1.1 CONCEPTUAL HISTORY AND CONSPIRACY THEORY

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Introduction

One of the striking features of the scholarship devoted to conspiracy theories is an acutely felt need to define the object of study. The study of other objects, by contrast, does not appear to labour under the same onus. Students of literature are not burdened to the same degree with the duty of defining, say, what an autobiography is, anthropologists can describe their experiences in the field without feeling compelled to submit a definition of shamanism and political scientists can discuss declining membership in trade unions without feeling the same pressure to first determine what constitutes the essence of such an organisation. As impressionistic as this observation might be, it can nevertheless serve as a springboard for some reflections about what intellectual commitments we are actually making by prefacing our inquiry into conspiracy theories with the search for a definition. What alternative avenues of inquiry we foreclosing – perhaps inadvertently or unconsciously – as a result of treating the object of study in this manner?

In this first contribution to the first section of this handbook, the aim is to examine one particular approach that exhibits a more qualified attitude to definitions. This is the approach known as conceptual history. In his *Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche made a quotable aside: ‘only something which has no history can be defined’ (Nietzsche 2007: 53). Nietzsche’s succinct rebuttal of the ahistorical metaphysics that often implicitly underpins attempts at definition has served on more than one occasion as a reference point for practitioners of conceptual history (see, for example, Koselleck 2004: 85). Distilled down into its starkest implications, it would seemingly confront us with two options: either admit the historical variability of conspiracy theory as a phenomenon and relinquish thereby the desire to define it, or insist upon its definability and deny that the phenomenon exhibits any variability in the course of history.

In fact, there are good reasons to regard the search for definitions with a degree of scepticism even without appealing to historical variability. The demand for a definition is often a reaction to what is felt to be a vagueness that inheres to conspiracy theory as a concept. It is, however, worth considering to what degree this vagueness is ‘baked in’ to the concept from the very start and therefore might not necessarily represent some conceptual flaw to be rectified through the work of definition (*locus classicus* for this consideration: Gallie 1956). A further source of unease derives from an awareness that the concept of conspiracy theory hardly qualifies as neutral. Instead, it is attended by an entourage of negative connotations that help it to achieve one of its primary
functions, namely: to disqualify what are deemed to be unorthodox and aberrant accounts of social and political reality. Richard Hofstadter was particularly unabashed in ascribing such a negative function to his own synonymous coinage, the paranoid style. As he wrote in his famous essay, “the term “paranoid style” is pejorative, and it is meant to be” (Hofstadter 1996 [1965]: 5 [my italics]). Conspiracy theory and its derivates (in particular: conspiracy theorist) have a similar ‘illocutionary’ profile. This is evident not least from the habit of disavowing any general association with the phenomenon, as exemplified by the leading clause ‘I am not a conspiracy theorist but…’, which then prefaces what in most cases can be described as a conspiracy theory (Knight 2001: 17; Harambam 2017: 181–3; McKenzie-McHarg, Fredheim 2017: 162–3).

One work that has squarely faced both the vagueness inhering to the concept of conspiracy theory and its usage as a term of derision and disqualification is Jack Bratich’s Conspiracy Panics (2008). According to Bratich, the vagueness is built into the concept because of the flexibility that it then is able to offer liberal regimes in their efforts to draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate forms of discourse. Bratich thus adopts a meta-position that accounts for both those features that have unsettled many researchers invested in a study of conspiracy theories that aspires to be both precise and value-neutral. And, yet, these valuable insights have been developed in a manner that is largely devoid of a historical dimension and that indeed suggests that conspiracy theories do not even really exist until the concept used to label them as such has emerged (Butter 2014: 289). It is here that conceptual history can provide a remedy by cultivating a sensitivity to the concept not only as it operates to safeguard the rationality of regimes of liberalism, but also as it varies over time.

