Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics 19 (2): 183–187
DOI: 10.2478/jef-2025-0025

BOOK REVIEW: *CONSPIRACY/THEORY*

Masco, Joseph and Lisa Wedeen, eds. 2024. *Conspiracy/Theory*. Durham; London: Duke University Press. 512 pages. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478027676

The book *Conspiracy/Theory*, edited by Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen, examines the intricate interplay between conspiracy theories and critical theory, showing how both serve as interpretative frameworks for understanding the modern world, particularly during episodes of epistemic crisis and uncertainty. The authors outline the growing prominence of conspiracy thinking in contemporary life, its links to power structures, and the ways it challenges conventional ideas of truth and knowledge. They argue that we live in an era marked by a generalised epistemic crisis in which propaganda, misinformation, and attentional hacks are rampant.

The volume is organised into four thematic parts, "Organizing Fictions", "Atmospheres of Doubt", "The Force of Capital", and "The Politics of Enmity", each comprising several essays. Each chapter provides a detailed exploration of conspiracy theories, blending historical analysis, philosophical enquiry, and cultural critique to offer a nuanced understanding of their societal impact.

The introduction explores the rise of conspiracy theories in the 21st century, emphasising their connection to digital technologies, disinformation, and epistemic uncertainty. It provocatively links conspiracy theories to critical theory, suggesting both aim to uncover hidden truths and challenge dominant narratives. The authors argue that conspiracy theories are deeply embedded in the social, political, and cultural fabric of modern life, functioning as world-making narratives that shape collective understanding, organise social action, and create alternative realities.

The first part, "Organizing Fictions", consists of five chapters that explore how conspiracy theories shape public imaginaries while being shaped by the cultural contexts that bring them to life. In the first chapter, titled "Impasse and Genre in American Politics and Literature", George Shulman critiques Richard Hofstadter's concept of the paranoid style in American politics, arguing that his approach oversimplifies the emotional and narrative dimensions of political life. The author examines how paranoia and fiction-making are central to understanding political crises and impasses, particularly in the Trump era. Shulman turns to the American novelists Herman Melville and Thomas Pynchon for guidance on how to deal with unavoidable paranoia in everyday life. This chapter calls for a deeper engagement with the imaginative aspects of political life to address the impasse in contemporary democracy.

Lochlann Jain's chapter "Where Did AIDS Come from?" revisits the origins of HIV/AIDS, challenging the dominant "natural transfer" theory that attributes the virus's emergence to zoonotic transmission. It explores the controversial oral polio vaccine (OPV) hypothesis investigated in Edward Hooper's The River (2000), which suggests that medical experimentation in Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi between 1956 and 1960 may have played a role in the virus's crossover. The author critiques the dismissal of alternative theories as "conspiracy" by healthcare experts and

highlights the need for rigorous investigation into biomedical practices. He examines the broader implications of scientific consensus, institutional secrecy, and the politics of knowledge production in shaping public health narratives.

The third chapter, authored by Masco, examines the concept of "false flag" operations, where responsibility for violent acts is falsely attributed to uninvolved parties. It explores how deception and disinformation have been weaponised in American politics, from the Cold War to the war on terror. The author delves into the role of political demonology, tracing how the US has historically constructed monstrous "others" to justify imperial projects. The chapter critiques the use of false flags as a tool for manipulating public perception and highlights the dangers of flattening complex realities into binary oppositions.

Using the theft of former Cypriot president Tassos Papadopoulos's body as a case study, Elizabeth Anne Davis explores how conspiracy theories are shaped by historical and cultural contexts. She introduces the concept of "conspiracy attunement", which refers to the shared sensibility of knowingness about conspiracy theories in Cyprus. The chapter examines how public discourse about conspiracy theories reflects broader anxieties about power, secrecy, and historical trauma. It emphasises the performative and recursive nature of conspiracy narratives, showing how they are both shaped by and shape political realities. Her aim is also to dismantle the epistemological centrism that establishes a diagnostic position for those of "us" who know the truth in relation to those who believe in "conspiracy theory".

