3.3
CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND GENDER AND SEXUALITY

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Introduction

The question of how gender and sexuality are connected to conspiracy theories comprises two different aspects. The first aspect concerns the question of how gender or sexuality influence conspiracy theory belief, i.e. who are the people believing in conspiracy theories and who are the people producing them? Are men more prone than women to believe in conspiracy theories or vice versa? The second aspect concerns the question of what importance gender and sexuality are to the content of specific conspiracy theories. In this chapter, I will first address how gender impacts belief in conspiracy theories (there are no studies that examine whether sexual orientation has any significant influence). Second, I will demonstrate by way of two case studies the centrality of gender and sexuality for the image of the alleged conspirators that many conspiracy theories paint and the issues around which they revolve. I will show that especially sexualities perceived as deviant play an important role in establishing the ‘other’ in conspiracy theory’s typical us-versus-them narrative. In the nineteenth century, for example, many American Protestants believed that Catholic priests were sexually abusing innocent American girls and that this was part of a plot by the Pope and the Austrian emperor to conquer the U.S.A. A century later, fervent anti-communists thought that homosexual tendencies made otherwise ordinary Americans susceptible to communism. In contemporary Western societies, white supremacist and nationalist conspiracy theorists are particularly targeting members of the L.G.B.T.Q.+ and feminist movements because they perceive them as a danger towards traditional family values.

The influence of gender and sexuality on conspiracy belief

The connection between conspiracy theories, on the one hand, and gender, on the other, is one of the most controversial issues in conspiracy theory research. Interestingly, quantitative and qualitative research arrive at very different, most often contradictory answers to the question whether gender influences belief in conspiracy theories. According to most quantitative studies, the stereotypical image of a conspiracy theorist as an ‘unwashed, middle-aged white male’ is wrong (Uscinski, Parent 2014: 73). Most studies in psychology and political science find no evidence that gender has any impact on belief in conspiracy theories, which directly contradicts this stereotypical image. Rob Brotherton summarises the psychological research on conspiracy
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Theories and states that neither gender nor age nor education seem to have a significant effect on a person’s belief in conspiracy theories (2015: 10). More specifically, Daniel Jolley and Karen Douglas, for example, found no significant correlation between the participants’ gender and their belief in conspiracy theories (2014: 40). In accordance with these findings, Jan Willem van Prooijen and Michelle Acker detected no significant effect of gender in their study, which was concerned with the influences of control on conspiracy theory belief and for which they collected data from 1265 participants from all over the U.S.A. (2015: 756). Uscinski and Parent thus conclude that ‘women are about as likely as men to be conspiracy theorists’ (2014: 82). According to them, receptivity to conspiracy theories is mainly by feelings of powerlessness, which leads them to the conclusion that ‘conspiracy theories are for losers’ (2014: 131).

One must take into consideration, however, that gender was not the main concern in any of these studies, but merely a control variable such as age or education, which was cross-referenced with the other data. Moreover, there are also some quantitative studies that find that men are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than women. A recent study on ‘Catholic collective narcissism’ and ‘gender conspiracy beliefs’ in Poland shows that men are significantly more ‘likely to believe in the gender conspiracy’ than women (Marchlew ska et al. 2019: 8 [italics in original]). The gender conspiracy theory the study refers to claims that feminism and the L.G.B.T.Q. movement, together with scientists and gender equality activists, form ‘a group that strategically and purposefully seeks to deny the importance of the traditional differentiation of men and women . . ., triggering conflict between sexes, promoting hostility to fatherhood and motherhood, finally leading to destruction of a family’ (2019: 2). Since the study presented the alleged conspiracy as much as a threat to motherhood and femininity as to fatherhood and masculinity, one could expect that women might be equally concerned about it. However, the results show that men feel far more threatened by the idea that gender is a psychological and cultural construct than women. In fact, sex remained a significant variable throughout the study, indicating that men are significantly more likely to both believe in a gender conspiracy as well as to show hostility towards people perceived as undermining traditional Catholic values (2019: 8–9).

Similarly, the 2019 edition of the bi-annually published study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on political attitudes in Germany also found a gender difference in conspiracy mentality. According to the study, male participants are significantly more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (43.9 per cent) than female participants (33.9 per cent) (Rees, Lamberty 2019: 213). The study furthermore shows that this conspiracy mentality can be directly connected to sexism and the depreciation of transgender people, thus supporting the results of Marchlew ska et al. (2019: 217–18).