**Conceptual history as a methodology**

Bratich’s line of argument, implies that conspiracy theories, if they exist at all, only do so from the moment at which the term has emerged to designate them as such. This position represents one extreme in a range of answers to the question about when conspiracy theories themselves first emerge in the historical record. The uncertainty that besets scholars in trying to formulate definitions of conspiracy theories thus finds its pendant among historians in the diverging opinions about the specific time and place at which the historical record unambiguously bears witness to their presence in social and political discourse. Located at the opposite end of the spectrum from Bratich are those scholars who regard conspiracy theorising as an anthropological constant. Thus, in an early article that aimed to sketch a first map of the phenomenon, the historian Dieter Groh (1987) characterised conspiracy theorising as a universal activity not specific to any time and place. An essentially equivalent position with regard to the temporal range of this phenomenon has been put forward in the recent volume In the Beginning was the Conspiracy Theory [Am Anfang war die Verschwörungstheorie] (Raab et al. 2017). In this book’s first chapter, the authors claim that a proclivity for conspiracy theorising emerged as humans transited from nomadic forms of existence to sedentary lives; settlements that humans began to inhabit engendered a more acute spatial awareness of boundaries drawn between those on the inside and those on the outside, and this development fostered the earliest forms of conspiracy theorising.

In the absence of written sources, such an argument remains speculative. Some historians are, however, adamant that the documentary record of both ancient Athens and ancient Rome attests to the presence of conspiracy theories within the political culture of these societies (Pagán 2004; Roisman 2006; Pagán 2008). Conspiracy theories are also thought to have left their imprint on certain episodes of medieval history, especially the accusations of collusion levelled at Jews, Muslims and lepers in southern France in 1320 and 1321 (Barber 1981; Ginzburg 2004 and, for a different reading of these episodes, Nirenberg 1996). Such observations have not
hindered German historian Cornel Zwierlein from suggesting that the first genuine conspiracy theories actually emerged in the early modern period as an infrastructure for the exchange of information, most visible in the northern Italian city-states, encouraged new forms of political calculation and prognostication (Zwierlein 2013). Michael Butter, by contrast, sees conspiracy theories ‘as a product of the Enlightenment’; ‘They first emerged during the seventeenth century and assumed the form we associate with them today in the second half of the eighteenth century’ (Butter 2014: 11), a position that directly contradicts the one adopted by Groh, who maintained that ‘the emergence and spread of conspiracy theories was obviously not greatly influenced by the universal-historical caesura whose core period extended from 1750 to 1850’ (Groh 1987: 11). At the same time, Butter felt confident in having demonstrated that ‘conspiracy theories exist independently of the designation “conspiracy theory”’ (Butter 2014: 289) – an assertion that obviously is at odds with the position staked out by Bratich, whose understanding of conspiracy theories as part of the tool kit employed by liberal forms of governance in policing the boundaries of acceptable discourse implies a dependence upon an availability of the explicit term.

Thus, there is a spectrum of possible answers about the time and place of the emergence of conspiracy theory as a phenomenon, and this spectrum obviously implies divergent answers about what a conspiracy theory is. Within this spectrum, the emergence of the concept itself might, however, represent a development whose analysis has the potential to illuminate the nature of the phenomenon in question. For, if historians and social scientists have difficulties in reaching a consensus about when the first bona fide conspiracy theories appear in the historical record, it should be easier to reach agreement about when the concept begins to emerge. This is because the concept is linked to words and expressions with an undeniable presence in the historical documents.

Framing the inquiry in this manner leads to the following conclusion: in a period extending roughly from 1870 to 1970, conspiracy theory enters the conceptual vocabulary of society. Expressing this result in a slightly different manner, it is possible to say that society first began to ‘observe’ conspiracy theories within this period. Obviously, this finding does not preclude the possibility that conspiracy theories existed before 1870 (pace Bratich). In fact, it raises an intriguing line of inquiry, expressed in the form of the following question: if we can specify the conditions that between 1870 and 1970 induced this generalised awareness of conspiracy theories, can we work back from this insight to arrive at a more refined appreciation of what conspiracy theories are? This appreciation need not lead to an infallible or unobjectionable definition that enlightens us about the essence of a conspiracy theory. What might instead be achieved is something akin to an x-ray image of the concept that helps us better understand the structure of that segment of reality to which the concept applies.

Conceptual history as a distinctive approach within historiography came into its own in the second half of the twentieth century as a sense of linguistic change imposed itself on society at large. Of course, people had previously been aware of linguistic variation, whether it applied to the differences between languages and dialects or between the registers of the same language (high/low, upper-class/lower-class, etc.). The drastic transformation of societies in the twentieth century now alerted people to diachronic variation, i.e. to shifts in the meaning of words, observable within their own lifetimes. Thus, cultural historian Raymond Williams relates in the introduction to his own contribution to this field *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* the sense of bewilderment he shared with a fellow student at Cambridge upon returning to the university after active service during the Second World War: ‘the fact is, they just don’t speak the same language’ (Williams 1983: 11). Williams’s sense of linguistic disorientation centred at first on the concept of culture, but it soon spread to other significant points on the conceptual
map: class, art, industry, democracy. The experience sharpened the awareness that the meaning of such concepts had always been in flux.

