



Conspiracies of Conspiracies: Delusions Have Overrun America, How Delusions Have Overrun America

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1 The Invention of Conspiracy Theory: The French Revolution and the Bavarian Illuminati


Writing in late seventeenth-century England, Daniel Defoe described an "Age of Plot and Deceit" featuring "court conspiracies, backstairs conspiracies, ministerial conspiracies, factional conspiracies, aristocratic conspiracies."³ It is important to note that none of these plots or coups involves any effort to deceive the public—an essential aspect of a genuine conspiracy theory—because the public played no role in politics. In fact, from a political standpoint, "the public" did not exist; people were subjects, not citizens, and no one thought them important enough

[22](#)

to try to deceive.⁴ By the eighteenth century, a somewhat wider array of participants was making politics more complex.

Early conspiracies and the public


July 1, 2020

 *The eighteenth-century conspiracy explanation was a rational assessment of politics, even if not always accurate. It combined a modern approach to understanding social change with a traditional determination to hold individuals accountable for their actions. Instead of offering a counter-discourse, as today's conspiracy theories do, conspiracy*

[22](#)

explanations were widely shared, thus becoming mainstream views of how politics operated.⁸ This enlightened view was, however, overwhelmed by the complexity and confusion of the French Revolution, which seemed to require some theory to explain its scope and force, for "no small group of particular plotters, . . . only elaborately organized secret societies like the Illuminati or the Freemasons, involving thousands of individuals linked by sinister designs, could be behind the Europe-wide upheaval."⁹

July 1, 2020


 *Robison, a traditionalist, had been fighting for some time against Enlightenment chemistry, which he found godless and mechanistic. This view put him at odds with Antoine Lavoisier, Joseph Priestly, and his own colleagues. By the time he began work on *Proofs*, moreover, Robison was a very sick man, subject to bouts of insanity and "vulnerable to melancholy, confusion, and paranoia." In *Proofs*, Robison denounced Lavoisier and Priestly as Illuminists and accused Madame Lavoisier of using her famous salons as "venues for sacrilegious rites where the hostess, dressed in the ceremonial robes of an occult priestess,*

[23](#)

ritually burned

the texts of the old chemistry.”¹¹ His defenders attributed questions about Robison’s mental state to the fact that he had exposed the “dark designs” of his attackers.¹² His idiosyncratic arguments about chemistry aside, Robison’s basic contention was that Adam Weishaupt’s Bavarian Illuminati, created in 1776, led the conspiracy behind the French Revolution in order to destroy all the religions and governments of Europe. The Illuminati, he maintained, had infiltrated French Freemasonry and brought the revolution about, under “the specious pretext of enlightening the world.”¹³ Robison himself had been a Scottish Rite Mason but had been shocked to find continental Masonic lodges to be, as he saw it, irreligious and decadent.

July 1, 2020



Barruel’s conspiracy outdid Robison’s in both complexity and duration. He linked continental Freemasonry to the Knights Templar, implicitly pushing the origin of the conspiracy back at least to the Crusades. Barruel did not invent this historical linkage; as early as 1736 some Freemasons had tried to establish it. But by portraying the Knights Templar as bitterly anti-Christian, Barruel could link them—and thus Freemasonry—to Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire and Weishaupt. All these links are uncertain at best, and Barruel appears to have confused the

[25](#)

Illuminati with mystical groups such as Martinists and Rosicrucians on occasion.¹⁵ The poet Shelley reviewed Barruel’s tome as “half filled with the vilest and most unsupported falsehoods” but recommended it anyway.¹⁶ Barruel’s views changed with newer editions of his work, each one “wilder and more vituperative than the last.”¹⁷ The most important change was inspired by a letter purportedly from a Captain Simonini, known as the Simonini letter, which ostensibly exposed the role of the Jews in the revolution as an “unseen and controlling presence” over the Freemasons, Knights Templar, and even the Illuminati. Despite doubts about the letter’s authenticity even at the time—it seems to have been the work of the French Police

July 1, 2020



As Michael Shermer, who coined the term "patternicity" put it: "Conspiracy theories connect the dots of random events into meaningful patterns (patternicity) and then infuse those patterns with intentional agency (agenticity)."20

[26](#)

Patternicity and agenticity

July 1, 2020



it has been called the patchwork quilt fallacy. By either name, it describes how unconnected facts and claims are linked under a conspiratorial hypothesis to "explain" them even though "there is no real need to explain the unconnected facts, so the evidence does not help to take the hypothesis

[27](#)

Seriously

July 1, 2020



distinguishes everyday reality, in which "actual conspiratorial politics" may well take place, from the imaginary realm of "bona fide conspiracy theories."32 The leap also reveals a key distinction between social critics whose work focuses on powerful elites and conspiracy theorists—a distinction the social critics have often noted. The "construct" created by conspiracy theories is a simplification that, social critics complain, ignores the fact that power structures can be "weak, fragmented, or pluralistic."33 Although power structure researchers and conspiracists do "share some specifics about how the social world actually works," the conspiracists "baffle us" only when they make the leap

[29](#)

The leap



*Vague yet menacing conspirators work well for conspiracy theorists. As Ernie Lazar has argued: "Most political conspiracy theories are primarily an intellectual device by which individuals and organizations demonize their perceived enemies whom they propose to vanquish."*³⁷ Vagueness

[30](#)

can also help conspiracists survive as their context shifts. For example, by abandoning their straightforward Soviet conspiracy in favor of a metaphorical "cancer of collectivism" Retrofitting.

July 1, 2020



European conservatives with fright for decades. The more repressive the regime, the more likely its leaders were to envision conspiracies.⁴⁴ At one end of this spectrum lay England, which was never consumed with conspiracy mania. Even a House of Commons investigative report undertaken during the worst days of the French Revolution expressed concern only over actual threats to the government—notably the United Irishmen. The report did not mention the Illuminati or even Freemasonry.⁴⁵ At the other end of the spectrum of fear, one Russian tsar after another was fed a steady diet of conspiratorial warnings by advisers and police officials. These warnings reflected the conspiratorial links that Augustin Barruel had come up with;

[32](#)

England Russia

July 1, 2020




Freemasonry, for example, had been tolerated, even by Russia and the Vatican, before the French

[33](#)

Revolution. But in the wake of twenty-five years of revolution and war, leaders of the more repressive of the restored governments took advantage of the idea that a "Masonic conspiracy 'explained' the Revolution without requiring social change." The natural result of such repression was a self-fulfilling prophecy: members of any groups

favoring social change or reform had to act secretly to avoid imprisonment, and so "secret societies" actually proliferated.⁴⁸

July 1, 2020


 *Illuminism reappeared only with the books of Nesta Webster, who transposed Robison and Barruel's idea of a string-pulling Illuminati from the French Revolution to the Russian one. It was only with Lady Queenborough's 1933 Occult Theocracy that the saga of Albert Pike reemerged, and only with Carr's work in the 1950s that an explicit continuity between*

[36](#)

eighteenth-century and current Illuminism was created. The entire body of occult Illuminati historical lore, the link between Illuminism and Lucifer, and any connections between Illuminism, Communism, and Zionism have been built on this weak foundation.

July 1, 2020

2 Conspiracism Takes Shape in the United States

 *A lack of evidence undermined his claims and even subjected him to occasional ridicule.⁷ None of Morse's claims impressed Thomas Jefferson*

[40](#)

New Englanders was Jedidiah Morse, a pastor and geographer who in 1798 gave three widely reprinted sermons supporting Robison's Proofs.



The Illuminati conspiracy arrived ready-made from Europe, and its American propagators were not actual theorists. They found an audience among elites whose power was in decline and who were deeply concerned about the direction of the new nation. Their situation was so dire that by 1804 New England Federalists were seriously considering secession. Contemporary research has found that people who see their situation deteriorating are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories. Feelings of increasing powerlessness, especially of a diminution of sociopolitical control, lead people to conspiratorial conclusions. Believing that one's plight is caused by a conspiracy can provide "a clear explanation for a negative outcome that otherwise seems inexplicable." 13 Such powerlessness can also lead to increased religious intensity or greater acceptance of authoritarian leaders, but when these feelings are linked with overwhelming, shocking events—such as the French Revolution and its associated terror—the odds of turning to conspiracy theory are increased. 14

[42](#)

more stringent and hidebound New England religions were rapidly being displaced by upstart religious groups such as the Methodists. 11 From the traditional Puritan viewpoint, America was spiraling out of control.




Contemporary psychological research links these attitudes to conspiracy mentality through right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. Right-wing authoritarians have a "markedly negative attitude" toward groups that deviate from their accepted norms. They are likely to scapegoat and actively persecute such groups as well. People with a

[48](#)

strong social dominance orientation behave similarly, but they single out groups they perceive as having low social status. Right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation are similar in their relationship to conspiracism, as both transform passive attitudes into active behaviors when serious threats are perceived. 30 Some researchers have concluded that "conspiracy mentality" should constitute a third "negative political 31 Anti-Catholicism was more than a resurgence of antipapism; it was an

The anti-Catholic conspiracy theory was notable for its prejudice against and scapegoating of immigrants.

July 3, 2020

 *The third antebellum conspiracy was supposedly perpetrated by the slaveholding class in the South to preserve and expand slavery. This was mirrored by a corresponding abolitionist conspiracy believed by Southern slave owners, especially after Great Britain abolished slavery in its territories. In addition to overestimating the influence of abolitionists, slave owners envisioned "fleets of armed steamers, loaded with black troops from the West Indies" attacking Southern ports. Robert Goldberg sees the slave owners not as conspiracy minded but merely as having "lost perspective and created a menace out of scale and more cohesive than the evidence allowed." 35 The*

[50](#)

The same could be said for most of the abolitionists worrying about the Slave Power conspiracy, which David Brion Davis considers to have been at least in part a matter of strategic rhetoric—a “necessary means of arousing the fears” of those northerners not concerned with the plight of slaves. During the Civil War, this rhetoric portrayed slave owners as an “aristocracy against democracy” whose members planned to “establish a monarchy.” 36

July 2, 2020



The conspiracy centered on a "cabal of coastal political elites [and] bankers" (At this time, "banker" was sometimes, but not always, a code word for Jews) and was driven by the demonetization of silver in the Coinage Act of 1873: "The greatest crime ever committed in the world—one that was to cause more suffering than all other crimes committed in a century." 41 Originally the silver advocates simply saw East Coast bankers as a "money trust," having so much clout in Washington that they were able to maintain the gold standard—benefiting their banks at the expense of southern and western farmers. 42 But this explanation became enveloped in an ever-expanding and increasingly distant array of conspirators.

Equally important in creating this Anglo-Jewish conspiracy were contemporary novels. In 1894, William Harvey published *A Tale of Two Nations*. Some of the populist writing foreshadowed later conspiracy theories rooted in the spread of *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Gordon Clark of the Bimetallic League published the openly antisemitic *Shylock: as Banker, Bondholder, Corruptionist, Conspirator* in 1894.

July 2, 2020



In Europe, conspiratorial suspicions focused on three things, none of which generated any conspiracy theorizing. First, fears of revolutionary aftershocks in the wake of the French Revolution never quite dissipated. Relatedly, the various movements of national liberation, and the secret societies they encompassed, were a constant concern of the forces of reaction. And third, beginning in roughly the middle of the century, a new type of antisemitism arose that was to become viciously conspiratorial in the twentieth century. In America, by contrast, new conspiratorial ideas flourished. Each conspiracy, even

if not much more than a simple explanation, contributed a lasting element to how conspiracy theories work.

greatness. It is almost as though the nation's grandiose mission to liberate and democratize the world could only be confirmed by proving the maliciousness and power of a clandestine enemy." 55 Add to these tensions the distinctively American puritanistic Protestantism and a strong anti-intellectual streak, and it is less surprising that America gave rise to so much homegrown conspiratorial thinking. 56

July 2, 2020

The anti-Catholics made the conspiratorial leap from the Vatican to the Austrian Empire, shifting the target of the conspiracy from religion to politics and liberty. As a stylistic breakthrough, both Morse and Beecher turned the rhetorical question into the mainstay of their argument, allowing them to avoid making specific claims (such as had undone Jedidiah Morse) while still sowing fears. Abolitionists of a conspiratorial bent pioneered the historical retrofit in their effort to turn Slave Power from a political issue into an actual conspiracy theory. And the Populists, taking a leap as the anti-Catholics had done, and reinterpreting history in the fashion of the abolitionists, created a huge global, evil conspiracy when East Coast bankers would have been more plausible villains by themselves. In addition, all the conspiracies featured two elements that have become staples in conspiracy theories: dupes and sex.

[56](#)

By the end of lodges, to the "Awful Disclosures" of Maria Monk about her captivity in a Montreal nunnery, to the seduction of America's womanhood by foreigners working for the Rothschilds in novels, the plight of women appears with surprising frequency—almost always in a context suggesting that a better showing of manly fortitude would have saved them.

July 2, 2020



And yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, even as these conspiratorial tropes were sinking in, conspiracism was losing ground. The republic no longer seemed so vulnerable. People were acclimating to progress. The Populists were defeated soundly in elections while the silver advocates found a home in the non-conspiratorial Republican Party. In addition, science—even social science—stressed complex explanations of events, undermining the conspiratorial approach. The

[57](#)

historian Gordon Wood, writing in 1982, concluded his defense of earlier conspiracy thinking with the observation that, by this time, “attributing events to the conscious design of particular individuals became more and more simplistic. Conspiratorial interpretations of events thrived, but now they seemed increasingly primitive and quaint.” 58 Nineteenth-century America had generated specific, event-driven conspiracy theories but no framework capable of sustaining a full-blown conspiracy theory.

July 2, 2020

3 Preconditions for Modern Conspiracism: Jewish Assimilation, Premillennialism, and Aryan Occultism



*Fantasies can achieve a causal status once they have been institutionalized in beliefs, values, and social groups. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism**

[59](#)

Fantasies causality

July 2, 2020




The primary source of the Protocols was the Jewish cemetery scene in Goedsche’s Biarritz. Lifted from the

[63](#)

*novel and published as a pamphlet in 1872, this story and variants spread westward, becoming less fictional as it went. By the time it emerged in Paris in 1886, it was prefaced as "the program of Jewry, the real program of the Jews, expressed by . . . the Chief Rabbi. . . . It is a speech made in the 1880s."*⁸ According to most sources, the cemetery scene, other antisemitic writing, and an otherwise harmless satire by

Maurice Joly were pieced together by (or at least under the direction of) Pyotr Rachkovsky, head of the Russian secret police. This farrago emerged in the early years of the twentieth century as an official-looking and detailed document revealing a multifaceted conspiracy by Jewish leaders to destroy Christian civilization and to rule the world.⁹


July 2, 2020

 *The Protocols "new political superstition concerning a secret Jewish government" led directly to two antisemitic conspiracy*

[64](#)

theories: the finance-based "secret government" and the anti-Christian "hidden hand" plot.¹⁴ By envisioning Jews as a powerful cohesive international organization devoted to world domination, the Protocols made it impossible for anyone to be a serious antisemite without becoming a conspiracist as well.

