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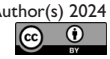

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More Than a Theory: Conspiracy Theorising As a Practical Tradition

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Abstract

In answering the question, 'What is a conspiracy theory?' scholars typically take an epistemological view, with many asking whether the term's pejorative use as a marker of obvious falsehood is justified. Especially among philosophers, a consensus has emerged that conspiracy theories should not be dismissed as prima facie false, that each should be judged on its own merits. However, while some philosophers have encouraged social scientists to embrace this epistemological view of conspiracy theories, this article argues that it is less useful for those of us working in political studies. We are right to worry about being too dismissive of all charges of conspiracy, but conspiracy theorising involves more than just making truth claims; it is about politics, history and culture too. In approaching it through the narrow lens of epistemology, we miss much of what is happening in conspiracy theorising. My aim in this article is to offer a new framework for analysing conspiracy theorising as a practice, rather than as a category of explanation. This framework builds on Michael Billig and Jovan Byford's idea of the conspiracy theory tradition, showing conspiracy theorising to involve the recycling and adaptation of pre-existing ideas, themes and texts to fit new situations.

Keywords

conspiracy theory, tradition, history of ideas, epistemology, particularism, generalism

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Introduction

What is a conspiracy theory? Scholars have typically defined conspiracy theories along epistemological lines; some take them to be necessarily false while others allow that they may be true or false, but the common assumption is that we are dealing with a *type of explanation or belief* in a conspiracy (see Douglas et al., 2019; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; Swami et al., 2014, 2016; Uscinski and Enders, 2023). Philosophers have homed in on this epistemological aspect, asking whether we can ever rationally believe in a

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conspiracy theory and when belief may be warranted (see Buenting and Taylor, 2010; Cassam, 2019; Dentith, 2018, 2019, 2023a; Matthews, 2023; Pigden, 2007). In these discussions, a consensus has been developing around a particularist view (Dentith, 2023b). This is the view that conspiracy theories cannot be dismissed as prima facie unwarranted, as particular cases may prove to be true while others will turn out to be false. Each one should therefore be judged on its own merits, and as Charles Pigden argues, 'we are rationally entitled to believe in conspiracy theories if that is what the evidence suggests' (Pigden, 2007: 219). A key part of this particularist position has been a minimal definition for conspiracy theory, omitting the term's pejorative connotations so that it is described as 'just a theory about a conspiracy' (Dentith, 2019: 2244).

We are right to criticise the assumption that believing in a conspiracy is necessarily irrational or unwarranted, which has often been tied to a suspect pathologisation of conspiracy theory believers (most memorably expressed by Hofstadter, 1966). However, in this article, I argue that epistemological accounts of conspiracy theory are of limited use to political studies scholars, as we risk losing sight of the social aspects of conspiracy theorising. I therefore argue against using a minimal definition when our focus is on politics of conspiracy theory, and follow Patrick Stokes (2018) in emphasising that conspiracy theorising is a practice embedded within particular historical, social and political contexts. The truth claims expressed in a conspiracy theory are made in a particular context influenced by politics, culture and history. Moreover, conspiracy theorising involves more than just stating truth claims; it can mean making political claims too, offering interpretations of how society functions and denouncing those deemed to be in control. Such aspects are too easily missed when we approach conspiracy theories only through the lens of truth and falsity, or reason and irrationality.

My aim here, then, is to provide a more suitable framework for understanding this practice. Therefore, the question of this article is not so much 'What is a conspiracy theory?' as it is 'What is conspiracy *theorising*?' with the focus being on a type of practice rather than belief. I argue that we should treat conspiracy theories as speech acts and draw on theories of discourse and rhetoric to better understand what someone is doing in expressing a conspiracy theory (Finlayson, 2007; Skinner, 2002, 2008). Moreover, I argue that we should follow the social psychologists Michael Billig (1978) and Jovan Byford (2011) in viewing conspiracy theory as a tradition, with certain ideas and themes being transmitted over time between texts, recycled and adapted to fit new situations. As well as overcoming the narrow account of conspiracy theory we get when relying on a minimal definition and seeing it only as an epistemological category, I will also show that this framework can accommodate particularist concerns about the *prima facie* dismissal or pathologisation of conspiracy theory. Though we should not stop looking at conspiracy theory from an epistemological angle, such a perspective on its own leads to a very partial view of conspiracy theory. Instead, my aim in this article is to bring together some similar strands from across the literature on conspiracy theory so as to offer a different framework through which to study conspiracy theorising, one that emphasises the historical, social, and political contexts in which it has been situated.

The article begins with a summary and critique of the particularist consensus within the philosophical literature, as I point to the limits of viewing conspiracy theory solely through an epistemological lens. Following this, I begin to outline my account of conspiracy theory as a practice, initially focusing on the elements of continuity and intertextuality in conspiracy theorising. The final section then turns to examine how conspiracy

theorising also involves elements of change and of agency on the part of the person expressing the conspiracy theory.

