Conspiracy theories are often seen as a phenomenon whose origins lie in the era of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution (Popper 1962: 7; White 2002: 4), with the imagination of Masonic and Illuminati plots linked to both dramatic transformations in society and thought, and the appearance of actual secret societies. For conservative elites, the French Revolution was seen as the triumph of subversive conspirators, a milestone in the global conspiracy against humankind (see Chapter 5.3). Yet, if we look further back in the past, we see that conspiratorial thinking has been part and parcel of history for much longer. Indeed, rudimentary conspiracist narratives already existed during antiquity and the Middle Ages (see Chapters 5.1 and 5.2), and this fits with the claims of some anthropologists and social psychologists who consider that conspiracy theories are the product of a universal mental mechanism when confronted with the unknown (Groh 1987).

Yet, historians usually consider that a recognisably modern form of conspiracy theory appeared during the early modern period at the earliest, and was a result of changes in political, social and cultural conditions (see Chapters 5.2 and 5.3). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, conspiracy theories thrived and increasingly took the shape of world conspiracy theories, that in turn circulated transnationally. From this broad historical perspective, the rise and transformation of conspiracy theories can be seen as the result of the process of modernisation of European society.

The first cluster of chapters in this section thus develops a historical framework, analysing the change in the nature and popularity of conspiracy theories through time. It becomes clear that the current popularity of conspiracy theories, as well as the fragmentation of the public sphere and the increasingly blurred line between fiction and truth, is far from unprecedented. In other words, a detailed genealogy of conspiracy theory is liable to change our interpretation of conspiracist discourses in the present, which are the result not only of their immediate context but also the legacy of narratives that have over time spread, changed, faded away and been revived.

Indeed, a historical approach sheds light on the astonishing persistence of particular conspiracy theories. The most prominent example is antisemitism, the importance of which is acknowledged by several contributions to the other sections of this handbook (e.g. Chapters 2.5 and 3.8). Developing into an all-encompassing conspiracy theory in the nineteenth century (see Chapter 5.3) and contaminating public speech in Europe in the twentieth century (see Chapter...
5.4), antisemitic conspiracy theories are still very much alive in the post-9/11 era and have become enmeshed with other superconspiracies (Barkun 2013).

Antisemitic conspiracy theories have long played a significant role in the politics of Western Europe, but in recent decades their influence is perhaps even greater in Eastern Europe (see Chapters 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7), the Middle East (5.8) and parts of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia (5.9). This underlines the importance of developing a comparative and transnational approach in order to shed light on the specific characteristics of conspiracy theories in different social and political contexts. Moreover, these national and regional case studies can also cause us to question some of the common assumptions about conspiracy theories, for example that they are necessarily a sign of a ‘crippled epistemology’ (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009: 219) or that they inevitably lead to political apathy (see e.g. Chapters 5.9 and 5.11 in this volume). And developing a geographical perspective can also provide detailed and nuanced evidence about how conspiracy theories work on the ground, causing us to rethink some of the more universalising conclusions produced in this field of inquiry.

Historical and comparative studies tend to take into account the political, economic, socio-cultural, cultural and religious dimensions of each case study, and they necessarily provide multifactorial explanations. When focusing on political aspects, for example, these studies highlight how conspiracy theories operate across the political spectrum and are embraced both by those in power and those attempting to resist domination. Many of the chapters in this section also make clear that different dimensions of conspiracism are often intertwined, with, for example, religious differences often rooted in political oppositions (see, for example, Chapters 5.2, 5.8 and 5.9). More generally, the chapters in this section develop a multidisciplinary perspective that emphasises the local impact of particular economic, social and cultural problems, even when they are drawing on globally familiar conspiracy tropes. These chapters suggest that social and cultural change is a powerful driver for the surge of conspiracy theories in different historical moments and political regimes. There is a striking parallel, for example, between the transformations of the early modern period and the advent of the digital age (see Chapters 4.8 and 5.2).

The following chapters attempt to provide a more inclusive and critical account of how conspiracy theories emerged and developed across different historical periods and in various parts of the world. In her reading of historical documents from the Roman Empire, Victoria Pagán (5.1) demonstrates the existence of numerous conspiracist narratives within Roman politics. Cornel Zwierlein (5.2) outlines the continuity between antiquity and the Middle Ages, when conspiracy narratives began to circulate in the manuscripts of the literate elite. In this view, fully-fledged conspiracy theories only appeared in the early modern period and developed into their modern form in the eighteenth century, as the product of deep changes in politics (the rise of nation-states and the emergence of political debate), in religion (the establishment of homogenous confessional boundaries) and in society (the surge of anonymous print media and the development of a public sphere). This dramatic mutation is confirmed by Claus Oberhauser (5.3), whose contribution underlines the decisive role of the anti-Enlightenment authors and networks in the fabrication of conspiracy theories that spread across continents during the nineteenth century.

