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CONSPIRACY THEORY IN HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND LITERARY STUDIES

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Introduction

Are conspiracy theories a universal part of human nature, an anthropological constant that is hard-wired into our psychology through our shared evolution as a species? Or are conspiracy theories particular ways of making sense of causality and motive, that have their own particular history and dynamic, varying over time and between different cultures and political regimes? Historical, cultural and literary studies start from the assumption that the latter view is more significant than the former in explaining the popularity of conspiracy thinking. For these disciplines, the meaning, style and consequences of believing that nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems and everything is connected are historically and culturally conditioned. Scholars in these disciplines have focused on a variety of elements in their analysis of conspiracy theories: The narrative structures, dynamics, images and metaphors of particular texts; the continuities and recombinations of familiar tropes over time and across cultures; the changing modes of transmission; the social and political context in which conspiracy theories are produced and consumed; and the psychic investment in the forms of interpretation encouraged by conspiracy theories.

This chapter discusses how historical, cultural and literary studies have analysed conspiracy theories. It summarises the key contributions in each field and assesses their strengths and weaknesses. The first section traces the shift from conspiracist interpretations as the norm in the nineteenth century, to their becoming characterised as a flawed approach by the middle of the twentieth century. A more concerted focus on the dangers of conspiracism as a significant aspect of European and American political history came with attempts from a psychohistorical perspective to explain the rise of mass political movements. The second section shows how cultural studies scholars around the turn of the millennium challenged the psychopathologising interpretation of the 'paranoid style' of American politics, instead viewing conspiracy theories as increasingly justified, creative and potentially radical challenges to the status quo. The third section explains how literary scholars have examined the connection between conspiracy plots and narrative plots in literature and film, with a focus on post-war American culture at first, but more recently taking in other historical periods and national traditions. Finally, we consider the discomfiting parallels between the interpretive manoeuvres of conspiracy theory and ideological critique itself, before going on to suggest avenues for future research.

Historical studies

Conspiracy theories may not be an anthropological given but, as several of the contributions to section 5 of this handbook highlight, they are a phenomenon with a long historical tradition (see, for example, Chapters 5.1, 5.2 and 5.10). By contrast, the historiographic engagement with conspiracy theories only began in the twentieth century; earlier historians did not analyse conspiracy theories and their impact on history, but articulated conspiracist interpretations of history themselves. For example, in books that from today's perspective would be classified as contemporary history, Augustin Barruel, John Robison and Johann August Starck promoted a conspiracist understanding of the French Revolution in the first decade of the nineteenth century, blaming the Illuminati and the Freemasons for orchestrating the event (see Chapter 5.3). In similar fashion, the idea that a group of powerful slaveholders – the so-called Slave Power – was controlling the American government and secretly manipulating events to introduce slavery everywhere in the country not only was the founding ideology of the Republican Party (Butter 2014: 198), but it remained the dominant explanation for the outbreak of the Civil War among historians such as Horace Greeley and Henry Wilson until the early twentieth century (Richards 2000: 16).

The longevity of the conspiracist take on history among professional historians is not surprising, as recent studies have shown how normal it was to believe in conspiracy theories in Europe and North America far into the twentieth century (Klausnitzer 2007; Butter 2014). In fact, the status of conspiracy theory as a legitimate form of knowledge only began to be challenged from the 1940s onwards. Sociologists such as Karl Popper, who also coined the modern meaning of the term 'conspiracy theory' in the second volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1950), criticised conspiracy theories for overestimating intentional action and underestimating structural causes and unintended effects. At the same time, writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust, another group of scholars, most notably Theodor Adorno, began to stress the dangers of conspiracy theories and tried to understand which personality types tended to articulate them and why the masses were drawn to authoritarian leader figures (Thalman 2019; see also Chapter 5.10 in this volume). These two traditions finally merged in Richard Hofstadter's seminal essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (1964) in which Hofstadter pathologised belief in conspiracy theories as a form of paranoia and claimed, wrongly, that while conspiracy theories had a long history in the U.S.A., they had always 'been the preferred style only of *minority* movements' (1964: 7 [italics in the original]).

