

## **Conspiracy Theory after Trump**

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The title of my article may seem premature, as American politics is not done with Donald Trump, and Trump definitely is not done with America politics. He may or may not manage to return to the White House, but it is highly likely that he will try. Still, for the time being the Trump presidency is history, and it is time to assess its effects on American politics in general and conspiracy theory in particular. Accordingly, the “after” in my title does not only indicate a temporal relationship but is also meant to articulate another meaning—admittedly, long obsolete in English—which the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as “on the authority of, as stated by, according to (an author or text)” (OED n.d.). In other words, what I am tracing is the impact that Donald Trump has had (and of course continues to exert) on the forms and functions of conspiracy theory in American political culture. Specifically, I am interested in tracing a shift in the status of conspiracist knowledge within the Republican Party and parts of its electorate. But to assess the impact of Trump we also need to understand what was going on before he entered the scene. This is why this article begins even before his ancestors immigrated to the United States. It ends with a consideration of what might lie in store in the future.

### **CONSPIRACY THEORY BEFORE TRUMP**

For a long time, it was completely ordinary to believe in conspiracy theories (Butter 2020, 97–99). Most scholars now agree that conspiracy theories emerged during the early modern period (Zwierlein 2020). From then until the 1950s, they constituted what the sociology of knowledge calls orthodox knowledge (Anton 2011, 25–31). They were both a mainstream and an elite phenomenon, and were produced, repeated, circulated, and believed by ordinary people as well as by epistemic authorities in both North America and Europe. As an integral part of public discourse, they were articulated in political speeches and pamphlets, sermons and religious treatises, newspaper articles, plays, novels, and many other forms of popular writing. Whereas today we tend to think of conspiracy theories as counternarratives, as challenges to official, non-

conspiracist versions of events, they usually were the official versions in the past. Accordingly, they often had significant impact on events and developments.

To give just two examples: The Republican Party was founded in 1854 on the basis of a conspiracy theory, galvanizing activism against slavery on moral grounds with resistance against what its members and supporters called the “Slave Power,” that is, the influence of the most powerful slaveholders over national politics. As Eric Foner puts it, the Slave Power conspiracy theory functioned as “a symbol for all the fears and hostilities harbored by northerners toward slavery and the South” (1995, 91) and united diverse groups such as abolitionists, conscience Whigs, and renegade Democrats. Its most famous indictment occurred in Abraham Lincoln’s 1858 “House Divided” speech in which he suggested that Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, and Presidents Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan had orchestrated all major events of the recent past—in particular the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the Supreme Court’s 1857 Dred Scott decision—to further the goals of the Slave Power (Butter 2014, 187–201). As the founding ideology of the Republican Party, the Slave Power conspiracy theory was an important cause of the Civil War. It enabled Lincoln to win the 1860 presidential election, which led to the secession of the slave states, which, in turn, resulted in the outbreak of hostilities.

A century later, the fear of a communist conspiracy masterminded in Moscow pervaded American society. In popular memory the Red Scare is nowadays often reduced to the rants of Senator Joseph McCarthy, but “there was far more to the ‘McCarthy era’ than Senator Joseph R. McCarthy.” Anti-communism was not a minority phenomenon, and “there existed in Cold War America a broad anti-Communist consensus shared and seldom questioned by most liberals as well as conservatives, by intellectuals as well as plain folks” (Fried 1990, vii, 34). Throughout most of the 1950s, it was accepted as a given that there was a large-scale communist infiltration of schools, colleges, government agencies, and society at large. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations and their respective congresses took a variety of measures that ranged from initiating loyalty and security programs to infringing on the civil rights of suspects and passing legislation that virtually outlawed the Communist Party. This conviction was only shaken at the end of the decade when conspiracy theories in general began to be considered as heterodox, that is, illegitimate and inaccurate knowledge.