Timothy Melley's chapter "Conspiracy, Theory, and the 'Post-Truth' Public Sphere" examines the rise of conspiracy theories in the "post-truth" era, focusing on Donald Trump's presidency and the erosion of public trust in the USA. It links contemporary conspiracy discourse to the Cold War legacy of secrecy and the growth of the national security state. The author explores how conspiracy theories critique institutional power and the public sphere, often blurring the line between legitimate social theory and irrational paranoia. The chapter highlights the role of popular media in normalising suspicion and the challenges of navigating a fragmented information landscape.

The second part titled "Atmospheres of Doubt" offers various ways of questioning the world or official truths, which lead to the promotion or, conversely, the refutation of conspiracy theories. Focusing on Syria's civil war, Wedeen explores how information overload and competing narratives create epistemic uncertainty. Wedeen examines how authoritarian regimes exploit doubt to undermine opposition and maintain control. She refers to Slavoj Žižek's (2008) term "systemic violence", which, in the Syrian case, operates alongside other forms of overt regime brutality to extinguish or dampen what began as incendiary political excitement. The chapter critiques the weaponisation of doubt by both state and non-state actors, showing how it fosters political paralysis and disengagement. Drawing on ideas of Hannah Arendt and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wedeen emphasises the importance of judgment in navigating complex political realities and calls for creative approaches to reclaiming collective agency.

Susan Lepselter delves into UFO conspiracy theories in the USA, exploring how people find patterns and connections in seemingly unrelated events. She introduces the concept of "resonant apophenia", which describes the aesthetic and affective dimensions of conspiracy narratives. The chapter examines how these narratives reflect deeper anxieties about power, loss, and technological change. It highlights the role of storytelling in shaping collective perceptions and critiques the tendency to dismiss conspiracy theories as mere irrationality.

The eighth chapter, authored by Demetra Kasimis, argues that Plato's Republic (2000 [ca. 380 BC]) engages with

conspiratorial thinking, reflecting the political instability of ancient Athens. The author examines how the dialogue stages the tension between secrecy and democracy, offering insights into the dynamics of political erosion. This chapter explores how Plato's depiction of conspiratorial plots and secretive governance resonates with contemporary concerns about democratic backsliding and the fragility of political systems.

Nadia Abu El-Haj, in her chapter, critiques the discourse of soldier trauma and the "military-civilian divide" in post-9/11 America. The author argues that the focus on caring for soldiers obscures the broader harms of US militarism and imperialism. The chapter examines how narratives of moral injury and the ritual of "thanking soldiers for their service" reinforce militarist ideologies and suppress critical engagement with the consequences of war. It calls for a rethinking of collective responsibility and the ethics of care in the context of global violence.

The third part, which is devoted to "The Force of Capital", deals with the "profit motif" as a vital component of conspiratorial argumentation. In her essay on gold in the context of deindustrialisation, Rosalind C. Morris draws attention to the perception of gold as a source and/or means of power for malicious conspirators in conspiracy narratives dating back to the 19th century. She points to the frequent thematisation of gold in conspiracy theories around the world, where it serves as a symbol of absolute or real value and a storehouse of wealth. Her contribution on gold miners in South Africa illustrates how marginalised communities are drawn into dangerous labour conditions to extract resources, highlighting the human cost of corporate extraction. She thus reflects on how the conceptual world of the informal miners in South Africa, called zama-zamas, presents a striking metaphor for 21st-century life, in which desires, social conditions, and the ruthless logic of the market shape – often in ways that resist full comprehension – even the most immediate pursuits of survival and gain, defining the boundaries between life and death, hope and despair, community and profit.

In the next essay, Joseph Dumit's interrogation of Big Pharma, Big Oil, and Higher Education shows how these institutions prioritise growth and profit over health, education, and the environment, effectively creating a conspiracy against life. Dumit draws on the work of artist and philosopher Adrian Piper (1996a [1990]; 1996b [1990]; 1996c [1991]; 1996d [1993]; APRA Foundation Berlin 2013) to reveal how her practice exposes the everyday complicities and silences that allow institutional harm to persist. Through Piper's lens, he reframes conspiracy not as secret plotting but as a structure of bystanding and bullying embedded in capitalist and academic life.

In her chapter, Louisa Lombard investigates rumours about humanitarian profiteering in the Central African Republic. Various theories critique the intervention of self-constituted caring experts who arrive with missionary zeal to improve local conditions. According to some interpretations, however, these efforts serve just as a form of extraction, raising questions about the true goals of foreign intervention. Lombard argues that these theories are a way to express the attitude of local inhabitants towards deep global stratification. However, she also expresses concern that their fixation on (self-)victimisation distracts them from issues that they could control if they tried.

