

‘Conspiracy theories are as old as the hills, but they only became the object of scholarly study and concern after 1945. In this meticulously researched study, Katharina Thalmann traces the discursive history of conspiracy theory, revealing how it became a familiar concept, a widely derided form of explanation, and a perceived threat to democratic rationality. Thalmann’s approach helps to explain the persistent public fascination with conspiracy, from the rise of a postwar “culture of paranoia” to contemporary debate about the politics of conspiracy discourse.’

Professor Timothy Melley, *author of* *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State*

‘Thalmann’s bold and timely book updates and challenges longstanding concerns that conspiracy theories have become increasingly respectable. In offering precise and nuanced readings of conspiracy theories and their reception within academic and media discourses, Thalmann produces a convincing argument about the changing status of conspiracy theories during the Twentieth Century. Thalmann also addresses the contemporary moment. While other commentators see Trump’s ascension as proof of conspiracy theory’s increased legitimacy, Thalmann suggests that Trump and other influential conspiracy theorists on the populist right today gain traction through their links to conspiracy theory precisely *because* of its fringe, illegitimate hue. Getting airtime is not the same as legitimacy in Thalmann’s eyes. Reading against the grain, with careful conviction, Thalmann’s book is a key intervention into the lively field of conspiracy studies.’

Dr Clare Birchall, *Reader in Contemporary Culture,*
King’s College London, UK

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THE STIGMATIZATION OF CONSPIRACY THEORY SINCE THE 1950S

Are conspiracy theories everywhere and is everyone a conspiracy theorist? This ground-breaking study challenges some of the widely shared assessments in the scholarship about a perceived mainstreaming of conspiracy theory. It claims that conspiracy theory underwent a significant shift in status in the mid-20th century and has since then become highly visible as an object of concern in public debates.

Providing an in-depth analysis of academic and media discourses, Katharina Thalmann is the first scholar to systematically trace the history and process of the delegitimization of conspiracy theory. By reading a wide range of conspiracist accounts about three central events in American history from the 1950s to 1970s – the Great Red Scare, the Kennedy assassination, and the Watergate scandal – Thalmann shows that a veritable conspiracist subculture emerged in the 1970s as conspiracy theories were pushed out of the legitimate marketplace of ideas and conspiracy theory became a commodity not unlike pornography: alluring in its illegitimacy, commonsensical, and highly profitable.

This will be of interest to scholars and researchers interested in American history, culture and subcultures, as well, of course, to those fascinated by conspiracies.

Katharina Thalmann is Assistant Professor in the American Studies Department, University of Tübingen, Germany.

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THE STIGMATIZATION OF CONSPIRACY THEORY SINCE THE 1950S

“A Plot to Make us Look Foolish”

Katharina Thalmann

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To Svenja Hohenstein,

who taught me what sisterhood truly means.

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INTRODUCTION

In a warning note, “To the Betrayed Inhabitants of the City and Colony of New-York,” the *New Hampshire-Gazette* in 1770 observed that “[British] minions of tyranny and despotism [...] [we]re indefatigable in laying every snare that their malevolent and corrupt hearts c[ould] suggest, to enslave a free people” (“To the Betrayed”) – they had joined, as the *Providence Gazette* reiterated in 1775, “the most horrid plot [...] a deep plot formed to divide [the colonists]” (“To the Inhabitants”). In 1835, Samuel Morse, inventor, intellectual, and son of the prominent preacher Jedidiah Morse, described the outlines of what he perceived to be a vast Catholic plot, threatening “the liberties of the country” (55). He cautioned that “The conspirators [...] ha[d] been admitted from abroad” and “[we]re now organized in every part of the country; they [we]re all subordinates, standing in regular steps of slave and master, from the most abject dolt that obeys the commands of his priest, up to the great master-slave Metternich, who commands and obeys his Illustrious Master the [Austrian] Emperor” (54). Deploring an alleged economic and moral decline of U.S. society in the postwar years, Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1951 noted that the American people had finally realized that this decline “was brought about [...] by will and intention” (135), that it was “the product of a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man” (136). In 2009, Alex Jones implored Americans to open their eyes to “the real power structure of the planet,” an “Anglo-American world empire” composed of, among others, Wall Street bankers, the Bilderberg group, the Rockefeller and Rothschild families, and “the military-industrial complex.” Although presidents like Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and George H. W. Bush had willfully joined the conspiracy to build a “new world order,” Jones contended, they were but “front men” for the “ruling elite behind the throne”; John F. Kennedy had been “the last true President,” but was eliminated when he began to pursue civil rights reform in earnest and suggested withdrawal from Vietnam (*Obama Deception*).

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Although these examples stem from four different centuries and very different moments in American history, they share many rhetorical and conceptual similarities: they convey fears of a human-designed plot, fears of losing one's freedom or political autonomy, of being enslaved to a foreign or corrupted hegemon; they rely on a Manichean worldview and an equally fervent and apocalyptic appeal to "the people"; and they rest on the belief that there is always more to history than meets the eye. As such, these examples illustrate the epistemological and narrative features of *conspiracy theory*: the view that a group of powerful agents is operating in secret to pursue a malevolent goal, which is, in most cases, the take-over of power over a cultural, religious, ethnic, or political community (Barkun 3; Butter, *Plots* 1; Fenster 1).¹ Conspiracy theories, as Michael Barkun has shown and the examples above underline, are based on three concepts (also cf. Keeley 116):

- Intentionality (3): Conspiracy theories conjure a history shaped and produced by human design, "by will and intention," as McCarthy put it in the 1950s.
- Secrecy and deception (4): The conspirators are said to organize covertly and consciously deceive others so that those on the outside of the conspiracy, its victims, in the words of Alex Jones, "can't see what's right in front of their faces" (*Obama Deception*).
- Causality and correlation (4): Conspiracy theories deny the possibility of coincidence, eschew structural explanations, and instead promote the view that everything happens for a very specific reason, thus forging connections between seemingly unconnected events in the past and present. Jones's conspiracy theory about the "New World Order," for instance, causally links the financial crisis of 2008, the Iraq War, and the death of President Kennedy.

In order to distinguish conspiracy theories from other texts which share similar conceptual premises, such as gossip, rumors, or urban legends, but also to specify Barkun's definition, I would add three more observations. First, conspiracy theories are characterized by a high degree of complexity (cf. Butter, *Plots* 14; Zwierlein 69). All of the examples quoted above are taken from lengthy pamphlets, detailed newspaper articles, or entire books devoted to uncovering a specific plot, such as Morse's *Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States* (1835) or McCarthy's *America's Retreat from Victory: The Story of George Catlett Marshall* (1951). Even Jones's two-hour documentary *The Obama Deception* (2009) presents an intricate argument bricolaging countless historical events, publicly available data, and interviews with (self-professed) experts into an alternate history of the past 50 years. While gossip, rumors, and urban legends can serve as vehicles for conspiracy theory and often carry conspiracist meanings (cf. Klausnitzer 89), they lack the attention to detail and elaborately drafted argumentation characteristic of conspiracy theory.

Second, although conspiracy theories often appear as factual in form, they are "not literally true" (Butter, *Plots* 15; cf. Pipes 10).² Examples of actual conspiracies are manifold, from the assassination of Julius Caesar to the 1605 Gunpowder Plot and the Watergate scandal in 1972, but these differ from the large-scale conspiracy

scenarios conjured by conspiracy theories (Butter, “Dunkle” 5). Moreover, conspiracy theories usually mix fact and fiction so that, according to Cornel Zwierlein’s definition, “A conspiracy theory is typically a narrative of a possible past constructed with the material of a large amount of facts that have really happened and that are commonly accepted as ‘real’ and other fictitious, or at least not proven and not commonly accepted, elements which are supposed to have happened” (70). Conspiracy theories during the Revolutionary War articulated the colonists’ very real struggle for political and economic autonomy, but did so in an exaggerated, hyperbolic fashion, translating the fight for independence into an uneven conflict between a malevolent master and the enslaved colonists; even the Declaration of Independence, which reverberates with the colonists’ conspiracist beliefs, does not merely summarize their disagreement with King George III’s policies but accumulates a list of 27 grievances voiced in, at times, highly metaphorical language (*In Congress*). And although the 19th century indeed saw a massive migration to the Western territories and states, westward expansion was driven by dominant ideologies, political incentives, and individual migration rather than steered by a Catholic plot, as Morse claimed.

