally, cultural and literary studies should not only consider ‘interesting’ – that is, complex and self-reflexive – treatments of conspiracy theory. Potboilers and B-movies also possess specific aesthetics that are worthy of scholarly attention. In that vein, research should also be more attentive to the impact of fictional representations of conspiracy on both allegedly factual accounts and the consumers of such fictions. While it is common knowledge that one of the most notorious conspiracy text of all times, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, is a forgery, it is less well-known that the text is in large parts a plagiarism of a nineteenth-century German novel (Hagemeister, Horn 2012). Moreover, scholars cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the *Protocols* was originally intended as a satire of anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories, and thus clearly as fiction (Gregory 2012). Similarly, much of what can be found in conspiracy theories about the Illuminati on the Internet today can be traced back to Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson’s *Illuminatus! Trilogy*, a satirical treatment of conspiracy theories (Porter 2005). Finally, even conspiracy texts that circulate as fictional can have real consequences. Timothy McVeigh, for instance, the Oklahoma bomber, was heavily influenced by the conspiracist novel *The Turner Diaries*. Thus, the role of fiction in driving belief in conspiracy theories and, at times, violent actions would be another fruitful avenue for future research.

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people who believe in discrepant conspiracy theories do so because they *want* to disagree, to give vent to the tensions that underpin society and that fail to find other channels for expression.

Future semiotic research on conspiracy theories might focus on their capacity to influence worldviews; such research should entail interdisciplinary collaboration. Contemporary communication is performed at an increasingly fast pace and is dominated by affective reactions to current events – a tendency enabled by the prevalence of emotionally and visually oriented messages. The information overload in social media communication has increased the relevance of focusers or filters of attention that can bring attention to a certain topic or event (Tufekci 2013: 856). People are more willing to share content that is perceived as novel, intriguing and somewhat mysterious or obscure. The affective aspect is intensified by fake news, conspiracy theories and so on, whose intriguing and sensational nature enables them to enact the attention-grabbing effect, increasing traffic to certain sites by creating a certain agenda. From a semiotic perspective, affect is an inseparable component of discourse and, thus, can be analysed by using Peirce's categories to explicate the interrelations between the emotional (affective) and the argumentative (discursive) aspects of meaning-making in conspiracy theories and its function as attention grabber.

Future studies should explain how some conspiracy theorists exploit the characteristics of particular interpretative communities and how their storytelling practices create a fertile ground for user-generated content supporting their agenda. Semiotics enables the analysis of the relationship between conspiracy theories and audiences and their meta-interpretations; in this context, several authors have dealt with the problem of constructing the audience. Eco (1979) has developed the concept of the model reader; Juri Lotman (1982) has coined the concept of the image of audience. Both authors show how the text constructs its own audience, and both provide concrete analytical tools for studying this phenomenon. Integrating them into academic studies on conspiracy theories would lead to a semiotic approach to strategic conspiracy theories. Future research should also explicate how different media support each other in particular representations of conspiracy, what are the dominant types of meaning-making and what kind of identification processes are related with particular strategic conspiracy narratives.

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there is something to reveal. However, the question of how well the media, research institutes, state agencies, investigative journalists and historians do their job is largely empirical, and surely there are considerable differences between countries and time periods. This suggests that, in the final analysis, philosophers may have relatively little to give to the ‘theory of conspiracy theories’. Although the epistemic question of when and why we are justified in using testimony as a basis of our beliefs is certainly a deep philosophical problem, examining the present state of existing knowledge-producing institutions in different countries is not primarily a philosophical project.

## Notes

- 1 In some cases, it may be difficult to say whether an explanation refers to a ‘conspiracy’ rather than to some other sort of confidential cooperation. However, secret cooperative activities whose aims and nature conflict with the so-called positive morality (that reflects our *de facto* moral commitments) or with specific *prima facie* duties are usually called ‘conspiracies’, especially if the members of the cooperation have a certain position, and if the goal of their activities differs from the goal they are authorised to pursue. Children may have morally questionable secret plans to influence events by secret means, but these incidents are seldom called conspiracies. Small children are not considered to be in a position to conspire. Secret military operations may be morally rotten, but as far as they have authorised goals, they are not usually called conspiracies. The members of an ‘official’ administrative meeting behind closed doors may secretly agree on issues they should not and start to pursue goals they should avoid. When this happens, the participants can rightfully be accused of conspiracy, as they have unauthorised goals now. Conspiracies involve secret cooperation, but that does not mean that the conspirators must meet secretly, so that outsiders do not know that they meet in the first place (see Räikkä 2018: 213).
- 2 It is not impossible that a member of an epistemic authority (say, a biologist or a climate scientist) earns a reputation for being a ‘conspiracy theorist’. This can happen when an expert suggests that there is a conspiracy, say, concerning genetically modified food, but does not get much support for her claims from the other relevant experts. Obviously, epistemic authorities do not form a unitary body, but are rather composed of heterogeneous bodies that may conflict. Of course, this does *not* imply that we cannot normally say who belongs to ‘epistemic authorities’ and who does not.
- 3 In contemporary democracies, trust in government is seldom strong. Although the E.U. has established itself as a major political entity, it can still be considered an emerging governmental body, which so far has not achieved full democratic legitimacy. According to *Special Eurobarometer 461* from the year 2017, for example, while citizens’ trust in the E.U. shows signs of increase, still less than half of the respondents (47%) are inclined to trust the E.U. The corresponding percentage is even smaller at the level of its member states: Only 40% of the respondents tend to trust their national government. Not more than 52% of the respondents say they are inclined to trust justice and their national legal system. Obviously, the deficits of trust merit concern. Citizens who are overly distrusting of their government – whether national or international – are unlikely to be willing to adhere to its rules, to engage in cooperative projects presupposing its mediation, or even to have interest in sustaining it. Indeed, research suggests that what have been called high-trust societies have stronger economies, higher levels of wellbeing and stronger social networks than so-called low-trust societies, and that distrust in government lowers tax morale and increases corruption, for instance (see e.g. Uslander 2018; Catala 2015; Melo-Martín and Intemann 2018).
- 4 A person may say (and even think) that they support a conspiracy theory just because they would like to protest against the official system and social elites that govern public space. By ‘supporting’ a conspiracy theory, a person is able to manifest their distrust in the system, although they may not have any view of the plausibility of the theory they say they support. Surely, people should have a right to these kinds of manifestations. However, this raises the question of how to struggle against such ‘supporting attitudes’ if a person who has them does not really *believe* that a theory they support is *true*. Their support is *non-doxastic* in nature.
- 5 Coady (2018) writes that Sunstein’s and Vermeule’s position is based on  
an equivocation over the meaning of the term ‘conspiracy theory’. This equivocation reflects a widespread assumption that conspiracy theories tend to be false, unjustified and harmful,

and that, as a result, we can speak as if all conspiracy theories are objectionable in each of these three ways.

Coady argues that ‘this assumption is itself false, unjustified, and harmful’ and that ‘because people often conspire, we often have good reason to believe that people are conspiring, and there is often a significant public benefit in exposing their conspiracies’. Coady compares ‘conspiracy theories to scientific theories’ and argues that

just as most of us regard bad scientific theories (i.e. false, unjustified and harmful ones) as an acceptable price to pay for good scientific theories, we should regard bad conspiracy theories as an acceptable price to pay for good conspiracy theories.

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The general function of conspiracy theories is thus identificational: Defining the enemy in order to define oneself as its mirror image and therefore to anchor the signifiers that identify one's own group, community or society. This dimension of conspiracy theories involves a number of moral distinctions or asymmetrical binaries that ultimately claim to differentiate good from evil. Finally, conspiracy theories have a wider symptomatic function. As emotionally charged explanations, they articulate deeper political cleavages running through the political field by means of interpreting previous traumatic events and processes as encounters with supposed enemies. Conspiracy theory as a symptomatic reading of political reality, a sort of 'behindology' (from the Italian, *dietrologia* – cf. Bratich 2008: 15) reveals the stereotypical images of the hostile others and the objects of enjoyment threatened by them. Regardless of whether the conspiracy theories are warranted or unwarranted, they can function as unconscious mechanisms for citizens' political behaviour (Blanuša 2011b: 311).

## Conclusion

The origins of the pathologisation of conspiratorial thinking are deeply influenced by the psychiatric and psychoanalytic concepts of paranoia. This chapter attempted to sketch their genealogy, together with the application of psychoanalytic accounts by prominent critical social scientists who used them mostly in order to explain totalitarian and extremist threats to democracy during the twentieth century. Later, the Lacanian approach made a significant turn in the psychoanalytic understanding of conspiracy theories. Instead of treating paranoia as an aberration, this approach put it at the heart of human thinking and explained the role of the incessant chains of objects of desire and fantasies in conspiracist cognitive mapping, conceived of as a way to cope with the complexity of the postmodern world shaped by increasingly impersonal regulatory mechanisms. In that way, Lacanian psychoanalysis enables a more nuanced exploration of the function of conspiratorial imagination in the social struggles over meaning, as well as of its political consequences. Although many researchers in cultural studies, sociology or anthropology claim that conspiracy theories could have emancipatory potential, from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, they are the last ruse of power trying to mask its impotence by representing itself as a mask of an omnipotent clandestine Other (Žižek 2006: 219). Therefore, the proliferation of conspiracy theories is a symptom not of a growing threat to the social order, but of its impotence, just as New Age beliefs are a symptom of the declining power of organised religion, or alternative medicine is a symptom of the declining power of science.

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witchcraft and sorcery, but how also he became afflicted by this emotion. Bubandt's fieldwork on this small island stretches across almost two years over a period of two decades. Like Favret-Saada, he is critical of the stress on belief and meaning among anthropologists and others when analysing witchcraft. For Favret-Saada, belief and disbelief in witchcraft cannot be separated, but are instead intertwined (see Kyriakides 2016) and, although cannibal witches are feared, doubt is the prevailing mode of thought among the islanders Bubandt lived with. Witchcraft accusations and witchcraft hunts in Europe, he argues, did not disappear through the spread of doubt and scepticism. On the contrary, such modes of thinking ushered in witch crazes. As has been discussed, fighting witchcraft makes the reality of witches credible. In the same vein, denying conspiracies reaffirms their reality and importance in the minds of – for lack of better and more sensitive vocabulary – conspiracy theorists.

