The rise of conspiracy theories
Reification of defeat as the basis of explanation

INTRODUCTION: THE IMMEDIATE APPEARANCE OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

During the EU membership referendum campaign in the UK, a rumour circulated that the outcome would be fixed.[1] MI5 or some other shadowy agency, it was alleged, would rig the result to ensure that, despite 'popular opinion', the Remain side would prevail at the polls and there would be no Brexit. The fact that pencils (rather than pens) were used in the polling booths was cited as evidence for this plot (since marks by pencil crosses can be rubbed out and changed whereas marks by pen cannot). A YouGov opinion poll found that 28 per cent of the sample said the referendum probably would be rigged (and a further 26 per cent said they did not know). These views on clandestine establishment interference were far stronger among 'Leave' voters than 'Remain' voters, and were particularly common among UKIP supporters.

A parallel example is the claim by some that the Charlie Hebdo killings of 2015 were 'false flags': i.e., operations by the state which were made to appear as if they were carried out by other forces. Certain supposed inconsistencies in reporting – such as the apparent lack of blood when the police officer was shot in the head – were cited as evidence that this was a covert operation masquerading as a terror attack by ISIS supporters. The covert operation was attributed to different agencies – including the CIA and Mossad[2] – despite documented counter-evidence.[3] Similar 'false flag' explanations also made an appearance following the Oklahoma bombing of 1995, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in 2012, the Boston marathon bombing of 2013, and other events.

Other conspiracy theories take the form of denying an event happened at all – such as the moon landings; in this case there is a conspiracy to concoct evidence of an event by faking footage, from those in authority, who are again portrayed as highly successful in that the great mass of the public believe them.

Despite their differences, these explanations each have many of the features of a contemporary conspiracy theory. In each of these cases, there is

[1] "UKIP voters worried that MI5 will rig EU referendum, new poll finds", Jon Stone, *Independent*, 21st June 2016
[2] "The psychology and economy of conspiracy theories", Frankie Mullin, *Vice*, 20th January 2015
[3] "Charlie Hebdo: les théories conspirationnistes démontées point par point", *Les Observateurs*, 13th January 2015 http://observers.france24.com/fr/content/20150113-theories-conspirationnistes-charlie-hebdo-demontees-complot-retroviseur-menotte-coulibaly

a critical perspective, a suspicion of those in power, whose interests are seen as different from and in conflict with the wider public (the 'people'). This populist assumption of 'people vs elite' is married to a notion of the hidden intervention of state forces, and – crucially – the notion that these forces would succeed. Alongside an anti-elitist ontology is an elitist epistemology, for the explanation of the fact that 'mainstream' knowledge is wrong is supposedly that the great mass of the population are dupes – the people are 'sheeple' – and only the small band of enlightened conspiracy theorists see the truth.

The popularity of conspiracy theories seems to have increased in the last ten or fifteen years.[4] There are observational examples to suggest this. Lisa Mckenzie's study of a working class neighbourhood in Nottingham noted the prevalence of classical conspiracy theories, which centred on the Illuminati, which she noted was preferred to critiques of capitalism.[5] There are also figures. According to one account, around 22 million people in the USA believe that the government faked the moon landing; and around 160 million believe that there is a conspiracy surrounding the assassination of former US president John F. Kennedy;[6] and in a recent survey, 37% of US voters were found to believe that global warming is a hoax and 28% believed that a 'secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government, or New World Order'.[7] Conspiracy theories are now so common that some of them mingle with 'mainstream' opinion rather than being limited to dedicated conspiracy theorists. Facebook and other social media are a conduit for many of them.

A recent report by the think-tank Demos (2010) suggests that the UK government is concerned about conspiracy theories (or that it should be). The concern is that the theories create distrust between government and the public – that they have a subversive effect. The report examines the links between conspiracy theories and 'extremist' groups, arguing that:

While it is not possible to demonstrate direct causal links between conspiracy theories and extremism, our findings suggest that the acceptance of conspiracy theories in contexts of extremism often serves as a 'radicalizing multiplier', which feeds back into the ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes of the group. They hold extremist groups together and push them in a more extreme and sometimes violent direction. (pp. 4-5)

As a form of populism, it seems likely that conspiracy theories reflect more than they create such distrust, however.

Of course there are many real conspiracies, in history and in contemporary politics. Historically, we have good evidence of state 'manufactured' incidents to start wars. Three famous examples: the 'Mukden incident' in 1931 which led to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria;[8] the 'Gulf of Tonkin' incident in 1964 which led to the direct US involvement in the Vietnam War;[9] and the 'Gleiwitz incident' in 1939 which was used as a pretext for the Nazi invasion of Poland.[10] All were apparently fabricated attacks in order to justify pre-planned military action. However, none of these 'incidents' involved the major destruction of resources or mass sacrifice of a country's own citizens, in contrast to conspiracy incidents such as Pearl Harbour – where it was claimed by some that Roosevelt and Churchill knew in advance what was going to happen and allowed it, to justify the US involvement in the world war. (As we will see below, the '9/11 was an inside job' conspiracy theory has a similar form.) So these real conspiracies are not enactments of a supposed opposition between 'elite' and 'people'. The Hillsborough disaster police cover-up was a real conspiracy too,[11] of course, and so was Watergate, and so was the blacklisting of the building workers by 'The Consulting Association'[12] between 1993 and 2009.[13] So some conspiracies by state forces are certainly real, while others are merely theories and are called conspiracy theories. And of course we recognize that the term 'conspiracy theory' is a term used to discredit.[14] Nevertheless there are certain

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[4] Several sources say the same thing, e.g. M. Barkun, (2013). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America* (2nd edn.). University of California Press. "The conspiracy theory community are dangerous enemies to make", Alex Miller, *Vice*, 24th April 2013.

[5] L. Mckenzie, (2015). *Getting By: Estates, class and culture in austerity Britain*. Policy Press.

[6] "Conspiracy craze: why 12 million Americans believe alien lizards rule us", O. Oksman, *Guardian*, 7th April 2016.

[7] Public Policy Polling: conspiracy theory results, 2nd April 2013.

[8] J. Weland, (1994). Misguided intelligence: Japanese military intelligence officers in the Manchurian Incident, September 1931. *Journal of Military History, 58*(3), 445–460.

[9] C. G. Appy, (2006). *Vietnam: The definitive oral history told from all sides.* Ebury Press. pp. 112-3.

[10] "World War II's first victim", *The Telegraph*, 29th August 2009

[11] "Hillsborough disaster: deadly mistakes and lies that lasted decades", David Conn, *Guardian*, 26th April 2016.

[12] The Consulting Association was the successor to the Economic League.

[13] "Blacklisting victims win £5.6million compensation payout from major construction companies", Mark Ellis, *Daily Mirror*, 8th February 2016.

[14] According to Mark Fenster, (1999). *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and power in American culture*, "the term 'conspiracy theory' serves as a strategy for delegitimization in political

distinguishing features of those explanations usually called conspiracy theories.

One definition of conspiracism is the belief that powerful, hidden, evil forces control human destinies.[15] Similarly, there is the notion of 'history as will'.[16] Related assumptions shared by many conspiracy theories include the idea that nothing happens by accident, everything is connected;[17] that power is the hidden motive for everything else; that who benefits from an event must have caused it; and that history is determined by conspiracies.[18]

While these characteristics are concerned with the nature of the world, other distinguishing features of conspiracy theories are concerned with how we come to know that world. The fundamental assumption that appearances deceive is the basis of numerous claims that the world is really the opposite of how it appears – for example seeing those who are political enemies as friends and those who are political friends as enemies.[19] Also distinctive is the circular form of justification often found in discussions of evidence: 'negative evidence shows the power of the conspirators to manipulate evidence'.[20] As with the Charlie Hebdo example, there is usually a focus on apparent discrepancies in the official account of events or in the way they are reported, which is the step to positing an alternative account. Another feature is their 'meticulous pseudo-scholarship'[21] and their source citation format which mimics conventional scholarship.[22] Further, according to a number of scholars of conspiracy theories, selective treatment of evidence is part of the hallmark as is indiscriminately accepting any argument that points to conspiracy.[23]

The term 'conspiracy theory' covers a range of types of explanation, ranging from accounts of specific incidents to grand or world conspiracy theories, which explain a series of events and social relations. The types of conspiracy theory we are concerned with in this article are those that are populist, that typically characterise the world in Manichean terms (i.e., as divided between 'elite' and 'people'), and that therefore embody suspicion of and hostility to 'the establishment'. These explanations offer themselves as radical analyses of 'the powerful' – i.e., the operation of capital and its political expressions. One of the features that is interesting about these conspiracy theories therefore is that they reflect a critical impulse. We suggest that at least part of the reason for their upsurge (both in the past and in recent years) has to do with social conditions in which movements reflecting class struggles have declined or are seen to be defeated. When class struggles are strong, the concepts and categories of revolutionary theory (Marx's analysis of capitalism) makes more practical sense, and become relevant because of underlying praxis, as people try to grasp their situation. In times of weakness or defeat, however, there is a gap, which comes from a breakdown between theory and practice. Conspiracy theories are not a 'dominant ideology'. Rather than acceptance, they express a strong sense of grievance and of estrangement from the state and capital, although in distorted form. They operate as a substitute for theory/proper analysis, a way of 'understanding' current powerlessness. Through their appearance of being radical or subversive, they appeal to critical people who seek to attack and expose wrong-doing in the ruling class. But without praxis, they are theories cut off at important points from social reality.

