“The Truth Is Out There”

Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability



Jaron Harambam

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By Jaron Harambam

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~

De waarheid op losse schroeven

Complotdenken in een tijd van epistemische instabiliteit

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Let there always be people for me to connect with, and I am a satisfied man.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Everything in the world happens according to a plan

It is the early Sunday morning right after the November 13 2015 attacks in Paris when I receive an email from one my sources stating how these cruelties allegedly carried out by militants of the so-called Islamic State (IS) militants are not what they seem:

> *Everything in the world happens according to a plan. Also in Paris on November 13:*
>
> - *The intelligence agencies CIA, Mossad, MI-6 and DGSE gathered on October 29 2015 to coordinate future events.*
> - *The authorities "coincidently" planned on that same day a large-scale disaster drill featuring attacks on multiple places.*
> - *Paris Match predicted in its October 2nd issue 'a French 9/11' that was 'impossible to prevent' because IS is an 'army of terrorists with unlimited resources' against which no defense is possible.*
> - *Francois Hollande knows immediately who is behind the attacks, even before the passports are*

found, something which the perpetrators always seem to leave behind (Lee Harvey Oswald, 9/11, Koauchi on 7/1, etc.).

- *A nationwide state of emergency is immediately declared (first time since May 1961) and the borders are 'closed' – general repetition for the definitive beginning of a police state?*
- *The press is in immediate overdrive: 'France is cruelly attacked because of its noble humanitarian fight against the terrorists in Syria.'*
- *All terrorists blow themselves up or are killed: no need for investigations nor for any litigation.*

> *The official version is thus again very professionally consolidated as Truth, and whoever asks questions is a conspiracy theorist. The seeds for the War on Terror are sowed once again, this time in Paris. Soon they will bring in the harvest*[1]

This email does not stand alone: over the course of that weekend I have been directed through several of my other sources on Facebook to a number of articles and postings similarly questioning the official reading of 11/13. In *The Paris Attacks: What You Really Need to Know* I read about the

> *concern from the conscious community – who have woken up to the reality that shadow power moguls have infiltrated our governments, media and international bodies with the agenda of instituting a one world government – that the latest Paris attacks are purposely designed and implemented to further their aim*[2]

The author of the article What's Really Going On With Paris Terror Attacks Summed Up In 4 Minutes tells us how:

> *[T]his event resembles other incidents which the media labels 'terrorist attacks' and I am equally skeptical about the motivation behind this one. As University of Ottawa Professor Emeritus of Economics Dr. Michel Chossudovsky has argued:*

> *"a criminal undertaking at a global level … and there is an ongoing war … The global war on terrorism … which is fake, it is based on fake premises. It tells us that somehow America and the Western world are going after a fictitious enemy, the Islamic State, when in fact the Islamic State is fully supported and financed by the Western military alliance … They say Muslims are terrorists, but it just so happens that terrorists are Made in America. . . . The global war on terrorism is a fabrication, a big lie and a crime against humanity [link to original source]."*
>
> *When it comes to the terrorist attacks in France, Chossudovsky wrote that*
>
> *"the media coverage of these tragic events was casually linked up with the war in the Middle East, highlighting France's commitment—alongside its allies—in waging a 'humanitarian war' against the terrorists. The attacks were described without evidence as an act of revenge and retribution against France for having bombed ISIS strongholds in Syria and Iraq as part of Obama's counter-terrorism air campaign […] The political discourse is in some regards reminiscent of the 9/11 attacks and the statements of George W. Bush et al. The media immediately started comparing the November 13 attacks in Paris to 9/11, intimating that France was at war and that the alleged Islamic State attack was from abroad, i.e. the Middle East" [link to original source].*[3]

The alternative news sites that I visited on a daily basis since I started my fieldwork similarly feature articles with myriad doubts about what really happened in Paris. These articles have headlines such as: *Analyst: Attacks in Paris Possibly False-Flag Operation*[4]; *VIDEO: This Interview About the Paris Attacks You Won't Find on Television*[5]; *Historian: Attacks in Paris Carried Out by Professional Commandos*[6]; *German Minister: Syrian Passport Perpetrator Paris Possibly False Flag to Scare People for Refugees*[7]. These articles make one thing abundantly clear: the official explanation

offered by our authorities of what happened on that November night are not believed by (what are commonly called) conspiracy theorists[8].

These messages are consistent with what I have found over five years of following a continuous stream of articles, emails, exposés, videos, Facebook posts, and other reports of hidden truths and deceit. Besides the abovementioned doubts about the official explanations that arise each and every time a tragic event occurs, there are many more less acute instances of (what are generally seen as) conspiracy theories. Such explanations of social phenomena involving the secret actions of some people trying to bring about a certain desired outcome, to provide a provisionary definition, are indeed numerous. When delving into the world of conspiracy theories, one is made aware of the covert machinations of the world's largest multinationals who do everything in order to satisfy those who profit from their profits: bribe government officials, direct public policy, manipulate scientific research, evade taxation, infiltrate regulatory bodies, dishonor human rights, destroy nature. Or one will hear about secret societies and the Illuminati in particular who covertly control the music and film industry and force artists, if they want to be successful, to sell their soul to the devil. It is easy to see who did so, just look for the display of satanic symbols (rain, snakes and triangles) in their music clips which expresses their dark loyalty. And those unwilling to be pawns in the game of the Illuminati are merciless eliminated, think of Marilyn Monroe, Bob Marley, Tupac Shakur and of course, Michael Jackson. Other *difficult* persona are similarly taken away by this global elite before they could make a real change. John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Princess Diana did not succeed, now you know why. Banking dynasties are frequently mentioned, such as the Rothschild's who are said to have profited from all wars and upheavals in history by consistently financing both fighting parties will surely pass. Never a losing game. And, of course, UFO's, aliens and other signs of extraterrestrial life are, so we are told, consistently covered up by our governments. Next to the real truth behind tragic events consistently framed as terrorist attacks, there is a plethora of other things *they* don't want you to know about.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories do not just come in many shapes and sizes, but are hugely popular as well. According to many opinion polls, both in the United States and Europe, significant segments of Western populations adhere to one or more conspiracy theories. Gallup, for example, has shown that fifty years after, a majority of Americans "still believe JFK was killed in a conspiracy"[9]. A 2013 survey by Public Policy Polling finds that "28% of [United States] voters believe that a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government, or New World Order" and another fifteen percent believes "the US government to control our minds through television"[10]. These are numbers that account for tens of millions US citizens and similar figures are found across the pond. A 2012 survey conducted by Opinion Matters in the United Kingdom claimed that "52 percent believe UFO evidence has been covered up because widespread knowledge of their existence would threaten government stability"[11]. Survey research in the Netherlands concluded in 2015 that almost forty percent believe that "the pharmaceutical industry can cure serious illnesses, but has more interest in keeping people sick so they can sell more pills" and about twenty percent "believes the US government to be behind the attacks of 9/11, or at least had concrete foreknowledge about it"[12]. These public opinion surveys have recently been corroborated by social scientific research. J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood (2014) claim that a similar twenty percent of U.S. citizens hold their governments responsible for the attacks of 9/11. They also claim that ten percent believes that the "vapor trails left behind by aircrafts are actually chemical agents sprayed in a clandestine program directed by government officials" (2014: 956). When millions of people in Western democracies adhere to conspiracy theories, it is fair to say that it has become a true mass societal phenomenon.

Conspiracy theories figure rather prominently in popular culture as well (e.g. Kellner, 2003; Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000). The TV-series *The X-Files* (1993-2002) centered on two FBI agents who investigate unsolved cases of supernatural and other unexplained phenomena. The skeptical Agent Scully and the gullible Agent Mulder

stumble over the years upon government cover-ups of extraterrestrial life and what seem even greater conspiracies to colonize Earth. *Trust no one*, the series' iconic slogan, became a cult theme featuring widely in today's popular culture. The 1997 Hollywood blockbuster *Conspiracy Theory* skillfully plays with common stereotypes: Mel Gibson may have started off as the paranoid cab driver who lives in an New York apartment-turned-fortress with steel walls, floors and ceilings, and locks everywhere, even on the fridge, but along the movie it becomes clear that his feelings of persecution were not that paranoid after all. And what about the widely acclaimed science fiction thriller *The Matrix* (1999) which propagated the (conspiracy) idea that the world as we know it is one big lie, one giant illusion, one enormous simulated reality constructed in order to fool the masses into believing that they are free while in effect they are slaves for the system. Who wasn't mind boggled by the thesis it put forward: how to tell, after all, if we aren't really living in that simulated reality we all believe to be real? The best-selling novels of Dan Brown (and the movies based on them) delving into the dark undercurrents of the Vatican such as the *Da Vinci Code* (2003), similarly popularized conspiracy theories about secret societies and the Church for a larger audience. The more contemporary TV-series like *24* (2001-2010), *Homeland* (2011-present) and *House of Cards* (2013-present) all play with the themes of conspiracy theories: political intrigues, government cover ups, clandestine operations by secret services and so on. In sum, the logic and rhetoric of conspiracy features abundantly in today's media culture and has, as such, helped institutionalize conspiracy theories as a broad based cultural phenomenon.

Yet, despite this popularization and normalization of conspiracy theories over the last two decades, strong moral opinions and normative judgements towards the subject matter remain prevalent. The notion of the conspiracy theorist as an obsessive, petty minded, militant and paranoid loner is widespread. The belief that conspiracy theories will do harm is just as common: they are seen as dangerously delusional ideas that pose serious threats to Western democracies. To give an example of this moral presumption towards conspiracy theories, I will go back to the Paris attacks, because just as

conspiracy theories can be expected to proliferate after such an event, so too are the newspaper articles alarmingly reporting about the *spread* of conspiracy theories in our societies. This "important piece", as another of my sources wrote to me by email, appeared a few days after the Paris attacks in one of the major Dutch newspapers, *Het Algemeen Dagblad*:

'Conspiracy Theorists Are Often True Little Cult Leaders'

They appear after every disaster. Also after the horrific attacks in Paris. Conspiracy theorists. They see in every shocking event a conspiracy of the government or "the elite" to impose their will to the citizenry. But how does a conspiracy theorist think? And why? The idea that conspiracy theorists form a small minority only is outdated. Websites about conspiracies have a large fan base who read everything faithfully. A recent video on YouTube about the conspiracy surrounding the attacks in Paris has been viewed almost 300,000 times.

Attention

According to secretary Jan Willem Nienhuys of Skepsis (the organization that looks critically at "exceptional" statements) conspiracy thinking is predominantly about getting attention. 'People who spread conspiracies are all little cult leaders. Often they are people with a low social standing who look in this way for attention. Sometimes they are societally disappointed and look for a larger plan or greater power, to blame others for their failure'.

Obstinate

Nienhuys speaks about the enormous obstinacy with which conspiracy theorists keep believing in the impossible. Like people who think that airplanes spread substances in the air to influence our psyche, the so called chemtrails. 'There are no such substances that have any effect at that height and with that nebulization. Let alone that it is possible to orchestrate such a thing with so many people. But they keep believing in it'.

Jews

The chairman of Skepsis do wants to warn for the danger of conspiracy thinking. 'It certainly is not harmless.

Look at the conspiracy theory that led millions of Germans in the nineteen thirties to believe that it was a good idea to fight the danger of the Jews'. Psychologist and associate professor Jan-Willem van Prooijen at the Free University of Amsterdam researches conspiracy thinking. 'You can set your watch by it after the attacks in Paris. That same evening posts were made on the Internet. Conspiracy thinking has everything to do with feelings of threat, with our sense of safety. People want to explain and understand, and some people simply have a strong sense of distrust'.

Loonies

Van Prooijen doesn't want to psychologize conspiracy theorists right away. 'Dissemination does depend on low self-esteem and low status. But some theories are adhered to by large parts of society. Conspiracy theorists are no loonies. There are simply too many'. Van Prooijen also sees the danger: 'it could undermine the trust in democracy and it can also lead to violence, we know that conspiracy thinking is related to radicalization. Conspiracy theorists are often extremely left or extremely right. And what you think, simply directs your behavior. It undermines trust in the rule of law and democracy'.

Hitler

Van Prooijen also mentions the Second World War as an extreme example where conspiracy thinking can lead to. 'Hitler enabled the Holocaust largely on the basis of the conspiracy that the Jews were responsible for the losses of the First World War'. British research showed remarkably enough that conspiracy theorists themselves have low morals. Conspiracy theorists often dream, according to the University of Kent, of cheating the public as rulers. What happens, according to researchers Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton is 'psychological projection', the proclivity to attribute their own morals to others. Their research showed that people with 'low morals' are more often adherents of conspiracy theories than people who are honest by nature. The conviction "they did it" appears to be motivated by the perception "I could do it". According to the British psychologist Patrick Lehman, who also did research on conspiracy theories, do these crazy theories provide in the need for security and predictability 'for those who

cannot really live with an instable environment'.

The Netherlands
The most famous conspiracy theorist of the Netherlands is publicist Micha Kat. The former employee of NRC [another major Dutch newspaper] regularly writes on his website that an "elite" wants to establish a New World Order to continue abusing children with impunity. Kat also published a story about Paris in which he wrote that there were no casualties at all. Kat was convicted in the past for making bomb threats to the Ministry of Justice and Security. He was recently sentenced to ten months in prison for libel and resides momentarily in Ireland because he is afraid to come to the Netherlands. Because of this recent conviction, the public prosecutor wants his DNA and Kat is frightened in his own words that the Public Prosecution Services will link him to "murder". One of his former lawyers, Gerard van der Meer, stated during a public hearing in court in 2013 that Kat faces serious anxiety problems.

Danger
Conspiracy thinking can in extreme cases lead to serious harm. Anders Breivik recently showed that again. Breivik was convinced that Marxists started to take over the political elite in order to destroy Christian values and norms. European rules would conspire with the Arab world to give Europe away to the Islam. This delusional idea led Breivik to kill 76 innocent youngsters. They became the imagined enemy of this disturbed individual.

This particular article is exemplary of the way commonly is spoken, written and theorized about the prominence of conspiracy theories in Western societies, both inside and outside academia. A first important characteristic is the moral alarmism virtually always present in discussions of conspiracy theories. Linked with political extremism (or in more contemporary terminology, with *radicalization*), conspiracy theories are said to pose sincere threats to democratic societies. Throughout the text above there are numerous and quite literal references to the *dangers* of conspiracy theories: they are said to lead to violence, murder, terrorism and more generally undermine (the trust in) democracies. Even the Holocaust is brought

into the discussion as an extreme consequence of conspiracy theorizing. As such, this article is a clear example of the *moral panic* surrounding the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories (cf. Bratich, 2008; Cohen, 2011; Knight, 2000).

A second important characteristic is the unambiguous denial of the plausibility of conspiracy theories, and consequently their blanket pathologization. The denial is at some points in this article quite explicit ("they keep believing in the impossible", "there are no such substances", "this delusional idea"), but at most other points it happens more implicitly as the implausibility of conspiracy theories is the working assumption of most texts covering conspiracy theories. Scholars and journalists alike simply assume that conspiracy theories are flawed understandings of how reality works, and start their analyses and interpretations from that assumption. Although in recent years people refrain from calling conspiracy theorists literally psychologically disturbed for believing in supposedly delusional ideas ("there are simply too many"), a strong tendency to pathologize them remains. Both psychological and cultural factors are put forward to explain why apparently "normal people believe in weird things" (cf. Bratich, 2008: 18). In this article as well, the image is constructed of the conspiracy theorist as a petty minded, insecure, socially disenfranchised, distrusting, militant, authoritarian and stubborn narcissist looking for attention and control in a complex and unsettling world.

What is, however, completely absent in such discussions of the role of conspiracy theories in Western societies are the actual people dealing with conspiracy theories themselves. While there is a need to understand the "mind" of the conspiracy theorist ("how does he think, and why?"), no one seems to be inclined to actually engage with those "loonies" to find out who they are and why they believe the things they do, not the journalist and neither those psychologists cited in the article. Instead, the journalist makes a more common guilt-by-association charge when he writes about the particular cases of the Dutch conspiracy theorist Micha Kat and Anders Breivik: because *some* disturbed extremists hold conspiracy theories dear, *all* conspiracy theorists must be disturbed and dangerously extremist as

well. But this *pars pro toto* reasoning—the part is taken for the whole—obscures the diversity that can be expected to exist *among* conspiracy theorists, and leaves us with uniform stereotypes but no real understanding of the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories. Of course, one may object that this is a newspaper article rather than a proper scientific study, yet this way of dealing with the subject matter at hand is just as present in much academic writing.

