

Critical Dialogue

Conspiracy/Theory. Edited by Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen.
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— Matthew Rhodes-Purdy , *Clemson University*
MHRHODE@clemson.edu
— Rachel Navarre , *Bridgewater State University*
rnavarre@bridgew.edu

Conspiracy/Theory, edited by Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen, applies the lens of critical theory to the field of conspiracy theory studies, providing an international perspective that focuses on why certain global structures of power and governance might encourage conspiratorial thinking. The essays in the volume argue that conspiratorial thinking is a kind of maladaptive cousin to critical theory, sharing its skepticism of the claims of authority, while lacking its rigor and commitment to truth. As such, powerholders often find conspiracy theories useful, as it allows them to denigrate any critical perspective.

The book starts with the editors challenging the popular conception of conspiracy theories as something abnormal that are held only by anti-social malcontents and right-wing extremists. Rather, they note that the line between conspiracy and critical analysis can be difficult to draw, as both ultimately seek to skeptically critique dominant social narratives that obscure power and injustice. They critique Richard Hofstadter's work on the "paranoid style", and Chapter 2 further develops this criticism.

For the unfamiliar, Hofstadter defined the paranoid style not as a clinical prognosis of the individual believer, but as a way to define the "sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" found throughout American history that eventually led to the "extreme right-wingers" of his time (Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, 1964). Chapter 2 takes Hofstadter to task for "pitting rationality and expertise against the irrationality and populism of a mass public and that remedies the public's ignorance, indignation, and fantasy" (Shulman 2024, p. 38), thus dividing the public into a larger, rational "we" and a smaller, minority fringe "they." Shulman notes in summarizing the volume's critique of Hofstadter that he "defines organizing fantasy and fiction-making as the betrayal of proper politics and not what all politics necessarily traffics in" (p.46). Shulman (and the volume in general) contends that all

political worldviews are created via organizing narratives, conspiracy theories are not limited to the extremist fringe, and, finally, there is nothing inherently "rational" about the liberal norm established in the post-war era.

The introduction and Chapter 2 also highlight another theme common throughout the book: elites often find preposterous conspiracy theories useful. Rather than seeking to end these narratives, they frequently use accusations of conspiracy thinking to marginalize movements challenging the dominant order, lumping those with noble goals and intentions together with "the crazies". In short, the book argues that elite discourse on conspiracy theories has its own agenda: namely, to hide the malign workings of power by painting legitimate critique and opposition with the same broad brush provided by improbable and often bizarre movements.

In addition, the behavior of elites and powerholders blur the line between rational and irrational politics, as they do, in fact, conspire and, far more frequently, act in ways that appear conspiratorial. Mass publics, seeing this, reasonably ask: if the powers-that-be have lied about Watergate, Iran-Contra, Tuskegee, and the purpose of vaccination campaigns—what else are they lying about? Chapters investigating these dynamics include work on the contested origins of the HIV virus (Chapter 3), controversies over a disappearing presidential corpse in Cyprus (Chapter 5), and the neoliberalization of higher education in the United States (Chapter 14), among others. Chapters 4 and 10 remind us that powerful intelligence agencies routinely promoted conspiracy theories regarding foreign adversaries to discredit those who might be critical of their activities and to justify ballooning defense budgets during the Cold War. (Indeed, it was recently revealed that the Trump administration deliberately supported conspiracy theories to cast doubt on the COVID vaccine from China).

Despite the very interesting ideas described here, we originally were not sure if we were the right people to review this book as part of a critical dialogue. Our book is firmly rooted in the positivist tradition of political science, complete with a focus on precise conceptualization, measurement, and quantitative analysis, while *Conspiracy/Theory* is steeped in critical theory. While we are sympathetic to critical theory, we are emphatically not critical theorists. Reading this work made us feel at times a bit unmoored, as

the language, jargon, and methods we are most familiar with were replaced with other modalities. To be fair, the editors of this volume probably felt the same way about our work.

That said, we are very glad we took on this dialogue, and found plenty of important ideas and arguments in this edited volume. We found a shared perspective in both our text and *Conspiracy/Theory*. This perspective, which for convenience we will call critical analysis, is one that looks skeptically at the claims of those in power and questions the status quo and conventional wisdom.