This vision of a world shaped at will by powerful forces is a parallel to – and indeed appears almost as a parody of – revolutionary theory. It is a parallel because it agrees with revolutionary theory that the world is structured by unequal power relations, and that the powerful act in their own interests and against the interests of the majority. It is a parody because of its simplification of complex phenomena to a straightforward act of will; no longer are state actors vulnerable, human and sometimes incompetent; rather they are super-competent. As has been pointed out on many occasions, conspiracy theories offer a rationale for despair and inaction; they contribute to powerlessness – for if the 'powerful' are so fully in control, there is no point acting to change the world. But such conspiracy theories are also *premised* on defeat and powerlessness.

To explore this 'social conditions' hypothesis, we will first briefly trace the origin and history of conspiracy theories, and then examine some of the politics of conspiracy theories through noting their appearance in both right and left and anarchist campaigns and struggles. We show how conspiracy theories operate to disempower, and then consider the different explanations for their prevalence. Finally we examine some evidence that their growth reflects moments of defeat and weakness in

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discourse. [... it] has come to represent a political Other to a 'proper' democratic politics". p. xiii.
[15] Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*.
[16] R. Hofstadter, (1964). "The paranoid style in American politics". *Harper's Magazine,* 229(1374), 77-86.
[17] Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy.*
[18] D. Pipes, (1999). *Conspiracy: How the paranoid style flourishes and where it comes from*. Simon and Schuster. pp. 40-47.
[19] Pipes, *Conspiracy.* p. 45.

[20] Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*.
[21] Pipes, *Conspiracy*.
[22] Hofstadter, "Paranoid style".
[23] Louis Farrakhan accepted both the anti-Semitic claim that Hitler was an illegitimate descendant of the Rothschilds and the claim that Churchill was a Rothschild stooge; he explained the apparent contradiction by claiming that the Rothschilds hedged their bets by funding both sides in the war (Pipes, *Conspiracy*. p. 41).

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the class struggle, using the example of 9/11 conspiracy theories.

HISTORY[24]

In this brief history of conspiracy theories, we focus first on the groups most often identified as powerful conspirators and trace how they became seen this way. We shall see that in part the story of the supposed rise of powerful conspirators is a distorted, reified version of the ascent of the bourgeoisie and proto-proletarian groups threatening social change.

A tradition of conspiracism emerged in medieval Europe, and specifically at the time of the Crusades, where the form of belief in which a small group of conspirators seeking power – applied today to Jews, Freemasons and Illuminati alike – first emerged. The Crusades to capture and 'protect' the Holy Lands from non-Christians (beginning 1096-99 and for several following centuries) were associated with a popular hostility to and persecution of Jews, and in turn many Jews understandably became hostile to their persecutors. There were two types of conspiracy theory: the first that Jews sought world power on their own and the second that they were collaborating to do so with Muslims.[25] The origins of these were two-fold. On the one hand, the persecution of Jews led to a Christian fear of Jewish vengeance. Second, usury was not allowed in many countries. However, this law was not applied to Jews, some of whom then made a living from usury, a practice which served to undermine the traditional relationships of feudal society. In an important sense, therefore, Jews became constructed as a malign force in the form of conspiracy theories because they became bearers of early capitalism.

A second enduring target of conspiracy theories also grew out of the Crusades: the Knights

Templar. These were a group of soldier-monks who were set up in 1119 to protect Christian pilgrims going to and from Jerusalem. The Knights Templar were supported by the King of Jerusalem, and a number of popes and noblemen and were widely acclaimed in Europe. They were different from other monastic orders in a number of important ways that contributed to their reputation for malign power. First, they were fighting men, which was an expensive activity, and so they always needed funds. Second, other monastic orders raised money through their land; they employed peasants to work for them, and the visible activity of farming and rents was the source of their wealth. But the Knights Templar didn't initially have such land. Instead, in order to raise the funds they needed, they used their reputation for integrity and their range of contacts to offer themselves as a banking service. However, again, banking conflicted with feudal norms against usury and so the Knights Templar became viewed with suspicion as they became more wealthy and acquired lands. They ultimately failed to protect the Holy Land from the Muslims; and this, combined with their secrecy and wealth, meant they fell from favour with the European establishment and were suppressed almost everywhere on the basis of accusations of apostasy. They were finished by the early 1300s. There is no evidence that they were actually seeking to challenge the existing order; rather, their banking activities were a portent of the coming social change, and perhaps this is really why many modern ideas about conspiratorial secret societies seeking to change or hold on to power are based on the Knights Templar.

In the eighteenth century, the medieval myths about Jews and Knights Templar were developed into the modern forms of conspiracy theory known today. This development coincided with three things: the emergence of many real secret societies, the French Revolution, and the emancipation of the Jews. The most notable real secret societies in the pantheon of conspiracy theories are the Freemasons and the Illuminati. The Freemasons organization comes from a medieval guild of craftsmen who carved stone for castles and cathedrals. In the seventeenth century, people who were not actually craftsmen began to join Masonic lodges, and by the early eighteenth century the organization became the structure it is today, with a Grand Lodge and a moral ethos, as well as a distinctive set of rituals and recognition symbols. Pipes (1999, p. 60) describes them as 'middle class liberals who sought to improve society through free speech, elections and secularism.' Put differently, they were part of the emerging bourgeoisie; while they may not have seen themselves as

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[24] Much of this section draws upon Pipes, *Conspiracy*.

[25] While Jews were 'the enemy within', Muslims were 'the enemy without'.
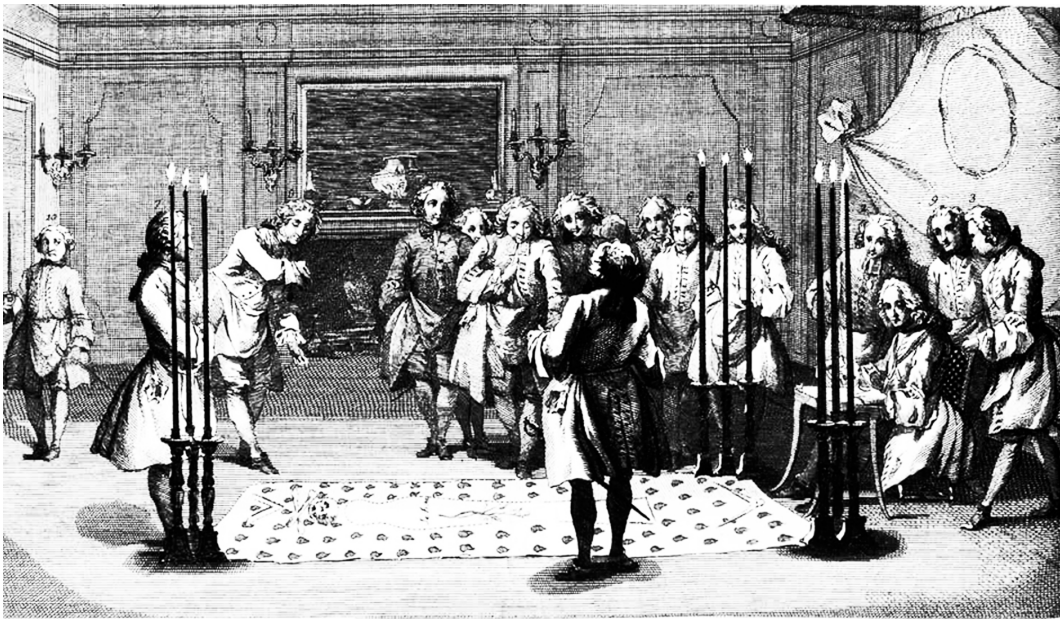
Order of the Illuminati, which was set up by Adam Weishaupt, a professor of Law in Ingolstadt, Bavaria, as an attempt to create a just and modern world within a corrupt society – a much more radical and political programme than that of the Freemasons.[27] The Illuminati only lasted eight years before being suppressed, but they were influential, not least

revolutionary, they represented the changing world, where wealth was more fluid and not bounded to certain groups. Lodges soon spread from the UK to mainland Europe, where their mild reformism was seen as radical and was condemned by the King of France, the Jesuits, the Vatican, Protestant authorities and the Russian government. 'The fear of Freemasonry grew even as the membership came to be more prosperous, established, and conservative' (Pipes, *Conspiracy*). Fear of the Freemasons was the fear by some of rising capital. Opponents linked the Freemasons with other secret societies, and with Jews, and constructed a continuity from the Knights Templar.

There were numerous secret societies in existence in the second half of the eighteenth century, many of which used the Freemasons as a model[26] or were set up in opposition to them. Well into the nineteenth century, many groups took this organizational form as a way of avoiding persecution: groups calling for social change had to exist in secret or risk death, in many cases. Elements of the secret society form were also to be found in the early trade union movement – for example oaths of loyalty – for similar reasons.