## Conclusion

Anthropological research on occult cosmologies including conspiracy theories is, as discussed, wide-ranging and moves from an analysis of intimate relations to relations connected to political power and the global economy. A basic tenet in anthropology is that all people are united by a common humanity, but how we organise our societies and our life worlds differ. And these are the differences that interest us. Illness, adversity and misfortune are always present in the lives of human beings everywhere. They must be handled, explained and solved in ways that are socially and culturally meaningful. When analysing such heterogeneous and complex phenomena as conspiracy theory and occult cosmologies, it is important to contextualise their particular manifestations. Anthropological research points to the enormous versatility and adaptability of these phenomena, and to the possible connections between them. Thus, they are, paraphrasing the famous anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, good to think with because they point to fundamental concerns for humanity.

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hinted in Hofstadter's (1966) 'paranoid style' description, the former sees conspiracy theories as irrational accounts that fail to understand the nature of events and as a political pathology of marginal groups (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Pipes 1997). In contrast, the modern perspective views conspiracy theories as a rational attempt to understand social reality (e.g. Knight 2000; Birchall 2006). The classical and modern approaches do not provide all-round perspectives, as while the former negates these accounts as 'political paranoia', the cultural perspective might not adequately emphasise their harmful impacts (Fenster 1999). In that regard, future sociological work could go beyond this division by both accounting for the paranoid and rational aspects of conspiratorial accounts.

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social media promote conspiracy theories in the context of both democratic and non-democratic forms of political culture.

## Notes

- 1 Goffman considers stigma reversal strategies as the claim and re-appropriation operated by some social actors of slanderous or disqualification labels.
- 2 McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim (2017) noticed that, in more codified and polite circles, the British parliament in the case they studied, the expression ‘cock-ups’ had progressively replaced ‘conspiracy theories’ to disqualify government failures in terms of incompetency rather than evil intents.

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Other limitations derive from the fact that research on conspiracy theories relies almost exclusively on rating scales. Such scales have many advantages: Precision in assessing the construct of interest through careful wording, ease of administration to large samples, standardisation across respondents and straightforward quantification. However, they suffer from several drawbacks. For example, rather than measuring individuals' actual endorsement of conspiracy theories, such scales may measure how plausible individuals find conspiracy theories. Furthermore, we know very little about the relationship between conspiracy endorsement and actual behaviour. For example, while endorsement of anti-vaccine conspiracies is negatively associated with self-reported vaccination intentions (Jolley, Douglas 2014a), this may reflect a consistency bias (i.e. people wanting to make their responses seem consistent, regardless of their actual behaviour). While more costly, objective indicators of actual behaviour would be welcome and a more reliable indicator of the real-life consequences of belief in conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, due to the almost exclusive use of this survey format, we actually know very little about the formation of conspiracy theories. Most of the available research relies on people's endorsement of either existing conspiracy theories or of theories that were crafted by the researchers. We know comparatively little about how people elaborate and construct such theories, be it intra-individually or through interactions with other group members. In this regard, greater reliance on qualitative material would be welcome.

An additional limitation of such research is that it relies greatly on intra-individual measures. Obviously, conspiracy theories are a collective phenomenon, depending on intra- and inter-group interactions. Yet, very little research focuses on such interactions.

## Conclusion

After a decade of research, social psychologists have highlighted the fact that conspiracy theories, despite often being presented as purely rational by their advocates, are related to a multiplicity of factors that impinge their endorsement. Hence, they appear to be only partly, if at all, rational. It is, however, important to note that in this regard, they are not different from many other types of beliefs. Conspiracy theories appear to be a particularly spectacular illustration of the fact that, most of the time, our beliefs about the world are more a reflection of a multi-biased information-seeking process than the logical conclusion of an objective investigation of reality.

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of each actor in the network (Hanneman, Riddle 2005; Wasserman, Faust 2013); that is, the ability to occupy a bridge position in a communication network through which many information flows circulate. Some of the most important relevant actors occupying this position are, on the independence side, @helpcatalonia2 (an account that has already been suspended and that played an important role in the dissemination of the campaign) and @cridademocracia.

The types of polarised reactions generated by this campaign, as well as its claim to internationalisation, are clearly understood when we connect Figures 1.10.1 and 1.10.2 with some popular tweets representative of the campaign. This provides an example of the fragmentation that underpins the polarisation between the communities of actors and that is reflected in the narratives.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has developed the idea that conspiracy theories, which were earlier disseminated orally or in print, have in recent years become widespread in the collaborative space of the Internet. This has substantially altered their strategies and means of diffusion. However, although conspiracy theories can now achieve a greater reach through online social networks, some of their basic messages have remained unaltered. Social network analysis and social big data can shed light on one of the central questions in the study of conspiracy theories: Who is behind the creation and dissemination of a particular conspiracy theory? Classic social network analysis, enriched by newer techniques and tools, can contribute to revealing hidden patterns in these communication networks. It achieves this by revealing important aspects of the online operation of particular conspiracy theories or the groups that promote them, or by revealing which actors or communities are behind the spread of those theories. In doing so, it makes it possible to report and close users accounts, for example. In addition, the analytic potential of social network analysis has increased due to the technical advances in big data fields or as a result of improvements in storage and processing capacities. This knowledge can contribute to improving the ability to anticipate behaviour, which is useful both for security reasons and for promoting greater transparency or defending privacy in social networks.

In the face of the current risks of disinformation, fake news and propaganda disseminated through social media (Marwick, Lewis 2017; Shu *et al.* 2017; High-Level Expert Group on Fake news and Disinformation 2018), a deeper knowledge of the mechanisms that drive the dissemination and virality of conspiracy theories in social networks can also help protect democracies from those destabilising effects. This knowledge could also help us to ensure the reliability of disintermediated content, in a context in which ever more individuals access information on the Internet directly, without intermediaries or other types of filters. The use of these mixed analytical methods allows researchers to examine the interaction that occurs between actors and narratives when conspiracy theories are disseminated on the Internet. However, further research on how conspiracy theories are disseminated on the Internet is vital, given that online narratives are now being weaponised to exacerbate political and social divisions (Allenby 2017).

## **Notes**

- 1 Degree: Number of direct relationships with other actors in a symmetric network. InDegree: Direct links that an actor receives in asymmetric networks. OutDegree: Direct links that an actor emits in asymmetric networks. Closeness: Distance of an actor from the rest of the actors in the network. Betweenness: The frequency with which each actor is in the geodesic path of each pair of actors.
- 2 All the data mentioned in this section are taken from our project: 'Social fragmentation and polarization on Twitter: The Catalan 'Procés' as a case study' (2019).

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not correspond to how people actually do behave in a given situation. Various other research domains within social psychology extensively focus on measures of actual behaviours (e.g. helping, aggression, cooperation and so on), and the psychology of conspiracy theories would benefit from also including such behavioural measures. For instance, do conspiracy theories influence people's aggressive behaviours, or their donations to charity? Do conspiracy beliefs about the government influence people's decisions about whether or not to cheat on their tax forms?

In sum, conspiracy theories are everywhere in society and large groups of citizens believe them. Social psychologists seek to understand conspiracy beliefs by examining the role of both individual and situational factors, and by examining the societal implications of conspiracy theories. Furthermore, although social psychologists have made significant steps in contributing to the study of conspiracy theories in recent years, there are fruitful opportunities for the field by incorporating physiological and behavioural measures, and by analysing big data. The chapters in this section reflect the current state of affairs in the psychology of conspiracy theories and are based on the principles laid out in this introduction. By combining the Lewin equation as a basic conceptual framework with a methodological toolbox that utilises quantitative hypothesis testing at micro- and meso-levels of analysis, social psychology has a unique place in the study of conspiracy theories.

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conspiracy theories (Goreis, Voracek 2019). However, those with a weaker conspiracy mentality rely more on slow, explicit thought than fast, intuitive understanding. It should be acknowledged that there is not yet a comprehensive theoretical model that encompasses all individual differences known to be related to conspiracy beliefs. Moreover, most of the empirical work in this area is cross-sectional, meaning that we do not know how opinions of conspiracy theories change and develop over time. In addition, we cannot yet say which of these variables *cause* people to accept or reject conspiracy theories, and which ones are in turn affected by perceptions of the world as a place run by conspiracies. Some variables, such as interpersonal trust, likely have a reciprocal relationship with conspiracy theory belief; others, however, are relatively basic and stable characteristics of personality, and are therefore more likely to be purely antecedent to opinions of conspiracy theories. Future work may attempt to include the temporal dimension to help us to build a more detailed understanding of how worldviews, cognitive styles and personality traits dynamically interact with one another.

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resist the temptation of acting like lawyers defending their case, but instead should behave like impartial judges or scientists (Epley, Gilovich 2016).

A second and related concern is what the propositions of the present chapter imply for citizens who *disbelieve* most conspiracy theories. We speculate that the cognitive processes underlying such disbelief can take two distinct forms. One form is that people may disbelieve conspiracy theories through similar cognitive processes. In these cases, people intuitively believe in the nonexistence of a conspiracy, and then justify this intuition through motivated reasoning. This process may lead perceivers to ignore actual malpractice (e.g. Republicans who, as the Watergate scandal unfolded, firmly believed in Nixon's innocence until he resigned). Both belief and disbelief in conspiracy theories can be rooted in the cognitive processes described here.

A different form of disbelief, however, is the result of habitually processing information objectively and critically. We propose that the tendency to rely on impartial analytic thinking and value objective evidence is at the core of scepticism (Ståhl, van Prooijen 2018). Of importance, scepticism does *not* imply gullibly accepting any official statement of power holders, nor does it imply gullibly accepting any bizarre conspiracy theory. Instead, it implies a humble awareness that one's initial intuitions may be mistaken, along with a reliance on evidence, reason and logic to come to objective conclusions. The sceptic approach thus involves a critical analysis of policy proposals or official readings of distressing events, but, also, a critical analysis of conspiracy theories. Sceptics also may form initial impressions of societal events through System 1 processes, but, in contrast to non-sceptics, they subsequently are more likely to unbelieve these first impressions through System 2 processes untainted by motivated reasoning.

