

Introduction

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Conspiracies have haunted the political and historical imaginary since antiquity. In them we find a secret dimension of politics, with unpredictable alliances, invisible networks, and hidden agents. Conspiracies—both real and imagined—raise questions about what constitutes the mechanism of power, its secret, dark side. What is a conspiracy? In criminal law, it is defined as an agreement between two or more persons to break the law at some time in the future. The essential components of a conspiracy are thus a group and a plan. “First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin,” as the Leonard Cohen song goes.

Thinking about this ominous “we” and these historical plots and cabals always means thinking about groups. Who are their members? How can they be recognized? What is it that binds them and keeps them together? What is the specific nature of the oath or the spirit of a conspiracy, whose roots are in the Latin words *coniuratio* and *conspiratio*? The type of group formed by a conspiracy implies that, while membership in this group is highly exclusive, it is also invisible and clandestine. No outsider may know who the members are, which is what distinguishes the conspiracy as a political agency from other secretive groups with agendas such as political parties or commercial firms.

Conspiracies are thus the dark side not only of social bonding but, more generally, of power and of political activity. They are that which must not and cannot come under public scrutiny, that which cannot be legitimized and therefore must draw the veil of secrecy. “Oh conspiracy,” says Shakespeare’s

Brutus. “Sham’st thou to show thy dangerous brow by night, when evils are most free.”¹ The secretive nature of the conspiratorial group seems to be, even in the view of the conspirators themselves, evidence and signature of its criminal intentions. This in turn casts a strong shadow of suspiciousness over any organization that operates with a certain amount of secrecy, whether it be the rather innocuous Freemasons or the rarely if ever innocuous secret services.

What is it, then, that keeps the group together, beyond formal oaths, strange rituals, or even—as Machiavelli recommends for efficient conspiracies—a certain amount of coercion by the conspiracy’s masterminds? Cohesion is achieved, first of all, by an (epistemo)logical principle: the sharing of a secret. For a secret, as Louis Marin explained, is something essentially social, and it implies at least three “players.” A secret can be defined as the exclusive knowledge that A shares with B against C.² A secret locked into only a single mind, that is not at least virtually “shareable,” is not a conspiratorial secret at all. A conspiracy thus refers to a group that is essentially constituted by the secret that keeps it together. The secret marks the very distinction between the group and the rest of the world, between outsiders and insiders. It is therefore the empty center of a conspiracy; whether it consists of a diabolical plot to seize world power or, as in the case of eighteenth-century secret societies, of not much more than the list of its members. The secret’s main function is that of a mere marker, a gate mechanism of inclusion and exclusion.

Given the crucial separation between the insider and the outsider position, any kind of talking, speculating, narrating, and even theorizing about conspiracies is always and by definition limited to the position of the outsider. “If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. . . . It’s the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us,” writes Don DeLillo in *Libra*.³ The outsider position with its limited knowledge unavoidably produces phantasms and projections: the phantasm of a flawlessly frictionless, unthwartable plan, of irresistibly powerful techniques and media of manipulation, and of an absolutely hermetic and cohesive cast of conspirators. No matter how “real” or “imagined” conspiracies might be, they can be explored or narrated only from an outsider position—and this is why, in our opinion,

1. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. T. H. Howard-Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 2.1.77–79.

2. Louis Marin, “The Logic of Secrecy,” in *Cross-readings*, trans. Jane-Marie Todd (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1998), 195–204.

3. Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 440.

one cannot always entirely separate conspiracies as an object of research or of narrative from the esoteric speculation of conspiracy theory.

How, then, can a conspiracy be narrated? How can its intrigue—whether as a past event or as a future scheme—be charted in a coherent sequence of intentions, acts, and events? This is exactly the question imposed both on the novelists and on the historiographers of conspiracies. How, in other words, does the *Komplott* become a plot? It can become a plot only by endowing the conspiracy with the hallmark of perfection that DeLillo ascribes to the outsider's viewpoint: "A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. . . . We are the flawed ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle."⁴ The conspiracy is the inversion, the sublimation of bad luck, happenstance, mistakes, the flaws and incoherence of everyday life. And so the narrative, whether historical or fictional, represents the conspiratorial intention as a coherent foolproof plan. Its apparent coherence is an effect of narrative arrangement: a sequence in time, an agent, a goal.