Among historians as that subset of people most directly involved in the attempt to make sense of the past, an awareness of semantic changes took the form of apprehensions about the old bugbear of their profession, namely anachronism (‘the worst of all sins, the sin that cannot be forgiven’ [Febvre 1982 : 5]). Historians came to realise that one can only truly come to terms with the past on the terms of the past, i.e. by appreciating how the older usage and meaning of terms might differ from the usage and meaning familiar to us in the present. Thus, anachronism is not simply a case of objects that later narratives erroneously insert into historical contexts in which they did not exist, as, for example, famously happens when Shakespeare allows Cassius to note, while conspiring with Brutus against Caesar, that ‘The clock hath stricken three’ (Shakespeare Act 2, Scene 1). More subtle anachronisms distort the view of the past when it is forgotten that the present exists not only at a temporal distance to the past but also at a linguistic and conceptual one. Conceptual history built on the intuition that, rather than further obscuring the past, this linguistic and conceptual displacement could, if studied systematically and with the appropriate methods, actually illuminate history.

In the endeavour to transform this awareness of the historicity of language into a method and then into a research programme, conceptual history could draw upon resources that had been recently made available by linguists and philosophers of language (Saussure, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, etc.). In this regard, conceptual history numbers among the beneficiaries of the ‘linguistic turn’. Precisely for this reason, it sets itself apart from an older history of ideas that was more vulnerable to the anachronisms entailed by a notion of ideas that are imagined hovering semi-platonically above a discourse. The conceptual historian is, by contrast, aware that a linguistic dimension inheres to concepts in a way that is not necessarily so true of ideas. This linguistic dimension anchors a concept within a social, political and historical context.

And yet while participation in the linguistic turn is relatively uncontroversial, debate has opened up on a number of fronts. The first debate concerns the concept itself – or, one might say, the concept of the concept. Concepts are obviously not the things themselves to which they refer nor are they simply the words or terms that achieve this act of reference. Various proposals have been put forward in an effort to clarify this relationship (see, for example, Weitz 1977; Busse 1987), yet this article will desist from any attempt to adjudicate in this regard, other than to affirm the good sense in drawing a three-way distinction: 1. thing/phenomenon; 2. word/term; 3. concept. It will be observed by orthographic differentiation: plain text refers to the thing itself, discussion of the word or the term is marked by quotation marks, while the concept itself is indicated by the use of italics. In due course, the reasons for distinguishing between ‘conspiracy theory’ as a term and conspiracy theory as a concept will become apparent.

If the preceding discussion pertains to the concept itself and how it is ‘built’ internally, a second debate has been set in motion by the concern that the concept might not be the appropriate unit of analysis in exploring the linguistic dimension of the historical record. These doubts culminate in the apprehension that a focus on the singular concept artificially isolates it from the semantic field in which it is embedded; such isolation is thought to incur the risk of a relapse into an older form of the history of ideas. Clearly one way to offset this apprehension is to emphasise how the concept is indeed related to the semantic field. In this regard one might decide to follow the historian J.G.A. Pocock, who has identified specific ‘languages’ as distinct sets of rhetorical rules and conventions specific to a particular political tradition or ideology. Or, alternatively, one could turn to Michel Foucault and his notion of discourse as a combination of language and practices that embodies a set of power relations and is generative of a certain type of knowledge.
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Even if both Pocock and Foucault might prefer to treat ‘languages’ or discourses themselves as the unit and object of analysis rather than specific concepts, there is then an even grander question concerning how language in general relates to the non-linguistic environment and how, more specifically, historical actors figure within it: are they sites of agency that exist outside the text or is this a spectral illusion to be deconstructed via the means of discourse analysis? A range of positions can be found on these issues among the innovators of historical methodology in the second half of the twentieth century, whether they come from the direction of Foucault’s discourse analysis, the contextualist readings of early modern political philosophy put forward by the Cambridge School or from Reinhart Koselleck as the *primus inter pares* presiding over the expansive lexicon tracing the semantic shifts in European political and social concepts (with a particular focus on German), the eight-volume *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (*GG*). Although the mutual awareness between these lines of inquiry was only slight and their interaction only sporadic, it is not difficult to identify a common sensibility to linguistic change that, even if insufficient for the purpose of subsuming these endeavours under the heading of one project, nevertheless justifies the view that sees them as all part of the same broader intellectual movement.