July 2, 2020


 *primitive races that predated the Garden of Eden, were the progenitors of every nonwhite race from Eskimos to Australian aborigines. These races were, naturally, far inferior to the Caucasians descended from Adam and Eve. This quasi-theological notion proved easy to combine with antisemitism by way of a two-seed theory. In seed one, Adam and Eve's son Abel becomes the origin of the white Europeans already established as the true Israelites. In seed two,*

[66](#)

Eve is seduced by Satan, and gives birth to Cain, the precursor of the Jews—who are by this logic the literal children of Satan. This two-seed version of British Israelism is the underlying “theology” of today’s Christian Identity movement.²¹

The relationship between ancient Hebrews and Anglo-Saxons was obvious to Rand, since “Saxon” is clearly derived from “Isaac’s Son,” while “British” combines the Hebrew words “Berith” (covenant) and “Ish” (man). Britain is thus home to Isaac’s sons, the men of the covenant.²⁰


July 2, 2020

 *It is not surprising that the Khazarian Jew became part of the Ku Klux Klan’s ideology, along with the two-seed theory.²² All this means the antisemitism behind so much of modern conspiracism is based on a thoroughgoing reconstruction of the Jews. What most people accept loosely as the Judeo-Christian heritage is recast as a narrowly conceived birthright of the Aryan race, while actual Jews are themselves recast as an alien force trying to destroy that heritage.*

[67](#)

Escaping repressive regimes, many Jews had fled to Khazaria, a region largely east of the Black Sea, and some Khazarian leaders had subsequently been converted to Judaism.

July 2, 2020

 *American religion had long been distinctly apocalyptic, giving it a “chronic predilection to locate and identify external antichrists,” finding them embodied in “ecclesiastical institutions, nation states, alien ideologies, and even specific individual[s].”²³ But, toward the end of the nineteenth century, religious changes were underway that would make American religion even more focused on the apocalypse and the Antichrist.*

[68](#)

July 2, 2020



Post-millennialists combine a prophetic eschatology with an essentially optimistic and progressive view of history.”²⁸ By the end of the century postmillennialists had largely been

[69](#)

drawn into the Social Gospel and Progressive Era reform movements, leaving traditional religion open to a more conservative direction. Premillennialist apocalyptic eschatology led directly down this conservative path. Anticipating the rise of the Antichrist and Armageddon, premillennialists devoted their efforts solely to converting people to their brand of Christianity before this final cataclysm. Reform movements, from this perspective, were worse than useless; they gave people false hope and distracted Christians from their true task. During the Progressive Era, religious fundamentalists in general and premillennialists in particular began to feel that they were losing ground to a Christianity “busied with such secular things as labor unions, social settlements, and even the promotion of socialism.” In response, dispensationalist premillennialism was “shaped by a desire to strike back against everything modern—the higher criticism, evolutionism, the social gospel, rational criticism of any kind.”²⁹

July 3, 2020



Literary and artistic romanticism provided the groundwork for occultism. The rediscovery of medieval glories, especially in English literature, brought back images of knighthood—and with it the legends of the Templars and Knights of Malta. The arts aside, the last half of the nineteenth century spawned an incredible array of philosophical and quasi-scientific ideas, some of which had a direct impact on

[72](#)

conspiratorial thinking in the twentieth century: first, spiritualist-based quasi-religious organizations; second, ancient knowledge (some perhaps true but most of it imaginary); and third, certain ancient races (again, some passably real but most of them imaginary).

July 3, 2020



Aryans had been invented by eighteenth-century linguists as a hypothetical people whose Indo-European language underlay more recent languages. Often referred to as Caucasians because they presumably hailed from somewhere in the Caucasus Mountains, the Aryans were increasingly romanticized as a cultured pastoral civilization. By the mid-nineteenth century, Aryans were being cast as race of such "near heroic proportions" as to make their modern-day descendants "seem degenerate in comparison." This idea was the antithesis of evolution and led naturally to concerns about further degeneration through the mongrelization that had destroyed

[75](#)

the purity of south Europeans.⁴⁴ The concept of an Aryan race, steeped in antiquity and naturally dominant, was appealing to a great many European Theosophists, but the peculiar origins of Aryanism were often downplayed. The Vril-ya, Bulwer-Lytton's fictional ancient race who derived supernatural powers from the Black Sun in the center of the earth, were "descended from the same ancestors as the great Aryan family, from which has flowed the dominant civilization of the world."⁴⁵

July 3, 2020



These actual sources of Aryanism were increasingly obscured as people would either present them vaguely as "gnostic" or emphasize their fairly respectable Hindu and Buddhist elements.

[75](#)

Origins of the Aryans

July 3, 2020



The outlier facing Aryan racists was the Jews, who,

[76](#)

*after the Jewish Enlightenment, could not simply be dismissed (as other races were) as distant, primitive peoples. As the "origin" of the Aryans shifted over time from the Himalayas to northern Europe, they emerged as the embodiment of "the purity of Germanic 'blood.'"*⁴⁹ *This new Aryanism was developed by a variety of writers and scholars, who downplayed its occultism. Ernest*

Renan, a French scholar who was a key figure in propagating the notion of Khazarian Jews, contrasted Aryans and "Semitic spirit." One of the strongest Aryanists was an expatriate Englishman in Austria, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who interpreted history as an "elemental conflict between the 'Aryan' and the Semite, between the forces of strength and weakness, of idealism and materialism, of nobility and servility."⁵⁰ The Jews were being painted as the evil counterforce to Aryan civilization, an idea that meshed extremely well with both the Protocols and the two-seed idea of Jews as Satanic.

July 3, 2020



Taken together, Protocols-based

[76](#)

anti-Semitism, occultism, and Aryan racism contributed heavily to some of the most horrifying aspects of the twentieth century—above all, Nazi Germany.

July 3, 2020



Without these disparate nineteenth-century developments, the modern conspiracism of the twentieth century would not be the same and might not have come into being at all. In this regard, the antisemitism of the Protocols stands out as obvious, while Aryanism and the occult are more muted in their effects. But Aryanism underlies a great deal of right-wing militia conspiracism, and occult thinking has expanded greatly, inspiring some of the more peculiar conspiracy thinking of the last fifty years. Of the three influences, antisemitism flourished earliest, as the

[80](#)

mainstay of the conspiracism opposing the New Deal. After World War II, the flagrant antisemitism of

the 1930s subsided, kept alive only by a fairly small band of unrepentant Nazis. Taking its place, especially as the civil rights movement emerged, an Aryan-based racism revived, including new developments in British Israelism conspiracy theories. Then, accompanying the rise of “new age” thinking in the 1960s, occultism became increasingly an integral part of conspiracy theories. This is clearest in UFO conspiracies but is also present in most contemporary religion-based conspiracy theories as well.

July 3, 2020

4 The International Jewish Conspiracy and the Secret Government

the most widespread and durable conspiracy theory of the twentieth century: the Jewish conspiracy for world domination. The basic idea grew out of a Jewish banking conspiracy already established by the time of the Populists’ conspiracism of the 1890s—but strengthened and broadened by the Protocols and fleshed out with Aryan-racist and occult concepts. The catalyzing event that turned many people’s attention to the “Jewish peril” was the Russian Revolution. For the most prominent conspiracist of that time, the Englishwoman Nesta Webster, Bolshevism amounted to a rebirth of the Jacobinism of the French Revolution. Accordingly, her work revived the ideas of Robison and Barruel and rescued the Illuminati from decades of obscurity. By giving

[81](#)

the Jews a prominent role, Webster shaped the thinking of a generation of conspiracists. The heyday of the so-called secret government occurred during the 1920s and 1930s, but it continues today as, among other variants, the Zionist Occupation Government conspiracy theory.

July 3, 2020



By her own day, Webster claimed, the influence of Jews in what she deemed "the five great powers at work in the world," Freemasonry, Theosophy, Pan-Germanism, international finance, and revolution, could no longer be considered "a matter of surmise but of fact."³ Although others concerned about "the Jewish peril" usually ignored the first three of these "great powers," the last two began to coalesce into a widely accepted vision of conspiracy.

Many respectable British commentators had already accepted the Jewish peril in light of the Russian Revolution. Winston Churchill, a member of the Lloyd-George government, questioned the loyalties of "international" Jews. The British government issued a booklet titled *The Jewish Peril* in 1920.

July 3, 2020



*The threat allegedly posed by Jewish Bolsheviks was not long in reaching the United States. Most famously, Henry Ford serialized and commented on the Protocols in his newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, and collected the series into a book, *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*.⁵ At the same time however, the authenticity of the Protocols had come under serious attack in at least three countries.*

Ford, the international jew

July 3, 2020



By the end of the 1920s, conspiracists saw an international Jewish conspiracy clearly in place, although its proponents were less numerous than they had been during the height of the Red Scare. The

onset of the depression reversed this decline, however, and by 1933 antisemites had a new common enemy: Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Antisemitism 20s New Deal

July 3, 2020

With the onset of the Great Depression, negative attention to Jews became increasingly focused on their financial activity rather than their Bolshevik plotting. The old populist conception of British bankers as the enemy was making a comeback, as were the Rothschilds, but with a stronger focus on that family's American agents. Jacob Schiff was the favorite candidate of many conspiracists.

[86](#)

Loeb and Company, the concern which is credited with having financed Lenin and Trotsky in overthrowing the Russian Empire.”¹⁵

July 3, 2020

Conspiracists also maintained that the Jews had conspired to destroy the American financial system, a process culminating in the establishment of the Federal Reserve System. The leading voice against the Fed was Representative Louis McFadden's.

[89](#)

that Jewish financiers created a system to foist worthless paper money backed by nothing on Americans, leading the nation to fall into their debt. “Do not force Americans to pay tribute to foreign ruler and potentates. Take back this country or perish in the attempt. Let this be our country again. Let us rebuild it for our own. . . . Remember, Mr. Chairman, that the ship of state has women and children aboard. Do not, therefore, guide it into uncharted waters. Do not allow the great Democratic Party to steer it onto the rocks . . .”

July 3, 2020



term "the Jew Deal" came into being.²⁵ For the conspiracy-minded antisemite, the problem with the New Deal did not lie in its actions or accomplishments. These were little touched on and, even then, often symbolically

[91](#)

Rather, the conspiratorial focus on the Jews in the New Deal encompassed both specific individuals as well as their overall numbers. Three individuals vied for the top spot. Bernard Baruch, a Wall Street banker and onetime adviser to Woodrow Wilson, was often referred to as "the unofficial president." Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis, whose famous dissenting opinions constituted FDR's "underlying philosophy," was dubbed "the father of the New Deal." The third contender, Felix Frankfurter, was until 1939 only an adviser to FDR. However, as a law professor at Harvard, Frankfurter contributed any number of "protégés" to the ranks of the New Deal. still being singled out as late as 1970 by the Ku Klux Klan because his ideas supported school desegregation.²⁶ That Frankfurter was born in Austria was a fact frequently highlighted by anti-Semites—though Baruch's South Carolina origins and Brandeis's birth in Louisville, Kentucky, were never mentioned.²⁷

July 3, 2020



With the dearth of actual Jews in important positions, non-Jews were frequently included in such lists. Pelley's followers included Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, who Pelley claimed was not in fact a Bostonian but a "Polish-born Jewess." A West Coast Silver Shirt reportedly offered \$1,000 to "the person who will bring me her American birth certificate." Eugene Sanctuary's list of five Jews gives way to people who, "if not Jews,

[92](#)

were closely connected with Jews."

July 3, 2020




Edward Edmondson singled out centuries of "nomadic desert life" for making Jewish tribes "Communitic in

[95](#)

structure" and thus "non-assimilable." Either way—by blood or custom—Jews were inexorably alien; FDR and his New Deal were inexorably alien; and there was only one possible cure. Pelley instructed his followers to "be prepared to strike directly at the heart of the whole racial conspiracy." Sanctuary looked to the new fascist regimes in Germany and Hungary, where the people "had the courage of their convictions and dared to meet this

slimy thing, although in human form, and thrust it from their midst."³⁷ Antisemitic conspiracists expended considerable effort moving the Jewish conspiracy from the financial realm into government.

July 3, 2020

 *As war in Europe threatened and finally broke out, the international Jewish conspiracy was adapted to include it. Early on, isolationist sentiment was common, but little of it could be considered antisemitic or conspiratorial. By the end of the 1930s, this opposition had been organized into a great many groups, the most famous and largest of which was the America First Committee.*

[97](#)

investigation by the American Legion in California found America First chapters overtaken by antisemites and Nazi followers from the American Guards, the National Copperheads, and members of William Pelley's Silver Shirts, among others. Bundists also worked their way into "Nativist hate-groups" such as the Ku Klux Klan.⁴¹ Efforts to resist the antisemitic onslaught were not successful. At a Carnegie Hall meeting of Women United, Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. told the crowd that "growing anti-Semitism in this country is the kind of thing that will destroy our republic, and should not be allowed to go on. Tolerance is as important to our national defense as armament. It is the cornerstone of the nation." More dispassionate reporting noted that her statement was received with "undisguised hostility" by the crowd, members of which called it "tolerance drivel" and "downright un-American."⁴²

July 3, 2020



The secret government had always been rather strictly defined by the concept of international Jewish finance. By controlling banking systems, Jews were presumably able to foist worthless "fiat money" onto Gentiles while amassing "real" wealth for themselves. They financed wars and revolutions and infiltrated government to institute policies—such as the Federal Reserve System and the abandonment of the gold standard—to manipulate debt and finance to their advantage. This conspiracy was carried into the New Deal but, by the mid-1930s, was giving way to a broader Jewish conspiracy that could be traced back to biblical times and sought to destroy gentile civilization itself. This broader conspiracy was often

called "the hidden hand." The narrower finance-based secret government conspiracy theory did not altogether disappear. Long after World War II, Don Bell, a new world order conspiracist, used it—and included a list of important Jews in government—to answer his rhetorical question, "Who are our rulers?" A pamphlet distributed by right-wing publisher Conde McGinley used the secret government to describe how the Jews secretly ruled the Soviet Union. A Jewish network of "secret boards," often headquartered in local synagogues, controlled the population through a campaign of fear.⁵³ The secret government remained a fixture in the rhetoric of the extreme Right fringe (including neo-Nazis) of the American political landscape

July 3, 2020

5 The Emergence of the Hidden Hand



It might seem predictable for the fascist voices—especially those linked through the German-American Bund to Nazi Germany—to use conspiracism. However, despite the occultish dimension to Nazism, their racism was built on the nineteenth-century emergence of Aryanism. The supremacy of the Aryan

"race" and the corollary necessity of maintaining its purity, combined with resentment of Jewish assimilation, was sufficient to scapegoat Jews and link them to revolution without recourse to conspiracism. In the United States,

evidence of this lies among the defendants in the massive sedition trial that took place during World War II. Those defendants connected to the German propaganda effort (e.g., Frank Ferentz, Peter Stahrenberg, George Viereck) were violently antisemitic, but not conspiratorial. Defendants without those kinds of connections, such as William Dudley Pelley, Elizabeth Dilling, or Gerald Winrod, were intensely conspiratorial.²

July 4, 2020

In light of the already well-established secret government conspiracy theory, it is worth clarifying how the hidden hand differed from financial control by international bankers and the idea that Roosevelt was dragging the nation into socialism. First, the conspirators were all the Jews—not merely bankers and government officials, but the entire "race." Jewish "domination" of science, literature, and especially popular culture are at least as important as finance and politics to the hidden hand. Building on this, the second distinct aspect of the hidden hand is that, despite their connection to Communism, the Jews' goal is not political or even to be found on the Left-to-Right political spectrum. Their goal is world domination, as

[106](#)

Third, the distinction between simply scapegoating Jews and painting them as the force behind a relentless conspiracy for global hegemony is evidenced by hidden hand conspiracists' attention to ancient Jewish lore. The "mystical cabalah" and the Talmud were used to explain why Jews needed to go beyond Communism. The fourth and last distinction—a corollary to the religious nature of the conspiracy—is that the victims of the conspiracy must be the Gentiles.

July 4, 2020



These four features constitute an outline of the conspiracy constructed by a relatively small number of individuals. The conspiracists attempt to explain America's shift to the left, embodied in the New Deal, as the current manifestation of a centuries-old Jewish plot to dominate the world and destroy

Christianity. Whatever shape the Jewish hegemony takes, it will represent an alien force and an alien way of life. This is, by any measure, a true conspiracy theory. It contains what Richard Hofstadter called "the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable."⁹ It leaps from an economic collapse and a nation's political scramble to a Jewish conspiracy, backtracking into the Talmud and other religious esoterica, then using those sources to justify belief in the Protocols —which, of course, prove Jewish guilt.

