5.10

CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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Introduction

Unlike the history of many other regions and cultures, the history of American conspiracy theories has already been well researched (see, among others, Goldberg 2001; Olmsted 2009; Barkun 2013). This article can therefore draw on a comparatively rich body of previous research, without, however, sharing their assumptions and conclusions. More specifically, the narrative I will relate here differs significantly from the most well-known account of U.S. conspiracy theories provided by Richard Hofstadter in his seminal essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'. Hofstadter acknowledged that conspiracy theories had a long history in the U.S.A. but argued that they had always 'been the preferred style only of *minority* movements' (1964: 7 [italics in the original]). Many scholars have drawn on this argument and have suggested that, ironically, exactly at the time when Hofstadter was making this claim, conspiracy theories were beginning to move from the margins to the mainstream of American culture. Focusing on the contemporary period, these studies argue that conspiracy theories have become more widely spread and influential than ever (Knight 2000; Melley 2000; Barkun 2013). This argument sounds very convincing at first, considering the attention that has been paid to conspiracy theories in recent years. With a president prone to use conspiracist rhetoric currently in the White House, it is not surprising that some very recent studies suggest that, due to political polarisation and the echo chambers of the Internet, conspiracy theories are now more popular than ever (Merlan 2019; Muirhead, Rosenblum 2019).

However, drawing on an approach from the sociology of knowledge (Anton *et al.* 2014), I will argue that the opposite is the case. Conspiracy theories have not increased, but decreased, in popularity and importance over time in American culture. They have moved from the mainstream to the margins, not the other way around. They were once orthodox, that is, officially accepted and legitimate knowledge, and became heterodox, that is, stigmatised and illegitimate knowledge after the Second World War. It is true that conspiracy theories have become more important again in recent years and are now more visible and influential than 30 years ago, but they are still far less widely spread and influential than 100 or 200 years ago.

This chapter therefore relates the history of American conspiracy theories in three steps. The first part focuses on the time from the seventeenth to the middle of the twentieth century. During that period, conspiracy theories change significantly in focus and rhetoric, but they are

always considered legitimate knowledge. They are believed and articulated by elites and accordingly exert a significant influence on culture and society, shaping many important events. The second part addresses the period from the late 1950s to the turn of the millennium. Rather than rehearsing the well-known conspiracy theories of that period, such as the Kennedy assassination or the moon landing, it discusses the stigmatisation of conspiracy theories and its effects on their visibility and popularity. As heterodox knowledge they are increasingly perceived as a problem and a potential danger to democracy, a feeling powerfully articulated in Hofstadter's seminal essay, and they exert much less influence than before. The final part, then, suggests that conspiracy theories have become more popular and influential again in recent years. They remain stigmatised in the public at large but, mostly due to the Internet, counter-publics have emerged in which conspiracy theories are again considered legitimate knowledge. Since these counter-publics make savvy use of social media and have created their own news outlets and experts, they can circumvent the traditional gatekeepers who still consider conspiracy theories wrong and problematic. Thus, conspiracy theories remain illegitimate knowledge, but, unlike in previous decades, they are highly visible and therefore significantly influence public debates.

From the colonial period to the Cold War: Conspiracy theories as influential orthodox knowledge

In recent years, there has been growing scholarly consensus that conspiracy theories are neither an anthropological given, as scholarship in the 1980s frequently claimed (Groh 1987), nor do they only emerge with the Enlightenment, as Karl Popper (1945) famously suggested. Scholars now identify the early modern period, more specifically the religious wars of the late sixteenth century, as the time when conspiracy theories emerged for the first time (Coward, Swann 2004; Zwierlein 2013). These conspiracy theories differ from most of the prominent modern ones in that they do not focus exclusively on human actors, but include supernatural ones as well. In fact, the struggle that these 'metaphysical conspiracy theories' (Butter 2014: 55) are concerned with is ultimately the apocalyptic confrontation between God and the devil.