The questions a historian, as much as a reader of fiction, has to answer are: Who is telling me this? What kind of story is this? From what elements, documentary or fictional or even forged, is this story elaborated? And what is the vantage point, or even the vested interest of a source, a text, a narrative? This difficulty in reading conspiratorial narratives is succinctly pointed out by Michèle Lowrie in her reading of the accounts on the famous Catilinarian conspiracy. When, for instance, Sallust narrates the lurid story of this conspiracy from the last years of the Roman Republic, he emphasizes his retirement from politics to underline the neutrality of his account, even though it is actually highly biased in favor of the targets of Catilina's foiled coup d'état. The Catilinarian conspiracy is perhaps the first example of a conspiracy that is practically impossible to research from a different angle than the one suggested by the victors, Catilina's enemies. Nevertheless, as Lowrie shows, this biased structure has been the point of departure of numerous later renarrations.

As we know, things have not gotten all that much better with more bodies of extensive evidence, more eyewitness accounts, and more media coverage. The twentieth century has been flooded with stories of conspiracies from the Bolshevik revolution to the Reichstag fire and the Warren Commission up to the present day. Any account of conspiracy is always a highly politicized tale, an interested and distorted version of a truth that seems to resist being fully brought to light as such. How do we confront such an account? One

4. Ibid.

strategy is to dismantle the conspiracy narrative, whether with more and counterfactual evidence or with alternative versions that make coherence incoherent. It means reading between the lines, reading in the gaps left in the all-too-convincing tales we are told. We must not only ask about the slant of accounts but also mistrust the nature of the facts on which they rely, as well as the facts themselves. The more facts, the more bodies of evidence, the more witnesses—the more unreliable these become. Conspiracy theories, however, thrive on such thickets of inconsistency. Instead of corroborating one plausible hypothesis, they tend to discredit one another, opening up an abyss of uncertainty and distrust. This is what, after the JFK assassination, DeLillo called a “natural disaster in the heartland of the real”: the overwhelming feeling that facts, proofs, and elements of reality suddenly started to appear as strange inventions, as fictions.⁵ The situation is further complicated by the existence not only of conspiracies and conspiracy theory but of counterconspiracy narratives created to debunk and demythologize other theories. As Michael Hagemester and Anson Rabinbach show in this issue, both the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and the Reichstag fire trial created opportunities for persuasive and—for long periods of time—widely accepted counterconspiracy narratives.

What is behind a conspiracy theory? Most neutrally, a conspiracy theory is “a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret.”⁶ For Richard Hofstadter, conspiracy thinking represents a kind of pathologized populism, anti-intellectualism with a paranoid core.⁷ Hofstadter’s approach rejects such theories because they are anti-intellectual and socially reactionary or because they rest on merely emotional evidence, though this does not hold true for all conspiracy theories. Following his lead, historians will often refer to larger mentalities such as anti-Semitism or racial prejudice as a virulently paranoid form of conspiracy thinking, based on fear and ignorance, irrationally projecting real problems onto imagined enemies. The problem here is not with the theory per se but with its purveyors and their motives, a criticism that avoids doing justice either to the verifiability of a given conspiracy theory or to the problems posed by conspiracies (real and imagined) for history and theory. Intel-

5. Don DeLillo, “American Blood: A Journey through the Labyrinth of Dallas and JFK,” *Rolling Stone*, December 8, 1983, 23.

