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3.2 CONSPIRACY THEORY ENTREPRENEURS, MOVEMENTS AND INDIVIDUALS

Jaron Harambam

Introduction

Conspiracy theories – explanations of social phenomena involving the covert actions of certain people – are everywhere today. From narratives about alien invaders and government cover-ups in Hollywood productions to widespread popular suspicions about the hidden workings of mainstream societal institutions like science, media and politics, conspiracy theories have in recent decades become a massive and mainstream cultural phenomenon. They are for many people nowadays an increasingly normalised idiom to account for what really happens out there, whether we speak about natural disasters, terrorist attacks or financial crises. However, despite this apparent popularisation of conspiracy theories, academic research on who actually endorses these alternative readings of reality is inconclusive and puts forward contradictory findings.

On the one hand, we are confronted with many versions of the stereotypical depiction of the conspiracy theorist as an obsessive, militant and fundamental paranoid who sees fire at all instances of smoke, and who poses considerable dangers to society by inciting distrust and hatred towards certain groups (elites, outsiders, Jews, etc.) (e.g. Pipes 1997; Barkun 2006; Byford 2011). While conspiracy theories may have once been a legitimate and widespread response to historical events (e.g. Wood 1982; Butter 2014), various historians, social theorists and political scientists began to identify conspiracy theories since the mid-twentieth century as a problematic form of knowledge, and consequently stigmatise the people who held such ideas as pathological (see Bratich 2008; Fenster 2008; deHaven-Smith 2013; Thalmann 2019).

On the other hand, there is a growing academic recognition that this pathology frame is problematic for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Many scholars have, since the end of the 1990s, argued that conspiracy theories may not be that irrational in the complex globalised world of today, and that the framing of conspiracy theorists as paranoid loonies may actually be irrational in itself (e.g. Knight 2000; Birchall 2006; Coady 2006; Bratich 2008; Harambam 2017). Such scholars bring up the valid point that when so many people from so many different corners of society, even from ‘science’ itself, practice some form of conspiracy theorising, it is hard to maintain that conspiracy theorists are the lunatic fringe. Large quantitative studies similarly show that conspiracy theorists are found across various different demographic categories, such as age, gender, ideological conviction, religion, income, education and ethnicity (Oliver, Wood 2014; Uscinski, Parent 2014). But, as Smallpage et al. (see Chapter 3.1) show, there is...
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fundamental disagreement about what constitutes a conspiracy theorist, and consequently much variety in the way scholars define and measure conspiracy theorists, leading to very different outcomes.

But, when everybody is a conspiracy theorist sometimes, can we still say something about the people engaging with them? Just as the common pathological stereotype obscures the wide variety of people following the alternative readings of reality generally called conspiracy theories, does not stating that there is a conspiracy theorist in all of us similarly prevent us from saying anything meaningful about these people? Or is there still something particular to say about conspiracy theorists and, if so, who gets to do that and how should that be done? Obviously, this points to the inherent power dynamics involved in describing some form of knowledge as conspiracy theory, and some sort of people as conspiracy theorists (cf. Hustig, Orr 2007; Bratich 2008; Pelkmans, Machold 2011; Harambam, Aupers 2015). While I am sensitive to the politics and power of language, i.e. using these terms without any reflexivity simply reproduces the stigmatised connotations they have, I have nonetheless chosen to continue to use these terms in this chapter for reasons of clarity and aesthetics. This is not ideal, but nor are the alternatives. Perhaps the descriptive and non-pejorative usage of these terms neutralises or lessens the negative connotations they have.

Whereas Smallpage et al. (see Chapter 3.1) show what quantitative studies can say about conspiracy theorists, in this chapter I will review how qualitative studies, in all their disciplinary and historical variety, depict these people. Starting with a brief overview of the traditional, pathologising views on conspiracy theorists, I will work my way through the cultural studies from the 1990s onwards that de-pathologised conspiracy theorists but hardly engaged with them, to more contemporary examples of scholars who in their empirical work interact more directly with conspiracy theorists, in order to shed light on their ideas and practices. I will conclude with a short reflection on what a good qualitative study of conspiracy culture entails and yields.

