

Obama

and the Paradigm Shift

Measuring Change

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building bridges*

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The Birthers' New World Order: Conspiracy Theories about Barack Obama

Ever since George Washington warned the young American nation in his Farewell Address against internal and external conspirators and demanded that “a free people ought to be *constantly* awake” to plots against its liberty (151; his emphasis), American presidents have enjoyed a very special relationship with conspiracy theory which I would like to define as the conviction that a group of evil agents, the conspirators, has assumed or is currently trying to assume control over an institution, a region, a nation, or the world. In his famous “House Divided” speech (June 16, 1858), Abraham Lincoln accused a group he and others labeled the Slave Power of secretly promoting the nationalization of slavery. In a similar fashion, Dwight D. Eisenhower warned against “the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex” in his 1961 Farewell Address. In an attempt to justify his administration’s support for the Nicaraguan contras, Ronald Regan implied in 1986 that the Sandinistas were part of a conspiracy that included Cuba and the Soviet Union and threatened not only Middle and South America but also the United States.¹

Yet since the time of the Early Republic American presidents have also been the object of conspiracy theories that project them either as the willing agents or the unwitting dupes of a whole number of plots against America or the world. During the late 1790s and 1800s, Federalists and Democratic-Republicans frequently accused the other party and its leaders of betraying the will of the people and collaborating with foreign foes, while half a century later, Lincoln and other members of the newly founded Republican Party were completely convinced that all of the

¹ On Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech, see Pfau 124–42; on the reception of Eisenhower’s Farewell Address, see Olmsted 134; and on Regan’s conspiracy theorizing, see Rogin xiv–xv.

recent presidents had been active agents or involuntary tools of the Slave Power.²

Such accusations have multiplied since the 1960s because of a transformation that occurred during that decade. Most visions of conspiracy from the Revolutionary War to the early Cold War were concerned with plots against the state and thus with conspiracies that had not yet achieved the major goal of subverting the federal government (the Slave Power conspiracy is an exception in this respect). By contrast, post-1960 theories usually assume that the federal government has already been undermined and thus envision both government agencies and the presidency as part of the conspiracy (Goldberg 20–21; Knight, *Conspiracy* 58). Observing this shift, Kathryn Olmsted states that

American conspiracy theories underwent a fundamental change in the twentieth century. No longer were conspiracy theorists chiefly concerned that alien forces were plotting to capture the federal government; instead, they proposed that the federal government itself *was* the conspirator. (4; her emphasis)

Thus, ever since Robert Welch, founder of the John Birch Society, “exposed” Dwight D. Eisenhower as a Communist agent in *The Politician*, every president has automatically become the target of conspiracy theories. No president, however, has as quickly become the object of as many suspicions as the country’s forty-fourth president, Barack Obama, and this essay explores why this is the case.³

Barack Obama, I wish to argue, figures in two types of conspiracy theories. On the one hand, there are New World Order conspiracy theories which have existed for decades and which invariably accuse each

² On conspiracy theories during the Early Republic, see Knox; on the alleged Slave Power plot, see Davis 62–86 and Richards.

³ Apart from being conspiracy theorists or being accused of plotting themselves, some American presidents also figure in accounts of conspiracy as the hapless victims of assassinations. This is most obviously true for John F. Kennedy whose death has triggered more conspiracy theories than any other murder in American history, but it also goes for Abraham Lincoln and William McKinley. On conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination, see Knight, *Kennedy*; on Lincoln, see Davis 4–5; on McKinley, see Miller.

American president or presidential nominee of being a conspirator. These conspiracy theories target Obama solely because of the office he occupies and not for reasons that have anything to do with him personally, such as his race or familial background. I engage with these theories by way of analyzing radio host Alex Jones’s online documentary *The Obama Deception* (2009). On the other hand, there are conspiracy theories that attack Obama because he is “Barack Hussein Obama,” the son of a Kenyan immigrant and the first black president. These theories hold that, unlike his predecessors and competitors, Obama was not eligible for the office of president of the United States and must, therefore, be considered an impostor. The conspiracy theorists who voice such suspicions are often referred to as “birthers” because their preferred argument is that due to circumstances related to his birth Obama does not qualify for the office of president. Some of them have even filed lawsuits in order to prove their point. In the following I mainly refer to the brief in the case *Kerchner v. Obama* (2009) in order to analyze their claims.