From Conspiracy Theory to Conspiracy Theorising

The framework I am proposing in this article is partly a reaction against the particularist consensus in epistemological debates around conspiracy theories; this first section gives a sympathetic critique of attempts to extend particularism's influence to the social sciences. This argument is not strictly opposed to epistemological perspectives such as particularism – indeed, the framework I outline in later sections will try to accommodate particularist criticisms of how some social scientists have approached conspiracy theories. But I nevertheless argue that particularism is of very limited use to researchers in political studies due to its narrow focus on truth and falsity, which fails to see conspiracy theories as speech acts that intervene in particular social contexts. Put simply, we need to be asking about what someone is *doing* in expressing a conspiracy theory, rather than only asking whether the content of their claims is true or false.

Scholars usually adopt the language of epistemology when defining a conspiracy theory, taking it to be either an explanation or belief about a conspiracy; as aiming at the truth, irrespective of whether we accept its specific claims. For example, the legal scholars Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule define a conspiracy theory as 'an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished' (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 205). They accept that 'some conspiracy theories have turned out to be true' but choose to focus only on 'demonstrably false conspiracy theories' (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 206). Similarly, in psychology, Karen M Douglas et al. define conspiracy theories as 'attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors' (Douglas et al., 2019: 4). Sometimes, scholars specify that these are false – for instance, Viren Swami and Adrian Furnham (2014: 220) describe conspiracy theories as 'a subset of false beliefs', though in a later article Swami et al. are less categorical, writing that 'Conspiracist beliefs *usually* refer to a set of false narratives' (Swami et al., 2016: 86, emphasis added). In each of these examples, the focus is on products (conspiracy theories) rather than practices (conspiracy theorising).

More recently in political studies, Joseph E. Uscinski and Adam M. Enders (2023) have expressed concern about the lack of an objective definition for the term *conspiracy theory.* As they describe, when it comes to the task of definition, 'most discussions invoke some version of the unviable and easily abused I-know-it-when-I-see-it standard' (Uscinski and Enders, 2023: 149). Considering the term's imprecision and its frequently pejorative use, they fear that it can be exploited by those in power to stigmatise and silence their opponents (Uscinski and Enders, 2023: 149). As they describe, in recent years, there has been growing pressure on social media platforms to remove content deemed to be conspiracist, partly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of QAnon, and the January 6 Capitol riot (Uscinski and Enders, 2023: 163–164). Years before such developments, even Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) advocated the infiltration of conspiracy theory networks by government agents. Sunstein, as David Coady (2018) reminds us, is not only an academic but has also wielded political influence, having served as an advisor to the Obama administration and the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.

At root, Uscinski and Enders' concerns are epistemological. They argue that, if we are to keep using *conspiracy theory* in a pejorative sense, then our definition of the term ought to include 'an epistemological component indicating deficiencies in evidence or theorization that single out particular theories as unevidenced, unlikely to be true, or false' (Uscinski and Enders, 2023: 151). We should have a clear and objective way of filtering out claims of conspiracy that are self-evidently false. However, in practice, what is seen as self-evidently false varies from person to person, and we are more likely to believe conspiracy theories about the political parties we oppose than those we support (Uscinski and Enders, 2023: 157–159). There is therefore a risk, when using *conspiracy theory* as a pejorative, that 'a theory that we in the community of the sane view as self-evidently false may in fact be true' (Uscinski and Enders, 2023: 151–152).

In making this argument, Uscinski and Enders draw largely on philosophers like Coady (2003), along with MRX Dentith (2018, 2019), and Brian Keeley (1999, 2007), who have questioned the commonplace assumption that conspiracy theories are plainly false or irrational. In the past few years, a consensus has emerged among philosophers that we ought not dismiss all conspiracy theories as prima facie false or unwarranted (see, for example, Buenting and Taylor, 2010; Coady, 2007; Dentith, 2018, 2023a; Pigden, 2007, 2023). Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor (2010) termed this the *particularist* view: particular conspiracy theories may prove true while others may be false; we cannot prejudge the truth or falsity of conspiracy theories generally; each must be judged on its own merits. They contrast this with the generalist view: 'conspiratorial thinking *qua* conspiracy thinking is itself irrational', so one can take a dismissive attitude towards conspiracy theory as a general category (Buenting and Taylor, 2010: 568). While generalists accept the pejorative connotations that *conspiracy theory* holds in everyday speech, particularists argue that these should be excluded from our definition of the term. If we define conspiracy theories as necessarily wrong, they argue, we risk overlooking cases of real conspiracies – in effect, the stigma could hamper the disclosure of actual wrongdoing (Coady, 2007; Pigden, 2007). Therefore, particularists have advocated using minimal, non-pejorative, and purely descriptive definitions of *conspiracy theory*. We have already seen that Dentith (2019: 2244) defines a conspiracy theory as 'just a theory about a conspiracy'. Similarly, Charles Pigden writes that:

> A conspiracy, then, is a secret plan on the part of some group to influence events by partly covert action. A conspiracy *theory* is a theory which posits such a plan. A conspiracy *theorist*, therefore, is someone who subscribes to a conspiracy *theory* (Pigden, 2006: 23).[1]

David Coady goes a step further by arguing that as the pejorative connotations of *conspiracy theory* cannot be erased, the term should be eliminated from our vocabulary, as it 'appears to do no good, while doing considerable harm' (Coady, 2023: 759).