The fact that these undertakings have reached a state of completion or appear to have run their course has raised the question about the future prospects of conceptual history. Proponents of this approach are currently grappling with both challenges and opportunities. If conceptual history advanced due to the tailwind generated by the linguistic turn, other turns – visual, material – have since opened up new perspectives onto the past; one challenge is to relate these lines of inquiry to conceptual history. (See, for preliminary explorations of the link to the visual turn, some of the contributions in Hampsher-Monk *et al.* 1998). A further challenge is to globalise the application of conceptual history, to thereby extend is application to cultures beyond the Western hemisphere and to consider what kind of light it can shed upon cultural transfer, specifically by asking how concepts are translated from one language to another (see, for an initiative in this direction, Pernau and Sachsenmaier 2016). Admittedly, the preliminary research to be sketched in this entry to the handbook is liable to dash any hopes that the conceptual history of conspiracy theory will contribute to the broader project of ‘provincializing Europe’ or more broadly the Western hemisphere (Chakrabarty 2000). Insofar as the story is a global one, it seems to be one of how the concept, after having been fashioned within a transatlantic context, has then been exported to other parts of the world – a pattern that might reflect the actual dissemination of the phenomenon of conspiracy theory itself (Butter 2018: 140–1).

In confronting these challenges, conceptual history can profit from the exciting opportunity presented to it in the form of big data and the digital humanities (see, for a bold attempt to innovate new methods on this basis in excavating the conceptual history of human rights, de Bolla 2013). If the breadth of sources drawn upon by earlier conceptual historians was impressive, particularly as demonstrated by many articles in the *GG*, it is nevertheless clear that the limitations of time, energy and access to sources skewed these efforts in the direction of studies focusing on the more rarefied heights of intellectual debate as preserved in books and journals. New databases make it possible for historians to tap into other levels of discourse where old concepts have been reshaped and new ones forged (Müller 2014). This development opens up avenues that are especially relevant for conspiracy theory studies, given that conspiracy theories have tended to find a home outside academic discourse.

Thus, Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent have drawn upon the letters to the editors sent to the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* as one source of empirical data for the longitudinal analysis they carry out in their book *American Conspiracy Theories* (2014). As another example with a more specifically conceptual focus, my colleague Rolf Fredheim and I recently authored
a study that drew upon *Hansard* (i.e. the records of the debates in the British parliament) as a unique source of reported speech in examining how the absorption of *conspiracy theory* into the conceptual vocabulary employed within parliament was correlated with a decline in the level of accusations of conspiracy voiced in its chambers. This decline occurred in part (one would presume) because members of parliament have become keen to avoid exposure to the charge that they are peddling conspiracy theories (McKenzie-McHarg, Fredheim 2017). The article is thus an attempt to take the measure of the illocutionary profile of *conspiracy theory* as that aspect of the concept that deprives it of its neutrality and therefore engenders doubt in some minds about its legitimate place in the context of the social sciences and historical research.

Even if conceptual history rises to these challenges and takes advantage of these opportunities, there is no reason to suppose that its status will change. It is, and always has been, essentially a *Hilfswissenschaft*, an ‘auxiliary science’ that does not presume to put forward a comprehensive model of what historical research should be but instead offers itself as a supplementary and complementary source of clarification and insight into certain aspects of the past. *Conspiracy theory* as a concept provides a cogent demonstration of its potential in this regard. Thus, the decision to examine *conspiracy theory* is motivated by the expectation that this approach will guide and inspire further research into conspiracy theory as a real-world phenomenon.