Qualitative research in the humanities often also claims that men are more prone than women to believe in conspiracy theories. Frequently, these studies explain the gender difference by casting conspiracy theories as a reaction to a perceived crisis of masculinity. One example of such an approach is Kyle Cuordileone’s study of American political language during the anti-communist scares of the 1950s (2005). The same applies to Timothy Melley and his research on the post-war era in the U.S.A. more generally. He develops the concept of ‘agency panic’, which he sees at the heart of the belief in and the production of conspiracy theories in the U.S.A. during the decades following the Second World War and the perceived threat to masculine notions of individuality and autonomy around which they revolve (2000: 14). He argues that, during this era, the long tradition of ‘[g]endered tales of socialization . . . becomes coupled to a narrative of violated identity and agency-in-crisis’ (2000: 32). Masculinity and heterosexuality become the normative model after which ‘human agency and subjectivity’ are conceptualised (2000: 33). Social forces that are perceived to take control over the individual and diminish
their agency are – in this ‘masculinist tradition’ – portrayed as ‘feminizing forces’ (2000: 33, 32 [italics in original]). Consequently, femininity as well as homosexuality are portrayed as both undermining and threatening traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity and male agency.

Christ has built on Melley’s argument and extended it to contemporary American culture at large: She argues that the question at stake for ‘every white male U.S. conspiracy theorist since the 1960s’ is about the meaning of masculinity and what it entails to be a man (Christ 2014: 311). While ‘men externalize and employ their psychological problems as a public conspiracy …, women at least suspect the perceived conspiratorial plot to be the result of their own psychological problems’ (2014: 329). Men, then, she argues, are more prone to be seen in interaction with the public sphere and large political conspiracies, while women’s fears – by themselves and others – tend to be pathologised and described as a symptom of female hysteria. Accordingly, for her, both believing in and producing conspiracy theories is closely connected to male identity and a perceived crisis of hegemonic masculinity. It is therefore no surprise that she concludes that American men are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than women.

Moving beyond the U.S.A., Michael Butter has recently argued that belief in conspiracy theories is far more important for male than female identity – especially because the threat posed by social and political transformations is significantly higher to hegemonic masculinity than it is to different forms of femininity (Butter 2018: 120). According to him, white men have throughout history been more powerful than women or men of other ethnicities. Since the racial and gender hierarchies on which this position of power depends have been increasingly challenged since 1945, conspiracy theories offer an easy explanation for this shift in power structure. They cast this transformation not only as problematic but as part of malicious plots aimed at undermining society as a whole. Butter concludes that this is why men are more drawn to conspiracy theories than women (2018: 123).

However, there is hardly any ethnographic research and thus almost no empirical data to either confirm or refute the claim that conspiracy theorists are more likely to be men than women. Fieldwork studies of conspiracy theorists and their communities are rare and often do not live up to academic and ethical standards. This is because most of the fieldwork so far has been undertaken by journalists, whose methods are often highly problematic from an academic point of view. German author Tobias Ginsburg (2018), for example, went undercover in the German Reichsbürger movement, a conspiracy community that believes that the Federal Republic of Germany does not exist and that the country is a company controlled and exploited by other Western countries, most notably the U.S.A. Ginsburg assumed a secret identity to get access to this movement; he was not, as ethnographic standards demand, open about his intentions and did not seek the consent of the people he talked to. Moreover, his tone and style when writing about the community he investigated is by no means objective but, on the contrary, highly subjective and, at times, even polemic. Thus, even though his report offers illuminating insights into an otherwise closed-up community, it needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Still, most of the people he interacted with and who feature prominently in the book he wrote about his research were, in fact, men.

In similar fashion, Jonathan Kay, an American journalist who investigated the Truther Movement after 9/11, also found that there are far more men than women in this conspiracy theory community (2011). He furthermore identifies several different motivations for the belief in conspiracy theories, such as the midlife crisis, which can be described as a personal crisis of masculinity. He claims that, in order to ‘understand these two men [two of the prominent Truthers he interviewed] is to understand the strangely sudden, strangely radicalizing effects that middle age can impose upon the male psyche’ (2011). Becoming a truther, he argues, allowed these
men to ‘reinvent’ themselves, escape from their lives and become somebody new who is not judged on the past but only on this ‘newly created identity’ (2011: 159). However, much like Ginsburg’s, Kay’s methods also do not live up to academic standards of research. Indeed, while Ginsburg does not even give the impression of trying to write objectively about the people he investigated, Kay claims to be objective, but turns out not to be. This is most obvious in the ways in which he categorises his interview partners. He identifies, for example, conspiracy theorists as ‘The Midlife Crisis Case’, ‘The Failed Historian’, ‘The Damaged Survivor’ or ‘The Clinical Conspiracists’, and even openly describes the last one as ‘out-and-out insane’ (2011: 151, 159, 170, 183). Following the tradition of Hofstadter (1964), Kay pathologises many of the truthers and treats them like patients in need of medical attention. Thus, he falls behind much of the work on conspiracy theories and the people who believe in them done in cultural studies and anthropology in the past two decades (see Chapters 1.2 and 1.6), because these disciplines have moved beyond Hofstadter and strongly oppose the pathologisation of conspiracy theorists.