July 4, 2020



Their epistemic structure guarantees that believers will always have some way of explaining away difficulties."¹¹ This is what makes conspiracy theories unfalsifiable; they are "the only theories for which evidence against them is actually construed as evidence in favor of them."¹² While this "epistemic defense mechanism" does make conspiracy theories self-insulating against disconfirmation, it also causes them

constantly to expand. A kind of cascade logic causes conspiracy theories to grow when, in the words of Ted Goertzel, "defenders of one conspiracy theory find it necessary to implicate more and more people whose failure to discover or reveal the conspiracy can be explained only by their alleged complicity." Expanding circles of complicity invariably encompass communication media, especially those in the "mainstream," and are clearly a part of the cover-up process of conspiracy building. Researchers focusing on cover-up conspiracies have compared them to "viruses" that expand by mutation: "As one version approaches extinction, a new, slightly different version gains strength."¹³

July 4, 2020



Jewish corruption of the schools faded as an issue until the Supreme Court's Brown v. Board ruling of 1954, whereupon racist antisemites revived it. In his call to "abolish the public schools! Now!" John Kasper tied together all the aspects of the "menace to American liberty" represented by the Jews: the Communist Party, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Federal Reserve System, and the World Bank.²⁷

[114](#)

In many areas, where the conspiracy expanded beyond the government and its minions in the press, there was a menacing undercurrent of lurid immorality and unbridled sexuality.

July 4, 2020



Arguing against the immigration of Jewish refugees, Agnes Waters exclaimed: "There are 200,000 Communist Jews at the Mexican border waiting to get into this country. If they are admitted they will rape every woman and child that is left unprotected." Gerald L. K. Smith concerned himself with "rampant" homosexuality in the State Department, "symptomatic of the terrible decay and degeneration in the City of Washington." Unable to stop himself, Smith concluded with the observation that these "were men who enjoyed the favor of both Franklin and Eleanor.

[116](#)

Elizabeth Dilling reached back to The Communist Manifesto for inspiration, citing its disparagement of "Bourgeois marriage" and promotion of what she called "an openly legalized community of women."

July 4, 2020



The findings of these studies are somewhat impressionistic, but overall, serious believers exhibit considerable paranoia, are extremely intransigent about their beliefs, incline toward political extremism,

[117](#)

and are given to racial and ethnic prejudice. Paranoia was famously the distinguishing characteristic used by Richard Hofstadter, and even critics who think he "pathologized conspiracy thinking"

still find evidence of paranoia in conspiracists.³¹ A willful imperviousness to evidence is widely noted in academic studies of conspiracy believers, reflecting a severe mistrust of accepted authorities. Many critical assessments of intransigence link it, explicitly or implicitly, to "low complexity cognitive styles" that make people want simple, unambiguous answers to problems.³² Not surprisingly, serious followers tend toward extremist views—occasionally a leftist extremism, sometimes a libertarianism that is hard to place on the normal Left-to-Right spectrum, but most frequently a right-wing extremism that incorporates racism, antisemitism...

July 4, 2020

People do not always think through the implications of casual beliefs. For the vaccine and autism story to be true would necessitate a

[118](#)

huge and sociopathic medical conspiracy that few people would accept. Conspiracists play into this thoughtlessness by avoiding conspiracist rhetoric while presenting their ideas as simple facts.³⁷

July 4, 2020

The illiterati have not actually looked at much of the material." Even though their attachment is casual, these people do accept that there was a conspiracy. It is a belief "to which they have committed socially and around which they have formed an identity." This emotional

[119](#)

attachment makes conspiracy theories very hard to overcome. As pseudoscience opponent Ben Goldacre has pointed out, "You cannot reason people out of positions they did not reason themselves into."³⁸ Any conclusions about the psychological characteristics of casual adherents are problematic, but they seem better adjusted than other conspiracists. They are presumably mistrustful enough of the authorities

to entertain conspiracy theories, but they do not seem paranoid or hostile. Nor is there any reason to consider them delusional. The worst that can be said about them—as is implicit in the term “illiterari”—is that they do not think much about what they believe.

July 4, 2020


[119](#)

*True conspiracy theorists—those who construct the alternative narratives that eventually filter down to their followers—have quite a different psychological profile. The emergence of the hidden hand conspiracy owes a great deal to a loose cadre of conspiracy theorists, whose work can be assessed in terms of psychological characteristics ranging from the patternicity inherent in conspiracist thinking, through the array of “negative political attitudes” (e.g., mistrust, alienation, hostility), to actual personality disorders and delusional thought patterns. Determining who is a true theorist and who falls short of being one is not an exact science, but three hidden hand theorists stand out: Nesta Webster, William Dudley Pelley, and Gerald Winrod. Webster’s main conspiratorial works were published in the early 1920s and were widely cited as late as World War II. Pelley and Winrod were quite prolific throughout the period. Each of the three worked at an abstract level to give meaning to the events of their times by exploring patterns no one else seemed to notice—patterns that could be explained only by a conspiracy. Webster was unparalleled at this. In *Secret Societies*, she ran through analogies, resemblances, modes of recognition, and spiritual descent to descendants, the Jacobins of 1793, and the sect of Hasan Saba (“the supreme model on which all systems of organized murder working through fanaticism such as the Carbonari and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, were based”).³⁹ Webster managed to cast all these groups and many others, modern and ancient, as subsidiary to the Jews in her version of a hidden hand conspiracy. A contemporary review summed up*

Webster's method as a "farrago of undigested nonsense combined with occasional glimpses of common sense." 40 Gerald B. Winrod "Americanized" Webster's work by coming at the conspiracy from a biblical perspective. The threat posed by secret societies was of negligible interest to Americans, but Winrod's version downplayed these societies along with their occult precursors. The few he felt compelled to leave in simply buttressed the role of the Illuminati. Relying on his extreme version of premillennial apocalyptic Christianity, Winrod created a conspiracy that Americans—especially fundamentalist Christians—felt at home with. Nowhere are Winrod's ideas better encapsulated than in Adam Weishaupt—a Human Devil, where the believer protected by "Bible truth" discovers,

Winrod exchanged Webster's patterns linking secret societies for patterns of biblical verse linking Satan to the Illuminati. This interpretation might seem to leave little or no room for the Jews, and yet: "The real conspirators behind the Illuminati were Jews. The whole scheme was a Jewish plot to the core." 41

July 4, 2020

 *Despite their differences, each of the three versions of the conspiracy posited a Manichean struggle between the forces of evil and the good Gentile population. The common factor in the evil forces was, of course, the Jews, whether alone (Pelley), in league with Satan (Winrod), or behind the Illuminati (Webster). These were not mutually exclusive versions, but each emphasis generated its own cadre of followers.*

[122](#)

For paranoia, only Pelley's writings stand out. Webster borders on paranoia in her lengthy responses to criticism, but her associate Leslie Fry, in private communications with Nazi agents, described her as insufficiently paranoid to trust. 47 And Winrod evidenced no paranoia to speak of.

July 4, 2020



Delusional thinking without accompanying paranoia runs through Webster's work, starting with her revelatory insights into eighteenth-century France, which led her to believe that earlier accounts of the French Revolution misunderstood it. Webster credited her revelations to reincarnation but left open the possibility of extrasensory perception or "spirit presences."

[124](#)

Delusional thinking

July 4, 2020



*With regard to the rest of the psychological characteristics, the only one that stands out is the personality disorder of narcissism. The casual ease with which Nesta Webster dismisses other authors' work ("French writers of the past had distorted facts to suit their own political views") shows it, as does her intense reaction to any criticism. Gerald Winrod's blurb for his *Three Modern Evils* ("This fearless book, bound in beautiful art covers, deals with Modernism in the Church, Atheism in the schools, and Communism in the world. It takes courage to write a book like this") exemplifies Winrod's sense of himself. 54 Neither, however, comes close to William Pelley in terms of narcissism, which trait also appears to underlie a severe authoritarian streak (as perhaps*

[126](#)

befits a man who created an avowedly fascist paramilitary organization).

July 4, 2020

6 *The Rise and Fall of the Hidden Hand*



Those who remained devoted to the global Jewish conspiracy were among the most intense and vicious conspiracists of any time, and a remarkable number of them continued to propagate an openly pro-Nazi version of the hidden hand conspiracy during and even after the war. Although their influence lingered for years, their central Jew-versus-Gentile narrative faded and subsequent conspiracists were markedly less religious.

[129](#)

WWII

July 4, 2020



Even with individual variations, however, some characteristics are uniform. The propagators share the delusions of the theorists and, sometimes, add to them. Dilling was so fixated on Sigmund Freud as a hidden hand influence that she inspected library copies of his books to determine how "well-thumbed" they were.

[137](#)

Dilling, Smith, Armstrong, and others became, if anything, even more extreme and vituperative.

July 4, 2020



with a narcissistic personality that persecution contains an element of schadenfreude or even martyrdom. In a not unfriendly assessment of Elizabeth Dilling, one writer quoted Dilling herself as ready to "serve the cause of Christianity and Americanism in whatever way is best, dead or alive, in jail or out, smeared or vindicated." Dilling reportedly took delight in being "a martyr willing to sacrifice herself for a higher purpose."¹⁹ The negative

[138](#)

psychology affected conspiracy propagators' political beliefs. At the beginning of the 1930s it was still possible to detect an element of old-style populist economics among the conspiracists. Early in his career, William Dudley Pelley organized a Foundation for Christian Economics, a compound

of mysticism and neo-populism.

July 4, 2020

By the end of the decade, however, the residue of populism was gone, swamped by antisemitism, isolationism, and fascism. This shift, by a group that was reactionary and nativist to begin with, seems to place the hidden hand conspirators solidly on the conservative end of the political spectrum. But the reality may not be that straightforward. In the breakthrough study of the authoritarian personality, Theodore

[139](#)

Adorno and his colleagues came up with the term "pseudo-conservative" to describe a person whose thinking is conventional yet chaotic, who yields easily to authority while trying to dominate his perceived inferiors. Applying this idea to the conspiracists of his day, Richard Hofstadter characterized them as a group who, "in the name of upholding traditional American values and institutions and defending them against more or less fictitious dangers, consciously or unconsciously aims at their abolition."²¹ Such people, Hofstadter noted, have little to do with traditional conservatism. They are clearly anchored on the Right end of the political spectrum but seem in some important way to have drifted off the spectrum entirely.

July 4, 2020

7 From Neo-Nazi to White Supremacist Conspiracism

A 1960 University of Illinois study estimated a thousand groups distributing "great quantities of right-wing literature."¹ But how much of this right-wing output was conspiracist in nature? Just as it had been possible to oppose Roosevelt and the New Deal without being a conspiracist, it was quite possible to be a vehement anti-Communist without recourse to conspiracism.

The Cold War, the Iron Curtain, and Russian spies all contributed to a fearful Red Scare and to the rise of McCarthyism. The years from 1945 to 1960 saw a diminution in accusations against Jews, despite occasional headlines

July 5, 2020

While most anti-Communists looked to the Kremlin as the source of the subversion, conspiracists were more likely to summon up Karl Marx himself, who was portrayed often as a puppet of the Illuminati.

important to conspiracists were the early twentieth-century progressives, especially those with internationalist leanings, and Fabian socialists. Depictions of these individuals blurred the lines between liberalism, socialism, and Communism, making it easier to throw them all into a single conspiracy. They also served to link leftist ideas with a suspicious cosmopolitanism. And last, as the embodiment of the new, highly educated class of political and social leaders, they were used to besmirch intellectuals, academics, experts, and other elites.⁹

July 5, 2020

Anti-Communist conspiracism proper did not outlast the Cold War, but it contributed to other conspiratorial themes that did. In combination with the residue of the

hidden hand, anti-Communist conspiracism played a role in the development new world order conspiracism. But it also provided some grist for the mill of neo-Nazi conspiracism.

July 5, 2020



Immediately after the war, one event and one nonevent bonded this group in defense of Germany. The nonevent was Treasury Secretary Morgenthau's plan to destroy German industrial capacity altogether in order to prevent it from waging war again. While this

[153](#)

plan was quite punitive, it was rejected by Roosevelt and never went into effect; still, conspiracists wrote about "Morgenthauists" as though they existed. The actual event was the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–46, disparaged as a kangaroo court for putting on trial "Germans who were doing nothing else but allowing their rulers to do as they did."¹¹ Cons

July 5, 2020



This farrago of ideas points toward another extremely influential Yockey-Madole contribution to conspiracism: what Michael Barkun has termed an

[159](#)

"improvisational" approach to conspiracy building. Abandoning even minimal conventional limitations, the improvisational style "is characterized by a relentless and seemingly indiscriminate borrowing." Spengler's understanding of "the growth and decay of civilizations according to organic principles," Yockey's virulent antisemitism, anti-Americanism, and Silver Shirt militarism, and Madole's Vedic-pagan, Theosophist-inspired vision of an authoritarian utopia constituted an unprecedented mixture of previously unrelated ideas. This practice was picked up on by conspiracists of all stripes over the next several years and today poses considerable difficulty in making sense of many conspiracy theories.²⁹

July 5, 2020




But the Yockeyite tradition also had adherents determined to maintain its distinctive antimodern, Aryan supremacist paganism and its concomitant

[162](#)

disgust with Christian "weakness." Like Klassen, William Pierce established his own non-Christian belief system, manifested in his newly established West Virginia compound, the Cosmotheist Community. The influential independent conspiracist

William Gayley Simpson credited Nietzsche as an antimodern inspiration, but in his treatment titled "The Fateful Crisis Confronting Western Man," Yockey's influence is unmistakable.


July 5, 2020

 *Neo-Nazi conspiracism and Yockey's iconic status have both resurged with the rise of the alt-right white supremacists. Alt-Right theorist Kevin MacDonald, who began his career as a bio-behavioral psychologist searching for a genetic*

[163](#)

justification for antisemitism, draws on conspiracies back to the hidden hand. Between 1994 and 1998 MacDonald published three books that blamed the Jews "for introducing evil social vices and other perversions into Nordic society" and portrayed them as "degenerates preying on unsuspecting, wholesome Aryans." Aside from replacing "Gentiles" with "Aryans," MacDonald's ideas are exactly the same as the hidden hand conspiracy theory

July 5, 2020

 *But generally, the alt-right "mainstream" has been limited to rarefied intellectual antisemitism and calculated ambiguity. Jared Taylor, writing in the magazine American Renaissance, describes the "debate in our ranks on . . . the role Jews may or may not have played in creating the crisis we face. Some people in the AR [alt-right] community believe Jewish influence was decisive in destroying the traditional American consensus on race. Others disagree."*
Richard

[164](#)

Spencer, an acknowledged alt-right leader, has soft-pedaled the "rabid"

antisemitism of Andrew Anglin, telling an interviewer, "Andrew and I have different styles; we have different approaches."⁴³ Taylor's American Renaissance conferences have exposed the rift between "those who see Blacks, Hispanics and Muslims as the primary enemy and those who say 'the Jews' are behind every evil." Avowed Nazis such as David Duke have generally stayed with Taylor's organization, while white supremacist Jews have drifted to Michael Hart's Preserving Western Civilization, a "white nationalist venue more friendly to Jewish participation."⁴⁴

July 5, 2020



*The alt-right has contributed to the growing conspiracist worldview by discussing race, immigration, and terrorism with constant but inferential references to the same white victimization conspiracism that has been a hallmark of the Right for decades. The alt-right also took the lead in framing "political correctness," a constant thorn in the side of white supremacists, as a conspiracy. Andrew Breitbart promoted the idea that "cultural Marxism is political correctness, it's multiculturalism, and it's a war on Judeo-Christianity."*⁴⁶

[165](#)

Recently, the alt-right has expanded into the online world of "Fake news, . . . hoaxes, fraudulent click-bait articles, and outright conspiracy mongering."⁴⁷ The alt-right has brought what had originally been a marginal neo-Nazi conspiracy theory to the strongest position it has ever held. When the violently racist Richard Spencer was punched in the head by a protestor while giving a television interview, the anonymous presence behind the Francis Parker Yockey website took it as a declaration of war. This sort of gratuitously offensive, yet anonymous, tough-guy stance has become the hallmark of alt-right blogging.