The most significant of the early secret societies in the late eighteenth century was the

in terms of their organization, which demanded loyalty from members but which had an 'elite' and 'mass' structure, whereby the leadership are party to the inner secrets and ultimate goals, while the rank and file are only told milder, less radical purposes. This form will seem somewhat familiar, for versions of it can be recognized in modern times across the political and social movement spectrum – from Leninists (such as the SWP) to fascist parties[28] to Jehovah's Witnesses.[29] Like today's entryists, members of the Illuminati joined other secret societies, such as the Freemasons, in an attempt to influence them, a strategy which other secret societies then borrowed.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the massive growth of secret societies, along with fears about them, was the basis of a fairly common type of explanation for political events. This process was enhanced by the French Revolution, since clandestine clubs were an important part of that (hence further inspiring revolutionary groups around the world to take this form – hence Blanquism, Leninism etc.). The apparent usefulness of conspiracy theories was particularly the case given that existing dominant explanations struggled to make sense of the Revolution, which represented a huge change from anything that had

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[26] For example the Italian Carbonari, which were one of very many secret societies in the Apennine Peninsula in the early nineteenth century.

[27] "Its teachings today seem to be no more than another version of Enlightenment rationalism, spiced with the anticlerical atmosphere of eighteenth-century Bavaria. It was a somewhat naive and utopian movement which aspired ultimately to bring the human race under the rules of reason. Its humanitarian rationalism appears to have acquired a fairly wide influence in Masonic lodges." (Hofstadter, "The paranoid style". p. 78)

[28] In his 1978 study of the National Front, Michael Billig described how the leadership propagated hatred against

blacks as fodder for the wider rank and file but themselves were really more interested in the supposed World Jewish Conspiracy, the hidden core beliefs of the party elite who would ultimately bring about social change. (M. Billig. (1978), *Fascists*. Academic Press.)

[29] The elite-mass structure enacted in the secret societies and in modern groups is a reification of the social organization of bourgeois society itself. The groups take this division in society between those who have specialist knowledge/understanding (and hence the exclusive ability to lead) and those who do not as a natural thing, and hence embody it in their group's organization.

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happened previously. It was also in the interests of some sections of society to offer conspiracy explanations; thus royalists focussed on powerful plotters rather than their own incompetence as a way of identifying a small group of enemies who they hoped could be more easily defeated than a mass movement.

But as well as giving sustenance to conspiracy theories, the French Revolution changed conspiracy theories themselves. The size and scale of the French Revolution meant the emergence of world conspiracy theories: theories about enemies seeking (or achieving) world domination. Following the French Revolution, a large number of publications proffered elaborate explanations for the events of 1789, attributing the events to one or more of the Knights Templar, the Illuminati and the Freemasons.[30] The former organization had not been suppressed after all, these authors claimed, but had gone underground for centuries to plot. One of these pseudo-scholarly works, Augustin de Barruel's four-volume *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1797-98), was for a while the most widely-circulated book in Europe.

The one group who did not seem to be blamed for the French Revolution were the Jews. It was only after Jewish Emancipation, which came after the French Revolution, that the World Jewish Conspiracy theory emerged. The fact that Jews benefited from the Revolution by the ending of special restrictions on them in 1791 then led some to suggest that Jews had *caused* the French Revolution. De Barruel developed his ideas to absorb this and other links in order to claim that Jews were controlling Masonic lodges, would enslave Christians, and set up a world Jewish government.

Consolidation and high points of world conspiracy theories

The nineteenth century saw the maturation of conspiracy theories. As mentioned, a number of political groups organized themselves as secret societies – in a sense a self-fulfilling prophesy as they attempted to avoid the paranoid and harsh police forces and right wing governments' fear of political change and secret societies. This provided the political context for conspiracy theories to appear justified. However, from the middle of the nineteenth century, the locus of anxiety conspiracies shifted from small private societies to institutions and the state. Alongside fears (in Europe) of Britain and the USA, this development was bound up with that of modern anti-Semitism.

An anti-Semitic literature on the World Jewish Conspiracy had developed from 1870 onwards. The publication in 1903 of the forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* enabled anti-Semites to reach out beyond their usual small circles and spread their ideas to a wider audience. The Protocols describes how Jewish leaders planned to create a 'super-government organisation' and presents itself as a transcript of a Zionist Congress that took place in Basel in 1871. In classic conspiracy theory style, it suggests that Jews use contradictory tools – both capitalism and communism – to meet their aims; thus the theory appealed across the political spectrum.

By the twentieth century, therefore, there was a change whereby instead of being seen as small groups outside the establishment trying to gain power (the rising bourgeoise), conspirators were now seen as embedded within the establishment and already in power (the bourgeoisie ascendant). From the 1930s, forms of conspiracism were mainstream, as evidenced by McCarthyite fears of Soviet conspiracy when thousands of Americans working in entertainment or for the government were accused of being Communist party members on the basis of no or little evidence. While the world wars saw these ideas in the hands of European governments (Nazi and Russian), after the second world war, they began to decline in the West.[31] They also changed again. The USA rather than Britain became seen as the main conspirator.

Conspiracy theories from the 1990s onwards

Writing in 1997, Pipes noted that there was a resurgence of conspiracy theories in Europe in the 1990s (e.g. the use by Jean Marie Le Pen of the World Jewish conspiracy theory and the rise of Freemason conspiracy theories during the Serbian war), but he concluded that conspiracy theories were now in retreat in the West and don't seem to have much impact on 'ordinary people' that encounter them.) Since then, however, the rise of the internet (and especially Facebook) has given many more people immediate access to conspiracy theories, and sources suggest there has been a growth of interest in the past ten or fifteen years, as we noted earlier.[32] The other main development is that many of the conspiracy theories have become intermingled. As well as increased popularity, there has been a general development of complexity of conspiracy theories in the last ten years.[33] In terms of content, the major development has been the cross fertilization of the different

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[30] "the panic that broke out in some quarters at the end of the eighteenth century over the allegedly subversive activities of the Bavarian Illuminati… was a part of the general reaction to the French Revolution." (Hofstadter, "Paranoid style". p. 78)

[31] Notwithstanding a second McCarthyite 'red scare' in the 1950s.
[32] See footnote 4.
[33] Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy.*

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theories, which in the past were separate but parallel traditions.

Thus Barkun (2013) distinguishes between 'event conspiracies' (focusing on a discrete event or events – such as the Kennedy assassination), 'systemic conspiracies' (focusing on the broad goals of a single evil organization – such as the Jews, Masons etc.), and 'super-conspiracies' (in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together hierarchically – this type has grown since the 1980s). However, FEMA concentration camps, implanted mind-control devices, and Illuminati can be treated individually or as connected.[34] One new admix is radical right /anti-government and UFO conspiracies (including Nostradamus, UFOs, and theories about the Illuminati). UFO writers had long been suspicious of the government. That started to mix with right-wing conspiracism in the 1980s and 1990s, borrowing from multiple sources.

THE POLITICS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The right
Historically, going all the way back to the French Revolution, conspiracy theories have been associated with the right. Today they are very much associated with the US fringe right (sometimes Alt Right);[35] but in fact, conspiracy theories are popular across the right wing spectrum in the USA, particularly in the last twenty years or so. The decision by the United States to go to war in the Gulf (1990-91) was taken by Pat Buchanan, David Duke[36] and others as evidence of a Zionist agenda based on Jewish infiltration of conservatism. The fact of the war (which right-wingers did not see as part of the US national interest), Bush's declaration of a 'New World Order' (understood as a 'Zionist Occupation Government' or 'ZOG'), on top of the FBI siege at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas in 1993, led to the emergence of the militia movement. Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh's bomb attack in Oklahoma City in 1995 was part of this; he explained his actions in terms of Iraqi deaths and US foreign policy in the Middle East.[37] Today, both the Imperial Klans of America (i.e., Ku Klux Klan) and the various right-wing militia groups (Michigan Militia, the Montana Militia, the Missouri 51st Militia, the North American Volunteer Militia, the Minnesota Minutemen Militia, and the South Carolina Militia Corps) all believe in the existence of a 'ZOG' (which is said to be behind such things as affirmative action and gun control). Additionally, the militias believe that UN forces are plotting to invade America and that FEMA (the US disaster response agency) has prepared concentration camps for US citizens.

The Republican right in the USA too draws upon conspiracist explanations – recently for example when Donald Trump,[38] in his acceptance speech for the presidential nomination claimed the 'system' was 'rigged'.[39] Again, this conspiracism is populist in form, and often has a close association with populist movements.

Presence in the anarchist movement
While conspiracy theories might be particularly associated with the right, the left and anarchist groups have also drawn on them at times. The following is an incomplete and somewhat arbitrary selection of examples, but it illustrates the point.

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[34] Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*.

[35] Hofstadter linked the 'paranoid style' to millennialism (the [Christian] belief that there will be a golden age). Conspiracism imposes a dualistic vision upon the world, but this is not sufficient for millennialism; and many conspiracy theories are not millennial – many are the opposite: they suggest the evil cabal is invincible (Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*). However many millennial movements are conspiratorial and Barkun also suggests that conspiracy theories are more common in millennial movements than in the past.