I would like to suggest that both types of conspiracy theory are expressions of dissatisfaction with the American political system. But whereas the first type can be regarded as relatively unproblematic, the second type gives cause for more serious concern because theories that claim that Obama was ineligible for the office of president are often informed by thinly disguised racism and have a direct impact on the political arena: A considerable part of the Republican base is convinced that these accusations are true. In fact, as I discuss in closing, the “birther” conspiracy theory and the considerable appeal it enjoys may be an indicator that conspiracy theories are once again becoming more important to mainstream politics.⁴ In this respect, then, the Obama presidency may indeed constitute a paradigm shift. Before I begin my anal-

⁴ Due to Richard Hofstadter’s influential indictment of conspiracy theorizing as a form of paranoia, the tendency to pathologize conspiracy theorists is still widespread. However, as Geoffrey Cubitt has demonstrated, conspiracy theories were regarded as a perfectly legitimate form of producing and representing knowledge far into the twentieth century. Conspiracy theories only lost this status in the United States during the 1960s. At that time they moved from the center to the fringes of society, and visions of plots against the government were largely replaced by visions of plots by the government.

ysis, however, some short remarks on the relationship between conspiracy theorizing and populism are in order.

Conspiracy Theory as Populist Discourse

In his seminal study *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Mark Fenster convincingly argues that conspiracy theories are “a non-necessary element of populist ideology” (84). This means that all conspiracy theories are populist, but not all populism assumes conspiracist form. The populist dimension of conspiracy theory had already been recognized by Richard Hofstadter during the 1960s. Yet whereas Hofstadter rejected populism as a “frequently dangerous cry and rage from the margins” that endangered the proper workings of democracy (83), Fenster operates with a different notion of populism, one that is indebted to the neo-Marxist work of Ernesto Laclau. As Laclau puts it in a passage that Fenster quotes, “Populism [...] ‘simplifies’ the political space, replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise” (*Populist* 18). According to Laclau, the construction of these two poles “involves the drawing of an antagonistic frontier” along which differences are recast as oppositions (78; see also Laclau, *Politics* 174). In this dichotomy, as Fenster explains, “‘the people’ [are placed] on one pole, and its Other, the power bloc [...], on the other” (84). By way of what Laclau calls the “*logic of equivalence*” (*Populist* 78; his emphasis), everything associated with the people is “made equivalent and necessary and part of that which is good, while every element linked to the Other is equivalent and wicked” (*Populist* 78). Thus, “disparate elements” eventually appear “to form a natural unity” (Fenster 85).

As Fenster adds in a footnote, in British cultural studies “this linkage is called *articulation*; that is, [...] the tenuous (in the sense of non-permanent) linkages between social practices that come together at a specific historical moment” (311n54; his emphasis). Such articulations, then, replace the logical connections between elements with “formal principles external to their logical nature” (Laclau, *Politics* 9). Accordingly, populism always, though to varying degrees, involves a misrepresentation of reality and social relations. But since it is characterized not by a particular content but by a certain form, it “has no necessary

political valence,” so that its relationship to democracy cannot be known in advance (85).

Accordingly, Fenster argues that “populist logic is an inevitable and necessary part of democratic political order, a challenge produced by the democratic promise of popular sovereignty and self-rule” (90):

Democratic politics relies on a gap between the public and its elected representatives that is mediated by established political institutions; populism emerges when this gap constitutes a problem, or even a crisis, and when a movement can plausibly offer some more direct or “authentic” means of representation in the name of the people. A populist challenge to an established order, then, has neither a necessary content nor a necessary relationship to that order. It could be reformist or revolutionary; it could embrace a seemingly more participatory form of democracy, or it could reject democratic processes entirely. (86)

As a specific form of populist discourse, conspiracy theories, then, can both question and confirm existing power relations. They can be both harmful and beneficial to democracy and, just like populist movements in general, should not be dismissed out of hand. As Fenster puts it,

overarching conspiracy theories may be wrong or overly simplistic, but they may sometimes be on to something. Specifically, they may well address real structural inequities, albeit ideologically, and they may well constitute a response, albeit in a simplistic and decidedly unpragmatic form, to an unjust political order, a barren or dysfunctional civil society, and/or an exploitative economic system. (90)

In other words, conspiracy theories emerge in the context of a perceived crisis of political representation, when the gap between the people and those in power seems to have become too wide, and they articulate this crisis as a vision of subversion. At the same time, and this is a point that Fenster implies but never makes explicit, conspiracy theories are also expressions of a crisis in semiotic representation. They are concerned with secret plots and hidden actions and not with attempts, however reactionary, to reform the existing system of representation. Since the alleged conspirators constantly disavow the intentions that conspiracy theorists ascribe to them, they produce signs which—from the perspec-

tive of the conspiracy theorists—are meant to mislead their unsuspecting victims.