This is not to suggest that conspiracy theories should be dismissed out of hand. Despite the fact that “conspiracy theories may be wrong or overly simplistic,” as Mark Fenster puts it, “they may sometimes be on to something” (90). Scholars like Fenster, Peter Knight, and Timothy Melley have therefore rightly underlined the significance of conspiracy theorizing as a meaning-making cultural practice and shown that conspiracy theories code and express actual socio-cultural and political concerns and anxieties. Conspiracy theories also often perform important cultural work, Michael Butter has pointed out, harking back to a concept introduced by Jane Tompkins, as they produce a collective identity by conjuring a communal enemy or presenting a vision for the future of a group or nation (*Plots* 21); Zwierlein has called this “the appellative-affective and denunciatory function” of conspiracy theory (69). “Conspiracy thinking produces America as a nation,” Jodi Dean writes, “it provides narratives that tell Americans who ‘we’ are” (“Declarations” 291) – just as it produces other cultural, ethnic, religious, or geographic collectives, other “imagined” communities.

Not surprisingly, the examples from the Revolutionary War as well as McCarthy’s and Jones’s texts all directly interpellate the audience as “the people,” which hints at the third feature that I would add to Barkun’s list: conspiracy theory’s equally populist and productive nature (cf. Butter, *Plots* 16–17). “Conspiracy theory is populist in its evocation of an unwitting and unwilling populace in thrall to the secret machinations of power,” Fenster explains, but also emphasizes that, as a form of populism, conspiracy theory does not simply reflect a particular grievance or given identity; it actively constructs and “produces” identities (84, 85). Rather than reject conspiracy theorizing, Fenster emphasizes, scholars should provide close and symptomatic readings of conspiracy theories to understand their causes, contexts, and underlying claims (84).

The studies by Fenster, Knight, and Melley, and other cultural and political analyses of conspiracy theory released in the wake of the cultural turn in the 1990s,

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made valuable contributions to the field of conspiracy theory scholarship because they eschewed the *a priori* pathologization which had characterized academic and journalistic writings since the 1960s when Richard Hofstadter famously rejected conspiracy theorizing as a form of political and cultural paranoia. Hofstadter claimed that conspiracy theorizing had always been “the preferred style only of minority movements” in U.S. history (7) and, by referring to such beliefs as a “paranoid style,” provided an intuitive label with which to dismiss conspiracy theories as a dangerous, misguided, and irrational epistemological model – to date, public and media discussions about conspiracy theories almost automatically recur to Hofstadter’s conceptualization of the “paranoid style.” Hofstadter’s essay about “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” also helped to shape two dominant schools of thought in the scholarly literature on conspiracy theory: whereas the one views conspiracy theorizing, in line with Hofstadter’s argumentation, as a practice limited to the margins of political and cultural life, the other, using Hofstadter’s argument as a starting point, believes that conspiracy theories have become increasingly mainstream in recent decades and invaded American political and popular culture (cf. Fenster 1). As is made explicit in the first but only implied in the latter, both schools rest on the assumption that conspiracy theories are detrimental to democratic societies; they agree, Fenster writes, “that conspiracy theory, in its dangerous conception of power, nationhood, and history, represents a dire threat” (2).

Although Fenster, Knight, and Melley have re-calibrated the field of conspiracy theory research by underscoring the cultural significance of conspiracy theorizing in the U.S., their studies are nevertheless still indebted to the second school of thought and also exhibit “a strong presentist bias” (Butter, *Plots* 6). Identifying the culture of the 1960s as a turning point, both Knight and Melley have argued that conspiracy theories are more mainstream than ever in the 21st century (Knight, “Introduction” 6; Melley, *Empire* 7–8).³ In the wake of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, fueled by growing concerns about the Vietnam War and the security state, and the rise of liberal counter-cultures, Knight holds, “conspiracy theories have become far more prominent, no longer the favoured rhetoric of backwater scaremongers, but the lingua franca of ordinary Americans” (*Conspiracy* 2). “Conspiracy theory has a long history in the United States,” Melley writes, “But its influence has never been greater than now” (*Empire* vii). Other scholars have detected a more recent change and argued that the advance of communication technologies and the Internet have facilitated the access to and the dissemination of conspiracist content (Birchall 17; Pipes 307; Schetsche 116; Lutter 22–24). Conspiracy theories are now “no longer ‘on the fringe,’” Jodi Dean proclaims (*Aliens* 10), and both Knight (“Introduction” 6) and Fenster (7) diagnose that “We’re all conspiracy theorists now.”

Contrary to this dominant view, the examples of conspiracist discourse that I have listed in the beginning already attest to the ubiquity of conspiracy theories throughout *all* of American history. During the Revolutionary War, Bernard Bailyn has shown, both the colonists and the British were convinced that the

opposite party was engaged in a conspiracy (150), but on the American side, conspiracy theories helped to unite the economically, geographically, and ethnically very diverse and divided colonists (155). The works of Michael Butter, David Brion Davis, and Gordon Wood have further stressed both the prevalence and pivotal role of conspiracy theorizing in American culture from the colonial era to the mid-20th century. Even Hofstadter, in the “The Paranoid Style,” describes a great variety of conspiracy theories, ranging from fears about Illuminati in the 18th century to fears of communism in the 1950s. Whether during the Salem witchcraft crisis, the presidency of John Adams, or the late antebellum era, conspiracy theories shaped politics and history as they both stabilized communities by exaggerating and exploiting fears of a conspiratorial enemy said to threaten the group from without, and/or destabilized communities by exaggerating and exploiting differences among community members (Butter, *Plots* 20). From the early modern period to the 19th and 20th centuries, the belief in and dissemination of conspiracy theories allowed Americans to “order[] and g[i]ve meaning to their political world,” Wood maintains, and explains that Americans “could scarcely conceive of a moral order that was not based on [human] intentions” (411, 440).

Apart from these historico-cultural analyses, studies which counter or, at least, question the predominant, presentist argument about the mainstreaming of and increase in conspiracy theories since the 1960s are rare and mostly point at the “long history” of conspiracy theorizing in the U.S. in passing (cf. Melley, *Empire* vii). Jesse Walker points at the continuous presence of conspiracy theories in American culture, from the Puritans to the present, “in the establishment as well as at the extremes” (*United* 8), but actually feeds into narratives about American exceptionalism as he portrays conspiracy theorizing as a somewhat uniquely American feature.⁴ Fenster at least acknowledges that “conspiracy theory has always been a significant element of American political rhetoric” (9), just as Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent argue that “Conspiracy theories are permanent fixtures on the American landscape” (105). Uscinski and Parent are also two of the few scholars to suggest, by referring to empirical data mined from analyzing surveys and letters sent to editors of two prominent newspapers, that “despite popular hoopla,” discussions of (possible) conspiracies have actually declined in the U.S. since the 1890s, with the exception of the Red Scare in the 1950s (110). Yet such findings often go unnoticed in the very “popular hoopla” Uscinski and Parent deplore, precisely because media discussions echo academia’s concerns about the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories in the 21st century. Media pundits have proclaimed an American “age of paranoia” (Baker, “Observer”) or “age of conspiracy theories” (LaFrance) at regular intervals since the 1960s, often by adopting the same apocalyptic argot characteristic of conspiracy theories. When *The Atlantic* in 2016 voiced concerns about “An Outbreak of Conspiracy Theories” (Beck), it actually appropriated an analogy quite common in anti-communist conspiracy theories of the 1950s which often equated communist ideology with cancer or infectious diseases (cf. Schrecker, *Many* 133, 144).

A different perspective is provided by studies which draw on the sociology of knowledge. Based on a Foucauldian approach, they conceive knowledge as a social

construct and argue that discursive practices, power constellations, and social configurations articulate boundaries between what is deemed to be legitimate and illegitimate, true and false knowledge (cf. Foucault, *Archaeology* 197; “Order” 52, 61, 67). Accordingly, these studies not only define “conspiracy theory as a knowledge-producing discourse” (Birchall 34), but also suggest categorizing the knowledge produced by conspiracy theory as “stigmatized knowledge” (Barkun 26), “subjugated knowledges” (Bratich 7), “heterodox knowledge” (Schetsche 119; Anton 29–30), “counterknowledge” (Fiske 191), or “popular knowledge” (Birchall 4). Whereas Michel Foucault subsumes both “buried scholarly knowledge and knowledges that were disqualified by the hierarchy of erudition and sciences” under the label of “subjugated knowledges” (“Society” 8), these scholars largely emphasize the latter “strategy of exclusion” (Husting and Orr), and hold that conspiracy theories have been discredited and stigmatized “by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error” (Barkun 26).