1.2 Academics on Conspiracy Theories: The Pathological Other

Whereas the subject of conspiracy theories was addressed by social scientists after World War II (Popper, 2013[1945]) and in the height of the Cold War (Hofstadter, 1996[1964]), it was only in and after the 1990's when conspiracy theories became a true mass phenomenon that the academic knowledge production on this matter substantially expanded. Scholars from a wide range of different academic backgrounds – political science (Michael Barkun, Chip Berlet, Robert S. Robins); anthropology (George Marcus); (political) history (David Aaronovitch, Dieter Groh, Kathryn Olmsted, Daniel Pipes, Elaine Showalter); (political) psychology (Jovan Byford, Ted Goertzel, Jerrold M. Post); cultural studies (Peter Knight, Timothy Melley); law (Cass Sunstein, Adrian Vermeule) and philosophy (Steve Clarke, Brian L. Keeley, Charles Pigden) – have since then started to write about conspiracy theories: what they are, where they come from and how they are to be understood. The early works of Sir Karl Popper and Richard Hofstadter have, however, firmly set the scene for subsequent research by making conspiracy theories *epistemologically*, *psychologically* and *morally* suspect. In the following I will show how their founding texts have helped establish that pathology model as the dominant frame to understand conspiracy theories/ists in academia. Three corresponding pathological diagnoses stand out: conspiracy theories as bad science; conspiracy theories as paranoid politics; and the combined result of these two, conspiracy theories as societal danger.

1.2.1 Pathology Number One: Conspiracy Theories as Bad Science

> *I shall briefly describe a theory which is widely held but which assumes what I consider the very opposite of the true aim of the social sciences; I call it the conspiracy theory of society; [It] arises from the mistaken theory that whatever happens in society – war, unemployment, poverty, shortages – is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups.*
>
> —*Popper, 2013: 306*

Academics writing on conspiracy theories conventionally start from the assumption that they are flawed understandings of reality. They follow Sir Karl Popper who argued in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* that "the conspiracy theory of society cannot be true" (2013: 307) because it opposes modern (read: scientific) understandings of how the world works. This is firstly so because conspiracy theorists are said to have an outdated, premodern, worldview: they are "some of the last believers in an ordered universe" (Keeley, 1999: 123), "a universe governed by design rather than randomness" (Barkun, 2006: 3). This, Popper argues, is "a typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition. The Gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups – sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from" (2013: 306). It may have been logical in earlier times to believe in powerful agents orchestrating worldly affairs, but today, with the rise of modern science and rationality, we should know better, "as nobody – not God, not us, not even some of us – is in control. The world is uncontrollable [and] without broad meaning and significance', but that is something 'the conspiracy theorist refuses to accept" (Keeley, 1999: 124). Conspiracy theories are thus unwanted remnants of a religious past.

Obviously, these academics argue, conspiracies *do* happen, "they are typical social phenomena" (Popper, 2013: 307), but to "regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events" is simply not how reality works (Hofstadter, 1996: 29; cf. Pipes, 1997: 43). Social life is far too "brittle" and "resilient" to be the

active result of the planned design of certain powerful groups of people, if only because action "creates many unforeseen reactions, some even unforeseeable" (Popper, 2013: 307). Conspiracy theories are thus implausible because they "reduce highly complex phenomena to simple causes" (Barkun, 2006: 7). At the same time, however, the exact opposite argument is made: "conspiracy theories require a chain of deception so complex, an intelligence so formidable, and a cast of accomplices so large that the whole scheme collapses of its own implausibility" (Pipes, 1997: 39; cf. Byford, 2011: 34). In order to preserve their "virtue of unified explanation," conspiracy theorists bring into their narratives all kinds of "unwarranted" explanatory excursions (Keeley, 1999: 119). Occam's razor, or the scientific imperative of parsimony, is now used to point to the epistemological frailty of conspiracy theories (Aaronovitch, 2010: 5; Barkun, 2006: 7). Conspiracy theories are thus at once too complex and too simple to be true.

Moreover, conspiracy theorists make bad use of facts and evidence making their allegations of conspiracy erroneous. Whereas such scholars all recognize their "heroic strive for 'evidence'" (Hofstadter, 1996: 36), they argue that conspiracy theorists "suffer from a 'crippled epistemology'" (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 212) and "inhabit a different epistemic universe, where the usual rules for determining truth and falsity do not apply" (Barkun, 2006: 187). For example, conspiracy theorists are not interested in falsification, but "indiscriminately accept any argument that points to conspiracy" (Pipes, 1997: 41), making them "highly selective in their approach to evidence" (Byford, 2011: 92). Moreover, because conspiracy theories are "the only theories for which evidence against them is actually construed as evidence in favor of them" (Keeley, 1999: 120), they are "resistant and in extreme cases invulnerable to contrary evidence" (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 223). This *self-sealing quality* renders "conspiracy theories at their heart unfalsifiable. No matter how much evidence their adherents accumulate, belief in a conspiracy theory ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof" (Barkun, 2006: 7). Conspiracy theories are the product of a flawed epistemology and fraudulent research practices.

The problem, according to these scholars, is that "the commonsense distinction between fact and fiction melts away in the conspiracist world" (Barkun, 2006: 29). Whereas scientists have fought a long way to separate facts from those from other claims on truth (e.g. myth, fiction, belief, superstition, etc.), conspiracy theorists "obscure, deliberately and cleverly" such important boundaries with their exposés (Byford, 2011: 13). They may often "begin with certain defensible judgments and with a careful accumulation of facts", but always end up making that "curious leap in imagination" by adding larger elements of fantasy (Hofstadter, 1996: 36). This "muddying of the waters" (Pipes, 1997: 30) is aggravated by mimicking mainstream scientific scholarship: "conspiracy theorists flaunt with academic credentials (professor, Dr., MD, etc.), publish books with scholarly sounding titles and adopt a style of writing that mimics mainstream academia" (cf. Byford, 2011: 89; cf. Pipes, 1997: 33-4; Barkun, 2006: 28). With all of "their forged scientific practices" (Showalter, 1997: 206), conspiracy theorists make a parody out of science, and make it difficult for the general public to "distinguish between the committed researcher and the careless loudmouth, the scrupulous and the demagogic" (Aaronovitch, 2010: 335). Conspiracy theories are therefore not just wrong, such scholars argue, they are the pathological Other of modern science.

1.2.2 Pathology Number Two: Conspiracy Theories as Paranoid Politics

> *We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well*
>
> *—Hofstadter, 1996: 40*

Academics secondly conceive of conspiracy theories as the delusional thoughts of disturbed minds. They are said to be the product of people's "imaginative power" (Showalter, 1997: 11), or as Daniel Pipes puts it, "a conspiracy theory is the fear of a nonexistent

conspiracy" (1997: 21). This tendency to pathologize conspiracy theories by framing them as the expression of paranoia is widespread in popular culture, and features similarly in much scholarly work on the subject. Byford argues in this respect that "the link between conspiracy theories and paranoia has become so strong that the two terms are now treated as almost synonymous" (2011: 121).

The academic association of paranoia with conspiracy theories has its origins in the work of historian Richard Hofstadter. In his most famous essay on American politics he coins a certain *style* of doing politics paranoid, "simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind [...] in the paranoid style, the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy" (1996: 3-4). Writing in the early 1960's, Hofstadter is worried about the polarized political climate of his time[13] and warns against the Manicheanism (a dualistic (religious) world view based on the notion of an ultimate conflict between light and darkness) that informs their thought: exponents of the paranoid style "bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action" which are "by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise" (1996: 39). "The paranoid is a militant leader" (1996: 21), Hofstadter argues, and by going against his preferred political virtues of moderation, deliberation and consensus, they do no *good politics*.

Although Hofstadter is at pains to make clear that he is merely "borrowing a clinical term for other purposes" (1996: 3),[14] his usage of the term, however, "has the tendency to slip from the realm of metaphor to the original clinical meaning" (Byford, 2011: 122).[15] Many of his followers have similar *difficulties* separating the clinical and the metaphorical meaning of paranoia when discussing conspiracy theories. Daniel Pipes states, for example, that "political paranoids need not suffer from personal paranoia," yet in the same breath he says that "often the two go together and mutually reinforce each other" (1997: 24). Robert S. Robins and Jerrold Post (1997) similarly oscillate throughout the book between literal pathological diagnoses of the *great paranoids* like Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot and metaphorical

analyses of the spread of political paranoia into mainstream society. Elaine Showalter (1998) speaks of "epidemics of hysteria" that have to be challenged, because they function as false metaphors to mask the real psychic problems that underlie the (mass) cultural expressions of paranoia she studies. Even more concrete is the work of political psychologists Marvin Zonis and Craig M. Joseph who argue that the "deficits that predispose an individual to conspiracy thinking are similar to those involved in the etiology of paranoid psychosis" (1994: 50). What becomes clear is that all of these scholars use the clinical understanding of paranoia to describe *and* explain the existence of conspiracy theories on a societal level.

This association of conspiracy theories with paranoia has received its fair share of criticism for it is unclear what explanatory work it actually does unless one wishes to argue that large parts of Western populations are mentally disturbed (e.g. Byford, 2011: 126-8; Bratich, 2008: 25-50; Knight, 2000: 14-18). Yet, the pathologization of conspiracy theorists persists in various degrees in a burgeoning experimental research tradition of social psychology (see for a discussion Swami, 2010; Bost, 2015). Some scholars do this very explicitly and argue that "conspiracy belief is strongly associated with paranoid ideation and schizotypy" (Darwin et al., 2010: 1292; Barron et al., 2015), while others look for more general psychological factors or personality traits that would lead certain individuals to endorse conspiracy theories (e.g. Bost, 2013; Douglas and Sutton, 2008, 2011; Leman and Cinnirella, 2013; Swami, et al. 2010, 2011; 2014). Hofstadter's assertion of paranoia as a relevant analytical category in the understanding of conspiracy theories is, however, never far away as a recently edited volume testifies. In their foreword, Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A.M. van Lange ask themselves "how often are citizens paranoid, perceiving immoral behavior and evil conspiracies when in fact there are none?" (2014: xiii). And they dedicate then a third part of that book to "investigate the psychological processes that lead people to be overly suspicious of power holders" and argue that "a substantial portion of these beliefs can only be misplaced paranoia" (2014: 4-5). The idea that there is something mentally wrong with conspiracy theorists thus remains.

However, instead of regarding conspiracy theories more neutrally as dissenting forms of (political) knowledge or practice, they are commonly framed in academia as the delusional and extremist allegations of paranoid minds. The discourse and rhetoric of these academic works carries, despite their disclaimers, clinical notions of mental illnesses and psychological disorders.[16] Mark Fenster rightfully argues therefore that "the 'paranoid style' framework continues to cast a long shadow, by [using] conspiracy theory as a means to enforce a normative definition of political belief and practice" (2008: 25). The point he makes is that these scholars do not just say that conspiracy theorists are paranoid, but that their thought and actions are the opposite, the pathological Other, of *good politics*.

1.2.3 Bad Science + Paranoid Politics = Societal Danger

Given their framing as *bad science* and *paranoid politics*, many scholars warn for the societal dangers if conspiracy theories proliferate and paranoia thrives. Whether "the danger lies less in such beliefs than in the behavior they stimulate or justify" (Barkun, 2006: 169) or whether "the belief is harmful in itself" (Aaronovitch, 2010: 15), they all agree that conspiracy theories are a threat to the health of the body politic.

Starting with Popper (2013) who warns against the prophetic ideas of some (Plato, Georg W. Hegel and Karl Marx) that history unfolds according to a master plan or universal laws for they bring forth and support totalitarian regimes, many other scholars similarly hold conspiracy theories to be indebted to the disastrous course history took, especially in the twentieth century. In their historical analysis of what they call the *great paranoids* (Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Ayatollah Khomeini but also Senator Joseph McCarthy and President Richard Nixon), Robins and Post (1997) hold their paranoid thought responsible for the worst of their violent excesses. Pipes makes a similar historical argument as he links conspiracy theories to virtually all the horrors of the last two centuries (1997: 173). He even devotes a whole chapter to "conspiracism's costs" and explains how it leads to "violence," "extremism,"

"totalitarianism," "wars," and "mass-murders" (1997: 171-185). Byford argues in line that "conspiracism has been the staple ingredient of discriminatory, antidemocratic and populist politics, a trademark of the rhetoric of oppressive regimes, and a faithful companion to antisemitism. Conspiracy theories remain the refuge of every dictator and authoritarian leader in the world" (2011: 144). Based on the characterization of certain historical figures as dangerously paranoid people, such scholars argue following a *pars pro toto* reasoning that *all* conspiracy theorists must be similarly dangerous.

Hofstadter's aversion to political extremism reverberates through many academic works. Scholars commonly point to US right wing militias, the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo sect, and radical Islamist movements like Hamas and Al-Qaida which are all thought to draw ideologically from conspiracy theories (e.g. Barkun, 2006: 18; Berlet, 2009: 3; Byford, 2011: 15). These militant groups embody, following such scholars, in very concrete ways "the paranoid style" Hofstadter (1996) wrote about: they envisage politics in Manichean terms and see the destruction of the enemy as the only solution. In all of these cases, a direct connection is made between conspiracy theories as a form of thought/knowledge and violent extremism as a practice. For example, Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule state that "conspiracy theories create serious risks [...] they create and fuel violence" (2009: 226), while Chip Berlet argues that "conspiracy theorists contribute to dangerous social dynamics of demonization and scapegoating — dynamics which are toxic to democracy" (2009: 7). Following Hofstadter, these scholars believe that the proliferation and popularity of conspiracy theories are serious political and cultural threats for they fuel an extreme polarization which is unlikely to be resolved by deliberation only (Barkun, 2006: 189; Van Prooijen and Van Lange, 2014: 10).

1.2.4 What Is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories as the Pathological Other?

This most dominant strand in the academic study of conspiracy theories thus conceives of conspiratorial forms of knowledge in rather

uniform ways as implausible and flawed understandings of how reality works, as the delusional thoughts of paranoid or psychologically disturbed minds, posing sincere threats to democratic societies. Conspiracy theories are, in other words, framed as the irrational and extremist opposite of modern science and of democracy. They are, in the eyes of such scholars, our pathological Other.

But this academic stance towards conspiracy theories is rather problematic for two main reasons. First of all, it can be seriously questioned how delusional and paranoid the belief in conspiracy theories actually is. While it is okay to accept that conspiracies are *typical social phenomena* (the history of mankind is dotted with such instances of hidden plots and deceits by the powerful), to believe that they *drive history* is to have an outdated world view, these scholars argue. The *conspiracy theory of society* in which everything is connected into one master scheme of explanation is simply not how reality works. Skip Willman argues, by contrast, that its conceptual opposite – the contingency theory of society – similarly "constructs an ideologically coherent social reality rooted in social fantasy" (2002: 21). The belief that history unfolds purely by chance and random luck is, after all, just as fantastic as the idea that conspiracies drive it: "they represent two sides of the same coin" (Willman, 2002: 25). Peter Knight similarly goes against a straightforward condemnation as he argues that conspiracy theorists' "faith in the fundamental connectedness of everything is also taken for granted in a host of other ways of making sense of the contemporary world that are seen as quite sane. Everything is Connected could function as the operating principle not just for conspiracy theory, but also for epidemiology, ecology, risk theory, systems theory, complexity theory, theories of globalization, boosterism for the internet, and even poststructuralist literary theories about intertextuality" (2000: 205). As Timothy Melley rightfully argues, "until we discover some magically unmediated access to reality, conspiracy theory cannot simply be pathologized in one sweeping gesture" (2000: 13). Moreover, in the last half century we have witnessed a great number of such *paranoid accusations* turning out to be actually true (think of the Watergate scandal, the CIA mind control program MK-Ultra, FBI's counter

intelligence program COINTELPRO, the Iran-Contra Affair, the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, and more recently the LIBOR scandal and the NSA intelligence operations revealed by WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden). It is therefore simply untenable to argue that the belief in conspiracy theories is by definition delusional and paranoid (cf. Coady, 2006; deHaven-Smith, 2013; Knight, 2000; Olmsted, 2009). Such unwarranted assumptions should not therefore not guide social scientific analyses.