One of the few existing academic ethnographies is a web-based study on conspirituality – a ‘hybrid of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality [that] has appeared on the internet’ – by Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011: 103). While New Age spiritual movements are dominated by women, the realm of conspiracy theory ‘remains a largely male enclave of political and scientific foci’, the authors suggest (2011: 106). However, according to them, New Age spiritualism shares with conspiracy theory the three main characteristics that Michael Barkun considers characteristic of conspiracy theorising: ‘nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected’ (Ward, Voas 2011: 108). Recently, hybrid world views based on both New Age spiritualism as well as conspiracy theories have emerged and have gained increasing popularity. The idea of hybridity suggests that gender difference is not as significant anymore as it was in the separate categories of New Age spiritualism and conspiracy theory. However, when discussing the appeal of conspirituality, Ward and Voas do not refer to any data on gender.

In addition, Ward and Voas’s assumption that ‘conspirituality appears to be an internet-based movement’ that has appeared online only in the mid-1990s has been contested by other scholars (2011: 104, 109). Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, for example, argue that the phenomenon Ward and Voas describe as ‘conspirituality’, can, in fact, be better understood as ‘a result of structural elements in the cultic milieu, rising from its interest in stigmatised knowledge, promotion of mystical seekership, and suspicion of “Establishment” discourses’ than a ‘novel and surprising phenomenon’ emerging out of New Age spiritualism and conspiracy theory (2015: 379, 367). What both studies ultimately suggest, then, is that conspiracy theorising proper is indeed more prominent among men, and that women only ‘catch up’ once spiritualism is added to the belief system.

However, this does not mean that women never conceive of politics or society in conspiracist terms. Popular feminist writers like Betty Friedan or Naomi Wolf, for example, have used rhetorical devices and arguments that draw on conspiracist language in order to write about the political system and the experiences of women within this system in the second half of the twentieth century. Their critique of patriarchy often treats it ‘as if it were a conspiracy, without ever fully cashing out the metaphor into literal fact’ (Knight 2000: 124 [italics in original]). Even though they repeatedly insist that their arguments are not conspiracy theories, they nevertheless repeatedly use conspiracy as a metaphor to strengthen their claims (2000: 118). Naomi Wolf, for instance, states in the beginning of her analysis that ‘[t]his is not a conspiracy theory; it doesn’t have to be’ (2002: 17). Similarly, Betty Friedan concedes that the feminine mystique is ‘[o]f course, … not an economic conspiracy directed against women’ but rather a ‘byproduct of our
general confusion’ (1966: 198). Through these statements, even though they are careful to not make an explicit link, both authors nevertheless succeed in implicitly linking the idea of conspiracy to patriarchy. They never explicitly claim that a conspiracy exists, but use the language of conspiracist discourse in order to create a strong us-versus-them opposition.

Conspiracy, then, becomes a metaphor for larger structures at work. As is the case with Melley’s concept of agency panic, conspiracy becomes a scapegoat, an enemy that can be blamed for structural problems and developments which are otherwise out of the individual’s influence. The agency of the individuals – in this case the agency of women – is perceived to be threatened by societal structures. However, in order to address and discuss this issue, someone needs to be the scapegoat that can be blamed. For Friedan and Wolf, this someone is the patriarchal system itself. In fact, Melley’s concept of ‘postmodern transference’ can be fruitfully applied to their texts (2002: 63 [italics in original]). According to Melley, postmodern transference is one of the two key components of agency panic. When agency panic arises, vast organisations or systems are treated as if they were individuals, assigning to them individuality and motivation (2002: 63). Moreover, the individual’s agency is transferred to the larger organisation or system, which can now act instead of them (Melley 2000: 41). This is exactly the case in these feminist texts: They treat patriarchy as a conspiracy to articulate their anger and frustration about the situation of women in society. In this way, the patriarchal system is imagined as maliciously acting against them and intentionally robbing them of their individual agency.