As Katharina Thalmann (2019) has meticulously shown, this process of stigmatization was largely driven by the popularization of insights from the social sciences. During the 1940s, social scientists began to problematize conspiracy theories in two different ways. Some scholars, most notably Karl Popper, argued that conspiracy theories were bad explanations of social and political processes because they overemphasized intentions and neglected unintended consequences and structural effects. Another group of scholars, among them Theodor W. Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, looked from their US exile to Germany, where the conspiracy theory of a Judeo-Bolshevist plot for world domination led to the Holocaust. These scholars claimed that conspiracy theories were not only wrong but also extremely dangerous.

These arguments were initially restricted to the ivory tower of academia and had no wider repercussions. During the 1950s, however, they were taken up by a new generation of researchers. Scholars such as the sociologist Edward Shils or the political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset switched their attention from totalitarianism in Europe to the situation in the United States, where many liberal intellectuals were suspected of being part of the communist conspiracy. To rebut these accusations, academics either tackled the conspiracy theorists in the manner of the Frankfurt School, branding them as “pseudo-conservative” or “populist,” or they took the Popperist line, attacking their pattern of reasoning and labeling them “pseudoscientific.” Unlike the work of Adorno or Popper, these studies attracted notice beyond the bounds of academia. This was due partly to the efforts of Shils, Lipset, and others to adopt an accessible style that would reach a wider public, and partly to the help of multipliers outside universities. Many journalists also regarded the Red Scare conspiracy theories as a danger to American democracy and seized on the research findings, thereby helping to popularize them.

The effects of this process became quickly apparent. While the idea of large-scale communist subversion orchestrated from Moscow was firmly anchored in mainstream American society in the mid-1950s, a decade later only members of the far-right John Birch Society and similar groups continued to believe in a communist plot to undermine American institutions. This, in turn, allowed a new generation of scholars to posit a natural affinity between radical positions at the margins of society and conspiracist ideology. For consensus historians like John Bunzel, extremist positions were not only antidemocratic but also anti-political, due in large part to the prominence of conspiracy theories. This stance culminated in Richard Hofstadter’s famous 1964 essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” which took the pathologization of

conspiracy theories to extremes by equating them with clinical paranoia and mistakenly claiming that historically such ideas had always been a minority phenomenon on the fringes of US society.

Accordingly, when Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent concluded in 2014 in their quantitative study on the role of conspiracy theories in American public life since the 1890s that “the data suggest one telling fact: we do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not for some time” (2014, 110–11), they were entirely correct. There is no similar study for Western Europe yet, but the evidence suggests that conspiracy theories underwent the same shift in status there (McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim 2017; Girard 2020). What is important to note, though, is that the transformation of conspiracy theories into heterodox knowledge and their relegation to the margins of society did not mean that they became completely unpopular. They were no longer believed in by the majority of the population but, as many polls and surveys have shown over the past decades, they remained attractive for a significant minority of the population in most Western countries (Goertzel 1994; Drochon 2018). But they now flew mostly under the radar of the public and rather thrived in subcultures that shared many characteristics with what the sociologist Colin Campbell has called the “cultic milieu” (quoted in Aspren and Dyrendal 2019, 207–8). These subcultures had their own publications and conventions, but they were rather self-enclosed and not easily observable from the outside. Their books and magazines, for example, were often self-published and not available for everybody (Butter 2020, 125–26).

This is not to say that conspiracy theorizing disappeared completely from the public sphere and never constituted the official version of events anymore. Think, for example, of the Ronald Reagan administration’s claim that all international terrorist organizations were secretly controlled from Moscow (Brunck 2018, 104–16) or the George W. Bush administration’s allegations about Saddam Hussein having weapons of mass destruction and ties to al-Qaeda before the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Aistrophe 2016). But there they could only be articulated in veiled form—without explicit talk of plots and cabals—and were met with ridicule and criticism sooner or later. Conspiracy theorists that positioned themselves against the official version were left with two options, as Thalmann has demonstrated. They could either pretend to be just asking questions to gain access to the public sphere or embrace their marginal status by appealing only to the members of the conspiracist subcultures by explicitly using the language of schemes and designs.