6. Brian L. Keely, “Of Conspiracy Theories,” *Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (1999): 116.

7. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (London: Cape, 1971), 3.

lectuals are generally hostile to conspiracy theories, but this does not address what is wrong with conspiracy theories or whether they might on occasion prove useful, or even correct. Precisely because they offer a seamless explanation, conspiracy theories frequently rely on a surfeit of detail and an overwhelming amount of information to show why the received wisdom is a purposeful mystification. This is the first philosophical flaw in such theories: they exhibit “an overreliance on the ability to explain errant [seemingly contradictory] data” and undermine “trust” in the authoritative sources of explanation.⁸ A second approach, also favored by philosophers, is to discuss conspiracy theories according to their epistemic or cognitive failures. Conspiracy theories thus fail because they do not respond appropriately or honestly to reasonable evidence that conflicts with them or because they are implausibly complex.⁹ This approach allows for some conspiracy theories to be accepted (e.g., the Watergate conspiracy), but it does not pertain to those that stretch credibility too far. A variant of this approach is to show that conspiracy theorists favor overwrought intentionalist and cumbersome explanations involving elaborate plans over situational explanations that are more easily ascertained. Though most conspiracy theories can be debunked, so this approach argues, they remain useful to keep skepticism and questioning alive.

A third approach, which might be called the anthropology of conspiracy, entirely circumvents the problem of truth content. Instead, it addresses conspiracy theory as a style of thought and being, as a mode of popular or nonacademic skepticism, and as an explanatory framework that has special meaning for its community of “researchers” or believers.¹⁰ Because they exist outside institutionally respectable or academic knowledge but in a universe parallel to it, such subcultures derive status from their marginality—they thrive on official condemnation.

Conspiracy theory is also one of the most powerful genres of fiction, from Friedrich Schiller’s unfinished novel *Der Geisterseher* (*The Ghost Seer*)—analyzed by Stefan Andriopoulos in this issue—to DeLillo’s *Libra*, which, by reconstructing Lee Harvey Oswald’s actions before and during the JFK assassination, responds to the fictionalization of reality by blurring or

8. Keely, “Of Conspiracy Theories,” 120, 121.

9. Steve Clarke, “Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32 (2002): 131–50.

10. Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to “The X-Files”* (London: Routledge, 2000); Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

artfully mingling the genres of historiography and fiction, to fictionalize history by constantly making us aware of the fact that there is no direct grip on the “real facts.” The question *Libra* forces on us is whether any account or description of conspiracy can ever escape being fiction. Being aware that one is writing fiction while dealing with conspiracies would imply the author’s awareness of the fact that, rather than reach a firm position of definite truth, one can offer only one (or even several) possible, plausible versions of what might have happened. Ultimately, *Libra* offers a brilliantly constructed speculative account of how a historical event might have occurred without entirely succumbing either to the paranoid fantasies of a David Ferrie or to the strange coincidences and conjunctures that drive the novel’s protagonists.

Conspiracy theory, like novels, is a form of fiction, but unlike most serious fiction, it is devoid of any reflexive insight into its own fictionality. Conspiracy theories take the opacity of reality as a point of departure to venture on an alternative interpretation about the order of things. They are variations on the theme of an ever-less-graspable political and social reality that seems to constantly withdraw from our grip. They seem to offer plausible explanations as to why, as Dieter Groh put it, “bad things happen to good people,” by simplistically indicting one supreme secretly operating agency.¹¹

One way to investigate the infinite number of motives and types of conspiracy theory—from the Judeo-Masonic-Marxist conspiracy to the “invisible government” of the 1960s—is to posit a taxonomy of types or structures of conspiracy theories. There are monocausal conspiracies, ascribing total power to a single agent, the most prominent of them the Jewish world conspiracy, and models of entangled networks, such as the Bush–Bin Laden connection or the nineteenth-century accounts of secret societies cooperating to organize the French Revolution. We have either conspiratorial actors who frame the entire world, as in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Illuminati, or the Trilateral Commission; or relatively limited conspiracies such as the Kennedy assassination or the omnipresent economical network of the Carlyle Group; or neat but locally and historically limited secret surveillance systems such as the Gestapo, the Stalinist Secret Police, or the East German *Staatssicherheit*.