Hofstadter was, however, not the first historian to critically engage with conspiracy theories in the past. As early as 1909, French historian Augustin Cochin challenged the conspiracist historiography of the French Revolution and spoke of 'la thèse du complot' that informed many accounts of this event (1909). A few years later, Vernon Stauffer (1918) examined the New England Illuminati scare of the 1790s (which led to the passing of the Alien and Sedition Acts), without assuming that there was an actual Illuminati plot against the U.S.A. Unlike Cochin, Stauffer did not attempt at all to label or theorise the phenomenon – a particularly powerful instance of conspiracy theorising. This distinguishes him from Charles Beard, who coined the phrase 'Devil Theory of War' in 1936 to criticise conspiracist explanations of the origins of the First World War. Finally, while Hofstadter was developing his ideas about conspiracy theory, Bernard Bailyn was working on a revisionist history of the American Revolution. In the introduction to his edition of pamphlets (1965) and a subsequent monograph (1967), he demonstrated that 'the fear of a comprehensive conspiracy against liberty [...] lay at the heart of the Revolutionary movement' (1965: x).

While Bailyn's book was highly acclaimed and recalibrated the historiography of the Revolutionary period, parts of its reception testify to the harm done by Hofstadter's stigmatising

conceptualisation of conspiracy theory as paranoid and a minority phenomenon to research in the history of conspiracy theories. Linking Bailyn's analysis to Hofstadter's powerful theorisation, a number of historians began to cast Washington, Jefferson and other important figures of the period as paranoid. 'Were the American Revolutionaries mentally disturbed?' begins a seminal essay by Gordon Wood (1982), a student of Bailyn's, in which he takes on such psychohistorical studies and demonstrates in great detail why it was perfectly rational to believe in conspiracy theories in the eighteenth century. However, even Wood refrained from challenging Hofstadter's general argument. In closing, he suggested that conspiracy theorising was a rational way of worldmaking up to the end of the eighteenth century and became quickly irrational after the turn to the nineteenth century, and thus swiftly moved from the centre to the margins of society.

This was unfortunate because Hofstadter's conceptualisation of conspiracy theory as a paranoid minority phenomenon impeded historical research for decades. It left historians with two problematic choices. On the one hand, they could embrace the framing of conspiracy theorising as pathological, but this often led them to underestimate the importance of these theories, or made them dismiss the anxieties that fuelled them far too quickly. In *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (1969), for example, David Brion Davis approached the topic on the basis of Hofstadter's 'paranoid style' and thus, unsurprisingly, arrived at the conclusion that northern allegations had little foundation in truth and were indicators of collective delusion. Also drawing on Hofstadter, Daniel Pipes (1996) blamed the popularity of conspiracy theories in the Arab world on the alleged irrationality of this ethnicity, thus avoiding a discussion of the historical injustices that drove them, and, in a subsequent study (1997), associated the alleged rise of conspiracy theories in the Western world with a decline in rationality.

On the other hand, historians could reject the Hofstadterian framework if they were aware that they were not studying a fringe issue driven by insanity, but this decision left them without any theorisation. Hugh Brogan (1986), for example, wrote of perceived 'plots', detected 'conspiracies' and collective 'paranoia' on nearly every other page in his discussion of the antebellum period in *The Penguin History of the United States of America*. He never mentioned Hofstadter and clearly did not consider what he describes as an irrational minority phenomenon, but, since he had no concept of conspiracy theory, his discussion of the topic is not as precise as it could be. The same holds true for a study that significantly revises Davis's work on the alleged Slave Power plot, Leonard L. Richards's *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination 1780–1860* (2000). Richards argues convincingly that northerners exaggerated southern unity and plotting, but he also acknowledges that they had much cause to complain since the slave states enjoyed an undue influence on the federal level. As with Brogan, however, the lack of a theory of conspiracy theory prevents him from pushing his interpretations further.

European historians engaged even less with manifestations of conspiracy across the ages than their American counterparts from the 1960s to the turn of the century, but there were some notable exceptions. Johannes Rogalla von Bierberstein (1976) wrote a comprehensive history of conspiracy theories in Germany from the eighteenth century to the Second World War in which he highlights how widespread and influential these suspicions were. He thus partly paved the way for a group of German historians whose explorations of historical conspiracy theories were published in two edited volumes (Caumanns, Niendorf 2001; Reinalter 2002). The most influential article in these collections is Pfahl-Traugher's contribution (2002), which develops a theory of conspiracy theory that avoids the pitfalls of the Hofstadterian 'paranoid style'. The same goes for Geoffrey Cubitt's definition (1989), upon which we drew in the introduction to this volume. Cubitt later demonstrated the productivity of his take on conspiracy theories in an analysis of conspiracy theories about the Jesuits in nineteenth-century France (1993).