Academic work on conspiracy theorists

While conspiracy theories seem to emerge in all historical periods (e.g. Pipes 1997; Roisman 2006), widespread scholarly interest in the phenomenon is of a more recent nature. Most scholars locate the origins in the works of Sir Karl Popper (2013 [1945]), who actually coined the concept of ‘conspiracy theory’, and Richard Hofstadter (1996 [1964]), who popularised the theme in both academic and popular discourses. But there are good reasons to argue that several other scholars have contributed to academic knowledge on this subject matter since the 1930s onwards as well. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (2019) point, for example, to the works of Harold Lasswell and Theodor Adorno, who blamed the conspiratorial thought of authoritarian leaders for the rise of totalitarianism all over Europe, and to sociologists Leo Loewenthal and Norbert Guterman, who related conspiratorial thought to the complexities of modernisation processes. Mark Fenster (2008) situates the work of Hofstadter in a broader academic climate of consensus politics propagated by scholars such as Edward Shils, Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, who all saw conspiratorial thought as extremist threats to a well-functioning democracy. Lance deHaven-Smith describes in full detail the position and works of Leo Strauss and Karl Popper as major influences in discrediting conspiracy theories as legitimate explanations in the social sciences, and juxtaposes that with Charles A. Beard, a U.S. historian who actually entertained many such assumptions (2013: 76–105). With the exception of the latter, all of these scholars regarded conspiracy theories and their proponents to be highly irrational and dangerous aspects of modern societies, that played a large part in the twentieth-century surge of totalitarianism.
These seminal works greatly influenced subsequent research by making conspiracy theorists epistemologically, psychologically and morally suspect (e.g. Pipes 1997; Robins, Post 1997; Keeley 1999; Barkun 2006; Berlet 2009; Sunstein, Vermeule 2009; Byford 2011). Most of these scholars take a historical approach and study the books, articles, pamphlets, videos and Internet sites, and/or secondary sources about various kinds of people designated as conspiracy theorists. These include both mainstream authoritarian leaders (e.g. Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Ayatollah Khomeini, but also Senator Joseph McCarthy and President Richard Nixon) (Robins, Post 1997; Pipes 1997), and more fringe individuals, often writers or leaders of cults and sectarian movements, like Nesta Webster, Lady Queensborough, Pat Robertson, William Milton Cooper, Jim Keith and so on (Barkun 2006; Byford 2011). Very briefly put, such scholars make three interrelated points (see Harambam 2017: 11–22). Following Popper, conspiracy theorists are first depicted as ‘bad scientists’: They reduce complex phenomena to simple explanations, make flawed use of evidence, selectively look for confirmation instead of falsification, are resistant to contrary evidence and envision a universe governed by design instead of randomness. Following Hofstadter, they are second depicted as ‘paranoids’: Conspiracy theorists have systematised, delusional fears of conspiracy and deceit, and cast the world rather unproductively in apocalyptic battles between absolute good and absolute evil. Going against the political virtues of moderation, deliberation and consensus, conspiracy theorists are militant leaders with whom no compromise is possible. Because of these characteristics, such scholars warn against the lure of conspiracy theorists as they seriously threaten the health and functioning of democratic societies by promoting demonisation, scapegoating, cultural conflicts, political extremism, radicalisation, violence, terrorism and more. Based on a pars pro toto reasoning (the part is taken for the whole), they argue that because some disturbed extremists hold conspiracy theories dear, all conspiracy theorists must be disturbed and dangerously extremist as well. While such analyses may apply well to these very extreme figures, they actually say very little about the broader population of people adhering to conspiracy theories.

Not satisfied with such psychopathological understandings of conspiracy theorists, another line of scholars argued instead to take a more detached stance, and study why conspiracy theories have become such a broad societal phenomenon (Dean 1998; Fenster 1999; Knight 2000; Melley 2000; Birchall 2006). This requires, according to them, moving from condemning conspiracy theorists towards understanding them, and from debunking conspiracy theories towards exploring their meaning for those involved. Mostly coming from the field of cultural studies, such scholars dissect and analyse the many cultural forms in which the themes of paranoia and conspiracy theory surface in Western societies: From alien abduction stories to major Hollywood movies, and from rap music that discusses life in the hood, to highbrow tales of Kafkaesque bureaucratic entrapment in post-war literature. Deploying a discourse of conspiracy is, according to these scholars, a broad, cultural attempt to grapple with the complexities, anxieties and inequalities induced by large-scale social developments (globalisation, mediatisation, technocratisation, corporatisation) and the autonomous workings of opaque systems (bureaucracies, capital systems, mass-communication technologies). The idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort: It makes sense of unexplainable, complex events and opaque structures, and may therefore be actually quite reasonable, they argue. This rings especially true for those living in less laudable circumstances, and/or those that have endured systemic oppression, like African-American communities (Knight 2000: 143–67) and women more generally (see Chapter 3.3). But as conspiracy theories are all explained with a lingering functionalism of dealing with such complexities, these scholars similarly portray conspiracy theorists as a more or less homogenous group: The paranoid is all too easily exchanged for the anomic or the disenfranchised. Moreover, their sole reliance on conspiracy texts (books, films, social theory, music lyrics, newspapers,
urban legends, television series, etc.) makes it difficult to hear conspiracy theorists, whoever that may be, themselves speak. What are their concerns, ideas, desires, doubts, fears, hopes, biographies, conflicts, practices, social lives and more, in all the variety that we expect from such a colourful group of people? These matters of identity appear elusive with such a methodological approach.

In recent years, there have been more and more studies by political scientists and psychologists who examine the demographic characteristics and personality traits of those endorsing conspiracy theories (see Chapter 3.1). These quantitative studies go some way in explaining the diversity of conspiracy theorists, but all construct their own analytical categories (e.g. education, race, party affiliation, personality scales, conspiracist ideation, etc.) into which conspiracy theorists should fit. While such quantitative analyses may be informative to some, it can be questioned whether these deductive characteristics of conspiracy theorists are the most relevant, but more importantly, they are most likely not the way these people would characterise themselves.