[36] The Ku Klux Klan leader "David Duke [has] now emerged as one of the most vocal of the extreme-right 9/11 conspiracy theorists. According to Duke, al Qaeda was behind the attack, but Mossad had prior knowledge of it and did not warn the US

so that it would retaliate against enemies of Israel in the Middle East". (A. Winter, (2014). "My enemies must be friends: The American extreme right, conspiracy theory, Islam and the Middle East", In M. Reinkowski and M. Butter eds., *Conspiracy theories in the Middle East and the United States.* De Gruyter. p. 17).
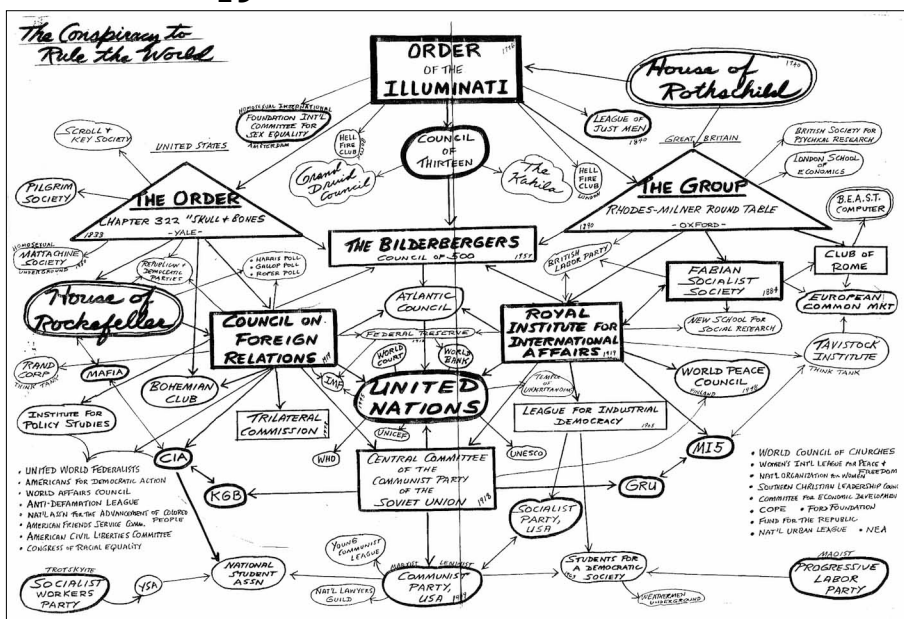
[37] Winter, "My enemies". p. 13.

[38] Some of Trump's supporters believe in a range of conspiracy theories: http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/08/conspiracy-theories-2016-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-214183 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/05/05/the-outlandish-conspiracy-theories-many-o

[39] Bernie Sanders used similar words and was later proved to be right – at least within the Democratic party machine.

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Back in the 1970s, Black Flag published on the Illuminati.[40] In the 1980s, there were a number of minor conspiracy theories doing the rounds in anti-state struggles. For example, at the Greenham Common women's camp, an explanation emerged for the prevalence of illnesses amongst the women that the US military was using microwaves against them. A more likely explanation, however, was that they were living in cold, damp caravans in the winter. It's worth noting too that this conspiracy explanation only became popular after the camp began to decline as fewer and fewer women were involved.

In the UK, two conflicting conspiracy explanations around riots have appeared in the 80s and 90s (and later) respectively. In the 1980s, there was the conspiracy theory that the government had enabled or deliberately allowed Toxteth and other places that were locations of the urban riots subsequently to be swamped with heroin, as a way of keeping people passive.[41] Immediately following the poll tax riot of 1990, not only did Militant notoriously attribute the start of the conflict to the intervention of agents provocateurs,[42] but a number of anarchists also argued the police deliberately engineered the riot at the behest of the Conservative government. The same kind of argument made an appearance during the student protests of 2010. Here, an apparently abandoned police van was 'explained' as a bait to encourage the protesters to attack it so that the protestors would appear gratuitously destructive.[43] And again, in 2011, in the otherwise useful video *Rebellion in Tottenham*,[44] an abandoned police car on Tottenham High Road is claimed to be evidence of a deliberate police strategy to draw people in, encourage them to burn the car and create the riot. This is what we said at the time:

> These kinds of explanations are typically premised upon an understanding of 'politics', within which the cops and the crowd are competing to win over an audience in the 'middle ground' who only support 'rioters' when they are victims. These kinds of explanations are politically disempowering, for the 'victims' are inevitably outwitted by the Machiavellian planning and superior anticipation of the super-intelligent cops. If such conspiracy theories are true, there is no point taking action for the real action takes place behind the scenes.

However, explanations such as this are rarely true and in general are complete bollocks. The supposed clever strategies of the cops at the poll tax and the student demonstrations appear to have backfired somewhat, for it was the cops who were the losers and victims, the ones treated for post-traumatic stress disorder and made to look like incompetent fools, while the movements each took encouragement from the events.

In the case of Tottenham, there is a simpler and much more plausible explanation for what happened that night than cop conspiracy. One of the main concerns for the cops when the cars were burning and they stood back was most likely to be Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the 'right to life'. In other words, they stood back because they believed that someone could have died if they got stuck in [and they would have been sued]... They didn't want to risk either another Blakelock (corporate manslaughter) or killing a rioter, with all that would have implied for an escalation - against

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[40] 'The Illuminatus! Trilogy' by Robert Anton Wilson was published by Stuart Christie's Cienfuegos Press; Albert Meltzer reviewed the book in the second issue of the journal. There were also various other reviews and articles on subjects like Freemasonry and the Knights Templar. See https://libcom.org/library/cienfuegos-press-anarchist-review

[41] https://radicaluniversity.wordpress.com/2013/06/04/the-heroin-ghost-towns-still-haunted-by-thatcher/

[42] See the 'Battle of Trafalgar' video, by Despite TV, where a Militant steward makes this claim. See also "In Living Memory", 12th March 2008, BBC Radio 4 http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0093ws4

[43] https://www.latentexistence.me.uk/police-planned-destruction-of-van/

[44] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Faysa6h0lR8

them. …. In general, the cops simply are not sophisticated or organized enough to plot in the way that some people imagine. They just react from one set of circumstances to another; and, in many cases (poll tax, Millbank) 'cock-up' is simply a far more plausible explanation for what the cops are up to than conspiracy.[45]

While these different anarchist-espoused conspiracy theories range from the more far-reaching (government plot to discredit the anti-poll tax movement) to just specific events (a particular police tactic), what they all have in common is the notion of the foresightful and effective authorities who are one step ahead. Of course, cops sometime plot to try to discredit protests. (One tactic relayed to us by a former riot cop (at the poll tax) and latterly a flying squad officer, was to leak misleading information to the press before a potentially contentious demonstration. This information would be in two forms: 1. 'Violent protestors are planning to disrupt an otherwise peaceful event.' This was to justify pre-event police raids and to encourage the 'peaceful' organisers and protestors to separate themselves from the 'violent minority' on the day. 2. Also that as a result of the threat 'the authorities are flooding the streets with police, with armed units held in reserve, army' etc. to put off the 'violent minority' from attending.[46]) But these kinds of examples do not involve engineering riots. Moreover, our point here is that the comparison of the 1990s (and onwards) conspiracy theories with those of the 1980s is revealing. In the 1980s, behind the critical conspiracy theory was the assumption that the authorities were *afraid* of riots; but behind the more recent conspiracy theories is the opposite assumption – that the authorities are trying to *create* riots. These recent 'explanations' of police provocation and state discrediting of movements are often premised on the assumption that rioting doesn't achieve anything and a respectable movement is always necessary. Thus we were more likely to find 'police conspiracy theories' following the poll tax riot among those who defined success in terms of the respectability of the movement – for them the riot was a defeat. As we shall argue below, movement defeat seems to be a major driver of conspiracy theories.

In the USA, Adbusters' 'subvertisements; contained the 'mass society' assumption that the 'sheeple' wouldn't get the critique.[47] More

explicitly, the group published an article entitled "Why won't anyone say they are Jewish?"[48] reproducing the 'finance capital' anti-Semitism theme characteristic of the world Jewish conspiracy theory. The same theme has appeared in groups associated with Occupy Wall Street. Right-wing groups inserted their narrative about the Federal Reserve into the movement's visible politics and used Occupy's open-ended structure to disseminate conspiracy theories (anti-Semitic and otherwise) and white nationalism.[49]

The important point here is that it is not just the right-wing and nuts who espouse and believe conspiracy theories, and that conspiracy theories are not only right-wing and anti-Semitic explanations; there is also considerable evidence that the form of explanation and some of the classic contents appeal to people in and around struggles against the state and capitalism, and people who might otherwise use theories of capitalism/politics instead. For these critical, oppositional people, conspiracy theories take the place of theory – in a damaging way. This is why they matter.
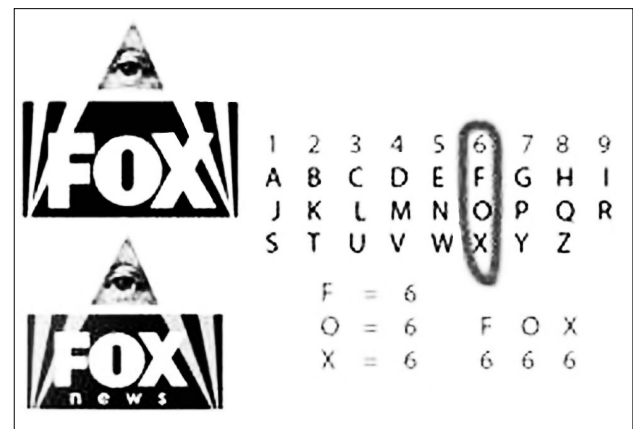
EXPLANATIONS

Major unexpected events evoke attempts to understand and explain them, which is one of the main reasons why there is a spike in conspiracy theories following news of such events. This would appear to be why many of the ISIS-related attacks in the West have been followed by conspiracy theories circulating on the internet, as have

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[45] Communities, commodities and class in the August 2011 riots. *Aufheben* #20, 2012.