European colonists brought their conspiracist suspicions with them when they settled in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Conspiracy theories were particularly prominent among the Puritans in New England, because these religious dissenters from the Church of England thought of themselves as a chosen people and confidently modelled themselves after the Israelites of the Old Testament. They saw themselves at the forefront of the cosmic struggle between God and the devil. They believed that all their enemies were secretly allied and that the devil orchestrated their attacks. The devil, they thought, considered them an important target because they had ventured deep into his territory: 'The New-Englanders are a People of God settled in those, which were once the *Devil's* Territories', Puritan minister Cotton Mather wrote in *Wonders of the Invisible World*, thus articulating the common conviction that the devil had fled to the New World when Christianity spread throughout Europe (1862 [1692]: 13). Finding a wilderness devoid of churches but full of easily seduced heathens, the devil 'had reign'd without any controul for many Ages' over the country, and, 'Irritated' by the Puritans' arrival, 'immediately try'd all sorts of Methods to overturn [their] poor Plantation' (Mather 1862 [1692]: 74, 13). He tempted individual souls, and he conjured up 'powerful "external" enemies – both human and non-human – dedicated to destroying the polity: storms, earthquakes, epidemics, pirates, foreign enemies, heretics, witches, imperial bureaucrats, Amerindians, and African slaves' (Cañizares-Esguerra 2006: 17). Interpreting each environmental disaster and conflict with any enemy as yet another episode in the battle against the forces of evil, the Puritans developed a veritable 'siege mentality' (Cañizares-Esguerra 2006: 29).

The conspiracy theory stabilised the Puritan community because it located the conspirators – except for the occasional witch or heretic – firmly on the outside. However, with the Salem witchcraft crisis of 1692–1693, it temporarily evolved into a socially destructive variant that shook the community to its core. Hundreds of people were accused, and among those accused – and even among those sentenced and executed – were many who were highly regarded or even in full communion with their churches. As we know today from the excellent studies by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum (1974) and Mary Beth Norton (2002), the crisis was fuelled by trauma and disaffection connected to an ongoing war with Native Americans, as well as an economic conflict within Salem Village. These issues, however, could not be addressed openly at the time but were articulated as accusations of witchcraft. To the Puritans, it thus appeared as if the boundary between inside and outside had collapsed completely. 'An Army of *Devils* is horribly broke in upon the place' and '*The Walls of the whole World are broken down!*', wrote Cotton Mather in *Wonders*, his account of the crisis (1862 [1692]: 14; 79 [italics in the original]). The spiral of accusations and convictions could only be stopped when the colony's new governor dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer (to Hear and to Determine) responsible for the case, but 20 people were already dead. One man, Giles Corey, had been pressed to death because he refused to acknowledge the court that was trying him, and 19 convicted 'witches' – 14 women and five men – had been hanged.

The resolution of the witchcraft crisis did not mean that conspiracy theories became less influential in what was to become the U.S.A. While the period between 1700 and 1750 has not yet been researched in that regard, Bernhard Bailyn has demonstrated that, from the 1750s onward, conspiracy theories were a decisive factor in bringing about the War of Independence.

> [T]he fear of a comprehensive conspiracy against liberty throughout the English-speaking world – a conspiracy believed to have been nourished in corruption, and of which, it was felt, oppression in America was only the most immediately visible part – lay at the heart of the Revolutionary movement,

Bailyn writes in the 'Foreword' to *Pamphlets of the American Revolution 1750–1776* (1965a: x), a collection of primary sources that complements his seminal study *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967). Over the course of the 1760s and 1770s, the colonists became increasingly convinced of the existence of what George Washington described as 'a regular, systematic plan … to make us tame and abject slaves' (1971 [1774]: 34). This plot, the colonists claimed, was carried out by the king, his ministers, parliament, the Church of England and the crown's representatives in the colonies. What is more, the colonists believed that the conspirators wanted to abolish liberty everywhere. As Bailyn suggests, this perception was of 'the utmost importance to the colonists' because 'it transformed [their demands] from constitutional arguments to expressions of a world regenerative creed' (1965b: 82). As one pamphleteer put it, the cause of America 'is the cause of *self-defense*, of *public faith*, and of the *liberties of mankind*' (qtd in Bailyn 1965b: 83). In light of such a comprehensive conspiracy, the colonists felt that their revolt was justified. Their conspiracy theory thus fuelled and legitimised the revolution.

Bailyn's analysis indicates that Richard Hofstadter could not have been more wrong with his claims about the status and influence of conspiracy theory in American history. During both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, conspiracy theories constituted a legitimate form of knowledge and significantly shaped the course of the country. They were sincerely believed and voiced by some of the nation's most revered leaders, among others by 'Founding Fathers' George Washington and John Dams, that is, figures who could not be further removed from the

fringes of society to which, according to Hofstadter, belief in conspiracy theories was restricted at that time. As Gordon Wood (1982) has convincingly demonstrated, this propensity to perceive the world in conspiracist fashion was fuelled by a specific epistemology of cause and effect that maintained that the moral quality of an action was identical with the intention behind the action.