**The merger of conspiracy and theory**

An obvious point of departure in exploring the conceptual history of *conspiracy theory* is to take note of the fact that it is a compound concept. As a result, purely on a lexical level the concept encourages us to break it down into its constituent parts (i.e. *conspiracy* and *theory*) and to consider what each part contributes to the characterisation of the phenomenon in question. Adopting this approach, it would seem that *conspiracy theory* achieves the feat of uniting a concept of a political provenance, namely *conspiracy*, with a concept exhibiting primarily a scientific pedigree, namely *theory*. It is advisable to exercise caution here as it would be naïve to assume that the conceptual breakdown into *conspiracy* and *theory* corresponds to a useful or tenable analytical decomposition of the phenomenon itself. And yet undoubtedly our understanding of conspiracy theories will profit from a more thorough appreciation first of the historical changes experienced individually by the concepts *conspiracy* and *theory*, and second of the circumstances that brought about the conjoinment of these concepts roughly from 1870 onwards. High expectations in this regard are justified because the current state of affairs in the research literature is not satisfactory. When accounts of conspiracy theory acknowledge the noteworthiness of the concept, there is an almost obligatory compulsion to point out the etymological derivation of *conspiracy* from the Latin verb *conspire* (to breathe [*spirare*] together [*con-]*)], just as there is an almost inevitable tendency to ignore *theory*, presumably on the grounds that the status and function of this part of the concept are more self-evident and self-explanatory.

A first step in remedying this situation might be taken by turning to the *GG* for some insight into the history of the political component of the concept in question, namely *conspiracy* (or, in German, *Verschwörung*). However, disappointment awaits in this regard. When it comes to conspiracy (*Verschwörung, Konspiration*, etc.), the *GG* is not overly forthcoming and the relevant comments are, for the most part, limited to a subsection of the article on revolution and rebellion (Bulst et al. 1984: 674–81). Nevertheless, for the purpose of outlining a conceptual history of *conspiracy theory*, it is possible to make heuristic use of the general theoretical comments with which Koselleck introduces this expansive project of post-war, West-German historiography (1972). This is particularly true if Koselleck’s comments are supplemented by the initiative recently taken by the younger historian Christian Geulen to extend the *GG* project into more
modern times (Geulen 2010). In this manner, we can achieve a first approximation in understanding the fusion of conspiracy and theory.

According to Koselleck, in the period spanning the century from 1750 to 1850 – a period that, with a focus on conditions in the German-speaking lands, he called the Sattelzeit – an older conceptual vocabulary, attuned to the hierarchical distinctions of the old order, was reconfigured in order to answer the needs of a new social and political reality whose normative framework had been most dramatically articulated in the ideals of the French Revolution. In attempting to disaggregate the general trends involved in this fundamental reconfiguration of the conceptual architecture of European political discourse, Koselleck identified the following forces for the Sattelzeit (1750–1850): Democratisation/temporalisation/ideologisation/politicisation.

It might be asked whether, once a concept such as freedom had traversed the ‘saddle’ of the Sattelzeit by divesting itself of the connotations of aristocratic privilege and by acquiring new associations linking it to the affordances of modern citizenship, it found its place within a new stable conceptual architecture. Geulen (2010) has argued that, in fact, the shifts in conceptual meaning continued apace after the Sattelzeit. In conscious emulation of the framework put forward by Koselleck, he has likewise proposed a quadripartite schema, made up of the following forces that dominated conceptual change in the period that he has simply designated as ‘modernity’ (1850–ca.1970) and that succeeded the Sattelzeit: Scientisation/spatialisation/popularisation/volatilisation or disintegration.

Without making excessive commitments to the two analytical breakdowns of semantic change as proposed successively by Koselleck and Geulen, one trend from each schema seems relevant in modelling the process by which conspiracy and then theory were nudged into positions that allowed them to dock into each other and thus create the modern concept of conspiracy theory.

We can begin with democratisation. If democracy has been recognised to be an ‘appraisive’ concept (Gallie 1956: 184) in the manner in which it prescribes norms to be observed by politicians and policy-makers operating within a democratic liberal state, democratisation, by contrast, a broader category. Its purpose is to neutrally register how certain opportunities, activities, courses of action and interpretations of the meaning of that action, all of which were once the exclusive preserve of an elite group, were subsequently extended to the generality (even though restrictions based on gender, age, religious affiliation or ethnicity might continue to apply). An example is provided by the concept of interest. As historian J.A.W. Gunn has pointed out, while originally kings and princes ‘had spoken mysteriously of their interests’, the concept was democratised in the course of the seventeenth century, leading to a new conception of human behaviour underscored by the recognition that ‘all men had such interests’ (Gunn 1968: 556). In other words, interest as ‘the guide for princes might be, and in fact was, the same as that for all human beings’ (Gunn 1968: 557).