Obviously, this conspiracist language cannot adequately capture the real mechanisms of oppression, since societal structures and historical developments cannot be reduced to the actions of individual people. Peter Knight calls this the ‘impossibility of naming the problem in an unproblematic way’ because ‘there is no language adequate to capture both the necessity of holding people responsible, and the knowledge that history is larger than the work of any group of individuals’ (2000: 140). The metaphor of conspiracy has to fail because a system or societal structure cannot be treated as if it were a group of individuals.

However, the metaphor allows these feminist writers to analyse a structural problem as if there was somebody to hold personally responsible. The tropes of conspiracy enable them to address ‘questions of blame, responsibility and agency, but also … link the personal and the political in one transcoding metaphor around which a women’s movement might coalesce’ (Knight 2000: 118). The rhetoric of conspiracy, then, fulfils the important function of creating a group identity for those opposing patriarchal oppression. According to the familiar logic of ‘us-versus-them’ that underlies all conspiracy theories, it posits the women as the victims of a malignant plot, and the men as the conspirators and victimisers.

One important rhetorical strategy these accounts of patriarchy share with conspiracy theories is the insistence that there are no coincidences. In fact, the ‘figuration of conspiracy articulates otherwise uncoordinated suspicions that daily life is controlled by larger, unseen forces which cannot be the result of mere coincidence’ (Knight 2000: 117). Thus, just as conspiracy theorists point out connections unperceived or dismissed as mere coincidence by the official version to argue that events are secretly orchestrated by sinister groups, the feminists actively write against notions of coincidence and contingency and ‘read coincidence as signs of conspiracy’ (Knight 2000: 119). During her investigation of dissatisfaction in middle-class housewives, Friedan, for example, ‘wondered if it was a coincidence’ only to conclude that ‘when [she] saw this same pattern repeated over and over again in similar suburbs, [she] knew it could hardly be a coincidence’ (1966: 224, 226 [italics in original]).

Another example of the conspiracist rhetoric these texts employ is the motif of brainwashing, which featured prominently in many American conspiracy theories during the post-war period. The concept is used by Friedan in order to conjure up an image of ‘women as innocent victims
of a scientific process of mind manipulation by external forces’ (Knight 2000: 120). Friedan evokes the image that women are brainwashed by professors, psychologists and the media into accepting their role as housewives rather than pursuing a career (1966: 120). The male conspirators, who all work in the media, educational institutions or as doctors, brainwash their female victims into accepting their ‘right’ place in society. Friedan uses the term ‘brainwashing’ to refer to this process, but she puts it in quotation marks. She argues that ‘the feminine mystique … “brainwashed” American women … for more than fifteen years’ (1966: 174). By putting the term ‘brainwashed’ in quotation marks, she achieves exactly the effect that Knight describes as treating patriarchy as a metaphorical conspiracy. She uses the terms and rhetoric conspiracy theorists would use, but she also distances herself from them at the same time through the quotation marks, implying that she is only using this language metaphorically.

More directly, Naomi Wolf claims that the ‘rituals of the beauty backlash … [are] literally drawing on traditional techniques of mystification and thought control, to alter women’s minds’ (2002: 88 [italics in original]). The images of ‘mystification’, ‘thought control’ and ‘mind altering’ are simply other terms for brainwashing. The beauty myth, which is her version of the feminine mystique, becomes personified. She ascribes direct agency to the beauty backlash in utilising techniques reminiscent of brainwashing in order to control and oppress the female population. She even explicitly states that this ‘comparison should be no metaphor’ (2002: 88). As a consequence, her analysis comes even closer to a conspiracy theory than Friedan’s. Even though she still shies away from directly calling the beauty myth a conspiracy, she explicitly casts the oppression of women in terms historically associated with conspiracy theorising.

Nevertheless, overall the conspiracy in Wolf and Friedan remains a metaphorical one. But, there are of course many texts that are far more explicit and direct in their accusations of conspiracy. We may not know for sure yet if men are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories than women, even though much qualitative research and some quantitative studies suggest as much. But scholars agree that gender and sexuality are of central importance for many accusations of conspiracy across time and space, as I will demonstrate in the following section by way of two case studies.

