

# Conspiracies, Conspiracy Theories and Democracy

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Conspiracy theories are attracting increasing attention from political scientists, much of it negative. Three recent books, from the disciplines of political science, cultural history and social theory, provide a valuable critical corrective. Uscinski and Parent argue that conspiracy theories are connected to partisan distrust and are largely stable across the twentieth century. Michael Butter uses detailed historical cases from the Puritan witch trials to the Red Scare of the 1950s to show the central and influential role that conspiratorial beliefs have played in American history. Luc Boltanski focuses on conspiracy narratives in early detective and spy novels, but situates them in a broader account of the relation between the state, the social and political sciences, and popular representations of political power. Taken together, these books place the problem of conspiracy theory firmly in the context of democratic politics, opening important empirical and conceptual questions about partisanship, populism, publicity and secrecy.

Boltanski, L. (2014) *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Butter, M. (2014) *Plots, Designs and Schemes: American Conspiracy Theories from the Puritans to the Present*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Uscinski, J. E. and Parent, J. M. (2014) *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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‘Conspiracy theories’ are attracting increasing attention from political scientists. It is fair to say most of the attention is negative. Conspiracy theories have been variously linked to a crisis of trust in government, to the undermining of democratic deliberation, a weakening of the state’s capacity to govern, and even to the growth of violent extremism (see Bartlett and Miller, 2010, p. 5). They have been associated with group polarisation (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). And they have been charged with promoting a ‘vicious cycle of cynicism’ (Einstein and Glick, 2013). Political scientists, psychologists and others have sought to identify the causes of, and in one prominent case, the cures for, conspiracy theories (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Conspiracy theories are taken to be a sign of naïveté, paranoia, and a host of individual and collective cognitive failings. They are often taken to be on the rise. And they are typically presented as a threat to democracy itself. They seem to parody the democratically valuable distrust of power, exaggerating it and perhaps at the same time disabling it, turning productive distrust into corrosive cynicism.

Yet ‘conspiracy theory’, understood as a distinct term for a problem of individual psychology and collective political behaviour, has quite a recent history. Richard Hofstadter famously wrote in the early 1960s of a ‘paranoid style’ in American politics, but he did not use the term ‘conspiracy theory’, and it only seems to have taken on its current connotations and entered popular usage from the late 1960s. In the 1990s,

cultural studies scholars took up the theme of conspiracy theory as it was manifested in popular culture in the post-war period in the US (Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000). They moved away from the treatment of conspiracy theory as a pathology of public opinion and sought instead to treat it as a cultural object in its own right, and to show how it had been constructed as a problem. Some cultural theorists have suggested that conspiracy theory is a 'poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age' (Jameson, 1990, p. 355), motivated by an insight into the nature of late modern global capitalism but without the structure once provided by grand narratives. These approaches, for all their differences, jump off from the way 'conspiracy theory' is used in ordinary language today.

A number of historians framed the problem more broadly, and asked: How do (and did) people think about conspiracies? Historians such as Bernard Bailyn (1967) and Gordon Wood (1982), looking back at the period of the American founding, emphasised that the debates around the constitutional convention were shot through with genuine fears of 'a conspiracy against liberty ... nourished by corruption' (Bailyn, 1967, p. xiii), and that in a broader sense eighteenth-century thought was 'structured in such a way that conspiratorial explanations of complex events became normal, necessary and rational' (Wood, 1982, p. 411). This raises the question, addressed by two of the books under review here, of the link between conceptions of causality and agency and ways of imagining conspiracies. More recently, Kathryn Olmsted (2009) has given a history of the changing ways in which Americans have imagined conspiracies located within the state over the course of the twentieth century – a story she tells alongside that of the growing size and reach of the national security bureaucracy. These studies (among many others) complicate the relationship between conspiracies and conspiracy theories, and direct our attention to a richer set of questions. What can the language of conspiracy, the accusations of conspiracy and the claims that one's opponents are conspiracy theorists tell us about the institutions and practices of contemporary politics and the state? How does the way people think about conspiracies and conspiracy theories relate to the institutions, practices and normative expectations associated with modern democracies?