This changed with the advent of the internet. Whereas the popular impression often is that the internet has led to an extreme rise in the popularity of conspiracy theories, most scholars agree by now that it has resulted only in a moderate increase in the number of believers and mostly merely made conspiracy theories more visible and available again (Butter 2020, 127–29). It has made it far easier for conspiracy theorists to get their ideas out in the open via blogs, websites, videos and posts on social media platforms. Whereas the traditional media had mostly guarded public discourse from conspiracist intrusions from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, conspiracy theorists could now simply bypass them. In turn, they became observable from the outside, and it is this visibility that has fueled a lot of the concern about conspiracy theories in Western countries in recent decades. In some countries, such as the United States, the concern is justified, while in others, such as Germany, it is rather exaggerated (Butter forthcoming).

Drawing on terminology proposed by Nancy Fraser, one could say that the rise of the internet transformed conspiracist subcultures into “*subaltern counterpublics*” (1990, 67, italics in the original). Fraser developed this concept in a 1990 article and, thus, long before the internet became a force to be reckoned with in such debates. Nevertheless, I find this and related concepts that she proposes quite appropriate to theorize the shift in status and influence that conspiracy theories have undergone in recent decades. In her article, Fraser criticizes Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, especially his claim that in a functioning democracy there should only be one public sphere. Fraser argues that this is not only historically inaccurate but also politically undesirable, as in stratified societies “arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (66). Importantly, Fraser is mostly concerned with oppressed groups that are denied (parts of) their democratic rights, but she is well aware that some subaltern counterpublics “are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian” (67). This is not to say that publics that revolve around conspiracy theories are necessarily “anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian,” but some of them are, and especially in the United States they have become dangerously influential. Fraser may thus have been a bit too optimistic when she argued that “insofar as these counterpublics [including the problematic ones] emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space. In principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out ... and that is a good thing in stratified societies” (67).

Conspiracy theories of all sorts were definitely contested in the dominant public sphere in the first years of the twenty-first century. In fact, they were usually only taken up there to be dismissed and ridiculed, or to alert the public to their potentially dangerous consequences. This led Jack Bratich, in his study of the public discourse about 9/11 conspiracy theories (2008), to conclude that the public had been gripped by a veritable “conspiracy panic”—a slight misnomer, as what he means is conspiracy theory panic. Importantly, most conspiracy theories circulating at that time were politically neutral in that they could be and were articulated by the right or the left. Conspiracy theories that claimed that the 9/11 attacks had been an “inside job” were articulated on the left to criticize the domestic and foreign policy of the Bush administration in the years that followed, as well as on the right where the events were quickly integrated into an overarching narrative of a New World Order plot (often allegedly Jewish) against national sovereignty. Even more importantly, these conspiracy theories were dismissed by liberal and conservative media alike and by Republican politicians as much as by Democrats. However, this changed with the election of Barack Obama, which in turn paved the way for Donald Trump.

### **DONALD TRUMP’S CONSPIRACY THEORIES**

On July 2, 2016, the *New York Times* ran a story titled “Inside the Six Weeks Donald Trump Was a Nonstop ‘Birther’” (Parker and Eder 2016). Its authors meticulously reconstructed how Trump had used the birther conspiracy theory in the spring of 2011 to build on his image as a successful businessman and TV celebrity and establish himself in the political arena as a spokesman for concerned citizens. In a series of tweets and interviews, Trump articulated the allegation that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and thus was not entitled to run for president. When this strategy proved successful—and Trump jumped to the top of the field of Republican contenders in some polls—he suddenly dropped the issue entirely. The 2012 election came too early for him, and he had no intention of running against Obama. But he returned to the tactical deployment of conspiracy theories four years later when he did run. By then the political landscape had changed to such a degree that this strategy worked even better.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, Trump did not invent the birther conspiracy theory, which emerged over the summer of 2008 and gained more and more traction in subsequent years (Jardina and Traugott 2019). Fueled by disappointment and a sense of entitlement, frustrated Republican voters embraced the conspiracy theory, which became a way to articulate their often racist concerns