Some scholars hold it therefore necessary "to tease apart claims of conspiracy that are based in reality from those that are spurious" (Byford, 2011: 24; Bale, 2007; Heins, 2007; Keeley, 1999; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). They argue to differentiate between "demonstrably false conspiracy theories, such as the various 9/11 conspiracy theories, [and the] ones that are true or whose truth is undetermined" (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 206). But such efforts are easier said than done. If determining truth and falsity would be that straightforward, conspiracy theories would not be that popular. And who decides what is true and what is false, the scholar? The same counts for paranoia: how to empirically distinguish between what some academics have called "healthy" or "critical paranoia" and "pathological" or "excessive" paranoia (Harper, 2008; Kellner, 2003; Robins and Post, 1997)? And what about the (alleged) dangers of conspiracy theories? Yes, paranoid beliefs may very well result in disastrous atrocities: the historical evidence these scholars put forward is both convincing and terrifying. However, reading Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2010[1944]), Hannah Arendt (2006[1963]), and Zygmunt Bauman (2000) one could easily make equally convincing arguments that rational science and instrumental reason are just as perilous to democratic societies. The emphasis on the dangers of conspiracy theories is, in other words, selective and informed by moral considerations. Max Weber (2009) argued long ago that sociologists can and should not determine what is rational and what not, what is healthy or insane, and what is good or dangerous. Yet, this imperative is not really heard in the academic study of conspiracy theories.

But even plain empirically speaking, it is rather difficult to set conspiracy theories unambiguously apart as distinctively implausible, paranoid and dangerous. In a world where intelligence agencies spy on presidents and ordinary citizens alike, where the mass media parrot the powerful and manufacture consent, where politicians lie about the reasons for going to war, where multinational corporations have a strong hand in the writing of legislation and the production of scientific knowledge,[17] conspiracy theories about those in power simply may not be that *paranoid* anymore. "As popular wisdom has it," Knight argues, "you now need to be a little paranoid to remain sane" (2000: 2). There are, in other words, good arguments to make *both in favor and against* the irrationality of conspiracy theories. The tables can therefore easily be turned, as Jack Bratich intelligently does when he "analyze[s] the discursive practices that channel, shape, incite and deploy conspiracy theories as meaningful" (2008: 7). Just like conspiracy theories are objects worthy of study, so too are the scholarly works for whom conspiracy theories are a concern. The question then becomes "who is interested in defining, problematizing, subjugating conspiracy theories" (Bratich, 2008: 16), and why, I would add. The construal of conspiracy theories by these scholars as implausible, paranoid and dangerous warrants, in other words, more sociological scrutiny as the existence of conspiracy theories alone cannot explain their production as a pathological Other. As Melley argues, such scholarly "diagnoses of paranoia are themselves political statements reflecting particular interests" (2000: 13). A good sociological understanding of conspiracy culture can therefore not stay insensitive to the definitional practices construing conspiracy theories as deviant forms of knowledge, a point that I explore at length in chapter seven.

But even more important for my argument is that discarding conspiracy theories as illusory, paranoid and dangerous does not help in any way to *understand* the huge appeal they have for many people living today. Unless one wants to contend that we are surrounded by a bunch of delusional and angry minds set out to destroy us (and regress in a conspiracy theory of one's own), this rather dominant approach gives no sociological grip on a cultural phenomenon as

prominent as conspiracy theories are today. If we are to grasp what they are about and why so many people nowadays engage with these alternative forms of knowledge, then we need to go further than merely dismissing these ideas as pathological. Then we should explore the reasons people have to follow conspiracy theories *without* the need to disqualify or compare them to certain moral or epistemological standards. When the objective is *understanding*, what else should we do than engage with the people actually following conspiracy theories to find out why *they* find these alternative explanations of reality more plausible than those offered by mainstream epistemic institutions, such as science, media, politics, religion. This is then exactly what I set out to do with this ethnographic study of, what can be called, the Dutch conspiracy milieu: to see the world from their perspective and to grasp their motivations, practices and products. The real sociological question is not whether conspiracy theories are right or wrong, rational or delusional, good or bad, but the matter at hand is one of exploring the *meaning* these forms of knowledge have for all those concerned, and how they influence people's everyday lives and their societies at large.

1.3 Conspiracy Theories: Making Sense in/of a Complex World

I am not the first to argue for a disinterested study of the cultural meaning of conspiracy theories in contemporary societies. In the last decades more scholars have criticized these pathological accounts of conspiracy theories. Such scholars refute their moralism and argue that it is neither fruitful nor possible to "disprove those weird beliefs by a dogmatic insistence on the proper version of events" (Knight, 2000: 13), that "understanding requires more than labeling it as pathological Other" (Fenster, 1999: xiii) and that dismissing it as paranoid "with their sense of marginal and insane interpretive activity" cannot aptly describe this "broad based phenomenon" (Melley, 2000: 8). Instead, they take a more detached stance and emphasize the

relevance to "explore the meaning of conspiracy culture for both those who produce it and those who consume it" (Knight, 2000: 22). Mostly coming from the field of cultural studies, such scholars dissect and analyze the many forms in which the themes of paranoia and conspiracy theory surface in Western culture, think of popular stories of UFO's and other alien invaders, the highbrow tales of Kafkaesque bureaucratic entrapment in postwar literature, cinematic reconstructions of the Kennedy assassination and both feminist literature and black music about white/male domination. "The task," Knight argues, "is not to condemn but to understand why the logic of conspiracy has become so attractive in so many different areas" (2000: 8). And, Melley adds, "to assess [their] cultural significance" (2000: 14).

What sets these scholars apart is that they *normalize* conspiracy culture by relating it to the complexities of living in a globalized and risk-saturated world. In contrast to Frederic Jameson original critical conception of conspiracy theories as "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age" (1988: 356), these scholars show the apparent rationality of such efforts in this *postmodern age* by bringing "paranoia [back] within reason" (Marcus, 1999: 5). Knight argues, for example, how "contemporary conspiracy thinking can be a *necessary* and sometimes even *creative* response to the rapidly changing conditions of America since 1960's" (2000: 8). For Melley too are the "paranoid" suspicions he explores (the "intense anxieties" about human control he calls "agency panic") "*logical* responses to technological and social change" (2000: 14). Jodi Dean, then, argues that "UFO, aliens, and abduction provide *ideal* vehicles for accessing the effects of these changes on American society" (1998: 10), and that "conspiracy theory, far from a label dismissively attached to the lunatic fringe, may well be an *appropriate* vehicle for political contestation" (1998: 8). Fenster adds a similar political dimension[18] and speaks about conspiracy theory as "a *tactical* response from the insignificant [...] for whom politics is inaccessible" (1999: xiii). "As a mode of populist logic," he explains, conspiracy theories "can in fact play the role of a *productive* challenge to an existing order – albeit one

that excessively simplify complex political and historical events" (2008: 90) (*all my italics*).

Deploying a discourse of conspiracy is according to these scholars, thus, a broad cultural attempt to grapple with the complexities, anxieties and inequalities induced by large scale social developments (globalization, mediatization, technocratization, corporatization) and the autonomous workings of opaque systems (e.g. bureaucracies, capitalist systems, mass-communication technologies). It is demonstrated how "he idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age: it makes sense of the inexplicable, accounting for complex events in a clear, if frightening way" (Melley, 2000: 8). Or, in the words of Knight: "conspiracy thinking [...] provides an everyday epistemological quick-fix to often intractably complex problems" (2000: 8). Such authors bring the distress and alienation of living in postmodern societies to the fore. These widely expressed feelings, "anxieties about technologies, social organizations and communication systems," should explain "the recent surge in conspiracy narratives" (Melley, 2000: 7/11). Knight argues: "in a world in which the triumph of laissez-faire capitalism has come to be taken for granted, for many people there is no way of framing an analysis of what is happening or registering their dissatisfaction other than in the 'crackpot' rhetoric of the conspiracy theorist" (2000: 37). Dean holds similarly that "paranoia responds to anxieties surrounding what can be assumed to be real or certain in today's high-tech television culture" (1998: 17). Knight concludes therefore that "conspiracy theory becomes a routinized defense strategy, a provisional but ever present way of making sense of the world and giving narrative shape to fears that are more a reflection of the society at large than one's own personal psychopathology" (2000: 230). From this perspective then, conspiracy theories – half soothing, half unsettling – become some sort of cultural coping mechanism to deal with a complex and uncertain world.

Such cultural analyses of the role and function of conspiracy theories in contemporary Western societies are a far cry from the overt dismissals and pathologizations discussed earlier. These authors explore in much detail the many contemporary manifestations of

conspiracy theory without measuring against any yardstick of normality and theorize with great ingenuity about their meaning in complex, risk saturated postmodern societies. Their works are an important intervention in the academic study of conspiracy theories and are therefore worthy of praise. It is therefore all the more unfortunate that the pathology frame appears hard to break from. After all, when the deployment of conspiracy theories becomes some sort of coping mechanism to deal with a complex and uncertain world, albeit *reasonable*, such scholars seem to reinvent on a cultural level the deficit theories they so rightfully refuted before: isn't the paranoid just too easily exchanged for the anomic? Of course, any cultural belief system—religion, science, mythology—is in some way a coping mechanism to deal with an essentially meaningless world (e.g. Weber, 2002; 2013). And I may be nitpicking here, but when these ways of sense making are described with words such as *anxiety*, *defense mechanisms* and *fears*, and when conspiracy theories are casually referred to as *weird beliefs* or simply *wrong* and *simplistic*, I cannot help but perceive the all too familiar pathology discourse again. I believe social scientists can easily do without such tainted language. We should write about conspiracy theories in ways that leave normative judgments to the reader and not weave them into our texts.

Moreover, despite such efforts to explore the cultural role of conspiracy theories in contemporary Western societies, the reliance of these scholars on conspiracy *texts* (books, films, social theory, music lyrics, newspapers, urban legends, TV-series, etc.) leaves a blind spot for *diversity* in the conspiracy milieu. Yes, they show and analyze the multiple manifestations of conspiracy theory, but as these empirical instances are all seen as expressions of dealing with the uncertainties and complexities of a postmodern world, they inevitably fail to explore the possibility that conspiracy theories can mean different things to different people who engage with them in different ways. Moreover, because these works in cultural studies take as their research objects conspiracy texts, we are left with *their* interpretations of the meanings of conspiracy theories. Texts do not talk back, after all. There is therefore little room in their analyses for the variety of people, meanings, practices and experiences that can be expected to

exist in the conspiracy milieu, let alone for disagreement, opposition and conflict *within* that subcultural world itself. An approach that is sensitive to the empirical richness of everyday life is called for.

1.4 A Cultural Sociological Approach: Meaning, Diversity and Relationality

In this work I build forth on the aforementioned cultural studies of conspiracy theories, but depart from them by *sociologizing* the study of conspiracy culture. This means, firstly, that I will explore it as a culture in its own right: I research the ideas, experiences and practices of people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu *without* the need to compare or measure them against certain (unquestioned) standards of normality. While refraining from reifying conspiracy culture as a distinct, uniform and historically stable whole (cf. Bratich, 2008), "round and hard like billiard balls" (Wolf, 1982: 6, cf. Clifford, 1988; Wagner, 1981), I take seriously the particularities of how conspiracy theorists see themselves, others and the world around them, if only because these ideas are real and meaningful to *them*. Such cultural frameworks may then be multi-layered, dynamic and structured by meaning-making practices (cf. Berger and Luckman, 1966; Weber, 2013), they also "possess relative autonomy in shaping [future] actions and institutions" (Alexander, 2003: 12; cf. Houtman and Achterberg, 2016: 228). Culture, to put it in another way, plays a powerful role in shaping our worlds. I approach conspiracy culture therefore not as something stable in need of explanation by structural or *harder* non-cultural variables, as both neo-positivists and critical sociologists would have (cf. Latour, 2005; Houtman, 2008), but instead as something productive in and of itself: it embodies categories of meaning that inform and direct behavior and has as such empirical consequences.

In taking (conspiracy) culture seriously, I follow an ethnographic approach and research *the actual people engaging with conspiracy theories*. Who are these people? What do they think and do? The explicit goal of this study is to get into the lives of these people: to understand their worldview, their ways of making sense of reality,

and their experiences of being in this world. To get there, I immersed myself in their social worlds for about two years. During that long period of fieldwork, I spoke with many different people, got acquainted with their ideas, websites, and biographies, and participated in their social get-togethers, like movie screenings, political party rallies, and public performances of famous conspiracy theorists. This effort towards *verstehen* is largely absent in the academic study of conspiracy culture, but is a central feature of the interpretative tradition in the social sciences that runs from Wilhelm Dilthey, Franz Boas, George Simmel and Max Weber to the many scholars thereafter who have taken people's *own* understanding of the world seriously. Their point is, like mine, that if we want to understand them, we need to start from what Clifford Geertz famously called "the native's point of view" (1983: 55-73). Social scientists need to start with describing the world as *they* see it, before we let our own categories and classifications do any interpretative work. Obviously, both "experience-near" (or emic) understandings of reality and "experience-distant" (or etic) interpretations of those realities are crucial for any good ethnography (Geertz, 1983: 57). In this study too, I make central the interpretative movement between descriptions of the world as my informants see them and the analytical elaborations of those ideas that are my own[19] (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). My goal is not to advance nor to condemn conspiracy theories, but to arrive at a sociological understanding of conspiracy culture that is honest and meaningful to both insiders- and outsiders.

This brings me to my overall **research questions**: what does conspiracy culture look like empirically? What are the ideas, practices, biographies and products of the people making up this subcultural world, and how are these related to what I provisionally call the mainstream? And secondly, how can the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories be explained? To answer these research questions, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. There are many more specific research questions that I address in each of the following chapters. But for now, let me further specify what my cultural sociological approach entails by

advancing three conceptual *moves* that should lead towards a more complex and empirically rich understanding of this phenomenon.

Move no. 1: From pathologizing conspiracy theories towards exploring their meaning. The first and foremost problem in the academic study of conspiracy theories is thus the consistent and unambiguous pathologization of these forms of knowledge and the people who adhere to them. In this study I move away from the aforementioned pathological assumptions, because it is not relevant for a cultural sociological study whether conspiracy theories *really* are illusory, paranoid or dangerous. Just like it would be irrelevant in the sociological study of religion to be bothered by the question whether god or other supernatural phenomena actually exist (e.g. Berger, 1967), or how it would make little sense in the anthropological study of non-Western cultures to measure their beliefs and practices against our own conceptions of causality, truth and reality (e.g. Geertz, 1973; Taussig, 1987), so too is it for the understanding of conspiracy culture not important whether conspiracy theories are right or wrong, true or false, rational or delusional. What *is* relevant to study – and empirically feasible –is what people (and in this case conspiracy theorists) think and do in their everyday lives, in other words, how they make *meaning* in an essentially meaningless world (cf. Alexander, 2003; Berger and Luckman, 1966). That is, after all, all that there is: there is no *deeper* or *truer* reality behind the relational webs of meaning that we carefully (re)construct everyday (cf. Elias, 1978; Weber, 2013; Houtman, 2008). This focus on meaning-making is exactly what I will do in this study as I address how people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu construe and understand themselves (chapter five and six), others (chapters six and seven) and the world around them (chapter three and four).

Move no. 2: From uniformity towards diversity in conspiracy culture. A second problematic characteristic of the contemporary study of conspiracy culture is its portrayal in uniform terms. Besides reproducing the pathological image of *the* conspiracy theorist as paranoid militants, scholars commonly construe the idea of a uniform conspiracist world view. This idea—whether termed "the paranoid style" (Hofstadter, 1996), "conspiracism" (Pipes, 1997:22), or

"conspiracist ideation"[20] (Swami et al, 2011)—groups together and homogenizes a multitude of different beliefs, practices and outlooks under one uniform header. Time, place and topic do not seem to matter, according to these scholars: conspiracy culture is, in essence, always the same (e.g. Byford, 2011: 4).[21] Now of course conspiracy theories may have similarities or historical continuities, and these may be illuminating to point out, but a sole focus on their (alleged) uniformity obscures the diversity of conspiracy culture that can and should be of great interest to anyone set out to understand this phenomenon. Academic talk about *the* conspiracy theorist as a deviant figure with certain immutable characteristics, about conspiracy theories as a distinct category of knowledge or *style*, or about *conspiracism* as a unified worldview, ideology or culture, just makes no good sociology. Instead, it creates stereotypes and enables processes of Othering (cf. Bhabha, 1983; Pickering, 2001; Weis, 1995). By contrast, I explicitly set out in this study to explore the diversity of conspiracy culture following my ethnographic approach: what variety in discourses (chapter three), epistemologies (chapter four and six), biographies (chapter five), practices (chapter six) and people (chapter five and six) is there in the Dutch conspiracy milieu?