Any attempt to foil a conspiracy must therefore be understood as an attempt, on the one hand, to preserve or return to the proper political representation of the people, and, on the other hand, to re-establish a transparent order of signification in which verbal and other signs express people's real intentions and do not serve to veil them. Significantly, conspiracy theorists usually do not doubt that this is possible. They do not assume that just political representation is impossible or that democracy as such is flawed but "merely" that the system has been or is about to be corrupted. Likewise, they do not consider signification *per se* to be problematic. Rather, they maintain their faith in a very optimistic model of semiotic representation in which signs can function as reliable indicators of people's intentions. Once the conspiracy theorists have understood what is going on, they believe that all of the signs produced by the conspirators will become legible and will verify their evil intentions. Moreover, when the conspirators have been defeated, and people really mean what they say again, even this interpretive effort will no longer be necessary.

The New World Order Conspiracy Theory

The so-called New World Order conspiracy theory is one of the most popular conspiracy theories of the past two decades.⁵ While various components of this theory have existed for a much longer time (including a long-standing belief in the cabals of secret societies such as the Illuminati, fears of a satanic conspiracy, and concerns about the United Nations), the conspiracy theory as such emerged during the 1970s and gained momentum during the early 1990s. Its name derives from a phrase that politicians like Woodrow Wilson and Winston Churchill employed to refer to the period of peace and international understanding that, as they hoped, would follow World War I and World War II respectively. Addressing a joint session of the US Congress in September 1990, George H.W. Bush revived the phrase in order to develop the vi-

⁵ See Barkun 39–78 for a far more detailed version of the trajectory provided in this paragraph.

sion of a post-Cold War world in which the nuclear stalemate between two superpowers would no longer make humanitarian interventions impossible. While progressives considered Bush's vision an excuse for imperialist endeavors and conservatives were put off by the central role Bush assigned to the United Nations (Judis), another group considered Bush's remarks as a further proof of a conspiracy with which they had long been concerned.

Since the 1970s a small group of conspiracy theorists had used the term "New World Order" to refer to an international conspiracy that, so they feared, was planning to ultimately abolish civil liberties and Christianity and introduce martial law in the United States. To them, Bush's use of the phrase signaled that the conspiracy was now bold enough to make its plans public, albeit still in disguised form. President Bush's speech thus served as a catalyst for fears of the New World Order. But this alone does not explain why this conspiracy theory has enjoyed such popularity ever since. Rather, the New World Order conspiracy theory must be regarded as a post-Cold War phenomenon. It answered the need for a new enemy image and offered an explanation for the enormous global transformations that took place between 1989 and 1991, casting them as part of a plot that had been long in the making and that was finally bearing fruit (Barkun 63).

The New World Order conspiracy theory holds that a secret world government has been at least partially in control of global affairs for quite some time and is gaining more and more power. Like virtually all major conspiracy theories, the New World Order one exists in various versions that at times complement and at others contradict each other. Individual accounts vary with regard to who controls this world government and with regard to the time at which the conspirators began to secretly direct the fate of the world. Different versions blame the Illuminati, the Bilderberg Group, Wall Street Jews, the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, the military-industrial complex, British bankers, or all of these groups. Some conspiracy theorists claim that the New World Order came to power during the 1920s and consolidated its position in the United States through Roosevelt's New Deal; others claim that it has, in various guises, been controlling American affairs since the times of the Founding Fathers, and still others that the assassination of John F. Kennedy marks the moment at which it came to power.

One of the most prominent proponents of the New World Order conspiracy theory is Alex Jones, a syndicated radio host and filmmaker, who runs the websites Infowars.com and PrisonPlanet.com. Thus far, Jones has produced and/or directed more than thirty online documentary films in which he promotes the conspiracy theory and fashions himself as a defender of Americans' constitutional rights and independence. As is the case with conspiracy theorists in general, his convictions have remained remarkably stable over the past fifteen years, and new major historical events have functioned to merely confirm his beliefs. For example, as early as 2002, in the film *911 The Road to Tyranny*, Jones casts the attacks of September 11, 2001 as an event staged by the New World Order to further its goals. It was therefore hardly surprising that he, along with many other New World Order conspiracy theorists, interpreted the election of Barack Obama in much the same fashion. Ever since Obama was elected president, Jones has been casting him as a conspirator in his radio show and in website articles. The most powerful and systematic articulation of his suspicions, however, is *The Obama Deception*, a film Jones released in January 2009 and that is available on YouTube and Google Video where it has been watched by millions of people.