To complicate such a typological approach to conspiracy theories, we would like to suggest an analysis of their specific style of thought. Conspir-

11. Dieter Groh, “The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory; or, Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? Part I: Preliminary Draft of a Theory of Conspiracy Theories,” in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. C. F. Graumann and S. Moscovici (New York: Springer, 1987), 1–13.

acy theories can be seen as a form of political thinking, as a “paranoid style,” as Hofstadter has called it. They are a way to make order out of disorder, to connect the dots, to interpret the world and situate oneself in it. According to Timothy Melley, “Paranoia is an interpretive disorder that revolves around questions of control and manipulation.”¹² Looking at the eclectic concoctions, at the bizarre systems and conclusions of conspiracy theories, one is certainly tempted to see in them nothing but a disorder, the pathology of a disoriented spirit. This is why conspiracy theory has often been seen as a certain type of ideology, an attempt to attribute agency in an overly complex modern or post-modern society to one superior, evil, and hidden agent. Fredric Jameson somewhat condescendingly called conspiracy theory “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system.”¹³ The broad interest taken by cultural studies in popular conspiracy theories mostly adopted Jameson’s view and regards them as the wrong answers to the right questions. Showing the symptoms of disorientation and loss of social transparency, conspiracy theorists are seen as the disenfranchised “poor in spirit,” who, for lack of a real understanding of the world they live in, come up with paranoid systems of world explanation.

What we would like to suggest, in contrast, is taking conspiracy theories seriously. The so-called paranoid style essentially consists not so much in giving answers as in asking questions. Instead of regarding conspiracy theories as ideologies and debunking them with the attitude of *Ideologiekritik*, it might be worthwhile to analyze them as what they are at first sight: systems that reorganize political, social, and scientific knowledge. *Conspiracy* theories are inspired by an attitude of distrust toward authorities, of skepticism toward official truths, and of an attention paid to conspicuous details. Conspiracy theory is a form of popular discourse on modernity’s *arcana imperii*, perhaps the only powerful way to question the secrets of the state today.¹⁴ Conspiracy theories have to be taken seriously as a mode and a model of critical political thinking. Why and under which circumstances have conspiracy theories been successful and convincing? What are their social and political functions?

12. Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 16.

13. Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 356.

14. This approach is outlined in a more detailed fashion in Eva Horn, “Staatsparanoia,” in *Der geheime Krieg: Verrat, Spionage und moderne Fiktion* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2007), 382–419.

This means, first of all, taking a closer look at their epistemological structure. Conspiracy theories often revolve around specific types of highly treasured, classified knowledge, such as the “secret of the atom bomb,” allegedly stolen by communist spies; the rise of media technology allowing for surveillance, interception, and possible manipulation of human behavior, such as the notorious research on mind control described by Melley; or the new cult of explanations for 9/11 discussed by Peter Knight. Conspiracy theories can be seen as the symptom of an epistemological crisis in the realm of state secrets. They indicate possible worst-case scenarios in the use and abuse of secret knowledge—and, therein, we contend, lie their essential lucidity and opacity.

Against the backdrop of these reflections, the articles presented in this issue address the question of conspiracy and conspiracy fiction through four equally crucial aspects: (1) the possibility of narration both on real and imagined conspiracies and on their social and political functions (Lowrie and Victoria E. Pagán, both taking as their example conspiratorial discourse in ancient Rome); (2) the relationship between enlightenment thought and the rise of conspiracy theories, as well as the fashion of conspiracy fiction at the end of the eighteenth century (Jakob Tanner and Andriopoulos); (3) the historian’s ability or rather inability to investigate conspiracies—such as the Reichstag fire and the concoction of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—without getting entangled in an equally conspiratorial gesture of “unveiling a final truth” (Hagemeister and Rabinbach); and (4) conspiracy theories’ and fiction’s role in thinking individual agency as well as privacy, political decision making, and social influence in an age of globalized mass media (Eva Horn, Melley, and Knight).

We would like to investigate the epistemological structure of conspiracy theories, their inextricably entangled dialectics of blindness and insight. How do they rearrange the bits and bytes of knowledge they can get hold of? What is the specific nature of their curiosity? Moreover, we also think that it is necessary to discuss what we would like to call the “ethics of conspiracy theories”: what is their social impact, and what are their effects on current political discourse? Last but not least, we would like to ask, is there anything we can learn from conspiracy theories? In the end, however, you might arrive at the question, what is “behind” conspiracy theory?