Move no. 3: From an isolated towards a relational understanding of conspiracy culture. Conspiracy culture is typically seen in academia as an aberrant cultural phenomenon, as our more or less pathological Other. Because it is framed as something radically different from the mainstream, scholars have typically studied conspiracy culture *in isolation*: focusing on their alleged inherent properties. Conspiracy culture is in this way reified, taken out of its social, political and historical context and analyzed as a rather peculiar and idiosyncratic sociological problem or curiosity. Even those culturalist studies that are more sympathetic to the subject mainly focus on the particularities of conspiracy theories: their narrative characteristics, rhetorical tropes and other inherent properties (cf. Bratich, 2008: 17). This broad academic tendency to regard conspiracy culture in sharp isolation is problematic because it ignores and obscures the multiple relations (of both conflict and affinity) conspiracy culture has with the rest of the world, most notably with media, politics and science.

Conspiracy culture does not exist on its own in some kind of cultural vacuum, but is shaped and formed by the interactions with these meaningful others. To miss these, is not just sociologically wanting, but insensitive to the dynamics of power that are at play here (cf. Bratich, 2008; Fiske, 1996; deHaven-Smith, 2013). Indeed, precisely the notion of what a 'conspiracy theory/ist' *is*, can hardly be understood by its inherent or substantial characteristics, but only by the fact that it *has been labelled as such* (cf. Bratich, 2008: 3; Coady, 2006: 3; Knight, 2000: 11). Moreover, the conspiracy theory/ist label is a serious and effective derogatory rhetorical weapon – a true *mot de combat* – in any polemic to discard an argument and to exclude an opponent from the arena of *legitimate* discussion (cf. Husting and Orr, 2005; Knight, 2000: 11). In this study I conceptualize conspiracy culture therefore *in full relational terms* (cf. Elias, 1978; Emirbayer, 1997; Latour, 2005). This means that I pay attention to the definitional practices framing conspiracy theories/ists as deviant categories of the social (chapter two and three) and focus on the strategies of resistance towards those (chapter six), I situate people's lives (chapter five) and practices (chapter four and seven) in their social, historical, and cultural contexts, and show the affinities and conflicts with other epistemic cultures (chapter four and seven). The coupled emphasis on meaning, diversity and relationality should all add to the understanding of the broader research question that guides this cultural sociological study.

1.5 Outline of the Book

Besides this introduction, there are another seven chapters in this book plus an epilogue. The next chapter, *Methodology*, speaks about how I carried out this study: I explain what I precisely researched and how I demarcated my research object in relational terms, I explain from which empirical sources I draw (e.g. websites, social movements and organizations, performances and documentaries, and people), and I explain how I analyze my empirical material in order to develop theory. Because this clarification of research practices contains much empirical information about the Dutch conspiracy

milieu itself, it is relevant for the understanding of the rest of the chapters, and may as such be of interest for all readers, not just the methodology minded.

Chapter three, *Contemporary Conspiracy Discourses: How a Power Elite Controls Our World*, aims at providing the reader with a clear and concrete understanding of what contemporary conspiracy theories are about. Based on a content analysis of seven prominent Dutch conspiracy websites (which are recognized as such by both in- and outsiders), I offer a systematic categorization of the conspiracy theories most popular today based on their thematic content. As such, I try to formulate a comprehensive answer to the question of what these narratives of collusion and deceit look like, in other words, what themes and what actors are addressed. The theoretical backdrop of this chapter is the premise that conspiracy culture has radically changed: from the scapegoating of an exotic Other to more diffuse suspicions about *enemies from within* (cf. Goldberg, 2001; Knight, 2000; Aupers, 2012; Melley, 2000, Olmsted, 2009).

In the subsequent chapter, *From the Unbelievable to the Undeniable: Epistemological Pluralism, or How David Icke Supports his Super-conspiracy Theory*, I analyze the 2011 performance of David Icke, one of the main and most popular propagators of what Michael Barkun calls 'superconspiracies: conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are believed to be linked together' (2006: 6). Icke is a true conspiracy celebrity and widely popular (and contested) in the conspiracy milieu. He is most famous, or notorious, for his *reptilian thesis*: the idea that shapeshifting alien races secretly control our world. The superconspiracy theory that he detailed that day is, however, even more extraordinary as he draw that thesis together in one master narrative involving banking scams, energetic schisms, multidimensional universes, and institutional forms of mind-control. In this chapter I take that performance as a strategic case-study to research Icke's discursive strategies of legitimation in more detail.

Chapters five and six delve deeper into lives of the people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. In the former, *Breaking Out of the Matrix: How People Explain Their Biographical Turn to Conspiracy Theories*, I explain the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories not

by an appeal to some psychological or cultural condition, but by studying people's auto-biographical accounts of how they got involved with conspiracy theories. Although respondents draw on a culturally shared *awakening* narrative, the analysis of their distinct life-stories showed more complexity: people speak about different experiences, leading to multiple motivations for engaging with conspiracy theories. Some of them look for larger frameworks of meaning are drawn to alternative explanations of life on Earth involving alien races, while others focus on the more mundane matters of corruption and deceit in an unfair world. What unites them, however, is that they situate these biographical trajectories in larger cultural developments: biography, society and history are fundamentally connected (cf. Elias, 1978; Mills, 2000[1959]).

In chapter six, *"I Am Not a Conspiracy Theorist": Relational Identifications in the Dutch Conspiracy Milieu*, I empirically study people's *own* self-understanding instead of imposing external categorizations and show how they deal with the pejorative image of *the* conspiracy theorist generally ascribed to them. Following a relational approach to identity formations (cf. Becker, 1963; Elias 1978; Jenkins, 2014), I focus in this chapter on the different ways in which these people make distinctions between self and other, in other words, on how they associate with some and disassociate from others. I show that people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu resist definitional practices of exclusion and stigmatization by reclaiming their rationality as *critical freethinkers* against a gullible mainstream. Despite a common opposition towards the cultural mainstream, considerable self-assigned variety exits in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. Different ideas of what conspiracy theories mean and what to do with that knowledge in one's daily life enact three distinguishable subcultures of the conspiracy milieu: *activists*, *retreaters* and *mediators*.

In the last empirical chapter, *Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theorists on the Boundaries of Science*, I situate conspiracy culture in a broader context of knowledge contestations. I study how and why people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu challenge the epistemic authority of science, and, following a *symmetrical* approach (e.g. Bloor, 1991[1976]), I analyze here as well how academics

pathologize conspiracy theories for the simple reason that those works operate as de facto strategies of boundary work (Gieryn, 1999). More in particular, I focus on the rhetorical strategies deployed by both parties in efforts to secure/attack the bastion of science and study as such the arguments and tropes they use to delegitimize each other's claims on truth. I show that conspiracy theorists challenge the epistemic authority of science by attacking its public image as skeptic, objective and egalitarian, while these academics defend the boundaries of science through the stereotypification of conspiracy theorists as modernity's dark counterpart.

I come back to my research questions in the *Conclusion* where I briefly summarize my findings and elaborate further on what I consider to be most crucial in the understanding of conspiracy culture, namely the contested status of mainstream epistemic institutions and the knowledge they produce. I argue that these historical developments feed on a cultural logic, a hermeneutic, of suspicion which is characteristic of conspiracy culture but has a broader intellectual history that I discuss in more detail. These three topics all direct attention to the fact that objective or unequivocal truths (as offered by these institutions) have become for many people quite implausible today. The truth of any situation is now always contested. Based on my analyses of the Dutch conspiracy milieu, I contrast here two ideal-typically opposed ways to deal with the difficulty of living in an age of *epistemic instability*, a historical context where the truth can no longer be guaranteed by one epistemic authority, institution, or tradition, while its consequential relativism and ambivalence cannot fully be embraced either. It is with that topic, by situating conspiracy culture in an age of epistemic instability, that I will conclude this study.

Finally, I reflect on my position as a scholar on conspiracy culture in the *Epilogue: Whose Side Am I On?*. Starting from my argument to stay *agnostic* in this study about the truth of conspiracy theories and *neutral* in the battles for epistemic authority conspiracy theorists are embroiled in, I ask myself whether such a position makes both theoretical and practical sense. By reflecting on the strategies other sociologists have proposed, I question whether that *bracketing*

sufficiently works in my efforts to maintain autonomous in my analyses of conspiracy culture so that I need to position myself more overtly. I pick up Weber's moral imperative for a *value-free* sociology through the works of Alvin Gouldner (1962, 1968) and Howard Becker (1967), and navigate through similar discussions in the social studies of science sparked by Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch's (1979) study of the paranormal world (cf. Hess, 1993; Mulkay et al. 1983; Scott et al, 1990). After advancing three *scenes* which illustrate the empirical difficulties of staying neutral, I explicitly formulate my own position in these contentious debates to prevent being hijacked by this or that political campaign. Instead of *taking sides*, I explain how I adhere to our most cherished procedure to settle disagreement peacefully—democracy—as a way out.

2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

Now that I have introduced this sociological study of conspiracy culture, I will discuss more precisely what I studied; my reasons for selecting my sources; and how I gathered and analyzed the empirical material. Although these are methodological matters, the following elaboration of the places, events, and people that are part of my research contains significant empirical information about contemporary (Dutch) conspiracy theorists, and is therefore informative for those without prior knowledge of this subculture.

2.2 The Field

The emphasis that I put in this study, and which informed my decisions of what to study, has been on the actual people engaging with conspiracy theories, including their ideas about reality and their meaning-making practices. For this reason I decided to do ethnographic fieldwork in the world of Dutch conspiracy theorists, as I believed it to be necessary that I personally got to know the people involved, in order to see the world from their perspective and to understand their motivations. Ethnographic fieldwork draws from a collection of methods (e.g. participant observation, in-depth

interviews, content analyses) to bring the experience and worldview of those researched to the fore (cf. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Denzin, 1997; Smith, 2005; Wolcott, 2008), and is therefore well-suited to my research objectives and ethical considerations. Between October, 2011 and June, 2014, I fully immersed myself in the social and cultural worlds of Dutch conspiracy theorists, during which I got acquainted with a range of people, attended many social gatherings, built rapport with community members, and was recognized by insiders as a trustworthy person. I read their posts, articles, and books, and I participated in the (political) activities they organized. I also watched their documentaries and stayed connected and informed through social media—especially Facebook, which throughout this time was a crucial tool for organizing and disseminating information. All these observations and interactions changed me as a person and influenced my worldview: they made me question my assumptions, think critically about the things I took for granted, and showed me sides of reality I did not afford much attention to before. Eventually, as I had gathered enough empirical material, and understood that the time has come to distance myself from this subculture again, I brought down my interactions to the point that I no longer feel part of that world anymore. I nevertheless maintain good rapport with some of my contacts: we exchange emails and keep each other updated about world and personal affairs. Before I detail the exact places, people, and events that were part of this study, let me clarify a bit more the *field* I went into.

Anthropological fieldwork conjures images of tribal peoples in distant lands. Unlike those distant tribes in places far away, the social and cultural life of conspiracy theorists is not embedded in a particular location, but is spread over multiple places and manifests in multiple forms (e.g. Appadurai, 1991; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Borrowing Colin Campbell's notion of the *cultic milieu* who describes the "cultural underground of society" in terms of its united opposition to "the dominant cultural orthodoxies" (2002[1972]: 14), I call the relatively stable, yet always fluid, network of people, places, and positions involved with the oppositional forms of knowledge commonly known as conspiracy theories, the *conspiracy milieu*. Like

the cultic milieu, it is characterized by a heterogeneity of people, beliefs, practices, and ideological orientations, yet united by an opposition to the cultural mainstream. To capture this fluid and spatially diverse cultural milieu that transcends one bounded locality, I loosely follow the methodological approach of the multi-sited ethnography to get a hold of the field I am interested in (cf. Falzon, 2009; Hannerz, 1998; Marcus, 1995). This approach starts from a similar relational understanding as mine to emphasize that local cultures are fundamentally entrenched in global structures and, more importantly for this study, that an insistence on one bounded locality does not capture the multiplicity of materializations of contemporary cultural phenomena. The conspiracy milieu, to make it concrete again, *exists in such multiplicity*. It exists as the everyday life of conspiracy theorists who write blogs, prepare their food, or design a petition against the powers of the banking industry. And despite their digital, and thus apparently ephemeral nature, the websites where conspiracy theories are disseminated and where contested topics are discussed are similarly the materialization of the conspiracy milieu. Likewise, we can speak of the performances, the documentaries, and the social movements produced by conspiracy theorists as empirical instances through which the conspiracy milieu becomes visible. But where does the field that I call the conspiracy milieu start, and where does it stop? To put it differently, what sources qualify to be included in this research and which should be omitted?

At first blush the answer seems obvious: go to the places where conspiracy theorists gather and where conspiracy theories are shared and disseminated. Yet the first thing I found is that what counts as a conspiracy theory is far from obvious, and people who engage with these discourses do not usually identify as conspiracy theorists (see chapter 6). As I argued in the introduction, substantive definitions do not adequately cover what is commonly meant by conspiracy theories and theorists. Explanations of reality with an appeal to a conspiracy as the causal factor can, after all, include *official* explanations like that of 9/11 (where a group of evil minded men [Al-Qaeda] conspired against the US with their terrorist plans) and *unofficial* explanations (where the US government would conspire

against its people by orchestrating those attacks). Although many scholars have searched for essentialist criteria to set conspiracy theories apart as a distinct category of knowledge (e.g. Barkun, 2006: 3; Byford, 2011: 32; Pipes, 1997: 38; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 206), such efforts do not work well in practice (Coady, 2006: 2-3). As Knight argues, "there is no fixed set of inherent qualities that makes something a conspiracy theory, since in many cases a view becomes a conspiracy theory only because it has been dismissed as such" (cf. Knight, 2000: 11). The question then is, of course: *by whom?* Who has the power and authority to categorize, and thereby dismiss, certain forms of knowledge/thought as conspiracy theory? Or as Bratich argues from a Foucauldian perspective: "conspiracy theories are defined not merely by their strictly denotative, inherent properties, but by their discursive position in relation to a 'regime of truth'" (2008: 3).

Given the fact that the conspiracy theory/ist label is thus fundamentally relational, and a serious instrument of power, demarcating my research field is far from a neutral activity. After all, when we scholars start to define what conspiracy theories are—i.e. designate some forms of action/thought as such—we inevitably immerse ourselves in the power games about truth and reality that we instead should trace and analyze. Even ostensibly neutral assessments of conspiracy theories are therefore always political and inevitably bound up in these public battles for epistemic authority. Bratich rightfully draws attention therefore to "the slipperiness and the political stakes in defining conspiracy theories as an object of study" (2008: 4). A few other scholars have paid attention to the (rhetorical) practices that frame certain forms of thought as a distinct and deviant category of knowledge called conspiracy theories (cf. Birchall, 2006; Fiske, 1996; deHaven-Smith, 2013). Following the relational imperative, I therefore *sociologize* the demarcation of my object of study: instead of defining the contours of the conspiracy milieu myself, I follow what is seen and labelled as such (cf. Becker, 1963; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). I began by following what outsiders consider to be part of the conspiracy milieu, but I was aware to incorporate what insiders themselves believe to be part of their world

as well. Although I do not assume that these two understandings of what counts as the conspiracy milieu (that is, outsider and insider) neatly overlap, my goal with this relational approach has been to circumscribe my research object in a way that is both methodologically sound and politically sensitive.