Nevertheless, many of these scholars have also reiterated the claims made by the majority of conspiracy theory researchers. They operate on the notion that conspiracy theories have always produced illegitimate knowledge or, by emphasizing the permeable and shifting nature of the boundary separating the illegitimate from the legitimate (Barkun 185), have found that the rise of the Internet and distrust of authorities in postmodernity have destigmatized knowledge produced by conspiracy theories (Barkun 186–87; Anton, Schetsche, and Walter 18; Degele 63). “Conspiracy theories were once a form of stigmatized knowledge,” Martha Lee writes (16), while Clare Birchall defines conspiracy theories as knowledge that “traditionally ha[s] not counted as knowledge at all” and stresses the “mass circulation” and proliferation of conspiracy theories in the wake of the September 11 attacks (1, 60).

The context and reception of the examples that I have listed in the beginning, however, paint a different picture. They also hint at a paradigm shift in the mid-20th century, but they suggest that Americans increasingly rejected the epistemological foundations of conspiracist beliefs – the emphasis on human intentionality and agency in particular – so that conspiracy theories no longer produced legitimate, official knowledge. From (and even prior to) the Revolutionary Era to the 1950s, conspiracy theories *traditionally* counted as *legitimate* knowledge, to reverse Birchall’s claim, and were also *already* widely circulated. Although polls indeed indicate that considerable numbers of Americans today continue to believe in at least one conspiracy theory (cf. Uscinski and Parent 5–6), surveys undertaken during the Revolutionary War, the 1830s, or the 1950s would probably have yielded similar results because fears of a plot – be that a British, Catholic, or communist one – were pervasive and widespread (cf. Butter, *Plots* 291). More importantly, those who postulated conspiracy theories were neither part of a minority movement, as Hofstadter believed, nor did they inhabit the fringes of American society; rather, conspiracy theorists included many members of the political, intellectual, and spiritual establishment. The founders were among those who spread conspiracy theories about a British plot; Morse was a prominent figure in the early

19th century and stemmed from a highly influential family; and even Joseph McCarthy was a legitimately elected, respectable senator when he began to amplify fears of communist subversion. Wood correctly observes that “at another time and in another culture most enlightened people accounted for events” through conspiracy theorizing (441), and Butter emphasizes “that throughout American history conspiracy theorizing has [...] been [...] a mainstream phenomenon undertaken not only by ‘normal’ people, but habitually by the nation’s leaders” (*Plots* 6).

The reception of Alex Jones, in contrast, reveals the change in the status of conspiracy theory. While Jones is influential and economically successful within his own (online) sphere and among a community of conspiracy theorists, he is nevertheless also vehemently opposed by mainstream media outlets, scientists, and intellectuals; in 2018, Jones and any accounts associated with his alternate news platform *InfoWars* were even banned from Twitter and Facebook for promoting conspiracist and other inflammatory content. Conspiracy theories about a New World Order or any other conspiracist interpretations of politics and history are ridiculed and stigmatized by mainstream discourse and often routinely dismissed by wielding the term “conspiracy theory,” just as most media articles dealing with Jones pejoratively label him a conspiracy theorist to portray him as a member of a lunatic fringe at best and a dangerous threat to the American political and media landscape at worst (cf. Brumfield; Roig-Franzia). Moreover, while it was widely circulated, well regarded newspapers which printed the colonists’ conspiracist accusations against the British Crown during the Revolutionary Era, and conspiracy theories were, for a long time, distributed through official, mainstream publication channels, the mainstream’s shunning of conspiracism has forced Jones, in contrast, to spread his conspiracy theories through his own website *InfoWars.com* or his online radio broadcasts – in other words, through publication channels that forgo the regulation by traditional gatekeepers of knowledge, such as editors, publishers, and peer-reviewers (cf. König 208; Barkun 12). Conspiracy theory *no longer* produces and represents legitimate knowledge, just as the term itself has a largely negative connotation today (Uscinski and Parent 29; Byford 22). Even Knight acknowledges that “Calling something a conspiracy theory is not infrequently enough to end discussion” (*Conspiracy* 11).

Emblematic of this shifting status of conspiracy theory is a 1955 cartoon by the *Washington Post*’s Herbert “Herblock” Block (cf. Figure 1.1). It was released shortly after the nadir of the Red Scare, which was driven by the anti-communist conspiracy theories propagated by McCarthy and others. Such conspiracy theories were widely spread and accepted in the early 1950s and even informed policies such as the McCarran Internal Security Act (1950), thus facilitating the surveillance and deportation of communist subversives. The cartoon, however, adopts a much more critical stance both vis-à-vis anti-communism and conspiracy theorizing. The black-and-white drawing shows members of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the Department of Justice who have just learned that Harvey Matusow, one of the most prominent anti-communist informants at the time, had actually been paid by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to testify

against members of the Communist Party. Dressed as clowns and jesters, the anti-communists huddle together, unable to come to terms with Matusow's revelation, and, in their denial, turn to a conspiracist interpretation: "Exactly! There's a plot to make us look foolish!," the caption on the cartoon reads. The cartoon, of course, implies the opposite: there is no plot to make the anti-communists look foolish; they have been foolish all along to believe in Matusow's testimony and the anti-communist conspiracy theories. As Herblock's cartoon underlines, beginning in the mid-1950s, "Much of the concern [...] shifted from the conspirators to the conspiracy theorists" (Dean, *Publicity's* 58). Throughout much of American history, it had been considered foolish *not* to believe in the existence of conspiracies or not to heed warnings about perfidious plots, but starting in the mid-1950s, it was increasingly considered foolish and ridiculous to believe in or spread conspiracy theories.

"Exactly! There's A Plot To Make Us Look Foolish"



FIGURE I.1 A 1955 Herblock Cartoon, © The Herb Block Foundation

This change in the status of conspiracy theory from legitimate to illegitimate knowledge has largely remained unnoticed in the research on conspiracy theory. While many scholars have commented on the illegitimate status of conspiracy theory in public discourse and the effective use of the term itself as a two-word counter-argument (cf. Clarke; Husting and Orr; Uscinski and Parent), there is, to date, no study that has investigated how and why this shift has occurred or looked at the effects of the stigmatization of conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists. Wood has briefly hinted at such a shift toward the end of his article on conspiracy theories in the 18th century, in which he argues that conspiracy theories lost their appeal in the 19th century when “sensitive and reflective observers increasingly saw the efficient causes of events becoming detached from particular self-acting individuals and receding from view” (441). Lance deHaven-Smith has observed the increasingly negative connotation and increasing usage of the term “conspiracy theory” since the 1960s, but has falsely suggested – not just in his book but also as a guest on *The Alex Jones Show* – that the term was introduced by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to counter conspiracy theories, specifically those about the Kennedy assassination (21); as Andrew McKenzie-McHarg has shown, however, the compound was first used in the late 19th century (2).

A more valuable insight is provided by Bratich, who claims that “the hegemonic meanings[] positioned conspiracy theories as illegitimate knowledges” (7). In his study, he focuses on “conspiracy panics” – which should more aptly be called “conspiracy theory panics”: just as mainstream discourse has “‘problematize[d]’ conspiracy theories as a relation between power and thought” (13), Bratich shows, it has initiated discussions about the dangers and harm inherent in conspiracy theorizing. “[T]he panic here is over a particular form of thought,” conspiracy theory’s epistemological foundations, Bratich writes, and explains that “Th[is] scapegoating of conspiracy theories provides the conditions for social integration and political rationality. Conspiracy panics help to define the normal modes of dissent” (11). For him, conspiracy theory is both a type of narrative and a sign of narrative disqualification (4): he contends that only because the term conspiracy theory came into existence and was used to denounce a specific worldview, conspiracy theories like the ones produced by Jones can be conceptualized and marked as a problem. Bratich thus assumes an extreme Foucauldian position and goes as far as to suggest that conspiracy theories only “come to exist as objects when they come to exist as objects of concern” (160), which neglects the fact that, as Butter points out, conspiracy theories existed long before the term itself was coined (*Plots* 289).

In his study of conspiracy theories from the Salem witchcraft crisis to the Red Scare of the 1950s, Butter also convincingly shows that conspiracy theories continued to be viewed as a widely accepted epistemological model until well into the 1950s. It was only in the 1960s that conspiracy theorists came to “be[] excluded from mainstream discourse” and their claims “[we]re invariably dismissed” (*Plots* 284–86). He compares the problematization of conspiracy theory to the labeling and delegitimizing of racism, homophobia, sexism, and xenophobia and holds that precisely because such beliefs are marked as problematic they are not on the rise,

but rather have become increasingly visible in public discourse (290). While he stresses that conspiracy theories have retained their commonsensical appeal, he also explicitly counters the argument about the mainstreaming of conspiracy theorizing (290). Because of his diachronic approach, however, Butter only addresses the problematization of conspiracy theory in his introductory and concluding chapters; neither Bratich, who mostly deals with examples from the 21st century, nor Butter focuses on or accounts for the paradigm shift.