Wood also claims that conspiracy theories lost their status as legitimate knowledge in American culture at the end of the eighteenth century. He considers the French Revolution the turning point:

> Although … conspiratorial interpretations of the Revolution were everywhere … the best minds … now knew that the jumble of events that made up the Revolution were so complex and overwhelming that they could no longer be explained simply as the products of personal intentions.
>
> *(1982: 432)*

However, while Wood draws on a plethora of sources for his observations about the Revolutionary Period, he offers no evidence at all for this claim, implicitly admitting that the majority of people in the U.S.A. and Europe continued to think on the basis of the old paradigm and that only some thinkers moved on to a different one. Thus, as Geoffrey Cubitt pointedly puts it in his analysis of anti-Catholic conspiracy theories in nineteenth-century France, 'Quite simply, this recession [that Wood postulates] shows very little signs of having happened during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' on either side of the Atlantic (1989: 18). The specific logic of cause and effect described by Wood survived into the nineteenth century. Additionally, as I have argued elsewhere (Butter 2014: 37–54), in the nineteenth as much as in the eighteenth century, conspiracist thinking in the U.S.A. was further fuelled by two other sources: The influential republican ideology that saw republics in perpetual danger of being overthrown by conspiracies and the heritage of Puritanism with its belief in the U.S.A.'s mission in a Manichean struggle of cosmic dimensions between the forces of good and evil.

As a consequence, the status of conspiracy theories did not change throughout the nineteenth century.[1] Elites as well as ordinary people remained convinced that smaller or larger groups of conspirators could and did shape the course of events for years or even decades. These suspicions tended to focus on minorities and immigrants (Rogin 1987; Mottram 1989), but they also ran along partisan lines. Almost invariably, the alleged conspirators were cast as a threat to the American way of life, as a danger to the rights of the people won with the Revolution. In 1790, the Federalists around Washington and Adams accused Thomas Jefferson's Democratic Republicans of being in league with the European Illuminati, who, according to Jedidiah Morse and others, had already caused the French Revolution (Stauffer 1918; McKenzie-McHarg 2014). The Democratic Republicans in turn alleged that the Federalists were colluding with Britain in order to re-establish the monarchy. A little later, Andrew Jackson tried to capitalise on fears about the undue influence of bankers – the so-called money power. However, these conspiracy theories never became as prominent as suspicions about Masons, Mormons and Catholics during the antebellum period (Davis 1960). Fuelled by a steady influx of Irish immigrants, the Catholic conspiracy theory gained particular traction between the 1830s and 1850s (Butter 2014: 113–66). It claimed that the monarchs of Europe were conspiring with the Pope to destroy American democracy because it was setting a dangerous example to the oppressed masses of Europe. Many accounts identified Archduke Metternich as the mastermind behind the plot (Beecher 1835: 53; Morse 1835: 44–6). Founded in 1850, the anti-Catholic Know Nothing Party won about 25 per cent of the popular vote in the presidential election of 1856, which illustrates how widely spread and influential this conspiracy theory was for a while.

Unsurprisingly, the most influential conspiracy theories of the antebellum period revolved around the issue of slavery. During the 1830s, the supporters of slavery began to perceive abolitionism as a British plot to weaken the American economy and, as with the Catholic conspiracy theory, to disqualify the democratic example the U.S.A. was setting to the world. In the 1850s, then, the pro-slavery faction increasingly cast the members of the Republican Party as the masterminds behind this plot, constantly referring to them as 'Black Republicans' in order to suggest that they were abolitionists in disguise who wanted to outlaw slavery everywhere. Over the course of the decade, their indictments became more and more alarmist in tone, until, after Lincoln's election, they argued that the administration had now been captured by the conspiracy. However, for the other side in this conflict, conspiracy theories were arguably even more important. Founded in 1854, the Republican Party fought not against slavery as such but against what its members called the 'Slave Power', that is, the influence of the most powerful slaveholders over national politics. As Larry Gara explains, Republicans 'feared the effect of continued national rule by slaveholding interests on northern rights, on civil liberties, on desired economic measures and on the future of free white labor itself' (1969: 6).