The three books under review here each in very different ways develop and advance this more critical perspective on the relationship between conspiracies, conspiracy theories and democracy. *American Conspiracy Theories*, by political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, draws on a series of empirical studies to argue that, viewed across the twentieth century, conspiracy theories are not actually rising at all. They directly and persuasively debunk some of the common assumptions about who believes conspiracy theories. And they develop an original model, in which conspiratorial predisposition combines with power differentials and perceptions of threat to produce a greater likelihood of imagining conspiracies. They thus end up proposing that conspiratorial accusation is linked to exclusion from political power.

Uscinski and Parent's main dataset is a sample of 104,823 letters to the editor of the *New York Times* from 1890–2010. They (or rather, their assistants) coded them for 'conspiracy talk' according to a common definition of 'conspiracy': (1) a group (2) acting in secret (3) to alter institutions, usurp power, hide truth, or gain utility (4) at the expense of the common good (p. 58). This approach shows in the first instance that conspiracy

talk, at least in this sample, is both very low (less than 1 per cent of the total) and largely stable or even declining over the last century, with just two anomalous periods. In the periods of stability, a pattern jumps out: when Republicans are in power, more of the conspiracy talk comes from the left, accusing Wall Street, corporations and right-wing organisations of secretly pulling the strings. When Democrats are in power, conspiracy talk comes more from the right, and focuses on subversion by communists, unions and so on. And across the board, foreigners are suspected of being up to no good, and to a lesser degree there is fairly stable suspicion of government and the media. Conspiracy talk, it seems, oscillates back and forth according to who is in power. Neither right nor left is more susceptible. Party identification is key to conspiratorial accusation, and in this sense, 'conspiracy theories are for losers' (p. 130). The anomalies are two periods of intense conspiracy talk in the 1890s and the 1950s. They explain these spikes in terms of the bipartisan perception of threat. In the 1890s big business had not yet been aligned with the Republican Party, and both main political parties saw monopoly and high concentration of wealth as a threat to American democracy. Almost a third of conspiracy talk from 1890–1896 concerned the influence of 'business'. In the 1950s, both left and right were gripped by the Red Scare. Again, partisan affiliations are the key to the resonance of conspiracy talk.

The authors also present the results of an internet survey of 1,230 Americans (part of the 2012 Congressional Election Survey), which upset some common assumptions about who believes in conspiracy theories. They suggest that large numbers of people believe in at least one conspiracy theory. Belief in conspiracies, they suggest, only seems marginal because we tend not to think of our own conspiracy theories as conspiracy theories; we just think they're true. Conspiracy theorists are equally likely to be male or female, and they are evenly distributed across Republicans and Democrats. However, they are more likely to be poor and poorly educated, and less likely to participate in political activity or work in financial services, government or the military. In short, 'they appear to deserve their reputation as outsiders' (p. 103).

The third dataset is a sample of news items containing the term 'conspiracy theory' picked out by a Google alert from July 2012 to July 2013. Perhaps most counterintuitively, these data suggest that the internet has not produced a flourishing of conspiracy theories. Most of the internet talk about conspiracy theories in this sample is focused not on propagating, but rather on debunking and mocking them.