In the remainder of the chapter, I will draw on several more ethnographically oriented scholars to show how their approach made it possible to speak about (the wide variety of) people that could be considered conspiracy theorists. Either by specifically focusing on people’s own self-understandings, or by merely following them doing their everyday things, concrete conceptions of how they see themselves emerge. The effort here is to bring such studies into the limelight, and to show what is (analytically) gained by studying ‘identity’ as emerging out of ever present and continuous interactions with meaningful others in various (mental, social, institutional, discursive) contexts (Jenkins 2014). I start by reviewing works that write about conspiracy theory entrepreneurs, then discuss those studying conspiracy theory movements and end with the more dispersed conspiracy theorists out there, but, as can be expected, these categories are not always mutually exclusive. Social movements sometimes have leaders that become entrepreneurs, and a variety of dispersed individuals may come together and form social movements around a certain issue over time. The following categorisation is therefore ideal-typical and used mostly for analytical and organisational purposes.

**Conspiracy theory entrepreneurs**

When thinking about contemporary conspiracy theorists, two main figures always come to mind: Alex Jones and David Icke. These two men are by far the most famous, popular, ferocious, outspoken and visible conspiracy theorists of today and the last 20 years, and they frequently come up in any newspaper article or academic work about conspiracy theories. It is no exaggeration to say that they are true conspiracy theory celebrities: well-known, admired and reviled. Alex Jones is from Texas, U.S.A., and is most famous for his popular daily radio talk show (*The Alex Jones Show*), website (*www.infowars.com*), and the more than 30 documentaries that he produced. Often described as a right-wing libertarian extremist, Jones promotes via all these media his ideas of a coming enslavement of people in a state-corporate surveillance prison world advanced by a shadowy world elite composed of bankers, military leaders, industrialists and politicians, also known as New World Order conspiracy theories (e.g. Zaitchik 2011). Of particular notoriety is his ideas that the so-called mass shootings sadly occurring in the U.S.A. (e.g. Sandy Hook, Las Vegas and Orlando) are hoaxes deployed by that shadowy elite to restrict gun ownership and that they are carried out with the help of ‘crisis actors’ purporting to be victims. These accusations even led to a lawsuit against him in 2019, and he got banned from most mainstream social media in 2018 for repeatedly violating their user policies.

David Icke is British, and is no less controversial or popular. Having been in media, sports and (local) politics, Icke developed himself as a prolific writer (he has published more than 20
books, translated in 12 different languages) and public speaker. He now holds performances in large venues all over the world (e.g. London’s Wembley Stadium), attracting crowds of thousands, and runs a popular website with many videos and interviews, which maintains an active discussion platform (www.davidicke.com). He is most famous (or notorious) for his reptilian thesis: the idea that a shape-shifting race of extra-terrestrial reptilians secretly rules the world. In his earlier days, Icke flirted more openly with antisemitic ideas, most notably those present in The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which continues to be a complex issue for most commentators today (e.g. Robertson 2016: 149–53). Perhaps in contrast to Jones, Icke proclaims the idea that the enslavement of humankind has already happened long ago. Both, however, arouse supporters by emphasising how they are all part of a global mass ‘awakening’ of people rising up against their alleged oppressors. In their tying up of many different smaller conspiracy theories in one master narrative, Jones’s and Icke’s ideas are perfect exemplars of what Michael Barkun called ‘super conspiracy theories’ (2006: 6). And, last, they can be seen as conspiracy theory entrepreneurs: Not only have they made a living out of spreading their conspiracy theories in both the off- and online worlds, their websites also have shops that sell, besides their own videos and books, many different products, mostly in the realm of alternative healing and food supplements.

This crossover between apocalyptic conspiracy theories about a coming totalitarian New World Order and messianic visions of global awakenings into a New Age (including associated spiritualities and healing methods) may seem counter-intuitive and antithetical, but actually characterises much of today’s conspiracy culture (e.g. Barkun 2006; Ward, Voas 2011; Robertson 2016). Alex Jones is, for example, widely popular in various extreme right U.S. patriot/militia movements with whom he shares much anti-government thought (e.g. Jackson 2017), yet at the same time publishes many articles on natural healing methods and sells food supplements that are popular in the alternative healing scene. David Icke is even more confluent: His more mundane assertions of intrigue and deceit by global power elites in the realms of finance, politics and media are effortlessly blended with New Age spiritualities detailing alternative histories, lost civilisations and extraterrestrial life. This seemingly odd combination of two opposing cultural streams, tapping from distinct social milieus with distinct ideologies, called ‘conspirituality’ by Ward and Voas (2011) (see Asprem and Dyrendal 2015, for a critique), is widely discussed in the works of Barkun (2006), Harambam (2017) and Robertson (2016), and forms, according to them, precisely the appeal of these conspiracy theory entrepreneurs. While none of these scholars actually managed to directly engage with or interview Jones nor Icke, both Robertson and Harambam attended Icke’s nine hour performance (in London and Amsterdam, respectively) and interacted with his audience. What they show is that Icke is able to convince his audience of his extraordinary super conspiracy because he is able to draw on multiple epistemic strategies or sources of legitimation (e.g. science, tradition, experience, supernatural, sci-fi) (cf. Robertson 2016: 45–53; Harambam 2017: 107–40). It is therefore not just a hybridity of cultures, people and ideologies, but also of epistemology that characterises these conspiracy theory entrepreneurs.

