This section examines the impact of conspiracy theories in society and politics and, in turn, the impact of society and politics on the construction and dissemination of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are an inherently social phenomenon as their meaning often derives from their specific social context. They are constructed and reconfigured in socio-historical circumstances, by both their creators and consumers. Dissemination of conspiracy theories is enabled and constrained by means of distribution, which in recent years has been facilitated by new powerful digital technologies.

Conspiracy theories can be highly political, and their framing often comes from ideas around power and authority. For instance, conspiracy theories may ascribe hidden socio-political power and ambition to an outgroup (e.g. Jews, Muslims or Freemasons), or they can be used to undermine the integrity of authorities. Similarly, they are often dismissed by those in positions of authority as offering distorted explanations of reality. In providing alternative knowledge, conspiracy theories can be seen as the product of taking political positions, and their description of the world is often constructed in an attempt to mobilise people in a specific political struggle.

The effect of conspiracy theories on society and politics has been widely discussed by both academics, politicians and journalists alike. As is illustrated in this section, they play multiple roles for a variety of actors. They can be propagated by those in power who seek to bolster their influence in society. And they can also be upheld by various underdogs who challenge precisely those practices and their active roles in shaping the world to their wishes (Harambam 2017). Regimes can spread conspiracy theories to sow distrust towards undesirable groups (e.g. Chapter 3.8). Citizens who feel powerless and marginalised may use them to justify their distrust, or even to find a sense of community with fellow conspiracy believers (Harambam, Aupers 2017).

While also drawing on examples from specific times and places, the emphasis in this section is on general questions and dynamics: Who believes in conspiracy theories, how conspiracy theories surface in different societies, who produces and consumes them, the role conspiracy theories play for different types of regimes, and how they are aligned with other belief systems.

Conspiracy theories are often seen as only being a discredited or stigmatised counter-knowledge, and, thus, not true. This can be misleading. Sometimes conspiracy theories are officially sanctioned explanations. The most notorious example here are the antisemitic conspiracy theories of Nazi Germany. In other types of regimes and at other times, they are counternarratives, as with the conspiracy theories of the 9/11 Truth Movement.
As counternarratives, conspiracy theories are usually rooted in distrust, defiance and even a desire to destabilise reigning powers. As such, they can be problematic when the reigning powers are democratically elected authorities whose policy agenda is obstructed or delayed due to conspiracy theories. An example would be President Obama, who had to spend significant amounts of time and public relations resources to quell the conspiracy theory that he was not born in the U.S.A., or that his health care reform would include ‘death panels’ in which people would be judged by the state whether worthy of receiving health care coverage or not.

As Uscinski and Parent (2014) have pointed out, there are also examples of conspiracy theories being a creative force for good in politics, the prime example being the foundation of the U.S.A. The founding fathers believed that the king of England at the time, George III, was scheming to ensnare the colonies under his rule and absolute authority. In response, they wrote the Declaration of Independence (Howe 1979: 80). The political struggle over slavery was exacerbated by conspiracy beliefs on both sides. ‘Slave power’ conspiracy theories were part of the motivation for the politics of the abolitionists, and anti-abolitionist conspiracy theories were important in driving the conflict into secession and the civil war that ultimately ended slavery (Butter 2014: 167–222).

Dealing with the interplay between conspiracy theories and society and politics requires an interdisciplinary approach. Different sources and research methods give us different forms of access to the complex questions raised. Quantitative studies (as in Chapter 3.1 and 3.4) give us more than just the numbers of how many believe in certain things. They can also tell us something about their backgrounds, their political stance, their other beliefs and worries, their social contexts and, sometimes, their other forms of interaction with society. However, quantitative studies are less good at giving deep understanding of the lived contexts of different types of people engaging with conspiracy theories.

Qualitative studies (as exemplified in Chapter 3.2) give us a chance at differentiating between different types conspiracy theorists and seeing which ideas and theories actually gain traction in lived lives. They can often tell us about the lifeworlds and worldviews of those engaging with conspiracy theories, how they negotiate and construct their identities, what epistemic strategies they deploy and how they resist the stigmatisation of conspiracy theories. Participant observation is one of the ways we may also learn more about the differences and similarities between ‘leaders’ and conspiracy theory consumers, between the conspiracy entrepreneurs and their audiences. When and to what extent are audiences mainly ‘adherents’, and when are they active participants, reconfiguring conspiracy theories and sharing those in new networks? Ethnographic studies can give us information that is often hard to get from historical sources, but detailed engagement with written sources, and not merely that which has seen print, remains vital to investigating conspiracy beliefs from different epochs. It allows us to trace networks of influence and transmission, and sometimes the contents and contexts of conspiracy lore.