In the past 20 years, the body of historical research has grown exponentially. Two factors appear to be responsible for this development. First, as discussed below, around the turn of the millennium, cultural studies scholars challenged the psychopathologising interpretation of the 'paranoid style' of American politics, providing theorisations of the phenomenon that allowed historians to approach the issue more neutrally. Matthew Gray (2010), for example, drew on the studies by Fenster (1999), Knight (2000) and Melley (2000) to revise Pipes's (1996) pathologisation of Arab conspiracy theories. Second, the plethora of conspiracy theories generated by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the new visibility of such theories through the rise of the Internet led some scholars to explore the past for similar manifestations. Accordingly, in the past two decades, there have been studies of conspiracy theories in, for example, classical antiquity (Pagán 2004; Roisman 2006), the early modern period (Coward, Swann 2004; Zwielerlein 2013), revolutionary France (Tackett 2000; Linton *et al.* 2010), nineteenth-century Europe (Klausnitzer 2007; Oberhauser 2013), post-war Italy (Girard 2008; Hof 2013) or twentieth-century U.S.A. (Olmsted 2009; Konda 2019). These studies do not pathologise conspiracy theories, but, instead, highlight how popular and influential they were in the periods they focus on.

The latest development in the historiographic engagement with conspiracy theories are diachronic studies that trace the shifting status of conspiracy theories across a longer period of time, or self-reflexively trace the development of the concept of conspiracy theory. Butter (2014) argues that conspiracy theories were more popular and influential in the U.S.A. before the middle of the twentieth century because they were then considered orthodox knowledge. He ascribes their visibility in the past decades (which has led other scholars to conclude that they have gained in popularity) to their relegation to heterodox knowledge, which has turned them into a widely discussed problem. Thalmann (2019) has traced this process of stigmatisation in great detail, providing a history of the discourse on conspiracy theory in which Hofstadter figures as the endpoint of the delegitimisation of this form of knowledge and not, as in earlier accounts, as its beginning. McKenzie-McHarg (2019; see also Chapter 1.1 in this volume) has traced the origins of the term 'conspiracy theory' to the second half of the nineteenth century and investigated its shifts in meaning and increasingly negative connotations up to Hofstadter.

Cultural studies

In the field of cultural studies, too, Hofstadter's notion of the paranoid style set the template for many subsequent studies of conspiracy theories on what they regarded as the unscientific, irrational and extremist aspects of conspiracism (Robins, Post 1997; Barkun 2003). However, around the turn of the millennium, a number of scholars began to challenge the assumptions behind the orthodox position (e.g. Dean 1998; Fenster 1999; Melley 2000; Knight 2000; Birchall 2006; Bratich 2008). Mainly rooted in the discipline of cultural studies, these scholars started from the assumption that the task is not to condemn popular manifestations of conspiracy theory, but to understand their appeal and assess their cultural significance. The aim of these revisionist studies was to make sense of why conspiracist narratives have become so attractive, both for individual believers and cultural forms such as postmodern novels and Hollywood thrillers.

The cultural studies approach thus explicitly rejects the pathologising tendency in much of the work that had followed in the footsteps of Hofstadter. In Rogin's terms (1987), these studies opposed the 'symbolist' focus on the idiosyncratic psychology of conspiracy theorists and instead adopted a 'realist' approach to the all-too-real social and political conditions and vested political interests that made such conspiracy narratives plausible. The focus of analysis was therefore less

individual psychopathology than the collective narratives that communities used to make sense of their worlds. In the post-war U.S.A., conspiracy theories thus constitute ‘logical responses to technological and social change’ (Melley 2000: 14), marked by increasing globalisation, corporatisation and media saturation. For other scholars (Olmsted 2009), seeing the world in terms of vast military-industrial-government conspiracies is an understandable response to the rise of the national security state (see Chapter 4.4 in this volume), with the many well documented examples of official conspiracies, from MK-ULTRA (the CIA’s illegal mind control programme) to the Iran-Contra affair. During the Cold War, the imagination on the part of the authorities of enemies everywhere – at times genuinely fearful, at others cynically exploiting popular suspicion to legitimise the pursuit of otherwise unpalatable policies – fed into the creation of an official culture of secrecy and conspiring, which in turn fuelled an all-too-understandable public distrust of the authorities (Melley 2012).