The notion of the Slave Power conspiracy explains how resistance to slavery could eventually emerge as a majority position in the North. The abolitionists, who opposed slavery on moral grounds, always remained a minority and lacked the political influence to effect any significant change. But, from the 1840s onward, more and more northerners who had no moral problem with slavery (because they were often racists themselves) began to articulate concerns about the seemingly unstoppable expansion of slavery to new states. The notion of the Slave Power conspiracy, 'a symbol for all the fears and hostilities harboured by northerners toward slavery and the South' (Foner 1995: 91), united diverse groups such as abolitionists, conscience Whigs and renegade Democrats. As Leonard Richards puts it, 'Men and women could differ on scores of issues, hate blacks or like them, denounce slavery as a sin or guarantee its protection in the Deep South, and still lambast the "slaveocracy"' (2000: 3). During the 1840s, the opponents of the slaveholding interests came together in the Free Soil Party; a decade later, the Republican Party became their home. As the founding ideology of the Republican Party, the Slave Power conspiracy theory was an important cause of the Civil War.

The most famous conspiracist indictment of the Slave Power occurs in Abraham Lincoln's 1858 'House Divided' speech in which he suggests that Senator Stephen Douglas, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney and Presidents Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan have orchestrated all major events of the recent past to further the goals of the Slave Power. Lincoln uses the metaphor of the house – a trope he employs earlier to famously argue that 'this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*' (1858: 461 [italics in the original]) – to insinuate that these four have been acting according to a secret plan:

> But when we see a lot of framed timbers, different portions of which we know have gotten out at different times and places and by different workmen – Stephen, Franklin, Roger, and James, for instance – and when we see these timbers joined together, and see they exactly make the frame of a house or a mill … – in such a case we find it impossible not to *believe* that Stephen and Franklin, and Roger and James all understood one another from the beginning, and all worked upon a common *plan*.
>
> *(1858: 465–6 [italics in the original])*

This idea that the conspiracy has brought the government completely under its control sets the Slave Power conspiracy theory apart from all other conspiracy theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The capture of the state and its institutions is also presented as a *fait accompli*

in anti–abolitionist texts written after 1860s, and earlier the election successes of both the Federalists and the Jacksonians had been cast by their opponents as the result of conspiracies. But, in these cases, the conspiracy theorists always assumed that the domestic plotters – the abolitionists, the Federalists and the Jacksonians – were puppets of foreign foes such as the French or the British. And in none of these conspiracy theories is the take-over of the government as comprehensive as in the Slave Power conspiracy theory, where Lincoln and others claim that the conspirators' plot has brought all three branches of government under their control.

The tendency of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conspiracy theories to focus on plots against the government is a logical consequence of conspiracy theory's status as orthodox knowledge at the time. As long as conspiracy theories were believed and articulated by elites, they tended to target alleged plotters threatening their status, that is, enemies from inside and outside the country supposedly bent on taking power away from them. And, since conspiracy theory's status did not change in the second half of the nineteenth or the first half of the twentieth century, the most prominent accusations of these decades followed the familiar pattern. Between the 1890s and 1920s, both Catholic and Jewish immigrants were cast as conspirators and imagined to be in league with American Catholics or bankers respectively. With the rise of National Socialism in Germany, the focus shifted to the alleged activities of Nazi spies in league with German Americans. After the end of the Second World War, then, suspicions quickly centred on the Soviet Union and communism.

The 1950s are the last decade in which conspiracy theories constitute officially accepted knowledge. In popular memory, the Red Scare is nowadays often reduced to the rants of Senator Joseph McCarthy, but, as scholars agree, 'there was far more to the "McCarthy era" than Senator Joseph R. McCarthy'. Anti-communism was not a minority phenomenon, and 'there existed in Cold War America a broad anti-Communist consensus shared and seldom questioned by most liberals as well as conservatives, by intellectuals as well as plain folks' (Fried 1990: vii; 34). Throughout most of the 1950s, it was accepted as a given that there was a large-scale communist infiltration of schools, colleges, government agencies and society at large. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations and their respective Congresses took a variety of measures that ranged from initiating loyalty and security programmes, to infringing on the civil rights of suspects and passing legislation that virtually outlawed the Communist Party. This conviction was only shaken at the end of the decade, when conspiracy theories in general began to lose the status of orthodox knowledge.