## Conclusion

What is most opposed to the discovery of truth is not the false appearance that proceeds from things and leads to error or even directly a weakness of the intellect. On the contrary, it is the preconceived opinion, the prejudice, which, as a spurious a priori, is opposed to truth.

*Schopenhauer, A. (1974 [1851]: 14)*

In the present chapter, we highlighted the cognitive processes underlying belief in conspiracy theories, and particularly challenged the notion that such beliefs are rooted only in System 1 thinking. The human mind is complex, and instead of being mutually exclusive, Systems 1 and 2 are complementary when people process information about the social world (Kahneman 2011). Specifying the role of both mental systems may integrate empirical findings suggesting a role of intuition (Swami *et al.* 2014) and emotion (Whitson *et al.* 2015) in conspiracy thinking, with the articulate nature of many conspiracy theories. We conclude that conspiracy beliefs largely originate through System 1 processes, yet people justify and sustain them through System 2 processes. Schopenhauer may have underestimated the role of reasoning in the quest for truth: Reason can greatly assist preconceived opinions in paving the road to conspiracy beliefs.

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motivations and alleviate their negative emotions. Early indications suggest that they may not. It is possible, therefore, that conspiracy belief is a self-defeating form of motivated social cognition. However, our analysis is preliminary and many important questions remain open. More controlled and longitudinal research – especially on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups – is needed to fully understand how motivations and emotions contribute to, and are affected by, conspiracy theories.

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target frequently are the powerful. It is not pre-empirically clear whether we should expect the same in contexts where a conspiracy rhetoric is a strategy of those in power and the targets of the insinuations are marginalised minorities or outside groups. Comparisons between such contexts or even better across a large number of contexts differing in this regard may further elucidate how close this link is.

Seeing the world governed by a secret plan made behind closed curtains intimately evokes questions of power. We have argued that even if one does not include high power of the conspirators into the definition (and thus make the connection tautological), conspiracy beliefs are tightly connected to distrust of people, groups and institutions with power, both conceptually and empirically. Whether such theories in the long run empower individuals to either perceive themselves as more powerful or indeed achieve more agency and control over their surrounding (e.g. via political protests) is an exciting avenue for future research.

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attention and drawing plausible hypotheses about conspiracy theory spread, but, as a conclusion, we invite researchers to investigate this virtually unexplored but crucial field of research.

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conspiracy beliefs. Future research could explore these important questions to enable a fuller understanding of the consequences of conspiracy theories.

In sum, the literature on the psychology of conspiracy theories has made some important strides in understanding conspiracy theories in contemporary society. Whilst scholars still have work to do, there is currently a dark picture of conspiracy theories emerging from the literature to date. Conspiracy theories have the power to seem appealing, but can go on to have a detrimental impact on the self and wider society.

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message, and targets the supply side (pre-emptive strike), or it takes place before the dissemination, but targets the recipient (immunisation); it takes place after the message was spread and targets the source (striking back), or takes place after the dissemination but targets the recipient (healing). Most of the research suggests that prevention is more useful than harm reduction, as conspiracy theories that have already spread are already having an impact on the recipient that is often difficult to neutralise. Also, the research suggests that fact and logic-based interventions have found to be efficient in many cases.

There is good news and bad news from the research on interventions. The good news is that, especially as a result of the misinformation campaigns threatening the integrity of the elections in 2016 (the Brexit campaign and the U.S. presidential election), the discussion of the possible counterstrategies is on a much more advanced level both in academic discussions and in policy discussions than before. The bad news is that experiences and academic research results are, in many cases, contradictory (e.g. on the usefulness of fact-checking), and it is difficult to put together a holistic picture from the very small and sporadic mosaics of research. A multiannual research project, based on meta-analyses of the existing research, replications and filling the existing gaps using a coherent theoretical framework and research design would be needed to have a more solid knowledge. As we live in an era of information warfare, there would be a need for a similar grand project to know more on propaganda and how to resist it than the one that was implemented during the biggest traditional war of the twentieth century: the Yale-program was focusing on the possibilities for attitude change and the resistance to persuasion in the context of the World Wars (for an overview, see McGuire 1996).

## Note

- 1 Similarly, van Prooijen and van Dijk (2014) previously found that perspective taking can rather increase the receptivity to conspiracy theories.

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sides claim the mantle of rationality, attempting to expel the accused party from reasoned social dialogue (e.g. Bratich 2008; Harambam, Aupers 2015). Such power contests may tend to favour those already powerful.

Another power game involves strategically levelling specific conspiracy theories against different social actors on e.g. social media in a way that is designed to silence critical speech. Accusing opponents of being a part of the conspiracy you claim to unveil is a well-known gambit. Variations of Pizzagate or QAnon theories accuse opponents of being part of a (often satanic) cabal of pedophiles, and these theories can be put to devastating use on social media, something we also see with regard to survivors of massacres and relatives of the slain in mass murders deemed ‘false flag’ episodes in conspiracy culture (e.g. Debies-Carl 2017; Persily 2017). These topics also merit further study.

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context. From what we have outlined above, we can cautiously answer the question who is a ‘conspiracy theorist’. Conspiracy theorising is prevalent – most people believe at least one conspiracy theory, even in surveys that ask only about a few. Conspiracy thinking is more apparent in the marginalised – or those who think of themselves that way – populations. We do see a general correlation between conspiracy thinking and people who distrust their government. Conspiracy thinking is a worldview that often escapes any single socio-demographic categorisation, largely because it is so common even across cultural contexts.

One potential avenue of research would be to explain domestic conspiracy culture in light of international political dynamics. This is an avenue not readily available to American audiences, but absolutely integral for understanding conspiracy thinking in much more integrated, international areas – like the E.U. and South America. Additionally, how does (de)democratisation influence the conspiracy culture of a country? Is there an absolute level at which conspiracy thinking becomes so saturated that the larger political culture collapses? The mature democracies like Germany and Britain, which are constantly worried about the rise of populist, right-wing authoritarianism, have far lower levels of conspiracy thinking – even in the right-wing – than the moderates in other countries. Is the problem the relative difference between domestic partisans? Unlike in the U.S.A. where national surveys and polls that contain conspiracy questions are more frequent, outside of the U.S.A. there is no reliable longitudinal data to help us assess any potential increases or decreases in the level of conspiracy thinking. Future research should fill this gap by having repeated surveys with identical questions administered across many countries over a significant period of time.

A second potential area of research is to examine the peculiarities of Sweden a bit closer. For many, ‘correcting’ conspiracy beliefs is normatively important. And, considering that unlike all the other countries in our sample, Sweden’s rate of disbelieving all of the conspiratorial statements in our sample is nearly 40 per cent of their public. Considering the next best is Great Britain at 20 per cent, we could look at the larger political culture and context to understand why conspiracy theories do not seemingly take root in Sweden. A further study of additional countries could tell us if Sweden is indeed an outlier.

Regardless of the precise next steps, the comparative analysis of conspiracy beliefs – which we hope to have contributed to with this paper – is itself the next leap for conspiracy theory research. But, before we can make that leap, we need to constantly remind ourselves that our definitions and operationalisations – even the key ones of ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ – must be scrutinised. We should not focus too heavily on large sociological factors, like the simple dissatisfaction in democracy; nor should we go too far in the other direction and define conspiracy theories so narrowly that they are not helpful and almost trivial, nor should we define a conspiracy theorist as simply those that believe these overly-narrow conspiracy theories. Instead, as we have tried to show, as conspiracy research moves into unfamiliar terrain, we should be vigilant that we are adapting to our surroundings without losing sight of the larger global and scientific enterprise.

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and historical variety, have written about conspiracy theorists. After briefly reviewing the traditional works that have mostly pathologised these people *and* the cultural studies scholars that highlighted the apparent rationality of conspiracy theorists instead, I have discussed the works of scholars that interacted more directly with conspiracy theorists in order to shed light on their ideas, practices and social contexts.

Distinguishing between conspiracy theory entrepreneurs, movements and individuals, this chapter has shown a wide variety of people engaging in one way or another with conspiracy theories. The very outspoken and publicly visible entrepreneurs embody how people can make a living out of spreading conspiracy theories in both the off- and online worlds. Particularly popular are those, like Alex Jones and David Icke, who fuse dark thoughts of a coming totalitarian New World Order with messianic visions of a global awakening into a New Age. The academic studies reviewed here show in much empirical detail how their conspiracy theories do not just 'travel' across communities and ideologies, but also across time when a new generation picks up on older works and connects them in new ways and to other audiences. While these entrepreneurs may represent prevalent stereotypes, the second section on movements makes that image harder to sustain. Taking the 9/11 Truth Movement as a case study, several scholars show how various kinds of conspiracy theorists come together to pursue common goals. Going against mainstream conceptions of reality, such movements can count on much criticism, both from academic scholars and the wider public. Some scholars include anti-conspiracy theory movements in their analyses as well, since they are part of the same interactional dynamic. The last section focused on ordinary people who in their everyday lives engage with conspiracy theories. While these people normally remain largely invisible, they arguably constitute the largest group, albeit a silent majority. Ranging from people attending New Age festivals to parents refusing vaccinations in Waldorf schools, the reviewed scholarly works show that there is not just great diversity in their ideas, motivations and practices, but also that identity and community formations play a central role in the cultivation and popularity of conspiracy theories.

While there is much diversity between qualitative scholars of conspiracy theories, this chapter has also highlighted what they share. A first and perhaps most important communality is the wish to make the world of those under study both intelligible and imaginable to a wider public. Especially among ethnographic scholars, there is a strong drive to empathise with interlocutors in order to be able to see *and* show the world from their perspective. This generally requires an agnostic (truth) stance towards people's ideas, but that does not mean endorsing those, merely that epistemological and/or normative judgements are suspended until further notice. This is often easier said than done: As this chapter has shown, doing ethnographic research seems to either blur or erect boundaries between self and other, both during and after doing research. But, as long as that is turned into an explicit reflexive practice, it may only add to the quality of the analysis. Focusing on what ordinary people think and do in their everyday lives highlights the enormous diversity of our worlds, but it inevitably brings *context* into the picture as well. People's lives do not stop at the (anticipated) conceptual borders of one's research project, but have meaningful relations with many different others that are hard to exclude. While counting people is important to get a broader picture of societal distributions, I hope to have shown in this chapter what a good qualitative study of conspiracy culture entails and yields.