The terms introduced by Buenting and Taylor are not wholly uncontroversial. Avowed generalists have been hard to come by, so much so that Maarten Boudry and Napolitano (2023) describe generalism as a straw man position that no philosopher really subscribes to, and so argue that Buenting and Taylor's terms should be abandoned. Even those scholars who are most critical of conspiracy theories, such as Quassim Cassam (2019: 4, 2023) and Richard Hofstadter (1966: 29), accept that conspiracies do occasionally happen. As Boudry and Napolitano describe:

> In our experience, we have never met a single psychologist or social scientist who didn't immediately embrace "particularism" and reject "generalism" as soon as you clarify that the definition of CT being used is just "any explanation of an historical event involving a conspiracy". They would have to be historically illiterate or extremely naive to do otherwise (Boudry and Napolitano, 2023: 23).

Boudry (2023: 620) has elsewhere argued explicitly for a moderate form of generalism and advocates rejecting conspiracy hypotheses that posit 'preternaturally smart and powerful conspirators', without rejecting all talk of conspiracy. Keith Raymond Harris (2022: 17) has openly defended generalism too, arguing that due to a track record of false conspiracy theories 'there is reason to assign a low probability to individual conspiracy theories prior to considering the evidence bearing specifically on individual theories'. While not explicitly advocating generalism, Napolitano and Kevin Reuter (2023) have taken an empirical approach to show that most people use *conspiracy theory* in an evaluative sense, and not a strictly neutral and descriptive sense. As these examples show, the disagreement between particularists and generalists is less about whether we can justifiably dismiss all hypotheses that posit conspiracies, and more about what we mean when we use the term *conspiracy theory.* Particularists see conspiracy theories as only sharing a descriptive attribute, with *conspiracy theory* referring simply to a theory about a conspiracy. In contrast, generalists see the term as meaning something more specific, and that beyond this descriptive attribute, conspiracy theories share an epistemologically significant attribute (Boudry and Napolitano, 2023: 23). For instance, Harris (2022) defines a conspiracy theory as opposing a relevant epistemic authority's explanation of an event. One upshot of this is that a claim of conspiracy will not count as a conspiracy theory when expressed by relevant epistemic authorities (Harris, 2022: 8–9). So, while Harris is suspicious of all conspiracy theories, he is not arguing that all invocations of conspiracy should be rejected without considering the evidence – by *conspiracy theory*, he means something more precise than simply a theory about a conspiracy.

Still, these cases of dissent stand out against the backdrop of a particularist consensus. One of the clearest signs of the new consensus was the publication in 2023 of a special issue on conspiracy theory in a leading philosophical journal, with most of the contributors adopting broadly particularist perspectives (see Dentith, 2023b). A recurring theme in that issue and other particularist texts is the failure of social scientists to think critically enough about the concept of conspiracy theory and its use as a pejorative. For example, Brian Keeley (2023: 415) observes that 'a lot of theorists in the psychological and social sciences start from a relatively unreflective, pejorative understanding of CTs [conspiracy theories] that focuses solely on example CTs whose epistemic faults are taken as given'. Similarly, Lee Basham and Dentith (2018: 85–86) express a hope that social scientists will come to see the need for conspiracy theorising in democratic and open societies. Charles Pigden is more dismissive of social scientific research on conspiracy theory, arguing that 'in effect that research into what is wrong with "conspiracy theories" or "conspiracy theorists" is (often) about as intellectually respectable as research into what it is about "bastards" that makes them so mean' (Pigden, 2023: 423).

As Maarten Boudry and M. Giulia Napolitano (2023: 22) sarcastically comment, 'particularism has carried the day, at least among philosophers, with only a few holdouts. Now we just have to convince those stubborn social scientists!' As a stubborn social scientist myself, I too am yet to be convinced. It is not that I disagree with Uscinski and Enders' concerns or the particularists' arguments about epistemology. However, these do

not map so easily onto the priorities of a social scientist – or those of our colleagues in history and cultural studies. Our concern is with studying human societies, but by viewing conspiracy theory through the lens of epistemology and defining it only as a type of explanation, we risk writing society out of the picture. We see this in the particularists' rejection of conspiracy theory's use as a pejorative term – put simply, particularism opts for a philosophically coherent definition at the expense of how the term is commonly used in everyday speech (Koper, 2024a). The particularist argument is compelling from an epistemological perspective, where the question is about how to tell truth from falsehood, but its minimal definition reduces conspiracy theory to a solely epistemological category. For epistemologists, such a definition may serve its purpose well, but it is less useful for the purposes of understanding conspiracy theory's place in society, culture and politics. There is more to any conspiracy theory than truth claims alone; each is formulated in a specific context that is missed when we view them only through the lens of epistemology. As Patrick Stokes explains:

> Conspiracy theories, as the term is popularly used at least, do not simply appear on paper and in the abstract. They are constructed by real people, and consist of speech acts that accuse other, real or allegedly real, people of doing secret and (typically) immoral things. That locutionary function of conspiracy theories is thus unavoidably social, and their utterance *qua* speech acts is thereby subject to ethical evaluation (Stokes, 2018: 28).