[46] Examples include Mayday 2001, see http://www.schnews.org.uk/sotw/mayday-madness.htm and June/November 1999 see https://www.theguardian.com/media/1999/nov/08/sundaytimes.mondaymediasection. Also the Bush demo in 2003: https://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2003/11/280525.html

[47] J. Conatz, 2014, Adbusted, https://libcom.org/library/adbusted

[48] Anti-semitism in Adbusters, 2004 https://libcom.org/library/anti-semitism-adbusters-2004

[49] S. Sunshine, (2014). The right hand of Occupy Wall Street: From libertarians to nazis, the fact and fiction of right-wing involvement. *The Public Eye,* Winter 2014 (Political Research Associates).

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disease outbreaks such as the Zika virus.[50] As Barkun argues,[51] however, conspiracy theories have grown and spread so much in the last fifteen years or so that this is not in itself sufficient as an explanation.

A variety of explanations have been offered for the take up and popularity of conspiracy theories. There are clearly psychological and cultural factors. In different ways, these explanations point to the role of (loss of) power as a factor. However, psychological accounts cannot explain historical variation, which is what we are particularly interested in here. In the past, publication of tracts (e.g. *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) helped promote conspiracy theories, and today the internet clearly plays a similar role in spreading the ideas; major world events and disease outbreaks are often followed by conspiracy theories circulated through social media. However, as an explanation this is just as limited and one-sided as the psychology/culture accounts.

Psychology

One of the largest areas of possible explanations is psychology. Hofstadter[52] compared belief in them to paranoia.[53] However, more recent research suggests personality or cognitive variation rather than mental illness as the cause. A number of cognitive-style variables have been found to predict belief in conspiracy theories, including open mindedness, suspiciousness, not trusting other people or institutions,[54] and lower analytic thinking.[55] Feeling powerlessness and high levels of uncertainty has also been shown to lead people to believe in conspiracies.[56]

Believing in a conspiracy theory is also said to be a strategy people use to regain a sense of control in their lives, even in domains apparently irrelevant to the conspiracy theory.[57] Despite this 'control' motive, belief in conspiracy theories is intuitively disempowering; the theory depicts a world where there is little point acting since powerful forces are always one step ahead. Indeed a characteristic feature of conspiracy theories is to

reify powerlessness. This has been shown experimentally too; exposure to government conspiracies led to less intention to engage in politics and lower likelihood of voting.[58]

These observations about powerlessness point towards a different kind of explanation. As well as varying between individuals, powerlessness can vary across cultures[59] Cross-cultural variation is beyond the scope of the present article. However, it is worth noting that, according to one commentator, the spread/uptake of conspiracy theories seems to be correlated with poverty/powerlessness; as countries develop, conspiracy theories decline.[60]

And relative powerlessness can also vary over time. The statistics on the popularly of conspiracy theories show historical trends that cannot be reducible to individual cognitive differences. In particular what needs to be explained is the growing popularity in the last fifteen years or so, and the encroachment of conspiracy theories into the mainstream.

Diminished social forces – two examples[61]

The conspiracy theories that we are focusing on here are populist in form, and the rise of populism

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[50] "By analyzing more than 130,000 tweets that mentioned the words 'Zika' and 'vaccine' in the first four months of 2016, the researchers found that pseudoscientific claims and conspiracy theories rose rapidly and in near lock-step with increased mention of Zika among mainstream news outlets, health organizations, and government agencies on Twitter overall." A. Bajak, (2016). Zika conspiracy theories and Twitter. *Undark*.

[51] Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*. p. 4.

[52] Hofstadter, "Paranoid style".

[53] See Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy.* p. 9 for a critique of this view.

[54] O. Oksman, "Conspiracy craze", *Guardian*, 7th April 2016.

[55] V. Swami, M. Voracek, S. Stieger, U. S. Tran, & A. Furnham, (2014). Analytic thinking reduces belief in conspiracy theories. *Cognition, 133*(3), 572-585.

[56] K. M. Douglas, R. M. Sutton, M. J. Callan, R. J. Dawtry, & A. J. Harvey, (2016). Someone is pulling the strings:

hypersensitive agency detection and belief in conspiracy theories. *Thinking & Reasoning, 22*(1), 57-77.

[57] O. Oksman, "Conspiracy craze", *Guardian*, 7th April 2016.

[58] D. Jolley & K. M. Douglas, (2014). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *British Journal of Psychology, 105*(1), 35-56.

[59] Today, both secret society/Illuminati theories and anti-Semitism are stronger in the East – especially the Middle East and Japan - than the West (Pipes, *Conspiracy*). (One of us came across *Mein Kampf* openly on sale in the streets of Amman, Jordan – something unheard of in the West.).

[60] Pipes, *Conspiracy*.

[61] There are others we could refer to from our own experience. For example, when the No M11 link road campaign declined, some of the local residents turned from direct action to David Icke.

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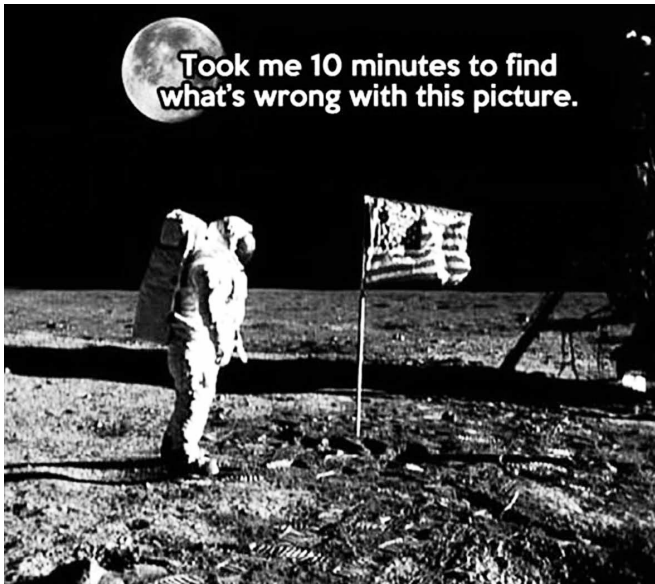
is predicted by threat to sections of society.[62] However, these conspiracy theories are not just any form of populism; they don't simply attack 'elites' but also attribute super-competence to them. Therefore, the idea we seek to explore here is that conspiracy theories gain purchase particularly at times when there is clear shared grievance but also a defeat or retreat, and hence a break between the activities that people might be a part of and the ideas they have to express their understanding of their antagonistic relations. When there is no social movement or activity to embody an alternative, world events become reified into the will of 'the elite' via a conspiracy. When there appears to be no agency in one's class, then conspiracy theories have practical adequacy as ways of grasping the operation of capital and politics ('power'). We briefly review analysis of the emergence of conspiracy theories of the right and then of the black working class before exploring how this might have operated for the most widespread conspiracy theory of the present time, the idea that 9/11 was an inside job.

The Paranoid Style. Writing in 1964, Richard Hofstadter[63] said that, though conspiracy theories had been around for a long time, a new 'paranoid (right wing) style' had emerged in the USA. Three main developments in the USA seem to have contributed to the right's suspicion that unseen forces controlled the Federal government: fear of communist subversion, extensions of government power (the New Deal – introduced in the 1930s and accepted by Republicans in the 1950s), and the entry of Jews into public life.[64] He described how the take up of conspiracy theories by the right could therefore be explained in terms of the (perceived) dispossession of certain social groups in US society and the political changes taking place at that time. The adherence to conspiracy theories was heightened by the response of certain men, mostly in New England and among the established clergy, to the rise of Jeffersonian democracy. The spokesmen of earlier (nineteenth century) movements felt that they stood for causes and personal types that were still in control of their country - that they were fending off threats to a still-established way of life. But by the middle of the twentieth century, these same people felt dispossessed: America had been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they were determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. Their predecessors had discovered conspiracies; the modern radical right finds conspiracy to be betrayal from on high:

> Having no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception that the world of power is sinister and malicious fully confirmed. They see only the consequences of power - and this through distorting lenses - and have no chance to observe its actual machinery. (p. 86)

Illuminati in the hood. Will et al.'s (2013) pamphlet *How to overthrow the Illuminati*[65] was produced as an intervention. They were responding to the increased popularity of Illuminati conspiracy theories in the black working class and in hop hop culture[66] in the USA. Their point was to show how when people drew upon Illuminati conspiracy

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[62] "feelings of relative personal deprivation and a general view of society being in decline were found to be the major predictors of populism….. There is now reasonably consistent evidence that populism thrives on people's feeling of a lack of political power, a belief that the world is unfair and that they do not get what they deserve – and that the world is changing too quickly for them to retain control. Whenever people attribute the origins of their perceived vulnerability to factors outside themselves, [right wing] populism is not far away." Stephan Lewandowsky (2016), Why is populism popular? A psychologist explains, *The Conversation*.