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patriarchal order, women actively contribute to the downfall of white people by weakening their position in contrast to other cultures in which this alleged feminist conspiracy does not have such strong influences. This new version of hegemonic femininity and the resulting removal of control over female reproduction from the patriarchal system – which is a narrative that can be seen as a direct continuation of the anti-Catholic conspiracy theory's narrative – is perceived as a threat to the national group and functions as an argument to denounce the other group, which is perceived as threatening.

These examples show that gender and sexuality are, in fact, central concerns for conspiracy rhetoric across time and cultures. Their function is to identify the deviant other, against which one's own (national) identity is constructed. Anxieties about gender and sexuality often become the battleground for conspiracist rhetoric in order to repudiate the political or religious other. The reason behind this is very often a crisis of hegemonic masculinity and a crisis of patriarchy. Just as Catholic priests were portrayed as taking control over female sexuality and thus reproductivity from Protestant men, homosexuality and female emancipation are perceived to threaten the hegemonic position of men as the protectors and leaders of modern society during the post-war era U.S.A. as well as in contemporary societies. Patriarchy is in both cases the institution threatened by the conspirators.

## **Conclusion**

Gender and sexuality are of great importance to conspiracy theories and their rhetoric. They play an essential part in the process of 'othering', as my discussion of different conspiracy theories has shown. Even though psychologists and political scientists mostly agree that gender has no or only little effect on the belief in conspiracy theory, most qualitative research suggests that masculinity plays a central part in both the production and dissemination of conspiracy theories. I identified the crisis of masculinity as one key factor fuelling conspiracy theories. In addition, sexuality and gender are of central importance to the content of many conspiracy theories since the enemy is often portrayed as the sexually deviant 'other'.

However, there is still very little research on these important aspects – especially concerning the first aspect of whether men or women are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories. The existing research suggests that there is far more work to be done. Concerning the question of who is more prone to believe in conspiracy theories, psychological studies need to focus directly on the question of whether or not gender has an influence on conspiracy belief. In addition, more ethnographic work needs to be done in order to support or dismiss the claims made by other disciplines. Concerning the importance of gender and sexuality for the content of conspiracy theories, it would be interesting to see if gender and sexuality are indeed central aspects in all kinds of conspiracy theories, or if they are particularly prominent in explicitly political conspiracy theories. In addition, most of the research so far has focused on masculinity and narratives produced by men. Additional work concerning femininity and conspiracy narratives by women should become a research focus across the disciplines.

## **Note**

- 1 However, Melley acknowledges that notions of gender are just as important in narratives by female writers who use this concept of 'agency panic to illuminate the violent effects of patriarchal social scripts' (2000: 33).

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may also help us better understand the function of conspiracy beliefs in the political arena if we study separately people high and low on political knowledge and interest. It is reasonable to assume that the people who follow politics may see conspiracy theories as a tool to voice dissatisfaction and may use them to propel like-minded citizens into action. Among people low on political interest, conspiracy theories may further solidify their distaste, lack of trust and alienation from the political process. Finally, as also suggested by Jolley *et al.* (see Chapter 2.7), it is possible that some conspiracies may lead to action because they generate anger, whereas others may generate a sense of greater vulnerability and powerlessness.

On a final note, researchers have just begun to study and debate the role of the Internet and social media in the development and diffusion of conspiracy theories (see e.g. Douglas *et al.* 2019). What is clear, however, is that online communities play a crucial role in the spread of conspiracy theories, and those communities tend to be both ideologically homogeneous and very polarised (Del Vicario *et al.* 2016). Future research on the effects of conspiracy beliefs on political participation needs to pay careful attention to if, and how, active engagement with conspiracy theories online translates to political participation, whether on- or off-line.

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Indeed, Iranian conspiracy theories accuse Freemasons, Illuminati or Zionist agents of acting secretly to overthrow the Islamic Republic. More specifically, the Bahais, a minority religious group, are also accused of constituting a fifth column, controlled by the U.S.A. or Israel and plotting to destroy the Islamic regime and Islam.

Islamic Republic also invokes Holocaust denial and conspiracies about Zionist world domination to legitimise governmental policies (Ashraf 1992). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promoted conspiracy theories by openly articulating them, most notoriously in his Holocaust denial. This reached a climax in 2006, when he organised an international conference in Teheran on the Holocaust that gathered leading denialists and conspiracy theorists such as David Duke, Robert Faurisson, Roger Garaudy, David Irving and Fredrick Töben. Self-styled as a layman, outside of the Islamic clerical oligarchy, Ahmadinejad addressed his audience with a populist rhetoric matching the occasion, mixing Islamic and populist political conspiracy theories. Although the historical and cultural setting of the event facilitated this conspiratorial mind-set, the ideological agency of the authoritarian states should never be underestimated. Such tendencies are exploited by regimes for their own ends and agenda.

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his belief in ... conspiracy theory and qualifying' it (Thalmann 2019: 199). For example, when asked about his earlier allegations of voter fraud in an A.B.C. interview a few days after the inauguration, he employed the same strategies that he had used throughout most of the campaign: 'You have a lot of stuff going on possibly. I say probably. But possibly' (A.B.C. 2017). It remains to be seen if and when Trump will become more explicitly conspiracist.

## Conclusion

Populism and conspiracy theory are clearly connected (Bergmann 2018), but how or to what extent exactly has not yet been adequately theorised. Our contention – that conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of populist discourses, often cynically articulated by a movement's leaders but genuinely believed by a larger or smaller number of ordinary members – raises more questions than it answers: Is it possible to predict in which situations conspiracy theories are important for a specific populist movement? Within such movements, who is particularly receptive to conspiracy theories? Are conspiracy theories more frequently found in right-wing populism than in the left-wing variant, as some scholars have suggested (Priester 2012; Wodak 2015), or are they as prominent on the left as on the right, as others have argued (Thalmann 2019; Uscinski 2019)? To answer these and a plethora of related questions more research and, importantly, a shift in focus is needed. Future projects should study the significance of conspiracy theories for specific populist movements with regard to both leaders and ordinary members. So far, most research – including our two case studies – discusses how populist leaders employ conspiracist rhetoric. However, it is necessary to study how conspiracy theories circulate among the ordinary members of such movements and parties in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory.

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possible resource for understanding the world, for identity construction, for ordering social relations, and for gaining or disputing authority and power. Even secular conspiracy narratives often serve as templates for predicting future troubles – ‘prophecy’ – as well as stories of what has already gone wrong. When imbued with extra status from association with values and institutions people hold sacred, such roles can become even more important. But religion does not play a simple, unified role. Even in simple religious communities, there will always be struggles over authority. We should always ask questions about who speaks, in what context and for which interests, as well as about what authority they claim, and the effect on the audience they address.

The causes of and intentions behind the narration of conspiracy are complicated, with ‘belief’ being but one possible aspect involved. Religious elites and their dominant discourses may be more or less ideologically attuned to a conspiracy narrative. This will tend to be one of the factors that select tales for re-telling, combined with other elements of fitness to group or elite purposes in their current situation. Neither group nor elites being homogenous, the potential for disagreement on what religious authority or religious identity should mean for interaction with the conspiracist ideas is always there.

There are some important social differences. Church religions, those a local population are born into, and heterodox religion will typically be embedded differently in power structures. This will tend to involve different social dynamics of conspiracy theory. In psychological research, conspiracy mentality predicts beliefs about the powerful, whereas authoritarianism better predicts conspiracy beliefs that protect power (cf. Imhoff, Bruder 2014; Wood, Gray 2019). The marginal and marginalised tend to use conspiracy theory more as a language of opposition, while dominant religion will, as in the Russian and Nigerian cases above, use them more as a language of counter-subversion. In the nativist variety, this can make ‘religions’ the target of conspiracy theory, as in the classical antisemitic arguments about Jews acting as a hidden ‘state within the state’, or in the case of Buddhist ‘counter-jihadism’ in Myanmar and Sri Lanka (Frydenlund 2019).

With the increasing dominance of a market economy, including in the area of religion, the dynamics of power may change again. In an open information economy with increasingly diminishing costs to establishing an outlet, any conspiracy entrepreneur has cheap access to disseminating their ideas. Being heard is another matter. One way of finding an audience can be speaking from and appealing to an established spiritual market, using established tropes and narratives to interpret news. As we saw from the Norwegian example, those who dominate the market can to some extent regulate access and serve to delegitimise even what they have earlier legitimised. Religious belief, even in the sense of established Church religions with doctrine, is often less a coherent, doctrine-based phenomenon, and more a selective, context-related pattern of feeling and thinking. Religiously authorised values and narratives are chosen, consumed and applied according to social and individual circumstance. The specific narratives are not chosen randomly; socio-political context activates types of religion and religious ‘beliefs’ as much as they activate conspiracy suspicions and narratives.

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mass media messages and to publicly express alternative conspiracy theories that compete with the truth claims of official experts, politicians, journalists and scientists. On the Internet, then, there is ample space for citizens to post, share, modify and appropriate conspiracy theories via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other digital platforms.

In conclusion, in this section on media and transmission, we aim to give an overview and analysis of the academic literature on media and conspiracy theories. Guided by the main assumption that conspiracy theories are deeply mediated, all chapters deal, in one way or another, with conspiracy theories *as/in* media texts and their historical and multi-modal transmission *through* media. Although the chapters are essentially discussing the literature in a particular domain, this field is still new and developing. This section is therefore not only displaying the state-of-the-art but is also setting the agenda for future research: If we want to better understand the nature, meaning, shape and dissemination of conspiracy theories in contemporary Western society, we need to study them as a mediated phenomenon.