about the first Black president. Together with related conspiracist accusations that allegedly disqualify Obama from being elected president—for example, the claim that he was secretly a Muslim—the birther allegations marked a shift in the public positioning of conspiracy theory within American political culture. Whereas most conspiracy theories had so far not been aligned with specific party positions, there was now increasing convergence between certain theories and the conservative wing of the Republican Party. As a consequence, there was now also more and more exchange between news outlets catering to this audience and conspiracist counterpublics. *The Glenn Beck Program*, for example, premiered on Fox News in January 2009—the month Obama was inaugurated—after it had been aired on the considerably smaller HLN for nearly three years. With the move to Fox, the program’s host, Glenn Beck, became far more explicitly conspiracist than he had hitherto been. Over the following years, he articulated a plethora of conspiracy theories directed against Obama and his team. Whereas conspiracy theories had for the past decades been almost universally condemned on national television, those that targeted Obama could now be voiced on Fox News. The relegitimization of conspiracy theory in parts of the public had begun. A few years later Trump would capitalize on it and push it further.

However, conspiracy theories still retained most of their stigma. Despite the increasing polarization of politics, Republican representatives or those running for office were careful not to endorse such theories, including the birther claims, in public. For example, in a conversation with supporters who doubted the legitimacy of Obama’s election in 2009, former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin said that “the public rightfully is still making it an issue” and that “the McCain-Palin campaign didn’t do a good enough job in that area” (quoted in Ruta-Franke 2009). When Palin’s statements were picked up by the media, however, she quickly backpedaled, announcing on Facebook that she had merely meant to say that voters were entitled to ask any question they liked. Palin and other Republican politicians, then, were happy to share the reservations of the so-called birthers as long as there were no cameras running. A year later, congressman Ken Buck from Kansas told his staff point blank: “Tell those dumbasses at the Tea Party to stop asking questions about birth certificates while I’m on camera” (quoted in Amira 2010). At that time, then, Republican candidates and politicians still exercised restraint in public in order to avoid scaring off more moderate voters.

To a lesser degree, the same can be said about Trump in 2015 and 2016 during his first run for the presidency. Trump flirted throughout with conspiracy theories, including the birther

claims he had first articulated four years earlier, but contrary to popular lore, it took him a long time to articulate conspiracy theories openly and in detail. Throughout the almost year-long primaries within the Republican Party and the five months of the election campaign proper, Trump drew on an array of conspiracy theories that ranged from the claim that vaccinations cause autism to accusations that his rival Ted Cruz was born in Canada and therefore not eligible for the presidency. These allegations served two functions: firstly, to discredit political opponents like Cruz; secondly, to present himself (however paradoxical this may sound) as a champion of truth, as somebody who was not afraid to embrace the conspiracist discourse frowned upon by the elite.

Characteristically, Trump almost always left himself a loophole in order to distance himself from any accusation that he was spreading conspiracy theories. In his speeches, interviews, and tweets, he invariably introduced conspiracist tropes with expressions such as “I often hear it said that” or “a lot of people are saying.” Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum see such phrases as signs of a new conspiracism popularized by Trump: “The new conspiracism—all accusation, no evidence—substitutes social validation for scientific validation: if *a lot of people are saying* it, to use Trump’s signature phrase, then it is true enough” (2019, 3, italics in the original). However, I would suggest that such phrases functioned in Trump’s rhetoric less as validations and more as disclaimers. He was not providing evidence by numbers, but was making it seem that he was not actively spreading conspiracy theories, merely repeating what others were saying.