The importance of gender and (deviant) sexuality in conspiracy theory narratives

Gender and sexuality figure prominently in many conspiracy theories throughout the centuries. Many of them are fuelled by a crisis of hegemonic gender roles. In order to illustrate this, I will first examine the mid-nineteenth century anti-Catholic conspiracy theory in the U.S.A. by analysing a prominent example of a convent captivity narrative in which Catholic priests are portrayed as sexual predators preying on innocent Protestant girls. I will then move on to the second half of the twentieth century and the American anti-communist conspiracy theory in which the conspirators were predominantly portrayed as homosexuals, threatening not only the political system but again the very foundation of the patriarchal system in the individual’s home as well as nationwide. Thus, I will show that gender and sexuality are indeed important aspects in conspiracy theory narratives over time and fulfil the important function of ‘othering’. Anxieties about changing gender roles and norms regarding sexuality are often transferred to a different realm such as politics and, more often than not, are fuelled by a crisis of masculinity.

Anti-Catholic conspiracy theories in the antebellum U.S.A., for example, heavily relied on arguments about sexuality, painting an image of sexually abusive priests in Catholic convent schools preying on innocent American girls. Anti-Catholic sentiments in the U.S.A. date back to the seventeenth century, but during the Jacksonian era they developed into a conspiracy
theory that claimed that the democracy and freedom of the American republic were threatened by Catholic immigrants who were only loyal to the Pope and the European monarchs. Between the 1830s and 1850s, a large number of Americans were convinced that Rome, together with the Austrian empire and other Catholic monarchies in Europe, were trying ‘to subvert, through the instrumentality of the Catholic religion, the Democratic institutions of the country’ (Morse 1855 [1835]: 12). One important step in this scheme was allegedly the establishment of educational institutions in the U.S.A. Samuel Morse, for example, points to the threat in observing that Catholic schools ‘are establishing in all parts of the country, colleges, convents, and seminaries, by means of Austrian money in the hands of the Jesuits’ (1855: 23). In the face of growing numbers of immigrants, the cultural work of these conspiracy theories was to promote national unity by clearly identifying the subverting other. As David Davis puts it in a seminal essay on the similarities of anti-Masonic, anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon conspiracy theories, the key function of these conspiracy theories was to promote unity and ‘clarify national values’ (1960: 215).

As Davis demonstrates, these three conspiracy theories are very similar in tone and tropes in that they cast the alleged conspirators as sexually deviant. In the case of the anti-Catholic conspiracy theory, the accusations could draw on a long history of suspicion that cast priests as sexual predators. According to Hofstadter, ‘the anti-Catholics developed an immense lore about libertine priests, the confessional as an opportunity for seduction, licentious convents and monasteries, and the like’ (1964: 21–2). He furthermore claims that ‘[a]nti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan’ (1964: 21). As Davis shows, priests were thought to have perfected their arts of seduction over centuries. They were believed to not recognise ‘Protestant marriages as valid’ and to be preying on the virtuous American housewives and daughters (1960: 218). Davis attributes this obsession with sex in these narratives to an ‘increasing anxiety and uncertainty over sexual values and the proper role of woman’, which were then projected into these conspiracy theories (1960: 219).

The genre of antebellum anti-Catholicism where the concerns about sexuality come to the fore most explicitly is the convent captivity narrative, a generic hybrid in which both the Puritan captivity narrative and the Gothic novel have left their traces. The reason for the popularity of this genre was the underlying recognition that the protagonist’s experiences functioned as signifier for the republic as a whole (Butter 2014: 141). By threatening the integrity and morality of virtuous American Protestant girls, the republican virtue of the whole nation was threatened. These narratives typically consist of women’s – allegedly true – accounts of time as captives in Catholic convents, where they were supposedly exposed to physical and psychological violence and moral corruption before they eventually managed to escape to tell their tales. These captivity narratives portray convents as locations of illicit sex and the Catholic priests as being sexually abusive, taking advantage of both the Catholic nuns and Protestant girls enrolled in the convent’s school by their unsuspecting parents.

The most popular and influential narrative of this kind was Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (1837), ‘which sold 20,000 copies within just a few weeks, and 300,000 copies by 1860, at home and abroad’ (Schultz 1999: vii). Maria Monk was born in Canada about 1817 and, according to Schultz, it is uncertain whether she actually ever spent time at the Hotel Dieu Nunnery or whether she invented the whole story. Monk’s mother claimed that she never went to the nunnery, but was, in fact, facing mental health problems that resulted from an early childhood accident (1999: xv–xvi). Nevertheless, Monk’s narrative of the horrors she allegedly lived through in the convent was extremely influential and strengthened the image of the priests as villains and sexual predators. As Monk tells the story, she first entered the Congregational Nunnery in Montreal as a student before she decided to become a novice at the Black Nunnery...
and eventually even chose to enter the convent as a nun. She reveals that, after her taking the veil, ‘one of [her] great duties was, to obey the priests in all things; and this [she] soon learnt, to [her] utter astonishment and horror, was to live in the practice of criminal intercourse with them’ (1837: 47).

