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Introduction

So we come to the problem of the naming of historical objects . . .

—BARTHES, “THE DISCOURSE OF HISTORY”¹

This has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realize that what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are.

—NIETZSCHE, *THE GAY SCIENCE*²

AT FIRST, a butterfly hunt seemed the metaphor best suited to justifying the somewhat peculiar path this book tracks, but then some years ago I stumbled across the image shown in Figure 0.1 in a folder of old newspaper clippings. Created in 1977 by the political cartoonist Paul Conrad and titled “Still at Large,” it shows a figure labeled “CONSPIRACY THEORY” running off at night into the woods. Of course, the cartoon originally offered commentary on particular events that in due course this book will revisit, but the image, when abstracted from this specific historical context, also suggested the possibility of raising the stakes: no longer a butterfly, but instead a fugitive. Either way—whether we are pursuing a butterfly or a fugitive—we forfeit any real control over the direction in which the chase takes us. In a similar manner, the task of working out how conspiracy theory entered our conceptual vocabulary

1. Roland Barthes, “The Discourse of History,” trans. Stephen Bann, in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook* 3, ed. E. S. Schaffer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3–20, at 13.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 121.



FIGURE 0.1 Paul Conrad, “Still at Large,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 7, 1979, used with permission of the Conrad Estate.

has necessitated a line of inquiry that zigzags in and out of disparate historical contexts—with all the risks that such a jagged path entails. Yet despite its zigzagging course, the unity underpinning this inquiry will hopefully remain apparent from the single-mindedness with which this book seeks an answer to a relatively simple question, namely: why, when we speak of conspiracy theories, do we speak of *conspiracy theories*?

Asking why we use a particular word (or combination of words) to denote a particular thing might seem like the bequest of a *Verfremdungseffekt*: it presents itself when we no longer take these words for granted and instead adopt a perspective from which they come to seem arbitrary and even alien. Of course, there is a simple technique for achieving such an effect: simply say a word out loud and then repeat it ad nauseam. Yet while semantic satiation (this being the term used by psycholinguists to describe how vocalized repetition has the effect of destabilizing the mental link between a particular thing and a particular sound) might induce an awareness of the well-known “arbitrariness of the sign,” the catalyst for this book was located elsewhere. It arose out of the

observation that the concept of conspiracy theory is often associated with beliefs that are very “un-theory-like.”³ As pedantic as this observation might seem, hindsight has taught me to recognize it as simply my own point of entry into the more general unease that this concept has repeatedly engendered since it first emerged. Soon enough, this book will document some of the occasions on which the concept has not just prompted reflection but also aroused suspicion; to many it has seemed that there is something not quite right about it and that, lurking within it, there is something artificial, contrived, disingenuous, and even conspiratorial.

The suspicion that, in speaking of conspiracy theory, we are dealing with a misnomer has motivated some scholars to put forward alternative nomenclatures—admittedly with little success when it comes to uptake either specifically in the academic literature or more generally in public discourse.⁴ However, in addition to responding to a misnomer by trying to replace it, another response is to ask how it arose in the first place. This question inspired a conference paper that represented my first foray into a fast-growing field of research and that had the title “How Did Conspiracy Theories Come to Be Seen as Theories?” Further immersion in the subject matter only caused the bafflement to spread; conspiracy theories, it soon seemed, were not only *not* theories (or at least not exactly) but were also *not* really about conspiracies (or at least not only about conspiracies). The paper deserved therefore a sequel, perhaps with the title: “How Did Conspiracy Theories Come to Be Seen in Terms of Conspiracies (i.e., to Invoke the Concept of Conspiracy)?” As it turns out, the sequel has become this book.

So does this book end up running down the fugitive who is fleeing into the woods? Because *The Hidden History of Conspiracy Theory* is not a crime-thriller

3. This observation finds expression both in popular outlets and in more specialized, academic contexts. To cite two recent examples, the *Los Angeles Times* columnist LZ Granderson justified his aversion to the label of “conspiracy theorist” on the grounds that genuine “theorists would be more like scientists” who are engaged in “building on knowledge with hypotheses, perhaps even testing them with research and experiments with controls, collecting data,” and so on (August 6, 2022). In *Conspiracy and Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2024), the philosopher Donatella di Cesare has criticized the concept of conspiracy theory because conspiracy theories have in fact very little to do with the “rigour and seriousness of scientific methods” (p. 20).

4. See, for example, Armin Pfahl-Traughber, “Bausteine zu einer Theorie über ‘Verschwörungstheorien’: Definitionen, Erscheinungsformen, Funktionen und Ursachen,” in *Verschwörungstheorien: Theorie—Geschichte—Wirkung*, ed. Helmut Reinalter (Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag, 2002), 30–44.

and therefore not beholden to any rules against “spoilers,” there is no harm in revealing at the outset that it does indeed apprehend its “concept of interest.” But perhaps a brief explanation is in order as to why the chase turned out to be so protracted, not least because such an explanation also offers an opportunity to present this book’s main thesis. As I came to realize, apprehending the concept of conspiracy theory proves more difficult than first expected because it possesses a Jekyll-and-Hyde capacity to assume different guises and, when cornered, to mystify us by swapping identities. This reference to the 1886 novella by Robert Louis Stevenson is, in fact, more appropriate than one might initially guess since Stevenson’s tale contains the same basic elements of the story presented in this book, albeit differently arranged. Most readers are doubtless aware of how the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* narrates the consequences that befall Dr. Jekyll as a result of his efforts to isolate the evil within his personality and confine it to his alter ego Mr. Hyde. The novella therefore replays the age-old *conflict between good and evil*—this being the first ingredient—but encapsulated in this rendition—and here comes the second ingredient—within a *case*.

Of course, the case is only one category that society has devised for the task of processing and managing reality. By assigning it a place in his *Simple Forms* (German original 1930), the Dutch German literary scholar André Jolles implicitly acknowledged how, in addition to breaking the world down into cases, one could alternatively mythologize the world, or joke about it, or express it as a riddle, and so on.⁵ By promising readers a “strange case,” Stevenson’s choice of title already announces the novella’s allegiance to this particular “simple form”—an allegiance that is furthermore entirely consistent with the way the novella allows a lawyer (the character Utterson) to recount what happened to a doctor (Jekyll), given that the professions of law and medicine have historically the oldest and closest ties to casework. As this book will demonstrate, conspiracy theory plays with these same elements: the cosmic clash of good and evil on the one hand, casework on the other. In fact, conspiracy theory truly comes into its own when the logic of the case begins to break down because it is no longer capable of containing the opposition of good and evil. Having attempted to cleave his personality into its good side and its evil side, Jekyll learned his lesson (even if too late for the lesson to save him): “If I could rightly be said to be either [side], it was only because I was radically

5. André Jolles, *Simple Forms: Legend, Saga, Myth, Riddle, Saying, Case, Memorabile, Fairytale, Joke*, trans. Peter J. Schwartz (London: Verso, 2014).

both.”⁶ A similar finding applies to conspiracy theory; it can appear in some contexts to be more about casework, in others to be more the clash between good and evil, but ultimately it is what it is because it is “radically both” of these things.