Stokes may be a philosopher interested in ethics, but his point is just as relevant to those of us in political studies. Take the example of birtherism – the claim that Barack Obama was born outside the United States and so was ineligible to be President, with this fact being deliberately hidden from the public. Adopting a particularist approach would mean evaluating the claims made in birtherism, looking at the evidence for and against, and reaching our own conclusions about their likely truth or falsity. If we are only interested in the truth status of birtherism's claims then a particularist approach makes sense. However, it is less helpful when analysing what someone was doing in expressing birtherism's claims (how birtherism was used, rather than just whether it was true or false) as it overlooks the broader context in which it was situated and fails to see what supporters of birtherism were doing by expressing their claims about Obama's birthplace. Consider how, as Michael Barkun (2013: 187) describes, the birther conspiracy theory came to prominence during the 2008 presidential election, spurred on by Republican figures opposed to Obama, like Donald Trump and Arizona secretary of state Ken Bennett. When Obama's birth certificate was made public showing that he had indeed been born in Honolulu, the claims did not go away as advocates of the conspiracy theory claimed the document was a forgery, including Trump, Obama's successor in the White House (Barkun, 2013; Guignion, 2022: 196–198). There is therefore a partisan and political aspect to this – birtherism is not only making a claim about the truth of a cover-up but is also making a political claim about who should be allowed to hold the highest political office in the United States. Race and religion were part of birtherism too, with Obama being depicted as a potential threat to the United States because his father had been a Muslim-born (later atheist) Black immigrant (Grimes, 2017). Considering this, it would be short-sighted to describe birtherism as *just* a theory about a conspiracy. A particularist might reply that it only takes a short moment to see that those claims are unwarranted and false – that this is not a conspiracy theory worth wasting much time on. However, this again assumes that we are only aiming to determine the truth or falsity of a conspiracy

theory's claims, or to devise criteria for doing so. What is concerning about a case like birtherism is not only the falsity of its central claims, but also the political ideas it expresses and how they are used. These claims about Obama's birthplace cannot be separated from their political context and the attempt to deny the legitimacy of a democratically elected politician.

Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead (2019: 104) see birtherism as part of the emergence of a *new conspiracism*; a kind of conspiracy theorising that repeats baseless assertions to delegitimise democratic institutions, that they summarise as 'conspiracy without the theory' (Rosenblum and Muirhead, 2019: 19). They contrast this with *classic conspiracism* – a 'sort of detective work' that at the very least tries to build an argument supported by a body of evidence (Rosenblum and Muirhead, 2019: 2).[2] Put simply, new conspiracism is more flagrant in violating epistemic norms, while classic conspiracism goes some way towards following or at least imitating those norms. Still, it is worth stressing that in approaching conspiracy theorising as a practice our main goal ought not to be to figure out if a conspiracy theorist's questions are sincere or cynical. Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers' (2015) study of the Dutch conspiracy milieu indicates that conspiracy theory believers are not always imitating epistemic norms for purely strategic reasons and can see themselves as adhering to the critical thinking that is so central to scientific research. Thus, conspiracy theories cannot be so easily categorised as anti-science or as totally opposed to all epistemic norms. Our focus should instead be on what someone is *doing* in expressing a conspiracy theory in a particular way, in a particular context and explaining why certain rhetorical and argumentative strategies are used.[3] As Raymond Geuss comments when describing how one should examine politics, 'Don't look just at what [people] say, think, believe, but at what they actually do, and what *actually happens* as a result' (Geuss, 2008: 10, emphasis in original).

The birtherism example illustrates well Stokes' (2018: 28) point that conspiracy theories consist of speech acts, and our understanding of these speech acts can be strengthened by drawing on the work of contextualist historians of political thought as well as theorists of rhetoric (such as Billig, 1991, 1996; Dunn, 1968; Finlayson, 2007; Skinner, 2002, 2008). Rather than only asking whether or not a certain conspiracy theory is true, warranted or reasonable, we ought to broaden the scope of our analysis to focus on the context in which a speaker or authors articulates a conspiracy theory. This approach is similar to Quassim Cassam's (2019, 2023) propaganda model of conspiracy theory, which rejects particularists' neutral definition while stressing conspiracy theories' function as pieces of propaganda and their use in promoting far-right politics and antisemitism. But we can go further by examining the different ways in which that propagandising plays out. For example, the infamous *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* expresses support for aristocracy while blaming Jews for the spreading of democracy; in Henry Ford's antisemitic writings, grouped together as *The International Jew*, Ford uses the *Protocols* for the reverse purpose, citing them to justify his depiction of Jews as innately aristocratic and anti-democratic (Koper, 2024b). In this way, when viewing conspiracy theories as propaganda, we need to get at the specifics of *what* they are advocating, and *how* they are propagandising. Our aim should be to recover the intentions of a speaker or author in making their utterance or text, what they meant by their particular intervention in a certain situation (Skinner, 2002: Chapter 5, 2008). The content of a truth claim is indeed worth studying, but is less relevant when our interest is in the speech acts that put claims to use, as Raymond Geuss reminds us:

> When at the Potsdam Conference in 1945 Truman told Stalin about the successful explosion of the first atomic bomb, this was not merely an exchange of a bit of information about the results of a physical experiment that had succeeded; rather, in doing this Truman was also performing a certain action, one of trying to intimidate Stalin, to discourage him from acting in certain ways, etc. In fact that was the *point* of Truman's action, and, whether one is Stalin or a student of twentieth-century history, one fails to understand the action at all if one fails to take that point (Geuss, 2008: 12, emphasis in original).