The first aim of this book is to do precisely that: to thoroughly trace the shifting status of conspiracy theory in the mid-20th century and the emergence of what Bratich has called an “anti-conspiracy theory discourse” (18) – a discourse on the legitimacy, or rather, illegitimacy of conspiracy theory. While the term conspiracy theory came to be used in forensics and legal proceedings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to somewhat neutrally describe a hypothesis to account for a possible crime, the term developed its second, much more negative strand in the 1940s and 1950s, as scholars, first and foremost Karl Popper, began to disqualify the epistemological foundations of conspiracist beliefs (cf. McKenzie-McHarg 2). They both popularized the term “conspiracy theory” itself but also effectively delegitimized and stigmatized conspiracy theories. Initially mostly an elite discourse, perpetuated by scientists, intellectuals, and left-leaning journalists concerned about the impact of totalitarian regimes in Eastern and Western Europe during World War II, threats to the autonomy of the sciences, and the influence of polarizing, populist politicians in the U.S. during the Red Scare and the Goldwater movement in the 1960s, the ideas, arguments, and terms circulating in the discourse on conspiracy theory eventually also trickled down into other spheres of American culture. Rather than the result of a plot designed to make conspiracy theorists foolish, as the HUAC members in Herblock’s 1955 cartoon allege, the stigmatization of conspiracy theory is a complex and continuous process that I view, in line with Foucault’s notion of “problematization,” as “the totality of discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought” (Foucault, *Politics* 247; cf. Bratich 13). Just as Bratich, I draw on the sociology of knowledge and operate with a Foucauldian conception of knowledge, to demonstrate how the term conspiracy theory was constituted as an object for thought in a play of binaries between what was considered true and false, rational and irrational, legitimate and illegitimate.

Although I believe that conspiracy theory was fully stigmatized in public discourse by the end of the 1960s, I neither intend to pinpoint the paradigm shift to a specific year or date, nor do I perceive of the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge as a fixed and permanent one. While I do not view the 1980s as the endpoint of the developments that I chart here, the main focus of this book lies on the 1950s to the 1980s, because, on the one hand, this is the period in which conspiracy theory scholarship emerged as a field of research and conspiracy theory was most actively and effectively delegitimized. On the other hand, to trace the status of conspiracy theory beyond the 1980s would force me to examine the impact of Internet technologies, the rise of social media, and the polarization and

fragmentation of political and media landscapes in the 21st century in great detail, which would go well beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, I am aware that the line separating legitimate from illegitimate knowledges is an ideal-constructionist distinction which plays down the fact that such boundaries and regulating principles are constantly and continuously articulated and challenged. As I acknowledge in the Conclusion, developments in politics and the media in recent decades may have augmented such challenges and conditioned a partial de-stigmatization of conspiracy theory. Again in line with Michel Foucault, I do not “imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one,” but rather “conceive discourse [...] as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (*History* 100). Yet the conception of such discursive boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge ultimately also allows me to grasp and describe the changes in the status of conspiracy theory that I find instrumental in understanding the trajectory of conspiracy theory since the mid-20th century.

As discursive formations are always characterized by fluctuation, articulation, and contestation, the second aim of this book is to investigate how the stigmatization of conspiracy theory has affected the form, structure, and production of texts that promote conspiracy scenarios as well as the self-positioning of those who continue to believe in or postulate conspiracy theories in a culture that largely regards them as problematic. I show that conspiracist accounts increasingly reflected their marginal discursive status as conspiracy theorists began to modify the ways in which they presented their conspiracist claims: they either adapted to the criticism of conspiracy theory voiced by intellectuals and journalists – or they rejected it. Some conspiracy theorists thus appealed to a mainstream audience biased toward conspiracy theorizing by resorting to an evasive rhetorical style characterized by a high degree of self-reflexivity, in effect illustrating what Dean writes about conspiracy theories in general: “Most fail to delineate any conspiracy at all. They simply counter conventionally available narratives with questions, suspicions, and allegations that, more often than not, resist coherent emplotment or satisfying narrative resolution” (*Publicity's* 51). Early conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination, for instance, produced at a time when arguments put forth by Hofstadter and others had begun to trickle down into mainstream discourse, avoided the semantic field of “conspiracy” or “plot” altogether, used rhetorical questions, and focused on specific details rather than to draw coherent conspiracy scenarios.

Since the late 1960s and even more so the 1970s, however, more and more conspiracy theorists have eschewed this self-reflexivity and, impervious to or outright dismissive of the criticism of conspiracy theory, explicitly use words like “conspiracy” and “plot” and promote large-scale conspiracy scenarios, what Michael Barkun calls “superconspiracy theories” (6). In contrast to event conspiracy theories (e.g. those that speculate on the Kennedy assassination or the moon landing) and systemic conspiracy theories (which claim that a specific group or organization is planning to take over power, such as McCarthy’s anti-communist or

Morse's anti-Catholic conspiracy theories), superconspiracy theories link both event and systemic conspiracy theories into a sprawling conspiracist history that involves countless players and spans across the globe (6). Typically, such superconspiracy theories do not spread fears about an "enemy without," a foreign or outside power or organization plotting the demise of the community, but about the "enemy within": these encompass subversives or spies, as in the anti-communist conspiracy theories, as well as corrupted politicians, presidents, and institutions that are perceived and portrayed as vague and diffuse threats (6; Dean, *Publicity's* 70; Knight, *Kennedy* 96; Olmsted, *Real* 4). As a prime example of a superconspiracy theory, Jones's version of the New World Order theories targets U.S. presidents, almost the entire judiciary and executive branches, shadowy banking elites, and the military-industrial complex, all of whom are said to operate both globally and from within the confines of American democracy and economy.

Scholars who have examined the origins and features of superconspiracy theories largely agree that they are a product of the 20th century. As Butter and others have argued, conspiracy theories in their "modern" form are a product of the Enlightenment (*Plots* 11; cf. Popper, *High Tide* 95). While conspiracy theories initially targeted metaphysical threats, they came to focus on human agents in the second half of the 18th century and increasingly spread fears about conspirators operating at a national or even global level, rather than on a limited, local scale (Butter, *Plots* 11–12). According to Barkun, superconspiracy theories, in return, have been popularized by "star" conspiracy theorists such as David Icke, a British former soccer player and commentator, and Jones since the 1980s (6), while Lee has shown that they originated from Great Britain where Nesta Helen Webster first spun theories linking anti-Semitic ideas with warnings about the Illuminati, other secret societies, and various social movements (68). Webster's ideas were imported to the U.S. by the anti-Semitic evangelist Gerald Winrod in the 1930s and then further disseminated by Robert Welch, the founder of the right-wing John Birch Society, in the early 1960s (77, 79). Olmsted, in contrast, sees the rise in "anti-government" conspiracy theories as inextricably linked to the rise of the national security state since World War I (*Real* 4).

In examining the changing style, form, and forum of conspiracy theories since the 1950s, however, this book shows that the superconspiracy theories can be read as a direct effect of the stigmatization of conspiracy theory. In fact, I claim that the discourse on conspiracy theory not only articulated new markers of legitimate knowledge and rules for speaking about or alleging conspiracies, it also conditioned the emergence of a veritable counter-discourse on conspiracy theory and conspiracist counter-culture, of which Jones may be the most prominent member today. Only because conspiracy theory has been stigmatized by mainstream discourse, does Jones attack the political and cultural elite in his conspiracist rants; only because mainstream discourse has dismissively labeled him a conspiracy theorist and positioned him on the discursive fringes, is he able to build a (corporate) identity that reframes and rebrands dissent and opposition to mainstream discourse into a subject position that openly and publicly claims and celebrates the stigma attached to conspiracy theorizing.

As Foucault explains, “Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (*History* 100–01). While discourses negotiate what is sayable and unsayable at certain points, filter the illegitimate from the legitimate, they also open up new spaces and subject positions for those seemingly regulated by the hegemonic order (cf. Birchall 10). Counter-discourse is thus “a discourse against power” (Foucault and Deleuze 209): “a space in which the formerly voiceless might begin to articulate their desires – to counter the domination of prevailing authoritative discourses” (Moussa and Scapp 88) and to resist or challenge prevailing orthodoxies. As conspiracy theorists in the 1970s increasingly accepted their marginal discursive position, they began to construct identities in opposition to mainstream culture, often interpreting the mainstream’s dismissal of conspiracy theory as another sign of the superconspiracy’s omnipotence (cf. Barkun 28), and explicitly addressing and criticizing the stigmatization of conspiracy theory in their texts. While many of these conspiracy theorists were part of a larger left-leaning counter-culture, others, such as Robert Welch and the John Birch Society, operated in right-wing counter-cultures and grassroots organizations. As they created new, independent dissemination channels, such as zines and newsletters, to circulate their productions, they further propelled the counter-discourse on conspiracy theory and even built entire counter-knowledge industries.