Likewise, cultural studies scholars have argued that the prominence of conspiracy theories in African-American communities and cultural forms such as hip hop is not a sign of inherent ‘racial paranoia’, as various right-wing commentators alleged (D’Souza 1995: 487). Instead, the circulation of conspiracy rumours is a justifiable reaction to a long history of abuse (sometimes through negligence, or institutional racism, but at others quite deliberate). Washington (2006), for example, documents the long history of dubious science, therapeutic neglect and outright abusive treatment of African Americans by the mainstream American medical community, with the Tuskegee syphilis trials as merely one example in a long litany of scandals. For Washington (as for Turner 1993; Fiske 1994; Knight 2000), explaining the salience of conspiracy theories in terms of the psychological lack of trust on the part of individual believers ignores the warranted untrustworthiness of medical institutions and practices.

According to the cultural studies approach, then, conspiracy theory offers ‘an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age: it makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening way’ (Melley 2000: 8). In short, conspiracism ‘provides an everyday epistemological quick-fix to often intractably complex problems’ (Knight 2000: 8). Many of these studies draw on and extend the analysis of Fredric Jameson, who noted that

conspiracy theories are 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, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content.

(1988: 356)

For Jameson, the obsession with conspiracies in popular film, television and fiction is a symptom of our contemporary inability to see how everything fits together, socially, politically and economically. Conspiracy theories satisfy the popular desire to see how everything is connected, but they mistakenly focus on imagined plots involving shadowy conspirators and high-tech surveillance. Jameson in effect reads conspiracy theory not as a mere symptom of a delusional mind-set, but as an *allegory*, at the level of form rather than content, of the complex social and economic changes of globalisation that cannot be understood in any straightforward way. Jameson’s observations are thus in tune with the cultural studies axiom that popular culture is not merely a side-show but is in itself a site of political contestation.

Like other cultural studies scholars, Jameson starts from the assumption that we need to take the world as we find it. Rather than wishing for a more perfect form of cognitive mapping, we need to see the imaginative potential in ‘degraded’ popular forms like conspiracy theories. The cultural studies approach thus goes even further in its challenge of the Hofstadter paradigm that

tended to present the ‘paranoid style’ of politics as ‘epistemologically, psychologically and morally suspect’ (Harambam 2017: 11). Conspiracy thinking is not merely an inevitable reaction to postmodernity, but at times it is a *creative* response. Far from being a dangerous threat to democracy, conspiracy theories on this line of thinking ‘can in fact play the role of a productive challenge to an existing order – albeit one that excessively simplifies complex political and historical events’ (Fenster 2008 [1999]: 90). In literal terms, conspiracy theories might not be strictly accurate, but they are one of the few popular attempts to address problems of power and secrecy in modern society. Conspiracism, far from being ‘a label dismissively attached to the lunatic fringe’, may instead be ‘an appropriate vehicle for political contestation’ (Dean 1998: 8). For Dean, even seemingly bizarre conspiracy theories such as alien abduction narratives can serve potentially progressive political ends because their very weirdness challenges ‘consensus reality’ that all too often serves the vested interests of the elite.

Other cultural studies scholars focus less on the meaning and function of particular conspiracy theories, than on the conditions of knowledge that create and sustain conspiracy theory as a distinct category. Bratich (2008), for example, argues that the very term ‘conspiracy theory’ is not neutral: It is often pejorative, used by elites to mark out particular beliefs as beyond the pale of rational political discourse. This means that certain ‘extreme’ (in the sense of non-mainstream) forms of political dissent can be delegitimised through what seems like an objective psychological diagnosis. Instead of explaining why ordinary people believe in conspiracy theories, Bratich insists that we need to consider why the spectre of popular conspiracism occasions panic among the elite, and how conspiracy theorists increasingly and self-consciously resist the stigmatisation of their worldview (Harambam, Aupers 2015). Birchall (2006) likewise explores how conspiracy theories can call into question the very boundary between the reasonable and the irrational, the official and the subjugated, given that any attempt to demarcate certain kinds of knowledge as legitimate is only ever a fiction. This is because there is no ultimate ground of justification that sets aside one way of knowing the world as intrinsically legitimate or true. Birchall suggests that the distinction between official and subjugated forms of knowledge is eroding in the present largely because of the influence of the Internet. Like other cultural studies scholars, she emphasises the playful and creative ways people engage with heterodox forms of knowledge.