Likewise, we need to ensure that we are not missing the point of a conspiracy theory. None of this is to say that Uscinski and Enders are wrong to worry about the pejorative use of *conspiracy theory* to stigmatise and dismiss political opposition. Indeed, we can equally ask what someone is doing in labelling another person as a conspiracy theorist or describing their beliefs as a conspiracy theory. Some scholars have already examined the use of such concepts in policing the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable politics in liberal democracy (see, for example, Bratich, 2008; Fenster, 2008; Gamberton, 2023; Thalmann, 2019). Others have studied how the pejorative connotations of conspiracy theory impact on the expression of conspiracy claims (see McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim, 2017; Thalmann, 2019). While using *conspiracy theory* in an unreflectively pejorative sense is dubious, studying the pejorative use and its effects is necessary for understanding how people formulate and express their beliefs. In this sense, it is not helpful to social scientists to be doing away with the pejorative meaning of *conspiracy theory* to reach a neater, less contradictory version of the concept (Koper, 2024a). The priorities of a political studies scholar differ from those of an epistemologist, and that we cannot afford to overlook the contradictory nature of conspiracy theory; we ought to accept the tension and study how it plays out in society.

If we were only interested in figuring out whether a conspiracy theory was likely to be true or false, then we could do worse than working with a minimal definition and following particularists' instructions to judge each allegation of conspiracy on the available evidence. However, there is more to conspiracy theories than their truth status, and in the remainder of this article I will sketch a framework for interpreting a conspiracy theory as a speech act occurring in a particular social context.

Continuity, Intertextuality and the Transmission of Ideas

By reducing conspiracy theory to an epistemological category, we risk seeing it as something inert (as a type of truth claim) rather than a practice comprising speech acts rooted in a specific context. We need to avoid relying on particularism's minimal definition for *conspiracy theory* when analysing conspiracy theorising as a social practice, and instead need a different framework to work through. Thankfully, there is already much in the way of case studies, empirical research and historical studies that we can draw on to devise such a lens (see, for example, Birchall and Knight, 2023; Butter and Knight, 2023; Butter and Reinkowski, 2014). In the remainder of this article, I will outline a framework that draws on a recurring, though often overlooked idea in this literature on conspiracy theory – namely the notion that conspiracy theory constitutes a tradition. While this idea was first developed by the social psychologists Michael Billig (1978) and later Jovan Byford (2011), and is a term that appears sporadically in the literature (see Berg, 2023: 285; Cassam, 2023; Stokes, 2018), it remains somewhat under-theorised – scholars have largely neglected to ask what it means for conspiracy theory to be a tradition. To build on

the work of Billig and Byford, and to develop our understanding of conspiracy theory both as a tradition and as a practice, I turn to Mark Bevir's (2000) conceptualisation of tradition, along with cultural and historical perspectives on conspiracy theory (such as Berg, 2023). For reasons of space, the following two sections are structured thematically, rather than tracing the development of the idea chronologically across Billig and Byford's work; in this section, I will examine the element of continuity in the conspiracy theory tradition, before turning to its scope for change in the next section.

Billig (1978) first refers to a conspiracy theory tradition in his book, *Fascists: A Social Psychological View of the National Front*. Here, he sets out to analyse the far-right National Front while overcoming flaws in earlier social psychological perspectives on fascism. He takes issue with the notion that there is a distinct fascist character (Billig, 1978: Chapter 3), as assumed in the work of Erich Fromm ([1942] 2001) and Adorno et al.'s (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, and argues that earlier perspectives have overlooked the importance of propaganda and ideology for fascism. Billig (1978: 132) argues that conspiracy theory has an important place within the ideology of the National Front, specifically the antisemitic myth of a Jewish plot to control the world. As he explains, 'The belief in a world-wide conspiracy provides the logic of the ideology' (Billig, 1978: 154). It resolves a tension within the ideology, between its explicit white supremacism and its claim that whites are under threat from supposedly inferior racial groups; if whites really are so superior, how can they be losing in their struggle with other races? The answer, according to the party's ideology, is that a Jewish-led conspiracy is afoot to trick whites into accepting liberalism and a false egalitarianism. This is a version of the recurring antisemitic conspiracy theory, with Jews being portrayed as conspirators working in secret to achieve the destruction of non-Jewish nations. The conspiracy is seen as working by sowing discord within nations, and is used by the National Front to explain developments such as the immigration of people of colour to Britain in terms of a deliberate strategy of destruction enacted by the conspirators (Billig, 1978: 154).