The online communities of conspiracy theorists today and the commercial success of conspiracy theory celebrities like Jones can be seen as products – and immediate side-effects – of the interplay between discourse and counter-discourse since the 1960s and 1970s, the discursive formation of conspiracy theory as a problem. Rather than rely on official, heavily regulated channels of publication, Jones distributes his conspiracy theories through his own website and YouTube channel, which are considerably less or hardly regulated. Through his effective marketing of his outsider status he offers identifying connections for those who feel equally outside or rejected by mainstream culture. The same can be said about Donald Trump’s conspiracist election campaign of 2016, which was based on an opposition to liberal orthodoxies and promised to reclaim any type of stigmatized knowledge, from conspiracism to sexism and xenophobia, deemed “politically incorrect” by mainstream discourse. All of this shows that the stigmatization of conspiracy theory lastingly altered and impacted what Knight refers to as “conspiracy culture” and gave rise to what I would call “conspiracy *theory* culture”: while Knight defines conspiracy culture as an increasing “presumption towards conspiracy as both a mode of explanation and a mode of political operation” since the 1960s (*Conspiracy* 3), I view the period since the 1960s as emblematic of “conspiracy *theory* culture,” which witnessed both changes in the way that mainstream discourse positioned and problematized conspiracy theory and in the way that conspiracy theorists presented conspiracy scenarios.

In tracing the development and effects of conspiracy theory culture, this book follows a two-part structure. Part I, “Theories of Conspiracy Theory,” consists of

one, albeit very long, chapter and focuses on the academic literature on conspiracy theory released between the 1930s and 1980s which helped to form a discourse on conspiracy theory. Here, I also demonstrate that the connotation of the term “conspiracy theory” changed as well: while the term dates back to the second half of the 19th century it only developed into a mainstream vocabulary in the second half of the 20th century, at the same time that scholars increasingly studied the phenomenon of conspiracy theorizing. But more than defining and describing conspiracy theories, the theoretical investigations also actively delegitimized the epistemological foundations of the belief in conspiracy theories. The academic writings can be roughly divided into three phases. The first phase encompasses the beginnings of conspiracy theory research published between the 1930s and the early 1950s when scholars like Harold Lasswell, Karl Popper, and what I refer to as “the Frankfurt School of conspiracy theory” tried to account for the rise in totalitarian regimes in Europe and the instrumentalization of conspiracy theory in national-socialist propaganda. The second phase followed the height of anti-communism during the Red Scare in the mid-1950s and saw scholars like Edward Shils, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Richard Hofstadter forge connections between conspiracism and pseudo-science, pseudo-conservatism, and populism. To reject anti-communist conspiracy theories was also a means to defend the autonomy of the sciences at a time when the hunt for communist subversives affected university departments all over the country. The third phase in the 1960s to mid-1970s can be seen as a reaction to the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater and the (alleged) influence of ultra-conservative grassroots movements like the John Birch Society, which continued to spread anti-communist conspiracy theories but also increasingly targeted the government itself. Consensus historians and pluralists denounced conspiracy theorists as the members of a paranoid, extremist fringe of society and politics, while Hofstadter synthesized the existing scholarship on conspiracy theory by providing an effective categorization of conspiracy theory as a “paranoid style.” As the ideas and arguments expressed by the scholarly writings also circulated outside academia, largely owing to the popularization of science and academization of audiences in the affluent American postwar society, journalists and public intellectuals further perpetuated and developed the discourse on conspiracy theory from the mid-1950s onward.

Part II, “Conspiracy Theory Culture,” consists of three chapters in which I investigate the effects produced by the academic discourse on conspiracy theory – the reactions and rejections – by focusing on three major historical events or periods that preceded, paralleled, and followed the stigmatization of conspiracy theory: the Great Red Scare in the 1950s, the Kennedy assassination in the 1960s, and the Watergate affair in the 1970s. Although I look at a wide variety of sources, including media articles, governmental reports, and conspiracy theories released in books, magazines, or handouts, I largely leave out fictional texts dealing with or staging conspiracy scenarios since the arguments I want to make about stigmatized knowledge and fiction would exceed the scope of this book and will therefore be the subject of a forthcoming separate publication. Chapter 2 proves an exception,

however, because I use, among others, a fictional television series to point at the pervasiveness and legitimacy of conspiracy theory in the 1950s, but this is only because the series performed important cultural work in the Red Scare and actually transcends the boundaries of fictional and non-fictional texts. In fact, Chapter 2 synecdochically traces the changing status and form of conspiracy theory at large by focusing on the figure of Herbert Philbrick. A high-profile informant for the FBI, Philbrick became a cultural icon in the early 1950s and even inspired the hugely successful television series *I Led 3 Lives* (1953–56) because he helped to uncover an alleged communist conspiracy before drifting off into the radical fringe in the early 1960s. Philbrick's career as a celebrity informant was only possible, I claim, because conspiracy theories still produced legitimate knowledge until the mid-1950s, when the anti-communist consensus began to wane.

Because I do not view conspiracy theory as “a symptom of the discourse that *positions* it” (Bratich 16; emphasis in the original), but as text, “a narrative of a possible past and present” (Zwierlein 72), defined by the narrative features listed in the beginning, conspiracy theories exist even when they are not labeled as such and represent a meaning-making cultural practice. Anti-communist conspiracy theories during the Red Scare had significant social and material consequences for those affected by the political and cultural anti-communist fervor, but at the time the term was not (yet) widely used (cf. Butter, *Plots* 289). To study these anti-communist conspiracy theories allows for a glimpse at the form, style, and function of conspiracy theories circulating in a culture that did not view the concept of conspiracy theorizing critically and provides a comparative framework for analyzing discursive and narrative shifts in the following decades.⁵ Chapter 2 thus shows, first, how texts, above all Philbrick's autobiography and the television series based on it, created the image of a vast communist conspiracy, while pointing at a struggle for discursive authority between private citizens like Philbrick and institutions like the FBI which anticipates the struggle between conspiracy theories and official accounts in later years. To underline that the problematization of conspiracy theory contributed to the decline of the anti-communist consensus and affected the form of conspiracy theory, the chapter then compares different conspiracist accounts produced by two notable anti-communists in the early 1960s: Fred Schwarz, founder of the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade (CACC), and Robert Welch, founder of the John Birch Society. Conspiracy theorists either embraced their marginalized subject position and developed large-scale conspiracy scenarios, or modified the conspiracist rhetoric and targeted mainstream audiences. These two strategies anticipate the developments I trace in the following two chapters.

Chapters 3 and 4 are structured in similar fashion: both focus, on the one hand, on the power struggles between official versions of the Kennedy assassination and Watergate respectively, and on conspiracist accounts about these events on the other. Revising the widespread notion that the Kennedy assassination and Watergate were turning points that contributed to a mainstreaming of conspiracy theorizing, I claim that the two events are important for understanding the status of conspiracy theory since the Cold War era because they show how conspiracy

theories mainly came to be seen as a problem while those who clung to such beliefs began to develop new channels of production and dissemination and new templates and tropes.

Chapter 3 thus investigates how the stigmatization of conspiracy theory affected the ways in which officials, the mainstream media, and private citizens constructed and interpreted the Kennedy assassination. Various media and official governmental reports, including those released by the Warren Commission in 1964, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (NCCPV) in 1969, and the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) in 1979, both perpetuated and developed the discourse on conspiracy theory and continued to (re)define and delegitimize the concept of conspiracy theory. Officials and journalists not only echoed the language of the academic discourse described in the first chapter but also worked with a narrow, legal notion of conspiracy to contrast the conspiracist accounts circulating at the time. These conspiracy theories can be categorized chronologically: early accounts still appealed to a mainstream audience as they did not sketch out any large-scale conspiracy scenarios, avoided words like “plot” or “conspiracy,” and instead resorted to asking questions. Later texts, in contrast, largely eschewed the markers of rational, accepted dissent established by the discourse on conspiracy theory: they explicitly used conspiracist language, developed complex conspiracy scenarios alleging that the government and official institutions were involved in the assassination, and addressed an emerging subculture open to ideas of conspiracy. Internal quarrels among conspiracy theorists in the late 1960s about proper forms and modes of dissent show that they had grown fully aware of the costs and consequences of voicing conspiracy theories.