When it comes to understanding conspiracy theories today, the authors argue that conspiracy theories appear when 'socialized motive meets political opportunity' (p. 17). By 'motive' they mean that some people are socialised into suspicion, and these people form a sort of vanguard in concocting and promoting conspiratorial accounts of the dangers coming from powerful opponents. They characterise this in terms of a sort of conspiracy ideology, which predisposes them to think in conspiratorial terms. When confronted with information suggesting a conspiracy by people they don't like, those high on this scale will be easy to convince, and those low on the scale less so. This, in its way, is a rational heuristic. It makes sense to be especially sensitive to potential threats coming from powerful oppositional actors, even if it doesn't always turn out to be correct. On this account, conspiracy theories look like an 'early warning system for group

security' (p. 17). More precisely, they claim that 'power asymmetries drive the ebb and flow of resonance over time' (p. 136), and they find that wars and elections are the moments when certain conspiracy theories are most likely to strike a chord with a wider public. When groups find themselves out of power or perceive themselves to be under threat, they are more likely to propose and to believe conspiracy theories.

Uscinski and Parent make a strong case for the value of large-scale longitudinal studies in a field dominated by historical and cultural studies of selected cases. However, their central claim – that conspiracy talk has remained more or less stable over the last century – raises further questions, which they do not persuasively answer. If conspiracy talk is stable or declining across the twentieth century, then why does there seem to be so much conspiracy *theory* talk today? It is only really in the last few decades that 'conspiracy theory' has emerged as a public problem and as a focus for social science research. Why weren't social scientists in the early twentieth century investigating the 'problem' of people believing in conspiracy theories? Also, while the book is written in a brisk, accessible style, with plenty of examples, there is a certain dryness to the text; it would have been great to see a few of those letters to the editor.

Michael Butter's *Plots, Designs and Schemes*, by contrast, gives us a wealth of cultural and historical information. His approach is to give a detailed account of four specific conspiracy theories: the Puritan conspiracy theory about witchcraft in the late seventeenth century; the Catholic conspiracy theory in the early to mid-nineteenth century; antebellum conspiracy theories about slavery; and the communist conspiracy theories in the 1950s. In each of these cases he proceeds by giving careful attention to a selection of key texts, from sermons and speeches to pamphlets and novels, taking us from Puritan sermons to J. Edgar Hoover's writings on communism and social deviance, and from Melville's *Benito Cereno* to the film *The Manchurian Candidate*. Butter is particularly keen to show that the conspiracy theories he identifies were voiced not only by ordinary folks, but by presidents (Washington, Lincoln, Eisenhower), senators (Sumner, McCarthy), religious leaders (Cotton Mather, Lyman Beecher) and intellectuals (in which he curiously includes Samuel Morse). He seeks to show that conspiracy theories have been integral to American culture over the last three centuries, 'repeatedly and decisively shap[ing] the course of the nation' (p. 283).

Butter suggests that underlying all these episodes is a conspiracy narrative with a common form and function, a populist rhetorical template filled out differently in different times, but nonetheless showing a remarkable family resemblance across the generations. He treats conspiracy theories as complex cultural symptoms, suggesting that while they are rarely true in a strict sense, they often reveal real anxieties, and they contribute the real 'cultural work' of constructing communities and framing social conflict. Conspiracy theories, he contends, misrepresent social and political conflict, but they tend to do so in two particular ways: they 'distort' conflict when they correctly identify the conflicting groups but not for the right reasons, and they 'deflect' conflict by targeting a group that has nothing to do with the conflict that is really at stake. So in the case of the famous witch trials in New England in the late seventeenth century, the accusations of witchcraft tended to run along an unacknowledged economic division in the community, between farmers in the west and the rising merchant class in the east. Furthermore, the poor progress of the

third Indian War was considered by both elites and ordinary citizens to be the work of hidden enemies. Political and economic conflict was played out as a moral struggle. The identity of the conspirators could only be revealed by testimony, about which there was a curious asymmetry: only a denunciation of someone else was regarded as credible, whereas an insistence of innocence was not. There was no way, so long as 'spectral evidence' was admitted in court, of limiting conspiracy accusations. Thus, a community already stabilised by a deep conviction that the devil was orchestrating a conspiracy against them (in which the British, the Indians and French Catholic settlers were all players), came to be destabilised and nearly destroyed by a suspicion that could not be limited.