Cultural studies thus provides a robust challenge to the Hofstadterian approach to conspiracy theories. However, there are more similarities with Hofstadter than might appear at first sight. We need to recognise that cultural studies has much in common with Hofstadter’s focus on the psychological, cultural and symbolic aspects of American politics (Fenster 1999). In contrast to the familiar emphasis in political science on the material realities of partisanship and vested political interests, Hofstadter was concerned with the psychic investment that individuals and groups might have in imagining themselves to be under imminent threat from enemies, both internal and external. His discussion, after all, is concerned with the *paranoid style* of American politics, and he is attuned to both the rhetoric and psycho-social dynamic of conspiracy narratives that are, on his account, often motivated by a sense of status anxiety and sexual repression (‘Anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan’, Hofstadter observed [1964: 21]; see also Fraser 2018). Much work in cultural studies has likewise focused on the particular tropes, images and narratives deployed in conspiracy theories, as well as their specific emotional appeal that is embedded in their varying cultural forms. Why do so many conspiracy tales, for example, employ a narrative style that is marked out by a sense of endless rush towards uncovering the conspiracy, yet at the same time also endlessly defer the final revelation? Why are some examples of contemporary conspiracy culture driven more by a sense of ‘insecure paranoia’ than the more usual, and paradoxically comforting, sense of ‘secure paranoia’, as it seems that we can no longer clearly tell the difference between Them and Us (Knight 2000: 175–7)?

As productive as the revisionist accounts emerging from cultural studies have been, there are also some troubling implications of trying to understand conspiracy theories – charitably – on their own terms. First of all, they have tended to focus almost without thinking on the U.S.A. and are not always clear whether the conclusions they reach about the nature of American conspiracism apply to other cultures. (Hofstadter, for example, hedged his bets by stating that he listed only American examples of the paranoid style only because he happened to be an Americanist.) Indeed, there is often an implicit American exceptionalism at the heart of cultural studies research on conspiracy theories, since it starts from the assumption that the ‘paranoid style’ is distinctively or uniquely American and then searches for explanations (Pasley 2000). This is not necessarily a problem in itself: Melley, for example, provides a very plausible account why American culture especially (though not necessarily exclusively) is beset by anxieties about the erosion of a sense of masculine agency in the face of post-war corporate bureaucratisation (see Chapter 4.4 in this volume), in the context of a longer American obsession with sovereign individuality. Butter (2014) has added historical depth to this argument and identifies factors that made conspiracy theories particularly prominent in the U.S.A. in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the large number of studies that have come out in the past few years that show how widespread conspiracy theories have been everywhere in Europe for centuries has strongly challenged this argument. Accordingly, Butter (2020) now rejects any notion of American exceptionalism when it comes to conspiracy theories.

Second, many of the studies cited above have been most interested in conspiracy culture from a particular historical period (the 1960s to the present). Again, it can mean that the more general conclusions reached in fact apply only to a distinctive – and possibly unrepresentative – phase. As discussed above, conspiracy theories have not always been a form of subjugated knowledge, but this has been the primary focus of research emerging from cultural studies. Moreover, the research has tended to concentrate on a particular kind of conspiracy theory text that revolves around questions of epistemology, doubt and trust. The prime example would be *The X-Files*, the hit television show from the 1990s, in which both the detective figures through whom the show is focalised (the F.B.I. agents Scully and Mulder) and the audience are confronted with the seemingly endless impossibility of knowing anything for certain. In effect, cultural studies scholars tend to latch onto those examples of conspiracy culture that encode – often self-reflexively – some of the central issues in discussions of poststructuralism and postmodernity. Although fascinating, these kinds of texts might well not be representative of the wider culture of conspiracy, both geographically and historically, but may be typical only of a specific moment in history (see Chapter 4.6). For example, the kinds of conspiracy texts under scrutiny in earlier cultural studies accounts are often as much a self-reflexive diagnosis of the dangers and attractions of popular conspiracism as they are an unwitting symptom. This is in large part because the focus has often been more on fictional texts (novels and films) than non-fictional ones, and usually highly sophisticated ones at that (e.g. the novels of Don DeLillo or the films of David Cronenberg). Moreover, although cultural studies is concerned with the relationship between producer, text and consumer, rarely have studies of conspiracy theories considered in detail how audiences engage with them. In addition, the choice of example is often skewed to those that most obviously lend themselves to an interpretation that emphasises the creative, countercultural potential.