July 5, 2020

8 *The Emergence of the New World Order*



The main concern of postwar conspiracism was not so much Jews as the menace of internationalism. The hidden hand conspiracy had focused on the destruction of United States, an emphasis unchanged since Jedidiah Morse's attacks on the Illuminati in the late 1700s. But now, the emphasis shifted to the threat of international organizations and eventually a world government. The theme of postwar conspiracism became threats to "our" sovereignty, originally the sovereignty of the nation but shifting to the state and local level as the federal government was seen as yielding more and more ground to the internationalists. Conspiracists began to turn their

attention to "our" local sovereignty, which they saw as under attack by the federal government itself.

July 5, 2020

Despite the best efforts of antisemites, it was hard to place the Jews at the center of such a network—but the question of who else would want to destroy American sovereignty loomed large. The answer that emerged defined a class of well-to-do, highly interconnected, intellectual members of the American "Eastern Establishment" and their British coconspirators.

A major step in defining the American side of this conspiracy was Emanuel M. Josephson's 1952 attack on the Rockefeller empire

July 5, 2020

invisible government and "dedicated to the ideal of pushing America into a one-world socialist system." Others took a slightly different approach, defining the invisible government as an "arm of the international bankers and their pet project the United Nations." Occasionally, the Illuminati would still turn up behind

*the secret government.³¹ In 1962, Smoot published his still popular book *The Invisible Government*, but within two years the term was appropriated by David Wise and Thomas B. Ross to describe the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as the "heart" of a new and different system that had "grown so big in men, money, and power that it has become an invisible government threatening the very freedoms it was designed to defend."³² Since that time, the*

term "invisible government" has been associated with the intelligence community and deep state conspiracism. The term that would emerge to replace both "one-worlder" and "invisible government" was "new world order."

July 5, 2020



The main difference between the internationalist conspiracy theory, as it has developed since the 1950s, and the secret government–hidden hand conspiracies of the 1930s

[184](#)

The conspiracy held that most, if not all, of these actual institutions had been infiltrated and subverted by agents of the conspiracy. In this sense, there is no fundamental difference between the nineteenth-century conspiracy theories such as anti-Catholicism or the Slave Power, the secret government of Zionists behind the New Deal, and the McCarthyite charges of Communist infiltration of the State Department. In the internationalist conspiracy, by way of contrast, the "government" is a mental construct, an abstraction created by the conspiracist—the "order" in the new world order. It is never merely the United Nations; that organization is just a front, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or the Soviet Union. The "government" is composed of whatever organizations and people the conspiracist chooses. Its members may be referred to as neutralizers, masterminds, usurpers, or mattoids. They work behind the scenes and their decisions are not public. This is not a captive or subverted government; it is a truly secret government. It is to this approach to conspiracism that we owe the well-known conspiracy chart connecting disparate components of the plot with arrows going every which way. It is also the reason why this chart can be filled with whatever international organizations come along: from the World Health Organization to the Bilderbergers.



Internationalist conspiracism marked a watershed in how conspiracies were made. It was completely improvisational, and thus anyone could alter it, bring in new components, or discard them. Accordingly, internationalist

[185](#)

conspiracism was not as coherent as its predecessors had been. At the individual conspiracist level, it reverts back to the Nesta Webster practice of simply mentioning several organizations in rapid succession to suggest that they are linked. As a school of thought, it may include anything from Jesuits to adulterated food.

July 5, 2020

9 The Conspiracy of Personal Destruction



The plot to create a new world order was too distant from many people's lives for them to become alarmed; even warnings about the conspiracy to "enslave Congress and You (documented)" could fall on deaf ears.¹ One way to shake up the public was to personalize the conspiracy, as had been done by listing members of the hidden hand who controlled the New Deal. Disparagement of FDR's "brain trust" had led quickly to a wider attack on intellectuals, even those not involved in politics. For example, Max Lerner, "who took over the department of political science at Williams College for Moscow in the fall of 1938," was accused of "intellectual arrogance"

[187](#)

for his pro-New Deal writings, which were described as a "potpourri of Polish Judaism and Yale Dialectics."² By the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy's crusade against the Communist conspiracy routinely attacked intellectuals. McCarthy's disparagement of intellectuals

"seemed to give a special rejoicing to his followers" and his "sorties against intellectuals and universities were emulated throughout the country by a host of less exalted inquisitors."³ Mistrust of intellectuals became a standard trope of conspiracist rhetoric. Clarence Manion, although dean of the Notre Dame Law School himself, blamed "scholars," a word he put in quotation marks, for creeping socialism. Dan Smoot was one of several commentators who blamed academic meddling for the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown v. Board of Education school desegregation ruling—particularly by Gunnar Myrdal, "a Swedish socialist with a Communist front record who, in a book called *An American Dilemma*, had proclaimed his utter contempt for the constitution of the United States."

July 5, 2020

Conspiracists often felt persecuted, first by the Anti-Defamation League in the 1930s, and then by anti-Nazi writers. As the New Deal gave way to internationalism, a feeling of persecution at the hands of a much wider array of intellectuals and their organizations began to grow.

[189](#)

Feeling persecuted

July 5, 2020

Thus, it was not only the campaign of desegregation that led some to advocate the abandonment of public education but what the students were forced to learn as well. Private schools without federal interference would ensure that "every parent and every child can keep a close watch on the 'materials' of education" to protect students from "any left-wing National Education Association . . . trying to brainwash American children to accept a one world, one race, one color super-state set up with Jew control at the top."³⁶ The threat posed by psychology went well beyond the textbooks and curriculum, sometimes to areas too delicate to mention.

[199](#)

Sex education in schools was, to some of its opponents, part of a larger

conspiracy against morality. An article lionizing the opponents of "blatant" sex education in Anaheim, California, schools

July 5, 2020



The 1960s saw a variety of "sensitivity trainings": Gestalt therapy, human relations workshops, Esalen, psychodrama. To conspiracists, the point of them all was the same: people would lose their individuality and "become homogenized into a group . . . subject to the will of a leader." In this context, self-criticism forms the basis of "voluntary" confessions of the type used by tyrants who want people's minds "influenced, tamed and broken down into servility." This Pavlovian "brainwashing" technique is, according to the conspiracists, a variety of "menticide." It can even be "used through the mass communications media . . . to turn

[201](#)

the U.S. into a nation of mental robots."

July 5, 2020



Representative James Utt of Orange County, California, explained: "The Beatles, and their mimicking rock-and-rollers, use the Pavlovian technique to produce artificial neuroses in our young people. Extensive experiments in

[202](#)

hypnotism and rhythm have shown how rock-and-roll music leads to a destruction of the normal inhibitory mechanism of the cerebral cortex and permits easy acceptance of immorality and disregard to all moral norms."

July 5, 2020




The public school as purveyor of psychopolitics persists in mind-control conspiracy theory.

[203](#)

And long-time public school opponent and Reagan administration education adviser Charlotte Iserbyt agreed. The “brainwashing for the acceptance of the ‘system’s’ control,” she wrote, “would take place in the school—through indoctrination and the use of behavior modification.” Iserbyt singled out for particular opprobrium “critical thinking” as “nothing but pure unadulterated destruction of absolute values of right and wrong.”⁴⁴

July 5, 2020




Aside from the creation of sex slaves, mind-control conspiracism is generally subsidiary to some other conspiracy theory. Presumably, conspirators are trying to brainwash the public to go along with some malevolent plan. But over the years a mind-control conspiracy theory with its own raison d'être began to take shape, at least to the degree that conspiracists became increasingly fixated on the techniques of mind control while paying less attention to its purpose.

[207](#)

Mind control

July 5, 2020

10 The Planners Take Over




A dominant theme among conspiracist speakers was the ever-increasing mistrust of the federal government. More than lingering opposition to the New Deal or Truman's Fair Deal, this mistrust grew out of fear of internationalism, which political leaders in both parties were embracing, as well as federal

[210](#)

revenue sharing with state and local governments. Conspiracists saw these developments as evidence of federal encroachment on local

sovereignty and as a conduit for the demands of the UN. The UN's efforts to combat genocide, for instance, were seen as part of a larger initiative, under which causing anyone "mental harm" would be a crime under the "Nero-like powers of the Genocide Convention." Thus, by calling a black person a "nigger" ("even jokingly"), you could be "hailed off to court in Tel Aviv or Afghanistan, as decided by the UN, and if found guilty, shipped off to hard labor in a Siberian Slave Labor Camp."⁸ This combination of racism and fear of the UN was not at all unusual.


July 7, 2020

 *Federal support for civil rights in the 1960s generated a great deal of mistrust of the government in the South and among racists*

[214](#)

everywhere. As with anti-Communists, one could be a thoroughgoing racist without a conspiratorial perspective. However, once the specter of a conspiracy began to arise, few vocal opponents of civil rights ignored it. The basic conspiracy grew out of the belief common among Southern racists that blacks did not want any change in their situation and, even if they did, were incapable of bringing it about. Working backwards, as conspiracists do, the question then became: what forces are really behind the civil rights movement? Not surprisingly, the force turned out to be Communists, with Jews lurking in the background.¹⁸


July 5, 2020

 *The standard photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. at the "communist training school" in Tennessee might*

[217](#)

accompany accusations (typically described as "citations") that King belonged to sixty Communist front organizations.


July 5, 2020

 *Even King's assassination was interpreted as part of the civil rights conspiracy, in which King's "Controllers"—"a small band of rich, educated and not at all oppressed conspirators secretly*

[219](#)

running the communization of America”—have him killed to ensure the passage of civil rights legislation.³² Conspiracists applied the same explanatory template to the anti-Vietnam War movement as they had to civil rights. Some remembered that progressive education was “sabotaging the minds and moral instincts of the children” and saw its effects in the counterculture. Others saw the Communists’ handiwork in the sudden popularity of Gandhi’s “heathen religion.” But, again, the prevailing explanation was Communism, backed by the federal government

July 5, 2020




The specter of the destruction of state sovereignty—or in extreme versions, the abolition of the states entirely—became a key element in conspiratorial thinking. Citizens for American Survival warned that “all levels of government are in the process of being reduced to a conglomerate of sovietized regions.”³⁷ Congressman Larry McDonald “revealed to Congress” that the government, which was secretly supporting domestic

[220](#)

terrorist groups, would “activate” these groups and then use executive order 11490 to meet the “threat.” President Nixon galvanized conspiracists with his 1969 executive order delineating ten administrative regions to be used in a state of national emergency. Just over two years later, Nixon confirmed the conspiracists’ worst fears with another executive order allowing the ten regions to be used to establish “closer working relationships between major Federal grant-making agencies and State and Local government and improved coordination of the categorical grant system.”

July 5, 2020




By the 1960s, the federal government’s threat to gun ownership had become an equally conspiratorial issue. The people needed to stand up to government, but “plans to confiscate all private firearms by the end of 1965” were in the works even before the Kennedy assassination brought gun control to the forefront.

[222](#)

Many other issues raised right-wing conspiratorial alarms, reflecting growing mistrust of government and authority in general. The government's abandonment of silver coins in 1965 was interpreted as part of its plot to debase our currency. The UN's plan to have soccer take over our school sports ("as a way of de-emphasizing nationalism") would be implemented with even girls encouraged to play ("rather than to look forward to being a mother"). International conspirators were also pushing for homosexuals to be counted "as a 'minority group.'" They could be stopped but only if current laws were enforced so that "the control of our Federal government and deep penetration of many state governments by the combined Homosexual International and the International Communist Conspiracy could be completely broken."⁴⁵


July 5, 2020

 *time of the campaign against Martin Luther King Jr., specificity was dying out. Falling back on "they" as the enemy of "we" was already a common anti-Communist rhetorical tactic that blurred the lines between liberals, socialists, and Communists.⁴⁷*

[223](#)

Many terms were used pejoratively rather than with any pretense of description: "pseudo-intellectual," "social engineer," "expert," "planner." Conspiracist writers typically placed these terms in quotation marks to indicate that they considered the designations fraudulent as well

July 5, 2020

 *The same rhetorical evasiveness was used to sanitize the antisemitism behind so much conspiratorial thinking. Even Benjamin Freedman, an open antisemite, used "they" constantly to avoid having to specify his*

[224](#)

targets. For example, Freedman's account of how Woodrow Wilson was elected president includes these key statements in a single paragraph, all implicit references to the Jews:

July 5, 2020

All these rhetorical sleights lead in the direction of the disembodied "they" and serve four related purposes. First, the vagueness allows the conspiracist writer to avoid specifics: who is actually behind some conspiratorial action? A cynical conspiracist can use this to try to fool readers, but many surely fool themselves the same way.

Second, the lack of specificity allows the reader to insert whatever referent makes sense. When warned, "Don't let them take your guns away!" a relatively moderate reader might think of actual gun control advocates. Conspiracists, however, might think of those shadowy planners waiting to activate executive order 11490 to send you to the work camp. Third, the use of "they" invites readers to imagine a great many powerful conspirators. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States may not be a formidable opponent, but the "they" behind "Pavlovian mind conditioning" certainly is. Fourth, and probably most important, the use of "they" makes it possible for conspiracists to ensnare any new development or event in the conspiracy. To the degree that one presents a group of real conspirators, it is necessary to explain why they would suddenly decide to, for instance, poison everyone with chemtrails. "They" eliminates this need.

July 5, 2020


11 Pan-Ideological Conspiracy Theories: Denialism and Cover-Up

The period spanning roughly from the Kennedy assassination to the election of Ronald Reagan marked more than just a turning point in conspiracy theorizing. Aside from the massive level of interest in assassination conspiracies, conspiracism in general seemed to be on the decline. Beneath the surface, however, conspiracy theories were mushrooming, incorporating new topics, a much wider segment of the public, and even distinctively new approaches. The underlying phenomenon behind this expansion

was the unprecedented decline in trust in government as well as other authoritative institutions, such as organized religion, the business community, and eventually even science, the military, and the

media. With regard to the government in particular, declining trust was transformed into active mistrust, an outlook extremely compatible with conspiratorial thinking.


July 5, 2020

 *Many attribute the growth of mistrust in this era to high-profile events: the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, the King assassination, the war in Vietnam, and the Watergate hearings. There were, however, many more events contributing to mistrust, and even alienation, among different segments of the public. Some of these events seem mild today, and it is hard to recapture the impact they had. For example, environmental activism and reporting in the 1960s*

[227](#)

shook the confidence of many moderate Americans by exposing hazardous business practices and lax regulations. And during the 1970s, a relentless series of revelations of governmental wrongdoing created a climate in which conspiracism was able to flourish. In 1971, anti-war activists exposed COINTELPRO, the FBI's counterintelligence program operation against civil rights and black power activists. The Washington Star broke the story of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments in 1972. In 1974, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh published stories of CIA spying on Americans. Interest in JFK's assassination rebounded strongly in 1975 when the Zapruder film was shown on network television.