The exposure of the concept of conspiracy to a similar process of democratisation is suggested by the observation, made by Machiavelli in his Discorsi at the beginning of the sixteenth century, that ‘all conspiracies have been made by men of standing (uomini grandi) or else by men in immediate attendance on a prince, for other people, unless they be sheer lunatics, cannot form a conspiracy’ (Machiavelli 2003: 402). This observation can be contrasted with the statements of Lucien de la Hodde, an agent infiltrating the milieu of nineteenth-century French republican secret societies in which republican ideals and copious wine created a heady mix: ‘recruiting went on exclusively among the very lowest classes of society, where, it is well known, a conspiracy is not retarded by being prosecuted with glass in hand’ (de la Hodde 1856: 219). Clearly, conspiracy was no longer an activity confined to the court of the prince. By the nineteenth century, the concept and the form of action it designated had slipped its original moorings and
had now lodged itself in a shadowy, proletarian *demi-monde* populated by figures whose humble background would have precluded their forebears from any involvement in politics in general and conspiracies in particular.

In fact, in the course of the eighteenth century, a causal link was forged that tied the concept of *conspiracy* to the concept of *revolution* and that the expansive works of Augustin Barruel, John Robison and Johann August Starck consummated with their common claim that the French Revolution had been set in motion by a conspiracy of philosophers, Freemasons and Illuminati (Oberhauser 2013). By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was natural for de la Hodde to see in revolution the *modus operandi* of ‘secret associations, whose designs are not only a change of persons but an overthrow of society’ (de la Hodde 1856: 219). In this manner, conspiracy was no longer regarded as a merely episodic convulsion set off by a ‘power grab’ in the world of politics. Rather, it had become the hidden cause of profound political and social change. It was this process of democratisation that primed *conspiracy* for its use in the concept *conspiracy theory*.

But what were the circumstances that compelled later observers to then see such explanations invoking conspiracy through the conceptual prism provided by *theory*? In fact, *theory* only began to offer itself as the semantic ‘handle’ with which to denote such explanations in the second period for which Geulen has proposed his own schema as a successor to Koselleck’s. It makes sense to pay close attention to the specific process denoted as scientisation in attempting to make sense of how and why *theory* advanced to the term fulfilling this function within the framework of what is now known as *conspiracy theory*. Scientisation denotes the process by which scientific standards, norms and models were imitated and emulated in areas of society that were previously legitimised by tradition or other sources of authority. Closer scrutiny reveals that the process of scientisation induced a pairing of *conspiracy* and *theory* within two distinct discourses: (i) the first was associated with the prosecution of crime and its forensic investigation, (ii) the second arose in the twentieth century in the form of the social sciences.

(i) **Criminal Forensics**: Some of the idiosyncrasies of the first discourse can be now uncovered by using databases that have digitised masses of American newspapers and made them searchable for specific words and phrases. In this manner, it has proved possible to locate occurrences of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ that predate the twentieth century in which it was originally supposed that the term first arose. (See the entry dating ‘conspiracy theory’ to the year 1909 in Ayto 1999: 18.) Indeed, from the 1870s onwards, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ appears in reports on criminal and also civil cases in American newspapers. In a recently published article (McKenzie-McHarg 2019), I have argued that these occurrences of the term are to be understood against the backdrop of (i) an adoption of scientific methods in the forensic investigation of crimes and (ii) an effort on the part of journalists to be more objective (and therefore more ‘scientific’) in reporting on crime. Thus, in the 1870s, we see ‘conspiracy theory’ emerge as simply one compound term among others constructed according to the same template (*crime X + theory*) whenever discussion in newspapers turns to the tentative explanations that are provisionally put forward and subjected to the forms of methodological testing that were being developed within the framework of criminal forensics. In surveying the newspaper articles penned by journalists responsible for reporting on ongoing investigations and trials, it is also possible to find references to the ‘murder theory’, the ‘abduction theory’, the ‘blackmail theory’ and the like.