[63] Hofstadter, "Paranoid style".

[64] "The basic elements of contemporary right-wing thought can be reduced to three: 1, First, there has been the now-familiar sustained conspiracy, running over more than a generation, and reaching its climax in Roosevelt's New Deal, to undermine free capitalism, to bring the economy under the direction of the federal government, and to pave the way for socialism or communism. 2, The second contention is that top government officialdom has been so infiltrated by Communists that American policy, at least since the days leading up to Pearl Harbor, has been dominated by men who were shrewdly and consistently selling out American national interests. 3, Finally, the country is infused with a network of Communist agents, just as in the old days it was infiltrated by Jesuit agents, so that the whole apparatus of education, religion, the press, and the mass media is engaged in a common effort to paralyze the resistance of loyal Americans." Hofstader, "Paranoid style". p. 81

[65] https://libcom.org/library/how-overthrow-illuminati

[66] Jay Z etc. See for example D. Millard, (2016). Why hip-hop loves conspiracy theories, *Vice*.

theories to explain the social world and the operation of power and dispossession, what they were actually trying to grasp was capitalism and that an understanding of capitalism was needed:

Many black people saw small business owners exploiting black customers, and banks refusing to loan to blacks, and some of these people were Jews. … These black artists and activists mistook the immediate appearance of their oppression for the whole thing. Yes, black people were exploited by petit-bourgeois business owners and bankers. Yes, many of these folks, (but not all of them) were Jewish. But they exploited black people because they were business owners, not because of their religion (p. 10)

"Illuminati theorists feel this force [capitalism] at work in society, but identify it incorrectly" (p. 20).

What is of particular interest here is that Will et al.'s brief analysis provides an attempt to relate the rise in conspiracy theories to the decline in a particular area of class struggle. They point out that by the 1970s, various conspiracy theories had already been circulating among black communities in the USA for years. These included the notion that certain soft drinks popular in low income (black) neighbourhoods were in fact being manufactured by the Ku Klux Klan and contained ingredients designed to sterilise black men; another conspiracy theory was that AIDS was created by the government to eliminate blacks; and a third, mirroring the riots-heroin conspiracy theory from the UK in the 1980s (see above), was that President Reagan and the CIA facilitated the crack epidemic, for the same reasons.[67] In each case we can perhaps understand the conspiracy theory as a distorted version of what was happening in terms of black Americans' real situation – for in terms of jobs, incomes, services, and treatment by police, they were indeed being 'destroyed' by the state as well as being persecuted by right wing groups.

These different conspiracy theories became consolidated and unified into a world conspiracy theory, drawing on the Illuminati myth and other groups, only after the defeats of the movement in 1970s, however. "By the mid-1970s, the black liberation movement had been mostly defeated. The rebellions had been put down with armed force, and the revolutionaries were dead or imprisoned" (p. 10). Significantly, the state's means for crushing not only the Black Panthers

and 'violent' groups but also the civil rights movement more generally was Cointelpro (the FBI's COunter INTELligence PROgram)[68] which comprised a series of covert operations, many of which were illegal.

At the same time:

U.S. capitalism [also] adopted reforms to take the steam out of the movement. Black mayors were elected in cities across the US. New careers opened up for black professionals. There had always [sic] been black business owners and middle class people. But legal segregation and white mob violence kept them living with, and servicing, the black working class. Now many of the legal and social barriers holding down the black bourgeoisie and middle class were removed. They quickly rose socially and economically, and left the black poor behind…

The theories of revolution coming from these [previous] struggles lost popularity. All this left a political void in poor and working class black communities. Black people had made it into positions of political and economic power, but racist oppression and exploitation continued for poor and working class black people. How could one explain this reality?

Illuminati theory flowed in to fill this gap. It was similar to other conspiracy theories that had been used before. It said the black elite had made it because they were part of a secret group of rulers, or had cut a deal with the devil. It said poor and working class black people were still oppressed, because these rulers were super-powerful. And the trend deepened in the 1990s." (pp. 10-11)

We now explore how far this kind of explanation - in terms of the defeat of a movement - can be applied to help explain the sudden popularity of what has been said by some to be the 'greatest' event-conspiracy theory: the belief that 9/11 was an inside job.

THE DECLINE OF THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT AND THE RISE OF 9/11 CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The sudden rise of 9/11 conspiracy theories
Accounts questioning whether the 9/11 plane attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon building

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http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/why-hip-hop-loves-conspiracy-theories-bob-flat-earth
[67] Pipes, *Conspiracy*. pp. 2-5.
[68] "a program of covert action launched against the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, perceived to be home-grown threats to the social and political order. The program baldly attempted to disrupt and destroy social movements like the Black Panthers and Students for a Democratic Society. It

also hatched bizarre schemes like a plan proposed by the FBI to hit printing plants with a substance "duplicating a scent of the most foul smelling faeces available." According to the report, at least 18 percent of the program squarely targeted speakers, teachers, writers and meetings or peaceful demonstrations, as opposed to criminal activity." http://inthesetimes.com/article/19093/church-committee-report-cointelpro-cia-fbi-movements

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really were a terrorist attack by Al Qaeda appeared within hours of the event. These alternative versions focused on anomalies in the official account. One of the more well-known 'anomalies' is the supposed contradictory evidence in relation to the plane that hit the Pentagon, killing 184 passengers and people in the Pentagon plus the hijackers themselves. After taking numerous pictures of the wreckage, a CNN reporter on the scene was quoted as saying he could see no evidence of a plane crashing 'nearby'. The same reporter later said that his words had been distorted; he posted pictures of the plane wreckage and tried to engaged some of the sceptics directly, but it was only his earlier statement that was seized upon by these 'truthers', many of whom argued that the Pentagon had been hit by a missile not a plane.[69] Another common element in 9/11 conspiracy theories is the claim that the WTC towers collapsed through a controlled explosion not a plane attack.

There are a range of 9/11 conspiracy theories. One of the most popular varieties suggests that the US establishment itself was responsible for the 9/11 attacks. A weakened version suggests that Bush et al. had prior knowledge of the attack and allowed it to happen. This is typically not a right-wing theory but rather is grounded in a left or liberal critique of American foreign policy; the argument goes that 9/11 was staged by the US government to justify a subsequent war in the Middle East for control and oil. The supposed collusion with terrorists funded by Saudi allies is also said to have been a deliberate ploy to justify increased securitization and control in Western countries.[70] Another version suggests that Israel engineered the events.

There are many more details to the varieties of 9/11 conspiracy theory, which we won't go into here.[71] We also won't spend much time debunking these theories, as that too has been ably done elsewhere, except to make the following key points. First, because the US and Al Qaeda had been at war for several years before this event, an attack by Al Qaeda is the parsimonious explanation for the events and so a conspiracy explanation is

unnecessary. Second, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that international politics work to suggest that the USA establishment needed such a risky act of self-destruction to manufacture an excuse for its interventions in the Middle East and Afghanistan.[72] And, third, as is the case with similar conspiracy theories, such an act by the USA would require an implausible level of obedience, organization and complicity at all levels.

It was a week after the attacks that the first full blown 'inside job' conspiracy theories appeared. These were first published in France and were treated by the US media with either puzzlement or amusement. In these early days, the conspiracy theory was restricted to left-wing and counter-cultural critics.

It wasn't until 2004 that 9/11 conspiracy theories began to increase in interest in the USA wider public. There was an upsurge in publications and of coverage in the mainstream media between 2004 and 2006.[73] This public response was now recognized as so serious and widespread that the U.S. government felt obliged to respond officially. They rebutted the conspiracy theory claims about the collapse of the WTC buildings by publishing a report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology, which basically showed that the planes damaged building support columns and displaced fire-proofing structures; tons of jet fuel poured into the building, and subsequent fires caused floor beams to expand and disconnect from the perimeter columns which then buckled. This created sounds like explosions. In 2006, the State Department also went as far as to debunk the conspiracy theories on a webpage they created. These rebuttals and similar detailed statements from structural engineers actually had the opposite effect of silencing the 'truthers' who now went to work in forensic detail challenging every element in the rebuttal statements.

In summary, therefore, while 9/11 conspiracy theories were present from the outset, the massive interest in them (particularly in the USA) didn't come until 2004 – some three years later. This change in interest can be seen in opinion polls.[74]

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[69] J. J. McIntyre, (2014). *Elements of disbelief: A case study of 9/11 truthers and the persistence of misinformation in the digital age*.

[70] Another example of 'who benefits from an event must have caused it'.

[71] See P. Knight, (2008). Outrageous conspiracy theories: Popular and official responses to 9/11 in Germany and the United States. *New German Critique, 35*, 165–93. He also argues that while 9/11 conspiracy theories have many features of classical conspiracy theories, they also depart in important ways – for example constructing greater complexity than the usual Manichean schema (see p. 182).

[72] Of course, it concocted Weapons of Mass Destruction as an excuse for attacking Iraq, but the fact that it ignored the UN suggests that it wasn't fully reliant on an excuse and would have gone ahead anyway.