Watching *The Obama Deception* for the first time is an experience apt to overwhelm viewers. The film invites one not only to accompany Jones and his entourage as they confront the alleged conspirators on various occasions but also bombards viewers with a never-ending flow of quotations, graphics, computer simulations, expert interviews, and film footage, intended to firmly anchor the belief in the New World Order conspiracy in their minds. The film moves back and forth in time at breathtaking speed, forges connections between forgotten as well as heavily mediated events, and confronts the spectator with an overload of often contradictory information. The pace of narration is constantly high and it accelerates whenever the film approaches one of its central scenes so that viewers do not have time to reflect on what has been presented. Instead, they are forced to accept allegedly compelling links between, for instance, the Illuminati, the establishment of the Federal Reserve in 1913, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

While the film professes to present a neutral account that will allow the audience to make up their own minds, it is of course Jones, who produced, directed, and narrates the film, and who decided on what

pieces of information should be passed on to the audience. By controlling the editing rhythm, he determines in what order the evidence is received, how much time the audience is given to digest each bit, and whether viewers will be "allowed" a few seconds of relief. In general, the information is presented so quickly and the editing is so fast that one-time viewers have no chance to question the interpretation that Jones's voice-over narration imposes on the material in order to interpellate his audience as conspiracy theorists. Hence, the film shows that the effect of a conspiracy theory often hinges on its narrative qualities. Not only does *The Obama Deception* offer an exciting account of the fight of a small group of investigators against a vast and seemingly invincible network of conspirators; it also replaces logical coherence with formal coherence.⁶

The argument that *The Obama Deception* proposes is twofold. First, the film tries to convince its viewers that the New World Order conspiracy really exists. Second, it claims that installing Obama as president was the conspiracy's latest ploy. The narrative singles out the Bilderberg group, an annual, unofficial, invitation only conference of around 130 people of public influence as the masterminds behind the conspiracy. Yet Wall Street, the Federal Reserve, and the Illuminati also receive their share of blame. And while the film makes contradictory claims about the country having been hijacked since the Kennedy assassination, or the formation of the Federal Reserve in 1913, or, even farther back since the War of Independence, it repeatedly drives home the message that the final stage of the takeover has now begun.

Obama, the film suggests, is the newest puppet that those in power have placed in the limelight in order to distract attention from who is really running the show. Jones and the "experts" he interviews claim that all of the presidents since Lyndon B. Johnson have been agents of the New World Order, employed to enforce the conspirators' agenda of what the voice-over narration repeatedly labels "global enslavement." What is more, Jones contends that during the past decades all of the presidential candidates have been carefully groomed by the New World Order. These candidates seem to compete with each other in primaries and elections, thus suggesting that the people have a choice and can

⁶ For a detailed analysis of similar narrative strategies in the *Loose Change* films, see Butter and Retterath.

influence the course of events, while, in reality, they are absolutely powerless and cunningly manipulated by a global conspiracy that carefully orchestrates all kinds of crises around the world to increase its already enormous powers. From this point of view, Obama is not the savior he fashioned himself to be and was widely accepted as during the election campaign but an enemy of the republic who threatens to introduce “martial law” to the United States and establish Nazi-like “Youth Brigades,” as much of the film’s imagery suggests and one caption makes explicit. It should therefore surprise no one that Obama’s policies do not differ at all from those of his predecessor. As one commentator puts it, “The new boss starts to look a lot like the old one.”

The populism that Mark Fenster considers integral to conspiracy discourse is palpable throughout *The Obama Deception*. Again and again, the film positions the people to be in an antagonistic relationship with those in power, and calls on its viewers to stand up and join the anti-New World Order movement. That such a movement already exists and fights the conspiracy is dramatized by a sequence about thirty minutes into the film which shows a group of anti-New World Order activists demonstrating outside the heavily guarded gates behind which a Bilderberg meeting is allegedly taking place. “Brave Americans came from all over the United States and bullhorned the main conference hall at close range as the global powerbrokers schemed inside,” Jones’s voice declares over footage of a black limousine passing the group of demonstrators at high speed, suggesting that “the elites” fear “the people.”

The Obama Deception, then, plays on two anxieties that are deeply ingrained in American culture: the fear of a strong central government that can be traced back to the origins of the American republic and the ideology of republicanism, on the one hand, and the fear of foreign influence, on the other. The latter derives from the same source and was given its most powerful expression in George Washington’s caution against “the insidious wiles of foreign influence” (151).⁷ Throughout the movie, anti-statist and nativist strands repeatedly converge at central moments in the argument. In the film’s final moments, for example, Jones argues that while some state governments are still under the

⁷ On republicanism, see the classic study by Pocock; on the relationship between republicanism and conspiracy theory, see Levine 8–11.

control of patriots, “the federal government has been completely hijacked by foreign interest.” He then calls on his audience once again to join the fight against “tyranny” and “world government.”