Third, there is also a tendency to see all conspiracy culture as a coping mechanism in the face of the same broad sociological factors (globalisation, mass media, technology, etc.). While these interpretations might be justified in some cases, they can lack specificity. In this way they can end up oddly similar to the sweeping psycho-cultural diagnosis found in the Hofstadterian focus on the political pathology of paranoia; and it might even be argued that there is something pathological – paranoid even – in the insistence that ultimately everything is always about the

impossibly vast and shadowy forces of capitalism. What is more, in their at least occasional disregard for nuance and differentiation, these accounts can also be said to mirror conspiracy theories that blame the CIA, the U.S. administration or the E.U. without acknowledging the diverging agendas of these institutions over time and the different personalities and agendas of their representatives.

Finally, in its desire to tune into the playful, creative, insightful and potentially progressive forms of conspiracism, the cultural studies approach at times can end up downplaying or ignoring the nonsensical and harmful kinds. In the afterword to his study, Fenster (1999) discusses the work of Fiske (1994), who advocated taking an agnostic stance when confronted with the seemingly bizarre claims he had heard on a black community radio station about H.I.V./A.I.D.S. being engineered in a U.S. government lab to inflict genocide on African Americans. In Fiske's account, these kinds of claims are rooted in a long history and continuing present of mistreatment, and, as forms of grassroots counterknowledge, conspiracy theories embody a potentially radical challenge to the status quo. In contrast, Fenster argues more cautiously that conspiracy theories are neither inherently reactionary nor inherently radical (as some writers had begun to suggest in the heady countercultural political atmosphere of the early 1970s). Instead, they can be articulated to political projects both good and bad, although Fenster ultimately concludes that they are indeed more often than not associated with reactionary political causes, as in the case of Timothy McVeigh, the white supremacist who blew up the Oklahoma City federal building in 1994.

Literary studies

In addition to the general issues raised by the revisionist take of cultural studies, literary criticism has been interested in three aspects of conspiracy theories in particular. First, the tools of narratology have been brought to bear on the style, function and content of conspiracy theories. Second, literary critics have focused on the fascination with ideas of conspiracy in specific historical periods (e.g. post-war U.S. literature), genres (e.g. the popular thriller) and authors (e.g. Charles Brockden Brown). Although American literature is the primary focus, scholars have begun to investigate other literary traditions. And, third, there are suggestive parallels between conspiracist modes of interpretation and the work of ideological critique itself.

Conspiracism appears in both factual and fictional narratives (and some of the latter have focused on how conspiracy theories can lead to an erosion of a clear distinction between the two). Conspiracy theories have not been limited to a particular genre, but instead have appeared in a wide variety of different modes, including sermons, political speeches, pamphlets, history books, essays, radio addresses, congressional debates and confessional tales by renegades in earlier periods, and, more recently, in literary and popular novels, films, television shows, video documentaries, articles that circulate on the Internet and in lengthy tomes dense with footnotes. In American culture, prior to the twentieth century, most conspiracy narratives tended to be promoted in factual genres.

Although both factual and fictional versions share many qualities, it is important to distinguish between discursive and dramatising narratives. Discursive texts 'expose an alleged conspiracy by gathering and presenting evidence that is supposed to convince readers that a dangerous conspiracy exists', whereas fictional texts dramatisise their conspiracy scenarios and usually provide an imaginative point of connection (Butter 2014: 25–7). In the U.S. context, discursive narratives usually follow well-trodden paths, but dramatising narratives have evolved significantly over time. Boltanski (2014), for example, argues that detective and conspiracy fiction emerges in the late nineteenth century in reaction to the rise of the modern bureaucratic state and its structural logic of secrecy and panoptic knowledge. Instead of merely representing

the supposed conspiracy and its on-going cover-up, modern fictional conspiracy theory texts tend to encourage their readers to identify with an individual character, usually a lone, heroic detective figure. 'Reading for the plot' (Brooks 1984) in conspiracy fiction therefore often involves dual narrative impulses. On the one hand, we follow the story of the ordinary citizen or the maverick outsider forwards in time as s/he discovers that everything is not as it seems and begins chasing down the clues. On the other, that detective surrogate pieces together the narrative of how the conspiracy has developed, a story that often works its way backwards in time to find the ultimate origin of the evil plot. With its narrative focus on detective work, amid conditions of radical uncertainty, conspiracy fiction – especially in its late twentieth-century incarnation – often thematises questions of knowledge: What counts as proof? Who can you trust? Are appearances deceptive? Am I paranoid, or are 'They' making me think that I'm paranoid? This latter question, for example, represents the infinite regress of scepticism encountered by Oedipa Maas, the housewife-turned-detective protagonist in Thomas Pynchon's post-modernist conspiracy novella, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). In contrast, a television drama like *House of Cards* eschews a narrative framing device of detection, and instead focuses obsessively on the 'reality' of the insider conspiracy (on the shift from epistemological to ontological forms of conspiracy culture, see Jones and Soderlund 2017).