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identifiable person, but rather of a collective) and secrecy, and this melange can suggest an occult control over how and what is communicated in society and ultimately an occult control over society itself. If heightened scope for anonymity is a quality inherent to print, the *contrast effects* discussed in this chapter arise as a result of its difference to older media. Such differences can bestow upon both face-to-face, oral interaction and written correspondence elements of secrecy. Finally, given Zwierlein's characterisation of conspiracy theories as occupying a no-man's land between fact and fiction, a fuller exploration of how this distinction is modulated and modified within print culture could be expected to yield highly relevant insights.

One final point deserves acknowledgment. The early pages of Starck's *Triumph der Philosophie* (1803) reference the paper revolution, the printing press and the westward migration of ancient but forgotten learning, carried in the trunks of Byzantine scholars seeking refuge after the fall of Constantinople. Starck shows himself here to be an astute observer of media phenomena. More fundamentally, the acknowledgment of these phenomena betrays his awareness that the maligned conspiracy had historical preconditions; in other words, the conspirators did not operate outside of history and, in this manner, steer and guide its course. Although a committed conspiracy theorist, Starck does not simply equate all of history with the progressive implementation of a conspiratorial plan. Such an 'absolutist' conspiracy theory has an affinity to the technological determinism that befalls media theory when it imagines technology as a force operating from outside of history. Furthermore, technological determinism mirrors the economic determinism thought to blight Marxist accounts of the rise of capitalism. Critics have elaborated upon these objections by questioning any simplistic dichotomy of technology and culture. As they point out, technologies might influence culture, yet they do so without transcending it; in other words, the distinction between technology and culture is undercut by the way in which technology is itself a part of culture. Such re-assessments have informed recent dissent from Elizabeth Eisenstein's ground-breaking *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), a work that discreetly took its cues from McLuhan (see, for example, Johns 1998). In conclusion, we simply note that, regardless of whether we are talking about conspiracy, capital or communication technology, no entity can claim the status of an externality that, by standing outside history and acting inwards, is capable of steering and directing it.

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committed in the past, while James Bond is tireless in his defence of the Western world from an attack that is always about to take place.

The absorption of conspiracy theories into narrative genres in the late nineteenth century – even if a ‘conspiracy fiction’ genre was yet to come – relied on the infrastructure of this period. Anarchists could make use of scientific discoveries and turn these and the very machinery of the city against itself. Secret association adopted new technologies of communication, which became the fields of detective expertise, a competition between criminals and police in a specialised print environment that cultivated distinctive genres – for example, the *Strand Magazine*’s successful run of Sherlock Holmes stories. Invasion fiction, published alongside news, was able to address readers as if the conspiracy were real, especially when these fictions made use of the realia of reportage. Nineteenth-century representations of conspiracy coalesced into genres that persist today, and did so in the modes of transmission that became available in the infrastructure of the modern city; dreams of infiltration acquired form in the process of their transmission.

## Notes

- 1 The website of the same name, [www.theriddleofthesands.com/](http://www.theriddleofthesands.com/), provides a wealth of resources on invasion and espionage fiction in the Victorian and Edwardian period.
- 2 This is the same ambiguity of conspiracy culture that Thompson identified in radical organisations and their infiltration much earlier.

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cultural narratives of suspicion changed character radically around the time Hofstadter published his essay. The dominant post-war American conspiracy theories express anxiety about the deceptions and powers of the U.S. security state.

## Conclusion

The post-war literature of paranoia addressed two crucial intellectual problems of the Cold War era. The first was an epistemological problem, a sense that it had become difficult to know what is real and true in the world. The other was a problem of agency, a sense that complex institutions and forces might manipulate and control individual action and thought. In facing both of these challenges, the literature of paranoia resisted the melodrama of the ‘paranoid style’. It used paranoid suspicion not as a demonological tool but as a way of imagining individual resistance to corporate and collective pressures. Heller’s ‘paranoid’ bombardier, Yossarian, stays alive in part because he believes that ‘everyone’ is trying to kill him, an overtly paranoid view that seems increasingly sound as *Catch-22* unfolds. The hackers of William Gibson’s novels recognise forms of state and corporate disinformation and redeploy them for their own purposes. Ishmael Reed’s satire of conspiracy theories, *Mumbo Jumbo*, reveals the systemic racism connecting what are often said to be shameful historical episodes.

The post-war literature of conspiracy and paranoia, in other words, was driven by a sense that knowledge and power are inextricably linked, and that to be ‘paranoid’ means rejecting the normalising ideology of the powerful. In this sort of regime, cynical reason flourishes. Everyone assumes that the game is rigged, that ‘They’, whoever ‘They’ are, are keeping something from us and there’s little to be done. Is it any wonder that so many leading American literary figures made paranoia and conspiracy central to their work?

## Notes

- 1 See Knight (2017) for a compelling account of *The Octopus* in relation to conspiracy.
- 2 Projection, according to Freud, is ‘the most striking characteristic of symptom-formation of paranoia’ (1911: 66).
- 3 Popper also clearly felt that this sort of historical interpretation was resistant to ‘falsifiability’ – the criterion at the heart of Popper’s programme for distinguishing science from pseudoscience.
- 4 Tanner observes that, ‘since the Cold War, a large number of Americans have come to regard society as some kind of vast conspiracy’ (1971: 427).
- 5 Jameson argues that conspiracy theory is a crude attempt to map the structure of late capitalism.
- 6 Butter notes that ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’ is ‘the urtext of American conspiracy theory research’ (2014: 4).
- 7 As McKenzie-McHarg (2019) shows, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ has a much older history, notably in nineteenth-century legal discourse. My claim is that the contemporary popular notion of ‘conspiracy theory’ as a categorical form of irrational thought was established after the Second World War.

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demonstrate is that – ranging from Rembrandt's *The Conspiracy of the Batavians* to Nazi propaganda charts – the visual culture of conspiracy is able to adapt to changing preconditions of mediality and of their inherent traits.

In this regard, antisemitic imagination over the last five centuries serves as a case in point. Whereas its tropes and their content remain, in principle, stable over time (and recur to an established canon of metaphors), their medialisation was adapted dynamically to shifting communicative aims and technologies (from woodcuts to charts), modes of expression, and audiences and their ability to decode the message. Thus, the Manichaeic dualism of the 'ritual murder' narrative morphed slowly from representing a Christian enemy image to the vocabulary of the modern political conspiracy theory, aiming to uncover the vast interconnections of assumed causality in the complex state of affairs in global politics. A recent example of this is presented in the 8Chan manifesto of the April 2019 San Diego synagogue assassin, who – conceiving himself as the avenger of Simon of Trent – merged traditional religious anti-Judaism with the conspiracist world view of white supremacist racism. Moreover, when the image of conspiracy moved into the 'age of mechanical reproduction' (in Walter Benjamin's term), it also allowed for new forms of lay reinterpretations (or 'pop-semiotics') and particular styles of D.I.Y. pattern detection, reflecting the grassroots obsessive search for causal connections. In contemporary art, the revelation of conspiracy aims to reveal the hidden dimensions of political reality, whereas the art of conspiracy theory engages with the surreal imagining of malevolent manipulation behind the scenes. Finally, the hyper-mediality of the digital age appears to – once more – dissolve the borders between text, image, sound and performativity, and prepares the ground for visual as much as virtual dissemination.

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theory narrative as it is a classical conspiracy narrative, because it is for a long time kept open whether Brody is really an Islamist sleeper or if Carrie, the C.I.A. agent investigating him, is paranoid. At the end, however, she is proven right, and subsequent seasons shed all self-reflexivity with regard to conspiracy theory. In similar fashion, the first season of *Berlin Station* (2016–2019) can be read as a dramatisation of why large-scale conspiracy theories fail to adequately grasp reality. In the show, the C.I.A. does not nearly work as smoothly as conspiracy theorists usually assume. As it turns out in the end, there is no large-scale Islamist plot, but the main suspect has been made to look like a terrorist by a branch of the C.I.A., who had planned to trap a mole inside the agency. However, another part of the agency has found this fiction so convincing that they have abducted and tortured the innocent man. As in the case of *Homeland*, though, in the following two seasons the plots are real, thus attuning the show to the dominant mode of representing conspiracies on television in the present.

## Conclusion

The ongoing popularity of conspiracy films and the sheer omnipresence of television shows that revolve completely or to a large degree around conspiracies have as much to do with the way in which conspiracy scenarios lend themselves to dramatisation in general and extended serialised narration in particular, as it has with American and, more generally, Western culture's fascination with conspiracy theory. Since all the shows mentioned here and virtually all conspiracy films of the past decade embrace the “nonserious” discourse of fiction (Melley 2012: 16), they should not be considered an indicator for an ever-continuing mainstreaming of conspiracism. Rather, they testify to and fuel in turn the long-standing appeal of conspiracy theories for those who believe in them and those who do not. For those who believe in them, the representation of plots and intrigues in film and television surely confirms the suspicions they harbour in real life. For those who do not believe in conspiracy theories, these representations are a way to indulge in a way of thinking that remains attractive but that they have learned not to apply to real life.

## Note

- 1 My argument in this section has been significantly shaped by the chapter on conspiracy (theory) films in Katharina Thalmann's doctoral dissertation (2017). Unfortunately, the chapter is not included in the version published later (Thalmann 2019).

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activists or sci-fi fans. Indeed: *mass media texts may be considered polysemic projection screens* that are, like Rorschach tests, open for various interpretations. However, the interpretations are neither individual nor arbitrary: They are embedded in and shaped by the worldviews of those who formulate them. The four ideal-typical groups formulated here are derived from the YouTube clips – several biographical references and explicit ideological statements made by the author – but the typology is more tentative than empirically grounded. A more systematic study of who the producers and audiences are and how their ideology relates to their interpretation/reading/decoding is called for.

## Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are often studied as stable media texts or narratives in literature, fiction, film or series. The goal of this chapter was to focus on how conspiracy theorists relate to mass media texts in everyday life. Given their ambivalent relation to media, the question was how they actively read, decode, use media texts in the formulation and communication of conspiracy theories. In the context of this concern, I discussed different theoretical perspectives in audience research and Internet studies and applied these to a specific case on conspiracy theories about Illuminati in the entertainment industry on YouTube. Conspiracy theorists on YouTube, it is suggested in this chapter, exemplify oppositional readings of mass media texts and performances and the paranoid style of decoding is characterised by a ‘deep’ reading of signs and symbols in seemingly trivial aesthetical details that, together, allegedly unveil the underlying ideology of the culture industry.