One factor conducive to the appearance of the ‘conspiracy theory’ in this context had to do with the status of conspiracy as a crime in Anglo-American common law. Yet the charge of conspiracy could also find traction in cases involving civil law, as is evident from the flurry of occurrences of ‘conspiracy theory’ as a term generated by the scandal that ensnared the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher in accusations of adultery in the early 1870s. The highly publicised trial that absorbed so much of the attention of the newspaper-reading public from early
1875 onwards was brought by Beecher’s erstwhile friend Theodore Tilton, with whose wife Beecher was alleged to have had illicit relations. The criminal, forensic dimension of a ‘conspiracy theory’ was more prominent when, in 1881, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ was deployed to denote speculation about the assassination of President Garfield, who, after being shot in July 1881, finally succumbed to his injury in September of that year.

A number of features of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ as it appears in this discourse deserve particular attention. First among these is its status as a term, rather than a concept. As it appears in these contexts, there is no evidence suggesting that ‘conspiracy theory’ formed part of a conceptual vocabulary, understood as a semantic memory bank from which concepts can be retrieved on successive occasions. Rather, the specific combination of words was generated each time anew by the specific needs of each specific case. A sure sign of the term’s purely denotative status is the fact that one never finds talk of ‘conspiracy theories’ (i.e. ‘conspiracy theory’ in the plural). Within the discourse of criminal forensics there is thus no awareness of conspiracy theory as a generic phenomenon whose existence embraces a bewildering array of specific manifestations (allegations of Judeo-Masonic responsibility for revolutions or military defeat, reports of alien abduction, claims that the moon landing was faked, etc.) and which therefore might call forth use of the corresponding concept to categorise its particular instantiations. Instead of a process of memory retrieval that applies for (generic) concepts, ‘conspiracy theory’ as a term is not retrieved but rather conjured into existence each time on the basis of processes that for their part entail deeper-lying shifts in the conceptual vocabulary, particularly as they pertain to the concept theory.

The fact that, whenever the term ‘conspiracy theory’ appears within the discourse of criminal forensics, it is produced anew and not retrieved, carries with it a further, noteworthy implication: In this context, ‘conspiracy theory’ is completely bereft of those connotations, negative or otherwise, that attend to the generic concept and are a source of unease for some researchers who would prefer to use a more neutral, less obviously biased term. To a certain degree, this wish is sustained by a muted awareness of this discourse (even if it is registered only as a possibility and not as a historical reality) in which ‘conspiracy theory’ does indeed have a neutral meaning, denoting without any prejudice those explanations that entertain the conjecture of multiple perpetrators of a crime working together ‘in cahoots’. This neutral—and naïve—usage of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ received a new lease of life first in the wake of the traumatic spate of assassinations that rocked American politics in the 1960s and then following the Watergate scandal. One of the first books to contain the term of interest in the title, Government by Gunplay: Assassination Conspiracy Theories from Dallas to Today (1976), collected a number of essays authored by members or associates of a citizens’ initiative known as the Assassination Information Bureau that dedicated itself to informing the public about the seedy underbelly of American politics. As befitted such a mission, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ appeared in the title as an entirely neutral designation for those explanations of an assassination that, rather than positing a lone assassin, posited instead a multiplicity of actors who had colluded in planning the act of violence. And yet the plural form indicates how the tumult of American politics in these years had given rise to an awareness of a generic phenomenon. This development set the term ‘conspiracy theory’ within the discourse of criminal forensics on a collision course with the concept conspiracy theory as it had emerged in a distinct discourse associated with the social sciences.

(ii) Social Science: Conspiracy theory was not simply a concept within the social science discourse but a negatively connotated one. The negative connotations reflected fundamental reservations about conspiracy as the model for explaining not so much individual crimes (such as assassinations) but broader social trends or large-scale political events (such as revolutions). Conspiracy in this tradition did not point to a specific crime but instead adumbrated an over-arching
narrative or an encompassing framework of subversion – with the implication that the meaning of specific events would first reveal itself once these events were placed in the broader context created by this subversion. The fact that conspiracy was in itself inadequate to the task of reaching these heights of abstraction becomes apparent in view of the need initially felt to append to conspiracy theory some general entity. Thus, we find talk of the conspiracy theory of society (Popper 1950), of history (Neumann 1957), of events and of politics (Bell 1960, 1963; see also, for the latter option, Baum 1960, and, for an astute analysis of the intellectual engagement with conspiracy theories during these decades, Thalmann 2019).