* * *

Admittedly, a broader agenda—one extending beyond the specific inquiry into conspiracy theory—informs this book. In addition to probing into the conceptual history of this particular phenomenon, *The Hidden History of Conspiracy Theory* urges a general inquisitiveness about the many concepts that we habitually use but that tend to evade close scrutiny because, like the well-worn furniture that clutters our private living spaces, they come to seem so familiar and self-evident.⁷ In fact, in the final analysis this inquiry grapples not only with the possibility of seeing the world specifically through the prism of conspiracy theory but also with the inevitability of seeing the world through the prism of concepts. With this agenda in mind, what is offered here equates to a test-case in seeking to determine how far it is possible to probe into a phenomenon by more specifically probing into the conceptual vocabulary that has accreted around it. In other words, by focusing on a specific concept, this book attempts to answer a question, which, when generalized, the philosopher Richard Rorty once imagined a skeptic of *The Linguistic Turn* (thus the title of his seminal 1967 collection) posing: “What is the use of looking at our use of the word ‘X’ if you want to know about X’s, or things which are X?”⁸

In fact, *The Hidden History of Conspiracy Theory* not only concretizes X for its specific line of inquiry—here X is made to equal “conspiracy theory”—but also transposes the inquiry from a philosophical setting to a historical one. It thereby seeks to demonstrate how the history of a concept can reveal quite a few interesting things about the corresponding real-world phenomenon. In

6. Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*, ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2002), 56.

7. An illuminating example of the insights that can be reaped from an interrogation of a seemingly self-evident concept is provided by Sophia Rosenfeld’s *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), especially because common sense itself seems to endorse an attitude of taking the concept for granted.

8. Richard Rorty, “Introduction: Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy,” in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1967]), 1–40, at 11.

the case of conspiracy theory, such insights might be useful not least because, if conspiracy theories often awaken associations with the mysterious, there are, appropriately enough, more than a few aspects of the general phenomenon itself that remain mysterious.⁹ For example, there is the question about when conspiracy theories first truly began to appear in the historical record. As things currently stand, the answer to this question is an unsatisfying “it depends”; in particular, it depends on whichever definition of conspiracy theory one feels inclined to endorse.¹⁰ At the same time, it is hard to shrug off the feeling that, if conspiracy theory is genuinely a real-world phenomenon, then it is not possible to pick and choose a definition on the basis of personal preferences or ideological leanings. The difficulties in formulating an accurate and agreed-upon definition of conspiracy theory will be explored at a later stage in this book. For now, it suffices to note that, regardless of the uncertainty that might beset attempts to determine when conspiracy theory as a *phenomenon* emerged, a far greater precision is achievable in pinpointing the emergence of the *concept*. This discovery brings us back to those general reflections on what the history of a concept can tell us about the corresponding phenomenon. Thus, to return to the level of abstraction on which Rorty formulated his imagined objection to the linguistic turn, the modified question might now assume the following form: what is the use of looking at the history of the concept of X if you want to know about X? Or, to shift to the distinctions of Saussurean semiotics: what does the historical emergence of the signifier tell us about the signified?

Several sources instill confidence in the value of this question and in the potential fruitfulness of an inquiry geared to answering it. First, there are those thinkers and theorists who agree in assigning a more than merely antiquarian character to the exercise of piecing together the history of a concept. Thus, the media theorist Walter J. Ong, SJ, has argued that “concepts have a way of carrying their etymologies with them forever. The elements out of which a term is originally built usually, and probably always, linger somehow in subsequent

9. See Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), esp. 3–15, for a more probing account of the two notions referenced in his book’s title.

10. To some degree, this situation parallels what Marc Bloch noted for historical accounts of capitalism: “there are as many birth-certificates as there are historians,” in large part because historians tend to cultivate an “every man for himself” attitude toward definitions. See Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 144–45.

meanings, perhaps obscurely but often powerfully and even irreducibly.”¹¹ The sense of a past whose imprint still makes itself felt in the way we use concepts in the present has been echoed by the philosopher of science Ian Hacking: “*Concepts have memories*, or at any rate, we in our very word patterns unconsciously mimic the phylogeny of our concepts. Some of our philosophical problems about concepts are the result of their history. Our perplexities arise not from that deliberate part of our history which we remember, but from that which we forget.”¹² Taking a cue from Ong and Hacking, one might then say that conceptual history as a method is all *about listening to words* . . . and not just the people who, at any specific moment and in any particular situation, happen to be speaking them.¹³ It cultivates this form of listening out of an awareness that words, in addition to being used to tell stories, have their own stories and that these two different kinds of stories are entwined in subtle yet profound ways.

A second affirmation of the basic intellectual program outlined by these statements can be found in those studies that have examined how the history of a specific phenomenon overlaps with—and indeed is inseparable from—the history of the words and phrases used by historical actors when thinking and talking about the phenomenon in question. In fact, the works that treat a concept less as the instantiation of an idea and more as a set of semantic traditions and conventions form a relatively small subcommunity within the broader category created by the rubric of the history of ideas. In adumbrating the club to which this present book seeks admission, one might cite Richard Koebner’s *Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840–1960* (1964), Alain Rey’s *Révolution: Histoire d’un mot* (1989), Jörn Leonhard’s *Liberalismus: Zur historischen Semantik eines Deutungsmusters* (2001), Robert K. Merton and Elinor G. Barber’s *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity: A Study in Sociological Semantics and the Sociology of Science* (2006), Helen

11. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1993), 12.

12. Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 37 (italics in original).

13. Admittedly, this somewhat Heideggerian remark (“Die Sprache spricht, nicht der Mensch”—“Language speaks, not man”) does not apply to all versions of conceptual history. A pioneering work that takes advantage of the affordances of the digital humanities in order not to “listen” to the words but instead to count and map them—and, in this manner, to uncover their conceptual architectonics—is Peter de Bolla’s *The Architecture of Concepts: The Historical Formation of Human Rights* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

Rosenblatt's *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (2018), and Michael Sonenscher's *Capitalism: The Story behind the Word* (2022). The titles conform roughly to a consistent pattern: the main part invokes an abstraction that, despite its abstract nature and whatever one might say about the dangers of reification, can be thought both to have played a role in history and to have its own history; meanwhile, the subtitle suggests that this historicity applies equally to the words that denote these abstractions.