[73] Knight, "Outrageous conspiracy theories".

[74] NY Times/ CBS polls: "When it comes to what they knew prior to September 11th, 2001, about possible terrorist attacks against the United States, do you think members of the Bush Administration are telling the truth, are mostly telling the truth but hiding something, or are they mostly lying?"

May 2002 responses: 21% said "telling the truth", 65% said they are "mostly telling the truth but hiding something", **8% said they are "mostly lying"**, 6% not sure.

3/30–4/1/04 CBS 24% said "telling the truth", 58% said they are "mostly telling the truth but hiding something", **14% said they are "mostly lying"**, 4% not sure.

4/8/04 CBS 21% said "telling the truth", 66% said they are "mostly telling the truth but hiding something", **10% said they are "mostly lying"**, 4% not sure.

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We now turn to the possible explanations for this
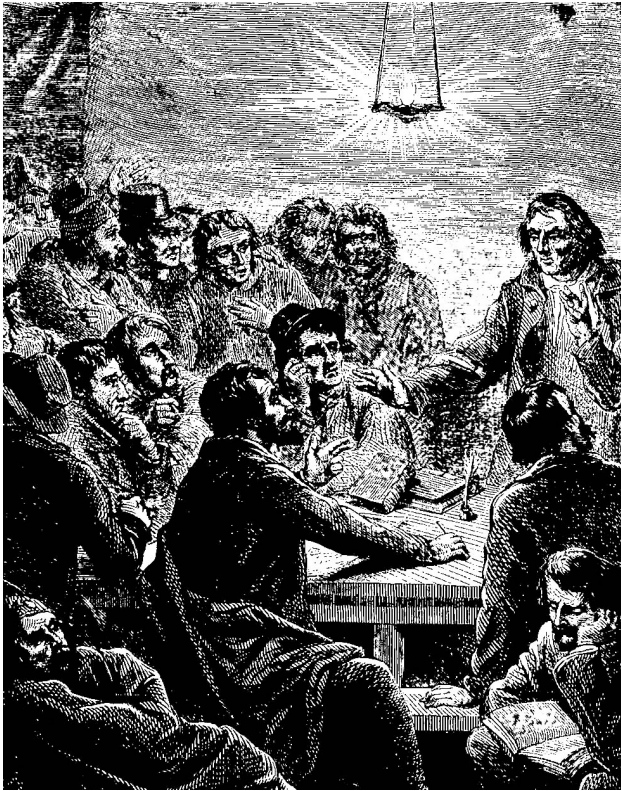
pattern.

Growth of the Internet

One of the factors that has widely been acknowledged to have contributed to the spread of conspiracy theories in general (and hence to 9/11 'inside job' theories in particular)[75] is the growth of internet use.[76] However, on every measure – hours online, number of people online, number of Facebook users, use of smart-phones – the growth of internet use has been a steady, linear increase.[77] The shape of growth of internet use is quite different than the shape of growth of 9/11 conspiracy theories.

The internet alone cannot account for the growth in belief in the 9/11 conspiracy theories. Moreover, the internet also makes rebuttal more available. Therefore while the growth of internet use and Facebook specifically clearly contributed to the uptake of 9/11 conspiracy theories – by simply making them more available – this growth

rate has a different pattern than the sudden, massive increase in interest (particularly in the USA) in 9/11 theories from 2004.

Discrediting of the justifications for war

The established factor that maps on quite clearly to the pattern of increased interest in 9/11 conspiracy theories is the sudden increase in criticism of the Iraq War and President George W. Bush in the USA and the Blair government in the UK. Most obviously the failure to find the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that were the supposed reason for going to war in Iraq. But there were other examples of dishonesty and deception that fed into the conspiracy theory narrative:

> the too easy acceptance of apparently forged documents purporting to show that Saddam had attempted to purchase yellowcake uranium ore from Niger; the belated release in 2004 (under pressure from the 9/11 Commission) of the Presidential Daily Briefing of August 6, 2001, which included the section "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US"; and recent reports that NORAD lied to the 9/11 Commission.[78]

Other examples included the supposed ricin plot in Wood Green, which was also hyped up to justify going to war.[79]

As we noted, many 9/11 conspiracy theories are premised on critique of US and UK foreign policy. They became mainstream at just the time that this policy was being discredited as dishonest and apparently based on ulterior motives. However, what is also interesting, perhaps, is why this critique took the form of a conspiracy theory. When the Vietnam War lost legitimacy, with the majority of Americans regarding it as a mistake by 1967, the frameworks that people drew upon for understanding the continuation of the war were not conspiracy theories but politics.[80] There was still a massive anti-war movement at this time, as well as a belief in the wider society that the world could be changed by struggle and protest. In the case of the war in Iraq, however, by the time the war lost popular legitimacy, the mass movement against the war had collapsed after it had been seen to fail. This meant there was an absence of an alternative political-praxis framework or reference point. The critical people, who might have drawn

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4/23–27/04 24% said "telling the truth", 56% said they are "mostly telling the truth but hiding something", **16% said they are "mostly lying"**, 4% not sure.

Oct 2006 responses: 16% said "telling the truth", 53% said they are "mostly telling the truth but hiding something", **28% said they are "mostly lying"**, 3% not sure. (our emphasis added)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polls_about_9/11_conspiracy_theories

[75] D. Banks, (2016). The internet as conspiracy theory. *The Society Pages*.

[76] M. J. Wood & K. M. Douglas, (2015). Online communication as a window to conspiracist worldviews. *Frontiers in Psychology, 6*.

[77] The correct measure to be used here should be n – 1 factorial to represent the connections between people. However, we use a measure based on aggregated individual use as a rule of thumb.

[78] Knight, "Outrageous conspiracy theories". pp. 182-183

[79] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wood_Green_ricin_plot4

[80] Of course, the Vietnam war lost legitimacy for other reasons than government dishonesty.

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upon a political analysis in which US power is not so inevitable, sought other kinds of explanations. Therefore, while the discrediting of the WMD excuse explains the sense of illegitimacy and grievance, what it does not explain is the powerlessness-content of the conspiracy theories that became popular at that time. This rise in conspiracy theories, we suggest, could correspond with the lack of collective agency that comes with defeat.

Rise and decline of the Iraq anti-war movement
The important point to bear in mind when considering the movement against the Gulf War (2002-2003) was that it was a genuine mass movement – in the UK, in the USA and in many other countries around the world. This is particularly clear when comparing this movement with those (would-be) movements that preceded it. The anti-globalization/ anti-capitalist movement (1999-2001) had little existence outside the mobilizations at the major summits – of the G8, World Trade Organization, World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union. It was also riven with internal contradictions.[81] It was a movement of activists, if anything, and had insufficient connection with the wider proletariat. It was not a mass movement.

The opposition to the 1991 Gulf War and the 'humanitarian' war in Kosovo (1998-1999) likewise both failed to engage with people beyond the usual small groups of activists.[82] The same was true of the 2001-2002 anti-war movement opposing the attacks on Afghanistan. Immediately after 9/11, a network of local groups and a series of national demonstrations was organized to campaign against the bombing. But this soon became smaller over time as activists dropped out and eventually the movement collapsed.

By contrast, the movement against the war on Iraq that was active in 2002 was one of the most exciting movements in years. It was a mass movement. Protest marches and rallies against the threatened bombing of Iraq began in September 2002. Events took place throughout October. In the UK, the Stop the War Coalition[83] called for local protests on 31st October 2002, in coordination with a similar call for demonstrations around the world. Indymedia reported around 150 such events in the UK alone that day (which was a working day).[84] The street demonstration and school children's protest in Brighton that day outmanoeuvred the police and its success in controlling the streets influenced later demonstrations (and police responses).

In the UK the national mass 'meetings' were carefully choreographed by the SWP through their front organization, Stop the War Coalition, and most people were fairly uncritical of these. Nevertheless, it seemed like every town had their own genuine anti-war group, who met on a regular basis, so the movement existed well beyond the front.

Large demonstrations continued throughout January 2003 across the world, culminating in the biggest demonstration the world had ever seen,[85] on February 15th 2003. Globally, about 10 million people demonstrated in at least 600 cities throughout the world, in many countries breaking attendance records previously held by the early 1980s protests against nuclear armament. It was also a very mixed crowd, including many people who had no previous history of political activity, and from very different backgrounds:

> In many countries, observers emphasized the internal diversity of the turnout and the representativity [sic] of the protest. In the United Kingdom, *The Times*, for example, described the London marches: "Groups representing their local churches and mosques, university students, parents with young children... People who have never been on a demonstration before... the grandmothers, ranging in age from later 40s to a frail 86. Cooks, teachers, doctors, computer programmers and grandmothers. Virgin Marchers, elderly, the young, families: people from all walks of life." ... The German *Die Zeit* did the same concerning the Berlin marches: "People of all ages and all professions were on the streets, expensive designer coats marched side by side with worn-off parkas."... As did *The New York Times*: "Protesters came from a wide range of the political spectrum: college students, middle-aged couples, families with small children, older people who had marched for civil rights, and groups representing labor, the environment and religious, business and civic organizations." ... The Dutch *NRC Handelsblad* asserted similarly reporting about the Amsterdam march: "Demonstration veterans, but also ordinary a-political citizens." ... The French *Le Matin* made exactly the same point referring to the protests in Paris: "Barbie dolls, doctors, lawyers, students, farmers, unemployed."[86]

The official figure for the London event was a million, though some sources put the figure as high as two million. The Italian demo was said by

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[81] Anti-capitalism as ideology... and as movement? *Aufheben* #10, 2002.
[82] A phenomenal anti-war movement. *Aufheben* #12, 2004.
[83] This organization was set up in September 2001 in response to the attacks on Afghanistan, and initially was also led by the Labour left, Socialist Party, CND and Muslim organizations.