This reading/decoding/prosumption of media texts should be further studied if we want to better understand contemporary conspiracy culture. Conspiracy theorists are critical audiences and their different readings can be understood as a form of pop-semiotics: The academic discipline in cultural studies of analysing the deeper meanings embedded in texts, evidently, trickled down to the ‘amateur’ who is not just a passive audience. (S)he produces new, subversive texts and videos on the Internet that are shared and, in turn, interpreted and decoded by other users. Studying this phenomenon of pop-semiotics, particularly on the Internet, has its own epistemological and methodological complexities: On the one hand, conspiracy theorists are competing with the humanities in the interpretation of literature, films, series and video games. Trained scholars do not have the authority on the question: What do these texts *really* mean? One of the common academic reflexes of being involved in such an ‘interpretive contest’ (Melley 2000) is ‘boundary work’ (Harambam, Aupers 2015) – the making of a clear-cut distinction between good/rational (academic) and bad/irrational (amateuristic) interpretations of media texts to, ultimately, defend the superiority of science as a professional practice (Gieryn 1983). Rather, however, I suggest that we should face the complexity of ‘double hermeneutics’ (Giddens 1984) in analysing the interpretive practices of conspiracy theorists: As academics, we are now in the position to not only analyse, read and decode published texts, but to *read the readers* and *decode the decodings* of these readers on the Internet. Herein lies, I think, one of the challenges for future research of conspiracy culture.

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structure that would allow us to easily trace their origin. On the contrary, they have been continuously sampled, remixed and even remade by online users, and, in the process, sometimes given new meanings. Such a rhizomatic development, in fact, is likely to cause misunderstanding and aberrant decoding, since it leaves no traces of the processes that led to it.

Nonetheless, this does not seem to acquire much importance within social media communications: Regardless of the truthfulness of posts and online content, people have not ceased sharing, reacting to and commenting on them, thus nurturing unpredictable and hardly stoppable cybercascades. In fact, the forms of ‘online conviviality’ (Varis, Blommaert 2014) brought about by the Web 2.0 have made ‘social trust’ emerge and become the base of a number of narratives whose verification transcends any reference to proven facts, and rather relies on other narratives (Perissinotto 2016; cf. Erdmann 2016; Madisson 2016).

From such a perspective, therefore, conspiracy theories can be conceived as a symptom of a larger problem embedded in the infrastructure of current communication systems, that is to say, the so-called ‘post-truth’ era: In contemporary rhetoric, the subjective and passionate component (i.e. appeals to emotion and personal belief) has become evidently more influential than the referential one, to the extent that personal beliefs have replaced verified facts (Lorusso 2018). The considered case study suggests that the Web 2.0, and especially social media, motivate today’s post-truth society: The mechanism of followers and likes on which such media are based does not dismantle falsehoods, but rather reinforces them, making sharing and belonging prevail over reliability and truth. Thus, echoes resound louder and louder in the rooms of the Internet, where people, although creatively expressing their agency, are at risk of losing the crucial ability for effective communication and discerning reliable and accurate information from falsehood and fake news. In this sense, we would conclude, the rapid spread of conspiracy theories should not simply be dismissed as a symptom of a paranoid or unreasonable society, as it is sometimes claimed. It should rather be conceived and studied as a consequence of the limited access to factual truth and experiences characterising contemporary societies, as well as of the increased difficulty of verifying information brought about by the cybercascades of contemporary information systems.

## Notes

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- 2 On 26 February 1998, for instance, the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine distributed a press release entitled ‘New research links autism and bowel disease’, and, the day after, B.B.C. News included ‘Child vaccine linked to autism’ within its news.

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campaign, is a good illustration of the proposed model. The whole-network dynamics are revealing and depict a stage of the lifecycle in which an echo-chamber is expanding through internal reverberation (T1). In just three days, the basic constitutive elements of the network – the active agents (nodes) and the connections established between them (edges) – almost duplicate their number (see Figure 4.9.3, T2). As the diameter of the network and the average path length grew (size), so did the probability of polarisation and fragmentation. Indeed, at T2 we see the emergence of a counter-group – a ‘conspiracy rebuttal cluster’ alongside the more centralised cluster of conspiracy centrals, brokers and amplifiers. The global increase of clustering (average clustering coefficient) indicates the fleeting consolidation of the polarised structures, which fades away again at T3. Rather than debunking the conspiracy theory, the falsification event, which is captured by the graph at T2, led to a retrenchment and a return to the echo-chamber dynamics.

## Conclusion

The perpetrator who stormed the pizza parlour where abominable acts were believed to take place acted on his beliefs in a conspiracy theory. This theory, I demonstrated, started as a viral narrative and has been produced and reproduced by conspiracy centrals linked to the far-right, alt-right, the Republican Party and Donald Trump. A host of willing converts, misinformed and disinformed users, clickbait operations and bots amplified the conspiracy theory, which, ultimately, motivated a violent event. ‘Pizzagate’ shows that extremism thrives in the shadows of an alternative reality nurtured by rumours, falsehoods and conspiracy theories. Powered by online technical and social structures, echo-chamber dynamics find far-reaching avenues of expression and new audiences to captivate – showing a capacity of adaptation that can go through phases of entrenchment, encroachment and retrenchment.

This is one of the reasons why mapping the network structure of the conspiratorial social space and studying the intent and content of the theory, the roles and positions of the different agents in the network and the dynamic of the whole-network is such an important matter. The networked disinformation lifecycle model provides a point of departure for such studies. Contrary to pre-Internet conspiracy theories – marked by isolation, exclusion and marginalisation – conspiracy theorists are now intruding in our public and private spaces. Although we have to specify the contexts and conditions, the more people are exposed to the unfiltered rumours and conspiracy theories on the Web, the more likely they will get contaminated. We live in a turbulent era of information cascades in which the traditional gatekeepers of the media ecosystem face extinction and disinformation reigns. ‘Pizzagate’ was a rare occasion to track the lifecycle of a conspiracy theory and a renewed opportunity to attest the importance of credible media validation. The conspiracy got out of hand and was forcefully verified through an act of violence. But, the lesson of ‘pizzagate’ is more about the easy path from conspiracism to populism and extremism than the difficulties facing rumour falsification. If the spread of a conspiracy theory fails, it does not necessarily expire. It goes back to the echo-chamber in search of future resonance. Conspiracy theories rarely die and the Internet does not forget. In our illustrative case study, the falsification forced the conspiracy theorists to adapt and, with time, ‘pizzagate’ morphed into other conspiracy theories, such as ‘pedogate’, a conspiracy theory about a world elite paedophilia ring, which used ‘pizzagate’ as a false flag to cover up their activities.

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part of political warfare or commercial scam that masquerades as political or pseudo-scientific or even entertainment media agenda. In this sense, ‘fake news’ represent a narrative ‘conspiracy method’ rather than a theory. Our research provides case studies, a theoretical discussion and an analysis that establish the foundation for an argument above open to further scholarly debate.

The suggested frame provides a non-contradictory distinction between the phenomena of conspiracy theories and fake news, and establishes connections, differences and synergies between the two. In this regard, we have argued that conspiracy theories have a vital role in the emergence and distribution of ‘fake news’ and vice versa, regardless of what particular attribution of the latter we use. In support of our argumentation, we applied the apparatus of description and classification of conspiracy theories to ‘fake news’, in order to distinguish and focus on the centrality of interpretation for this phenomenon and its further implications. Subsequent sections of our discussion concentrated on the mechanism of ‘cross-pollination’ between the two phenomena, as well as the implications of their synergy and distribution, as we argue that for the producers of ‘fake news’, distribution and outcomes in targeted audiences are of prime interest and importance. In the same line of thinking, we suggest that both phenomena interact rather well, as ‘fake news’ represent an almost ideal carrier of whole or partial conspiracies in certain cases, as they are instrumental in garnering political support, increasing polarisation and as they represent useful instruments for reputational damage. In conclusion, we discussed specific conspiracy theories with broad cross-sectional political and partisan appeal that attract non-factual and not necessarily strictly political disinformation, that subsequently is politicised. Our main suggestion is to apply the available conspiracy theory research apparatus (augmented by the insights gained from narrative theory, rumour and propaganda studies) towards a fuller scrutiny of the ‘fake news’ phenomenon. This approach enables further insights about its interaction with the conceptualisation of conspiracy beliefs in regards to specific topics and themes in different national, social and cultural contexts.

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period before the Enlightenment and the contact with the West, especially in the Middle East or Asia, and this research might well call into question the dominant accepted chronology of conspiracy theories developed in the study of the West.

The authors of this section acknowledge the shortcomings of the current state of research. It has been a conscious decision of the editors to begin to overcome the current Eurocentric focus in the study of conspiracy theories. While obviously not closing all the gaps, several chapters (5.5, 5.8, 5.9 and 5.11) try to point out the peculiarities of the non-Western manifestations of conspiracy theories and underline their similarities and stark differences with European and American conspiracy cultures.

It is also important to recognise that the historical and regional approach provides a perspective on cultures mainly based on the study of the most available sources: Statements of politicians, works of intellectuals and the mainstream media. This focus on the elites is certainly a flaw of most of the grand conspiracist narratives. But the focus on one kind of evidence can only scratch the surface of national cultures of conspiracies, and is in danger of overlooking what happens on the grassroot level. The next step would be to analyse how prevalent those elite discourses are among citizens through nationally representative surveys (Turjačanin *et al.* 2018), and more with qualitative, ethnographic research on groups particularly prone to conspiracism. This would be a first step in problematising conspiracy discourses across time and space, and we hope that the current volume will open the way for the further debates and studies in various national and regional contexts.

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articulates and circulates a method of historical interpretation, a general theory of historical agency and an underlying conceptual structure that makes human history intelligible. It is an actively resistant cultural practice that challenges explanations of historical actions, agents and forces. In such an interpretive system, even the most negligible detail can signify consequences of great import.