From the 1960s to 9/11: Conspiracy theories as stigmatised heterodox knowledge

The fate of the Red Scare conspiracy theory effectively exemplifies the shift in status that conspiracy theories underwent in American culture around 1960. Quite suddenly, it was no longer senators and congressmen who believed in this conspiracy theory, but people like Robert Welch, a candy manufacturer from Massachusetts, who founded the John Birch Society in 1958 in order to fight the communist conspiracy. The John Birch Society, named after an army captain killed by Chinese communists, was not exactly a minority movement – by 1967 it had 80,000 members (Bennett 1988: 319) – but, compared to the mass appeal that warnings of communist subversion had had a few years earlier, it was marginal. Whereas the anti-communists of the 1950s voiced their suspicions in official government publications, through the national media or in books that became bestsellers, Welch's publications, such as *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society* (1961) or *The Politician* (1975) (in which he accused President Eisenhower of being a communist conspirator), were privately printed and distributed. David Bennett takes this idea further and convincingly suggests that the John Birch Society appealed initially to at least some

people not because of, but despite, Welch's accusations of conspiracy. Moreover, 'Welch's conspiratorial fantasies turned away many of these people by the late 1960s' (1988: 323). The society survived until the mid-1980s, but its few remaining members had no political influence and were largely ignored, if not forgotten, by the mainstream of society.

The shift from orthodox to heterodox knowledge constitutes the most important caesura in the history of American conspiracy theories. It is far more important than the Kennedy assassination, whose impact other scholars have highlighted. Peter Knight, for example, has argued that 'Following the assassination …, conspiracy theories have become a regular feature of everyday political and cultural life' (2000: 2), when, in fact, the opposite is true. The Kennedy assassination was the first event in American history that triggered large-scale conspiracy theories that were problematised immediately and on a completely new level. Whereas discussions in earlier decades and centuries had revolved around the question of whether a particular conspiracy theory was true, political elites and the media now began to question the foundations of this mode of thinking and they expressed concerns about its possible effects. Put briefly, where earlier ages had once worried about the effects of conspiracies, the public was now becoming concerned with the effects of conspiracy theories. Thus, conspiracy theories were much talked about but no longer believed.

The reasons for this shift have been thoroughly investigated by Katharina Thalmann (2019). The problematisation of conspiracy theories began within the social sciences and spread from there through the whole culture. More specifically, Thalmann argues that the stigmatisation of conspiracy theories occurred in three waves (2019: 29). During the first wave, which peaked in the years after the Second World War, social scientists began to challenge conspiracist knowledge in two different ways. On the one hand, writing under the impression of the war in Europe and the Holocaust, émigrés from the Frankfurt School – Adorno *et al.* in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) and Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman in *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (1949) – stressed the potential dangers of conspiracy theories for peace and democracy. On the other hand, scholars like Karl Popper – in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1956) – criticised the epistemology of conspiracy theories, arguing that they overestimated intentional action and underestimated systemic conditions and structural effects.

These studies did initially not have much impact outside of the ivory tower, but their ideas were picked up a few years later by a younger generation of scholars. No longer concerned with Europe, but with the effects of the Red Scare in the U.S.A., scholars like Seymour Martin Lipset – in 'The Sources of the Radical Right' (1955) – or Edward Shils – in *The Torment of Secrecy* (1956) – sought to counter the widespread allegations that liberal scientists and intellectuals were puppets in a Soviet plot. They labelled such accusations either 'pseudoconservatism', following the path of the Frankfurt School, or 'pseudoscience', following the path of Popper. Unlike the earlier scholarship, the studies by Lipset and Shils received a much broader reception because they made efforts to write in ways accessible to larger audiences. Moreover, many liberal journalists, who also worried about the effects of the Red Scare, picked up on their ideas and popularised them. This popularisation was accelerated by an 'unprecedented growth in audiences who were receptive to and interested in scientific ideas' due to the 'G.I. Bill' (Thalmann 2019: 30), which paved the way to tertiary education for 2.8 million veterans (Luey 2010: 36).

As a consequence, conspiracy theories lost their status as orthodox knowledge and moved to the margins of society. This, in turn, motivated a third generation of scholars to investigate the links between conspiracy theory and extremism. Consensus historians like John Bunzel – in *Anti-Politics in America: Reflections on the Anti-Political Temper and Its Distortions of the Democratic*

Process (1967) – denounced belief in conspiracy theories as irrational and the very opposite of politics proper. The most important text of this wave, however, is Hofstadter's essay on 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' in which he pathologises conspiracism as a form of paranoia. Hofstadter published the first version of the essay in *Harper's*, a widely read magazine. This shows what 'broad impact … his, and others', dismissal of conspiracy theory as paranoia could develop at the time' (Thalmann 2019: 30). Accordingly, by the 1970s, conspiracy theorising had been so utterly stigmatised that the term 'conspiracy theory' itself had become an insult. As Peter Knight puts it, 'Calling something a conspiracy theory is not infrequently enough to end discussion' (2000: 11).