Another unlikely crossover of different cultural worlds involving these conspiracy theory entrepreneurs is noted by Travis L. Gosa, who studied the production and circulation of conspiracy theories in hip hop counterculture (2011). He regards hip hop culture as an alternative knowledge system challenging mainstream ideas and institutions, and conspiracy theories are an important part of explaining both the structural racial disparities and the everyday discriminations African American’s face. It is therefore interesting, Gosa notes, that different rappers and rap groups have made alliances with a person as right-wing and reactionary as Alex Jones. Gosa points to rapper KRS-One who was sharing New World Order and 9/11 conspiracy theories
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On the Alex Jones Show in 2009; rap group Public Enemy that encourage fans to watch an InfoWars documentary about Barack Obama; and Peruvian American rapper Immortal Technique who performed with Alex Jones on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks when Jones lectured and screened his 9/11 film (Gosa 2011: 195). The conclusion that Gosa and the aforementioned scholars all draw is that the ‘cultic milieu’ (a term Colin Campbell uses to describes the ‘cultural underground of society’ [2002 (1972): 14]) in which conspiracy theories thrive is flexible or heterodox enough to accommodate opposed factions and strange bedfellows as they are all united in their opposition to the dominant cultural orthodoxies. And, as Matthew Hayes’ historical genealogical study of the case of Canadian U.F.O. researcher Wilbert Smith shows, conspiracy theories do not just ‘travel’ across communities and ideologies, but also across time with the help of influential conspiracy theory entrepreneurs that pick up on older works and connect them in new ways to other audiences (2017).

Besides these well-known conspiracy theory entrepreneurs that are documented by many commentators, other less visible and popular ones are (also) brought under attention by the more ethnographic work of Harambam (2017) and Rakopoulos (2018). Delving into the Dutch ‘conspiracy milieu’, Harambam speaks, for example, about Marcel Messing (writer, speaker, teacher, performer and visionary) as a prominent and influential person in that subcultural world and leader of the collaborative project WeAreAwakening (see below). In his work and thought, Messing similarly connects conspiracy theories with modern esotericism, religion, art, poetry and science, and strongly opposes the increasing technologisa tion of life which, according to Messing, will keep people docile and prevent them from achieving their true potential (Harambam 2017: 44–5). Rakopoulos presents Aris Dovlis, a central figure in the Greek alternative knowledge subcultural world, as a prolific writer, visionary and creator of the Greek nationalist Epsilon cosmology (2018: 380). This glorification of Hellenic history coupled with conspiracy theory fears of external invasion and destruction of Greece inspires many local extreme right groups, and even led some to carry out two bombings in the north of Greece in 2015 (no casualties) in order to ‘liberate Greece from the New World Order’ (Rakopoulos 2018: 379). Other, even lesser known conspiracy theory entrepreneurs are the several alternative bookstore owners Rakopoulos meets in Thessaloniki that all traffic in recent editions of the classic forged anti-Jewish conspiracy theory, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Some owners he describes as conservative, even elitist intellectuals, and others as more classic right-wing nationalists (Rakopoulos 2018: 382–6). Each national and/or regional context must have their own conspiracy theory entrepreneurs, some better able to reach larger audiences or make a greater fortune than others, but it is illuminating how ethnographic research brings such actors and economies into the limelight.