While this does not sound very conspiracist in itself, Monk’s revelations have to be seen in connection with many other anti-Catholic texts that were circulating at the time and that her readers were undoubtedly familiar with. While the texts by male writers like Morse or Lyman Beecher exposed the larger picture of the Catholic plot, convent captivity narratives like Monk’s provided the lurid details, ‘exposing’ how Protestant girls were corrupted in order to destroy the foundations of American democracy. Thus, by bringing into the open what was allegedly happening in nunneries and convent schools, Monk adds significantly to the national narrative of conspiracy in which Catholic immigrants are plotting the demise of the American republic.

The illicit sexual relationships between the priests and the nuns in their care furthermore illustrate that the central threat in these narratives is the removal of ‘the control of female sexuality and reproduction from the Protestant patriarchy’ to the convent, thereby granting ‘access only to Catholics’ (Schultz 1999: xxi). According to Butter, this loss of control threatened not only the women themselves but the very foundation of the American republic because women were believed to play a vital role in the republic by educating their sons and raising them to fulfil the republican value of ‘civic virtue’ (2014: 138). By removing virtuous American women from Protestant control and re-educating them in monasteries and boarding schools closed to the public, the very foundation of the republic was threatened.

Monk illustrates this threat most explicitly through her language which moves ‘to a level of pseudo-pornography’ in her revelations and warnings to the public (Schultz 1999: xxii). She justifies this almost pornographic language in the preface to her *Disclosures* by stating that ‘it is a far greater offence against virtue and decency to conceal than to proclaim their crimes’ (1837: 4). By this she refers to what were, for nineteenth-century standards, explicit and graphic descriptions of sexual abuse throughout the narrative. Monk claims that her words are supposed to be a ‘warning’ to the public (1837: 4). She is fulfilling her civic duties in publishing the horrific story because it will keep other girls from the dangers she herself was ignorant of (1837: 4). The scandalous language throughout the narrative – surely highly entertaining for a part of the audience – is justified by laying open the conspiracy through showing this sexual perversion and the resulting crimes inside the Catholic convent.

Indeed, the horror does not stop at sexual deviancy, but sexual deviancy directly results in murder and even infanticide since, as a consequence of sexual intercourse between the nuns and the priests, ‘[i]nfants were sometimes born in the convent: but they were always baptised and immediately strangled’ (1837: 49). In Chapter 9, which marks the shift to a more horrific narrative, Monk describes the murder of one of the nuns, St Francis, who was ordered to be killed by the Bishop because she ‘still wished to escape from the convent; and that she had firmly resolved to resist every attempt to compel her to the commission of crimes which she detested’ (1837: 101). This episode does not only add to the list of sins the Catholic priests are guilty of and illustrate where this sexual deviancy leads to, but also shows the result of resistance to the Catholic authorities. In her determination to not let herself be morally corrupted, and even wanting to actively remove herself from these influences, St Francis has chosen her own death sentence.

The only reason why Monk herself is in the end able to escape the convent is her status as an expectant mother. Schultz observes that, at the close of her narrative, Maria Monk reveals being pregnant and ‘asserts that she escaped from the convent to prevent the murder of the child she was carrying – whose father, she said, was a Catholic priest’ (1999: xvi). In order to protect her
child and thus fulfil her civic duty as an American woman and mother, Monk manages to escape the Catholic threat and return to Protestant patriarchal protection, where she and her unborn child are safe.

The sexual and gender politics conveyed in these convent captivity narratives, then, is a strong advocacy for Protestant notions of domesticity. Women who leave the domestic sphere, join a convent and consequently abdicate their role as mothers become victims of horrific crimes. The threat to American hegemonic femininity through sexual deviancy and moral corruption associated with the Catholic monasteries and boarding schools is thus a threat to the entire republic. The removal of the control over femininity from the patriarchy would mean the collapse of the latter since the whole system relied on the domestic role of women as educators. Thus, the convent captivity narratives, explicitly promoted as ‘warnings’, are supposed to keep parents from sending their daughters to Catholic schools and to keep Protestant girls from joining a convent by their own. According to Butter, these narratives ‘projected domesticity not as the problem but as the solution to the perversions caused by convent life’ (2014: 153). In domestic life and under strong patriarchal authority, the girls as well as the future of the republic as a whole are protected.