As much as the works cited above have guided and inspired the present project, one difference has become ever more evident as a result of grappling with its particular subject matter. Studies devoted to such lofty themes as imperialism, liberalism, or capitalism draw in the main upon solidly respectable sources. By contrast, the source material associated with conspiracy theory denies scholars any easy assurance that it merits their attention. Instead, those who summon the patience to engage with conspiracy theory expose themselves to some highly liminal specimens of human thought. It is here that a more genuine *Verfremdungseffekt* makes itself felt. As one, rather randomly chosen sample, the reader can consider the following excerpt from a 1998 interview printed in *Steamshovel Press*, a zine that, from its launch in 1992 onward, trawled the twilight zone of contemporary culture for bizarre accounts of history such as the one alluded to in the following exchange:

Q: Probably one of the most controversial points in your book is that the Beatles and rock music in general were the creation of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in England. What kind of documents did you see that brought you to this conclusion?

A: Well, I got hold of all of the documents concerning Theo Adorno, who was kicked out of Germany by Hitler because Hitler came across the fact that he was working with music which was designed to so confuse the mind of the listeners, directed primarily to the youth, that they would be susceptible.

Q: Adorno was a sociologist?

A: A musician. A professor of music.

Q: So this was a kind of experimentation?

A: What he was doing—he was taking the music of the priests of Baal and he was using this, which is really a repetitive beat, incessantly played over and over with some variations being on a discordant note,

atonal, which repetitively played, would make people become virtually disoriented.

Q: What was the reason for this research?

A: He was commissioned by the Committee of 300 to prepare the way for their huge drug invasion in America. Don't forget—they had this enormous, profitable drug empire in China, worth billions of dollars.¹⁴

On one level, this tissue of weird invention and clumsy half-truth possesses an almost whimsical air of Pynchonesque absurdity. Yet amusement cedes to distaste after longer exposure to this kind of material. Should one even dignify such warped and grotesque accounts of history with the attention otherwise reserved for serious topics of research?

However, perhaps this unease is also a clue to the nature of the phenomenon we are dealing with. For those committed to the norms of truth and objectivity that inform and guide genuine scholarship, conspiracy theory is not merely an object of study on par with the countless other objects that scholars approach with carefully calibrated combinations of professional detachment and personal curiosity. The reason for the distinctive nature of the relationship that most scholars adopt toward conspiracy theory has to do with the dual status it assumes within the broader enterprise of scholarship; not only is it a potential object of study, but it also functions as a negative countermodel, corresponding to the kind of explanation that (most) scholars are at pains to avoid. In other words, scholarship qualifies as serious scholarship precisely because it is *not* the kind of pseudo-scholarship denoted as conspiracy theory. Engaging with conspiracy theory requires historians and social scientists therefore to perform two kinds of work at the same time: first, object-work, or, in other words, the standard work of observation, description, theorization, and so on; and second, boundary-work, which involves drawing a line between, on the one hand, legitimate forms of inquiry, worthy of institutional

14. Uri Dowbenko, "Conspiracy 101: An Interview with John Coleman," *Steamshovel Press*, 1998, 38–43, at 41. Coleman, who claims to be a former British intelligence officer, is the author of *Conspirators' Hierarchy: The Story of the Committee of 300* (c. 1992), *Diplomacy by Deception* (c. 1993) and *Socialism: The Road to Slavery* (1994). In *The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations: Shaping the Moral, Spiritual, Cultural, Political and Economic Decline of the United States of America* (2006) he asserts that Adorno actually wrote the Beatles' music (p. 158), thereby rendering moot the long debate about whether Lennon or McCartney was the more talented songwriter—according to Coleman, it was all Adorno.

recognition and deserving of research funds, and, on the other, illegitimate forms associated in particular with conspiracy theory.¹⁵

Thus, the grievance voiced on occasion by conspiracy theorists, namely that mainstream social science, historiography, and cultural studies marginalize them, is by no means rooted in a delusion. While this marginalization might seem entirely justified when reading the absurd view of history expressed in the *Steamshovel Press* interview, it is far from easy to formulate a more general argument for why mainstream scholarship is entitled to dismiss a specific conspiracy theory not on the merits of the case it presents but because it presents this case in a mode that has become recognizable to us *as conspiracy theory*. Scholarship has thus a highly ambivalent relationship to conspiracy theory, at least in comparison to other subject matter. A historian investigating, say, fluctuations in grain prices during the Napoleonic Wars is, for better or worse, spared the need to confront such issues. By contrast, when attention turns to conspiracy theory, the complex relationship to the object of study has the potential to imbue the investigation with a distinctive kind of intellectual friction. Framed in this manner, an inquiry into conspiracy theory overcomes the unease occasioned by its more outré forms, more than a few of which we will encounter in this book.

* * *

But first a few words about the methodology and structure of this book, both of which observe a three-way distinction. This might require some extra explanation, especially in the light of a more familiar two-way distinction that differentiates between (1) words and (2) their referents, or between (1) the signifier and (2) the signified. However, a three-way distinction is by no means unknown to thinkers who have pondered these matters and in some cases argued for the need to acknowledge that “there are things and words and concepts”—thus, the axiomatic position adopted by Morris Weitz, a

15. See Thomas Gieryn, “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (1983): 781–95 (who admittedly does not speak of object-work). For an insightful account of how conspiracy theories were progressively delegitimized—and indeed stigmatized—in the second half of the twentieth century, see Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory since the 1950s: “A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish”* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2019).

mid-twentieth-century philosopher who made some important, albeit now largely forgotten contributions to the history of concepts.¹⁶ The next question is then: how are we to understand the relationship between these three entities, or, expressed somewhat differently, what *concept of the concept* do we allow to guide us in this exercise in conceptual history?

Essentially two options are available and both play a role in this book. The first option involves levels of observation: the word can be thought of as an observation of the thing, while the concept rises to a higher level by observing the word. At the same time, concepts are concepts because, in observing words, they do not lose sight of the things to which the words refer. This presents us with the second option; instead of the concept being on top (as per the levels of observation), we imagine the concept as being in between and acting as an “intermediary” between the thing and the word.¹⁷ This characterization can save historians from falling into one of two diametrically opposed traps. On the one hand, reducing the concept to a word results in an arid etymology (“arid” because etymology tends to be disinterested in how a word is related to the reality it references), while on the other hand treating it as a thing risks a relapse into a naive history of ideas (“naive” because such a history assigns ideas an autonomous existence divorced from language).¹⁸ Of course, there are many works of intellectual history that are very far from being either arid or naive but that nevertheless lean in the one direction or the other, concentrating either more on the thing or more on the word; the first might be described as realist, the second as nominalist.¹⁹ At a number of points in this

16. Morris Weitz, *The Opening Mind: A Philosophical Study of Humanistic Concepts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 7. There are, of course, many precedents for this triadic (as opposed to dyadic) approach; I restrict myself here to recalling the “semantic triangle” that C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards presented in the first chapter (titled “Thoughts, Words and Things”) of *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Ark, 1985 [1923]), 11.