Conspiracy theory movements

It is often argued that conspiracy theorists are lone individuals who lose themselves in imagining malicious schemes and intrigues from the dark corners of their messy basements or attics. Putting two conspiracy theorists together would inevitably lead to rifts and fights about the proper interpretation of events and evidence. And while that may be true in some instances, it is also true that they form alliances and group together to advance their cause. Perhaps the best known and well-organised one is the 9/11 Truth Movement (9/11 T.M.) that came into being in the years after the 9/11 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City. This group of more or less loosely affiliated people challenges the mainstream explanation that these attacks were the (sole and original) work of Islamic jihadists called Al-Qaeda and led by Osama Bin Laden, and that the crashes of the hijacked planes led to the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. Instead,
they argue that this official explanation suffers from a number of gaps, inconsistencies and unexplained phenomena, which brings them to demand answers and clarifications, and advance their own theories of what happened instead. The most prominent alternative explanations are that it was an ‘inside job’, a ‘false flag attack’ and ‘the new Pearl Harbor’, meaning that the U.S. government either knowingly let the attacks happen or even made it happen (theories known as L.I.H.O.P. [Let It Happen On Purpose] and M.I.H.O.P. [Made It Happen On Purpose]) in order to garner support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and to legitimise the restriction of civil rights and liberties under the guise of the ‘War on Terror’. In the years after 9/11, many different people, including a wide variety of scholars, architects and engineers, gathered together in this social movement and they are still active ‘to expose the official lies and cover-up … to promote the best investigative reporting, scholarly research and public education … to seek justice … and to end the regime and illicit power structures responsible for 9/11’ (www.911truth.org). While there has been quite some media attention to this movement over the years, and widespread support for their ideas among the general U.S. population according to several polls, there has been rather limited specific academic attention to 9/11 truth as a social movement. That is quite remarkable given their popularity and longevity, and their centrality in the wider conspiracy milieu. Byford argues that ‘as well as attracting ideas, motifs and arguments from the conspiracy tradition, the 9/11 truth movement acts as a magnet for the wider conspiracist community’ (2011: 109). For many different scientific reasons it thus makes good sense to focus on this movement. And, while Pelkmans and Machold are right that the academic study of 9/11 events itself ‘is a precarious undertaking because of the potential to be seen as a conspiracy theorist unworthy of academic status’ (2011: 66), researching the 9/11 T.M. instead should be less ‘risky’ (although that can also be questioned). The truth is that few academics ventured down this road.

Journalist Jonathan Kay is one of the exceptions and perhaps most known for his work on the 9/11 T.M. In Among the Truthers, Kay delves deep into what he sees as ‘America’s growing conspiracist underground’ (2011). Like a real anthropologist, he ‘immersed himself for two years in this dark subculture’, as the front flap says, ‘attending conventions of conspiracy theorists, surfing their discussion boards, reading their websites, joining their Facebook groups, and interviewing them in their homes and offices’. A first and very important observation he makes is that the people he met did not conform to the common stereotypes of conspiracy theorists as ‘street corner paranoiacs’ and ‘freaks’, but instead ‘most were outwardly “normal”, articulate people who kept up with the news and held down office jobs’ and even ‘looked and sounded a lot like [him]’ (2011: 6–7). This observation and his wish to understand them notwithstanding, he ends up describing his ‘correspondents’ in rather denigrating and pathological ways, seeing their engagements with the movement as ‘a symptom of a flight from reality […] induced by any number of causes – midlife ennui, narcissism, profound psychic trauma, spiritual longing, or even experimental drug use’ (2011: 150). He categorises the different people active in that movement as ‘the midlife crisis case’, ‘the failed historian’, ‘the damaged survivor’, ‘the crank, the evangelical doomsayer’ and so on, providing a far from neutral ‘typology of the different varieties of conspiracists’ (2011: 150). This raises the question of how the 9/11 Truthers that are depicted in these ways would identify with such descriptions. As both Ellefritz (2014), Harambam and Aupers (2017), and Jones (2010) show, people actively resist the conspiracy theorist label and associated pejorative connotations. To give a fitting example, Laura Jones shows in her ethnographic study of the 9/11 T.M. how its members reconfigure their derogative framing as being ‘unpatriotic’ in the highly polarised context of Bush’s War on Terror (‘you are either with us, or you are with the terrorists’) by arguing how it is their ‘patriotic duty’ to participate in the ‘active pursuit of truth and justice despite the ridicule and anger this may generate’ (2010: 367).
This is not just rhetoric and self-legitimation, as Jones argues, members of the 9/11 T.M. go out on the streets to hand out flyers and encourage people to ‘perform their patriotic right and constitutional duty to question the actions of their government’ (2010: 367).

Kay (2011) eventually explains the appeal of the 9/11 T.M., and conspiracy theories more generally, in line with Popper as secularised, ersatz religion, providing people with similar psychological comforts. The 9/11 T.M. is, according to Kay, both symptom and cause of a larger societal and intellectual crisis that people would now call ‘post-truth’: Experts and institutions are no longer trusted, values or fantasies are prioritised over facts, and so-called ‘rational intellectual criteria are treated as optional’ (2011: XIX). Dreading this loss of a ‘shared reality’ and a ‘collective sense of truth’, Kay reverberates Hofstadter’s desired consensus politics, and warns throughout the book for the societal consequences of this ‘intellectual balkanization’.

Whereas one could perhaps expect such a stance towards one’s research population from a journalist, it is stranger to encounter that from an anthropologist. Steven Sampson, a U.S. anthropologist working in Sweden, did ethnographic research in the Copenhagen 9/11 Truth Movement, and studied their materials, as well as those of their (more prolific) U.S. originator. In an unpublished paper (2010), Sampson explains that he is interested in understanding the dynamics of the 9/11 T.M., and provides much information on it (its actors, ideologies, practices, schisms and media), but he is taking a clear epistemological and normative position towards his research subjects, which is unusual in the field of anthropology, as he acknowledges himself (2010: 22–3). According to Sampson, the 9/11 T.M. is fundamentally misguided and even dangerous to society, and he reiterates many of the aforementioned classical examples in the scholarly literature of the pathological ideas and practices of conspiracy theorists (false use of evidence, unwarranted conjectures, Manichean populism, excessive paranoia, etc.). This brings him to ‘take a stand’ against the ‘obscurantism disguised as science’ of the 9/11 T.M. (2010: 22–3). His questions are ‘where do we anthropologists draw that relativist line?’ (2010: 3), and ‘how should responsible scholars deal with such groups?’ (2010: 23). Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on this task, a challenge that has been tackled by various scholars in a special issue on this topic (Harambam, Drazkiewicz 2019).

