A glance at the contents of this first section of this handbook will make one thing immediately apparent to the reader: Many disciplines have something to say about conspiracy theory. This observation only seems unremarkable until one is challenged to name another phenomenon whose elucidation can draw upon such disparate research endeavours. Anthropological fieldwork in tribal societies can shed light on conspiracy theory, but this is also true of the data-crunching algorithms applied to digital media by social network analysis. Tests carried out by social psychologists on human subjects can be similarly illuminating, while the deep reading of post-modern novels offered by literary scholars also warrants attention. What other object of study can claim to be a point of convergence for so many researchers coming from so many disciplines? If nothing else, the cursory glance at the chapter headings in this section will suggest to the reader that there are few other phenomena that can hold a candle to conspiracy theory in this respect.

The next remarkable point, not so obvious from the chapter headings themselves but clear from a perusal of their contents, is that this research is all of relatively recent origin. Throughout the twentieth century, scholars occasionally asked questions and pursued lines of inquiry that in retrospect can be assimilated into the prehistory of research on this phenomenon (Thalmann 2019). And yet it was only in the 1990s, and more particularly under the auspices of cultural studies, that research into conspiracy theories established itself as an ongoing concern. The mysterious workings of the Zeitgeist were in play here; Fenster (1999), Knight (2000) and Melley (2000) assure us that they all alighted upon the theme of conspiracy theory independently of each other. With the appearance of their works in close succession at the end of the previous millennium, the field of research spluttered into life. Since then it has been picking up momentum and drawing more researchers from different fields into its orbit. Today, new work is being produced at such a rate that, even for an academic who is committed to research on this topic, it has become a challenge in its own right to keep up.

So why did it take so long? If a historical perspective can identify the presence of conspiracy theories at far earlier stages of the historical record, why was it only in the twentieth century that people started to notice the existence of a generic phenomenon? And why was it only at the end of that century that people started to engage in a sustained conversation about them? And, finally, why was it only in the first decades of this new century that a burgeoning research field began to manifest itself in the form of a flurry of publications and grants awarded to projects devoted to this topic?
The answer has at least in part to do with the conflicted nature of our relationship to conspiracy theories. On the one hand, they are an object of study like any other phenomenon that engages the attention of social scientists and scholars in the humanities. On the other hand, conspiracy theory is a competitor of sorts. In parallel to academic research, it also is equipped to observe political events, cultural trends and economic forces. Likewise, to account for these observations, it fashions and submits explanations, often in accordance with a logic that can seem unnervingly similar to that of accredited scholarship and that at times generates discussion about a common ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. The result is a situation in which explanations seeking the imprimatur of legitimate academic research are compelled to distance themselves from conspiracy theory. This naturally results in a negative default setting, evident already in the pejorative connotations associated with the concept ‘conspiracy theory’ and its morphological variations (‘conspiracy theories’, ‘conspiracy theorist’, etc.).

A description of this situation can be refined by enlisting the notion of boundary-work outlined in the well-known essay by the sociologist of science Thomas Gieryn (1983) and elaborating upon his conception of scientific activity by adding a complementary notion of object-work. Boundary-work, according to Gieryn, entailed the deployment of a historically and situationally variable ideology of science to justify the preferential treatment of one form of investigatory and interpretative activity over another. Consequently, this kind of work justifies its recognition of certain kinds of research and certain kinds of explanation as bona fide science by denying this recognition to other kinds of ‘non-scientific’ research and explanation. Yet scientists do not just do boundary-work. To denote the other kind of work they conduct, once they have secured research funds and built up institutional infrastructure by dint of boundary-work, one might speak of ‘object-work’. It comprises of activities such as observation, experimentation, description and theorisation. This pairing of object-work and boundary-work captures (some of) the complexities of intellectual inquiry into conspiracy theory: dealing with conspiracy theory requires researchers to multi-task by engaging simultaneously, or at least in short alteration, in both object-work and boundary-work. Juggling these dual demands is not an easy task. It requires us, for example, to approach conspiracy theories in a spirit of open-minded neutrality, just as other researchers approach their objects of study, while insisting at the same time that conspiracy theories are not to be taken seriously or seen as legitimate alternatives to our own explanations; after all, boundary-work is never neutral.

Different disciplines manage these dual demands in different ways. Because conspiracy theories often submit alternative explanations for sociological phenomena, sociologists are, for example, subjected to the demands of boundary-work to a greater degree than, say, psychologists, whose explanations do not generally stand in such a competitive relationship to those of conspiracy theory – though, even here, conspiracy theory can offer itself as a mode of explanation to account for certain kinds of mental impairment and trauma for which psychologists devise distinct explanations (Showalter 1997). In this first section of the handbook, we gather together contributions from a multitude of disciplines that have, each in their own way, embraced the dual challenge of object-work and boundary-work on conspiracy theories. The contributors describe the specific understanding of conspiracy theory developed by their discipline, the methods their discipline has developed and the track record it has to show in terms of research activity and output.

The section opens with two chapters that lay some of the essential foundations for the contemporary study of conspiracy theory: the chapter by McKenzie-McHarg (1.1) outlines the genealogy of the concept ‘conspiracy theory’ and uncovers the origins of the ambivalence it tends to elicit, while the chapter by Butter and Knight (1.2) summarises the field-defining work carried out in cultural, literary and historical studies, has provided key insights informing the recent surge in scholarly research on conspiracy theory.
After a chapter by Leone, Madisson and Ventsel (1.3), which focuses on the semiotics of conspiracy theory as systems for the production of meaning, two chapters follow that tack between the contrasting approaches of analytical and continental philosophy: Räikkä and Ritola (1.4) examine philosophical debates on the definition, epistemic justification and ethical status of conspiracy theory, while, by focusing on psychoanalysis and critical theory, Blanuša and Hristov (1.5) delve into the pathologisation of conspiracism, the role that desire plays in conspiracist thinking and the interpretation of conspiracy theory as a symptom of late capitalism.