Literary criticism has thus begun to develop accounts of the typical narrative features of both discursive and dramatising conspiracy theories. Fenster (1999), for example, identifies three elements that are common to conspiracy narratives: Their 'narrative speed' and 'velocity' (high-paced action that zips around the world at an increasing pace); the importance of 'narrative pivots' (the moment when the protagonist begins to connect the dots); and the restoration of agency (either with the publication of the factual account, or, in fictional versions, the imaginary defeat of the conspiracy by the hero). Or, we might instead point to the centrality of the 'republican jeremiad' (Butter 2014: 32–67) in American conspiracy narratives, the conviction that unveiling and combatting an evil conspiracy will restore the U.S.A. to its divine mission. Although some combinations of these aspects are visible in many conspiracy narratives (most notably in Hollywood thrillers), they are not universal – especially so in factual forms of conspiracism from before the twentieth century, and in other cultures.

The theme of conspiracy – and its associated problems of epistemology, agency and causality – are central concerns in some of the most prominent post-war American writers, including Kathy Acker, William S. Burroughs, Don DeLillo, Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, Joseph Heller, Diane Johnson, Ken Kesey, Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon and Ishmael Reed. What distinguishes this writing is that it is reflective about the problem of 'paranoia' (in the sense of a mode of interpreting the world), even to the extent of self-consciously using that diagnostic terminology as it explores the creative and countercultural possibilities of conspiracy theory (see Chapter 4.4). Critics such as Tanner (1971), Melley (2000), Knight (2000), O'Donnell (2000) and Coale (2005) have considered how

there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and your stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous.

(Tanner 1971: 15)

Earlier periods of American literature, although as rich in conspiracy theories as postmodernity, have received less scholarly attention, but there are some notable exceptions. Levine (1989)

demonstrates the pervasiveness of the most important conspiracy theories of the early republican and antebellum periods through the works of Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, and explicitly challenges Hofstadter's conceptualisation of conspiracy theory as paranoia from the fringes. The same holds true for Butter (2014), whose readings of Hawthorne, Melville and George Lippard show how nineteenth-century texts often affirm popular conspiracy theories while simultaneously challenging their assumptions as well. A slightly different take on the topic informs an important essay by White. Clearly influenced by the studies by Fenster, Knight and Melley, he argues that eighteenth-century conspiracy theories constituted a reasonable response to the challenges 'to late colonial modernity, offering a model of structural analysis from within' (2002: 26). His attempt to link the literature of earlier centuries to that of the present is continued by Wisnicki (2008), who discusses both British Victorian and American postmodernist fiction, arguing that there is a development from conspiracy narratives that dramatise plots to conspiracy theory narratives that self-reflexively ponder the possible existence of such plots.

Wisnicki's study stands out because it discusses more than one period and assumes an explicitly transnational approach. In general, articulation of conspiracy (theory) in European literature remains under-researched. Work published so far focuses on single texts or periods and hardly ever traces diachronic developments or considers the multiple entanglements of different national literatures. The genre that has arguably been best researched is the German *Geheimbundroman* or secret society novel (Voges 1987; Robert 2013), while the Victorian age is the period whose conspiracy literature has been most fully explored (Pionke 2004; Wisnicki 2008). Carver (2017) has built on these studies and, with special emphasis on invasion narratives, extends their focus into the early twentieth century. The two most ambitious studies of the European literary imagination of conspiracy are Klausnitzer (2007) and Ziolkowski (2013). Klausnitzer not only discusses literary works by Goethe, Schiller and Tieck. His book is also a thorough analysis of the intellectual discourses and media transformations of the *Sattelzeit*, which made conspiracy theories, as he argues, widespread and normal. Ziolkowski offers a far more sweeping account that traces fictional representations of secret societies and conspiracies from antiquity to the present.