An important anthropological effort is to bring context into the study. Sampson does so by paying attention to the various sceptics and critics of the 9/11 T.M. as well. He writes about this loosely structured community of 9/11 ‘debunkers’ as having their own media and materials that all focus on disproving the 9/11 T.M. (2010: 19–20). The 9/11 T.M. reacts in turn to their debunkers with refutations, giving rise to a seemingly infinite regress of debunking. Such a relational focus on the 9/11 T.M. and their critics is present in the PhD of Richard Ellefritz (2014), who focuses on their (discursive) interactions. Following his ethnographic study with the 9/11 T.M., Ellefritz highlights how their critics employ the label of ‘conspiracy theory/ist’ to stigmatise and discredit this movement. Following Hustig and Orr (2007), he argues how attributing this derogatory label to someone functions as a ‘transpersonal strategy of exclusion […]’ which allows ‘one to go meta by sidestepping empirical claims in favor of the ad hominem’ (Ellefritz 2014: 17–20). This critique – that opponents of conspiracy theorists hardly go into the evidence itself because they are framed as conspiracy theorists – is more widely shared in the conspiracy milieu (Harambam, Aupers 2017). Ellefritz argues that this practice is problematic, not just because it is unscientific, but also because it ‘undermines respect for human subjects and social justice’ (2014: 36). He eventually comes to the opposite position of most commentators on the subject by arguing that, unless people’s claims can be proven false, scholars should refrain from using the ‘conspiracy theory’ label as it (un)wittingly discards popular claims of elite criminal activities and upholds ‘existing ruling systems of authorities and their truth regimes’ (2014: 266).
What is remarkable about Ellefritz’s study is that he identifies himself as a 9/11 Truther (2014: 24), which brings many epistemological and ethical issues to the fore. As he himself argues, ‘my reflexivity as an insider can be viewed as a sign of rigor and trustworthiness […] or it can be viewed as a sign of inherent bias and unreliability’ (2014: 26). This obviously depends on the degree of positivism to which a scholar subscribes, but even among ethnographically minded scholars there is much disagreement about the advantages and pitfalls of such auto-ethnographies (e.g. Denzin 2006). This is not the place to discuss these issues, but what can be said is that doing qualitative/ethnographic research with people who go about living their everyday lives inevitably draws the researcher into the picture, both while doing research and thereafter (e.g. Harambam 2017: 259–75). As Laura Jones explains in her ethnographic study of the 9/11 T.M. (2010), she too grapples with how to negotiate sameness and/or difference with one’s research subjects. During her fieldwork, she ‘had visibly associated herself with the group and their conspiratorial claims, despite [her] skepticism towards these claims and the regressive politics they may promote’ (2010: 368). She emphasises the difficulties of ‘wanting to connect with people and better understand their unique experiences’, while being/staying an outsider as a researcher (2010: 368). While qualitative/ethnographic scholars often pay more explicit reflexive attention to their positionality as a scholar, and how that influences the research done, this is actually a quality all scholars from whatever discipline and methodological tradition should profess. To be sure: These are not mere academic questions and reflections. As Judy Wilyman and her PhD supervisor Brian Martin have experienced in the context of the heated (anti)vaccination debates, studying movements that challenge the status quo, or making a stance in favour of them, may result in being drawn into the battlefield. As a science and technology scholar, Martin has done much research and supervised many PhD projects on controversial (science) topics, but has never seen such sustained and abusive attacks on citizen critics of public policy as with the anti-vaccination movement (2018).

Conspiracy theory individuals

While conspiracy theory entrepreneurs and movements may be most visible for the wider public, including academic scholars, arguably the largest group of people engaging with conspiracy theories are the ordinary individuals living among us. These people are hardly publicly recognisable as conspiracy theorists, often would not self-identify as such, and embody great diversity in age, class, education, race/ethnicity, worldview and so on. Yet, in their everyday lives, conspiracy theories (may) play a significant role, ranging from influencing the way these people eat, to the media they use to inform themselves or the health care services they make use of. But, as these everyday activities remain largely invisible to most scholarly and journalistic efforts, such people are often left out of academic analyses of conspiracy theorists. Women in particular seem to more often engage with conspiracy theories in their everyday lives, instead of publicly proclaiming their enthusiasm for such ideas. Moreover, these more dispersed conspiracy theory individuals empirically show how difficult it is to pinpoint conspiracy theorists: When do you actually count as such? Many people might have doubts about the way terrorists attacks are mediatised, distrust their governments and associated institutions, or hold multinationals responsible for various forms of serious corporate misbehavior, including tax evasion, corruption and cartel forming/collusion. But, does that make you a conspiracy theorist? It remains a tricky question. Quantitative studies, especially those based on large-N polling data (see Smallpage et al. Chapter 3.1 in this section), have made some progress in bringing these ordinary people to the surface, yet, by the nature of their methodology, it is hard to hear them speak about the role conspiracy theories play in their everyday lives. In what follows, I will draw
on more ethnographic studies that have ventured into different cultural and social worlds in which conspiracy theories circulate in order to bring these ordinary conspiracy theory individuals and their thoughts, experiences and practices to the fore.