This strategy of referencing conspiracy theories without actually embracing them was most apparent in Trump’s interview on the *Alex Jones Show* in December 2015. During the half-hour conversation, which Trump joined remotely from Trump Tower in New York, Jones repeatedly tried to get him to endorse the New World Order conspiracy theory by putting words in his mouth. But Trump evaded all these attempts. He used the opportunity to get Jones to corroborate his own claim that New Jersey Muslims had cheered the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, while he also indulged at length in a critique of elites and the system. But he refused to engage with Jones’s explicitly conspiracist claims. The reason for this, I would suggest, is simple: Trump’s campaign was aimed at appealing to multiple audiences, or, to employ Fraser’s terminology, publics: those who believed in conspiracy theories and those who did not. Simply by appearing on Jones’s show, Trump signaled to conspiracy theorists that



he was one of them; he did not need to endorse any specific theory explicitly. At the same time, not committing to specific conspiracist claims was designed to avoid alienating potential voters who were skeptical of such theories.

Whereas Muirhead and Rosenblum suggest that Trump's "pairing of conspiracism and a populist style" is "awkward" (2019, 64), it is actually quite typical of how populist leaders employ conspiracist rhetoric in political cultures in which conspiracy theories are more or less stigmatized. As Eiríkur Bergmann and I have argued elsewhere, "conspiracy theories ... offer a specific explanation as to why the elites act against the interests of the people" that "tends to co-exist within a populist movement or party with other explanations such as negligence or personal enrichment." In countries in which conspiracy theory underwent a process of stigmatization it is usually a significant minority within a populist movement that believes in them. Populist leaders therefore customarily try to cater to this part of the electorate by confirming their suspicions without doing it too openly and too frequently (Bergmann and Butter 2020, 334). Trump acted accordingly until a few weeks before the election. After all, he was not only trying to keep together a populist movement in which many believed in conspiracy theories and even more did not; he was also working to secure the votes of traditional supporters of the Republican Party that are rather unreceptive to conspiracism and populism as well as those of undecided voters. Thus, he repeatedly suggested that the election was being "rigged" but never elaborated on his claim (Trump 2016a).

However, in October 2016 Trump changed his approach. The race seemed lost: he was still behind in the polls, the debates were over, and the audiotape in which he discusses sexually assaulting women had just been made public. Most probably, he and his advisers understood that there was now no way for him to win over still undecided moderates. He could count on those supporters of the Republican Party who would, even grudgingly, vote for the Republican nominee, and so Trump and his team focused on mobilizing those particularly receptive to his populist and conspiracist rhetoric. Accordingly, in a campaign speech in West Palm Beach, Florida, on October 13—his first public appearance after the release of the tape—Trump moved from allusions to conspiracy theory to developing such a theory in detail by accusing the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton of conspiring with the international financial elite against the American people. His accusations culminated in the claim that "the Clinton machine is at the center of this power structure. We've seen this first hand in the Wikileaks documents, in which

Hillary Clinton meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of US sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers, her special interest friends and her donors” (2016b). We do not know exactly what impact this and similar speeches that Trump gave in the days that followed really had. But apparently his openly conspiracist rhetoric did not appall those who had already decided to vote for him. By Election Day he had won more voters, and thus the strategy seems to have paid off. Trump was carried into office by those open to the rhetoric of the Florida speech, as well as traditional Republican voters who did not desert him despite his explicit conspiracist claims. It is this “Trump coalition,” as one might call it, that the Republican Party is relying on to win back Congress in 2022 and the White House in 2024—with the important difference, discussed below, that conspiracist convictions are now even more important.

Yet, in 2016 we were not quite there, and after he had won the election, Trump immediately resorted to his earlier strategy of “simultaneously affirming his belief in ... conspiracy theory and qualifying” it (Thalmann 2019, 199). For example, when asked about his earlier allegations of voter fraud in an ABC interview a few days after the inauguration, he employed the same strategies that he had used throughout most of the campaign: “You have a lot of stuff going on possibly. I say probably. But possibly” (ABC 2017). He positioned himself similarly vis-à-vis the QAnon conspiracy theory—in many ways the postelection version of the Pizzagate allegations—and neither endorsed nor dismissed it explicitly. Occasionally, he would draw on other popular conspiracy theories. For example, on October 5, 2018, as the Senate was voting to end the debate about his controversial Supreme Court Justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh, Trump connected the Kavanaugh case with the upcoming midterm elections. “Look at all of the professionally made identical signs. Paid for by Soros and others. These are not signs made in the basement from love! #Troublemakers,” he tweeted (2018), harking into the—implicitly antisemitic—conspiracy theory that the Democrats pay protesters with money provided by exactly those international banking elites he accused Hillary Clinton of conspiring with two years earlier. But he never followed up with another tweet, so as not to commit himself to the conspiracy theory too explicitly.