Similar to the anti-Catholic conspiracy theory in the nineteenth century, gender and sexuality perceived as deviant are central to the American anti-communist conspiracy theory during the 1950s. However, an important difference to the earlier conspiracy theory is that the causal connection between conspiracy and devious sexuality is now reversed. While the Catholic conspiracy in the nineteenth century manifested itself in devious sexuality – the abuse of Protestant women was a strategy to destroy the foundations of the American republic – sexuality in the Cold War U.S.A. allegedly led to conspiracy. Homosexuals, as well as women who did not fit into the ideal of hegemonic femininity, were considered the most likely candidates to become communist conspirators. The narratives of homosexual conspirators and American women subverting the U.S.A. from within illustrate the ‘anxieties about sexuality, manhood, and the self [which] surfaced in cold war political rhetoric and intersected with anxieties about Communism and national security’ – anxieties that were in no way new to national narratives (Cuordileone 2005: xx).

As already hinted at in the previous section, a crisis of masculinity fuelled the anti-communist and other conspiracy theories during the post-war period. It found expression in the twofold imagination of perceived threats by both homosexuals and women. While women were the victims in nineteenth century conspiracy narratives, they now became the perpetrators. As Melley highlights, F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover, for example, claimed in Masters of Deceit that ‘many high-ranking communist agents were “attractive,” “smartly-dressed,” apparently patriotic American women’ (2008: 156). Femininity became the subverting ‘other’ in this conspiracy against which ideal masculinity was constructed. Cuordileone, for example, describes femininity during this crisis of masculinity at the height during the 1950s as the ‘oppositional archetype against which a healthy autonomous male self could be measured, or as the purveyor of feminizing values and forces that emasculated the culture or crushed the male ego’ (2005: 104). John Frankenheimer’s The Manchurian Candidate (1962) is a prominent example which – from the perspective of the early 1960s when the wave of anti-communism had largely abided – reflects upon the central fears of the 1950s anti-communist scare and illustrates the two central motifs of 1950s anti-communist conspiracy narratives: Overbearing femininity and brainwashing.

The Manchurian Candidate combines two key motifs of 1950s conspiracist discourse, brainwashing and deviant sexuality, by establishing associations between ‘hypnotic suggestion and female sexuality’ (Melley 2008: 157). The threat of feminisation is most obviously represented by Senator Iselin’s overbearing wife Eleanor, a communist spy, who embodies the movie’s
central threat to the U.S.A. She manipulates both her son and Raymond Shaw, the protagonist, in order to assassinate a presidential candidate. Her manipulation tool is thought control. As is revealed fairly early in the film, Raymond Shaw and his fellow soldiers have been brainwashed by Soviet and Chinese agents during the Korean War. Instead of remembering the brainwashing, however, the soldiers are led to remember an afternoon in a ladies’ gardening club. This telling image explicitly links the idea of brainwashing to femininity. In addition, the trigger with which Eleanor Iselin can activate Shaw and turn him into a slave who does anything she orders is the deck card *Queen of Diamonds*, another obvious symbol of femininity. Male agency, as well as the whole patriarchal system, is thus depicted as threatened by the ‘domestic female influence’ (2008: 159). Therefore, Melley concludes, the movie’s ‘deepest worry is neither communism nor anticommunism but embattled human autonomy, specifically male autonomy’ (2008: 157).

Anti-communist conspiracy theories, thus, can be described as the battleground for negotiations of masculinity and male agency, which are threatened by changing gender roles.

In addition to overbearing femininity, homosexuality – especially among men – became a prime indicator for a communist conspiracy. One prominent event that inextricably linked the anti-communist cause to the perceived threat of homosexuality was, according to Cuordileone, the Alger Hiss case. When questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee (H.U.A.C.), Whittaker Chambers, former *Time* magazine editor and accused communist, named Alger Hiss as a fellow communist offender. In his written statement to the F.B.I., Chambers claimed that his goal was to ‘stop the Communist conspiracy’, thus explicitly confirming the suspicions many harboured about large-scale infiltration and subversion (Chambers 1948: 151). In addition, he confessed in much detail to the F.B.I. about the ‘promiscuous life he had secretly led as a “homosexual” and a married man, the parks and hotels he frequented, the compulsion with which he sought male sexual partners’ (Cuordileone 2005: 42). His homosexuality soon became public knowledge and thus ‘fed the imagination that linked communism and “sexual perversion” together’ (2005: 44). Moreover, in the eyes of many conservatives, the case – and Hiss’s undisputed guilt – ‘proved both the legitimacy of the HUAC mission and the rumors of New Deal “treason” that had circulated for years’ (2005: 41). In the following years, the hunt for communists in public office became closely intertwined with the cleansing of homosexuals from government positions.