Although David Robertson focuses on three prominent figures (novelist and U.F.O. abductee Whitley Strieber, David Icke and channeller David Wilcock) in his study of ‘millennial conspiracism’ (the cross fertilisation between popular religious and conspiracist fields), he also studied the people that are in various ways interested in these figures (2016). Attending Strieber’s 2012 fifth annual Dreamland festival in Nashville, Tennessee, Robertson speaks with many of the attendees (2016: 105–16). The festival was held at the Scarritt-Bennett Centre, ‘a non-profit education, retreat and conference center’ with ‘a strong commitment to the eradication of racism, empowerment of women and spiritual formation’ and featured talks (for example, by the well-known conspiracy theorist Jim Marrs), meditation sessions, spiritual workshops and more (2016: 105). After the opening presentation of Raven Dana, who described a ‘family history of questioning authority, and how her grandmother would talk to the dead and that her grandfather had seen a UFO’ and professed how a ‘counter epistemic habitus’ is intergenerational, Robertson engages with a variety of people, including Bill, a former U.S. army veteran who went into computer programming after retiring (2016: 106–7). He told Robertson how he was concerned about ‘government secrecy’, ‘the removal of individual rights’, ‘security cameras everywhere’, and ‘the poor quality of food in the US and about the use of GM produce and hormone supplements in cattle’ (2016: 107). After having visited David Icke’s 2012 Wembley performance, Robertson ventures to the house of Belinda McKenzie in London’s leafy and posh neighbourhood Highgate (106: 158–61). He finds there a variety of people: Besides Belinda, who had occupied herself mostly with child abuse cases and pedophilia networks in the U.K.’s power brokers, Robertson meets ‘Tony Farrell, a former intelligence advisor for the Metropolitan police, [who] was allegedly fired after returning a report alleging that the UK government were responsible for the 7/7 London bomb attacks’ (2016: 160). The next day, Robertson attended the ‘David Icke Changed My Life’ meeting held in an upstairs room of a pub in central London, after which he talks to attendees such as Steven, ‘a fairly posh chap who described himself as a filmmaker’ who talked about out-of-body Experiences (2016: 161). Based on these experiences, Robertson concludes that these were normal people. Male and female, working-class and wealthy, frequently highly educated and accomplished people. There was no sense of dysfunctionality […] no skinheads or people with right-wing or racist views, [merely people] motivated principally by concern; for crimes and abuses going unpunished, for the inequalities of the state etc.

(2016: 163)

Although such statements are a bit dubious and partly reflect Robertson’s own normative standpoints, they do show a great diversity of people, and highlight the fact that directly engaging with people who have nonmainstream ideas can make it more difficult to set them aside as mentally unstable.

While Robertson’s display of ordinary conspiracy theory individuals is primarily descriptive and anecdotal, an ethnographic study by the present author and Stef Aupers into the Dutch conspiracy milieu offers a more systematic analysis of how ordinary people engaging with conspiracy theorists see themselves and others in that cultural world and beyond (Harambam, Aupers 2017). During my fieldwork, I conducted in-depth interviews with a wide variety of people whom I recruited from sources associated to a varying degree with conspiracy theory,
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ranging from particular Facebook groups to a public screening of a conspiracy theory documentary (Harambam 2017). Moving beyond common identity signifiers (age, class, education, political leaning, etc.), I let these variegated people speak about themselves in their own words, and analysed how they made distinctions between self and other. The first conclusion we draw is that ‘people in the conspiracy milieu collectively distinguish themselves from the “mainstream” by arguing that they are “critical thinkers”, they ‘reclaim rationality’ by arguing how the gullible mainstream, often called ‘sheeple’, are actually the irrational ones for simply believing what the authorities tell them (2017: 118). Being aware of the pejorative meaning of the ‘conspiracy theorist’ label, these people make no mistake in also distinguishing themselves from what they see as the ‘real’ conspiracy theorists who conform to that stereotypical image. Following such distinctions between self and other in the conspiracy milieu, we make three distinguishable groups apparent: What we call activists, retreaters and mediators. Activists are most visible and vocal as they actively make their conspiracy theory positions clear by demonstrating, openly protesting, confronting those in power and by rubbing against the grain. Their militancy is, however, not appreciated by all: The radical tone and practice of activists appears a divisive element in the conspiracy milieu (2017: 120). Retreaters have a more spiritual, New Age, worldview in which activism is rejected because it feeds from negative emotions like aggression and fear. Instead, they insist that one should focus on improving the self as societal change can only come when people change from within. Mediators argue that the way forward is to bring people with different ideas together, to build bridges instead of fighting for one’s own truth. We show clear internal variety among conspiracy theorists and conclude therefore that it is hard to speak of them as one type of people, despite similarities in distrusting official narratives.