The chapter by Robert Meister explores the financialisation of higher education in the USA and how universities are increasingly run like hedge funds, profiting from student debt. He recounts his experience as a faculty union leader, uncovering how tuition revenue is used as collateral for bonds, effectively converting students into debt vehicles. Meister highlights the dangers of normalising financialisation and shutting down debate around these practices.

The last part, titled "The Politics of Enmity", explores the various forms of racism and demonisation as frequent implications of conspiratorial theorising. In her chapter, Faith Hillis delves into the history of disinformation campaigns, focusing on Russian efforts to undermine liberal democracy. She traces the origins of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and their continued influence in contemporary politics. Similar to the Russian FSB and the hacking accusations in 2016, the Okhrana – the 19th-century Russian secret service – sought to promote the Tsarist state across Europe in the 1880s by discrediting its critics. Hillis argues that these disinformation campaigns are a powerful tool for discrediting critics and promoting authoritarian agendas.

Darryl Li examines the legal fiction surrounding the designation of al-Qa'ida as a global conspiracy. He analyses the evidence used to justify the US war on terror, highlighting how unverified documents and the testimony of "terrorism experts" are used to create a narrative of global violence. Li critiques the production of this national security fiction and its consequences for communities targeted by counterterrorism efforts.

Hussein Ali Agrama explores the role of secret knowledge and state power in shaping collective imaginaries in the USA and Europe. He concentrates on the ways in which the modern liberal state relies on covert intelligence agencies and the demonisation of specific populations, particularly global Muslims. Agrama questions the basis for such suspicions and argues that the growth of covert intelligence agencies is co-implicated in the production of enemy formations.

Kathleen Belew analyses The Turner Diaries (Macdonald 1978 [1974–1976]), a white power text that serves as a blueprint for racist revolution. She shows how this science fiction novel has inspired violence and fuelled the white power movement in the United States. Belew argues that the book's conspiratorial ideas and depictions of race war offer a dangerous vision of America that needs to be destroyed in order to be saved.

The epilogue reflects on the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection, linking it to the themes of conspiracy, narrative, and political violence explored throughout the book. The authors emphasise the need for careful evaluation of conspiratorial thought to address the challenges of contemporary politics. The epilogue underscores the importance of narrative power in shaping collective action and calls for a more nuanced understanding of conspiracy theories as both symptoms and drivers of political instability.

The publication inspires (and perhaps even gently provokes) readers to approach conspiracy theories not just as irrational beliefs, but as ways of understanding the world, finding patterns and making sense of complex events. The importance of narrative in shaping our understanding of social reality is emphasised, with the book exploring how stories, both factual and fictional, influence our perceptions and actions. Stories organise collective action and shape perceptions, with the potential for both social change and manipulation.

Conspiratorial thinking interprets hidden forces and alternative realities, influencing both progressive and authoritarian narratives. Examples include the white power movement, the US government's use of conspiracy charges, and the global war on terror. Modern political systems are shaped by secrecy and suspicion, which influence public trust and legitimacy. Doubt is amplified by modern technologies, undermining trust and collective action. Moreover, conspiracy theories often obscure systemic causes of inequality and injustice.

The contributions often do not offer simple answers but inspire reflection and encourage questions. For example, what are the essential criteria for sound political judgment in an age defined by widespread information warfare? How can we develop the necessary understanding to identify

and combat significant harms when crucial information is unreliable or suppressed? Instead of dismissing conspiratorial narratives as irrational responses to a clear and easily understood reality, Conspiracy/Theory acknowledges the inherent human drive – among experts, theorists, and ordinary citizens – to seek patterns in events, expose hidden truths, and pay attention to aspects of life that may be deliberately concealed. It offers space for reflection on reevaluating simplistic, stereotypical approaches to defining conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists.

Through historical and geographical explorations, the contributors examine the emotions and visions driving political mobilisation, tracking counter-revolutionary efforts while also recognising collective aspirations that necessitate a form of "conspiratorial" engagement. Overall, the book encourages readers to a nuanced understanding of conspiracy theories, recognising their potential to reveal and obscure truths, and emphasises the importance of evidence-based reasoning.

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