The fears of Catholic conspiracy in the early to mid-nineteenth century served to affirm the collective identity of a Protestant community under increasing strain. The spectre of papal infiltration served to 'deflect' the real concerns of working-class Protestants competing for jobs with rapidly growing numbers of Irish and German immigrants, and to unify Protestantism in a rapidly diversifying religious marketplace. Butter quotes from a sermon of Lyman Beecher:

But if, upon examination, it should appear that three-fourths of the foreign emigrants whose accumulating tide is rolling upon us, are, through the medium of their religion and priesthood, as entirely accessible to the control of the potentates of Europe as if they were an army of soldiers, enlisted and officered, and spreading over the land; then, indeed, should we have just occasion to apprehend danger to our liberties (p. 129).

This was a serious business. Immediately after one of Beecher's sermons in Boston in 1834 a convent was burned down by an angry mob, and the anti-Catholic fears culminated in the rapid rise of the 'Know-Nothing' Party.

Following immediately from this episode, Butter discusses several conspiracy theories around slavery, which he thinks played a crucial causal role in escalating the conflict between those for and against slavery. One was the quite well-known 'slave power' conspiracy theory, in which opponents of slavery thought that the slave-holders had hidden powers, reaching into government and the judiciary – powers that became manifest in the Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that African Americans could not be US citizens and that the federal government had no right to regulate slavery in the Western territories. Another is what he calls the 'abolitionist' conspiracy theory, in which supporters of slavery thought there was a conspiracy to undermine their way of life. In this case we might well ask: Where is the conspiracy? The abolitionists obviously and openly opposed the interests of the slave-holders. Butter refers to arguments in which abolitionists are portrayed as unwitting dupes of cynical British aristocrats, who didn't really care about slavery but wanted to undermine the American economy. Yet at this point the reader wonders where the line is to be drawn between heated partisan rhetoric and conspiracy theories.

Butter's central theoretical claim is that all these cases share an underlying epistemology within which claims about conspiracy were widely accepted as credible and legitimate forms of knowledge. In this respect he follows Gordon Wood (1982), who argued that 'conspiratorial interpretations' were central to the Anglo-American political metaphysics of the eighteenth century. Wood claimed that growing complexity and interdependence

led to a growing gap between leaders' actions and their effects, and that conspiratorial interpretations emerged as a way of explaining those effects without invoking supernatural entities. This view of social causality, Wood concluded, was overtaken in the early nineteenth century by the view in which the outcomes of complex systems were seen as unintended consequences of human action. From this modern point of view, perceiving social and historical phenomena in a conspiracist fashion came to seem quaint and naïve. Butter confirms the structure of Wood's argument, but thinks he got the timing wrong. It was not until the 1960s, Butter contends, that conspiracy theory ceased to be a credible form of knowledge.

This claim about the timing of the 'delegitimation' of conspiracy theory as a way of looking at the world underpins Butter's main contribution to the conspiracy theory literature. The usual narrative is that conspiracy theories have never been more mainstream and influential than they are today. Butter, however, argues the opposite. They used to be mainstream and influential, freely invoked in presidential speeches or in the sermons of prominent religious leaders. Now, however, 'those who are still seriously concerned with conspiracy are ... both marginalized and in the minority' (p. 290). There is more conspiracy theory talk, he suggests, but less serious and influential belief in conspiracy theory. This is a very good point. However, there is something unsatisfactory about his argument when it turns in the final chapter from history to the present.