Moving past our paradigmatic disagreements, we believe both of our books should be considered works of critical analysis. We agree that the popular discourse often gets conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking wrong. We further agree with the assertion in the Epilogue to *Conspiracy/Theory* that “precarity is one key driver of conspiratorial reason, enabling for many a charged psychosocial space that can be ripe for political manipulation, for misrecognition and for targeted exploitation” (p. 429). We also strongly agree with their idea that facts do not speak for themselves, and that the stories we tell ourselves (or rather the stories that exist in our social environment from which we pick and choose) shape reality in profound ways. Put simply, narratives matter. Most crucially, both our book and *Conspiracy/Theory* argue that discontented politics (including conspiracy theories but also populism, ethnonationalism, and violent contention) are not aberrations but rather natural consequences of the inequalities and inefficacies of neoliberal democracy.

As is to be expected, there were points of contention we had with the text. While the goal of *Conspiracy/Theory* is to add nuance to the study of conspiracy beliefs by pointing out how “the system” uses them to shut down dissent and how they can be an important way to make sense of a senseless world, these debates are disconnected from the wider social scientific literature on conspiracy theories that has developed since Hofstadter, and thus are a bit of a “straw man.” This absence of the current literature reoccurs throughout the text starting with defining key terms in the introduction; there is no attempt to engage with the wider understanding of the terms used to either criticize or utilize existing conceptualizations. Furthermore, there has been a significant move in recent work to avoid pathologizing those who believe in conspiracies as irrational.

Many of the criticisms found in *Conspiracy/Theory* are also widely discussed in the current positivist literature. For example, Douglas et. al write that the term conspiracy theory can “be weaponized, and because of this, people often deny that their ideas are conspiracy theories even though they clearly qualify. Politicians sometimes use these terms to deflect criticism because it turns the conversation back onto the accuser rather than the accused” (Karen M. Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theories,” *Political Psychology*, 40(S1): 3–35, 2019, p. 5).

In short, *Conspiracy/Theory* fails to recognize that a critical perspective is alive as well in contemporary social scientific treatments of this topic. If the goal of this book is to provide an antidote to the popular coverage and conception of conspiracy theories, this is fine, but its impact on the broader field will be limited due to this lack of engagement with the literature. This may have been a conscious choice on behalf of the authors—after all “mainstream” political scientists are not known to seek out critical theory work, much less engage with it—but it left us wanting to ask the editors: how do these arguments challenge, support, or expand what is already out there?

The rift between critical theorists and positivist political science is deep and long standing. A reader coming from a background similar to ours, finding that this text assumes a high degree of familiarity with critical theory concepts, ideas, and prose style, may be intimidated or put off. This itself is a problem as critical theory provides a useful (and often necessary) corrective to the (often unconscious) elitism of our own discipline. Political science is a field that, at its core, is the study of power, and yet we (on the non-critical side) all too frequently uncritically accept the perspectives and biases of the powerful in our analyses.

That said, we believe that for critical theorists, further engaging the positivist side might also be beneficial. The editors write that what separates critical theory from conspiracy theory is “the pursuit of rigor itself, as opposed to indifference to truth and variety” (p. 430). This rings both true and hollow, the latter because *Conspiracy/Theory* spills so much ink explaining why the kind of concrete, reliable information that would banish conspiracy theories is impossible to get. Positivist social science may be profoundly imperfect, but we ask the editors: what method would be better to achieve the rigor the editors themselves aspire is necessary to distinguish critical theory from conspiracism? And isn’t the close line you draw between conspiracy theory and critical analysis at best unhelpful and at worst perversely system justifying?

As noted earlier, it is highly unlikely that we would have delved into a book like this in the ordinary course of business. That would have been a shame, as the perspective in *Conspiracy/Theory* is essential to consider as we all grapple with rising discontent with democracy and the post-war systems across the globe.

Response to Matthew Rhodes-Purdy and Rachel Navarre’s review of *Conspiracy/Theory*

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— Joseph Masco
— Lisa Wedeen 

We appreciate the authors’ efforts to engage with our work. Unfortunately, the review is misleading and misrepresents what the book is about. The audience we geared