To make this relational approach more concrete, I will explain in detail how I demarcated the Dutch conspiracy milieu. To find out what *outsiders* consider as part of the conspiracy milieu, I have used the general mainstream media (primarily newspapers), the Dutch skeptics organization *Skepsis*, and an anti-conspiracy theory wiki. The latter, *HoaxWiki*[22] is a Dutch chapter of the collaborative internet-based content (knowledge) producing network for popular culture, Wikia[23] Its aims, according to the site, are corrective: "to show how ridiculous many conspiracy theories are by giving correct information so that people can come to the logical conclusion how absurd they are." The wiki is comprised of "sceptic" and "sarcastic" articles on the many "hoaxes, conspiracy theories, urban legends, pseudoscience and quackery that wander the internet". But they also provide lists of both conspiracy theorists[24] and conspiracy theory websites[25] that I have I used as a basis for the outsider's categorization.

Similarly, I have drawn from the articles posted on the website of *Skepsis*, the Dutch organization of *skeptics* that purports to "critically assess extraordinary claims, pseudo-scientific theories, dubious therapies and paranormal convictions."[26] *Skepsis* is a not-for-profit organization run by volunteers and is financially fully dependent on donations and memberships.[27] Along with the website, they publish the quarterly magazine *Skeptor*, hold lectures, organize a yearly congress on related topics (which, in 2010, was fully dedicated to conspiracy theories), and are often present in the media (as the newspaper article in the introduction testifies). Finally, I have used mainstream media outlets as pointers to what constitutes the conspiracy milieu. By reading newspaper articles in the most important Dutch newspapers, and by watching television segments on conspiracy theories, I got an idea of what the mainstream media regarded as constituting the conspiracy milieu.

In contrast, I have also used demarcations of what those who are active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu consider to be a part of their subculture. At first I obtained such an insider's perspective by tracking the references of people I encountered: every person I met, I asked what websites they use as sources of news and information; which conspiracy theorists they follow; which Facebook pages they connect to, and what conspiracy theory groups or organizations they support. This *snowballing procedure* obviously had to begin somewhere, and the few uncontested conspiracy sites (such as David Icke and his 2011 performance in Amsterdam, and the *Zapruder* and *Niburu* websites) were my official starting point. Although most of the sites included in this study are widely recognized as real parts of the conspiracy milieu, some explicitly position themselves on its edges. These organizations and websites are not deep in the cultural underground, rather, they try to connect to cultural mainstream.

In the course of conducting my fieldwork, I came across a conspiracy website, called *New Media News*,[28] which is fully dedicated to giving an overview of all the Dutch conspiracy-minded websites. According to this site, the difference between new media and old media is that the former "do pay attention to news that question the integrity and sincerity of government, multinationals, mainstream media and royalty."[29] The simple looking website offers links to the five newest items of forty-one new media websites, and has a list of 178 links to various new media news sources, blogs, online radio stations, and so on. The site urges visitors to "always use your own capacity of discernment when reading both mainstream as new media. Never uncritically assume anything." Whereas *New Media News* helps interested people to navigate through the myriad conspiracy theory-minded websites out there, it provides me with a formalized insider's perspective of what counts as a conspiracy theory website.

I have selected empirical materializations of the conspiracy milieu as recognized by both insiders and outsiders. However, I did not newly enter the field after this selection procedure, rather, my understanding of the Dutch conspiracy milieu gradually took shape over the course of my fieldwork. Little by little, I got a grip on the Dutch conspiracy milieu, and I became more sensitive in

understanding which people, websites, and organizations make up this subcultural world. As I formalized my notes, the abovementioned actors proved helpful allies in circumscribing this field. My selection of sources is, however, by no means a comprehensive delineation of what can be called the Dutch conspiracy milieu, if only because that field is an organic network with new material becoming part of it and others dropping off. There are undoubtedly more sources that I might have included, however, all selected sources are recognized by both insiders and outsiders as unmistakably part of the Dutch conspiracy world. As a sociologist, I am more interested in this communal verification than on following a set of formal criteria for inclusion.

2.3 The Sources

The conspiracy milieu appears in different empirical forms which I have attempted to capture in its diversity. This means that I draw in this study from a number of different sources as my empirical material. Whereas I started off in the early 2011s following established conspiracy websites and visiting their Facebook pages as a daily routine, it took a number of months before I began to attend social activities and to meet and interact with the people I was following online. Steadily I got more of grip on *who is who* and *what is what* in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. Throughout that period of my fieldwork, I consistently wrote down my observations, experiences, and personal reflections. These field notes, ranging from descriptions of the ordinary everyday practices that I witnessed on one side of the spectrum, to the recordings of my own thoughts and feelings about what I had seen and learned on the other side, form the basis of my empirical material (Emerson, 2011). They are the most raw building blocks of this study and are the product of my own sense-making practices in that cultural world. From the start, my guiding questions about this milieu centered on the basics: what do people say and do, and what does that tell me? The objective throughout that period (and in this study in general) was to capture as accurately as possible the way that people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu experience themselves, others, and the world around them. Given the centrality

of *meaning* in my study of conspiracy culture, these field notes have the quality of what Geertz famously coined "thick description" (1973). That is, they are detailed accounts of my observations and experiences in the field, but are always socially and historically contextualized so that they are meaningful to outsiders as well. More than mere factual descriptions of what happens, they are meant also to include my reflections and interpretations of these happenings.

In the following section, I explain in further detail the sources from which I have gathered the empirical material of this study. In order to categorize the sources I have consulted, I distinguish between websites, social movements and organizations, performances and documentaries, and people. Nor do these distinctions exclude each other: all of these social movements also have websites, and some documentaries are products of these social movements. Therefore, I organized my sources by how I have used them in this study.

1. Websites. About thirty-five conspiracy theory websites feature on both of the aforementioned directories (*HoaxWiki* and *NewMediaNews).* In the course of my fieldwork, it became clear that several of these websites were important players in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. I continuously asked the people I talked with about which sites they visited to stay updated on *alternative news* so that I was sure to be following the correct sites and to not miss current developments within the milieu. Whereas some of these websites have a wide audience, others are less mainstream but attract a particular subculture of the wider conspiracy milieu. Not all conspiracy websites are the same: some are serious, others satirical; some are spiritual, others factual. Following my emphasis on diversity in the conspiracy milieu, I wanted to include many different websites serving the different crowds of this subculture.

Basing myself on empirical relevance (e.g. the most popular websites) and analytical saturation (capturing diversity), I ultimately selected seven key websites to base my analysis on. This empirically-grounded selection of the more comprehensive lists of conspiracy websites strives to represent the broader Dutch conspiracy milieu. I recognize, however, that any totalizing attempt is bound for failure, if only for the ever-changing nature of the internet. But given the

broad thematic scope of these seven websites and the fact that they act as curators for a much larger set of sources (via linked summaries), it is unlikely that I missed a significant genre of websites that would alter my analysis in any meaningful way. In other words, there may be legitimate reasons to make another selection of these two lists, but this would most likely not yield a significant, alternate conspiracy discourse.[30] Moreover, in terms of content and style, I am confident that these seven websites represent what conspiracy theories have to offer in the Netherlands.

Zapruder Inc.[31] *Zapruder* is one of the oldest and most popular conspiracy websites of the Netherlands. It is a weblog that started in 2006 and is dedicated to "alternative truths and awakening news." Despite the rhetoric of veracity, the site claims that it is not always serious, if only to encourage skepticism, as the site says, "that is an explicit part of the formula: think for yourself!" The site covers topics ranging from alternative histories, corporatism and terrorism and war, but it got wide recognition by promoting the *9/11 truth movement* in the Netherlands. Other main topics are climate change, known as the *CO2 hoax*, Peak Oil, and the HIV-AIDS controversy (in which they support the dissident standpoint and aligned themselves with the *Rethinking AIDS Movement*). The site has nearly 4,000 articles and over 66,000 comments, and most articles have links to other websites that offer more information on the subject. It is visited by over a hundred thousand people monthly (an average of 3,087 per day), and at its peak the site had 9,482 original visitors simultaneously, making it one of the biggest weblogs in the Dutch blogosphere.[32] In 2008 *Zapruder* won the "Dutch Bloggie" award for the best political weblog. On a weekly basis it is cited as the source of a short news item on national radio channels. The articles posted are written by a small staff of permanent writers, but most are contributed by freelance writers. They also have a *zaplog,* where visitors can post freely, content from which may be picked up by the writing team if it is considered suitable. This discussion area is popular and intensively used, and they claim that they have a loyal community who regularly show up at gatherings and demonstrations.

Niburu.[33] *Niburu* started in 2003 as an information website around chemtrails, UMTS frequency bands, radiation, and vaccinations (about "what the elite does to keep people small and ignorant"), but the site also concerns itself with the "revelation of worldwide contact with civilizations from outer space, and UFO activities." The website is named after the supposed tenth/twelfth planet (Nibiru) in our solar system. This planet is unrecognized by mainstream scientists but very much alive in the alternative-science works of, for example, Zecharia Sitchin. Its offspring *NineForNews*[34] (founded spring 2014) is supposed to supplant it as a successor, and indeed seems more active, but both websites are still online (as of February 2016). The format, however, is more or less the same: they offer daily "revealing and awakening" news items in order that, as they say, "people can release themselves from the shackles governments and shadow-governments have put on them". In many cases they feature items from other (alternative) news agencies, often translated or re-written in Dutch but with links to the original article. Beneath postings there is a comments area in which people react and discuss, which is often very active. *NineForNews* "publicizes news that the mainstream media do not" and aims "to present information in such a way that everyone can decide what 'truth' is, that it begins with being well informed and envisioning matters from different perspectives." Those different perspectives, they hold, are made available on their website. It is ultimately up to the reader, they argue, to "assess what feels good to them or what fits their convictions."[35] Besides regular columns by authors whose works connect the scientific with the spiritual, and a web shop to order "many products for conscious people," there is also a UFO-hotline to report sightings. The Dutch political party *Sovereign Independent Pioneers* (SOPN) that I will discuss below was derived from this site. *NineForNews* is consistently highly trafficked (about 4,000 unique visitors a day), and they have over 4,000 followers on Twitter and about 8,400 friends on Facebook.

We Are Awakening.[36] *We Are Awakening* is a collaborative project of Marcel Messing, who is a prominent and influential person in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. Messing studied anthropology, philosophy, and religion studies, and is author of 25 books and many articles in

which he connects esotericism with science, religion, art, and poetry. After working in the Dutch higher education system, he got involved in the alternative news circuit. In his own words, after years having delved into the hidden powers behind the world stage, he realized that the spiritual evolution of humanity was seriously threatened and decided to write a book about it (*Will We Awaken?*).[37] One of the threats Messing sees is the increasing technologization of life, which he says will keep people docile and will prevent us from achieving our true potential. He is a fervent anti-transhumanist. The web site contains a growing body of articles about such threats to the evolution of humanity (currently numbering over two thousand posts). Topics that the site covers includes information on climate change, health and nutrition, radiation, body chips, the new world order, supernatural phenomena, pharmacy, religion, spiritual texts, and literature and film. There is also his spiritual bent, such as a discussion of "the immortal light being that transcend the material world and reveals our true being." The articles are written by a mostly permanent team of writers, or else have been translated from their source language into Dutch by the site's own "translators collective". In all cases, links to the original sources are included.

Argus Eyes.[38] An online media platform run by volunteers, *Argus Eye*'s credo is "a new look on society" and proclaims "unity in diversity." They hold the commonly shared "awakening process" to be central to their objective, which is to provide "conscious-making and inspiring information based on open source." This objective is seen through by readers who post their own op-eds and articles, and is also supported by informative contributions of cooperating partners. Together, *Argus Eyes* hold, these will show the promised *unity in diversity*. With their website, they "want to offer a dynamic and versatile platform that occupies itself with the conscious creation of the future. A future that belongs to all, after all. In total freedom."[39] The site was very popular a few years ago, then went offline for half a year, and is now back online. They have a Facebook page, are a Twitter account and a YouTube account on which they post recordings of their weekly radio transmission. The topic of their site is broad but articles are categorized as health and well-being, society

and politics, myths and mysteries, and science and technology. There are links to other sites in the Dutch conspiracy milieu categorized by the same index.

Want to Know.[40] *Want to Know* is "a platform for people with a mission to serve their fellow humans with providing information that contributes to our awakening." This "leading website about everything you won't hear about in mainstream media" offers news items written by a small group of editors on the usual subjects: health and nutrition, politics, economy and society, and UFOs and extraterrestrial life. It is a spin-off or local continuation of the American site wanttoknow.info of Fred Burks, which promotes itself as being "for those who want to know the truth: reliable and verifiable information on major cover-ups and a call to work together for the good of all." *Want To Know*'s objective is "to empower people, to help people achieve their potential. This is hindered by forces working behind the curtains whose interests are not with the empowerment of people. It is therefore important for people to be informed about these machinations." The editors encourage visitors to help them achieve this by generating content (suggesting interesting articles, writing op-eds and book reviews) and through the dissemination of information to other sites. Underneath each article there is a space for discussion, which is widely used by members of the site. It receives just over 3,000 unique visitors every day.

Normal News.[41] *Normal News* is a website that offers weekly news items that are written by a handful of (guest) editors, or translations/copies of news items from other websites. The site started out of a "discontent with the way the news is currently portrayed to us by the established news agencies." They argue how the news is brought to us in a very particular way that benefits those owning the news corporations, namely private banks. "And they don't hesitate to twist the facts, to manipulate those or to deliberately leave certain facts out." This has led them "into resistance and strive for freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and safeguard from manipulation, because how free are we actually?" The articles primarily concern (geo)political news and are categorized in their archive as politics, economy, foreign affairs, science, and health.

Articles are mostly written from a personal perspective with subjective interpretation and opinion, and often lack precise references to original sources, so the veracity of the news items are often called into question in the comments section. It nevertheless attracts over 3500 unique visitors a day, with a Facebook page that has over 5,000 friends.

Anarchiel. As the site name suggests, *Anarchiel* is an anarchist-inspired website that describes itself as "promoting self-determination" through the facilitation of discussion and the distribution of information: "our goal is not to evangelize, our only wish is to stimulate free thinking and to provide access to matters not (evenly) discussed in the mainstream media."[42] Although *Anarchiel* offers links to current news items, the emphasis of this website lies more in their depository of files on a number of different subjects written, selected, and edited by a team of about fifteen people. These "masterly articles about societal problems and political perspectives have been written from the personal feeling and vision of the authors," but are nevertheless well documented and mostly have good references to original sources. The topics are diverse and range from international agreements like ACTA, PIPA, and SOPA include discussions ranging from aliens to hallucinogenic drugs. All share a dedication to "explore the concept of freedom in all its facets." In addition to this *library*, they have a so-called *dump,* their user blog section, a place where all members of the site can freely publish thoughts, comments, and links. In line with their digital culture/hacker rhetoric, the site values freedom and privacy, including explicit mentions of its own use of cookies, caching protocols, and data storage policies. Moreover, all site statistics are available on the website itself, which reveals about thousand unique visitors a day.

These seven websites of the Dutch conspiracy milieu with their frequent publishing of articles and their heavily-visited fora and discussion pages have proven a true portal for me into that subcultural world. By visiting them on a daily basis, I was able to see what was on the minds of these people, which ideas, thoughts, and theories were shared amongst them, what real world events caused a spike in posts

and articles, and which topics generated disputes and controversy within the milieu. But these websites also directed me to real world events and social activities, and gave me easy access to the people actually engaging with conspiracy theories. I could chat, talk, and recruit them for the in-depth interviews that I eventually did as part of my study. And finally, these websites and their contents were the basis of my analysis concerning what contemporary conspiracy theories are about (see chapter three).

2. Social Movements and Organizations. It is common to think of conspiracy theorists as *lone wolves*, searching for hidden truths in the private confines of their homes. Although many people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu engage with conspiracy theories independently, there are nevertheless all kinds of ways in which they come together and form new collectives. What often unites them is the desire to do something with the knowledge gained; they share a wish to bring about societal change.

One of these initiatives bringing conspiracy theory-minded people together is the newly established political party, Sovereign Independent Pioneers Netherlands. SOPN ran in Dutch national elections in 2012 and has its origins in the *Niburu/Ninefornews* websites. The people behind those websites founded a political movement, which is, in their own words, "no ordinary political party. Politics, after all, means for a long time favoritism, backroom politics, and ostrich politics".[43] SOPN is different, they say, because they are "a people's movement, a participation party', doing 'politics not *for* the people, but *by* the people." They "are the only party daring to point to the root of our problems: the rule and domination of banks and multinationals."[44] Their political program consists of many different propositions, of which the main priorities are described as,

> *an unconditional basic income for every Dutch citizen, maximal civil participation in public governance, total transparency about everything in the public domain, respectful tolerance to all perspectives on all terrains, liberalization of health care and education, tax equality for citizens and companies alike, monetary stability through a fixed value currency.* [45]

Despite all these different political aims, SOPN was dubbed in the media as the *UFO-party*, in light of their demand for government disclosure on UFOs.[46] A closer look at their party program shows that their goals are far broader: SOPN calls for structural societal reforms drawing on socialistic, democratic and libertarian ideals. Like the many populist parties popular today in Western Europe (cf. Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2004), they defy as such an easy left/right categorization. SOPN managed to receive 12,982 votes in the 2012 national elections, roughly a fifth of what is needed for one parliamentary seat.