17. Weitz, *Opening Mind*, 8.

18. The connection between concepts and words (a connection that makes a concept a linguistic phenomenon in a way that a pure history of ideas tends to ignore) was appreciated in the Vienna Circle; their 1929 manifesto makes this clear by pointing out that “if a mystic asserts that he has experiences that lie above and beyond all concepts, one cannot deny this. But the mystic cannot talk about it, for *talking implies capture by concepts* . . .” See Otto Neurath, “The Scientific Conception of the World,” in *Empiricism and Sociology*, ed. Marie Neurath and Robert S. Cohen (Dordrecht: Springer, 1973), 299–318, at 307 (my italics).

19. The distinction maps onto the difference between what the conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck denoted as onomasiology and semasiology. See Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023),

book, the realist and nominalist options will present themselves like a fork in the road; at such junctures, it might seem more important to consider the word and the trajectory it has tracked over time, while at others the focus will fall upon the thing and the evidence suggesting how it has varied through history. However, the approach associated with conceptual history is ultimately attentive to both sides and tacks back and forth between them.²⁰

Such a tacking maneuver arises because in their role as “intermediaries” concepts do not rigidly link words to things. Instead, they mediate between them. Mediation entails an underdetermination in how words and things relate to each other; at any point in time, a word can refer to different things while a thing can find expression through different words. Citing a concrete example for this underdetermination provides also an opportunity to introduce one intellectual figure who will loom large in this book, namely Niccolò Machiavelli. For the literary scholar Giuseppe Prezzolini, one of the main obstacles impeding a true understanding of the Florentine’s writings lay in his language: time and again, one finds that Machiavelli “employs the same words for different concepts and expresses the same concepts in different words.”²¹ The observation echoed what the German historian Friedrich Meinecke had earlier noted about Machiavelli’s conceptual relationship to the doctrine of reason of state; although “Machiavelli had not compressed his thought on *raison d’état* into a single slogan,” Meinecke did not doubt for a second that Machiavelli’s “whole life was bound up with . . . a continual process of thinking about” the distinctive logic by which states strive to survive and expand.²²

This underdetermination of concepts in their relationship to things and words becomes even more apparent when we move from a synchronic frame

47–48. Using a slightly divergent terminology (“conceptualist” vs. “nominalist”), Samuel Moyn applies this distinction when surveying the scholarship on liberalism in *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of our Times* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 17–18.

20. To cite one example from this book, applying the nominalist approach to the concept of conspiracy theory leads us to the Nuremberg Trial, which the third chapter of this book will examine because the collocation “conspiracy theory” recurred throughout the preparation of the trial. The fourth chapter then tacks back to the realist approach by considering the degree to which this usage indicated an interpretation of events corresponding to what we might understand a conspiracy theory to be.

21. Giuseppe Prezzolini, *Machiavelli* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1967), 4.

22. Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d’État and Its Place in History*, trans. Douglas Scott (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998 [1924]), 29.

to a diachronic one and consider the emergence of concepts over time. To this end, we can revisit a scenario invoked by a contributor to an earlier phase of the discussion about conceptual vocabularies. Imagine a young girl making the patriotic declaration “I love my country”—and indeed doing so “before ‘patriotism’ enters her vocabulary.”²³ Is the inference then correct that the girl possesses the concept even though she does not (yet) possess the word “patriotism”? Yes and no. It seems more advisable in this situation to recognize a concept in an inchoate state of becoming. Concepts truly come into their own through the consolidation of their association with a recognizable (though never fully rigidified) set of words and terms.²⁴ These standardized words and terms serve then as vehicles for both the generalization of meaning and its decontextualization. To return to the aforementioned case, it is this process that, by making it possible to abstract from the specific love felt by this specific girl for this specific country, creates a situation in which it becomes possible for her and others to reflect upon the pros and cons of patriotism, to compare one kind of patriotism with another, to elaborate upon its difference to nationalism, to contrast patriotism with allegiances toward other communities of greater or lesser scope (e.g., local patriotism, Catholicism, cosmopolitanism, etc.) and so on.

Conceptualization is thus a process that creates and makes more probable certain intellectual and communicative possibilities. Perhaps another scenario can clarify the affordances that the emergence of a concept bestows upon users of a language. Imagine now that the same girl encounters one of her playmates, a little boy, who boasts to her: “I know something you don’t.” Of course, it would be reasonable to presume that this scenario is equivalent to one in which the boy declares “I know a secret.” The difference in the two scenarios becomes, however, apparent if we imagine the girl, who is not only patriotic but also aware of her playmate’s reputation for empty boasting, responding as follows: “Your only secret is that you have no secret.” Admittedly a clever

23. James Farr, “Understanding Conceptual Change Politically,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 24–49, at 27.

24. As Quentin Skinner points out, “the surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed.” See his essay “Language and Political Change,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6–23, here 8. This remark echoes Bloch’s observation that “the advent of the name is always a great event even though the thing named has preceded it; for it signifies the decisive moment of conscious awareness” (*Historian’s Craft*, 168).

riposte, and moreover one that is instantly comprehensible. But it is worth considering how hard it would be to formulate such a statement if we return to the first scenario in which “secret” does not (yet) fully belong to the conceptual vocabulary possessed by either the boy or the girl. One can appreciate the degree of difficulty by trying to translate the girl’s assertion back into a language *not* containing the word “secret.” Perhaps it would go something like this: “When you say ‘I know something you don’t,’ the only thing you know is that you don’t know anything that I don’t already know also.” Such a convoluted reformulation makes it apparent how specific concepts place at our disposal handles upon complex and perhaps even internally inconsistent subject matter. They thereby generate intellectual and communicative possibilities, the equivalent of which in any meaningful sense is very hard to imagine in the absence of these concepts (or, if one prefers, conceptual handles).