July 5, 2020

 *These and other conspiracy-friendly subjects received even more media and public attention due to a remarkable series of government investigations and hearings. Senator Edward Kennedy held hearings on the Tuskegee experiment. More prominently, the*

[228](#)

Church Committee held hearings on the FBI's counterintelligence program and various CIA practices. These hearings revealed FBI efforts to undermine civil rights organizations (including Native American and Hispanic groups) as well as the anti-war movement. More alarming to most people, they also revealed the CIA's practice of assassinating foreign leaders, including embarrassing accounts of the CIA's efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro, which also exposed the

collaborative relationship between the CIA and organized crime. At the same time, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller oversaw the Commission on CIA Activities in the United States, devoted in part to uncovering the CIA's MK-Ultra (mind control) experiments. During Representative Otis Pike's tenure as chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, hearings on the activities of the FBI, the CIA, and the Defense Intelligence Agency proved so incendiary that the committee's report was not even published by the Government Printing Office. Deteriorating public confidence in the Warren Commission's investigation of the Kennedy assassination led to the 1976 House Select Committee on Assassinations, the ambivalent conclusions of which fueled conspiratorial thinking about both the Kennedy and King assassinations.

July 5, 2020



The new conspiracy theories that grew out of this milieu of journalistic exposés, congressional investigations, and popular culture are typified by the moon-landing hoax conspiracy. This constituted a new approach to conspiracism; its proponents built it out of nothing, and it appealed to a wider array of people by avoiding the overtly political or ideological. In the years after the moon landing, public opinion surveys consistently showed that a noticeable minority of people doubted that it had in fact taken place. Seizing the opportunity, a public relations practitioner and writer

[229](#)

One problem facing Kaysing was logistics: how could NASA, or anyone, fake a moon landing? The other problem was motivation: why should they? Kaysing offered some desultory arguments about intimidation of

astronauts and control of the media, but he was more interested in asking questions along the lines of “Why were all transmissions to be public via TV and radio, media of communications easily faked?” and “Why did so many astronauts end up as executives of large corporations?” Kaysing then offered up considerable technical detail, daunting, but relatively pointless: the composition of “hypergolic propellants” and a cutaway illustration of the Lunar Excursion Module to show how many parts it had that might malfunction. Third, he relied very heavily on visuals, printing grainy images of the moon, with captions such as “NO evidence of the surface being disturbed beneath the engine nozzle,” “Again, no stars!” and “No dust on face shield.” Less compelling were pictures of a patch of Nevada desert having a “striking similarity” to the moon and of the buffet at the Sands Hotel and Casino, where the astronauts presumably ate while the hoax was going on.⁴ This scattershot approach, heavy with visuals but light on argumentation—“just asking questions”—has become a standard method of creating and defending conspiracy theories. It replaced the ideology in earlier conspiracy theories, which had given people a framework for accepting them. Disaggregated information, provided to the point of overload, with strong visuals and loaded questions turned out to be a powerful tactic for drawing people in (not to mention selling books). The moon-landing conspiracy also illustrates the staying power of conspiracies in today’s media environment. Flimsy and inconsequential as it was, Kaysing’s conspiracy received a boost from the 1977 movie *Capricorn One*, a thriller depicting a Mars mission

July 5, 2020

Probably the most prominent area of pan-ideological conspiracism today deals with health and medical issues: pandemics, alternative medicine, genetically modified food, AIDS, and, of course, vaccines.⁸ In a slightly different fashion, MK-Ultra-based mind-control conspiracies invariably have a political dimension, whether a left-wing conspiracy about corporate-fascism or a right-wing one about global government’s plans for its critics. Even 9/11 conspiracy theories, initially dominated by leftist attacks on the Bush administration, have become more politically balanced as leftist interest has faded and rightist

[232](#)

interpretations have emerged. And sometimes nonideological conspiracy theories have been moved by a particularly strong faction into one or another ideological camp.



Many conspiracy theories with ambiguous politics fall into one of two general categories: denialism and conspiracy by cover-up. Both grow primarily out of mistrust of authorities and may well be most pronounced among "cynical individuals who support democratic principles." These are people who wish they were able to trust their own government. Psychologists

[232](#)

maintain that denialists' belief in conspiracy theories "allows them to exert some control over their lives." To denialists, the "official story" comes to be thought of as a conspiratorial construct in its own right, making any alternative attractive by comparison.¹⁰ The construction of a conspiracy by cover-up begins similarly but moves on to at least one widely believed conspiracy theory. The template for this method of conspiracy building is the UFO movement.

July 5, 2020



Contemporary denialism, however, is more than just a refusal to believe; it is an active process—what Robert Proctor calls "agnotology" or "the cultural production of ignorance." While the earliest example of this could well be Bill Kaysing's moon-landing denialism, Proctor suggests that the "evil genius" behind it may have come from the tobacco industry: "The idea was that people would continue to smoke so long as they could be reassured that 'no one really knows' the true cause of cancer. The strategy was to question all assertions to the contrary, all efforts to 'close' the controversy, as if closure itself was a mark of dogma, the enemy of

[233](#)

inquiry. The point was to keep the question of health harms open, for decades if possible."¹² This strategy links denialism to pseudoscience in two complementary ways. First, pseudoscientific claims are used to bolster denialist views, and second, the very concept of science is attacked and discredited. The pseudoscientific claims are sometimes the

work of scientific “gadflies,” or they may come out of well-heeled corporate labs. Or they may simply be made up. One study of anti-vaccination websites found that over two-thirds claimed “scientific” backing for bogus claims such as vaccines’ causing “brain damage.” Similarly, AIDS denialist Matt Irwin has claimed that an HIV-positive diagnosis causes stress, which suppresses the immune system

July 5, 2020



Denialism, pseudoscience, and conspiracism are closely related. Some beliefs begin as denialism but slowly become conspiratorial to answer critics who wonder why everyone else believes what they deny. Anticipating this, deniers frequently describe the cover-up and censorship they face. This was the case for Bill Kaysing’s moon-landing exposé; HIV and polio denialists have followed the same practice; and (replacing scientists with historians) Holocaust deniers have done the same for years.¹⁴ More frequently, denialism and the accompanying conspiracy emerge together. Vaccine-induced autism believers saw early on “massive academic fraud and conspiracy to

[234](#)

discredit Dr. Andrew Wakefield” by authorities who spread “provably false lies about his research.” (Wakefield’s discredited research began the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine scare.) Much the same is true of food-related conspiracies, such as those surrounding pasteurized milk and genetically modified organisms. A third situation arises when denialism is purposefully used in support of a conspiracy theory. This, of course, was the tactic pioneered by the tobacco companies but applied to climate change.¹⁵

July 5, 2020



Discrediting science outright, rather than co-opting it, is today’s prominent strategy. By subtly discrediting “scientism,” which suggests a gullible willingness to believe whatever orthodox science

[234](#)

claims, conspiracists can use “alternative” scientific findings while at the

same time disparaging the scientific establishment. This is where denialism most strongly intersects with conspiracism. The “conspiratorial element of denial,” as Stephan Lewandowsky puts it, “explains why contrarians often perceive themselves as heroic dissenters who—in their imagination—are following Galileo’s footsteps by opposing a mainstream scientific ‘elite’ that imposes its views . . . for political reasons.”¹⁶ For example, conspiracist Russell Blaylock, a neuroscientist, took exception to an article by the psychologist Sander van der Linden that had noted the troublesome societal implications of climate change denial. Blaylock complained: “This statement makes the declaration that the debate over climate change is finished and settled and no more discussions are needed. Despite the fact that the proposed solutions to climate change demand a virtual destruction of the free market and the private ownership of private property, this writer and the climate change scientists in general insist that we charge ahead.”¹⁷

July 5, 2020



Carl Sagan observed that pseudoscience set forth ideas “often framed precisely so that they are invulnerable to any experiment that offers a prospect of disproof.” Then, scientists’ refusal to accept pseudoscience becomes evidence of

[235](#)

“conspiracies to suppress it.” Science denialism works the same way.¹⁹

July 5, 2020



Psychologists, however, have linked such beliefs with a tendency to conspiracism. A series of studies has found that poor reality testing is a characteristic of people who believe in the paranormal and among conspiracists. Not surprisingly, acceptance of pseudoscience and of superstition was found to correlate with conspiratorial thinking as well. Perhaps more surprisingly, anthropomorphism correlates with conspiracism. Apparently, anthropomorphism links back to hyper agency by searching for an “intelligence” of some kind behind the scenes of disturbing events. This is essentially what Karl Popper

[237](#)

had in mind by writing off conspiracy theories as the

"secularization of religious superstition."²² These correlates may lead people to embrace conspiracism if their beliefs are refuted by the authorities and belittled by intellectuals or the media. Rather than undermining the beliefs, refutation is taken as an indication that the authorities have a reason to hide the truth—a cover-up of whatever conspiracy is afoot.²³ The template for conspiracy theory through cover-up emerged from the UFO phenomenon of the 1950s.

July 5, 2020

Throughout this time, military authorities issued occasional reports designed to downplay UFO sightings. These reports were riddled with misinformation, since some of the "UFO" sightings were actually observations of secret, experimental aircraft. Moreover, the CIA muddled the water with misleading

[238](#)

information to try to confuse the Russians.²⁵ The government's explanations of UFO sightings (e.g., clouds, planets, swamp gas, ball lightning) were rejected and even ridiculed.

July 5, 2020

The cover-up conspiracy-building process amounts to a backward, tautological syllogism. Beginning with the belief that UFOs are truly extraterrestrial, the authorities' rejection of that belief automatically constitutes a cover-up of the truth. As part of this cover-up, the authorities must offer some non-truth (the "official position") in place of the truth. This merely strengthens the conspiracist's belief in the first "real truth" (UFOs are extraterrestrial) and adds to it a second, conspiratorial real truth (the government knows the first real truth and is lying about it). This is the case whether one believes that the aliens piloting the UFOs are peace loving or warlike, benevolent or

[239](#)

given to cattle mutilation, greys or angels—and

thus conspiracies tend to multiply.

July 5, 2020



Any official pronouncements or reports provide a target for conspiracists, and the information contained in them can generate additional questions, expanding the conspiracy. The investigations by the military and intelligence agencies turned flying saucers into fodder for an array of competing conspiracies. Reassurances from the U.S. Public Health Service helped shift opposition to water fluoridation from a crackpot health notion into a "Red conspiracy" and a plot to "weaken the Aryan race."⁴³ Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories were kick-started by the (admittedly inadequate) Warren

[244](#)

Report. Congressional investigations revealing the absence of any POW/MIAs served mainly to entrench conspiracist beliefs to the contrary. Official statements by psychological organizations against the "recovered memory" craze were cast as part of a CIA disinformation campaign on behalf of the Illuminati. And NASA's efforts to prove that it truly had sent men to the moon have done nothing to thwart even the most bizarre conspiracy theories.⁴⁴ Negative attention by the authorities is so vital to the success of a conspiracy theory that conspiracy advocates will pretend to have found it.

July 5, 2020



Even absolute inattention can be turned around,

[244](#)

Nevertheless, since they had no actual official attention with which to work, neither Masters nor Gordon was successful in that neither the Bigfoot-as-alien nor the Planet X conspiracy seems to have attracted many adherents.

July 5, 2020

12 Conspiracism Proliferates: Some Anomalies



*Books about mysterious and suspicious symbolism have been popular for a great many years—and TV shows such as *Forbidden History*, which pursue the “true” story behind them, always find an audience. But these books and shows are often not conspiratorial at all, and even when they are, they just speculate on the “cover-up” by respectable scientists and historians who refuse to seriously examine the mysteries. Conspiracism in this*

[253](#)

area centered originally on Freemasonry, a practice rich in arcane symbols that could easily be billed as occult or even Illuministic. In the United States, these connections receive particular attention, as Freemasonry was common among the nation’s founders.¹⁹ At the edge of this attention to the role of secret societies in the founding of the United States, though, conspiracies have been accreting rapidly.

July 5, 2020




the followers of Plato and those of Aristotle, as he explained: “One elite, the humanists, the Platonic or Neoplatonic faction, is dedicated to steering the course of history away from rule through mythologies. The other, the Aristotelians and their heirs, is committed to strengthening the rule by mythology, for the purpose of establishing a permanent ‘feudal-like’ Utopia of obedient simple-minded folk ruled by a tenured neo-Aristotelian oligarchy.”³² LaRouche’s determination to link every event in conspiracy history to this philosophical battle (in which he sides with Platonic humanism) is the main reason why his ideas have proved too difficult for most people. But, his ideas eventually focus on Great Britain and the Royal Family, LaRouche’s nemesis.

[257](#)

LaRouchites isolate themselves by producing lengthy Platonic versus Aristotelian analyses of the Jacksonian populist effort (Aristotelian) to eliminate the Bank of the United States, the superiority of Alexander Hamilton (Platonic) over Thomas Jefferson (Aristotelian), and how the work of Francis Bacon (Aristotelian) set the stage for the Illuminati.³⁵ Very few people either understand these arguments or care to.

July 5, 2020




The plan now encompassed a plot to wipe out sub-Saharan Africans with a combination of pollution, desertification, and weather manipulation. Another version of the plot against Africa claims that it

[260](#)

is part of the Rockefellers' plan to seize that continent's diamonds.⁴⁰ That same posting also included the Rothschilds, along with Cecil Rhodes, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the secret MJ-12 group behind Roswell. Even Nuwaubian ideas—originally limited to the claim that ancient Egypt was a black African civilization and that white academics conspired to cover up that fact—have come to encompass a genocidal threat from the Illuminati and the Bilderbergers.⁴¹ Perhaps the black genocide conspiracy's days as an anomaly are numbered as black conspiracism is coming to resemble its white counterpart.

July 5, 2020



Pan-ideological conspiracism implies that people on the Left as well as the Right may adopt a conspiracy theory. And, while the conspiracism of the twentieth century was dominated by right-wingers, nineteenth-century conspiracy theories were not. The question today is whether there are substantial left-wing conspiracy theories growing out of a leftist conspiracism. It is not unusual for people to assume political symmetry, despite the evidence. American studies professor Alasdair Spark, for instance, sees the new world order as "an equal opportunity conspiracy theory" with left- and right-wing versions. The equivalence is seriously undermined, however, by

[260](#)

Spark's evidence. From the right-wing

Police against the New World Order: Behind the scenes is a plan for an oligarchy of the world's richest families to place 1/2 the masses of the earth in servitude under their complete control, administered from behind the false front of the United Nations. . . . The plan calls for the elimination of the other 2.5 billion people through war, disease, abortion, and famine by the year 2000. And on the Left, Noam Chomsky's not particularly conspiratorial left-wing interpretation of American intervention in the war in the Balkans: "The aim of these assaults is to establish the role of the major imperialist powers—above all the United States—as the unchallengeable arbiters of public affairs. The New World Order is precisely this: an international regime of unrelenting pressure and intimidation by the most powerful capitalist regime against the weakest."⁴² More bluntly, journalist Jonathan Kay tries to demonstrate Left-Right symmetry by comparing Mein Kampf, and Hitler's "delusional fears that Jews were conspiring to destroy not only the Aryan nation, but all of humanity," with Marx's Das Kapital. Kay claims flatly that: "Notwithstanding the numbing jargon about Hegelian dialectics and such, the real lure of Marxism . . . is its fundamentally conspiracist vision of society."⁴³ If one accepts Marxism as inherently conspiracist, then left-wing conspiracism exists, quod erat demonstrandum.