The stigmatisation did not mean, however, that conspiracy theories became unpopular. They never lost their commonsensical appeal, and it is safe to assume that belief in them remained widely spread. While some conspiracy theorists struggled to find a larger audience, for example, Harold Weisberg, who self-published *Whitewash* (1965), his critique of the Warren Commission Report, because he did not find a publisher, other conspiracist indictments, for example, Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991) were commercially very successful and reached a large audience. However, as Stone and many other conspiracy theorists experienced, their convictions could no longer be articulated with impunity in public, and they were rejected and sanctioned by the media, academics and other gatekeepers. Thus, explicit conspiracy theorising – not to be confused with an often alarmist discourse on conspiracy theories – largely disappeared from the public sphere and moved into subcultures. As they were now predominantly articulated by figures on the margins of society trying to come to terms with their own marginalisation, the nature of conspiracist accusations changed. Whereas earlier conspiracy theories had almost always focused on external enemies or plots from 'below', 'The 1960s … witnessed a broad shift … to conspiracy theories proposed by the people about abuses of power by those in authority' (Knight 2000: 58). In other words, ever since the 1960s, most American conspiracy theories have revolved, not around alleged plots *against* the state, but *by* the state.[2]

Not only did the focus of American conspiracy theories change because of their stigmatisation, their rhetoric shifted as well. As Thalmann highlights, their now precarious position within the culture left conspiracy theorists with two options that still organise conspiracist discourse to this day. Conspiracy theorists can either try to still appeal to the mainstream by rejecting the language of plots and schemes and by pretending to be just asking questions, or they can embrace their marginalisation and give up on appealing to a mainstream audience by openly adopting the language of conspiracy theory. The earliest conspiracist accounts of the Kennedy assassination, for example, firmly fell into the first category. Texts like Edward Epstein's *Inquest* (1966), Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* (1966) and Sylvia Meagher's *Accessories after the Fact* (1967) hardly used 'terms like "conspiracy" and "plot" and mostly pointed at inconsistencies in or raised questions about the *Warren Report*' (Thalmann 2019: 130). Forty years later, the first version of the immensely successful *Loose Change* films, 'the first Internet blockbuster' according to *Vanity Fair* (Sales 2006), employed the same strategy to cast doubt on the official version of the 9/11 attacks. In fact, the slogan of the Truth Movement – 'Ask questions. Demand answers' – can be seen as the self-conscious attempt to downplay its own conspiracy theorising and still appeal to the mainstream.

In general, though, the other option has become more important over time because the stigmatisation of conspiracy theory further increased during the 1970s and 1980s. Accordingly, later accounts of the Kennedy assassination such as New Orleans state attorney Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins* (1988) or Oliver Stones's film *JFK* (1991) are far more explicit in their accusations and develop much grander visions of conspiracy. Following the Watergate affair, such explicit large-scale conspiracy theories were in the majority from the outset, and the

latter versions of the *Loose Change* series: *Final Cut* and *An American Coup* also shed the restraints of the earlier versions and explicitly blamed the Bush administration for orchestrating the attacks (Butter, Retterath 2010). Thalmann convincingly links this development to 'conspiracy theorists increasingly abandon[ing] mainstream markets' and constructing their identities more and more in sharp opposition to those who ridiculed such worldviews (Thalmann 2019: 131).

Another characteristic of explicit conspiracy theorising since the late 1960s is the tendency to develop what Michael Barkun has called 'superconspiracy [theories]', conspiracy theories, that is, that do not merely revolve around one specific event – the Kennedy assassination or 9/11 – or a specific group of alleged conspirators – the Slave Power, the communists or the government – but merge several of these scenarios. Such conspiracy theories were first developed by Nesta Helen Webster in England in the 1920s. In the U.S.A., they were first picked up by Robert Welch, who linked the alleged communist conspiracy of the 1950s and 1960s to the working of the Illuminati in the eighteenth century. On a larger scale, however, they only gained traction about a decade later. Jim Garrison's 'ever-evolving and large-scale conspiracy theories [already] point toward the kind of superconspiracy theories that were increasingly promoted by conspiracy theorists in counter-cultural publications in the 1970s' (Thalmann 2019: 143). By the 1990s, superconspiracy theories had become the dominant type of conspiracy theories circulating in the U.S.A. Anxieties about the evildoing of a New World Order, articulated by Alex Jones, Pat Robertson and others, fall into this category, and so does the final version of the *Loose Change* films, *An American Coup*, which no longer focuses on 9/11 exclusively but instead presents that event as just another episode in a decade-long plot against the American people.