For the purposes of this essay, however, what is most important is that the film never blames Obama for anything that he personally represents. While the film’s poster echoes a racialized discourse in that it reverses the idea of passing—under Obama’s black skin lurks the white establishment—this idea is not taken up in the film itself. Obama emerges from the movie as just another puppet that has been carefully groomed by the New World Order. He is a fresh face meant to deceive the unsuspecting masses into believing that their votes really make a difference. If John McCain or Hillary Clinton had won the election, Jones would similarly have demonstrated their ties to the New World Order, as he did for George W. Bush and John Kerry in his 2004 film *American Dictators: Documenting the Staged Election of 2004*.

The “Birther” Conspiracy Theory

Like the New World Order conspiracy theory, the “birther” conspiracy theory considers Barack Obama to be part of a large-scale plot against the American people. Yet while the former theory claims that Barack Obama is not at all different from his immediate predecessors and that the presidency has been controlled by the conspiracy for a considerable time, the “birther” variant holds that Barack Obama differs from all of the previous presidents: He was never eligible for the office of president of the United States and he is the first person whom conspirators have managed to place in office. A major disparity between the two conspiracy theories is, then, that they imagine plots that have progressed to varying degrees; other differences will be discussed below.

The “birther” conspiracy theory claims that Barack Obama was ineligible for the presidency because he either is not a natural born citizen under Article Two of the Constitution or he lost his citizenship at some point. As with all conspiracy theories, it is ultimately impossible to determine who voiced these suspicions first. However, it seems certain that they originated with supporters of Hillary Clinton during the 2008 Democratic primaries (Smith). In response to these accusations, the Obama campaign published a digitalized copy of Obama’s “Certifi-

cation of Live Birth,” which clearly indicates that he was born in Hawaii and therefore is a natural born citizen, on its website in June 2008. Conspiracy theorists were quick to expose the certificate as a forgery, but their demands for an investigation were initially ignored by the media and politicians of both parties. However, the allegations never disappeared and became more and more popular once Obama took office. According to a CNN poll, in August 2010 a quarter of Americans harbored serious doubts about the legitimacy of the Obama presidency, and these doubts were not entirely dispelled by the release of Obama’s long-form birth certificate in April 2011 (Travis). As a Gallup poll found, even after its publication 23 percent of Republicans continued to be convinced that Obama was born in another country (Morales).

Unlike the New World Order conspiracy, the “birther” one does not rely on presenting its argument with formal elegance to convince those who might subscribe to it. It is not actualized in fast-cut and entertaining online documentaries, but on billboards, in advertisements paid for by the conspiracy theorists, or in court briefs. The claims that Obama’s birth certificates were forged imply the existence of a large-scale conspiracy that has groomed him for the presidency and controls his public image, but individual conspiracy texts rarely ever engage with this dimension of the plot. Even the more detailed ones tend to focus on demonstrating the illegitimacy of Obama’s presidency. The “gripping, dramatic story” (Fenster 119) characteristic of conspiracy theory is only implicit in these texts. It lurks under the surface of blatant accusations or legalistic language.

To demonstrate this pattern, I will focus on *Kerchner v. Obama*, a case filed by Jamesberg lawyer Mario Apuzo with the United States District Court for the District of New Jersey in January 2009. It was quickly dismissed by this court and all higher courts where appeals were filed. The case’s main plaintiff was Charles F. Kerchner, a registered member of the Republican Party. His rationale—or maybe his pretext—for asking the court to determine the legitimacy of Obama’s presidency was his status as a reserve officer. As the brief puts it: “Should plaintiff be recalled to active duty, he would need to know whether the President and Commander in Chief who may be giving him orders is in fact the legitimate President and Commander in Chief” (*Kerchner v. Obama*).

As is typical of texts that promote conspiracy theories, the legal brief raises not only one accusation against Obama but several. To begin with,

the document claims that “Obama has not met his burden or otherwise adequately shown that he was born in the United States.” The short version of Obama’s birth certificate is dismissed as “not the best evidence” because “at the time of his birth Hawaii granted such documents to parents whose children were born outside the United States.” However, the file does more than insist that validation of Obama’s status is still pending; it also presents “evidence” meant to show that Obama was indeed born outside of the United States. The file holds that “Obama’s paternal step-grandmother Sarah Hussein Obama has stated that she was present at Obama’s birth in (Mosombosa) Kenya”; that “Obama’s half-sister, Maya Soetoro, has named two different Hawaii hospitals where Obama could have been born”; and that “the Kenyan government has sealed Obama’s Kenyan records” (*Kerchner v. Obama*). In combination, these claims project the picture of a global conspiracy, operating in America as well as Africa, whose workings are only observable because some members of the Obama family are not part of the plot or made silly mistakes in the past.