July 5, 2020




The best-known proponent of a conspiracist Left is Daniel Pipes, who divides conspiracies into only two categories: antisemitic and secret society—with Marxism as a secret society. The reductionist simplicity of this scheme has led to the criticism that Pipes, a strong anti-Communist, "appears to be wilfully blind to the ideological implications of conspiracism." The larger question is not whether Marxism is conspiracist—few see it that way—but at what point does analysis of the power of elites in society become twisted into "conspiracy fantasy"?⁴⁴ William Domhoff, whose career has been devoted to analyzing power politics and economics from a leftist

[261](#)

perspective, has laid out five reasons why, in his words: "There are no conspiracies." In drawing the distinction between his work (which conspiracists have appropriated) and actual conspiracism, Domhoff concludes that "careful studies show that all these actions were

authorized by top government officials, which is the critical point here. There was no 'secret team' or 'shadow government' committing illegal acts or ordering government officials to deceive the public and disrupt social movements. Such a distinction is crucial in differentiating all sociological theories of power from a conspiratorial one."⁴⁵

July 5, 2020




Peter Dale Scott has termed "deep politics," which owes its origin to the Kennedy assassination. Like all the power elite researchers, Scott tries to keep his distance from "traditional conspiracy theory." Nevertheless, he finds the line between "deep political analysis" and conspiracism is "not always easy to draw."⁴⁶ Indeed it is not. If it is not a conspiracy theory, deep politics must be a particularly large conspiratorial explanation. It borders on creating an "alternative historical construct," but its narrative does not take Richard Hofstadter's "curious leap" to people not plausibly connected with the events in question. All in all, Scott's book appears to stop short of conspiracism

[262](#)

Interestingly, much deep politics conspiracism exists in the realm of the arts, rather than research per se. Oliver Stone certainly sees himself in this light; his film JFK relied heavily on Garrison's memoir.

July 5, 2020




"Fusion paranoia," a term coined by journalist Michael Kelley in 1995, was first used to capture an array of authors, publishers, periodicals, and online entities that combine muckraking, historical revisionism, deep politics conspiracism, and sometimes occultish and New Age ideas but are not racist or antisemitic. There are many outlets, but some are sincere, some are hoaxes, and some are, as they say, just for lulz.⁵⁰ Fusion paranoia was taken up early on the Left in articles that noted similarities between 1960s antiwar

[263](#)

activists and later antigovernment patriots. The common "paranoia" of these groups provided a rationale

for their "fusion."⁵¹ Fusion paranoia has also been put to use by the Right. By including such nonconspiratorial beliefs as UFOs and Atlantis, Daniel Pipes was able to continue to disparage the Left as inherently conspiratorial. More recently, fusion paranoia has been used to connect all opponents of Israeli policies under the heading of antisemitic conspiracists.⁵²

July 5, 2020

 *Although deep politics is generally distinct from conspiracy theories, there is a bedrock level of conspiracist thinking on the Left.*

[264](#)

After the 9/11 attacks, rightists tried to use this to lure leftist "truthers" to right-wing conspiracies, often relying on their common rejection of anti-truther leftists such as Noam Chomsky or Howard Zinn. They met with only marginal success, in large part because the right-wing conspiracies are so often antisemitic.⁵⁵ Still, bedrock leftist conspiracism turns up from time to time as conspiracy theories centered on specific events, such as the October surprise during the 1980 election or the airplane crash that took the life of Senator Paul Wellstone. But, on the Left, these conspiracies tend to get resolved and adherents abandon them, a rare occurrence on the Right.⁵⁶ Moreover, studies, both in the United States and Europe show markedly less conspiracism among supporters of Left parties than Right parties.⁵⁷ All in all, Left conspiracism is at best a pale shadow of its right-wing counterpart. It takes up only a small part of the conspiracist stage, it has never cumulated into a sprawling theory, and it is much more in touch with reality.

July 5, 2020

13 *Christian Identity and the White Race*

 *Christian Identity has generated several specific*


[266](#)

organizations and inspired other movements. As a theological concept, it has been incorporated into the framework of right-wing conspiracism and is considered a "'motor' for militant white supremacy."¹ Christian Identity has its roots in the British Israelism movement (also known as Anglo-Israelism), with which it is sometimes confused.²

As a coherent theological and political creed, Christian Identity dates from around 1950, a few years after its main precursor—British Israelism— was merged with explicitly racist and apocalyptic

July 5, 2020

14 The Government Conspiracy against "Us"

 Harrell identified a "Mid-America Survival Area"—defined by its corners: Lubbock, Texas; Scotts Bluff, Nebraska; Pittsburgh; and Atlanta—he believed to be "defendable" against invasion by an "alien force."⁵ Rural areas were vulnerable to the Christian Identity message, even in its virulent forms. The farm economy suffered badly in the 1970s, with increased energy costs and lower commodity prices. Farm foreclosures created an "existential insecurity" that Christian Identity preachers could easily whip up into

[287](#)

hatred. James Wickstrom, head of "counterinsurgency" for the Posse Comitatus, portrayed the farmer as the "Twentieth Century Slave" who was at the mercy of Jewish "land-grabbing devils."⁶ This fear of losing control of the land was exacerbated by a 1976 change in federal law that brought more land under the administration of the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, and other agencies. A "sagebrush rebellion" of state and local officials in the West fought these changes in the courts but lost. As rural America continued to suffer economically into the 1980s, conspiracism flourished. Various groups and their periodicals began to characterize the foreclosure problem as intentional.

Depending on the breadth of definition, the militia movement may or may not be considered the same as the Christian patriot movement. It certainly has some roots in the "township" movement that originated in Nehemiah Township, Idaho, in 1982 and was devoted to the "preservation, protection, and sustenance of our Aryan race." Similarly to the Posse Comitatus position, sovereign townships used "Anglo-Saxon" law and "Yahshua Christian" law, and considered any other governments' laws that conflicted with their own to be invalid.¹⁵ Although the specific

"legal" terms are not used uniformly across the patriot movement, Anglo-Saxon law seems to be much the same as organic law, the underlying documents of which are "the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Bill of Rights" but not necessarily the Constitution. This body of law is seemingly threatened by the "Talmudic Law" that serves as the basis of "the current welfare state: the mob rule of democracy."¹⁶ In 1996, the Southern Poverty Law Center distinguished between militias and patriot groups, identifying over four hundred of the former and three hundred of the latter. Others have lumped them together as white supremacist groups.¹⁷ Essentially, the idea of forming "militias" derived from William Potter Gale's reading of the Constitution as promoting "unorganized militias" to guard against government tyranny. Because of the problems other antigovernment groups had encountered with infiltration by law enforcement, Louis Beam (of the Aryan Nations) added the idea of "leaderless resistance," which in practice meant no large-scale organization—hence the hundreds of small groups that the Southern Poverty Law Center identified.¹⁸

July 6, 2020

Third, and ultimately most important, the existence of martyrs means that there must in fact be a conflict. Guerilla wars and resistance movements have always had their martyrs, whether Che Guevara or members of the French Resistance in World War II. A list of

martyrs tells people that they are not conspiracists imagining a Zionist Occupation Government, but real fighters, prepared to give their all to protect beleaguered white Christian America against the real forces of the ZOG.

The creation of martyrs became particularly important First, while conspiracists had long complained of victimization, the suffering of specific individuals made it viscerally real. Second, dates commemorating martyrdoms take on real meaning and inspire others.

July 6, 2020

defense of white Christian civilization" in the face of ZOG's effort to establish "One World Dictatorship!"³⁴ The use of the term "ZOG" does little to distinguish militia and patriot ideas from earlier antisemitic conspiracy theories. Their distinctive conspiracism arises from William Potter Gale's organic law ideology laid out in 1963, which was the basis for "the myth of the Organic Constitution," according to which: "The Constitution is a divinely inspired document in which human agency is secondary to God's will. Only the original Constitution and Bill of Rights as signed by the Founders is the supreme Law of the Land and this law should be interpreted in the light of Biblical understanding. All later amendments, laws and regulations

[298](#)

are 'unconstitutional' in the sense that they 'create a federal constitution in opposition to the original.'³⁵ Despite the obvious religious rationale for the organic Constitution, the main point behind it is racial. While all Constitutional amendments were considered suspect, the Fourteenth Amendment was singled out as a key part of the conspiracy against the white race, because it ensured citizenship to former slaves. A country "is like a home to a people," wrote Erst LaFlor. "White men struggled to build a beautiful house for their children and future generations. And then, just as they were nailing on the last board, negroes were made citizens and given full run of the house."³⁶ During the school desegregation campaign of the 1960s, Dan Smoot had issued a call for a "first-rate political figure" to spearhead a drive to have the Fourteenth Amendment "resubmitted" for ratification, since its original ratification had been coercive and

fraudulent. Smoot was certain that, in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the amendment would fail.³⁷

July 6, 2020



The worldview of sovereign citizens is so intense and peculiar that members of this movement are a major concern for law enforcement and the courts. Aside from the many instances when sovereigns have been involved in shootouts with the police, they have caused considerable harm by filing injunctions and issuing liens against the property of public officials—what has come to be called “paper terrorism.” They flood the courts with paperwork

[305](#)

featuring “odd or seemingly inane use of secondary legal materials, statutes, and overruled, misunderstood, or outdated case law.” They are, however, considered competent to stand trial. Even though their beliefs appear delusional, legally they are not. Regardless of its content, any belief held by a considerable number of people cannot constitute evidence of insanity.⁵⁶

July 6, 2020

15 Conspiracism Rebounds: Truthers, Birthers, and the New Militias




Over the decades, conspiracism evolved and branched out into different versions, from the secret government/hidden hand to mind-controlling psychopolitics to shape-shifting human-reptilian hybrids posing as our political leaders. During the last few years, conspiracism has become so imbedded in the popular mind that the once-menacing Illuminati has become a punchline. Websites filled with photographs of celebrities making triangular hand

[307](#)

gestures or of crackpots with photoshopped tinfoil hats define the weird end of conspiracy theory for most people. The more serious side of conspiracism in the twenty-first century was first defined by the 9/11 attacks and the obsessive "truther"

conspiracism that followed them. By the time that burst of conspiracism faded, the election of Barack Obama brought the racist right-wing conspiracism that lurked beneath the surface to prominence in American politics. Despite the panoply of different conspiracy theories that arose between Nesta Webster and 9/11, none has wholly disappeared. In part, this is because the technologies of social media have made it easy to rekindle and spread any conspiracy theory. The dominant strand of conspiracism—the continuum from secret government to hidden hand to one-worlder to new world order—continues to be widely propagated, with perhaps an infinite number of subtle variations.

July 6, 2020

 *since the Kennedy assassination powerful enough to generate extensive conspiracies of its own. Most of the avalanche of conspiratorial interpretation of 9/11 took place outside the long-established frameworks of conspiracism. The two basic "theories" around which suspicions gelled were LIHOP (let it happen on purpose) and MIHOP (made it happen on purpose). The LIHOP allegation was basically that the Bush administration knew (or suspected) that an attack was coming but did nothing to prevent it so it could pursue its war plans in the Middle East. The more severe MIHOP allegation was that the attacks were a false flag operation carried out by the Bush administration for the same reason. Both terms cover a variety of*

[310](#)

scenarios. The LIHOP scenarios are conceptually simple, and they barely rise to the level of conspiracy "theory." The MIHOP scenarios, in contrast, are genuinely theoretical, involving many more participants, long-term planning, and a leap of faith. In practice though, the line between LIHOP and MIHOP is often skirted, as illustrated by David Ray Griffin, a major voice of 9/11 conspiracism, in his book *The New Pearl Harbor*

July 6, 2020



Most of those who find connections between 9/11 and the Kennedy assassination are in the "deep politics" camp pioneered by Peter Dale Scott. By linking "deep events" (those that reveal the workings of "the deep state, that part of the state that is not publicly accountable"), Scott and others try to piece together the clandestine power structure. In much of this analysis, similarity between the roads to American attacks on Cuba and in Iraq is key.¹⁵

[313](#)

Deep politics

July 6, 2020



July 6, 2020

[313](#)



This level of conspiracism did not emerge from nothing. Years of 9/11 trutherism had helped make conspiracism a familiar, even acceptable, approach to politics. Moreover, there were specific connections between trutherism and birtherism.

[316](#)

Frank Gaffney, a disenchanted Reagan administration defense spokesman who accused Obama of hiding both his Kenyan birth and Muslim religion, had earlier invented a MIHOP 9/11 theory that placed conservative activist Grover Norquist at the center of the conspiracy. Philip Berg, who brought an early suit challenging Obama's eligibility, had in 2004 filed a LIHOP lawsuit against George W. Bush, alleging a FEMA plan to establish a secret government

July 7, 2020




Similarly, a July 2008 conference sponsored by Tom

[317](#)

DeWeese's antienvironmental American Policy Center and Phyllis Schlafly's "pro-family" Eagle Forum introduced the United Nations 1992 sustainable development plan, Agenda 21, to the conspiracy world. This "anti-human document" represented the new world order's "new world theology" of replacing God with nature. The John Birch Society (for which the 2008 conference marked a return to

prominence) also attacked "The New False Religion," claiming that "advocates of UN world government have drafted an Earth Charter, which they compare to the Ten Commandments and keep in an 'Ark of Hope.'"²³


July 7, 2020

 *Many of these minor groups faded away after Obama's reelection, but they did not all disappear. Some were reduced to their core membership "who feel as if they have lost their only home. . . . They get increasingly frustrated and sometimes go out in*

[320](#)

a blaze of glory." The result was an increase in "lone wolf" and small group attacks. At the same time, a troubling increase in reported connections between such groups and the military was beginning to emerge. These were not well received reports—a 2009 Department of Homeland Security report was downplayed largely because it reported that the "willingness of a small percentage of military personnel to join extremist groups during the 1990s because they were disgruntled, disillusioned, or suffering from the psychological effects of war is being replicated today."³¹ While the military may be reluctant to admit it, it has been plagued by this problem, as neo-Nazis and RaHoWa fighters find military bases to be fertile ground.³²

July 7, 2020

 *Obama's election marked the third burst of right-wing conspiracism since around 1970, when Christian Identity groups and the fading neo-Nazi groups built on white fears and rural resentment to create the*


[321](#)

conspiracist idea that the federal government would eliminate their racial privilege and run roughshod over their land. Early militias, the Aryan Nations, and the Posse Comitatus embodied this thinking. As these groups in turn began to wane in the 1990s, a series of deadly confrontations—Gordon Kahl, Randy Weaver, Waco—generated a surge of new, much more violent groups, a wave that expanded rapidly before fading after the 9/11 attacks. With Obama’s election came a new type of group: militia-like, but more respectable—

Mike Vanderboegh’s Three Percenters, Stewart Rhodes’s Oath Keepers, Richard Mack’s Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association. Although distinct, these groups overlapped and many of their leaders interacted regularly with the Tea Party and other conservative groups. Right-wing conspiracism was about to enter the political mainstream.