However, the targeting of homosexuals and especially homosexual men in conspiracy theories is by no means limited to the 1950s or the U.S.A. In contemporary Russia, for instance, the anti-homosexual propaganda employs a very similar rhetoric. Homosexuality is closely linked to liberalism – the perverting and undermining ‘other’ in Russian society. Gender is one of the identity categories that, in recent years, has become an important part of liberal ideology and its efforts to promote tolerance. In ideologies that perceive liberalism as evil, as undermining national and Christian values, gender becomes the scapegoat to discuss issues of traditional family values. Homosexuals, as well as women who choose partners outside of their ethnicity, are seen as the subverting force working towards a complete destruction of those traditional family values (Borenstein 2019).

In addition, similar arguments about gender and sexuality can also be found in white supremacist conspiracy theories fuelling Islamophobia in contemporary Western societies. One such example would be the so-called ‘Replacement Theory’, which is based on the argument that ‘white women are not having enough children and that falling birthrates will lead to white people around the world being replaced by nonwhite people’ (Bowles 2019). The conspiracy theorists here claim that the feminist movement has indoctrinated white women to leave their place at home raising children in order to, for example, pursue a career. By following this ideology imposed by elites and gender equality activists to openly criticise gender imbalance and the
patriarchal order, women actively contribute to the downfall of white people by weakening their position in contrast to other cultures in which this alleged feminist conspiracy does not have such strong influences. This new version of hegemonic femininity and the resulting removal of control over female reproduction from the patriarchal system – which is a narrative that can be seen as a direct continuation of the anti-Catholic conspiracy theory’s narrative – is perceived as a threat to the national group and functions as an argument to denounce the other group, which is perceived as threatening.

These examples show that gender and sexuality are, in fact, central concerns for conspiracy rhetoric across time and cultures. Their function is to identify the deviant other, against which one’s own (national) identity is constructed. Anxieties about gender and sexuality often become the battleground for conspiracist rhetoric in order to repudiate the political or religious other. The reason behind this is very often a crisis of hegemonic masculinity and a crisis of patriarchy. Just as Catholic priests were portrayed as taking control over female sexuality and thus reproductive from Protestant men, homosexuality and female emancipation are perceived to threaten the hegemonic position of men as the protectors and leaders of modern society during the post-war era U.S.A. as well as in contemporary societies. Patriarchy is in both cases the institution threatened by the conspirators.

Conclusion

Gender and sexuality are of great importance to conspiracy theories and their rhetoric. They play an essential part in the process of ‘othering’, as my discussion of different conspiracy theories has shown. Even though psychologists and political scientists mostly agree that gender has no or only little effect on the belief in conspiracy theory, most qualitative research suggests that masculinity plays a central part in both the production and dissemination of conspiracy theories. I identified the crisis of masculinity as one key factor fuelling conspiracy theories. In addition, sexuality and gender are of central importance to the content of many conspiracy theories since the enemy is often portrayed as the sexually deviant ‘other’.

However, there is still very little research on these important aspects – especially concerning the first aspect of whether men or women are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories. The existing research suggests that there is far more work to be done. Concerning the question of who is more prone to believe in conspiracy theories, psychological studies need to focus directly on the question of whether or not gender has an influence on conspiracy belief. In addition, more ethnographic work needs to be done in order to support or dismiss the claims made by other disciplines. Concerning the importance of gender and sexuality for the content of conspiracy theories, it would be interesting to see if gender and sexuality are indeed central aspects in all kinds of conspiracy theories, or if they are particularly prominent in explicitly political conspiracy theories. In addition, most of the research so far has focused on masculinity and narratives produced by men. Additional work concerning femininity and conspiracy narratives by women should become a research focus across the disciplines.

Note

1 However, Melley acknowledges that notions of gender are just as important in narratives by female writers who use this concept of ‘agency panic to illuminate the violent effects of patriarchal social scripts’ (2000: 33).
References