The way *Kerchner v. Obama* presents evidence for its claims is typical of how conspiracy theories try to prove their allegations. Details are removed from their original contexts and re-arranged; unsubstantiated claims and hearsay information such as the grandmother’s alleged statement that Obama was born in Kenya are presented as unquestionable facts, and all of the evidence that challenges the conspiracy theorists’ interpretation of events is completely ignored. Moreover, the way the brief handles the publication of the birth certificate testifies to conspiracy theorists’ tendency to recast evidence against their theory as supporting it.

But as if distrusting the persuasive power of its argument, the brief also claims that even if Obama had been born in Hawaii he would still not qualify for the office of president because even then he could not be considered a “natural born Citizen” under Article II of the Constitution (*Kerchner v. Obama*). The file offers two arguments for this. In obvious contradiction to the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution which specifies that: “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States” (US Const., amend. 14, sec. 1), it argues that Obama cannot be a natural-born citizen because, one, his father was not American and, two, he has dual citizenship in the United States and Kenya (*Kerchner v. Obama*). In

truth, Obama did hold dual citizenship, but he lost his claim to Kenyan citizenship in 1984. And even if he were to have dual citizenship, this would not disqualify him from being eligible for the presidency.

Finally, the brief claims that Obama lost his American citizenship, if he ever rightfully possessed it, when his mother married an Indonesian and moved with him to Asia. The new husband, the argument goes, surely adopted Obama who then ceased to be an American citizen: "It is likely that Obama lost whatever citizenship he had and became a citizen of Indonesia upon his adoption." The evidence offered for this claim is that Obama went to school in Indonesia at a time when, allegedly, "only Indonesian citizens were allowed in that nation's schools." Moreover, the file holds that US citizens were not allowed to travel to Pakistan during the 1980s. That Obama did so is seen as proof that he was not an American citizen at the time. Thus, the file concludes: "There therefore exists a legitimate question as to what type of passport and declaration of citizenship Obama used to gain entry into Pakistan" (*Kerchner v. Obama*). Obvious nonsense, this claim, like the others, is widely held by those who doubt that Obama was eligible for president.

The populism characteristic of conspiracy theory discourse is as pronounced in *Kerchner v. Obama* as in *The Obama Deception*. The legal document opens with a quotation from the Declaration of Independence that concerns the nature of political representation: "Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." What is more, the brief not only indicts Obama but also members of the House of Representatives and the Senate because "elected representatives of the American people [through whom] the people speak and act" allegedly have failed in their duty toward those who they represent because they have not investigated the question of Obama's eligibility properly. Therefore, the text again and again blames not only the mainstream media but also politicians of both parties for ignoring the "significant public doubt regarding [Obama's] eligibility to be President," for failing to "shed light on his true identity," and thus for betraying the interests of both the plaintiffs in particular and "the people" in general (*Kerchner v. Obama*). What is needed therefore, *Kerchner v. Obama* suggests, is a grassroots movement of concerned Americans, of true democrats who will uphold the

Constitution and the Declaration of Independence and re-establish a transparent order of political as well as semiotic representation.⁸

Like the New World Order conspiracy theory, the "birther" conspiracy theory expresses long-standing fears of a strong federal government and foreign influence. What is more, both conspiracy theories articulate concerns that the American political system is no longer working as it should and that the people have been betrayed by those in power. Those concerned about the New World Order are alarmed because nothing has apparently changed after Obama's election: He simply continues the globalist agenda of exploiting the people. Those who doubt his legitimacy, by contrast, are alarmed by the radical change that his presidency has allegedly brought about and the subversion of the presidency that Obama's election signifies. Accordingly, these theories can be said, quoting Fenster again, "to be onto something," and deserve to be taken seriously. As extremely distorted reactions to structural deficiencies in the American political system, they point to the shortcomings of representational democracy.

There are, however, important differences between the two theories, with the New World Order theory being the less problematic one. Not only is it believed in only by a rather marginal social group, but it will pose no danger unless the unlikely occurs and a misguided conspiracy theorist tries to beat back the New World Order by assassinating its most important puppet. Moreover, the theory reflects the historical trend that elected representatives in the United States and elsewhere appear to be increasingly powerless vis-à-vis the influence of the globalized streams of capital and special interest groups. With its carefully orchestrated system of checks and balances, the United States' governmental system forces the president to face individual representatives who prevent him from going through with what he promised during his election campaign if not an outright hostile legislature. Such a situation is bound to disappoint voters, who may easily get the impression that nothing ever