In his historical cases Butter takes what we might call a 'realist' approach to conspiracy theory, according to which we can identify a conspiracy theorist whether or not they even utter the term 'conspiracy'. It is enough that they invoke or imply a belief in the existence of a conspiracy to be what we would now call a 'conspiracy theorist'. When he turns to the present, however, he implicitly takes a more 'nominalist' view of conspiracy theory, to the effect that only that which is labelled a 'conspiracy theory' is a conspiracy theory. What this means, however, is that Butter is using different criteria of identification in the two different phases of his study. This comes to the surface when at one point he notes that since the 1960s there has been both a 'delegitimization of conspiracy theory' and 'a change in the internal structure of conspiracy theories' (p. 294), but he does not consider that we might simply be talking about different things. The rhetoric and imagery he describes as conspiratorial in the case of slavery and abolitionism can be found in plenty of cases today, such as the visions of collaboration between Saddam Hussein and al-Qa'eda that were used to justify the rush to war, but they are not the cases now identified with the term 'conspiracy theory'. Butter recognises this point, but his discussion in the last chapter feels less focused and conclusive than his rich discussions of the historical material, and still leaves open the question of how the history relates to the contemporary problematisation of conspiracy theory.

Luc Boltanski gives just such an account of how and why conspiracy theory came to be seen as a problem, but this is not his central concern. In *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels, and the Making of Modern Societies*, he relegates the figure of conspiracy theory itself to a minor role in a rich and complex reflection on the relation between the state, the social and political sciences, and popular representations of political power.

*Mysteries and Conspiracies* begins with Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret. With a sociologist's eye, Boltanski analyses the

social types that populate the stories, and draws out the very different relations between state and society in Britain and France at the time of those novels. His main claim is that both sets of stories have in common the way that they dramatise the need for a regime of exception – i.e. the need for a figure who acts outside the confines of law in order to guarantee the stability of the legal order itself. ‘The detective,’ he writes, ‘is the state in a state of ordinary exception’ (p. 72).

The state of exception is also central to the spy novel. Effectively, Boltanski suggests, the division between apparent but fictitious and real but hidden political power maps onto two faces of democratic sovereignty: that of government by public discussion, and that of suspending law and exercising extra-legal violence to restore order. In the genre of the spy novel it is not simply social order threatened by the master criminal, but society as a whole threatened by vast conspiracies conducted by foreign agents and enemies within, and which corrupt or weaken the state itself. John Buchan’s *The 39 Steps*, published during the First World War but set before its outbreak, is in Boltanski’s view the archetype of the genre. It vividly exemplifies what he calls the ‘doubling’ of reality, the setting up of a gap between an official but false reality and a deeper, hidden reality. The state appears as a ‘theatre in which marionettes move about, their strings pulled by skilled manipulators in the wings’ (p. 134). The early detective and spy novels dramatised the trials faced by the state as it fended off the forces of nihilism, anarchism and foreign powers. They thus tended to be politically conservative, although the imagery of conspiracy came to be used also by novelists of the left. However, over the course of the twentieth century the stories of conspiracies *against* the state are increasingly supplemented by narratives in which the conspiracy is located *within* the state itself.

As befits a sociologist of modernity, Boltanski sets the emergence and development of conspiracy stories alongside the rapid social and economic changes of the ‘first globalisation’, the consolidation of the modern nation state and the rise of social scientific knowledge in practices of government and administration. The seductive power of both detective and spy novels, he claims, lies in the way they both arouse and then appease anxieties about the location of power in complex societies. Yet these same anxieties, he claims, are central to the development of political and social science in the twentieth century. Accordingly, in the second half of the book, he turns from literature to social science. He first considers the figure of paranoia as a social pathology, exemplified by Richard Hofstadter’s famous 1964 essay on ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’, and shows its continuity with present-day worries about the dangers of ‘conspiracy theories’. More interestingly, however, he traces the figure of paranoia back to the late nineteenth century and shows its relation to fears of nihilism and resentment.