The developments traced in the previous chapters continued throughout the 1970s and beyond. By looking at press reports about the Watergate scandal, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s *All the President’s Men* (1974), and autobiographies written by the Watergate conspirators, I examine how official discursive constructions of the event presented this actual conspiracy at a time when conspiracy theory produced and represented illegitimate knowledge. Media accounts of Watergate employed a very narrow notion of conspiracy, referring to the event as a “criminal conspiracy” and to Nixon as an “unindicted co-conspirator” in the legal sense of the term, and branded the Watergate conspirators as paranoid conspiracy theorists to distance themselves from conspiracist accounts. In a series of close readings of different conspiracist accounts about Watergate, I trace the emergence of the counter-discourse on conspiracy theory and investigate the form, style, function, and production of so-called superconspiracy theories. More and more conspiracy theorists ceased to appeal to mainstream audiences, rebranded terms like “conspiracy theory,” and even viewed the public’s rejection of conspiracy theorizing as proof of a large-scale conspiracy, which became constitutive for the conspiracy theorists’ collective and individual identity. Furthermore, the counter-discourse helped to shape what Birchall calls a “knowledge network” (45): conspiracy theorists developed alternate dissemination strategies and publication channels and even founded magazines like *Minority of One* or *Steamshovel* geared toward a niche

audience of the conspiracist like-minded. At the same time, the superconspiracy theories of the 1970s established templates for conspiracist discourse that remain the dominant form of conspiracy theorizing until today, as they easily allow for the integration of new events and actors. These “knowledge networks” and conspiracist counter-cultures can be viewed as predecessors to the online and offline communities of conspiracy theorists in the 21st century. Therefore, the chapter ends with a brief outlook on the status of conspiracy theory in the 1980s and beyond, but points out that much of what has been argued in the chapter still holds true today: while conspiracy theories simultaneously exist in popular, mainstream, and counter-culture, conspiracy theory largely continues to produce and represent stigmatized knowledge. Even Ronald Reagan, whose policies and speeches marked a return to the anti-communist worldview of the early Cold War era, adhered to the markers articulated by the discourse on conspiracy theory and avoided using terms like “conspiracy” and located the conspiratorial enemy outside American culture and politics.

The Conclusion faces the inevitable question of to what extent the improbable advent of Donald Trump as well as larger changes in media landscapes and the public sphere have impacted conspiracy theory culture and caused a partial destigmatization of conspiracy theory. A brief look at the election of 2016 already reveals that conspiracist rhetoric has made a comeback in official political discourse as Trump and, for instance, Bernie Sanders and his supporters resorted to conspiracy theorizing in their populist campaigns. The simultaneous presence of the “anti-conspiracy theory discourse” – the public reactions to and rejections of Trump’s conspiracist rhetoric – underlines that conspiracy theory is still largely considered an illegitimate epistemological model. Nevertheless, the polarization and diversification of media outlets and emergence of political echo chambers have nevertheless also divided the public sphere and challenged the influence of traditional gatekeepers of knowledge. At the same time, I show that the opposition to mainstream discourse was and is key to the successful marketing of Trump as an anti-intellectual, anti-Establishment candidate just as it helped to launch the careers of Alex Jones or the right-wing media phenomenon Milo Yiannopolous who rely on the continuing stigmatization of their claims for the construction of their (corporate) identities. Finally, I look at the prevalence of conspiracist tweets, memes, and conspiracy rumors during the election to question whether complexity is still a defining narrative feature for conspiracy theory. While the processes of the stigmatization of conspiracy theory and the establishment of the counter-discourse reflect the dominant “regime of truth” of the 1950s to 1980s, the 2016 canvass, which saw an almost equal share of conspiracy theorizing and histrionics about conspiracy theory, reflects on current “dominant forms of rationality” (Bratich 19) – whether it also reflects a change in the regime of truth is, to a large degree, still a developing story.

By tracing the emergence of conspiracy theory culture, this book addresses several of the desiderata in conspiracy theory research that Knight has identified in a 2014 article. As it investigates the shift in the status and connotation of conspiracy

theory and the delegitimizing processes, it sheds light on the history and origins of the concept of conspiracy theory (“Plotting” 346). It also examines more closely the kind of “conspiracy (theory) panics” that Bratich has described and the effects they have on the production and dissemination of conspiracy theory (347). The book further reveals that conspiracy theorists indeed developed strategies which “undermin[ed] the force of the delegitimation of dissent,” as Knight has speculated (347). Moreover, throughout the book, I look at different modes of transmission of conspiracy theory and, briefly toward the end, examine how the advance of the Internet has impacted conspiracy theory culture (364–66). Finally, the findings offered here also contribute to current debates about the dangers and societal impact of conspiracy theorizing (367–68). The marginal status of conspiracy theory since the 1960s strongly suggests that the influence of conspiracy theories has decreased in comparison to previous centuries. At the same time, conspiracy theorizing has not lost its entertaining, interpretive, and even financial appeal, and since the influence of gatekeepers has waned in recent years and media landscapes have become increasingly fragmented, conspiracy theories might even have become partly de-stigmatized. Despite renewed demands to conspiracy theory scholars to provide a “cure” for conspiracy theorizing (cf. Sunstein and Vermeule), or to increase efforts to debunk conspiracy theories, the fact that conspiracy theories continue to produce individual and collective identities, despite their stigma, shows the difficulty, and to a certain extent also futility, of developing such a cure.

Notes

- 1 My terminology draws on distinctions and definitions that Michael Butter has made (*Plots* 1n1): I use “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theories” synonymously and in line with the definition above. Conspiracy theorizing refers to the practice of developing and postulating conspiracy theories; the adjective “conspiracist” refers to texts or explanations that muster as conspiracy theories; and “conspiratorial” describes the actions of the alleged conspirators. “Conspiracy theorists” are those who believe in, design, or spread conspiracy theories, and “conspiracism” is a worldview informed by conspiracy theorizing.
- 2 Brian Keeley suggests differentiating between “warranted” and “unwarranted conspiracy theories (UCTs)” (51). A defining feature of UCTs is, according to Keeley, their opposition of official explanations and narratives and a “focus on errant data” (51–52; also cf. Coady, “Introduction” 2). While it may be true of most conspiracy theories released since the 1960s that they counter or at least question official accounts, the example of the colonists’ conspiracy theories shows that this was not always the case; during the Revolutionary War, conspiracy theory *was* the predominant mode of explanation and the colonists’ conspiracist interpretation of the fight for independence *was* the official account. Moreover, I do not believe that categorizations such as Keeley’s are feasible. Even during the Watergate scandal when reporters like Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein tried to find evidence for the Nixon administration’s involvement in the various conspiracies, their texts still adhered to the conventions of journalistic writing, whereas conspiracy theories about the Watergate scandal are completely different in style and form and usually exaggerate and distort the actual conspiracies (cf. Chapter 4).
- 3 For a similar argument cf. Olmsted, *Real* 2; Barkun 2; Keeley 45.
- 4 Conspiracy theories are, of course, not at all exclusive to the U.S., although a disproportionately large number of studies dealing with American conspiracy theorizing has created this impression (cf. Butter, *Plots* 2–3).

- 5 While I acknowledge that it is somewhat problematic to both analyze the discursive emergence, changing connotation, and delegitimization of the term “conspiracy theory” and to apply the same term to a group of texts, there is no way out of this conundrum because I am interested in the effects of and changes provoked by the stigmatization of conspiracy theory.

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NOTES

Introduction

- 1 My terminology draws on distinctions and definitions that Michael Butter has made (*Plots* 1n1): I use “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy theories” synonymously and in line with the definition above. Conspiracy theorizing refers to the practice of developing and postulating conspiracy theories; the adjective “conspiracist” refers to texts or explanations that muster as conspiracy theories; and “conspiratorial” describes the actions of the alleged conspirators. “Conspiracy theorists” are those who believe in, design, or spread conspiracy theories, and “conspiracism” is a worldview informed by conspiracy theorizing.
- 2 Brian Keeley suggests differentiating between “warranted” and “unwarranted conspiracy theories (UCTs)” (51). A defining feature of UCTs is, according to Keeley, their opposition of official explanations and narratives and a “focus on errant data” (51–52; also cf. Coady, “Introduction” 2). While it may be true of most conspiracy theories released since the 1960s that they counter or at least question official accounts, the example of the colonists’ conspiracy theories shows that this was not always the case; during the Revolutionary War, conspiracy theory *was* the predominant mode of explanation and the colonists’ conspiracist interpretation of the fight for independence *was* the official account. Moreover, I do not believe that categorizations such as Keeley’s are feasible. Even during the Watergate scandal when reporters like Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein tried to find evidence for the Nixon administration’s involvement in the various conspiracies, their texts still adhered to the conventions of journalistic writing, whereas conspiracy theories about the Watergate scandal are completely different in style and form and usually exaggerate and distort the actual conspiracies (cf. Chapter 4).
- 3 For a similar argument cf. Olmsted, *Real* 2; Barkun 2; Keeley 45.
- 4 Conspiracy theories are, of course, not at all exclusive to the U.S., although a disproportionately large number of studies dealing with American conspiracy theorizing has created this impression (cf. Butter, *Plots* 2–3).
- 5 While I acknowledge that it is somewhat problematic to both analyze the discursive emergence, changing connotation, and delegitimization of the term “conspiracy theory” and to apply the same term to a group of texts, there is no way out of this conundrum because I am interested in the effects of and changes provoked by the stigmatization of conspiracy theory.