It suffices here to point to one precursor of this conceptual usage of conspiracy theory, first because it predates the previously cited sources but, unlike them, has thus far gone unnoticed, and second because it nevertheless exemplifies much of the logic of this particular tradition. Born in 1903 in San Bernardino, California, the political scientist Marshall Edward Dimock led an unobtrusive yet productive life in which periods of tenure at various American universities alternated with stints of public service. His primary interests were in the study of effective administration and in determining and adjudicating upon the responsibilities entailed by governing a modern, industrialised society. In 1937, he published Modern Politics and Administration: A Study of the Creative State. This work was an attempt to bring theories of public administration up to speed with developments that, particularly in the wake of the New Deal, had seen state action extend well beyond the traditional remit of protecting the population from external enemies and preserving the inner peace. Several theories, partly descriptive and partly normative in nature, competed in describing what the function of the modern state was or should be. One of them Dimock denoted as ‘the “conspiracy theory” of government’. As a first observation, Dimock’s coinage registers a development that assigned to the state authorities the role of the perpetrators of a conspiracy. These authorities were therefore no longer regarded as merely the conspiracy’s target, as corresponded to the traditional understanding of the concept. This inversion of the traditional scheme reflects the real-world trend that induced increasing numbers of Americans throughout the twentieth century to identify the state (or the government) as the point of origin of subversion, as noted and described first and foremost by historian Kathryn S. Olmsted (2009).

Dimock was aware that, in speaking of ‘the “conspiracy theory” of government’ in 1937, he was putting forward a neologism – his formulation was at this point in time ‘not customarily employed in political science’ – yet, at the same time, he was adamant that this formulation ‘best describes a position that needs to be identified’ (Dimock 1937: 50 [my italics]). He went on to note that:

Anyone who assumes that social relations are governed almost solely by careful calculation and design, the laying of plans against others, may be said to subscribe to the conspiracy theory. It is a simple explanation of political behaviour, and there is considerable substance in it; but there is great danger in trying to read too much into it.

(Dimock 1937: 50)

The important point was that Dimock’s conspiracy theory was a generic object, a recurrent pattern of thought that did not measure up to the more sociologically and psychologically sophisticated theories with which it competed and which, according to Dimock, could be legitimately dismissed on these grounds. Unlike the singular conspiracy theories to emerge from the forensic tradition, there were therefore a priori reasons for dismissing the conspiracy theories that came into view as distinct ‘epistemic objects’ against the backdrop of the modern social sciences. And yet at the same time, a note of equivocation reverberated through Dimock’s argument. As the above quotation...
indicates, he was ready to concede that the conspiracy theory was not without ‘considerable substance’. Formulating robust refutations of the conspiracy theory of government, of society, of history, of politics and of events would continue to present a challenge to social scientists and historians. The challenge would intensify once the unwieldy abstraction (government, society, history, etc.) was dropped (as already occurs in the passage from Dimock’s 1937 book reproduced above). As a consequence, one was left with a polyvalent term in which the difference between the term as produced by the discourse of forensics on the one hand and the concept as generated by the discourse of social science on the other was elided.

The end result was a concept troubled by the inadequacy of the dismissal of conspiracy theories as practised by the discourse of social science, given that conspiracies really did occur (as the discourse of forensics knew full well). The source of much of the ambivalence that we feel towards conspiracy theories becomes thus comprehensible when we use conceptual history to reconstruct the genealogy of the corresponding concept. It lays bare a ‘conflicted’ concept that has absorbed two distinct semantics, corresponding to two distinct attitudes towards conspiracy theory. In one semantic, ‘conspiracy theory’ was a neutral term employed to do ‘object-work’ in the field of criminal forensics; in the other, conspiracy theory was a negatively connoted concept that performed ‘boundary-work’ in the social sciences. (For the distinction between ‘object-work’ and ‘boundary-work’, see the introduction to this section). This insight has admittedly not brought us any closer to a definition – and certainly not to one that satisfies the strict criteria that philosophers since Aristotle have specified as preconditions for grasping the essence of a phenomenon. It has, however, hopefully sharpened our appreciation for conspiracy theory as a historically variable, epistemically complex phenomenon.

References


Conceptual history and conspiracy theory