Even when not explicitly studying conspiracy theorists, ethnographic scholars may encounter people engaging with conspiracy theories. Elisa Sobo, for example, originally studied Waldorf (anthroposophical) education in California: ‘how teachers leveraged [its] unique pedagogy to promote child health’ and how aligned with parents’ home health practices (2016: 344). Parents’ vaccination practices turned out to play a central role, and in good anthropological fashion, she followed up on that in subsequent research. While it is more commonly known that vaccination rates are lower at such schools, it is less clear why parents do not follow official public health recommendations. As Sobo argues, such parents are ‘traditionally lumped together as “refusers”, yet great diversity exists within the lot’ (2016: 344). She first points out that parents do not all refuse the same vaccines or doses, nor for all of their children, but also that parents have diverse reasons for refusing vaccinations. Some worry about side-effects or question their necessity and efficacy, whereas others distrust the medical-industrial complex promoting vaccinations. Many such motivations are often dismissed as conspiracy theory (Harambam 2017; Martin 2018), which is probably the reason why Sobo refrains from using that term. The important point she makes is that ‘variation aside, parents’ vaccine refusals were always highly social’ (2016: 344): Sobo shows how local norms and expectations cultivate parent’s decisions, how refusal can therefore be an ‘affiliative act’, letting people belong to a certain community, but also that it ‘signals one’s subversive opposition to the status quo’ (2016: 345). Like the other scholars discussed in this chapter, Sobo makes it abundantly clear how conspiracy theory ideas and practices are complex, evolving and always embedded social environments. But, also, that qualitative, ethnographic research is perfectly suited to grasp and understand these dynamic webs of meaning.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories are everywhere, yet our understanding of their followers is still rather limited and inconclusive. This chapter has shown how qualitative studies, in all their disciplinary
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and historical variety, have written about conspiracy theorists. After briefly reviewing the traditional works that have mostly pathologised these people and the cultural studies scholars that highlighted the apparent rationality of conspiracy theorists instead, I have discussed the works of scholars that interacted more directly with conspiracy theorists in order to shed light on their ideas, practices and social contexts.

Distinguishing between conspiracy theory entrepreneurs, movements and individuals, this chapter has shown a wide variety of people engaging in one way or another with conspiracy theories. The very outspoken and publicly visible entrepreneurs embody how people can make a living out of spreading conspiracy theories in both the off- and online worlds. Particularly popular are those, like Alex Jones and David Icke, who fuse dark thoughts of a coming totalitarian New World Order with messianic visions of a global awakening into a New Age. The academic studies reviewed here show in much empirical detail how their conspiracy theories do not just ‘travel’ across communities and ideologies, but also across time when a new generation picks up on older works and connects them in new ways and to other audiences. While these entrepreneurs may represent prevalent stereotypes, the second section on movements makes that image harder to sustain. Taking the 9/11 Truth Movement as a case study, several scholars show how various kinds of conspiracy theorists come together to pursue common goals. Going against mainstream conceptions of reality, such movements can count on much criticism, both from academic scholars and the wider public. Some scholars include anti-conspiracy theory movements in their analyses as well, since they are part of the same interactional dynamic. The last section focused on ordinary people who in their everyday lives engage with conspiracy theories. While these people normally remain largely invisible, they arguably constitute the largest group, albeit a silent majority. Ranging from people attending New Age festivals to parents refusing vaccinations in Waldorf schools, the reviewed scholarly works show that there is not just great diversity in their ideas, motivations and practices, but also that identity and community formations play a central role in the cultivation and popularity of conspiracy theories.

While there is much diversity between qualitative scholars of conspiracy theories, this chapter has also highlighted what they share. A first and perhaps most important communality is the wish to make the world of those under study both intelligible and imaginable to a wider public. Especially among ethnographic scholars, there is a strong drive to empathise with interlocuters in order to be able to see and show the world from their perspective. This generally requires an agnostic (truth) stance towards people’s ideas, but that does not mean endorsing those, merely that epistemological and/or normative judgements are suspended until further notice. This is often easier said than done: As this chapter has shown, doing ethnographic research seems to either blur or erect boundaries between self and other, both during and after doing research. But, as long as that is turned into an explicit reflexive practice, it may only add to the quality of the analysis. Focusing on what ordinary people think and do in their everyday lives highlights the enormous diversity of our worlds, but it inevitably brings context into the picture as well. People’s lives do not stop at the (anticipated) conceptual borders of one’s research project, but have meaningful relations with many different others that are hard to exclude. While counting people is important to get a broader picture of societal distributions, I hope to have shown in this chapter what a good qualitative study of conspiracy culture entails and yields.

References


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