Chapter 1

- 1 Parts of this chapter have been published as “John Birch Blues’: The Problematicization of Conspiracy Theory in the Early Cold-War Era.” *COPAS* 15.1 (2014). Web. 1 Sept. 2018.
- 2 The term “conspiracy theory” was also used in other newspaper articles during the Tilton-Beecher Scandal (cf. “Summary”; “Press Comments”).
- 3 The term “plot theory” was alternatively but far less frequently used, for instance in a 1881 article on the Garfield assassination (cf. “Guiteau’s Mad Freaks”), and as late as 1979 in an article on the Kennedy assassination (cf. Herbers E5).
- 4 For the news coverage on the assassination of Garfield and MacVeagh’s conspiracy theory see “Theory: The Conspiracy”; “Guiteau’s Mad Freaks.”
- 5 Popper does not use the term “conspiracy theory” in the first edition published in 1945; his musings about conspiracy theorizing are only included in later editions, starting with the second edition released in 1952.
- 6 Interestingly, in Remington’s dissertation the two semantic strands still coexist. He attempts to define “the ‘Conspiracy theory,’” but adds that it should rather be called “a peculiar hypothesis” (vii). Self-reflexively he also comments on the academe’s relationship with conspiracy theories and the use of the word “theory”: “the present writer is fully aware that the term ‘theory’ is ordinarily used to denote a more or less plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle offered to explain phenomena. Because, however, there are writers who claim to prove the existence of a conspiracy, and who are firmly convinced that their findings constitute the truth which explains causal-effect relations among people and nations, then from this restricted view – and regardless of the professional historians’ categorical rejection of their theses as unwarranted conjecture – the ideas of these writers may be regarded as a theory held by themselves and their believers” (viii).
- 7 Although the Ngram search visually underlines my argumentation, Ngram of course also offers a slightly simplistic and also problematic view. It only allows a search of those texts that have been scanned by libraries and disregards many other factors which might have influenced the prominence of a term, such as the fact that scientific literature in general has grown in the 20th century (cf. Zhang).
- 8 Despite the controversial and highly critical reception of Freud’s theories among U.S. psychologists, by the 1920s Freud’s psychoanalysis enjoyed enormous popularity in American culture and its influence continued to rise in the following decades (cf. Benjamin Jr. 24).
- 9 For an account of the reception of *The Authoritarian Personality* in the 1950s and 1960s, cf. Roiser. He has shown that reviewers and political scientists initially were highly enthusiastic about the study and noted its relevance (136). While scholars like Edward Shils began to criticize Adorno et al. in the mid-1950s, among other things because the authors did not distinguish between left-wing and right-wing authoritarianism, the text continued to resonate among left-leaning intellectuals and even in popular culture in the 1960s (138, 141).
- 10 As Alexander Dunst has shown, Hofstadter was deeply influenced by discussions of *The Authoritarian Personality* in a seminar on McCarthyism, offered by Columbia University in 1954, which also inspired his first major essay, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt” (*Madness* 24).
- 11 On the reception of *The Authoritarian Personality* see Walter-Busch 127–33.
- 12 Of course, conspiracy theories in the 19th century, such as the so-called Slave Power conspiracy theory, attacked very specific groups (cf. Butter, *Plots* 190), and, as I show in Chapter 4, theories featuring large-scale international plots, what Michael Barkun has termed theories of “superconspiracies” (6), only gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s.
- 13 While I focus on *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, I have also included *Conjectures and Refutations* here which was only published in 1963. But first, some of the segments in *Conjectures* date back to the late 1940s and early 1950s, and second, the volume helps tremendously to shed light on the theoretical foundations of Popper’s thought in *The Open Society*.
- 14 Gardner’s book, for instance, was issued as a paperback.

- 15 In a strange twist, as Eric Foner observes in his biography of Hofstadter, Hofstadter's first teaching post at New York City College in 1941 only opened up because the professor who held the position before him was a member of the Communist Party and a victim of early blacklisting – he was Eric Foner's father, Jack Foner (598, 603).
- 16 The discontented of the 1950s that Hofstadter and Lipset describe in their texts are portrayed in similar fashion to the “deplorables,” the Trump voters during the 2016 presidential election; not surprisingly, many commentators have used “status anxiety” as an explanation for the disgruntled voters in 2016 (cf. Siegel).
- 17 The term “crank” is very commonly used in literature of the 1940s and 1950s (Lowenthal and Guterman 138), but it is also a specific subtype of “the authoritarian personality type” with a tendency towards paranoia (cf. Dunst, *Madness* 31).
- 18 Hitchcock's article “The McCarthyism of the Left” shows that the extremist label was not reserved for the right wing only but also applied to radicals on the left.
- 19 Hofstadter explicitly cites Lasswell in the introduction to *The Paranoid Style* (xxxiii).
- 20 To a certain extent, Davis here echoes Brian Keeley's later suggestion to differentiate between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories (51–52).
- 21 Merely judged by the numbers, Davis was right. Two Harris polls taken in May 1967 and in October 1975 found that more than two-thirds of Americans believed that President Kennedy's assassination had been the product of a conspiracy (Fenster 244). Yet, of course, no polls were conducted in the 18th and 19th centuries that could have corroborated Davis's argument.
- 22 Strictly speaking, of course, the term translates as “love for conspiring,” but that is evidently not the meaning that Donner had in mind.

Chapter 2

- 1 I use the term “Red Scare of the 1950s” to refer to what is also commonly called “the Second Red Scare” or “the Great Red Scare.” In line with Ellen Schrecker's periodization, I roughly date the historical period to the time span between 1946 and 1956 (*Many* xviii). While the Red Scare has often been wrongly equated with the career of Joseph McCarthy, as the term “McCarthyism” suggests, the anti-communist consensus existed well before the senator from Wisconsin entered the stage in 1950 (xii). Events in the mid- to late 1940s, such as the Amerasia case, the defection of Elizabeth Bentley, and the Alger Hiss affair, greatly fueled fears of communist subversion, and the anti-communist conspiracy theories continued to prove popular even after McCarthy's censure by the Senate in 1954.
- 2 Ellen Schrecker estimates that several hundred Americans were sent to prison or deported during the Red Scare and 10,000 to 12,000 lost their jobs, but also emphasizes that the widespread fear cannot be measured in terms of numbers (*Many* xv).
- 3 One exception is the administration of Donald Trump, to which I briefly turn in the Conclusion.
- 4 I have chosen the term “informant” in favor of the slightly more pejorative term “informer” as an umbrella term to denote all those who testified against alleged communists.
- 5 Conservatives who were supportive of the anti-communist messages of groups like the CACC or the John Birch Society were hesitant to publicly align themselves with them or defend them (Powers, *Not Without* 295). The fact that Goldwater enjoyed the support of “extremist” groups like the John Birch Society eventually proved to be highly detrimental to his campaign; during the so-called “Bastille Day Announcement” the other contender for the Republican nomination in 1964, Nelson Rockefeller, had already tried to distance himself, and the conservatives' cause, from the “Radical Right” (Reinhard 176–77).
- 6 As Michael Butter has shown, this change already occurred during the 1930s when, in light of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, communist ideology increasingly found supporters among Americans. Beginning in the 1930s as well, anti-communists began to perceive of the communist menace as an organized effort to subvert the country and compared it to a “Trojan Horse” (*Plots* 224).