Another important player in the Dutch conspiracy milieu is *Frontier World*.[47] This non-profit organization aims "to collect and disseminate information of the fringe sciences." They argue that "established science often has no explanations for certain facts or phenomena, and silences these subjects." They, on the other hand, "take on these subjects and shed light on them from multiple perspectives." Such subjects include, in their words, "odd or unexplained phenomena, alternative history and archeology, ancient civilizations, politics and conspiracy theories, aerospace, extraterrestrial life, alternative science and technological developments, spirituality and (para)psychology, alternative health and futurology." They have a weekly internet radio show and they sell "hard to get" books, magazines, and DVDs in their shop in the center of Amsterdam and via their website. They are most famous for their magazines, one in Dutch (*Frontier Magazine*, 6 times a year, since 1995) and one in English (*Nexus Magazine*, 6 times a year, since 2011). In addition, they organize numerous events (lectures, workshops, etc.). The one that I attended, called *Frontier Symposium*, is the largest and best known of their yearly gatherings. Started in 2001, the annual symposium has become a landmark event for the organization, but also for the cultic milieu in general. The 2012 symposium that I went to was set up like a scientific conference, including keynote speakers and a series of smaller lectures by people active on the *fringe* side of science. Some of these people are famous in the Dutch conspiracy milieu, like Marcel Messing, but others are generally less known.

WeAreChangeHolland[48] is a local chapter of the global network *WeAreChange.org* and they describe themselves as a

> *nonpartisan, independent media organization comprised of individuals and groups working to expose the lies of governments and the corporate elite who constantly trash our humanity [...] is comprised of independent journalists, concerned citizens, activists, and anyone who wants to shape the direction our world is going in.*[49]

This local Dutch chapter participates in journalistic efforts to confront those in power, in their words, "we don't present (conspiracy) theories but rather ask questions." On YouTube they have their own channel where one can clearly see how they perform their citizen journalism.[50] With a small video-recorder, they attempt to interview many different Dutch politicians, about issues such as failed policy or on subjects like the Bilderberg conferences, but these efforts are often to no avail: questions are hardly, if at all, answered. To outsiders, the citizen-journalists of *WeAreChangeHolland* are seen as radical conspiracy theorists.[51]

The Zeitgeist Movement is another group active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu, which brings together people seeking to advance and implement their political ideas in everyday life. Inspired by the *Zeitgeist* documentaries, this grassroots "sustainability advocacy organization conducts community based activism and non-violent awareness actions" all over the globe. It currently has local chapters in over sixty countries worldwide, including the Netherlands.[52] Since 2008, they have organized a yearly global event called *Z-Day*, which aims to "increase public awareness" by hosting lectures, screenings, and interviews. This main event is complimented with about three hundred local, self-organized events at chapters worldwide. I attended two of the local Z-Days in Amsterdam, the first in 2010 when the Dutch chapter was founded, and the second in 2014 when more established speakers were invited. The *Zeitgeist Movement* is a non-profit organization "striving for a new economic model [because] solutions cannot be expected to come from the system itself." Like

the *Zeitgeist* documentaries from which they ideologically draw, these activists are viewed in the mainstream media and by others on the internet as conspiracy theorists.[53]

Over the course of my fieldwork I attended some of their meetings, symposia, demonstrations and other get-togethers in order to observe what they are about, who is involved, and what they actually do on a day-to-day basis. Although I do not directly use my experiences with these movements in the analyses of the chapters that follow, they have informed my understanding of how this community comes together and organizes itself on the basis of a discontent with our current societal order. Conspiracy theories do not only separate, but also bring people together. However, because quite a number of the people I interviewed are part of these social movements, the ideologies and practices of these social movements inevitably come back in my analyses, since my respondents speak about their motivations and experiences with them. Moreover, most people active in the conspiracy milieu know about these organizations and relate in one way or another to them. Either by following or opposing them, these social movements and organizations feature in the lives of those who are active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu and therefore find their way into the chapters that follow.

3. Performances and Documentaries. A key part of the Dutch conspiracy milieu are the many presentations, videos, and documentaries that are shared over the Internet. These visual-textual sources are often the work of foreign, most notably UK and US, actors who exert as such considerable influence on the Dutch conspiracy milieu. In this study, I pay special attention to *David Icke*, one of the most popular and best known conspiracy theorists today, who came to Amsterdam in 2011 for a performance at the RAI convention center. Icke is a true celebrity in the conspiracy milieu internationally, and holds these performances in large venues all over the world for crowds of thousands. He is also the author of more than twenty books, which are read in twelve different languages, and he owns a popular website with extensive videos and interviews, and that features a fairly active discussion platform (with more than 100,000 registered users).[54] His motto is "exposing the dream world we

believe to be real," and he is most famous, or notorious, for his *reptilian thesis*, which is the idea that reptilian human-alien hybrids secretly rule the world. But he is also known for his synthesis of seemingly different systems of thought: in his *superconspiracy theories*, he brings together New Age teachings with apocalyptic conspiracy notions of a coming totalitarian New World Order (cf. Barkun, 2006; Ward and Voas, 2009). Icke's fan base is diverse, including various spiritual seekers, political anarchists, members of the alternative medicine circuit, and members of the anti-government populist right. All of them, however, share a discontent with the current societal order, and more precisely with the way mainstream epistemic institutions (i.e. science, politics, religion, media) work. In Chapter Four, I analyze the content of his show to understand how he supports his extraordinary claims, but Icke comes up in the interviews with my informants as well. Many, if not all, people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu know about him and he engenders considerable traction with his militant activism.

In addition to Icke's work, there are two other visual-textual sources important to discuss here. Two documentaries in particular play a powerful role in bringing people into the Dutch conspiracy milieu, as a number of my respondents explained. The three-part *Zeitgeist* series (*Zeitgeist: The Movie*; *Zeitgeist: Addendum*, and *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward*) convey a number of what outsiders commonly see as conspiracy theories,[55] mostly about the way financial system of fractional reserve banking works and how that turns societies and people into economic slavery. A greater part of these documentaries is, however, reserved for the development of an alternative socio-economic model, arguing that our current neoliberal and capitalist one is reaching both social and natural limits. Their alternative, a "resource based economy," puts environmental friendliness, sustainability and abundance as fundamental societal goals and affords an important role to technological innovations as ways to achieve them. These documentaries are created by independent filmmaker and activist Peter Joseph, and have been watched by millions of people all over the world, thus sparking the aforementioned social movement.

The documentary *Thrive: What On Earth Will It Take?* performs a similar, if minor, role in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. Most people I met had seen this film or at least knew about it. Like the *Zeitgeist* documentaries, *Thrive* starts with a promise to lift "the veil on what's *really* going on in our world by following the money upstream, uncovering the global consolidation of power in nearly every aspect of our lives," but moves then to "real solutions and bold strategies for reclaiming our lives and our future" by "weaving together breakthroughs in science, consciousness and activism." [56] According to its critics, "the film smashes together pretty much every modern conspiracy theory, [features] pseudoscience stars [and] is a not-so-well disguised libertarian propaganda piece."[57] The documentary is the product of Foster Gamble (allegedly heir of the Procter and Gamble company) and his wife Kimberly Carter Gamble. It has been viewed over 35 million times and is available in 27 languages. Like *Zeitgeist*, it encouraged a corollary activist movement so that people "can thrive together," but it has much less local support than other groups, at least in the Netherlands. In the summer of 2011, I attended a local screening of *Thrive* with about thirty others people in a small community center in Amsterdam. After the movie, there was a discussion in which people shared opinions about the film and then an informal gathering over drinks where people mingled and discussed with each other the issues that the film raised.

Both documentaries are exemplary of the contemporary fusion of science and spirituality that is so characteristic of the cultic milieu and very present in much of the contemporary conspiracy milieu as well. For myself, they have proved a true eye-opener when I first saw these movies in that they are professionally crafted, exhaustive, and compelling, but mostly they gave me insight about the world from the perspective of conspiracy theorists. They testify to the power of film (especially documentary film) in the dissemination of conspiracy theories. For many, these documentary films have been a substantial influence in their turn to conspiracy theories. Although these documentaries are not the main objects of the analyses done in this study, their presence in the lives of people

active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu makes them present in the chapters nevertheless.

4. People. Along the course of my fieldwork, I made contact with many different people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. Some are rather active participants of this subculture and organize various civil initiatives or run websites, whereas others merely browse the conspiracy websites occasionally in order to get a different take on the news. However fascinating most of these interactions were, I wanted to go into more detail with a smaller number of people about their own motivations and experiences. I selected therefore twenty-one people during those months for the in-depth interviews I wanted to undertake. The most important criteria I used when choosing my respondents was that of diversity: I tried to get in contact with as many different people as possible, because I wanted to grasp the sheer variety of standpoints, practices, and biographies that make up the conspiracy milieu. Besides selecting people at different sites, I often used physical clues as a shortcut to diversity, seeking out young and old, male and female, lower class and upper class, individuals and groups, provincials and urbanites, Dutch natives and (children of) immigrants, and so on. Although this approach of selecting people on the basis of external clues obviously draws on prevalent stereotypes and assumptions, it nevertheless proved an adequate additional strategy to capture the diversity I was aiming for.

On my first real in-person encounter with the Dutch conspiracy milieu, which was Icke's 2011 performance, I invited numerous people to follow-up for interviews, out of which three eventually took part. That day, during the breaks in Icke's seven-plus hour show, I had ample opportunity to talk to the a variety of attendees. I stumbled on a number of people who told me they were part of Marcel Messing's group. After some questions about my intentions (why was I interested in them, and what did my research look like?), they told me that they regularly work with Messing and write articles for *WeAreAwakening*. Two of them eventually gave me their contact details, and I managed to complete an interview with one of them. During another break, I spoke to a group of men who appeared working-class, in their late thirties, who were smoking

rolled cigarettes outside. They turned out to be a group of close friends from the south of Holland. One of them knew Icke well and suggested that his friends come along, who were only peripherally engaged with conspiracy theories. I took the contact details of the former with whom I did an interview a few weeks later. Finally, right before I decided to go home, I saw a posh looking couple in their forties sitting not far from me in the auditorium. They were happy to talk and curious about my research. The tickets for Icke's show were given to them by an angel medium who was Icke's personal assistant that day. They knew about Icke, but they also told me that they would not have come if they were not supplied complimentary tickets. Some weeks later I am doing an interview with the one half of the couple, a man who worked for an agricultural import/export company.

These were typical of the sort of encounters I had during my other in-person engagements with the Dutch conspiracy milieu. At the screening of *Thrive*, I had a good conversation with a young female professional in the media industry who was thrilled about the positive message in that documentary and its call for societal change. She agreed to have a more thorough talk about her ideas and experiences in an official interview. I also met a former activist who I spoke with during at Z-Day a year earlier. He told me that he is working on multiple fronts in the conspiracy milieu to bring that subculture more into the mainstream. When I tell him about the details of my research, he is enthusiastic about cooperating, and a few weeks later I visit him at his house. At a SOPN election rally, I made contacts with four people: a young *frat boy* sort, who caught my attention during the presentation of the party leader for posing some critical questions about the financial solidity of their plans. It turned out that he is a student of economics at the university where I work and I met him a few weeks later in my office in Rotterdam. A young woman in her early thirties joined our conversation about the party program and their objectives. She volunteered for a newly-established political party in the Netherlands called The Party for the Animals.[58] Doubts about which party to volunteer and vote for occupy her, and we talked in more detail about her views in a later interview. I also saw a guy who I knew from my childhood, a cousin of a former neighbor

friend. I had not seen him in years, but he had not changed much, still the friendly-faced Suriname kid I remembered. He told me that he has read all of Johan Oldenkamp's work and was intrigued by what this party was about. He even coaxed his father along for the event that night. We were both excited to meet up again to talk in depth about how he got involved with Oldenkamp and conspiracy theories in general. At the end of the evening, the party secretary asked me if I wanted to help SOPN register in Amsterdam. She was in her late thirties, spoke with a local accent, and was the regional coordinator of the party responsible for getting SOPN on the city's election list. She needed multiple people in each district in Amsterdam to confirm their support for the party at the municipality. I explained my research and we agreed on an interview instead.

I recruited an additional group of people via the discussion forums of the internet sites that I have been following,. Attracted by her comments on *Argus Eyes,* I set up an interview with a woman in her fifties who runs her own coaching and counselling therapy practice for people with *soul problems*. Somewhat coincidentally, I met her again at the Frontier Symposium a few months later. I got in touch on that forum with a father on welfare in the city, who has experienced personal issues with the medical establishment; a woman in her thirties who just completed a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela during which she experienced the peacefulness and solidarity she wishes to see in the rest of the world; and a former squatter who now lives in a vacation house in the woods where he subsists on the small permaculture garden he recently installed.

Through links and comments on the key websites I used, I found some people who ran their own conspiracy-minded websites. Given their active participation in the conspiracy milieu, I recruited four of them for interviews: the owner of the most visited Dutch website on 9/11, *Truth911.nl*; a retired "independent researcher" who takes a stance against the 'financial dictatorship' of the banking industry by "revealing the secrets behind money"[59]; a father of two children who is a nutritional counsellor and runs a conspiracy website mostly dedicated to health issues called *AreYouStillAsleep*; and a student of philosophy who started his own discussion site about conspiracy

theories *called SeekTheTruth*. From that latter site, I recruited two active forum participants, one, an employee of a green energy company who is active in a local chapter of the Zeitgeist Movement, and the second, a man in his early thirties who just opened his own tile shop at which I conducted his interview.

One of these informants directed me to a peer in her network because she felt he would be relevant to interview. And indeed, that man, a former mayor of a small town who now runs a citizen's platform for governmental discretion and societal change, proved an interesting source. He is quite well known in the conspiracy milieu, is befriended by many and garners much support for his political activities. Months after our interview, I met him again at the Frontier Symposium where he introduced me to other active participants of the conspiracy milieu. And finally, through my own personal network I got in touch with an additional two people. The first, the brother of a family friend who was heavily involved with conspiracy theories and the second the mother of a friend of a friend, who is similarly engaged with these alternative ways of knowing. I first met her at an *Occupy Amsterdam* rally and later returned to her house for a formal interview.

All in all, I have managed to collect from these different sites a wide variety of people active in the conspiracy milieu: from the young to the old (23 through 67 years, median age 42), male and female (12/9), lower to higher educated (International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) levels 0–3: 5; level 4: 7; levels 5–6: 9), provincials (9) and urbanites (12); Dutch natives (18) and (children of) immigrants (3), and others, totaling 21 people.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with this diverse group over a twenty month period of fieldwork. These were mostly done in the safe atmosphere of people's own homes. This gave me a unique look at the way they lived their daily lives, and gave them a comfortable setting to speak at their ease. Often they invited me for lunch, and I stayed over for much of the day. If the situation demanded otherwise, we did the interview at my office at the university in Rotterdam, my own place in Amsterdam, or on one occasion at a public cafeteria. The interviews ranged between one-

and-a-half to five hours, and a few times I continued the interview with a gap of a few weeks.

Given the exploratory nature of my research, the interviews were only loosely structured around certain themes so as to let my respondents freely associate and discuss what was on their mind. I asked them general questions on the following topics: their personal biographies, how they turned to conspiracy theories and what their current reasons and motivations are, their thoughts on the most popular conspiracy theories today, how they assess knowledge and truth in a mediatized world, which sources of information they use and which they avoid and why. I asked them about their ideas of and experiences with mainstream epistemic institutions like politics, media, religion, medicine, and science. I also asked them to describe their role in the Dutch conspiracy milieu, including, how they see themselves and others in that subcultural world, how they deal with the stigma associated with it, what activities (if applicable) they undertake, and about their interactions with others. These interviews have all been recorded and transcribed into written documents. I draw on this empirical material throughout, and analyze it specifically in chapters five, six and seven.