These examples suggest that the emergence of a concept corresponds to a process that coaxes more abstract generalizations from context-bound circumlocutions (at least that is how they can look with the benefit of hindsight); in this manner, the statement “I love my country” prefigures the generalized concept of patriotism, just as the boast “I know something that you don’t” has a similar anticipatory relation to the generalized concept of the secret. If we now return to the case of conspiracy theory, my impression is that we find such foreshadowings of the concept arising at the end of the eighteenth century (which, of course, does not preclude the existence of the thing itself, namely conspiracy theory, at far earlier stages of the historical record). Thus, in an article that in 1799 opened the first volume of the *Historisches Journal*, its editor, the conservative Prussian publicist Friedrich von Gentz, took stock of certain observers and interpreters of the French Revolution who coalesced into a distinctive subset because they all deployed a specific strategy in accounting for this epochal event. This strategy induced them to

seek refuge in the so-called secret mechanical springs [*Triebfeder*] and hatch out fables in which quite a few limited or confused minds [*irre geführte Köpfe*] still believe to find the true meaning of the Revolution. . . . Here is where the most bizarre fairy tales [*Märchen*] are devised which imagine the Revolution to be a product of the secret operations of the Jesuits, then the Masonic lodges, then the Rosicrucians, then the Illuminati, and then the immortal Knights Templar.²⁵

25. Friedrich von Gentz, “Über den Gang der öffentlichen Meinung in Rücksicht auf die französische Revolution,” *Historisches Journal* 1 (1799): 3–62, at 42.

It seems clear that Gentz was writing about—and indeed criticizing—what a later age (though how much later?) came to conceptualize as conspiracy theory. Admittedly, his dim, *avant-la-lettre* perception of this phenomenon is limited to the way that an underlying pattern of interpreting the causal agency behind the French Revolution persisted, even as the putative protagonists (Jesuits, Masonic lodges, Rosicrucians, etc.) varied. Conspiracy theory has since then come to encompass not only variation in the protagonists but also variation in the event or trend to be explained. In other words, conspiracy theories have arisen not just in response to the French Revolution and also not just in the context of attempts to explain political and social revolutions more generally. One finds instead the same interpretative template put to work in the most disparate contexts. A list of words that flag some of these contexts (in addition to the context linking secret societies to revolutions) might include the following: political assassinations, alien abductions, faked moon landings, forged birth certificates, vaccinations, the New World Order, and so on.

* * *

The three-way distinction between things, words, and concepts as outlined above has a general validity since every concept is to be distinguished from both the thing it denotes and the words that are used for that denotative purpose. However, when it comes to the concept whose history and nature is the core concern of this book, an added complication arises from the fact that it has come to employ not one word (as is the case with, for example, the concept of patriotism) but two, namely: “conspiracy” and “theory.” The “compound” nature of the concept—in other words, the fact that it resembles more a molecule than an atom—has two important consequences. First, it entails a need to differentiate between the concepts of conspiracy, theory, and conspiracy theory, and then to problematize the relationships between these concepts. This need arises because a facile view that defines a conspiracy theory simply (and simplistically) as a theory about a conspiracy elides these differences. To be clear: it is not as if the concept of conspiracy and the concept of theory have nothing to do with the concept of conspiracy theory. However, the relationship is more complicated (and more interesting) than most accounts realize. As this book will demonstrate, neither the three concepts nor their respective histories neatly fold into one another.

The second consequence of the compound nature of conspiracy theory corresponds to another methodological danger of which we need to be wary.

This danger derives from the illusion of an absolute moment of creation; after all, it seems perfectly plausible to imagine the concept of conspiracy theory coming into existence when someone, somewhere, at some time, for some reason, first decided to couple the word “conspiracy” with the word “theory.” This presumption underpins a habit observed by much of the research literature, namely the habit of attributing the invention of the concept to the British-Austrian philosopher Karl Popper; by putting “conspiracy” and “theory” together in two lectures delivered in mid-1948, Popper apparently gave birth to the concept so familiar to us today.²⁶ To be sure, searchable databases soon revealed occurrences of “conspiracy theory” predating Popper’s lectures, but even if such discoveries suggested a more obscure origin, one could still hold on to the implicit premise that there had indeed been such an origin—a moment before which the concept of conspiracy theory did not exist and after which it did.²⁷

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that this book subscribes to an understanding of the concept (or, alternatively, a concept of the concept) that, in reconstructing the history of individual specimens within our conceptual vocabulary, rejects—or, at the very least, relativizes—the notion that they are “created” as some specific time and place. In fact, instead of conceptual history, one is entitled to speak of conceptual genealogy in order to clarify the more specific view of history that informs this method. The important point is that *genealogy* eschews *genesis* as its operating premise.²⁸ Instead of seeking a singular moment of creation, it seeks antecedents, which in turn have their own antecedents. This poses a challenge since a description of a genealogy has to begin somewhere, even if the genealogy itself has no beginning. Choosing the historical location of that “somewhere” will therefore always seem somewhat arbitrary and need to be justified on the basis of reasons extraneous to the logic of the genealogy. In attempting to undertake such a task

26. Karl Popper, “Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition” and “Prediction and Prophecy in the Social Sciences,” chapters 4 and 16 of *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2002 [1963]), 161–82 and 452–66.

27. See, for example, John Ayto, *Twentieth-Century Words: The Story of the New Words in the English Language over the Last Hundred Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18, which gives 1909 as the earliest occurrence, presumably as a result of a search using the database for academic journals JSTOR.

28. Genealogy “opposes itself to the search for ‘origins,’” as Michel Foucault wrote in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139–64, at 140.

for the concept of conspiracy theory (even if by no means in a comprehensive fashion), the first chapter of this book opts to start in Florence at the end of the fifteenth century. It does so mainly because in this historical context the “things” (in contrast to the words and the concepts) from which conspiracy theory is made—in other words, its constituent elements—are both clearly visible and culturally proximate to each other. What then are these elements? A first approximation of them was introduced above as casework and the cosmic clash of good and evil, but in attempting to formalize this characterization this chapter identifies two modes of thinking and communicating that I have attempted to contrast with each other by describing them as “analytic” and “apocalyptic.” Each mode, the analytic and the apocalyptic, employs a distinctive logic and mobilizes a specific (though historically variable) conceptual vocabulary. It is their entanglement that gives rise to conspiracy theory.

This first chapter then progresses by ascending from the level of things to the level of words and then from there to the level of concepts. It does so first by asking when the specific concept of conspiracy found uptake within the apocalyptic mode; in other words, when exactly did those who felt inclined to comprehend history as a cosmic drama pitting the forces of good against the forces of evil integrate the concept of conspiracy into this scenario? (N.B.: we are referring here to the concept of conspiracy and not to the concept of conspiracy theory.) If we momentarily return to Gentz’s commentary of certain interpretations of the French Revolution that observed this logic, it is striking how he did *not* invoke the specific word “conspiracy” (or, in German, *Verschwörung*). This is all the more curious since some of the anti-revolutionary authors on whom he was commenting had in fact already made this move. By recruiting this concept to order and frame their claim of a comprehensive subversion culminating in revolution, these writers were in fact making their own contribution (albeit unknowingly) to the formation of another distinct concept that subsequently came to employ the term “conspiracy theory” to denote, critique, and, most fundamentally, *observe* a distinctive way in which others *observe* certain events and trends (such as—but by no means limited to—revolutions). The last part of the first chapter ascends to this level of observation by analyzing this development. In doing so, it transplants us into the modern era on which the remainder of the book focuses.