The question of entrepreneurs, audience and consumption becomes particularly visible in the sphere of cultural production. As section 4 of this handbook makes clear, literature, film and other media are also important scenes for the imagination of society and politics, not least including the dark desires of conspiracy theory. Popular culture is a vital scene on which the social imaginary plays out and, as a scene which reaches large audiences, it gives us important information about the imaginations of society and their political consequences.

When studying the impact of conspiracy theories in society and politics, it is necessary to take into consideration both those who produce them and those that adhere to them. The relationship between the two is highly complex and researchers can easily be misled. Conspiracy theories about the politically powerful may work differently than those involving mostly ethnic or sexual minorities, activating different political identities and affiliations. Another way of inquiring...
about participants is to analyse the nature of their entanglement, for instance by examining people’s everyday liaison with conspiracy theories, be they explicit or implicit.

Such explorations will often have to take into account wide and varied relations between multiple positions, including the interplay between believers of a conspiracy theory and those sceptical of it. What positions do people take and why? What is at stake? Who is involved, with what outcomes and which dynamics of power are played out? These questions call for specific investigations, but some of the outcomes point to more general answers. In the first chapter of the section (3.1), Smallpage et al. look at and problematise what we think we know about who believes in conspiracy theories and how we know it. The chapter gathers data from multiple countries and regions, and addresses both their contents and shortcomings. This is complemented by Harambam’s review of qualitative studies (3.2), which differentiates between the consumptive practices and social contexts of individual believers, the work of conspiracy entrepreneurs and the social activism of groups devoted to specific conspiracy beliefs. Some conspiracy believers are thus activists, but how does conspiracy belief more generally relate to political participation? This is the topic of the chapter by Thórisdóttir, Mari and Krouwel (3.4), who address whether and how conspiracy believers vote, and to what degree they are engaged in other political activities.

Conspiracy narratives involving gender roles have often been used to mobilise people to engage in collective action. These have often been of a conservative nature and may be intensely interested in ‘correct’ sexualities. Thiem (3.3) therefore discusses the connections between gender and sexuality. Drawing on historical data, she shows how a crisis of hegemonic masculinity is one of the key factors motivating conspiracy theories. She examines whether there is a distinction between men or women when it comes to belief in conspiracy theories. As shown by Borenstein (2019), conspiracy theories about sexuality and gender can also be part of regime-supportive or state-sponsored propaganda. Giry and Gürpinar (3.5) take a broader look at the use of conspiracy theories as propaganda. They focus mostly on findings about authoritarian regimes, but they also have a broader outlook that includes the propaganda of populist politicians. Populist movements have been on the rise throughout the world for at least the last two decades, and conspiracy theories have played a role in this rise in many countries (Bergmann 2018). Bergmann and Butter (3.6) address the relationship between populism and conspiracy theory.

According to research done in social psychology (see section 2), extreme, anti-democratic political and religious positions correlate with conspiracy beliefs, and narratives of conspiracy often play a role in the internal culture of extreme movements. However, as Lee shows (3.7), the role of conspiracy theories in the processes of radicalisation is complex and necessitates taking into account their function in creating a shared identity among believers. Conspiracy theories tend to point out who the enemy behind the curtain is, and one of the more consistent answers to that question has been ‘the Jews’. Simonsen (3.8) gives an overview of the development of antisemitism as a conspiracist tradition, from the high medieval period to the present. Jews are not the only minority that have been subject of conspiracy theories. Rounding out this section, Dyrendal (3.9) surveys some of the variety of relations between conspiracy theory and religion, looking through the lens of conspiracy theories as, about, and in religion.

There are of course many related issues to the interplay between conspiracy theories, society and politics that are not discussed in full detail here. Among them is the relation between race, ethnicity and conspiracy theory: the conspiracy beliefs of minorities, and the conspiracy beliefs about minorities, and how racial fears and fantasies play into that dynamic. Nor is there a specific focus on the complex, social use of conspiracy theory in political power games. Labelling something a ‘conspiracy theory’ can be a tool in policing epistemic boundaries, where one or both
sides claim the mantle of rationality, attempting to expel the accused party from reasoned social dialogue (e.g. Bratich 2008; Harambam, Aupers 2015). Such power contests may tend to favour those already powerful.

Another power game involves strategically levelling specific conspiracy theories against different social actors on e.g. social media in a way that is designed to silence critical speech. Accusing opponents of being a part of the conspiracy you claim to unveil is a well-known gambit. Variations of Pizzagate or QAnon theories accuse opponents of being part of a (often satanic) cabal of pedophiles, and these theories can be put to devastating use on social media, something we also see with regard to survivors of massacres and relatives of the slain in mass murders deemed ‘false flag’ episodes in conspiracy culture (e.g. Debies-Carl 2017; Persily 2017). These topics also merit further study.

References