⁸ And such a movement does indeed exist. The website *birthers.org*, which functions as the movement's self-proclaimed portal, offers an overview of all past or pending lawsuits concerning the legitimacy of Obama's election and coordinates demonstrations. Significantly, on the website the populist dimension of the conspiracy theory is as palpable as in the brief discussed here. One of its sections—tellingly entitled "The People"—offers short portraits of the "Heroes" who have dared to challenge the conspirators by filing lawsuits.

changes and that below the surface the same intangible forces remain in control. Thus, in the final analysis, the criticism that Alex Jones's *The Obama Deception* voices is not that different from that of Tariq Ali's *The Obama Syndrome*, on whose cover George W. Bush emerges from under the mask of Barack Obama. Here, too, the new boss is starting to look a lot like the old one.

For two reasons the "birther" conspiracy theory is more problematic. First of all, this particular theory is far more xenophobic and racist than the one concerning the New World Order. New World Order conspiracy theories are fueled by the fear of foreign influence, and they imagine national sovereignty to be threatened by international forces. Rather than considering people of a certain color, culture, or creed to be the problem, they target the international capital elite. In fact, while the anti-New World Order movement may be strongest in the United States, it is actually an international phenomenon. By contrast, the "birther" conspiracy theory indicates more than an unwillingness to accept the outcome of a democratic election that has yielded an unwanted result. Informed by an often only thinly disguised racism that despises the highest office of the country being filled by a black man, its nativism is far more pronounced and traditional. It envisions the takeover of the federal government by someone who is cast, not only metaphorically but literally, as "un-American" and, by way of the color of his skin, marked as the Other. The conspiracy theory suggests that Obama would not conspire against the United States if he were not a foreigner and if he were not black.

At this juncture, conspiracy theories concerning Obama's birth and eligibility converge with those that claim he is secretly Muslim. Such theories work on the basis of the assumption that the United States is a Christian country and the Muslim faith represents a foreign influence that must be contained because it is inextricably linked to an undemocratic political system, just as Catholicism in the nineteenth century had to be contained because of its association with the despotism of the Pope and European monarchs. Like its nineteenth-century counterpart, then, the "birther" conspiracy theory projects the United States as a white Christian country. Its populism could prove extremely harmful to individuals as well as democracy.⁹

⁹ On nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism and nativism in general, see Billington, Bennett 27–155, Griffin, and Highham.

The "birther" conspiracy theory is also more problematic than the New World Order one because far more people believe in it—and not only those who are located on the margins of society and are devoid of influence on important political figures' and major political parties' agendas. In fact, the prominence of the "birther" conspiracy theory at the Republican Party base and the way in which Republican politicians have reacted to and sometimes even taken up the allegations can be seen as an indication of conspiracy theories shedding their status as illegitimate forms of knowledge and becoming, once again, important for political decision making.

A Paradigm Shift?

From the Revolutionary War until the 1950s, conspiracy theories were an accepted and unquestioned part of mainstream discourse in the United States. Voiced by the nation's leaders—presidents such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, senators like Joseph McCarthy, and intellectuals like Samuel Morse—and believed in by many, these theories repeatedly shaped the course of the nation. Without conspiracy theories, the American Revolution or the Civil War, for example, would have occurred much later or not at all.¹⁰ During the 1960s, however, conspiracy theories lost their status as official knowledge. Increasingly considered as "stigmatized knowledge" (Barkun 5) or "subjugated knowledges" (Bratich 7), they were relegated to the margins of society and excluded from mainstream discourse, thus losing their impact on political decision making. For the past fifty years, whenever the mainstream media have reported on visions of conspiracy, they have labeled them "conspiracy theories," thereby implying *prima facie* that their premises are faulty and their conclusions wrong. As a consequence, "The term 'conspiracy theory' often acts as an insult itself, an accusation of unsophisticated, woolly-headed thinking that verges on the mentally disturbed. Calling something a conspiracy theory is not infrequently enough to end discussion" (Knight, *Conspiracy* 11). Thus one might say

¹⁰ On the conspiracy theories of McCarthy, see Oshinsky; on Morse, see Bennett 40–41. On how conspiracy theories triggered the Revolutionary War, see Bailyn and Wood; on their impact on the Civil War, see Davis, Pfau, and Richards.

that whereas previous ages were concerned about conspiracies, ours is concerned about the harmful effects of conspiracy theories.¹¹

This does not mean, however, that American politics has been devoid of accusations of conspiracy during the past decades. As already mentioned, Ronald Reagan projected the image of a large-scale conspiracy during the 1980s, as did the Bush administration when it tried to link Osama bin Laden to Saddam Hussein during the build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In both cases, those voicing their “suspicions” carefully avoided the term “conspiracy.” Moreover, the accusations were in both cases directed against purely external enemies. By contrast, when Hillary Clinton painted the picture of “a vast right-wing conspiracy” against her husband on public television in 1998 (qtd. in Fenster 116), she was derided by both political opponents and the mainstream media. Even political friends had a hard time standing up for her.