In adopting a conceptual-genealogical approach, this book sets itself apart from the work undertaken by a group I have called the “philosophical apologists of conspiracy theory.” The aim of these apologists is to deploy a range of arguments to rehabilitate conspiracy theory, which they see as an urgently

necessary but unfairly maligned way of holding the powerful to account. How the approach of the apologists differs from the one applied in this book is addressed in a short excursus at the end of the first chapter. These differences are not limited to an appraisal of the value of conspiracy theories as a means of keeping tabs on the powerful. A further point of divergence lies in the tendency of the philosophical apologists to treat conspiracy theories as *theories*—as sincere attempts to explain the world that do not lose the quality of sincerity even if others deem these explanations to be misleading. But what if these explanations (or, more precisely, those who devise them) purposely mislead? By drawing attention to the kinds of work that conspiracy theories often perform, this book's second chapter argues that it is vitally important to consider conspiracy theories as *conspiracies*—or, at least, as often highly conspiratorial in the motives they draw upon and the effects they educe.

The second part of the book, comprising chapters 3 and 4, examines how, from the late nineteenth century onward, the context of forensic, legal, or journalistic investigations repeatedly generated the term “conspiracy theory” and how this usage, particularly evident in the preparation for the famous Nuremberg Trial after the Second World War, persisted deep into the second half of the twentieth century. But why is the talk here of the term—and not of the concept? In considering conspiracy theory as casework, the three-way distinction between the thing, the word (or term), and concept once more becomes relevant since occurrences of the term “conspiracy theory” in this forensic-legal-journalistic context do not connote the presence of the fully fledged concept. In his early essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche noted how a word “becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individual experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases.”²⁹ Concepts are generalizations. This means that they function differently from names, which denote something unique and singular. When “conspiracy theory” appeared in the context of casework, it functioned more like

29. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1988), 42–47, at 46. See also Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2007 [1964]), who, in arguing that the administrative control typical of advanced industrialized societies has the effect of depleting the conceptual resources available to these societies, observed how a concept “is always abstract and general” and consequently “never denotes one particular concrete thing” (p. 109).

a name and less like a concept—in other words, more like “Lassie” as the name for a particular dog rather than “dog” as the generic concept for an animal species.³⁰ More specifically, its role was simply to denote one possible way to explain or prosecute an as-yet-unsolved crime. Besides earmarking the provisional status of such an explanation or strategy, the term “conspiracy theory” had the additional quality of being neutral; thus, while the concept familiar to us is pejorative, the term originally carried with it neither positive nor negative connotations. Furthermore, because discussion always revolved around the case at hand and the efforts to solve it, one only finds usage in the singular. Apparent exceptions to this rule reveal themselves to be exceptions *that prove the rule*. Thus, a search of the relevant databases throws up an occurrence of the plural in 1875 in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, yet closer inspection indicates a false positive; the headline “The Blackmail and Conspiracy Theories Knocked Out of Court” is clearly referring not to “conspiracy theories” in the plural but rather to two theories, namely the “blackmail theory” plus the (singular) “conspiracy theory.”

The genuine use of the plural “conspiracy theories” emerges in a distinct context, corresponding to the second milieu whose specific approach to this phenomenon has fed into our current understanding of the concept. This milieu was the one associated with twentieth-century social science; its discussions about how to understand the world, in conjunction with its discussions about how *not* to understand the world, form the focus of the third part of this book (comprising chapters 5 and 6). Admittedly, use of the plural was originally an offshoot of engagement with a more generalized abstract singular. This is evident not least from the concepts with which “conspiracy theory” was originally linked. Thus, Karl Popper actually spoke in his 1948 lectures of the “conspiracy theory of society” (and not just of “conspiracy theory”—an important detail almost invariably overlooked in the specialist literature). Around this time (i.e., the mid-twentieth century), one also finds talk of “the conspiracy theory of government,” “the conspiracy theory of events,” and “the

30. It is worth noting how one of the distinctive peculiarities of compound terms (such as “conspiracy theory”) is the possibility that they can initially function in a manner akin to a name; by contrast, it is hard to imagine historical situations in which, for example, one can distinguish between the word “secret” and the associated concept. As a further example, one can consult *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), in which Sarah Churchwell documents an initial phase in the history of the collocative concept of the American Dream when the occurrences of this term had none of the resonant qualities with which the concept subsequently became endowed (pp. 21–40).

conspiracy theory of *politics*.” The fifth chapter considers a further variant of this pattern, namely “the conspiracy theory of *history*” as conceptualized in the mid-1950s by the German political and legal theorist Franz Neumann. Neumann’s willingness to subsume under this heading specific historical instantiations of this mode of explanation prompted him to speak of “conspiracy theories” (i.e., conspiracy theory in the plural). Emerging within a sub-strand of the broader social-science discourse, the concept denoted therefore a *generic* phenomenon; consequently, use of the plural to denote a plurality of individual *specimens* was entirely natural.

The chapter devoted to Neumann also introduces a trait shared by two later chapters, which similarly take a deep dive into the lives of individual thinkers and, in doing so, combine conceptual history and intellectual biography. Thus, the sixth chapter attends to a phase in the career of Richard Hofstadter, a historian whose own tenure at Columbia University overlapped briefly with Neumann’s and who in some of his work in the mid-1950s borrowed Neumann’s concept of the conspiracy theory of history. By the end of this decade, Hofstadter, however, had started to develop an alternative approach. He did so by leaning more heavily on the diagnostic insights offered by psychology. The result was an alternative coinage: the paranoid style. A precise reconstruction of the process by which Hofstadter arrived at this formulation should go some way to countering a criticism made occasionally of conceptual history, namely that it tends to focus myopically upon a concept in one of its terminological crystallizations and thereby to isolate it from a semantic field containing other options.³¹

The importance of surveying the semantic field instead of focusing on a single term is highlighted by the argument that the fourth and final part of the book will develop. Its first chapter (chapter 7) aims to show how the conceptual intersection of the paranoid style and conspiracy theory contributed to

31. Some of this criticism can be inferred from the skepticism J.G.A. Pocock expressed in considering the theoretical premises underpinning *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe (GG)*, the pioneering project in conceptual history undertaken by German historians in the years from 1972 to 1997. In “Concepts and Discourses: A Difference in Culture?,” in *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte*, ed. Hartmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1996), 47–59, Pocock surmised from the “lexical structure and alphabetical arrangement” of the *GG* a danger of presenting each concept in an “abstracted and isolated” manner (p. 51)—an approach at odds with his own notion of “languages” made up of rhetorical conventions and argumentative tropes that prestructure a discourse.