Literary studies has also been interested in the self-reflexive meditations on paranoia in postmodernist texts because of the parallels between critical and conspiratorial modes of reading. In essays on Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, McHale (1992) develops an argument about what he terms 'meta-paranoia'. Modernist texts invite paranoid readings, he argues, because they encourage readers to discover secret analogies between events, hidden significances, concealed allusions and so on. After 'the New Critical institutionalization of Modernism', he continues, 'paranoid reading comes to be taken for granted, assumed to be the appropriate norm of reading' (McHale 1992: 61–86, 87–114, 165–87). What is the reader then to make of 'postmodernist texts', McHale wonders, 'which assume and anticipate paranoid reading-habits on the part of their readers', with their representation and thematisation of paranoid reading in the form of conspiracy theories? McHale advocates the idea of meta-paranoia, which would involve 'some form of paranoiacally sceptical reading of those paranoid structures' that make up a book like *Gravity's Rainbow*.

In contrast, theorists such as Sedgwick (2003), Best and Marcus (2009) and Felski (2015) have argued that we need to move away from 'paranoid' modes of reading. Ricoeur (1970) influentially identified the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' as the driving force behind the tradition of critique that begins with Marx, Nietzsche and Freud in the nineteenth century, who (respectively) sought to reveal the hidden economic, moral and psychological forces that govern human behaviour and the unfolding of history. This tradition of critique starts from the assumption that

'a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings' (Best, Marcus 2009: 3). Suspicion is thus 'a distinctively modern style of interpretation that circumvents obvious or self-evident meanings in order to draw out less visible and less flattering truths' (Ricoeur 1970: 356). In contrast, Sedgwick (2003), thinking in part of the rise of blatant right-wing violence and the erosion of civil liberties legitimised through the scaremongering tactics of the War on Terror in the early 2000s, argued that 'paranoid' reading is not necessary. 'In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systematic oppression', Sedgwick warns, 'to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve or complaisant' (2003: 125–6). The idea is that we no longer need a rarified form of ideological detective work to uncover abuses of power that scarcely have to conceal themselves.

Likewise, Latour (2004) suggests that politically progressive forms of critique have run out of steam because populist conspiracy theories have adopted the language of unmasking hidden realities for their own – frequently reactionary and right-wing – purposes. Left-leaning laments for the death of critique in effect are based on a historical argument (not entirely accurate, as we have seen) that conspiracism is now (once again) firmly associated with right-wing demagoguery rather than the countercultural radicalism of figures like Burroughs and Pynchon. For Ngai (2009), both critique and conspiracy theory (as instantiated in the political thriller) are problematic because they rely on a distinct and outmoded form of masculine interpretation. In works of ideological critique such as Jameson's, she argues, 'the male conspiracy theorist seems to have become an exemplary model for the late twentieth-century theorist in general, and conspiracy theory a viable synecdoche for "theory" itself' (2009: 299).

There have been various suggestions for what should take the place of 'paranoid' reading. Where Sedgwick (2003) called broadly for a return to more 'reparative' modes of reading (that could nevertheless still serve progressive political ends), Best and Marcus (2009) advocate for 'surface reading' that pays attention to the aesthetic forms and materiality of the text, and the affect it produces in readers. These versions of 'postcritique' (Felski 2015) do not entirely reject the tradition of critique, but they do call into question the sometimes uncomfortably close affinities between literary criticism and conspiracy theory. As Freud put it in his musings about the similarities between the work of the scientist-analyst and the paranoid: 'the delusions of patients appear to me to be the equivalents of the constructions which we build up in the course of analytic treatment' (1937: 268).

Conclusion

The research on conspiracy theories in historical, cultural and literary studies puts a spotlight on difference. Whereas other disciplines that contribute to conspiracy theory studies hold that similar – if not strictly identical – psychological and social factors drive belief in conspiracy theories everywhere and in all times, the studies discussed in this chapter show that conspiracy theories can assume many different forms, and their functions, knowledge status and plausibility can differ widely. However, the picture they paint is still very incomplete. This is most obvious in historiography where a far more sustained engagement with conspiracy theories is direly needed. There are still many countries and periods that have not been researched at all with regard to conspiracy theories, while others remain largely unresearched. We know basically nothing about the history of conspiracy theories outside of Europe and North America. There are, for example, no studies about Asia before the contact with the European powers or about the Arab world in past centuries. Thus, one of the most fundamental questions of conspiracy theories studies remains unresolved: Are conspiracy theories an anthropological given, or did

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

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

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

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