The “birther” conspiracy theory, however, enjoys widespread support among the Republican base, especially in the South and with Tea Party activists. 37 percent of Republicans questioned in a YouGov poll from January 2012 said that Obama was not born in the United States, and a further 35 percent said they were “not sure” where he was born (Berinsky). Republican politicians and particularly candidates for public office cannot simply ignore these claims even if they do not believe in them. Asked about Obama’s birth certificate whose release the “birthers” were still demanding, Sarah Palin, for instance, said late in 2009 that “the public rightfully is still making it an issue” and added that “[t]he McCain-Palin campaign didn’t do a good enough job in that area” (qtd. in Ruta-Franke). Congresswoman Jean Schmidt from Ohio told a woman who complained about Obama’s ineligibility, “I agree but the courts don’t” (qtd. in “Jean Schmidt”).

However, Palin, Schmidt, and other Republican politicians are well aware that it is only a minority of the electorate, albeit a substantial one, that believes these conspiracy theories and that open support of the “birthers” would negatively impact their poll numbers. Accordingly, these politicians often acknowledge and even support the conspiracy theories and later deny that they have done so, claiming that they have been misunderstood. Thus Schmidt’s office quickly issued a statement

¹¹ For a far more detailed exploration of the large historical narrative unfolded in this paragraph, see my forthcoming study on American conspiracy theories.

according to which her comment was “taken out of context” (“Jean Schmidt”), and Sarah Palin posted on her Facebook page that she had merely meant to say that voters had the right to ask questions (Ruta-Franke). In fact, Palin and others seem to feel most comfortable supporting the “birthers’” claims when they are off record. Hence, the Republican Candidate for Kansas’s US Senate seat in 2010, Ken Buck, told one of his staffers to “tell those dumbasses at the Tea Party to stop asking questions about birth certificates while I’m on camera,” implying that he was willing to discuss the issue when none was present (qtd. in Amira). That such comments invariably become public sooner or later might just be what Republican politicians count on as it allows them to pick up on the issue while denying that they are doing so.

As of this writing, it is impossible to say whether the current vogue of Obama conspiracy theories indicates that conspiracy theory’s status and influence are changing. If this were the case, there are two not mutually exclusive ways to account for this trend. The first would be to point out that the borders between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge have become more and more fuzzy and that the hegemony of officially produced knowledge—in universities, mainstream media, and political discourse—has been increasingly challenged. Illegitimate knowledge now enjoys more importance and a wider circulation than ever before. Tracing these shifts, Claire Birchall suggests that the newly heightened status of illegitimate knowledge is largely due to the influence of the Internet: “Locally, of course, ‘illegitimate’ knowledges have always been exchanged. Yet, the velocity and scale of knowledge exchange in the Internet age is unique. Those local, ‘illegitimate’ knowledges now enjoy mass participation” (5). Not only have collaborative projects like Wikipedia successfully challenged the prerogative of elite institutions to produce official knowledge, but the Internet is also a largely unregulated space where legitimate knowledge, such as a mainstream media reporting on the Obama conspiracy theory, and illegitimate knowledge, including a conspiracy theorist’s exposure of the Obama conspiracy, are only one click or Google search request apart. In this context, conspiracy theorizing represents a way of viewing the world that has never lost its commonsensical appeal (Bratich 7) and may have gained new credence and thus become more influential again.

The other explanation is that conspiracy theories are not moving back into the mainstream of American culture but that the mainstream is

disappearing and the margins are becoming broader. A subject of enormous controversy for more than conspiracy theorists, the Obama presidency has undoubtedly accelerated the erosion of the political mainstream and served as a catalyst for an ever more heated atmosphere of partisanship. In a climate in which the two political camps more and more frequently accuse one another of acting against the good of the country, claims of conspiracy may appear increasingly attractive and believable. They offer an explanation for why the other side will not listen to reason.

The Obama presidency, then, may be part of, or in fact the catalyst for, a historic return to the legitimacy of conspiracy theory in political discourse. But it is important to stress that Obama and his presidency are not in any way responsible for this development. Rather, aspects of the president's person, such as his skin color and history, including his international childhood, have proven to be particularly felicitous to conspiracy theorizing. Thus, even though the Obama presidency may have brought about at least one paradigm shift, it is one that is not of Obama's making. Nor is it one that he and his staff would have wished for.

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