Conclusion: Conspiracy theories as heterodox and orthodox knowledge in the fragmented public sphere the early 21st century

The rise of the Internet has, without doubt, had a tremendous impact on conspiracy theorising in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. Often, the dawn of the digital age is perceived as yet another step in the mainstreaming of conspiracy theory since the 1960s (for example, Barkun 2013). By contrast, in my narrative, which has focused on the marginalisation of conspiracy theory in the second half of the twentieth century, the Internet would appear as a factor moving conspiracy theories closer to the mainstream *again*. However, the story is more complicated. As any casual glance at the alarmism shows with which the conspiracist allegations of Donald Trump have been discussed in most American media (Thomas, Lerer 2016; Uscinski 2016), conspiracy theories have not (yet) returned to the position at the heart of mainstream and elite discourses that they occupied from the seventeenth century to the 1950s in American culture. The Internet has not simply removed their stigma and turned them into orthodox knowledge once more.

However, the Internet has clearly made conspiracy theories more popular and influential again. From the 1970s to 1990s, conspiracy theorists increasingly embraced their own marginalisation. They shunned the mainstream, and the mainstream shunned them, reporting on them critically at times and denying them access to its media channels and markets. Thus, conspiracy theorists had problems circulating their ideas beyond the subcultures in which they moved. If their ideas made it into the general public, then always already framed negatively by the mainstream media and its acknowledged experts. The Internet has changed this completely. Conspiracy theorists do not need the traditional media anymore to reach a large audience; they can set up their own websites and use social media platforms. Thus, their ideas are now far more visible and available than in previous decades. This surely means that their counter-narratives appeal to more people again and, therefore, it is safe to assume that there have been more

convinced conspiracy theorists in the U.S.A. in recent years than in the decades before (Butter 2018: 182–90). A recent quantitative study found that every second American believes in at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver, Wood 2014). This is certainly an impressive number and surely higher than a comparable study would have found in, say, 1984. But, the number is almost certainly much lower than it would have been in 1914 or 1814, when conspiracy theories were still a widely accepted form of knowledge. As Uscinski and Parent conclude in their diachronic empirical study on the role of conspiracy theories in American public life, 'The data suggest one telling fact: we do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not for some time' (2014: 110–1).

Importantly, the Internet has facilitated the emergence of counter-publics with their own media outlets and experts. The fragmentation of the American public sphere began, of course, much earlier (Lütjen 2016), but the advent of the Internet has accelerated and intensified it. In the 1990s, a conspiracy theorist like Alex Jones still needed radio stations to reach a national audience; the Internet has made him independent and allows him to reach people from all over the world. Likewise, a news outlet like breitbart.com would have been impossible without the Internet. Accordingly, there are by now parts of the public sphere in which conspiracy theories are considered orthodox knowledge again, and where the denial of large-scale plots is considered the real problem. In fact, much of the alarmism that characterises current debates about conspiracies and conspiracy theories can be explained by the fact that there are by now at least two publics that debate the same topics, but on very different epistemological grounds. One is concerned about conspiracies, the other about conspiracy theories, and what happens in the one public has repercussions in the other. For the time being, then, conspiracy theories still remain stigmatised, but, as Thalmann puts it, 'that might not matter anymore' (2019: 192), because they exert their influence nevertheless.

Notes

1 Davis (1971) provides an excellent overview of the various conspiracy theories discussed in this section and assembles key passages from the major sources that articulated them.
2 Olmsted also observes this shift, but dates it too early. She suggests that it occurred during the First World War as the expansion of the federal government turned this institution into a far more likely conspirator than it had been before: 'Sinister forces in charge of the government could do a lot more damage in 1918 than they could have done a few years earlier; in fact, in the view of some conspiracists, the state *was* the sinister force' (2009: 4; emphasis in the original).

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