Billig (1978: 155) situates this antisemitic myth within the context of a 'long-standing political tradition', and traces this back to the anti-Illuminati writing of Augustin de Barruel and John Robison in the late-eighteenth century. Written during the French revolutionary period, these early conspiracist texts 'were particularly concerned to expose the hidden evil forces behind Jacobinism, but since then conspiracy theories have been enlisted to support a variety of causes' (Billig, 1978: 155). Speaking of a conspiracy theory tradition means that we emphasise the transmission of ideas, tropes and themes between texts over time. As Billig notes, 'To establish the existence of a tradition of thought it is not sufficient to outline certain similarities between the ideologies of different historical periods. Continuity must also be demonstrated' (Billig, 1978: 156, emphasis added). The importance of continuity and transmission for traditions has also been theorised by Mark Bevir (2000: 40), who notes that the elements of a tradition 'must embody a series of temporal relationships such that they provided the starting point for each of their later exemplars'. This starting point provides the tradition's adherents with certain ideas and practices to work with, acting as an 'initial influence on people' rather than imposing limits on how they think and act (Bevir, 2000: 37). Billig gives us a basic example of how such a transmission can occur in the conspiracy theory tradition, with the National Front magazine featuring reprints of Birchite articles as well as recommendations for conspiracy theory texts like Gary Allen's *None Dare Call it Conspiracy*, Nesta Webster's *World Revolution* and *Secret Societies* (Billig, 1978: 156–157). Billig's interviews with members of the National Front also show the importance of texts like *Protocols*

of the Learned Elders of Zion and the writing of A. K. Chesterton in spreading the conspiracy theory among party members (Billig, 1978: 299). Similarly, in a later article on conspiracy theories that emerged during in Yugoslavia during its war with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Jovan Byford and Billig show how these conspiracy theories made use of American conspiracy theory literature and again referenced the work of Gary Allen and the *Protocols* (Byford and Billig, 2001).

It is in Byford's (2011) book *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* that the idea of conspiracy theory as a tradition is explained most extensively. Here, Byford refers to conspiracy theory as 'a *tradition of explanation*, characterised by a particular *rhetorical style*' (Byford, 2011: 4, emphasis in original). We are told that the tradition provides a set of tools with which the conspiracy theorist can interpret new events and situations:

> This tradition consists of a corpus of ideas, arguments, 'facts', 'revelations' and 'proofs' pertaining to the alleged world plot, which have accumulated over time, and which are referred to, cited, quoted and perpetuated by successive generations of conspiracy theorists (Byford, 2011: 5).

The conspiracy theory tradition and its corpus are presented as being historically specific, rather than transhistorical – that is, the tradition has not always existed and has developed from a particular origin. He goes on to trace this history, once again, back to the late-eighteenth century and to figures like Barruel and Robison who accused secret societies like the Freemasons and the Illuminati of seeking to destroy Christianity (Byford, 2011: 40). What differentiates these authors' writing from earlier allegations of conspiracy is, in Byford's (2011: 43) view, the expansive scope of the plots they describe and the evil intentions of the conspirators. The conspiracies they postulate were not aiming at personal gain, but at the destruction of Christian society (Byford, 2011: 43). Furthermore, Byford describes Barruel as having been influenced by anti-Protestant rhetoric in France, and argues that the language of heresy provided his writing with a Manichaean outlook that can still be seen in many conspiracy theories today (Byford, 2011: 45). Byford sees Barruel and Robison as having been so strong an influence on later conspiracy theories that he describes them as 'the founding fathers of the conspiracy tradition' (Byford, 2011: 45).

In describing conspiracy theorising as a tradition and pointing to the element of continuity within that tradition, I do not mean to suggest that it is perennial and transhistorical. As Bevir argues, a tradition should not be hypostatised, but should be treated instead as historically specific: 'Traditions are not fixed entities people discover as already given. They are contingent entities people produce by their own activities' (Bevir, 2000: 40). The same is true for the conspiracy theory tradition – conspiracy theories are products of people's actions and are not created in a vacuum. The position I am sketching here therefore contrasts with Karl Popper's view that conspiracy theory stems from the secularisation of religious superstition, effectively a modern version of the belief in the Homeric gods' control over events (Popper, 2002: 352). This view also contrasts with Hofstadter's (1966) highly influential account of the paranoid style, which neglects the influence of history and culture on conspiracy theory belief, depicting it as a product solely of the individual's faulty psychology (Butter, 2021). In this way, this approach avoids pathologising the people who express conspiracy theories, as what a person intends in expressing a conspiracy theory may vary from one case to the next – are they expressing a committed belief or just toying with an interesting idea? Perhaps they are using the conspiracy theory

instrumentally for political ends? Nor do I mean that every person who has participated in the tradition will have done so intentionally – a tradition is partly constructed by the people studying it, and its value to us as researchers lies in how well it can explain the practices and beliefs we are interested in (Bevir, 2000: 46). What matters is that we can explain how certain ideas, themes and texts that we classify as belonging to the tradition have been transmitted between people over time. What exactly belongs to the conspiracy theory tradition is beyond the scope of this article, and is indeed a topic for historians to explore, with the likes of Michael Butter (2014, 2020), Michael Barkun (2013) and Kathryn Olmsted (2009) having already studied the development of conspiracy theories since the late-eighteenth century.

Change and Agency in the Conspiracy Tradition

Talk of tradition can bring to mind age-old practices and rituals – from religious ceremonies unaltered across the centuries, to family recipes passed down over generations. But traditions do change, even when one tries to preserve them exactly as they are. As Bevir writes:

> Every time we attempt to apply a tradition, we have to reflect on it, we have to try to understand it afresh in the light of the relevant circumstances, and by reflecting on it, we necessarily open it up to possible innovation. In this way, human agency can produce change even when people think they are adhering to a tradition they regard as sacrosanct (Bevir, 2000: 35).