[84] http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2003/09/277888.html
[85] S. Walgrave & J. Verhulst, (2009). Government stance and internal diversity of protest: A comparative study of protest against the war in Iraq in eight countries. *Social Forces, 87*(3), 1355-1387.
[86] Walgrave & Verhulst, "Government stance".

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organizers to be three million; there were 250 demonstrations alone in Canada and the United States.[87]

In the UK, there were 'structural' reasons for the growth of the movement against the war in Iraq.[88] Anxiety was increasing among different sections of the population, including the 'middle classes' who had been persuaded to vote for New Labour but who were now facing insecurity to white collar jobs in the public sector, loss of occupational pensions and therefore the failure of the government to look after their interests. Many were people seeing themselves as middle class but now threatened with becoming a new working class. The threat of war against Iraq served to unite disparate groups with apparently different grievances, who now could see that they shared the same antagonism. These were among the reasons why the anti-war movement in the UK was much bigger and more inclusive than the movements that preceded it. The huge size meant that it was capable of a high level of activity and participation, including actions that disrupted daily life in many towns and cities around the country – such as blocking roads. While many of these actions (marches, rallies) were not themselves particularly radical, what was interesting is that they drew in many people who had not previously been 'political' but who became politicized through their participation. This meant that they were sometimes a little unpredictable and 'uncontrolled' – such as the Halloween event mentioned above.

This influx of new people created a sense of possibility that challenged the usual sense of fatalism accompanying the threat of war, and which had prevented the campaigns against the war in Afghanistan developing. Thus the giant demonstration in London engendered a sense that the movement could have some effect, could impact on the drive to war, preventing it happening. Indeed, the belief of many of those that took part in that demo was that they could influence the parliamentary vote and so stop the war.

The movement did have some impact.[89] The ruling class were shaken by the size and composition of the opposition. The government was split and forced to agree to a parliamentary vote, causing a delay in the start of the war by several months. Nevertheless, the war did go ahead. The February 15th demonstrations were the zenith of the movement and in effect the beginning of the end. On the day the war began, there were mass demonstrations around the world. Yet the movement fell into a rapid decline. Demonstrations continued but they were much smaller; they and

the local groups became numerically dominated by the same old faces instead of the new people.

After the invasion began in March 2003, many of the new activists felt that if a demonstration of the size and strength of February 15th couldn't prevent the war then collective action itself was pointless. The failure to prevent the war had a disillusioning effect for these neophytes.

As we have seen, it was after this time – i.e., by 2004 – that 9/11 conspiracy theories became widespread and even 'mainstream'. The revelations about the dishonesty of the Bush and Blair administrations, in 2004, happened at a time when the anti-war moment had shrivelled to the small hard-core of activists. As far as most people were concerned, there was no anti-war movement, no 'alternative politics' to the politics of war.

Were the people who dropped out from the anti-war movement, who were disillusioned with 'politics' and struggles, the same people who were now drawn to 9/11 conspiracy theories? The basic growth in belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories is to a large extent of the left-wing variety, operating as a critique of US foreign policy in the same way that the movement did. At least some of the newly politicised people were likely to have the same grievances and hostility towards the US state, and were likely to be those seeking critical understanding separate from protest activity. We know some people like this. And many others for whom the 9/11 conspiracy theories now had appeal were probably those who were never active,

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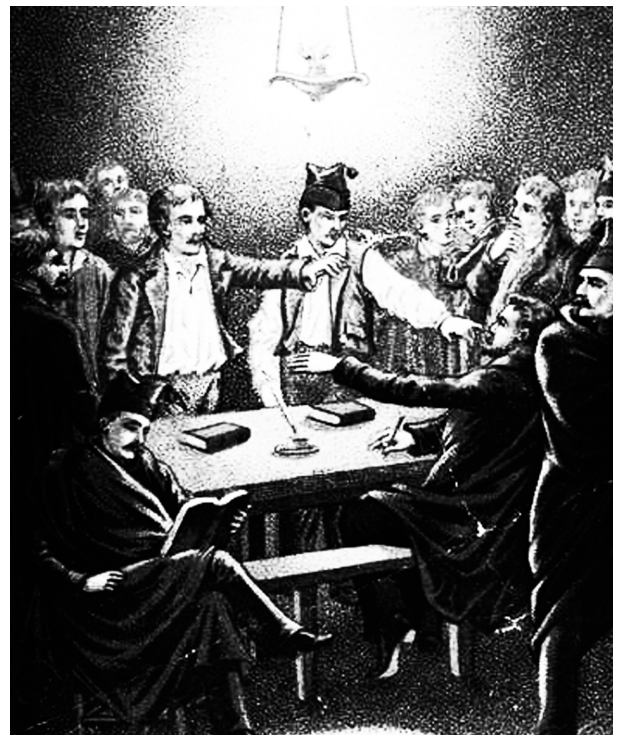
[87] D. Della Porta, M. Diani, & L. Mastellotto, (2003). No to the war with no ifs or buts: Protests against the War in Iraq. *Italian Politics, 19*, 200-218.

[88] See, A phenomenal anti-war movement. *Aufheben* #12, 2004.

[89] Though not the hyped effect the SWP claimed.

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including keyboard warriors and other passive critics, who might have treated the movement's activity and analysis (i.e. that struggles change politics) as a reference point; they could no longer do this if there was no movement.

For many of these critical, disempowered people, previously the theory embodied by the mass anti-war movements (of a world shaped by struggle) would have made good sense; but now 9/11 conspiracy theories were perhaps a good 'fit'. These 9/11 conspiracy theories expressed the dissatisfaction they felt with a world of 'injustice', where the 'establishment' of 'wealthy nations' could wipe out thousands of people despite the wishes of their own citizens. The conspiracy theories also highlighted the secrecy, dishonesty, and clandestine nature of power, in line with the plot to lie about WMD. The conspiracy theories also pointed to the strategic alliances that make up the political world at the top. In addition to all this, and crucially, the conspiracy theories reflected the powerlessness (or at least the feeling of such powerlessness) that comes from disconnection from 'politics' or activity and the possibility of social change; they express the weakness that comes from defeat and the sense that the 'elites' will impose their will against and despite anything the 'people' could do. There is a shift from 'politics' as something we do to 'politics' as the machinations of elites that we contemplate. While the social condition of the 9/11 conspiracy theories is therefore disempowerment, this is also its effect, for if true these theories obviate the impulse for action to bring about change.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have not aimed to refute conspiracy theories (except in passing) but rather to understand the conditions for their emergence and popularity. Conspiracy theories often mistake the workings of capitalism for a conscious conspiracy by a small group. We noted that conspiracy theories arose with a focus on certain small groups apparently trying to achieve power at a time when the bourgeoisie was organizing itself. By the twentieth century, when conspiracy theories shifted to the notion that the conspirators were actually in power, capitalism had consolidated itself in Europe and the USA. In modern times, while there are a number of factors that seem to explain their spread, populist conspiracy theories seem to reflect not only an opposition to 'the establishment' – usually a distorted form of opposition to the operation of capitalism – but also a real defeat or failure that gives rise to powerlessness. Conspiracy theories

express that powerlessness as the idea of untrammelled power and foresight of 'elites'.

There are different degrees of defeat and powerlessness, which might explain some of the different reactions of groups adhering to conspiracy theories. While left-liberal critical conspiracy theories such as '9/11 was an inside job' seem to correlate with an absence of activity, the conspiracy theories of the right have led some to mobilization. The right-wing militias' visions of 'ZOG' suggest that the liberal elite want to take away their guns, put them in FEMA concentration camps etc. – but these things haven't happened yet. Within the system, these groups of conspiracy theorists still have the hope that they can maintain their way of life. For others, however, it is too late and hence there is no point resisting.

If conspiracy theories do reflect a critical impulse, can they ever be really subversive, or do they cause more damage to the cause of revolution than they can threaten this world of capitalist relations? They may have unintended positive effects. According to one source, 9/11 conspiracy theories "played an instrumental role in convincing various 9/11 pressure groups that there were many unanswered questions, which in turn led to the pressure on the White House to rethink its initial opposition to a full investigation and its initial appointment of Henry Kissinger as chairperson."[90] DEMOS might be partially correct to say that conspiracy theories 'create' distrust between public and governments, which could lead in interesting directions - as well as to dead-ends and to fascism. However, our analysis suggests that conspiracy theories reflect more than cause such distrust. Therefore the underlying relations of

antagonism, not the distorted ideas coming out of these relations, are the real basis of transcendence.

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[90] Knight, "Outrageous conspiracy theories", p. 182.