The golden age of conspiracy theories, however, seems to be the first half of the twentieth century. To explain their significance in this period, Pascal Girard (5.4) stresses the impact of wartime, nationalism, extremist political movements and totalitarian regimes, which led to the fabrication and use of various conspiracy theories as political tools.

After the Second World War, the situation diverged: Although conspiracy theories became less significant in Western Europe, they played a more prominent role in the Balkans. Nebojša
Blanuša (5.6) explains the particular attraction of conspiracy theories in the Balkans, and why they persisted – not least because of the residual communist political culture and the outbreak of war in the 1990s.

The evolution of conspiracy theories in the U.S.A. seems to match that of Western Europe. Michael Butter (5.10) challenges the idea that conspiracy theories are now more prevalent in U.S. culture compared to earlier centuries. While conspiracist thinking was a widespread and orthodox form of knowledge until the 1960s, it has since been delegitimised. Butter argues that the apparent current prominence in conspiracy theories does not prove their overwhelming power, but instead is due to the fragmentation of the American public sphere.

The evolution of conspiracy theories takes different forms in other parts of the world. Doğan Gürpinar and Türkay Salim Nefes (5.7) emphasise the fact that the current prominence of conspiracy in Turkey is a legacy of that country’s particular history. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, Kemalist nationalism promoted various conspiracy theories. Later, Turkish Islamism and the rule of the A.K.P. enforced them as part of a mainstream political discourse based on the threat of foreign and internal enemies. The case of Venezuela, studied by Rosanne Hooper (5.11), shows many similarities: The prominence of conspiracist speech has to do with turbulent political history, economic and social issues, and above all the propaganda of the Bolivarian leaders, using conspiracy theories as means of government.

Ilya Yablokov (5.5) demonstrates that the importance of New World Order conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia is the result of an authoritarian regime relying on propaganda; the revival of former conspiracy theories among far-right nationalists; the incredulity about the downfall of the Soviet Empire; and the integration of Russian society into the processes of globalisation. Discussing the Middle East, Matthew Gray (5.8) explains the remarkable importance of conspiracism in this region in terms of social and political factors, such as the propaganda of weak and authoritarian states, the fragmentation of societies and the repeated interference of foreign powers. The conclusions of Viren Swami et al. (5.9) about Southeast Asia likewise stress the impact of economic, social and ethnic divisions, the political use of conspiracy-mongering by governments and also by Islamist movements, leading to inter-group violence.

Taken together, these contributions underline that (except perhaps for the West), the influence of conspiracy theories is increasing, as they play into a wide variety of specific political, social and religious contexts. While well-established democracies seem to have, at least until recently, managed to confine conspiracism to the margins of politics, conspiracy theories spread in weakened or more recently established democracies, and authoritarian states in particular very often use them as a tool of government. Indeed, conspiracy theories have become driving forces for creating national and political identities, and help governments channel often quite legitimate political, economic and social dissatisfaction onto the supposedly dangerous conspiring ‘other’. These chapters thus confirm that easily transmissible ideas about plots and schemes are not a part of an isolated national discourse. Indeed, the transnational dimension of conspiracy rhetoric and the importance of networks of transmission has been a key feature of the phenomenon since the early modern period.

Academic research on conspiracy theories developed primarily in the context of the U.S.A. and was then expanded to consider Western Europe. To date, research about countries or regions of the world such as Africa, China, India, Latin American or the Central Asian republics is scarcer. This does not necessarily mean that there are no significant conspiracy theories in these regions. In Africa, for example, the recurrence of the Fula people conspiracy theory in Guinea and its recent translation into Nigeria, or the pervasiveness of H.I.V./A.I.D.S. conspiracy theories in South African society (Nattrass 2012), suggest that there is much scope for research in these areas. The need for further research is particularly important concerning the
period before the Enlightenment and the contact with the West, especially in the Middle East or Asia, and this research might well call into question the dominant accepted chronology of conspiracy theories developed in the study of the West.

The authors of this section acknowledge the shortcomings of the current state of research. It has been a conscious decision of the editors to begin to overcome the current Eurocentric focus in the study of conspiracy theories. While obviously not closing all the gaps, several chapters (5.5, 5.8, 5.9 and 5.11) try to point out the peculiarities of the non-Western manifestations of conspiracy theories and underline their similarities and stark differences with European and American conspiracy cultures.

It is also important to recognise that the historical and regional approach provides a perspective on cultures mainly based on the study of the most available sources: Statements of politicians, works of intellectuals and the mainstream media. This focus on the elites is certainly a flaw of most of the grand conspiracist narratives. But the focus on one kind of evidence can only scratch the surface of national cultures of conspiracies, and is in danger of overlooking what happens on the grassroot level. The next step would be to analyse how prevalent those elite discourses are among citizens through nationally representative surveys (Turjačanin et al. 2018), and more with qualitative, ethnographic research on groups particularly prone to conspiracism. This would be a first step in problematising conspiracy discourses across time and space, and we hope that the current volume will open the way for the further debates and studies in various national and regional contexts.

References