In much the same way, a numerological explanation for the great fire displaces the possibility for recognising and enacting affirmative social and political change for current and past problems in favour of an abiding belief in a metaphysical solution (Fenster 2008: 199, 230, 231). Yet, Tacitus is categorically dismissive of such vapid observations of the commoners, who are overly impressed with nothing more than luck. When one form of reasoning is dismissed, another rushes in. The conspiracy theory of the Christians is all the more potent because numerology is so easily rejected. Each sentence, each word of Tacitus conveys the ongoing struggle to represent and understand the past and to assert control over the forces of history.

In the end, the scapegoating of Christians in the narrative of Tacitus is so logically coherent with later hermeneutic patterns that it almost does not matter whether they started the fire or not: The core of the conspiracy theory resides in the collective ethos of its Roman producers and consumers across time. Conspiracy theory gains momentum and force in part by replacement, by means of an effortless slip from fact into fiction, from provable to unprovable. This is evident in Tacitus' *Annals*, in which the scapegoats who were blamed for starting the fire and who served to deflect blame from Nero are easily replaced with the Christians. The conspiracy theories surrounding the fire derive in part from the fundamental attribution error, which allowed Romans to create their own comforting realities: Easier to fear tyranny than contingency; easier to blame Christians than admit complicity in tyranny. The punishment of Christians for the fire obfuscated the suspicions held against Nero, but only after suspicions against Nero weakened the ever-resilient forces of contingency. Conspiracy theory is most virulent when it promises to dismantle the forces of chaos and pointlessness in the world, and in this we may have more in common with the ancient Romans than we may wish to acknowledge.

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(Tackett 2000; Campbell *et al.* 2007) This antagonism was conceived through the prism of ancient patterns: Robespierre compared the ‘conspirations contre la République’ with the Cati-line conspiracy (Robespierre 1967 [1793–1794]: 358). The abstract form of those antagonisms (Girondins against Montagnards, both competing for the control of the majority of the moderate so-called *plaine*) has indeed similarities with the old pattern of a city-republic suddenly eroding and being deconstructed into competing factions – this struggle somehow representing the drift of French revolutionary politics as a whole.

Conspiracy patterns were similarly shaped on the side of the counterrevolutionaries. For Edmund Burke, the royalists or Barruel, the Revolution itself threatened to drag humankind back into forms of barbarism (Pestel 2015). From this perspective, Englishmen could compare to the chaos in France their good, and allegedly peaceful, ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688 as the morally successful example of establishing a civilised commonwealth. In Europe, fears were of conspiracies that tacitly or consciously opposed the old European hierarchical society with a new yet-to-be-created egalitarian bourgeois society. But, outside of Europe, in the colonies, conspiracism and fear of revolts were usually framed within the divisions of the stratified society of colonisers and colonised. During the Saint-Domingue/Haiti Revolution, revolutionaries could be both pro-colonial and defend at the same time the execution of Louis XVI, while anti-revolutionary exiles could opt against slavery. As a consequence, although they may have started on common ground, discourses and fears of conspiracies could become very multifaceted (Knight 2000; Geggus 2000: 149–70; Girard 2005; Sharples 2015; Dillon, Drexler 2016; Pope 2017).

## Conclusion

Conspiracy theories in a narrower definition are an early modern ‘invention’ or a phenomenon only emerging after the Renaissance, during the confessional age. Two major types of conspiracy theories were evolving at this time: Those with a confessional, eventually apocalyptic framework from the 1560s to the eighteenth century that were based on anti-popery, anti-Puritanism, anti-Jansenism and so on; and those conspiracy theories informed by the new Enlightenment secret societies and social transformations that were first only imagined in utopian forms. These deep changes in society were then realised during the age of revolutions, with the reiteration and pluralisation of friend-enemy oppositions and antagonisms along the framing social and philosophic-historical divisions between an Old and a New Order. The older confessional and the new Enlightenment type of conspiracy theories merged with each other, using similar vocabulary and stereotypes. All those early modern conspiracy theories, finally, fed upon other factual types of future-oriented narratives – plans, projects and causal analysis of past events for reasons of taming the future (Bode, Dietrich 2013) – that had emerged with the evolution of modern anonymous news communication and the visibility of participants within the political public sphere.

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the history of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory, the role of the Jews in these texts changed noticeably. Among these was the prominent title *Le juif, le judaïsme et la judaïsation des peuples chrétiens* by Gougenot des Mousseaux, published in 1869, which Alfred Rosenberg brought onto the market as a German translation in 1921. The work claimed that the Jews were not only the enemy of Christianity, but also of the whole world, with a world republic as their goal. Above all, it denounced the so-called 'kabbalistic Jews', allegedly connected with Freemasonry. The well-known occultist and anti-Semite, Édouard Drumont, regrouped the relationship: Freemasons were not the motor of Jewish emancipation, but the Jews were the secret superiors of Freemasonry. In his voluminous work *La France Juive* (1886), he sought to demonstrate that Freemasonry was controlled by Jews intent on destroying Christianity. Barruel, Deschamps and Jannet were also quoted in 1893 by the Jesuit Léon Meurin in his work *La Franc-Maçonnerie Synagogue de Satan*, which cited Simonini's letter in an attempt to prove the link between the Jews and the Manicheans.

Finally, Simonini's letter would again resurface in pamphlets interpreting the First World War as a conspiracy. Most importantly, Nesta H. Webster discussed it in her book *World Revolution* (1921) and became the first author to connect this letter and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Having read both Barruel and Robison, she used their conspiratorial approach in order to explain the nature of historical revolutions in general. In her widely read publications, the anti-Illuminati tropes were merged with antisemitic and anti-Bolshevist elements.

The legacy of Simonini's letter leads to Alfred Rosenberg, known to be one of the publishers of a German edition of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. *The Protocols*, whose author is still unknown, were also based on a fabricated story about the plan of a Jewish elite group wanting to seize world domination through the infiltration and instrumentalisation of Freemasonry. But, far from being only an interpretation of history, this forgery proved to be a propaganda weapon with tragic consequences.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

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Europe were not immune to beliefs in conspiracy, but conspiracy theories were endorsed by extremist organisations from both sides of the political spectrum, although generally more often by the minorities. It was in a context of war (interstate war, civil war or even the Cold War) with existing enemies that conspiracies were most credible and accepted by the public sphere, with outbreaks of spy-fever or scapegoating.

In Central and Eastern Europe, where authoritarian states, dictatorships and totalitarian regimes ruled for a large part of the century, conspiracy theories were very often top-down official discourses, spread within society through long-lasting and consistent propaganda. The case of Nazi and Soviet totalitarian states that shared ‘theories of conspiracy, phobias of encirclement, the fear of “fifth columns”’ (Geyer, Fitzpatrick 2009: 414) underlines the fact that conspiracy theories were a twofold phenomenon. They were a political belief thriving on state-sanctioned Manichean ideology and the pre-existing diegesis of ‘imagined wars’ against peoples, social categories and foreign powers. They were also used as a political tool, enabling totalitarian regimes to create a narrative of victimhood and assuming a defensive posture legitimating the exercise of violence against real or supposed enemies. From this perspective, the real state of war did not create but rather intensified the fear of conspiracies and the violence that it justified.

Beyond this broad divide between democracies and dictatorships that paralleled to a large extent the one between Western and Eastern Europe, the fate of diverse conspiracy theories diverged. One conspiracy theory appeared to be so strongly embedded into society and culture that it contaminated all other conspiratorial narratives, especially in Eastern Europe. Quite apart from Nazi ideology, the Jewish world conspiracy theory proved to be ubiquitous: Crucial in the political discourse of many nationalists, it also reappeared under the guise of a Zionist conspiracy in the post-war Soviet bloc, and survived not only de-Stalinisation, but also the end of the Soviet Union.

In Western democratic countries, conspiracy theories followed a trajectory similar to the conclusions drawn by Michael Butter (2014) about the U.S.A. Indeed, from the 1970s, a new form of anti-authoritarian conspiracy theories emerged, denouncing government agencies of the ruling elite of apparently peaceful democracies. First limited to explaining isolated events such as suspicious murders or accidents, those conspiracy theories progressively developed into superconspiracy theories (Barkun 2013) involving apparently outdated protagonists as well as post-war free-trade organisations and allied foreign states (in the first instance, the U.S.A.). The spread of the New World Order conspiracy theory during the 1990s was the result of trans-national contacts and reciprocal influences between the U.S.A. and Europe.

This evolution has certainly contributed to the current conception of conspiracy theories in the West as the grass-roots discourse of innocuous, if not laughable, marginal groups or individuals fighting mainstream narratives and trying to find meaning in a disruptive and confusing world (Byford 2011: 129–33). But history reminds us that conspiracy theories were deeply rooted political beliefs – and evidence suggests that they still are (Uscinski *et al.* 2016). The past century also teaches us that conspiracy theories could be mainstream, official and normative narratives, established on a set of strong ideological dogmas and certainties and used to fuel victimhood – a weapon of mass crimes in the hands of ruthless and paranoid rulers.

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located in Siberia, is underdeveloped technologically, cannot compete with global economies and is also largely under the control of global markets that are hard to predict.

[Russian elites'] insecure sentiments easily mix with the conspiratorial, defensive, and person-centred understanding of how global markets and financial institutions operate. In contrast to its supposed function as harbinger of rationality and sobriety, the Russian public sphere is saturated by isolationism, misinterpretations of the global economy, and glorification of authoritarian policies.

(Etkind, Yablokov 2017)

## Conclusion

The notion of sovereignty as the way to protect the agency of the post-Soviet political elite has resulted in the perceived globalisation and technological domination of the U.S.A. being seen as a serious threat to the political survival of Russia's elite. In post-1991 Russia, suspicion of the global political elite, which drives fear of the New World Order, has become a useful way of channelling criticism of unipolarity in international relations and has legitimised the Kremlin's authoritarian policies. Yet, the heterogeneity of the concept and the active exchange of ideas have provided much leeway for authors to develop it in all possible ways. This can be used as a tool to back the isolationist policies of the Kremlin. However, at times that are critical for the regime, such as the 1990s, this theory can seriously tarnish the Kremlin's public image and empower the opposition forces critical of the Kremlin's actions. So far, the pro-Kremlin elites are extremely skilful in keeping control of the country. However, as a populist tool that helps redistribute power among all political actors, anti-Western conspiracy theories (including the New World Order conspiracy theories) could become an important factor in the future evolution of the political regime in Russia.