I doubt that even the people consciously drawing on earlier conspiracy theories see their actions as part of a *sacrosanct* tradition, but the relevant point here is that people can innovate even when trying to preserve older practices or beliefs. We find an example of this in Winston Berg's (2023) historical study of the deep state conspiracy theory, specifically his discussion of the John Birch Society (JBS), its founder, Robert Welch, and their influence over the deep state discourse. As Berg (2023: 287–294) explains, over the course of a series of speeches between 1964 and 1966, Welch drew a connection between his own theory about a communist conspiracy and John Robison's (1797) theory of an Illuminati conspiracy, as described in the latter's book *Proofs of a Conspiracy*. Doing so was part of an effort to overcome tensions withing the JBS, to 'shore up disputes between proponents of the anti-communist and anti-Jewish theories that competed in [Welch's] organization' (Berg, 2023: 285). While he did not depict the supposed communist and Illuminati conspiracies as one and the same (Berg, 2023: 291), Welch's use of Robison's work allowed him to present his own beliefs as part of a category with a longer history:

> He appropriated [Robison's anti-Illuminati writings], staging them as the predecessor and, more importantly, the original version of a structure he argued lay behind both the theories of the communist and Jewish world conspiracies. By drawing these multiple traditions, separated by time and place, together as branches of the same shared practice of counter-conspiratorial politics, Welch made a statement about what it meant for something to be a conspiracy theory (Berg, 2023: 285).

In this way, Welch 'constructed a category of "conspiracy theory" that could accommodate both anti-communist and anti-Semitic interpretations while deferring endorsement of either' (Berg, 2023: 288). Although he was positioning his own beliefs as part of a practice that was much older than his mid-twentieth century context, Welch was also

doing something new in responding in this way to the specific circumstances of the JBS in the 1960s. This case illustrates the limits of seeing conspiracy theory solely through the lens of epistemology, as only a theory about a conspiracy, with Welch using the Illuminati conspiracy theory for reasons besides uncovering some truth – the more tactical goal of managing the JBS' internal divisions. One needs to consider the broader context around a conspiracy theory, not in order to judge whether it is true or false but rather to better understand what a speaker or author was doing in expressing a conspiracy theory.

The framework of tradition can thus capture elements of both continuity and change in a conspiracy theory text. Because of the element of change or innovation, we cannot prejudge what someone is doing in articulating a conspiracy theory – Welch's intentions were different from those behind birtherism, for example. Therefore, we need to focus on particular cases rather than only treating conspiracy theory as a general category. This does not mean revealing the ulterior motives of anyone engaged in conspiracy theorising, as though it must always be a cynical ploy for achieving political ends. We cannot 'perform any such conjuring trick as that of re-entering the minds of historical agents' (Skinner, 2008: 652). Instead, interpretation of conspiracy theory texts means treating each one as a social act occurring in a specific context. This will also involve finding intertextual connections and seeing how a text or utterance is part of a broader argument (Skinner, 2008: 651). The aim is to give an evidenced case for a particular understanding of what the speaker or author is doing, not to uncover the definitive and complete account of a text. It is worth echoing again Geuss' (2008: 12) warning not to miss the point of an utterance, by stressing the need to separate the question of the truth of a conspiracy claim from the question of its politics. Someone can act on information or beliefs that are actually false, but this is not the chief concern of the framework of tradition. As Geuss (2008: 11) notes, 'even illusions can have effects'.

One upshot of separating the questions of truth and politics is that true conspiracy claims can also have political effects. For instance, we can accept the truth of the conspiracy and cover-up claims made by *The Washington Post*'s Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein or the Senate Watergate Committee against the Nixon administration (see Genovese, 2023: Chapter 3; Hosansky, 2007), while also acknowledging that these claims were used by actors for political ends. By 'political ends', I do not mean anything pejorative nor that the investigators had an ulterior motive, as though the investigations were simply a ploy for ousting Nixon. Rather, I mean that truth claims can be incorporated into arguments about what political action ought to be taken – including arguments that we may find highly compelling. Again, what someone chooses to do with a conspiracy claim is different from the question of whether that claim is true or false.

Just as we must look at the particular context in order to understand how a conspiracy theory text was used, so too must we looking at that context to understand the nature of a text's relationship with the conspiracy theory tradition – as Bevir suggests, traditions and their practices lack strict boundaries and there are different degrees of participation:

> There are no natural or given limits to particular practices by which we might separate them out from the general flux of human life. For example, the boundary of a Church does not clearly appear with those who attend weekly services, those who attend services once or twice a year, those who wander in for private prayer, those who go to secular events organized by the Church, or those who are helped directly by the social work of the Church. Where we locate the limits of practices must be a pragmatic decision that we can justify only by reference to the purposes of our so doing (Bevir, 2001: 118).