Boltanski then turns to Karl Popper’s charge, in the *Open Society and Its Enemies*, that most contemporary sociology amounted to a ‘conspiracy theory of society’. Popper’s theory was based on two methodological claims. First, he insisted on a strict individualism. Only individuals, he insisted, and not social ‘wholes’ or collectives, can be subjects of action. Second, Popper argued, that large-scale social phenomena are typically the unintended outcome of the interaction of many actions with many intentions. Thus, if you try to explain some phenomenon (like rising inequality) in terms of the agency of some unofficial collective entity (like ‘the 1 per cent’), then you are either talking

metaphorically or you are making a mistake. And worse, your mistake implies an illusory belief in the capacity of hidden groups of individuals to bend societal development to their will. You begin to sound like a conspiracy theorist. Boltanski takes this criticism seriously, and he describes the methodological development of sociology in the post-war years as a series of attempts to escape ‘Popper’s curse’ – i.e. to find a way to analyse and explain unofficial collective entities without sounding like a conspiracy theorist. But, he says, the problem never really goes away. The problem of ‘reality’, which is to say, the problem of authoritatively establishing entities to which we can attribute causes, is endemic to complex modern societies.

Boltanski’s discussion of ‘conspiracy theory’ is illuminating. He thinks the category of ‘conspiracy theory’ itself is simply a name for a collection of different phenomena, where the naming – the definition of what belongs to the set of ‘conspiracy theories’ – has become part of the phenomenon itself. But while Boltanski questions the category of ‘conspiracy theory’, he suggests that conspiracies – in the sense of ‘solidarities, connivances and personal ties woven surreptitiously for the purpose of seizing power or wielding it in secret’ (p. 35) – are ubiquitous. Anxieties about conspiracies, as dramatised in spy fiction, surely, he insists, have something to do with the rise over the twentieth century of an increasingly powerful and opaque security bureaucracy (p. 37). And more generally, we can see that imagining and investigating conspiracies is a central activity in a political regime that grounds itself on a separation of public and private power. In a liberal democracy, a central task of inquiry, whether by journalists, police, or social and political scientists, is to reveal and criticise those entities and causal relations that are not official, but which are nonetheless real. It is in this connection that the rise of ‘conspiracy theory’ as a pejorative label has raised a new problem – namely how to talk about conspiracies without sounding like a conspiracy theorist.

While there is little methodological overlap between these books, which draw on the disciplines of political science, cultural history and sociology, it is worth noting one parallel. Both Boltanski and Uscinski and Parent use letters to the editor as a way of tracking conspiracy claims among a general public. But there is an interesting difference. Uscinski and Parent took the approach of coding letters to the *New York Times* for conspiracy claims, identifying both the proportion of letters invoking conspiracies and their distribution according to who is supposed to be behind the conspiracy. Boltanski doesn’t actually conduct a study of conspiracy theories, but he outlines a method based on an earlier study he led on claims of political injustice in letters to newspapers. Importantly, Boltanski proposes adding a second step to the analysis. He suggests that after coding the letters for grammatical and semantic features, they should then be passed on to a number of people who would read them and assign them to one of two categories: conspiracy theory or not conspiracy theory. Correlating the semantic features of the texts with the judgements of their credibility would enable him to identify what he calls a ‘grammar of acceptability’ – i.e. to say something about how people in fact identify instances of conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theory might seem a marginal topic; a footnote to a long catalogue of liberal anxieties about public ignorance. Yet these books together suggest that conspiracy and conspiracy theory are connected to the institutions and expectations associated with

contemporary democracies, and that they bear directly on central themes in democratic theory, from the public sphere and public deliberation, to partisanship and polarisation, to theories of elite power and influence. Furthermore, all three books suggest important criticisms of the simplistic view of conspiracy theories as a problem for democracies. For Uscinski and Parent, conspiracy theories appear as an endemic and not necessarily unhealthy feature of the vigorous partisanship of electoral democracies. For Butter, conspiracy theories are symptoms of underlying social anxieties, serving to deflect or distort from real conflicts and tensions. Conspiracy theories serve to reduce complex differences and conflicts to a binary opposition, simplifying – and misrepresenting – the political space. In this sense, conspiracy theories share what Ernesto Laclau has described as a ‘populist form’. Treating conspiracy theory in terms of partisanship and populism at least complicates the question of their democratic effects. As Butter at one point notes, the conspiratorial beliefs of abolitionists certainly misrepresented the degree of organisation and reach of the slave-holding powers, but they served to unify and galvanise an otherwise disparate community to oppose a genuine injustice (p. 198).