July 7, 2020

16 Conspiracism Enters the Mainstream

 *A second noteworthy feature, though it proved to be temporary, was the marked diminution in the level of antisemitism on the conspiratorial Right.*

[323](#)

emanating from patriot groups. This might be attributable to better public relations and coded messages, but even the Anti-Defamation League in 2009 found negligible antisemitism. While they identified many instances of racist imagery and rhetoric, the ADL also detected rhetoric attacking Obama as a Nazi and his proposals as Fascist. It appeared to have been separated from the increasingly constitutionalist patriot conspiracism.²

July 8, 2020

 *Right-wing patriot groups were able to broaden their*

[324](#)

base by going mainstream. Militias began collecting food for food banks, conducting blood drives, and "getting together an open-carry group who will openly carry our firearms and pick up trash." They considered their armed patrols on the lookout for illegal aliens to be a civic service. Eventually, they even portrayed the carrying of their automatic weapons to the local Jack in the Box as a public service and seemed upset when people were afraid.³ The main break with their

past practices, however, was becoming involved in electoral politics through the Tea Party movement. Although it began as an "astroturf" movement—that is, a seemingly grassroots-based citizen group backed by right-wing money—the Tea Party exploded spontaneously, splitting into at least half a dozen overlapping groups and becoming an important vehicle for Ron Paul's 2008 presidential bid. After the election, various Christian rightist, patriot, and neo-militia leaders made their way into these groups, considerably changing their character.⁴

July 8, 2020

The history they espoused, though, was a peculiar form of "historical fundamentalism"—not just "kooky history; it was antihistory": "Marked by a belief that a particular and quite narrowly defined past—'the founding'—is ageless and sacred and to be worshipped; that certain historical texts—'the founding documents'—are to be read in the same spirit with which religious fundamentalists read, for instance, the Ten Commandments; that the Founding Fathers were divinely inspired; that the academic study of history . . . is a conspiracy and, furthermore, blasphemy; and that political arguments grounded in appeals to the founding documents, as sacred texts, and to

[325](#)

the Founding Fathers, as prophets, are therefore incontrovertible."⁵ These conceptions were all in keeping with the organic Constitution idea of William Potter Gale but filtered through a different conspiracist, W. Cleon Skousen. An anti-one-worlder, anti-Communist conspiracist since

the 1950s, Skousen had turned his attention to early American history in the 1980s

July 8, 2020



Skousen's argument, much like Gale's, is based on a religious take on natural law as the only basis for government. Legal scholar Jared Goldstein drew out the implications: "For Skousen, natural law means God's laws and encompasses the necessity for 'limited government,' the right to bear arms, protections for the family and the institution of marriage, the sanctity of private

[326](#)

property, and the avoidance of debt. Such natural law principles, Skousen claims, are not subject to change by mortal legislators. Legislation contrary to God's laws is a 'scourge to humanity' and is therefore unconstitutional."8

July 8, 2020



As this conspiratorial constitutionalism made its way into politics by way of the Tea Party, the absence of the virulent antisemitism that had characterized Christian patriot groups made it more acceptable to mainstream conservatives. Parts of the conspiracy suffered a loss of coherence without the Jews—

[326](#)

notably those parts having to do with the Federal Reserve System and its "fiat" currency, and the abandonment of the gold standard. Ever since Representative McFadden's diatribes eighty years earlier, the central tenet of the financial conspiracy had been that the Jews were stealing "our" money. But, by the time Ron Paul published his version of the conspiracy in 2009, the Jews were gone, leaving the rationale for and beneficiaries of the financial "cartel" a mystery.

July 8, 2020

Skousen's National Center for Constitutional Studies organized seminars for Tea Party groups nationwide, teaching a mix of vaguely Anglo-Israelite biblical and "free market" constitutionalism. After learning that Karl Marx invented the income tax and that national parks subvert the Constitution, Tea Party students realized the importance of grasping

"the founding principles to understand where the country has gone off track." Seminars devoted specifically to a close reading of *The Making of America* stressed the federal government's "usurpation of power" and consequent illegitimacy.

July 8, 2020

The electoral success of politicians supported by the Tea Party in 2010 brought conspiracy theories into politics as never before. This has been apparent at the congressional level, but state and local politics has probably been affected even more. Virtually every issue has now been couched in a conspiracist context to a greater or lesser degree.

After interviewing attendees at the Tea Party National Convention in 2010, Jonathan Kay, whose earlier work had dealt with the 9/11 truth movement, wrote that "it has become clear to me that the movement is dominated by people whose vision of the government is conspiratorial and dangerously detached from reality."¹³

July 8, 2020

The concept of a conspiracy meme began to spread. The central logic of the conspiracy meme, according to Ted Goertzel, who pioneered the concept, "is to question, often on speculative grounds, everything the 'establishment' says or does and to demand immediate, comprehensive answers to all questions." Answers that conspiracists do not find convincing, Goertzel adds, "are taken as proof of conspiratorial

deception.”¹⁴ The ubiquity of the conspiracy meme contributed to a problem that has only grown worse: the term “conspiracy theory” has begun to lose its meaning. This problem actually has two parts, which work together to create a knot of confusion. First, “conspiracy theory” has been

increasingly applied to things that are neither conspiratorial nor theoretical. Second, actual conspiratorial ideas are often couched in circumspect language that is not explicitly conspiratorial, making it hard to tell whether calling some statement a conspiracy theory is correct.

July 8, 2020

Exactly when “conspiracy theory” began to be applied too widely is hard to say.

[329](#)

given Palin’s “taste for conspiracy theories and her less than rigorous commitment to facts, it was easy for her to start raving about ‘death panels.’”¹⁶ Pigeonholing ideas or terms as conspiracist began moving into standard conservative rhetoric as well. As early as 2011, Hugh Hewitt, a conservative law professor and radio-show host, continually tried to define Kevin Williamson’s analysis of growing Wall Street support for Obama as a “Bilderbergerish” conspiracy. When Williamson referred to brokers as “these guys,” Hewitt responded: “When you say these guys, are they in a clubhouse somewhere? . . . How many of them are they? Are they getting together at the Harvard Club on the 3rd floor in the Library Wednesday night for drinks to decide the world

July 8, 2020

The second part of the problem—the fact that mainstream rhetoric began to reflect conspiracy theories without explicitly articulating them—exacerbated the problem of distinguishing conspiracism from political hyperbole. Implicit conspiracy references require prior knowledge to decode—but prior knowledge of what? The Tea Party’s conspiratorial underpinning was the ongoing betrayal of American tradition and values—the cleverly

[330](#)

hidden, devious and insidious town by town destruction of our Constitutional Republic . . . by our own government.”¹⁸ This notion derived from the patriot movement (militias, sovereign citizens, posse comitatus), its loosely affiliated Christian Identity church

movement, and the constitutional history of William Potter Gale and Cleon Skousen. Tea Party conspiracism inherited considerable racism and antisemitism from these sources but generally made some effort to downplay the antisemitism. The betrayal conspiracy also represented an extension of the one-worlder, anti-UN conspiracism of the 1950s. Neither the one-worlder conspiracist theorists nor the new world order Tea Party conspiracists looked behind the scenes to a larger Illuminati or Talmudic or Masonic source of evil. Instead, the betrayal conspiracy featured two interacting forces trying to destroy America: from the patriot movement, the federal government itself, and from the one-worlder conspiracists, the United Nations and any other internationalist organizations.

July 8, 2020

*But, the racism and antisemitism were not gone. They began reshaping this betrayal conspiracy soon after the Tea Party’s success. Implicit in much of the anti-civil rights rhetoric, this bigotry found its voice in the early 1970s. Books such as Wilmot Robertson’s *The Dispossessed Majority* (followed in short order by *Ventilations*, a diatribe against those who found his first book to be racist) and Erst LaFlor’s *The Betrayal of the White Race* stripped down the conspiracy to its basic element. The same spirit of intolerance infused Ben Klassen’s *Church of the Creator* and many of the militias of the 1990s. These extreme racists, especially neo-*

[331](#)

Nazis and neo-confederates, were early users of the internet, which “dovetailed nicely with the notion of leaderless resistance.”

July 8, 2020

Eventually this underground network emerged as the "alt-right." This twenty-first-century manifestation of intolerance "intellectualized" the betrayal of whites in terms of a conspiracy against Western civilization, an idea that can be traced back to Francis Parker Yockey's Imperium and James H. Madole's version of an Aryan "renaissance." The loose-knit alt-right has only one common

defining characteristic: adherence to the notion of white supremacy. And while some of its adherents flaunt their racism, others use the term "white identitarian" to try to avoid the stigma of racism, making interaction with less racist groups possible.²⁰

July 8, 2020

The other side of the problem—unrecognized conspiracism—was exemplified a few months earlier when former Florida congressman and Fox News regular Allen West made news with a blog post (since removed): "Sharia Law Comes to Walmart?" West recounted an experience he and his daughter Aubrey had shared:

first, that the government is engaged in a campaign to "crush" (as West put it) the rights of Christians and, second, that there is a conspiracy trying to establish Sharia law in the United States. Both of these are manifestations of a conspiracist belief in a larger effort to destroy America. The issue died when Walmart explained that, under state law, minors such as the clerk in question were not allowed to sell tobacco or alcohol. West had reacted to a "conspiracy" that existed only in his mind. Unlike Carson's sermon, West's post was conspiratorial, but the press tended to treat it as a slip up rather than a conspiracy theory.²²


July 8, 2020

Anything having to do with Muslims can generate a conspiracy theory in America, and sometimes these in turn can generate their own reality. Belief in President Obama's foreign birth and secret adherence to Islam

make it small leap to the conspiratorial belief that he is "allied with our Islamist enemies in a 'Grand Jihad' against America" and perhaps guided by the principles of Kenyan anticolonialism.²⁴

First in Oklahoma, then in states across the South, activist groups put anti-Sharia ballot measures before the public with the strong suggestion that a pro-Sharia conspiracy made the move necessary. Sometimes this conspiracy was linked to immigration reform (a "tool of Satan that will lead to the enactment of Sharia law and usher in the End Times").


July 8, 2020

 *The exact interpretation varied: the attack might be the work of a government willing to kill innocent people in its push for gun control, or the entire event may have been staged by the government for the same purpose. The former variation had been around for some time; it was applied to the Oklahoma City bombing and featured in some of the more extreme 9/11 conspiracies. The idea of the government's staging a massacre is newer, emerging out of the Sandy Hook School shooting in December 2012 and heavily reinforced by the Boston Marathon bombing the following April. Distinctively, arguments for these conspiracies were carried on almost exclusively online and were heavily visual, with photographs and short videos*

[335](#)

dominating. Many of these featured "crisis actors," people supposedly paid by the government to portray victims in one massacre after another, which conspiracists thought proved that the events are "controlled by the evil ones."

July 8, 2020

 *These conspiratorial interpretations were not spontaneous rumors. An early study found the conspiratorial alternative narratives about mass*

[335](#)

shootings to have distinctive online "signatures" that suggested a purposive campaign. They also noted the co-

occurrence of the hashtag #falseflag with #obama, #nra, and #teaparty.³⁰ It seems fairly likely that the campaign was motivated by the reelection of President Obama. Orly Taitz, whose birther lawsuits had been thrown out some years earlier, was among those playing up the Sandy Hook massacre as part of Obama's determination to seize patriots' guns, tweeting: "Obama and his regime are trying to disarm all of us, in order to gain an absolute power."³¹

July 8, 2020

Even the violent confrontations and vehicular murder during the 2017 Charlottesville neo-Nazi rally have been molded by Jones into a false flag narrative, complete with crisis actors and agents provocateur paid by George Soros, who is beginning to replace the Rockefellers in the conspiracist pantheon. Responses to Jones's video cast additional blame on everyone from the

[336](#)

"Berkeley-educated" Charlottesville mayor (who held back the police) to the Jews (some of whom could be connected to the murderous driver).³³

July 8, 2020

The debate over the "common core" standards promoted by the Department of Education have similarly become imbedded in conspiracism. Aside from the standard concern over "Communism," conspiracists have linked the standards to the federal government's larger goal of promoting homosexuality.

[336](#)

"We don't want our children to be taught to be anti-Christian, anti-Catholic and anti-American," the Alabama Senate's education committee was told by Terry Bratton, an Alabama tea party leader.

July 8, 2020



According to conservative activist Field Searcy, host of the briefing, this goal could only be reached by widespread mind control: "They do that by a process known as the Delphi technique. The Delphi technique was developed by the Rand

[338](#)

Corporation during the Cold War as a mind-control technique. It's also known as 'consensus process.' But basically the goal of the Delphi technique is to lead a targeted group of people to a pre-determined outcome while keeping the illusion of being open to public input."³⁷

July 8, 2020



During the 2016 presidential election, conspiracy theorizing reached a new level, becoming the pervasive characteristic of Donald Trump's campaign in particular. To some degree, this may have been an election-driven acceleration of the trend in conspiratorial thinking since the rise of the Tea Party. Clearly, the increase was also fueled by Trump himself, who had

[338](#)

expressed 9/11 conspiracy ideas and had been a prominent "birther." Behind the scenes, however, changes in the nature of social media may well have contributed to both more conspiracism and a different dynamic of conspiracy theory development and distribution. The very algorithms designed to build on what users of social media have attended to in the past can create a "filter bubble" of reinforcing information—whether essentially accurate news or mean-spirited bigotry or deranged speculation. The information tends to be both repetitive and disaggregated, often passed along from one person to another after only cursory attention. Information becomes "stories" that "jump from platform to platform, reaching new audiences and 'going viral' in ways and at speeds that were previously impossible."³⁸

July 8, 2020



This process reinforces the ad hoc nature of modern

[339](#)

conspiracism, increasingly spread by networks of anonymous conspiracists who may well be fed information by politically interested parties. The stories that emerge out of this process are uncertain and unverifiable, and when they break into wider discourse, the rhetoric used is usually referential, implicit, or oblique. Donald Trump himself has been prolific enough to provide examples of all three styles. In one of his last forays into birtherism, Trump tweeted at the end of 2013: "How amazing, the State Health Director who verified the copies of Obama's 'birth certificate' died in a plane crash today. All others lived."

The obvious reference to a fading, but still ongoing conspiracy theory makes this tweet perfectly comprehensible.³⁹ By the time he was running for president, Trump had moved on to less obvious remarks. Talking with right-wing radio-show host Michael Savage, Trump said about the death of Justice Antonin Scalia two days earlier: "Well, I just heard it today, just a little while ago actually, I just landed and I hear it's a big topic, the question, and it's a horrible topic, but they say they found the pillow on his face, which is a pretty unusual place to find a pillow." This statement clearly entertains the idea that Scalia was murdered, although Trump does not explicitly mention any type of foul play. It is an implicit nod to the conspiracy theories that were already swirling around the internet.⁴⁰ On the other side of the admittedly fine line between implicit and oblique lies Trump's remark in the wake of the Orlando nightclub shooting. Referencing Islamic terrorism, Trump said of President Obama on Fox News: "He doesn't get it, or he gets it better than anybody understands." Trump continued by saying that Obama "is not tough, not smart—or he's got something else in mind."⁴¹ Somewhere behind these oblique comments lies the Obama-as-secret-Muslim conspiracy.

July 8, 2020


17 The Attack on Science

As conspiracism has become more prominent in daily

life, its impacts have multiplied. In recent years, conspiracism has spilled over from politics to science as never before. The baleful effect of conspiracy theories on science recently reached the point where scientists held an unprecedented nationwide series of protest marches on Earth Day 2017.

Science today faces challenges ranging from everyday people who fear having their children immunized to powerful politicians who maintain that climate change is a hoax. Overwhelmingly, the term used for such antiscience thinking is “denialism,” which connotes a purposive rejection of science rather than mere thoughtless nonacceptance. Scientific breakthroughs and theories have long been resisted by people who felt their beliefs challenged, going back at least to Galileo.


July 8, 2020

 *Such a turn toward conspiracism is typical of people who believe that they have discovered something miraculous, whether a medical cure, a technological breakthrough, or lost arcane wisdom. When the experts reject or ignore their find, they reject the experts. In medical areas, where government approval is also involved, rejection routinely flowers into conspiracy.*

[348](#)

Public health issues have been affected by conspiracy theories for decades, whenever spurious cures have come under attack from medical authorities. Typically, the issue is first portrayed as a “controversy” with a medical “democracy” on one side fighting know-it-all elitists on the other.⁹

July 8, 2020

 *Behind such claims lies the energy industry and its manifold front groups, many with names intended to create confusion with actual scientific organizations. In the United States, most of these are funded through the industry’s Heartland Institute.²⁴ Foremost among Heartland’s creations is the*

[352](#)

Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC), which has distributed, among other activities, its packet of instructional materials titled Climate Change Reconsidered to schools and colleges nationwide. After reassuring teachers that NIPCC is "wholly independent of political pressures and influences," the cover letter

accompanying the packet asked them: "Will you tell your students the 'science is settled' on global warming, as the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) claims it is? Or will you explain to them that real science is never settled—that the essence of science is skepticism?"²⁵ Similar denialist organizations funded in part by the Heartland Institute include the Science and Public Policy Institute, Craig Idso's Center for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change, and the International Climate Science Coalition. For several years, Heartland and NIPCC organized annual meetings, called the International Conference on Climate Change, where participants exchanged conspiratorial views on climate change.