the next development in the morphology of “conspiracy theory,” namely the personalization of the term in the form of the “conspiracy theorist.” By turning again to the databases that compile digitized printed material from the twentieth century and earlier, it becomes possible to appreciate how the conspiracy theorist as a recognizable (and recognizably marginal) type began to emerge sometime in the 1960s and the 1970s.³² After reconstructing this process in the seventh chapter, the final chapter of the book recalls an intellectual and an activist who on more than one occasion experienced the ignominy of being described and derided as a conspiracy theorist. Now largely forgotten, Carl Oglesby was first an intellectual leader of the 1960s student protests before his immersion in the investigation of political assassinations exposed him to targeted use of the “conspiracy theorist” label. However, the label fails to do justice to the nuances and the complexities of the interpretation of American politics that he fashioned in the 1970s and that drew upon older traditions of revisionist scholarship. These qualities allow us to recognize in Oglesby’s activism and commentary a rich source of insight into the conflicted status of conspiracy theory and the clash of attitudes engendered by the concept.

In summary, if the overriding aim of this book is to reconstruct how modern society has come to conceptualize conspiracy theory, it achieves this in large part by considering when and how the concept was pluralized and personalized. The underlying premise is that the emergence first of the concept and then of its morphological variations were not just the inevitable and automatic actualization of potentialities lying latent in the language. Rather, these processes were responses to identifiable demands created by describable historical situations. When and why did society start denoting a certain set of suppositions or beliefs as a conspiracy theory? What were the conditions that jump-started talk about multiple conspiracy theories? And what then induced the habit of designating certain people as conspiracy theorists? Undoubtedly, a discussion about, for example, the plural form of “conspiracy theory” will disappoint those who have opened this book in the hope that it will explore outlandish claims such as the one that traces the emergence of modern

32. For a table compiling evidence drawn from databases demonstrating that, very approximately, “conspiracy theory” first arose in the 1870s, “conspiracy theories” in the 1950s, and “conspiracy theorist” shortly thereafter in the 1960s and 1970s, see my chapter “Conspiracy Theory: The Nineteenth-Century Prehistory of a Twentieth-Century Concept,” in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. Joseph E. Uscinski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 62–81, at 64.

American drug culture back to atonal music as developed from ancient sources by a twentieth-century German Jewish philosopher. Here, I opt to be unapologetic. The subject matter surveyed in this book is lurid enough. Consequently, the dry-as-a-bone approach of conceptual history supplies the perfect foil for its examination and investigation and, in doing so, also furnishes the ideal set of tools for understanding what we are actually dealing with when we reach for the concept of conspiracy theory.

In terms of the book's own location in the semantic history under consideration, we can round out this survey by taking account of a feature of its title, *The Hidden History of Conspiracy Theory*. The use of the concept here corresponds to what linguists call "zero-marking." In zero-marking, the definite or indefinite article preceding the noun is omitted. The effect of this omission is often to bestow a higher level of abstraction upon a concept. In the case of conspiracy theory, the trend toward zero-marking can be documented from the mid-1990s onward. Thus, an editorial by Ira Straus in the *Christian Science Monitor* from May 13, 1996, carried the headline "When Conspiracy Theory Replaces Thought" and declared that "conspiracy theory is doing America real harm." Clearly, the point of reference in these remarks was not one particular conspiracy theory but the general phenomenon under which individual specimens are subsumed.

Admittedly, another option offers itself as a means of ascending to this level of generality. This option is presented by the term "conspiracism." By reconfiguring itself in this manner, conspiracy theory enters the company of the Isms, those terms that denote particular theological, ideological, or artistic perspectives upon reality and that include "communism, authoritarianism, theism, fascism, nativism," and so on—these being the examples cited by the political scientists Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum in their recent book *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (2019).³³ Whereas the old conspiracism corresponded to conspiracy theory, Muirhead and Rosenblum flag in their title a "new conspiracism"; the new version differs from the old because as "conspiracy without the theory" it amounts to little more than a nihilistic assault upon democratic traditions and institutions that, in contrast to other ideologies, is bereft of even the

33. Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 8. On Isms more generally, see H. M. Höpfl, "Isms," *British Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 1 (1983): 1–17.

most minimal capacity to imagine alternative modes of managing our shared social existence. The earliest appearance of “conspiracism” seems to have been in Frank P. Mintz’s *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right* (1985), an account of an American right-wing pressure group founded in 1957. In addition to the nativism and racism inhering in their ideology, Mintz also referred to their conspiracism as evident in their “belief in the primacy of conspiracies in the unfolding of history.”³⁴ The criticism that some have leveled at the term caused me to go back and forth on whether I should adopt it.³⁵ In the end, I have opted for zero-marking over the introduction of a further Ism (a decision indicated not least by the title *The Hidden History of Conspiracy Theory*). In doing so, I have embraced the advice offered by the philosopher of science and social theorist Bruno Latour who, admitting the shortcomings of “network” in a book on network theory, resolved to forge on nevertheless. As he reminded readers (and potential critics), “there exists no good word anyway, only sensible usage.”³⁶ His observation holds true in equal measure for an inquiry into conspiracy theory.

* * *

On October 3, 1970, the Yale historian David Brion Davis wrote a letter to Richard Hofstadter, the subject of this book’s sixth chapter, in which he expressed the wish that Hofstadter might recover from the leukemia that had recently hospitalized him. Hofstadter was only fifty-four when he succumbed to the disease some weeks later (the same age, incidentally, as Franz Neumann

34. Frank P. Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right: Race, Conspiracy and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 4.

35. Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), objects to the tendency of conspiracism to suggest a “demonized and reified entity on which most of the ills of history can be blamed” (p. 7), while Pierre-André Taguieff, *La foire aux illuminés: Ésotérisme, théorie du complot, extrémisme* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2005) lists “conspirationnisme” among the “mots qui cachent ou brouillent au moins autant qu’ils éclairent” (pp. 43–44). It should be noted that I find the distinction between “conspiratorial” and “conspiracist” useful and have tried to heed it throughout the book: “conspiratorial” refers to conspiracies, while “conspiracist” refers to conspiracy theories.

36. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 132. Admittedly, one might counterpose this sentiment with Albert Camus’s conviction that “mal nommer un objet les choses, c’est ajouter au malheur du monde.” See Albert Camus, “Sur une philosophie de l’expression” [1944], in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. J. Lévi-Valensi et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 1:908.

had been at the time of his death in a car accident sixteen years earlier). Within the span of his professional career, he had made significant contributions to America's understanding of its history and therefore of itself, and for precisely this reason his death seemed unfairly premature; it robbed the academic community and the broader public of further insights that one had every reason to expect from this preeminent spokesperson of postwar liberal historiography. In his letter, Davis assured Hofstadter that if it was a case of blood transfusions, volunteers could be found, if necessary on Davis's doorstep in New Haven: "Even in this relatively backwater town, the Red Cross nurses all know the name of Professor Richard Hofstadter—though I am afraid they've never heard of the paranoid style."³⁷ This reference to the paranoid style gave Davis the opportunity to pivot to another matter. He reported to Hofstadter that he had been reading proofs for the "big 'conspiracy reader,'" a compilation of writings and speeches that documented *The Fear of Conspiracy* (as the volume was titled when it appeared the following year) throughout American history. Hofstadter had been the inspiration for the volume, which, as Davis admitted, could easily have been a lot longer—"but the historian has to call a halt somewhere." The challenge in knowing when to stop arose because "the subject matter is so incredible and fascinating."

All those engaged in research will empathize with Davis's admission of a need "to call a halt somewhere." One of the initial attractions about an inquiry primarily directed at the concept of conspiracy theory rather than the general phenomenon itself was that it seemed more manageable. Even if this has proved to be true, this book can by no means claim to be exhaustive even within its modest scope. Indeed, those who already have some familiarity with this field might well ask why Karl Popper has not received his own chapter, given that his reflections on the "conspiracy theory of society" are so often cited in the literature on conspiracy theories as the point of origin for the concept. While Popper was indeed a focus of much preliminary research, in trying to impose some order upon the research in total and prime it for presentation within the scope of a monograph, I came to realize that his contributions can be largely assimilated to another discussion internal to social science about the competing claims sociology and psychology make in explaining how human beings act individually and collectively. I

37. David Brion Davis to Richard Hofstadter, October 3, 1970, box 2, folder "David Davis," Richard Hofstadter Papers (RHP), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

also came to realize that, for all the perfunctory glosses upon Popper's conspiracy theory of society when the research literature feels called upon to address the history of the concept, Neumann's "conspiracy theory of history" had a substantially larger impact.³⁸ Given that Neumann's contribution is mostly ignored in the research literature, a chapter devoted to the conspiracy theory of history affords an opportunity to redress this imbalance. And while Popper will put in a few appearances in this volume, a more probing analysis of his contribution can wait until another day. It is, after all, necessary to "call a halt somewhere."

Zooming out from the modest dramas of the research on this book to consider the field as a whole in its development over the last decades, for a long time the difficulty lay less in calling a halt somewhere and more in getting it started in the first place. One mode of boundary-work is to exclude what is deemed to be nonscientific or nonrational simply by ignoring it, and for many years willful obliviousness most closely corresponded to the attitude adopted by the majority of historians and social scientists. However, since the beginning of the new millennium the tendency to give conspiracy theory the "silent treatment" has ceded to active engagement. Of course, every theme has its season, and there are numerous signs that entitle us to wonder whether that of conspiracy theory is upon us. But why did it take so long for scholarship to discover conspiracy theory as an important—and perhaps even urgently important—object of study?

As has already been suggested, one inhibiting factor has been the uneasy sense of consanguinity between scholarship and conspiracy theory; for serious scholars, conspiracy theorists can seem like embarrassing relatives.³⁹ If one recalls the exchange excerpted above from *Steamshovel Press*, the references made repeatedly throughout the interview to "documents," "evidence," and

38. The Google Books Ngram Viewer can be used as a source of quantitative corroboration for this assertion. Entering the phrases "conspiracy theory of history" (Neumann) and "conspiracy theory of society" (Popper) into Ngram demonstrates that the former occurred far more frequently than the latter from the 1950s onward (though the values are relatively low). The relationship starts to invert roughly from the beginning of the new millennium onward, presumably because, from this time on, more or less continuous research into conspiracy theory starts to consistently cite Popper's coinage when attempting some thumbnail sketch of the conceptual vocabulary that has accreted around this theme.

39. See Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48, for a classic statement expressing an awareness of this affinity.

“research” hint at the mimicry of proper scholarship that is characteristic of much conspiracy theorizing.⁴⁰ Yet rather than ignore conspiracy theory because its strained similarity to scholarship can assume forms either laughable or discomforting or both, engagement provides historiography and social science with opportunities to reflect upon their own standards and shortcomings. It is a further contention of this work that the scholarly discourse about conspiracy theory—even if it was for a long time sporadic, stilted, and subdued—has come to accept the corresponding concept as part of its recognized vocabulary and that, for better or for worse, this concept has laid down the tracks for future discussion. This history of how the concept of conspiracy theory emerged is not immediately visible, but because it is a crucial factor determining how this discussion will unfold, it deserves attention and needs to be revealed. Or rather excavated, whereby it is important to note how an Indiana Jones version of archeology might trade in notions of secrecy, but genuine archeologists know the lost city to be not shrouded in secrecy but simply buried under the sand. Likewise, this book does not pretend to disclose a secret history but instead aims to unearth—beneath the mounds of textual material preserved in archives, stored in libraries, and digitized in databases—a *Hidden History of Conspiracy Theory*.

The distinction between secret history and hidden history is important because when David Brion Davis confided in Hofstadter how he found conspiracy theory to be “incredible and fascinating,” he clearly did not hold the conspiracy theories to possess these attributes on their own terms. Rather, they assume this character when viewed through the prism of history and social science. Emphasizing the externality of this viewpoint hopefully counteracts the widespread tendency to regard conspiracy theories as inherently intriguing in and of themselves. Once research has pulled back the curtain on their repertoire of cheap tricks, their entertainment value declines precipitously. Relishing the attention of an interviewer, the conspiracy theorist interviewed in *Steamshovel Press* seems completely enthralled by the “incredible and fascinating” nature of his revelations. After all, within the space of a short question-and-answer exchange he treats the interviewer (and, by extension, the zine’s readership) to a display of a seemingly fearless mind at work—a mind capable of revealing secret connections that tie together the Beatles,

40. In *A Lot of People Are Saying* (esp. 19–41), Muirhead and Rosenblum argue that precisely the disinterest in scholarship, explanation, and theory sets the new conspiracism apart from what went before.

Adorno, the priests of Baal, and the Chinese opium trade. Needless to say, such secret connections do not exist—or at least do not exist in anything like the form imagined by this particular conspiracy theorist. In fact, the conceit of presenting history as a web of secret connections does not even begin to do justice to how “incredible and fascinating” history really is. Among the other things it aspires (or has aspired) to be, this book is happy to see itself as an attempt to illustrate this simple truth.

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