Accordingly, assessing the status of conspiracy theories in American culture halfway through Trump’s presidency, Thalmann concluded that “conspiracy theory remains illegitimate [but] that might not matter anymore” (2019, 192). Such theories, she argued, were still derided in

large parts of the public sphere. But this did not prevent them from finding their audiences because of the internet—the subaltern counterpublics, as Fraser would call them—and the increasing conspiracy peddling of news outlets such as Fox, fueled by the ever-intensifying polarization of the political landscape. Moreover, Thalmann suggested convincingly, Trump and others who spread conspiracy theories were not at all interested in returning them to the hegemonic position in the hierarchy of knowledge that they had occupied until the late 1950s because their status as stigmatized knowledge allowed them to “[embrace and market] their opposition to mainstream culture” (2019, 197). In other words, conspiracy theories were useful to Trump because of—not despite—their still relatively marginal status and the wholesale dismissal with which epistemic authorities and elites reacted to them, because this enabled him to fashion himself as oppressed and a champion of the people.

However, when Trump lost the 2020 election, this changed. Conspiracy theory became a way to contest the defeat, but the status of conspiracy theory as illegitimate knowledge proved problematic in turning the result around. Trump had been talking about possible election fraud, particularly in connection to mail-in ballots, since the spring of 2020. But he had done the same in 2016, and until election night on November 3, 2020, he stuck to his usual pattern of vague claims and ambivalent allegations on Twitter and in his campaign speeches. Once it became clear that he had lost, however, he began to spread explicit conspiracy theories—just as he had done in October 2016 when defeat seemed certain. He was supported in his effort to cast the election as stolen by Fox News hosts such as Tucker Carlson, who fell in line after some initial hesitation and amplified his allegations, as well as other branches of the conservative media ecosystem. These concerted efforts were successful. As many polls have shown, many Republican voters still believe that Joe Biden’s victory was the result of a sinister plot. A few days after the election, a Reuters poll found that 52 percent of Republicans believed that Trump was the rightful winner (Kahn 2020). By January 2022, to give one further example, 40 percent of Americans overall believed that Biden was an illegitimate president because the election had been stolen (Yang 2022).

Trump and his allies, then, were quite successful in convincing much of the public that their conspiracist allegations were true, but this was not enough to overturn the election. The attempts by Trump and his inner circle to pressure Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and other officials on the state and county level to recount, not certify the results,

or discount certain ballots have been well-documented by journalists and others. In addition, the Trump campaign filed more than 60 lawsuits in several states to contest the election process, the counting of ballots, and of course its results. None of them were successful, as the courts refused to accept the conspiracist logic most of them were based on as a legitimate form of legal discourse and dismissed them quickly. To resort to Fraser's terminology once more: Trump and his allies had managed to construct a weak public, one "whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation," but failed to transform it into a strong one, a public "whose discourse encompasses both opinion-formation and decision-making" (1990, 75). They were successful in making conspiracy theory a legitimate form of knowledge (again) in the public formed by conservative media and its audience but did not manage to achieve the same for the strong public that is the US legal system. Their conspiracy theorizing was successful in a court of public opinion, but not in a court of law.

Accordingly, as the investigation of the United States House Select Committee on the January 6 attack—whose public hearings are taking place as I write this text in June 2022—has conclusively shown, Trump instigated his supporters to storm the Capitol and attempt a coup d'état on January 6, 2021. Before they attacked the building, many of his supporters gathered outside the White House to listen to his hour-long conspiracist rant. He claimed that the election had been stolen by a conspiracy of the radical left, the big tech companies, the media, and Republican traitors. In typical conspiracist fashion he bombarded his audience with numbers, half-truths, questionable eyewitness accounts, and suggestive questions (Trump 2021). What had not worked for the judges worked for this audience, and they went down to the Capitol. Whereas Trump had for a long time headed a populist movement in which a significant minority believed in conspiracy theories, it had now been transformed into one glued together by such a theory. Luckily, the coup d'état failed. Congress certified the election result eventually, and on January 20, 2021, Joe Biden was inaugurated. But the story does not end here.