2.4 The Analyses

Because qualitative or ethnographic studies of conspiracy culture are relatively rare, the analytical approach that I took towards my research object and the interpretation of the empirical material is an inductive one (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Silverman, 2013). This means that I went into the field with minimal preconceived ideas about what I was going to find. Obviously, one never confronts reality without prior conceptualizations and knowledge of the world, so I merely let my theoretically-informed intuition, what Charles Wright Mills calls "the sociological imagination" (2000), guide me. As such, I came across texts, people, and events I had not previously considered, and I often ventured into territories I had not foreseen, both online and off. Sometimes these sidesteps were theoretically or empirically productive, and other times I traced aspects of conspiracy culture to

their dead ends, at least for this study. In other words, my fieldwork period was characterized by uncertainty and capriciousness, but I always tried to stay as close as possible to the lives of the people I researched. Put differently, I pursued an inductive research strategy with the aim of developing novel, contextual theoretical frameworks for understanding conspiracy culture, instead of testing for preconceived hypotheses.

During that long period of fieldwork, I collected a wide range of empirical material: written accounts of how Dutch conspiracy theorists see the world (i.e. contents of popular websites); my own observations of their practices (i.e. performances, blogging, and collective actions); personal narratives and life experiences via interviews. These different types of data have all consistently been organized with the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti 7 in order to systematize my inductive process of theory building. Based on a close reading of this empirical material and continuous discussions with my supervisors, I first developed rough analytical categorizations. To explain and make more concrete how this analytical process of inductive theory building took shape during the course of my research I will make use of one particular example, namely how people explain their turn to conspiracy theories (which I treat in depth in chapter five), but note that this exemplification is similar to all other forms of theory building present in this study.

In this first process of *open coding*, frequently-occurring observations, recurrent topics, and primary aspects of the stories people told me were given solidity and coherence by giving them an analytic name, or *code*. To put it differently, I reduced and organized the richness of my empirical material with analytical categories that emerged from the data (e.g. Erlandson, et al, 1993: 118). This process of dividing up my empirical material into meaningful categories yielded, in the early phases of empirical research, many different codes. For example, when assessing the stories people told me of how they got involved with conspiracy theories, I initially distinguished relevant excerpts with codes such as *historical events* (e.g. 9/11, war in Iraq, etc.), *personal crises* (death of loved one, burn-outs, birth of children, etc.), *media distortions*, *travels abroad*, *education,*

spiritual longings, *political discontents*, *documentaries*, *discomfort with the church*, *the internet*, *supernatural experiences*, and so on. In other words, my interviewees offered me many different explanations of why they turned to conspiracy theories, which I then analytically separated out by constructing such distinct categories.

Through the duration of my fieldwork I adapted and fine-tuned these analytical categories through the *constant comparison* of such categories with the empirical material they are supposed to contain (e.g. Glaser and Strauss, 1967). I reassessed my empirical material several times during that period to explore in further detail the categorizations I had made, asking, do they still fit the data, should I amend the properties and dimensions of these analytical constructs, or develop entirely new ones? What do they actually mean in light of some theoretical perspective? In this analytical phase, fewer and fewer new analytical categories were constructed and instead existing categories were reassessed, brought into connection with each other, and sometimes merged into more abstract, or higher order, categories. This process is often called *axial coding* (e.g. Corbin and Strauss, 2015; 239-241), in which the idea is to think about the empirical material in increasingly abstract terms and to relate distinct categories with each other in a coding schema or tree.

For example, when thinking about how to organize and associate the abovementioned categories, it struck me that people explain their involvement with conspiracy theories as developing either along gradual, incremental lines or else by abrupt, life-changing moments. There were, in other words, patterns in the stories people told me. I constructed then two coding trees in which the different categories were assigned to their respective axis (gradual or abrupt). The idea was that I could differentiate two distinct *careers* of how people became conspiracy theorists. However, as much as I tried to assign the original categories to either of the axes and develop two distinct pathways, my empirical material resisted. To put it differently, the theoretical idea that I started to develop did not work with the stories people told me, and this approach then began to strike me as too formalistic too account for the variety of experiences I encountered. I therefore decided to go back to my original categories

and to reassess the interview material again. With a new look on my empirical material, I started to see how my respondents contextualized their own private experiences of turning to conspiracy theories *within* larger societal developments. I then decided to change course by categorizing these personal experiences by the historical currents they conveyed. This way of organizing my empirical material proved not only more empirically just but also theoretically more rewarding, and the conclusions I draw in chapter five are the product of this move back to my original data.

Similar re-evaluations of and adjustments to the analytical categories I was ordering and interpreting my empirical material with were made along that period of field research (and on a continual bases after). Sometimes this led me to go back into the field so that I could compare and assess my newly-developed analytical categories, and to possibly adapt them once more. For example, when I attended the performance of David Icke, I observed and made notes of his performances with an open mind: I merely wanted to be taken along by his argumentation. When I firstly analyzed his show systematically (with the help of video recordings), I focused on how he brought together all many different facets of his superconspiracy theory into one coherent narrative. This resulted in a number of different analytical categories with which I continued my formal analysis. However, along the process of making theoretical inferences from analytical categories, I realized that is was theoretically more interesting to shift focus from how he *connected the dots* to how he empirically supports these different claims, in other words, to focus on the different sources of epistemic authority from which he drew (see chapter four). This readjustment of my theoretical perspective led me to completely re-analyze his show and to build new analytical categories from those subsequent viewings.

This continuous movement between the empirical material, analytical concepts, and theoretical interpretations is a central feature of a *grounded theory* approach (cf. Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The analytical frameworks that are developed and portrayed in this study and the theoretical conclusions that I ultimately draw, are all the product of this iterative procedure

of data-driven theory construction. My goal is, however, no totalizing grand theory as with modernist traditions (cf. Lyotard, 1984; Ritzer, 1997; Seidman, 1994). Instead, I set out to provide in intelligible and meaningful "local knowledge" (Geertz, 1983): contextually bound *small narratives* which are meant to inform us about parts and perspectives of worlds hitherto under-explained (cf. Bauman, 1987; Toulmin, 1990; Latour, 2005).

3. Contemporary Conspiracy Discourses: How a Power Elite Controls the World

3.1 Introduction

Given the contemporary ubiquity of conspiracy theories, most people have an idea of what they are. Some would speak of 9/11 and the widespread suspicions of the official account, while others would talk about the assassinations of important figures like John F. Kennedy. But conspiracy theories come in many shapes and sizes. The sheer scope of conspiracy theories warrant a more thorough exposition. In this chapter, I will therefore explore in greater detail the many conspiracy theories that circulate in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. It is, however, not my intention to provide a complete overview of all conspiracy theories out there; others have already made such attempts (cf. McConnachie and Tudge, 2008; Lewis, 2008; Vankin and Whalen, 2010). Neither is it my intention to identify certain rhetorical characteristics or epistemological tropes inherent to *all*

conspiracy theories. These quests to find "the nature of conspiracy belief" (Barkun, 2006) or to dissect "the anatomy of the conspiracy theory" (Byford, 2011) are informed by essentialist notions of *the* conspiracy theory, the problems of which have been addressed in the introduction. Instead, I would like to provide a systematic categorization of the conspiracy theories popular today so to clarify the body of knowledge that I refer to when I speak of conspiracy theories in the chapters that follow.

There are many ways to do so. An often-applied criterion in academic studies to categorize conspiracy theories is *plausibility*.[60] As the introduction showed, scholars often distinguish *real* from *false* conspiracy theories, albeit in many different ways (e.g. Bale, 2007; Byford, 2011; Keeley, 1999; Pipes, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Others categorize conspiracy theories by scope. Pipes, for example, separates "petty" from "world" conspiracy theories: the former are "limited in ambition, however dangerous in consequence" whereas "world conspiracies aspire to global power and to disrupt the very premises of human life.... [T]he unwarranted belief that rivals are at work ganging up on you is a petty conspiracy theory; fear of Jews' or Freemasons' trying for global power is a world conspiracy theory" (1997: 21-2). Michael Barkun distinguishes three *types* in ascending order: "event", "systemic" and "superconspiracies" (2006: 6). The first refers to conspiracy theories about a single event like the Kennedy assassination or the attacks of 9/11. *Systemic conspiracies* have sweeping goals, like world domination, but refer to a rather simple notion of cabals: the Jews, the Freemasons, the Communists, the Capitalists. *Superconspiracies* are those in which all other conspiracies come together in one nested framework of conspiracy, where "at the summit of the conspiratorial hierarchy a distant but all powerful evil force" (2006: 6). David Icke's reptilian theory, which will be further discussed in the next chapter, is a clear example of the latter.

In contrast to the more common categorizations of scope and plausibility, which I believe are too general and too much guided by the need to discredit conspiracy theories, I will discern conspiracy theories here by their thematic content. This emphasis on thematic content, on *meaning* instead of *truth*, follows logically from the

cultural sociological approach that I take. The guiding question of this analysis is a simple one: what precisely are contemporary conspiracy theories about? What do these narratives of collusion and deceit look like? Who are the figures that are (allegedly) involved, how do the conspiracies work, and what, generally speaking, is their argument? The source of the data I use for this content analysis is the repository of articles housed on Dutch conspiracy websites. These materials provide an empirically-grounded selection of the narratives that are most popular today. Following the definitional approach to my research object, I selected those websites labelled as conspiracy websites both by people inside the milieu *and* by (critical) outsiders (see section 2.2). I will explore the variety of contemporary conspiracy theories with a theoretical argument in mind related to the specificity of the historical context. This is the premise that contemporary conspiracy culture has radically changed: from the scapegoating of an exotic Other, to a more diffuse suspiciousness about enemies *from within* (cf. Goldberg, 2001; Knight, 2000; Aupers, 2012; Melley, 2000, Olmsted, 2009).

3.2.1 Modern Conspiracy Theories: Scapegoating an Exotic Other

Conspiracy theories are obviously not a new thing. Allegations of conspiracy, political manipulation and deceit are as old as the way to Rome. Literally. The political culture of the ancient Romans was rife with concerns about conspiracy, argues Byford, and he calls the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44BC "the paradigmatic 'inside-job'" (2011: 43). The writings of the old Athenians contain similar discourses of plots, intrigues, and conspiracies (Roisman, 2006). But also the alleged Jewish plot against Jesus, and the anti-Semitic ideas that haunted Christianity ever since, are prime examples of conspiratorial rhetoric in times long ago (Cohn, 1967; Pipes, 1997).

Despite these early origins, most academics lay emphasis on the late eighteenth century as a significant period in the history of modern conspiracy theories (e.g. Byford, 2011; deHaven-Smith, 2013; Hofstadter, 1996; Lipset and Raab, 1978; Pipes, 1997; Wood,

1982). These grand moments of political turmoil and rapid cultural change around the French and American revolutions have, following such authors, been strongly characterized by conspiratorial thought and allegations. But more than being mere historical contingencies, Wood explains in a compelling historical analysis, why and how "conspiratorial explanations became a major means by which educated men in the early modern period ordered and gave meaning to their political world" (1982: 411). To summarize, Wood argues that in the age of the Enlightenment, the concept of conspiracy fitted people's modern understandings of political reality. When there is no longer a place for the random happenings of chance or of the supernatural, all *effects* must have their causes. No longer did God have a hand in how the world works, but causation came to be centered squarely on people. The idea of conspiracy resonated well, in other words, with the modern epistemology of mechanistic causality that was then gaining traction. Three types of conspiracy theories have since then been particularly prominent: *secret societies*, *powerful factions*, and *Jews*.

Conspiracy theories about the machinations of secret societies are the most obvious group considering their prevalence in popular culture. Ever since ideological and political critics of the French revolution proclaimed that this political upheaval must have been the result of conspiring groups like the Freemasons, the Jacobins, the Philosophes, and, of course, the Illuminati, secret societies became the hallmark of modern conspiracy theories (Barkun, 2006; Byford, 2011; Hofstadter, 1996; Pipes, 1997). As these exclusionary organizations promoted a radical and progressive Enlightenment agenda, such scholars argue, they became obvious and attractive scapegoats for counterrevolutionaries to blame for all the changes that were going on. Supported by the supposedly-scientific works of Augustin Barruel (1797) and John Robison (1797) which *proved* the existence of such conspiratorial plans behind this revolution, the belief that secret societies were orchestrating the course of history gained currency, and influenced not only future conspiracy theorists (Barkun, 2006; Byford, 2011: 45) but also wider reactionary movements throughout Europe and the United States

(Hofstadter, 1996; Pipes, 1997: 71). Conspiracy theories about secret societies remain widespread and hugely popular.

Today the Freemasons and the Illuminati still inform much conspiracy discourse—and their symbolism features notoriously in popular culture—while other types of secret societies increasingly compete for conspiratorial attention. I mean here the transnational clubs that emerged in the twentieth century: the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, and the Bilderberg Group. Although these are more exclusive *and* elusive organizations than secret societies, they all have an inner circle of powerful men pulling the strings of world affairs, or so the conspiracy theory goes.

The idea that certain powerful factions or interest groups rule the scene of world politics is a second major category of modern conspiracy theories. Historians like Bailyn (1997) and Tackett (2000) start with the revolutionary days of the eighteenth century when the *founding fathers* of the newly established United States of America were convinced of the conspiratorial plans and actions of old-world powers to destabilize the new republic. These were even put to paper, as the Declaration of Independence is full of conspiracy accusations towards hostile powers, and in particular towards King George III of Great Britain who was thought to plot an "absolute tyranny over these states" (DeHaven-Smith, 2013: 7/53-76). DeHaven-Smith states, therefore, that "the United States was founded on a conspiracy theory" (2013: 7). Moreover, its "constitution was designed within the expectation that public officials are likely to conspire to abuse their powers and undermine popular control of government" (DeHaven-Smith, 2013: 58). James Madison contended in one of *The Federalist Papers* (a series arguing for the ratification of the United States Constitution) that the greatest threat to the constitutional order was coming from *factions*, that is, groups with political aims against the interest of other citizens or the community (*Federalist* 10). Conspiratorial suspicions were an intricate part of the political culture in these new sovereign states, DeHaven-Smith argues, and "for the next hundred years, American statesmen regularly voiced suspicions regarding antidemocratic conspiracies

when circumstantial evidence suggested hidden intrigue" (2013: 64). Madison's fears of the hidden plots and schemes of certain powerful factions frequently reappear in the history of conspiracy theories and today. Interest groups like the military-industrial complex, communists, the pharmaceutical industry, the intelligence community, religious institutions, and, of course, international finance are all good examples of such factions said to conspire against the good of some or all.

The faction of international finance is strongly linked to a third strand of conspiracy discourse, which is the enduring suspicion of a "Jewish world conspiracy" (Cohn, 1967). Anti-Semitic conspiratorial talk has a long history in the West, but it was not until the emancipation of the Jews in the nineteenth century that the notion of Jewish world domination became popular (Poliakov, 2003). In contrast to the medieval demonology that characterized Jews as pawns of Satan, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories transformed in the modern age of secular politics and Enlightenment philosophy into more mundane but nevertheless malevolent accusations (Byford, 2011: 48). Jews were believed to use their money, knowledge, and influence to secretly rule the world behind-the-scenes. Such ideas of a Jewish world conspiracy fell on fertile ground in Europe since democratic revolutions benefited Jews when they were suddenly granted citizenship and property rights—"so they must have had a hand in it" (Cohn, 1967).