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politicians and Yugoslav Peoples' Army started the wars in Croatia and Bosnia with a goal of creating Greater Serbia. Serbian citizens in these matters have the completely opposite view. An even bigger contrast in these views exists between ethnic Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which shows even more homogenous beliefs in conspiracy theories in line with their ethnic grand narratives. Compared to them, Bosniaks (as the third party in the conflict) and Macedonian citizens (who were out of the conflict) do not show such stark differences in their beliefs in war-related conspiracy theories. Regarding conspiracy theories indicating the trauma of social change, i.e. troubles with privatisation, international financial institutions and the E.U., the pattern of such beliefs is much more similar in those countries (Bovan *et al.* 2018).

## Conclusion

All previously studied instances of conspiratorial discourses show their embeddedness in the historico-political context inherent to European collective experience since the late nineteenth century. Through the lenses of Orientalism and Balkanism, worldwide travelling conspiratorial discourses, and local conspiracy theories about the war and social change, Europe and the Balkans mutually constitute each other as opposites, and yet the process remains permanently unfinished. How similar or different the Balkans are from other parts of Europe in these terms is a matter of further research, and it is rather a question of degree, not of kind. However, by analysing these wild hermeneutics of suspicion, we can confirm that it is possible to:

Write a [piece of] history of limits – of those obscure gestures ... through which a culture rejects something which for it becomes the Exterior. [However,] interrogating a culture on its limit-experiences, is to question it within the confines of history, on a rupture which forms the very birth of its history.

(Foucault, 1961, cited in O'Farrell 2005: 91)

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Authoritarian regimes need enemies to legitimise their existence. Furthermore, as ideologies wane, they seek unidentified, elusive and metaphysical enemies, such as demonised alternate ideologies and political movements. To secure subservience, the ruling A.K.P. also needs enemies whose hostilities are not mundane, nor grounded on a conjectural realpolitik or national interests, but rather on an ontological grounding as a political strategy (Snyder 2018: 33–40).

## Conclusion

Although the preeminent ideologies reigning in Turkey, such as Kemalism, Islamism and nationalism displayed different and even antithetical ideological tendencies, they shared similarities, although couched in different terms. This is because they inculcated in the same historical milieu. They rose on deep mistrust against not only imperialist foreign powers but also unrelia- bles within. Conspiracy is omnipresent and omnipotent. Such an intellectual climate fostered an environment in which conspiracy theories flourish. This clearly shows that Turkey is not an outlier, but another geography in which national euphoria and populist urges search for con- spiracy theories to render their narratives impeccable and moral.

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## Conclusion

Both the prevalence and the sources of conspiracy theories in the Middle East point to why they matter to observers of the region. They are sufficiently routine that they suggest the region has a sizeable population that is dissatisfied with the political system, economic conditions or other features of the region. There is a perception that the region is heavily penetrated and exploited by external powers, and has been for some centuries now as a result of the relative decline in its global prominence as Europe and, later, the U.S.A. rose to positions of global dominance. The anti-Westernism and anti-Israeli sentiments that are so common in the region are best seen in this light; as symbols of the anger and fear created by foreign intervention and by the endurance of the seemingly-insoluble Israeli-Palestinian issue. The conspiracy theories that see the state as a threat likewise point to the sense of powerlessness among so many people in the Middle East, and the widespread view that the political and commercial systems are rigged against ordinary people; against all but the best-connected or most corrupt. This provides fertile ground for conspiracy explanations. That the state, too, articulates conspiracy theories shows that the politics of such language goes further still, being embedded in authoritarian political structures and of use for elite consolidation, popular legitimisation and, ultimately, regime maintenance and the stability of the state.

The Middle East overall suffers from a range of formidable economic, social and political problems. The struggles of most regional states to deliver economic development has been a notable issue in recent decades, with the economy undermined by factors such as a high population growth, the reliance in many states on oil and gas revenue, and the challenge of competing economically at the global level in other sectors. Meanwhile, Islam is going through a period of turmoil, as many key figures and movements within the religion contest the long-term question of who should speak for Islam and on what tenets they should do so. Societies are both constrained by traditional hierarchies and traditions, while in many ways liberated by new communications technologies and other transformative products of globalisation. Conspiracy theories are important because they signify failings and disappointments among actors and forces across all these dynamics. At the same time, where they mislead or confuse or undermine faith in institutions, they are also adding new complexities to regional politics, undermining and complicating efforts at stabilising the region, hampering the development of the state-society relationship, and hobbling economic processes and outcomes. Conspiracy theories are thus an important component – if only one of many – in the formula that will determine the future of the region.

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important as it highlights the myriad ways in which macro- and micro-level factors overlap to provide fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories.

## **Conclusion and future directions**

At the outset of this chapter, we suggested that our aim was to counter the reductionist view that conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia are a result of collective psychopathology or failed modernisation. Instead, through the examples of conspiracy theories we have reviewed in this chapter, we have attempted to highlight the ways in which Southeast Asian conspiracist narratives are shaped by the socio-political and economic dynamics of the region. In some cases, conspiracy theories are utilised by political elites to maintain the *status quo* or to provide a justification for attacks on perceived political enemies. In other cases, conspiracy theories gain traction as a means of derogating outgroups and maintaining a sense of ingroup positivity, particularly during periods of rapid socio-political transformation. In yet other cases, conspiracist narratives emerge as a means of understanding and explaining trajectories of nation-state, regional or localised power asymmetries. In all such cases, however, it would be misleading to simply dismiss Southeast Asian conspiracy theories as the outcome of psychopathology or under-development; rather, these conspiracist narratives frequently have historical roots and reflect political, social and economic conditions at both national and regional levels.

Despite this, there remains much work to be done to better understand the pervasiveness and spread of conspiracy theories in Southeast Asia. For one thing, the majority of studies to date have focused on Indonesian samples and narratives, and empirical work in other Southeast Asian countries remain piecemeal or – in some cases – non-existent. Likewise, little attempt has been made to understand conspiracy theories that traverse nation-state boundaries, particularly those that may have broad regional appeal (e.g. anti-Western conspiracy theories but see Changsong *et al.* 2017). In addition, there is a marked disjuncture between studies that have approached the issue of conspiracy theories from a psychological perspective (primarily focused on social identity theory) and those that have approached it from a sociological or anthropological perspective (primarily focused on historical trajectories and power asymmetries). Bridging this gap may provide a fuller account of the ways in which conspiracy theories emerge, are disseminated and influence decision-making at both the levels of the nation-state and in popular culture.

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convinced conspiracy theorists in the U.S.A. in recent years than in the decades before (Butter 2018: 182–90). A recent quantitative study found that every second American believes in at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver, Wood 2014). This is certainly an impressive number and surely higher than a comparable study would have found in, say, 1984. But, the number is almost certainly much lower than it would have been in 1914 or 1814, when conspiracy theories were still a widely accepted form of knowledge. As Uscinski and Parent conclude in their diachronic empirical study on the role of conspiracy theories in American public life, ‘The data suggest one telling fact: we do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not for some time’ (2014: 110–1).

Importantly, the Internet has facilitated the emergence of counter-publics with their own media outlets and experts. The fragmentation of the American public sphere began, of course, much earlier (Lütjen 2016), but the advent of the Internet has accelerated and intensified it. In the 1990s, a conspiracy theorist like Alex Jones still needed radio stations to reach a national audience; the Internet has made him independent and allows him to reach people from all over the world. Likewise, a news outlet like *breitbart.com* would have been impossible without the Internet. Accordingly, there are by now parts of the public sphere in which conspiracy theories are considered orthodox knowledge again, and where the denial of large-scale plots is considered the real problem. In fact, much of the alarmism that characterises current debates about conspiracies and conspiracy theories can be explained by the fact that there are by now at least two publics that debate the same topics, but on very different epistemological grounds. One is concerned about conspiracies, the other about conspiracy theories, and what happens in the one public has repercussions in the other. For the time being, then, conspiracy theories still remain stigmatised, but, as Thalmann puts it, ‘that might not matter anymore’ (2019: 192), because they exert their influence nevertheless.

## Notes

- 1 Davis (1971) provides an excellent overview of the various conspiracy theories discussed in this section and assembles key passages from the major sources that articulated them.
- 2 Olmsted also observes this shift, but dates it too early. She suggests that it occurred during the First World War as the expansion of the federal government turned this institution into a far more likely conspirator than it had been before: ‘Sinister forces in charge of the government could do a lot more damage in 1918 than they could have done a few years earlier; in fact, in the view of some conspiracists, the state *was* the sinister force’ (2009: 4; emphasis in the original).

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Carey suggests that improving education levels, stabilising the economy and reducing political partisanship could help break the cycle of conspiracism in Venezuela (2019: 454). Yet, this ignores the fact that conspiracy theories also thrive in largely stable economies such as the U.S.A. (though they may surge in times of turmoil) and, arguably, if we really are moving towards a ‘post-truth world’ in which analysing objective evidence and facts is less important, it is questionable whether improving education levels would have any effect.

This chapter has shown that conspiracy theories are by no means restricted to the U.S.A., and that they are a complex phenomenon that offers considerable insight into the fears and anxieties that govern contemporary Latin American society. As such, it is hoped that the issues raised and discussed here will spark further research into the role and popularity of conspiracy theories in this fascinating region, and why the spectre of conspiracy continues to haunt Latin American politics.

### Note

- 1 According to data collected by the Venezuelan human rights organisation, Foro Penal, in its first three years and ten months, Maduro’s government imprisoned 56 political opponents on conspiracy charges (as well as another 48, mostly on protest-related charges), sentencing 21 of them as of February 2017 (Amaro Chacón, Carey 2017; Foro Penal 2017).

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