## **CONSPIRACY THEORY AFTER TRUMP**

The most worrisome aspect of the story I am telling is not that Trump's peddling of conspiracy theories has paved the way for the election of figures such as Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who has repeatedly expressed belief in far more outlandish and explicitly antisemitic conspiracy theories such as QAnon. This is a phenomenon long familiar in Western democracies.

There is probably no national or regional parliament in Europe or North America that does not have such figures. The most worrisome aspect of the story is also not the attack on the Capitol. Rather, it is the degree to which the Republican Party and the media that support it have not only *not* distanced themselves from Trump and his conspiracist allegations about the stolen election but also appropriated them and how they have rewritten the story of what happened on January 6, 2021. I explained above that the Republican Party was founded on a conspiracy theory in the 1850s; now a conspiracy theory is foundational for the party once again.

Whereas some Republican representatives spoke out against Trump immediately after the attack on the Capitol, the party has since then embraced his conspiracy theories. Representatives like Liz Cheney, who called the attack on the Capitol what it was and held Trump responsible, have been demoted in Congress and face primary challengers supported by Trump. What happened on January 6 is either dismissed as completely exaggerated or—in yet another conspiracist move—blamed on the radical left, which allegedly staged the attack disguised as Trump supporters. This conspiracy theory is by now believed by half of those who identify as Republicans, according to a recent poll (Lange 2022). By the same token, the conspiracy theory of the stolen election is by now virtually uncontested within the party, with only those whose careers are effectively over, like Senator Mitt Romney, daring to disagree openly. Whereas elected officials and candidates did not want to be publicly associated with birther claims 10 years ago, they now either openly embrace this theory or at least do not explicitly distance themselves from it. Some of them might be genuine believers, others merely self-serving, and yet others are maybe just afraid to speak their mind. All of them, it is safe to assume, are aware that the conspiracy theory goes well with Republican voters, many of whom, as polls show, believe it themselves. Those who do not adhere to conspiracy theories often vote for candidates who do anyway because party affiliation trumps other considerations in the extremely polarized climate of contemporary American politics. What I termed the Trump coalition still stands, and conspiracy theories are more central to it than a few years ago, as evident in the more open way in which they are articulated and the larger number of coalition members who uphold them today.

Conspiracy theories, then, have indeed been relegitimized to a considerable degree in American political culture because many genuinely believe them and the Republican Party has recognized their strategic value as a tool of mobilization and weaponization. This means not that

the term “conspiracy theory” can now be openly embraced—it is always the other side that is spreading “conspiracy theories”—but that the logic of conspiracy theory has become more accepted again. When I wrote the conclusion to my book on the history of American conspiracy theories, I already suspected that such a development might be in the making. Back then, I suggested that what appeared to be happening was that either conspiracy theories were entering the mainstream again or that the margins of society, to which conspiracist discourse had been largely relegated since the 1960s, were becoming broader (Butter 2014, 300–301). In light of recent events, I think that there is a third and better explanation: the fragmentation of the public sphere. Whereas Fraser in 1990 was thinking of a dominant public sphere and a number of different subaltern counterpublics, we are now faced with at least two different publics—one Democratic and one Republican—that span both politics and the media and that need to be distinguished from a number of less influential counterpublics that of course continue to exist. It is currently impossible to say which of these publics is in the hegemonic position. Since one of these publics has embraced conspiracy theories and the other has not (which is not to say that such theories are entirely absent there), conspiracy theory is now both stigmatized and relegitimized. Depending on the public, it functions still as heterodox or again as orthodox knowledge.