- 7 At the peak of the informant program, between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, around 1,000 informants had infiltrated the CPUSA and its front organizations (Schrecker, *Many* 228).
- 8 MacDonald, for instance, writes that actor Richard Carlson admitted in an interview that the FBI had supervised scripts of the show (5); Doherty (144) and Grams (37), in contrast, claim that the FBI was not involved in the production at all. Doherty cites an internal memo, sent by Hoover to Clyde Tolson, in which the FBI director states: “It is recommended that we tell Philbrick frankly that the Bureau has no interest at all in seeing any of the devices or investigation techniques used by the Bureau publicized on TV and that no assistance in this regard can be given” (144).
- 9 The video is available online, but I have not been able to verify the year that the film was released; since it refers to the Cuban Missile Crisis it must have been made after 1962, but probably also prior to the Kennedy assassination since the event is not mentioned.
- 10 Comparing communism to a virus or cancer was a common analogy during the Red Scare. Hoover viewed communism as “a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic” and Senator Hubert Humphrey called it a “political cancer” (qtd. in Schrecker, *Many* 133, 144).
- 11 As early as 1950 the American journalist and CIA aide Edward Hunter coined the term “brainwashing.” He described certain methods with which communist scientists had experimented in order to influence and control the thinking of U.S. prisoners of war held captive in North Korean camps located at the Manchurian border (Seed 27). Anti-communists like Hoover picked up the idea of brainwashing and turned fears about conformism into a nightmarish metaphor of an invisible enemy within who had been manipulated by stereotypical “mad scientists.” As Timothy Melley has shown, the brainwashing trope became popular in the 1950s but also continued to be employed in the 1960s, defeating a “marginaliz[ation] by the mid-1950s as a symbol of anticommunist hyperbole” (148), because it helped to maintain a belief in the autonomy of the self “by understanding social control as the work of an exceptionally powerful, willful, rational, and malevolent human agent – the brain-washer” (149).

Chapter 3

- 1 In addition, the doctors who had operated on the president spread confusing information about the source of Kennedy’s head wound at the impromptu press conference held at Parkland Hospital (Zelizer 55).
- 2 In the following, I refer to and cite the text by using the abbreviation *Warren Report*.
- 3 While the *Nation’s* coverage of the conflicting views on the Kennedy assassination shows that the press at the time tried to draw a more nuanced image than in 1964, the magazine’s contradictory stance also suggests that news outlets were not above trying to market the controversies and conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination.
- 4 Previous investigations were conducted by the Warren Commission, the NCCPV, the Rockefeller Commission, and the Church Committee. As neither the Rockefeller nor the Church investigation offer relevant insights about the status of conspiracy theory I have omitted them from my analysis.
- 5 I refer to these private citizens investigating the Kennedy assassination alternatively as “assassination researchers” and “conspiracy theorists,” because I deem these to be more neutral than the many derogatory terms with which they have been labeled.
- 6 As Kathryn Olmsted reports, Sylvia Meagher came close to losing her job at the United Nations as she was questioned about her loyalty in 1953; Harold Weisberg lost his job at the State Department in 1947 because he did not pass the loyalty test; and Fred Cook had written about McCarthyism as a journalist (*Real* 131–32).

Chapter 4

- 1 Hofstadter explicitly uses the phrase “the conspiracy theory of history” in *The Age of Reform* (77). Also cf. Neumann 279; Rovere, “Easy” 12.
- 2 On the cultural work of the *Godfather* films cf. Jenkins 48. He argues that *The Godfather: Part II*, in particular, “is a classic Watergate-era movie” because it deals with “themes of distrust and paranoia” and the sanctimony of “‘legitimate’ politics and business” (48).
- 3 A year later, Gary Allen in *The Rockefeller File* (1976) asked whether “Nixon [Was] Watergated?” and argued that “Kissinger, Rockefeller and the CIA were obviously deeply involved” in the ultimately staged break-in at the DNC headquarters (176).
- 4 Prouty was also an active assassination conspiracy theorist and inspired the figure X in Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (Olmsted, *Challenging* 77).

Conclusion

- 1 The balloon had actually crashed during a test run by the U.S. Army Air Force as part of their secret “Project Mogul,” which was meant to help detect atomic bomb tests conducted by the Soviet Union.
- 2 For the ways in which Republicans dealt with the Birther conspiracy theories on- and off-camera, cf. Butter, “The Birthers” 300.
- 3 Like Trump, Flynn mostly used his Twitter account to spread conspiracy theories and rumors about Hillary Clinton, usually by posting links to alternative news sites and blogs that spread fake news. His son and top aide Michael G. Flynn did so, too, including allegations that Clinton was member of a pedophile sex ring based in, among others, the basement of a D.C. pizza restaurant – the infamous “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory (cf. Carroll; Kaczynski and McDermott).
- 4 In light of these parallels, it would be interesting to compare and contrast conspiracy theorizing on the political left and right in greater detail, as well as mainstream discourse’s reactions to both, especially since I have been met with irritation or outright disbelief every time I have publicly pointed at similarities between Sanders’ and Trump’s rhetoric. This would also help to counter claims such as those by Colin Dickey in *The New Republic* who believes that “conspiracy theory – the idea that sinister forces are secretly engaged in a host of elaborate plots to manipulate virtually every aspect of our lives – has been fairly rare on the American left,” but that this has changed since the 2016 election. On the contrary, as I have shown throughout this book, the counter-discourse on conspiracy theory was forged, in equal measure, by those on the right and the left, and yet I have not always paid attention to the qualitative and quantitative differences between left-wing and right-wing conspiracy theories.
- 5 While Trump’s conspiracism has not ended since he has moved into the White House, and there are also many left-wing conspiracy theories circulating about his presidency and his campaign’s ties to Russia, I will mostly focus on examples from the presidential canvass in 2016.
- 6 For instance, a study by psychologists Karen M. Douglas and Daniel Jolley, “Prevention is Better than Cure: Addressing Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories,” has found that the attempt to debunk anti-vaccination rumors or conspiracy theories only affirmed the belief of those who were familiar with such theories.
- 7 One of the reasons for the differences between Jones’s elaborate narratives and Trump’s evasive statements is that the two pursue different goals. Chiefly driven by economic interests, Jones’s elaborate conspiracy theories quite simply help to fill airtime and, by constructing what can almost be called multi-episode narrative arcs, to invite audiences to tune into his program again. While Trump’s rhetoric may simply be construed as a sign that he has decided to tone down his provocative rhetoric since his inauguration, his unabated proclivity to spread conspiracist content through his Twitter account even in his capacity as president does not reinforce this impression. Rather, his statements are

evocative of a conspiracist brand of populist politics. As Mark Fenster writes, while all conspiracy theories are inherently populist, including those spread by Jones, as they “call[] believers and audiences together and into being as ‘the people’ opposed to a relatively secret, elite ‘power bloc’” (89), not all populist movements employ conspiracist rhetorics (84). However, Trump’s invocation of “the people” who “saw things happen” not only reveals the conspiracist *and* populist nature of his rhetoric. By invoking the image of a voter fraud conspiracy – and here it is enough to hint at rather than to spell out the conspiracy theory – Trump constructs an identity for his voters as the honest but neglected “people” who have been deceived by the ruling elites, but who will also eventually help to uncover the truth. Even as a populist, however, Trump’s conspiracy theories are different in form than, for instance, the populist conspiracy theories espoused by Senator Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare (cf. Risen and Risen). While McCarthy also heavily relied on anti-intellectual and apocalyptic imagery, he stood on the Senate floor for hours to postulate his theories or released book-length conspiracist treatises characterized by a certain degree of complexity and attention to detail.

- 8 While the terms are sometimes used interchangeably I view rumor and gossip as vehicles through which conspiracy theories can be transmitted (cf. Sunstein 26). On the difference between rumor and gossip cf. Coady, *What* 87–88.
- 9 This evolution of conspiracy theory – and the extent to which my observations are true has yet to be seen – would also mean that we have to rethink the role and function of the conspiracy theorist as exemplified by previous generations of conspiracy theorists or by fictional ones in cultural productions like *JFK* or *Homeland*. As Mark Fenster has suggested, conspiracy theorists, both real and fictitious, have been motivated by a desire to investigate, to collect evidence, to narrate, to heroically uncover the truth – the conspiracy theorist is a bricoleur who, by interpreting data, merely produces more desire for interpretation because there is always one more piece of evidence to locate and interpret (111). But is someone like Trump or the users who spread rumors on 4chan and Reddit motivated by a similar desire? Do they revel in the spreading of rumors or are taken up in the writing of conspiracy narratives, 140 characters at a time? Either way, there seems to be a difference between the classical conspiracy theorist described by Fenster and the social media theorist or the populist conspiracy theorist who wields conspiracy theories as a tool of “targeted provocation” (Connolly).
- 10 Cf. Schreckinger on the impact of Internet memes on the election.

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