Similarly, we cannot assume that everyone who expresses a belief in a conspiracy will invested in the conspiracy theory tradition in the same way as Welch or Billig's interviewees from the National Front. In each case, different parts of the tradition may be emphasised, played down, reinterpreted or excluded. Whereas a minimal definition would focus on the truth or falsity of a conspiracy theory's claims, the framework of tradition can help us to understand the broader context surrounding a conspiracy theory, including its interaction with other kinds of cultural phenomena – sometimes, traditional conspiracy theory elements may feature alongside content from beyond the tradition. One example of this is QAnon, the pro-Trump conspiracy theory whose claims have been combined in online spaces with multi-level marketing, esotericism, lifestyle influencing and alternative healing (Argentino, 2021). QAnon has also been used to promote the return of traditional gender roles, attributing changes around gender norms to a broader deep state conspiracy (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021, 2022). Another example is given by Byford and Billig in their study of the Yugoslav case, as they describe the writing of Ratibor Đurđević, who envisioned NATO's intervention as part of a satanic plot to establish a New World Order, combining aspects of American antisemitic conspiracist literature with the work of Nikolaj Velimirović, a Serbian Orthodox bishop who also espoused antisemitic views (Byford and Billig, 2001: 52). This too demonstrates how a conspiracy theory does more than making truth claims, with Đurđević combining resources from the conspiracy theory tradition with cultural resources from Serbia to explain a new set of events. As the presentation of a conspiracy theory's relationship with the broader tradition will vary between contexts (because of such factors as the intended audience), understanding an author or speaker's intention in expressing a conspiracy theory will require us to look at the specific details of each case and the context in which it is situated. In this way, using tradition as a framework leads us to adopt something surprisingly like a particularist approach, though one that sees conspiracy theories as doing more than expressing truth claims. While particularist philosophers argue that we cannot presume that all conspiracy theories are false or irrational, the framework I have been outlining here rejects the presumption that all conspiracy theories will be used in the same way, and again focuses our attention on the particulars of each case – albeit by interpreting their political content and function within a specific context, rather than focusing on their truth claims. Like particularism, this framework avoids pathologising conspiracy theory believers, but is nevertheless critical of the content of their claims where need be, drawing our attention to intertextual relationships within an often troubling conspiracy theory tradition. The purpose of this framework is not to provide a critique of particularism on epistemological grounds, but to offer a new way to interpret conspiracy theories and how they are used in politics.

Conclusion

While particularist's minimal definition of conspiracy may be useful from an epistemological perspective, it is far less useful for political studies scholars, and we need not be bound to it – there is a lot more going on in conspiracy theorising than just a truth claim about the existence of a conspiracy. Conspiracy theorising is caught up in politics and history, as well as cultural and social issues. In overlooking these factors, a solely epistemological view of conspiracy theory can lose sight of its object of study – conspiracy theory looks less like a social practice and more like an abstract philosophical concept. In this article, I have argued against adopting particularists' minimal definition of conspiracy theory for this very reason and have instead advocated for an framework based on

Michael Billig and Jovan Byford understanding of conspiracy theory as a tradition. I have elaborated on Billig and Byford's work by looking more closely at what it means for something to be a tradition, drawing on the work of Mark Bevir to highlight how this explanatory concept best captures the aspects of continuity and change within conspiracy. Finally, I have shown that this view of conspiracy theory as a tradition still addresses some of particularists' chief concerns by avoiding both prejudging claims about conspiracy and the pathologising of individual conspiracy theory believers.

This article is merely intended as a jumping off point for future investigations of conspiracy theory. My aim has been to outline a framework for understanding conspiracy theory that avoids succumbing to conspiracist apologism while nevertheless being open to looking at the similarities and differences between cases of conspiracy theory. Moreover, in drawing on Billig's notion of the conspiracy theory tradition I have sought to show how a social scientist may overcome the generalist and pathologising tendencies described by particularists (Basham, 2018; Basham and Dentith, 2018). The sketch of the tradition I have given here needs to be filled in with more detail in future, as there are still many questions about the tradition that need answering. For instance, what texts can be categorised as belonging to the conspiracy theory tradition? We have already seen that Billig and Byford agree on the importance of Barruel and Robison's writing for the tradition, as well as later texts like the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion.* What other authors and texts might also belong to the tradition? Answering this question would need us to examine conspiracy theory texts to detect their relationship with other texts, to see which authors appear most frequently. A similar approach could be taken to understanding the core themes and ideas in the conspiracy theory tradition, by looking at particular conspiracy theories to see which themes and ideas are repeated and altered over time.

Perhaps most importantly, this framework can also aid us in the analysis of contemporary conspiracism, looking at how current conspiracy theories came about and how they draw on pre-existing conspiracist ideas and motifs. Rather than looking to the psychology of individual believers, the framework I have been describing would encourage us to see where conspiracist ideas have been transmitted over time to better understand the conditions in which they emerged and developed.

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Notes

1. The page number for this quotation refers to the draft of Pigden's (2006) chapter, as I have been unable to access the original book.

2. Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019: 20) give 9/11 conspiracy theories as an example of classic conspiracism, which 'revolve around the collection and interpretation of supposed facts left out of official reports and covered up by so-called reliable sources'.
3. For example, Alan Finlayson (2022) has already given compelling analyses of rhetorical style of the right-wing commentator Paul Joseph Watson – who has promoted a range of conspiracy theories online – focusing especially on the importance of ethos to his rhetoric.

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