July 8, 2020



The information that filters down from these pseudoscientific organizations reaches the public through "an ecosystem of hyperpartisan media outlets," from which it emerges in an even more conspiratorial context.

[353](#)

The right-wing Media Research Center keeps the public apprised of the mainstream media's contribution to the climate change agenda with stories such as "Networks Hide the Decline in Credibility of Climate Change Science." Alex Jones has linked the climate change agenda to chemtrails (which have been accused of "geoengineering" the climate to make it conform to IPCC models). Breitbart's regular contributor on environmental issues, James Delingpole, subsumes climate change into the grand environmental conspiracy that, "after militant Islam, probably represents the biggest political and economic threat to the world today because its tentacles spread so far and because its influence is so insidious

July 8, 2020

Many vested interests appear happy enough to use conspiracism to undermine science for their own benefit; best known among these are the tobacco and energy industries. But in addition, a surprising array of conspiratorial

individuals seem perfectly willing to disparage or undermine science. There are HIV denialists motivated by a clear disgust for what they imagine to be the gay lifestyle among the “syphilitic bath house veterans” who refuse to take responsibility for their “self-destructive behavior.” What are now called SLAP-activists (for the Secret Large-Scale Atmospheric Spraying Program using chemtrails) work to undermine science and even threaten scientists. Young-earth creationists fighting evolution have incorporated the “Climategate controversy” into their science bashing. Andrew Schlafly, founder of Conservapedia, attacks Albert Einstein and his theory of relativity as a liberal Zionist conspiracy.

July 8, 2020


18 Democracy and Civil Society

As conspiracism has become more prominent in daily life, its impacts have multiplied. In American politics, conspiracy theories first became an integral part of political debates, taking many politicians by surprise during the town hall meetings held to discuss Obama’s health care plan. Tea Party activists accused government officials of “trampling on our constitution” and demanded “their country back,” and gun-wielding patriots offered veiled threats. In short order, conspiracism moved into electoral campaigns, hitting its stride in 2016. Today, conspiracism has made the transition from electioneering to government itself, and concern is growing over its effect on democracy.² In addition to these more existential concerns,

there is the much more immediate phenomenon of conspiracy-related

violence, including serious attacks and mass shootings. These are, of course, rare and often written off as the work of the mentally ill, but they are fostered by conspiracism more than is generally known.


July 9, 2020

 *The link between conspiratorial beliefs and violent behavior is not surprising, given the array of violence-prone groups that grew out of the "anti-government, paramilitary survivalist/conspiracy mentality" prevalent on the extreme Right in the 1980s and 1990s.³ The Posse Comitatus, Aryan Nations, The Order, various state*

[358](#)

militias, the sovereign citizens, and the Phineas Priesthood all committed violent acts. In some cases, as with The Order, violent attacks, including assassinations, were planned in detail. In other cases, notably the sovereign citizens, almost all fatal incidents were spontaneous, often the result of unplanned interactions with law enforcement.⁴ Many violent acts have been clearly tied to a group, but the connection can be obscure, in keeping with the Aryan Nation's principle of leaderless resistance. Small cells of terrorists give themselves names suggesting their inspiration: Sons of Gestapo, Team Viper, Army of God, League of the Silent Soldier, Sons of Liberty, or Third Continental Congress.⁵ And there are lone wolves, not really part of any organized group but inspired by conspiracism

July 9, 2020


 *In a multination study of extremist violence, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller concluded that conspiracism tends to exaggerate extremist views and propel some individuals toward violent acts in three ways.¹¹ First, conspiracism exaggerates the "otherness" of one's opponents. This is fully in keeping with the Manicheanism of so much conspiracy thinking but can also show up in smaller ways. Chris Mercer, who killed nine people at Umpqua Community College in Oregon in 2015, distanced himself from the type of person who would become his victim in a blog post. "Most*

[360](#)

people,” Mercer wrote, “will spend hours standing in front of stores just to buy a new phone. . . . I used to be like that.”¹² The second way in which conspiracism leads to violence stems from its tendency to delegitimize moderate views, again feeding into a dichotomous worldview in which people are either with you or against you. Your opponent becomes your enemy as hostility erodes any finer distinctions. The Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik exemplified this thinking when he

lumped together four enemy groups of pro-Islamic traitors, from the cultural, political, and media elite constituting Category A down to the compliant drones of Category D.¹³ The third spur to violence provided by conspiracism, especially the more apocalyptic variety, is the idea that violent acts may be necessary to “wake up” the public. Joseph Stark, a “tax resister” who flew an airplane into an Internal Revenue Service building in Austin, Texas, exemplified this in his suicide note/manifesto: “I can only hope that the numbers get too big to be white washed and ignored that the American zombies wake up and revolt; it will take nothing else.

July 9, 2020

 *The conspiratorial backgrounds of lone wolves vary considerably. Sometimes their conspiracism is not overt or is overshadowed by even more peculiar ideas, and sometimes the conspiracism does not emerge quickly. In 2010, John Patrick Bedell, firmly in the grip of a libertarian version of a deep-state conspiracy theory (involving both a narco-conspiracy and mind-controlled sex slaves), drove from California to the Pentagon, where he wounded two guards before being killed.*

[361](#)

Sometimes the conspiracism motivating an attack is long-standing. When James von Brunn attacked the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, in 2009, killing a security guard, he was portrayed as a racist, a white supremacist, and/or a Holocaust denier. All true, but these views were also strongly embedded in a conspiratorial framework von Brunn had maintained since reading John Beaty’s “Khazarian Jew” conspiracy opus, *The Iron Curtain over America*, in 1964.¹⁷

July 9, 2020



Probably even more important, since not all conspiracists care to read, music supports some of the most violent conspiracists. The subgenre of country hate music dates back to the civil rights movement when the United Klans of

[365](#)

America sold dozens of records, most simply and offensively racist, but others—"Stand Up and Be Counted" or "The Money Belongs to Us"—echoing conspiracy themes. More recent music is similarly not overtly conspiratorial, its viciously racist lyrics instead focusing on white supremacism. Today the best-known area in this musical genre is the völkish white supremacist music of bands beginning with RaHoWa in the early 1990s.

July 9, 2020



Some people are drawn into violent, confrontational situations by immersing themselves in conspiratorial fantasies about the collapse of society. People can become so obsessed with "the end of the world as we know it" (TEOTWAWKI) that it becomes "Doom Porn," which can be thought of as "applied conspiracism." Conspiracists convinced of an impending apocalyptic battle will begin "preparing for TEOTWAWKI, because they appear to have a deep-seated, almost nihilistic wish for everything just to end."²⁷ There are people who find these doomsday scenarios perversely appealing and unconnected to

[366](#)

conspiracy theories. Many TEOTWAWKI adherents are more attuned to power grid failures, pandemics, or other catastrophes than to conspiracies. Their deepest concern is escaping the boredom of everyday life, as underscored on their websites—of the "105 ways TEOTWAWKI changes everything," the top three are the demise of lawn mowing, traffic jams, and video games.²⁸ Some people, however, combine TEOTWAWKI with the immediacy of SHTF—"shit hits the fan," the ideas of which were initially a response to the civil rights activities in

the 1960s. The conspiracy theory shared among SHTFers is that the federal government is wholly illegitimate and a betrayal of the Constitution, kept in power only through intimidation and deceit. The federal government and its globalist allies conspire constantly to destroy America. Occasionally, someone will expound on details of the globalist agenda, but the topic usually is how, exactly, the government plans to enforce martial law.³¹

July 9, 2020



Both the conspiracy-driven violence and the emergence of science denialism have impacts on public policy. Law enforcement agencies and the court systems have found it necessary to devote considerable attention to handling mass shootings, organized resistance such as at Bunkerville and the low-level but constant threat posed by sovereign citizens. Many analysts have bemoaned how conspiracy theories and the misinformation they spawn "distort the debate that is crucial to democracy" and divert attention from real issues.³³

[368](#)

Imaginary conspiracies such as those over Sharia Law or the federal government's preparations for attacking Texas during Jade Helm 15 pop up from time to time. But more serious imaginary conspiracies such as the government's determination to impose draconian environmental restrictions on everyone in keeping with the UN's Agenda 21 proposals have hampered local planning efforts for years.³⁴

July 9, 2020




All indications are that this situation is worsening. Republican representative Devin Nunes noted that, in 2003, about 10 percent of his communications from constituents was "conspiracy-theorist nonsense," a figure that he estimated in 2016 to have risen to 90 percent. Much of this nonsense is denialist conspiracism that underlies people's refusal to allow their children to be vaccinated. Such noncooperation also stems from the increasingly polarized politics

[369](#)

*fostered by the Manicheanism of conspiracist thinking. More troublingly, in government itself the "norms of partisan restraint have eroded in recent decades," rendering "our democratic institutions increasingly dysfunctional."*³⁵ *Distraction, distortion, and noncooperation are not, of course, separate in practice.*

The birther movement, for example, relied entirely on distorted information, was a political distraction, and served as a rationale for noncooperation. Still, they are useful distinctions.

July 9, 2020

 *The greater question, being raised in many quarters, is to what degree conspiracism constitutes a threat to democracy itself. There are two aspects to this concern. One is how much conspiracist depictions of reality can manipulate or badly distort public opinion. The other centers on authoritarianism, its capacity to destroy democracy, and its relationship to conspiracism. The idea that the "informed public" (theoretically the bedrock of democratic government) can be manipulated is not new; it goes back at least to Walter Lippmann's 1925 *The Phantom Public*. Not surprisingly, new information technologies and practices lie at the center of today's concern. There has been, it is argued, a "shift in paradigm" as the amount of easily available conspiracist information has increased. "News" stories "grounded on conspiracy theories tend to reduce the complexity and are able to contain the uncertainty they generate," creating a "climate of disengagement from*

[369](#)

mainstream society and officially recommended practices.³⁶ If conspiracy theories can, as psychologists suggest, reduce uncertainty with simplifying narratives, many people will turn to and accept them. This tendency is even more pronounced if the matter at hand involves any moral judgment and is accompanied by greater levels of interaction (e.g., comments) with conspiracist narratives.³⁷



The attraction of conspiracist narratives and stories is increasingly reinforced by the very algorithms used to provide people with information. On Facebook, now many people's primary source of information, "once people join a single conspiracy-minded group, they are algorithmically routed to a plethora of others." At the same time, countervailing information is algorithmically rejected, so that a 'filter bubble' is created: "Join an anti-vaccine group, and your suggestions will include anti-GMO, chemtrail watch, flat Earther (yes, really), and 'curing cancer naturally' groups. Rather than pulling a user out of the rabbit hole, the recommendation engine pushes them

[370](#)

further in. We are long past merely partisan filter bubbles and well into the realm of siloed communities that experience their own reality and operate with their own facts."³⁸

July 9, 2020




This is what philosophers call a crippled epistemology, in which the information any one person receives is constantly reinforced, contributing to individual intransigence and social polarization. Conspiracy theorizing is implicated in this process as a key source of simplifying, uncertainty-reducing, popular misinformation. Moreover, social-web activity features a notorious "asymmetry of passion," leading to conspiracists' being greatly overrepresented (hence the fact most online information about vaccines is anti-vaccination). Thus, early hopes that new technology's expansion of accessible information would lead to greater "collective intelligence" is being supplanted by fear of "a sort of 'collective credulity.'"³⁹

[370](#)

This serendipitous fit between the characteristics of conspiracism and technological advancement is not quite the entire story. Online practices such as trolling and astroturfing compound the difficulty of achieving collective intelligence. Hoaxes, parodies, and satires, often posing as “alternative news sources,” routinely fool conspiracists, who repost them or work them into the evidence for their conspiracy.⁴⁰ Astroturfing and false tweets, when used to spread conspiracies, raise the question of attribution. Anonymously generated information played a key role in the PizzaGate claims. It can be quite difficult to know who is behind a conspiracy theory and why it is being put forth.

July 9, 2020




The second point of the argument that conspiracism threatens democracy has two variants of its own: that conspiracism is cultlike to the point of being antidemocratic and that conspiracism is a bridge to authoritarianism.

[371](#)

The first variant is less common and is often made implicitly, but the interaction between cultish and conspiracist thinking was noted in the wake of the failure of Y2K end-of-the-world predictions. Evangelical Y2K conspiracists maintained their beliefs with two “mutually supportive discourses”—both Manichean and apocalyptic: “A fundamentalist dispensationalism that interprets all world events as part of a grand narrative culminating in the Second Coming of Christ, and an entrenched conspiracism that regards the current political system as both hopelessly corrupt and a pawn in the hands of the powerbrokers of the New World Order. When Y2K failed to usher in the Antichrist, the discourse shifted from dispensationalism to conspiracism.”⁴¹ But in the end, cults do not seem to add much to our understanding of apocalyptic conspiracy theories. We may be saying nothing more here than that cults are inherently conspiratorial.

July 9, 2020



Conspiracism as a bridge to authoritarianism, which is by definition a threat to democracy, is a more substantive point but often an ambivalent one. Authoritarians appear to use conspiracy theories for their propaganda value, even if they do not personally believe those theories. Vladimir Putin casts the West

[372](#)

*as the villain in the Russian version of the hidden hand conspiracy. Some analysts think he does so cynically, even if the Russian military and security services accept the idea.*⁴⁴

In 2016, Sir Richard Evans summed up three-and-a-half-years' worth of interdisciplinary work at Cambridge's Conspiracy and Democracy Project in this curiously ambivalent fashion: "It's not a case of conspiracy theories threatening democracy, whatever else it might be. By themselves, such theories may reinforce political suspicion and prejudice but they're not the origin of it. So: they can in some circumstances be something of a threat to democracy, but on the whole, I think it's fair to conclude that the scale of the threat is fairly limited."⁴⁵

July 9, 2020

One can easily see the same dynamic, with conspiracism at its core, in the rise and radicalization of the Christian patriots in the late twentieth century. Equally obvious was the expansion of this dynamic into the political mainstream with the election of Barack Obama, a president who faced an unprecedented level of conspiracy theories. The rise of the Tea Party introduced Cleon Skousen's "fundamentalist vision of the Constitution," which served as a means of "channeling nationalistic and authoritarian impulses."⁴⁸ Adam Gopnik made the current argument during the 2016 presidential campaign, telling readers that the details of Trump's latest conspiracy theory did not really matter. "What should hold our attention," Gopnik said, is Trump's "mainstreaming of conspiracy theories, and the hate speech that usually accompanies them."

[373](#)

All fascism takes on a peculiar national tone, and where the national tone of Germany lent itself to anti-Semitic theories, that of the United States involves paranoia about secret government actions, of the kind that the radio host and Trump partisan Alex Jones engages in so much."⁴⁹

July 9, 2020



While all these links are hard to prove, a consensus appears to be developing around the danger of conspiracism to a democratic civic culture. The psychological literature, perhaps even more so than a few years ago, reflects the view of most researchers that conspiracist ideation is not "harmless fun" but carries serious social consequences. Researchers studying the effects of social media—the filter bubbles and siloed communities—are especially concerned. The scientific community has begun to band together as the various conspiratorial attacks on different areas of science threaten to cohere under Donald Trump into "an authoritarian tendency to base policy arguments on questionable assertions of fact and a cult of personality."⁵⁰ Those on the Left find "conspiracism—and the

racism it builds on . . . the greatest long-term threat that we need to tackle," a right-wing populism that carries with it "the implied threat of an armed political culture."⁵¹ At present, conspiratorial thinking, its increasing de facto linkage to right-wing and authoritarian politics, and the conspiracy-friendly imperatives of web-based communications have all combined in American politics to create a situation many people find extremely ominous. At the same time, no one wants to circumscribe free speech or have an authority designate which ideas are reasonable and which are conspiracist nonsense. It may be comforting to think that the situation will resolve itself or that a shift in political beliefs will undo it. But the evidence suggests otherwise.

July 9, 2020