The next chapters explore the approaches developed by three classical social sciences. Rabo (1.6) focuses on the cultural dimension of conspiracy theory and explains how anthropological research methods (particularly participant observation) can be used in its study. The chapter by Nefes and Romero-Reche (1.7) on sociology and social theory discusses how conspiracy theory is associated with modernity and the processes it sets in motion (rationalisation and secularisation, emergence of the nation-state, etc.). The chapter by Giry and Tika (1.8) highlights the political dimension of conspiracy theory, focusing on its relations to political institutions and actors.

The final two chapters look forward. The chapter by Klein and Nera (1.9) succinctly outlines the history and methods of research conducted by social psychologists on conspiracy theory and thus functions as a bridge to section 2 of this handbook. The chapter by Gualda Caballero (1.10) explores the possibilities afforded by social media analysis for large-scale research on the dissemination of conspiracy theories.

This brief overview of this section’s contents prompts two general comments. First, while relatively comprehensive, the range of contributions is not exhaustive. Although we have aimed to solicit contributions from as many fields as possible, gaps remain, leaving us to speculate about what chapters from those disciplines absent from this section might have hypothetically added to the conversation. Thus, it will be noticed that there is no chapter written by economists. Is there an economics of conspiracy theorising? And, if so, in what sense? Claire Birchall’s essay about ‘the commodification of conspiracy theory’ (2002) would represent one possible point of departure in initiating object-work in this direction. And it would certainly seem that economists might have something to say about the aspect of boundary-work. After all, the experiences of depression, inflation, displacement, lay-offs and economic hardship in general have long been grist to the mill of conspiracy theorising. It would be interesting to consider the practices of demarcation with which economists seek to ensure that their explanations are not confused or conflated with those submitted by conspiracy theorists.

And, as one further example, what about gender studies? The seminal contributions of Fenster, Knight and Melley identified rich material and submitted stimulating analysis, amply demonstrating the relevance of this perspective. Thus, Knight examined the efforts of American feminists to draw upon conspiracy theory and at the same time disavow it in accounting for the disappointments and disillusionment experienced by the feminist cause. In doing so, he detailed the ambivalences of boundary-work as performed in popular, non-academic feminist writings. More recently, an essay by Birte Christ (2014) offered an example of the insights to be derived from the particular kind of object-work that gender studies was uniquely positioned to perform – and supplemented this analysis with the added bonus of suggestive reflection on why research into conspiracy theory is marked by a conspicuous male bias (of which the team of sub-editors for this section of the handbook must, somewhat sheepishly, admit itself as a further exhibit).

The second comment pertains to the order of the contributions. The section begins with a contribution on conceptual history, based on the notion that any inquiry should clarify the concepts and terms it employs at the outset. The order of the rest of the chapters is not based on a simple chronology of how different academic disciplines came to address the issue of conspiracy theories, because much of the work emerged more or less simultaneously and was often
interdisciplinary in outlook. Instead, the chapters are arranged thematically, suggesting the links – but also the tensions – between the differing approaches.

This absence of a rigid ordering principle in this opening section has a wider significance. Today, we no longer have a *trivium* (logic, grammar, rhetoric) that grounds a *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music), both of which are then encyclopaedically rounded by a universalistic conception of stable knowledge. We are similarly no longer beholden to a scheme of cognitive faculties, made up of memory, reason and imagination, just as we have also abandoned the notion of a hierarchy of academic faculties whose order can potentially be called into question by a ‘conflict of the faculties’. Of course, the demise of such overarching epistemic taxonomies and architectures occasioned its own bouts of conspiracy theorising, which tended to implicate Enlightenment *philosophes* as the culprits guilty of subversion. Yet, leaving aside these flights of conspiracist fantasy, the service rendered in the past by these taxonomies and architectures is instructive: They regulated the relationship between the disciplines. Now that this regulative function is left unattended, the question about these relationships poses itself with an unprecedented urgency and generates calls for interdisciplinarity. Suddenly, we are forced to consider how autonomous disciplines should not only regard external reality but the other neighbouring disciplines with which they share building space on university campuses and with which they compete for student enrolments, funds, grants and public recognition, but from which they can also potentially learn and be inspired and stimulated. Gieryn has suggested that disciplines also engage in boundary-work vis-à-vis neighbouring disciplines – indeed, disciplines *are* disciplines because they have the ‘discipline’ to remain loyal to their own distinct perspectives – and yet this boundary-work would seemingly occur according to slightly different rules than those that apply to non-scientific knowledge (such as conspiracy theory). The call for interdisciplinarity might equate to a demand to re-evaluate these rules. Be that as it may, the first section of the handbook does not itself perform the (hard) work of interdisciplinarity but, by gathering its individual contributions and placing them in close proximity, creates conditions conducive to its occurrence. Subsequent sections of this handbook will then rise to the challenge of this work.

A second service of traditional epistemic taxonomies lay in their assurance that the field of knowledge was limited and, with sufficient diligence and adequate resources, could be mastered. That is no longer the case, and even a sub-field such as that devoted to the phenomenon of conspiracy theory demonstrates how our knowledge has become dynamic and ever-expanding. If, as noted above, that now makes it hard to keep up, the following chapters and this handbook in general might be thought to merely exacerbate the problem: yet more reading material to process! The aim of this section, however, is to provide vantage points from which to survey this rapidly expanding field of inquiry, and a map of how different disciplines make sense of conspiracy theories.

**References**


Introduction