Boltanski’s critique is less direct, but nonetheless useful. He seeks to historicise the problem of conspiracy theory, and to shift the terms of the discussion away from the supposed false beliefs of the masses and towards the distinctive problems of identifying and critically analysing power in modern democracies. He locates current liberal anxieties about conspiracy theories in a longer tradition of hostility to mass democracy. More positively, he presents conspiracy theory as one part of a spectrum of modes of inquiry into hidden power that extends to police inquiries, investigative journalism and more respectable forms of social and political critique. While in one sense this blurs the boundaries between conspiracy and critique, it also opens up fruitful lines of inquiry. However, Boltanski leaves the theme of democratic politics curiously underdeveloped. While he briefly mentions the extension of the franchise in the mid to late nineteenth century, he does not mention one of its most important consequences: the rise of the political party in something like its modern form. The expansion of the franchise created a demand for mass legitimation, which in turn required the organisation of opinion and political communication on a massive scale. Political parties introduced greater distance and bureaucratic organisation into the process of representation itself, and this in turn raised the threat of a new sort of domination by elites. When Boltanski discusses the anxieties associated with communication, mediation and distance that arose in the late nineteenth century, he does not emphasise their relation to the distinctive problems of political representation structured predominantly through party competition.

These books, then, in various ways, link the problem of conspiracy theory to the political ideals and practices of the advanced democracies. Butter frames conspiracy theory as part of the Enlightenment tradition, and emphasises the particularity of the American case. Uscinski and Parent locate conspiracy talk in the framework of America’s two-party system. Boltanski links the theme of conspiracy to the distinctively democratic problem of managing the tension between the expectation of publicity and the necessity of secrecy.

More broadly, however, the three books suggest the value of shifting the question from ‘Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?’ to ‘How do people think about

conspiracies?'. This in turn suggests at least two broad directions for further research. One is comparative. What about post-colonial states such as Pakistan and Iran? What about transitional democracies such as Argentina? What about the authoritarian regimes or illiberal democracies of Turkey and Russia? More generally, what about countries with restricted public spheres? Or with weak legal and bureaucratic institutions, or low quality of government? Conspiracy talk looks different in these contexts, but is it a difference in scale or a difference in kind? Can we conceptualise the prevalence and use of conspiracy talk in making sense of political power using the same assumptions and conceptual tools with which we approach the problem in the American, British or French contexts?

However, another broad line of inquiry would look at how 'conspiracy theory' came to be distinguished (and continues to be distinguished) from more respectable ways of thinking about or inquiring into conspiracy, collusion and hidden connivances in the exercise of power. Indeed, we might ask, what are we talking about when we talk about conspiracies? And how might we distinguish them from and locate them against their near conceptual neighbours, such as collusion and complicity, and other relatives such as corruption? Popper framed a stark dichotomy between a 'conspiracy theory of society', characterised by a search for hidden agents and hidden intentions to explain complex social and political phenomena, and an 'invisible hand theory of society', in which complex social and political phenomena emerge from the interactions of many agents, none of whom intends or foresees that outcome. Yet between the pure 'smoky room' ideal of a conspiracy and the pure 'invisible hand' account of emergent order there is a spectrum of intermediary and interlocking forms. Exploring these forms would be a useful task for political theory, helping address the question of how to talk about conspiracies without sounding like a conspiracy theorist. Such work could lead to a more differentiated account of when and how suspicion of hidden power hits its mark and when it is a dangerous distraction, feeding a contemptuous cynicism about democratic politics itself.

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