This is worrisome not only because such fragmentation makes meaningful public debate on topics such as climate change impossible, and it is no coincidence that this topic, too, is increasingly seen as a conspiracy in one of the publics. But it is also worrisome because the partial relegitimization of conspiracy theories poses a more immediate threat to American democracy. Trump’s conspiracy theorizing with regard to the election was reactive. Before he lost, he restricted himself to rumors and hints. The full-blown theories only followed afterwards. They were dismissed in the courts but sparked the attack on the Capitol. Republican politicians, however, are now acting proactively with regard to upcoming elections. They have been using the specter of voter fraud in general and of the “stolen election” in particular to introduce voting restrictions of all kinds that are allegedly meant to make voting securer but are in effect making it more difficult for groups that tend to support the Democrats, most notably non-Whites (Brennan Center 2021). And while Brad Raffensperger managed to keep his job and fended off the challenge by a Trump loyalist in the 2022 primaries, other officials in key positions for certifying election results who did not give in to Trump have by now been replaced. The

Republican Party's embracing of the conspiracy theory of the stolen election means that conspiracy theories are now part of what Fraser called a strong public, one with decision-making power. Thus, if the 2024 election results are contested with the claim that the election was rigged, it might play out differently than in 2020.

## CONCLUSION

Very often—and often entirely justifiably—the United States is seen as the future of Europe. Developments that occur there—from the rise of neoliberalism to the possibility to order one's coffee to go—are said to take place in Europe a little later. Accordingly, and especially in what Donald Rumsfeld called “old Europe,” many observers worry that conspiracy theories can become a danger to democracy in these countries as well. To my mind, this is exaggerated. Conspiracy theories need to be taken seriously because they can be a catalyst for radicalization and thus lead to violence (Butter 2020, 154–55), and as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, they can also tear families apart (Butter forthcoming). But democracy in the German-speaking countries, the Nordic countries, in Western and in Southern Europe is not threatened by it. Their political systems are far less polarized than the American one because they are built on proportional representation and because competing parties are usually forced to cooperate or even form coalitions. This makes it far more unlikely to see another party as conspiring, as conspiracy theories thrive when supporters of different political parties see no common ground and perceive the other party as a threat to the country (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). These countries also have for the most part far less polarized media landscapes, which works against fragmentation and keeps conspiracy theories at the margins. What is more, in Central and Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Hungary, conspiracy theories are already a danger to democracy and have been for a much longer time than in the United States. In this region of the world, conspiracy theories never lost their status as an orthodox form of knowledge (Butter 2020, 105), and the PiS Party in Poland and the Fidesz Party in Hungary have been using them systematically to consolidate their power bases and cut back on civil liberties.

Accordingly, it might be time to turn the perspective around and ask, as the *Daily Show* recently did (Kurtz 2022), if Hungary might not be the future of the United States—an illiberal democracy that retains the semblance of a proper democracy but wherein one party has “rigged” the system in such a way that it has become almost impossible to vote it out of power. There is

no voter fraud in the sense that ballots are forged or destroyed, but the election laws that Fidesz passed after it came into government favor the strongest party disproportionately and that party is invariably Fidesz. Moreover, all TV stations are by now controlled by Fidesz, which means that the party's candidates and platforms receive much more airtime and attention than those of the opposition. Importantly, both Fidesz politicians and the media attached to the party feed it a constant stream of disinformation and conspiracy theories, thus mobilizing the party's supporters and misrepresenting and disqualifying the opposition (Krekó and Enyedi 2018).

It is unlikely that such complete control could be established in the United States, but it is also not necessary. The Electoral College already gives the Republican Party an unfair advantage. In a way, the system is already “rigged.” All that is needed is to make sure that the party comes out on top in a number of key states. And the party is working hard to ensure this—based on a conspiracy theory that it has inherited from Donald Trump.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>To say that Trump deployed conspiracy theories strategically is not to say that he did and does not genuinely believe (some of) them. This question—just as that of authorial intention in literary criticism—is impossible to settle.

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