The proliferation of one specific document was a turning point in the persistence of beliefs about a Jewish world conspiracy: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This pamphlet purports to be the authentic minutes of a congress of Jewish leaders at the turn of the twentieth century, in which a detailed plan is laid out of how a Jewish world domination should be established. Although rather quickly exposed as an anti-Semitic hoax and a forgery of different bits and pieces of art, satire, and literature (e.g. Byford, 2011: 55), the *Protocols* gained massive popularity in the early twentieth century and was conveniently used in opportunistic politics and "agitation propaganda" throughout the world (Ellul, 1965). Russian tsarists and other opponents of the Bolshevik revolutions spread the document to

scapegoat the Jews (Pipes, 1997). It was an instant best-seller in post-WWI Germany and became the Nazi's "warrant for genocide" (Cohn, 1967). And in Britain, Winston Churchill was not alone in holding Jews responsible for "the overthrow of civilization," and Henry Ford helped to spread the document massively throughout the US by funding the printing of 500,000 copies (Byford, 2011: 53-54). Although most contemporary conspiracy theorists disassociate sharply from an overt anti-Semitism taking up the rhetoric of anti-Zionism, some scholars argue this is simply a smokescreen, and continue to emphasize the enduring and inescapable relation that conspiracy theories have with anti-Semitism (e.g. Byford, 2011; Pipes, 1997). This is a complicated matter, considering that being called an anti-Semite may be an even more powerful disqualifying label than that of a conspiracy theorist, and these rhetorical dynamics warrant research of their own. I hope it suffices here to have shown the historical presence of the idea of a Jewish world domination in many conspiracy theories, and leave the question of whether and how such anti-Semitic notions endure in the contemporary conspiracy culture for future research.

Despite the markedly different narratives, rhetoric, and histories, what these three strands of conspiracy discourse share is their cultural meaning and social function. By scapegoating a concrete and identifiable enemy, conspiracy theories can bolster a strong sense of collective identity. This is what Knight calls "secure paranoia" (2000: 3-4). They may engender a sense of peril, but as the cabal is made known and their sinister objectives made clear, such conspiracy theories paradoxically generate a state of reassurance, of stability and order. This type of conspiracy discourse has often been deployed by those in power in various countries and of various political affiliations to unite a troubled people through the construction of a dangerous enemy. The *Red scare* in twentieth century United States or the *anti-Semitic/anti-Zionist* conspiracy theories found in many Arab countries today are useful examples of this type of conspiracy theory. Given these characteristics of *secure paranoia*, of establishing order and stability in a chaotic world, and considering the underlying epistemology of mechanistic causality (Wood, 1982), I conceive of

such conspiracy theories as utterly modern products. They all imply, after all, a course of history that is manmade, where every effect has an identifiable cause, and every event an intentional agent. In other words, these conspiracy discourses keep it simple and predictable: all that moderns ever wanted (cf. Latour, 1993a).

3.2.2 Postmodern Paranoia: Enemies from Within

In recent decades, some critics have argued that alongside these historically-entrenched narratives based on scapegoating an allegedly-dangerous Other, there has emerged a new type of conspiracy discourse which operates in different ways, performs other social functions, and taps different cultural repositories (e.g. Aupers, 2012; Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000, Olmsted, 2009). Basing themselves on popular culture (postwar literature,[61] TV series, movies, documentaries, journalism) and certain case-studies (e.g. JFK assassination, 9/11 truth movement, computer viruses, gangster rap, the AIDS-crisis), such scholars contend that the logic of conspiracy has migrated since the long sixties from the extremist-fringe to the main stage of (American) culture. And with this movement to the center, conspiracy theories have transformed into a more general concern about the institutions that govern everyday life. "Paranoia is in bloom," Aupers argues, "[it] has become a veritable sociological phenomenon," and "evolved over the last decades from a deviant, exotic phenomenon to a mainstream narrative that has spread through the media and is increasingly normalized, institutionalized and commercialized" (2012: 21-24). Melley states that Americans (but Europeans just as well) "now account for all sorts of events—political conflicts, police investigations, juridical proceedings, corporate maneuvers, government actions—through conspiracy theory." Melley sees this "broad cultural phenomenon" as a "pervasive set of anxieties about technologies, social organizations, and communication systems" (2000: 7). Knight confirms that "the images and rhetoric of conspiracy are no longer the exclusive house-style of the terminally paranoid. Instead, they circulate through both high and popular culture, and form part of everyday patterns of thought.

Conspiracy has become the default assumption in an age which has learned to distrust everything and everyone" (Knight, 2000: 3). In short, the logic of conspiracy has become both mainstream and widely popular: "we're all conspiracy theorists now" (Fenster, 2008: 1, Knight, 2002: 6).

The most important change in the discourse of conspiracy theories, these scholars argue, is that they are no longer about an alien power like the British, the Jews, the Communists, the Capitalists, or any other demonized *Other* threatening a stable *us*, but rather, as Goldberg (2001) puts it, the enemy now comes from *within*. Olmsted, for example, argues how "American conspiracy theories underwent a fundamental transformation 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" (2009: 4). Melley broadens the scope and argues that "the rhetoric of conspiracy is deployed to imagine the controlling power of private enterprise, of regulatory discourses and systems, and of the state, or of some bewildering combination of these entities" (2000: 9). Aupers picks up on this point and reasserts that "contemporary conspiracy culture is different: it is less about scapegoating a real or imagined 'Other' but can be characterized as paranoia about the human-made institutions of modern society itself" (2012: 24).

Indeed, people now hold the omnipotent state responsible for all kinds of tragic events; we tend to distrust the operations of scientists in pharmaceutical laboratories; we do not readily believe political representatives to be serving our interest nor that of the public good, and we are often suspect about new technologies propagated by giant corporations whose health effects are unknown. "Popular conspiracism," Knight concludes, "has mutated from an obsession with a fixed enemy to a generalized suspicion about conspiring forces. It has shifted, in effect, from a paradoxically secure form of paranoia that bolstered one's sense of identity, to a far more insecure version of conspiracy infused anxiety which plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion" (2000: 4). But more than a mere turn inwards, these new forms of conspiracy theories no

longer address a temporary disruption of the normal way things work, but increasingly "express a not entirely unfounded suspicion that the normal order of things itself amounts to a conspiracy" (Knight, 2000: 3). Or, as Melley proposes, a common thought today is that "many of us are being influenced and manipulated, far more than we realize, in the patterns of our everyday lives" (2000: 1). Conspiracy is, in other words, everywhere and always around us.

The cultural meaning and social function of conspiracy theories have changed accordingly. Whereas before, Knight holds, they "functioned to bolster a sense of an 'us' threatened by a sinister 'them', more recently, however, the discourse of conspiracy has given expression to a far wider range of doubts, and has fulfilled far more diverse functions" (2000: 3). He refers, for example, to the growing distrust of the traditional epistemic authorities such as science, media, religion, and politics. In highly mediatized societies, in which scientific disputes are played out in the open, it becomes increasingly difficult, Knight argues, to know "which expert to trust—and how to decide whether someone is indeed an expert?" (2000: 95). The rhetoric of conspiracy articulates such doubts about the unstable nature of truth in postmodern societies: "they stage a contest over reality" (Melley, 2000: 20) and assume a "vertigo of interpretations" (Knight, 2000: 99). Aupers similarly recognizes that "this epistemological swamp is a fertile ground for the bloom of conspiracy theories: scientific truth claims are increasingly challenged because of the inconsistency of information, giving way to alternative, more private interpretations of the truth" (2012: 318). The modern culture of conspiracy is therefore not only about a distrust of established (epistemic) authorities, but involves all kinds of amateur investigative initiatives that seek to interrogate the veracity of such authorities. Whether it is the 9/11 truth movement, filmmakers like Oliver Stone, or the biomythography of gangster rap, all kinds of ordinary people increasingly set out to find the *real truth* behind the often-dubious course that history takes. "Interpretation," Fenster argues, is "conspiracy theory's key practice and source of pleasure" (2008: 14). Aupers speaks in this respect of conspiracy theorists as "prosumers": "they read, negotiate and rewrite history and, in doing

so, they often produce an ever expanding patchwork theory of what 'really' happened" (2012: 27). What these critics emphasize is that contemporary conspiracy theories are not so much spread by (state) elites to unite a people, but can better be seen as the popular and bottom-up practices of ordinary people looking, researching, and interpreting a variety of consequential events.

Contemporary conspiracy theories do not only channel discontents about the workings of societal institutions and the knowledge they produce, but also give expression to the more diffuse feelings of uncertainty and anxiety induced by living in hyperconnected-yet-alienating technological societies. "'Conspiracy,'" Melley argues, "has come to signify a broad array of social controls [and] rarely signifies a small, secret plot anymore. Instead, it frequently refers to the workings of a large *organization, technology or system*—a powerful and obscure entity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of the traditional conspiracy" (2000: 8, original italics). The large abstract systems that surround us every day, these authors argue, bring forth an ontological insecurity: all kinds of fears and fantasies about opaque and autonomously working structures like the bureaucracy, financial markets, or any other modern system that seem *out of control* and out to get us. "Conspiracy theories," Aupers concludes, "are cultural responses to these developments—they are strategies to rationalize [such] anxieties by developing explicable accounts for seemingly inexplicable forces" (2012: 28). What was once a clear and concrete enemy has transformed into elusive and intangible webs of conspiring powers: "a rigid and detailed conspiracy theory about a small cabal of ruthless agents has given way to a more fluid and provisional sense of there being large, institutional forces controlling our everyday life" (Knight, 2000: 32).

Taking this argument one step further, Melley argues that "this new model of 'conspiracy' no longer simply suggests that dangerous agents are *secretly* plotting against us, on the contrary, it implies, rather dramatically, that whole populations are being *openly* manipulated without their knowledge" (2000: 3, original emphasis). These scholars contend that in complex risk-societies, the assertion of malevolent cabals pulling the strings behind world events simply

becomes implausible. Knight even goes as far to argue that "the contemporary discourse of conspiracy gives narrative expression to the possibility of conspiracy without conspiring, with the congruence of vested interests that can only be described as conspiratorial, even when we know there has probably been no deliberate plotting" (2000: 32). Just as the notion of conspiracy took hold with the acceptance of mechanistic causality in the eighteenth century (Wood, 1982), these contemporary forms of conspiracy discourse are validated by postmodern understandings of complex causality, chaos theory, and interconnectedness, or so Knight suggests (2000: 204-241).

In contrast to the earlier, comparatively-straightforward scapegoating of an outside threat to bolster in-group identities, postmodern paranoia lacks all such clarity. Instead, it reverberates with an everyday suspicion towards the institutions of modern life that we are always and everywhere confronted with. Even though these authors interchangeably refer to conspiracy and paranoia, I have used the term *postmodern paranoia* here to circumscribe these new forms of conspiracy theories, because this term better captures the cultural meanings that are involved. It is, for example, *postmodern* paranoia because these new types of conspiracy theories give expression to the uncertainties people experience of living in globalized, risk-saturated, and hyper-connected worlds. But it is also *postmodern* because these new forms of conspiracy theories articulate a fundamental insecurity about truth and reality, and challenge the authority of those allowed to make such claims. It is postmodern *paranoia,* then, because such explanations of the world no longer provide the stability they once gave by marking a clear and concrete enemy, but instead make *the normal order of things* suspect, and see elusive dangers always around us. In sum, it this radical uncertainty characterizing the contemporary culture of conspiracy that grants postmodern paranoia its name.

3.3 Conspiracy Theories Today

In the following section, I will elaborate the conspiracy theories that are popular today based on a content analysis of the articles posted on

seven major Dutch conspiracy websites (see section 2.3). Since most of these websites position themselves as news sites, many of the featured articles are about dramatic events like the unnatural deaths of important persons or the larger societal catastrophes of plane crashes and terrorist attacks. These shocking events are commonly characterized by uncertainty and mystery: what *really* happened is often in question. In the conspiracy milieu, this absence of conclusive explanations gives rise to suspicions and accusations about what *might have* happened, and about *why* it might have happened. However, the conspiracy theories surrounding each unexplainable event are not unique or singular, but they are informed and structured by fundamental and institutionalized narratives of conspiracy. In other words, each new event that attracts conspiratorial accusations will not generate a completely idiosyncratic theory, but is often structured by established narratives of conspiracy and deceit.

I will give here two examples. Conspiracy theories about the crash of the MH-17 plane above Ukraine in 2014 clearly have certain particularities that apply to this case only, but they are also structured by more general ideas of conspiracy that have a longer history in conspiracy circles. I refer here to the notion of *false flag operations*: covert, inside jobs designed to make the public believe the enemy is behind an event so that a coup or a war can be staged. The MH-17 crash is often understood in the conspiracy milieu as just such a false flag attack,[62] just like Pearl Harbor and especially 9/11. On a similar note, conspiracy theories about the 2014 outbreak (and persistence) of Ebola in West African countries are informed by established narratives of *bio-warfare* well-known in the conspiracy milieu. Similar to conspiracy discourses on outbreaks of HIV and SARS, such arguments accuse US government agencies like the CIA of secretly carrying out research on biological warfare in African labs, and are then responsible for leaking the virus.[63] It is not my intention to go into the details of each of these events and the conspiracy theories that surround them; instead, I will discuss such established narratives that inform and underpin the conspiracy theories of these singular, dramatic events.

Although the generic conspiracy narratives that I am interested in are quite diverse themselves, there are certain thematic continuities by which to order this variety. In line with the *emic* classifications of conspiracy theories that I have encountered on the websites detailed above, I distinguish six key categories of conspiracy narratives: finance, media, corporatism, science; government, and the supernatural. I will show what each category of conspiracy narratives entails based on my analysis of the material found on these seven websites. I do not strive, however, to compress all such conspiracy theories into one narrative that should represent the full extent of the category in question, but instead I wish to highlight some dominant lines that best illustrate the matter. As these categories are ideal-typical, it is evident that some conspiracy theories can belong to more than one category. This is more than a mere possibility: conspiracy theories are notorious for *connecting the dots* between separate domains, and as such defy precise categorization (cf. Barkun, 2006: 4; Byford, 2000: 34; Melley, 2000: 2). Besides providing an empirically-rich and analytically-clear understanding of the many different conspiracy theories popular today, I thus set out to investigate the way that these articles resonate with the modern or postmodern forms of conspiracy theories. Note that each introductory quote in the following sections is cited by authors from these seven websites, and are deployed by them to support their argument. As such, each section begins with an epigraph that is an emic illustration of the central concern of each category.

3.4.1 Modern Finance: The Biggest Scam in the History of Mankind

> *It is well enough that people of the nation do not understand our banking and monetary system, for if they did, I believe there would be a revolution tomorrow*[64]
>
> *—Henry Ford, 1932*

Given the historical prominence of a (Jewish) world conspiracy of bankers set to bring the world to its knees, it is quite surprising that very few of the main scholars on conspiracy theories have paid attention to those concerned with money and the finance industry, which are especially popular now. Scholars in the cultural studies tradition like Melley and Knight do not mention such topics at all, while those emphasizing the more traditional forms of conspiracy demonology like Pipes and Barkun give occasional, oblique references, but never give these theories their due analysis. But if conspiracy theories are products of their time, as I will argue in this chapter, then it should not be a surprise that the world of banking and high finance occupies a dominant place in the narratives circulating on conspiracy websites today. The worldwide financial crisis of 2008, the public rescue of banks and insurance companies deemed *too-big-too-fail*, the resulting economic recessions and depressions, the massive expansions of our money supply by central banks in efforts to augment economic growth, the many sovereign debt crises throughout Europe around 2011, the austerity measures forced upon many countries in response, all have left their mark on the conspiracy milieu and the theories in vogue. In the following I will discuss how finance plays a role in contemporary conspiracy narratives along three major themes: the workings of the Western monetary system, the role of central banks in that system, and the historical connection between powerful banks and powerful banking families.

Many, if not all, conspiracy websites like to start their sections on finance by explaining "the mystery of banking"[65] and how this "well-kept secret"[66] is "one of the biggest scams in the history of mankind."[67] In short, the story of banking as a source of wide-scale fraud is as follows: in the beginning, people used gold and other precious metals to make financial transactions, but as this was rather unsafe and inconvenient, it became commonplace to deposit these metals at the vaults of goldsmiths who gave credit receipts in return. Soon, these *rights to claim* replaced gold altogether in the trading of goods, and modern money was born. Because only few people actually redeemed the gold, goldsmiths soon started issuing more of these receipts to people in need of money for a small fee, called

interest, and so modern banking was born. The former goldsmiths turned into big multinational banks, but, so the story goes, they still acted as mere intermediaries between people with money (creditors) and those in need of money (debtors). This "fairytale of modern banking" is repeated on conspiracy websites *ad naseum*, because "everything we know about money is not just wrong, it's backwards."[68] Banks do not allocate the money they hold in reserve, but instead "create it out of thin air" by issuing loans.[69] Money is debt; when a debt is made, money is created. Further, because banks are legally allowed to issue loans in amounts that are ten-, twenty-, thirty-fold what they actually hold in reserve, the "biggest secret" is therefore that "banks can sell money, without really having it, and then charge interest over it! That's one hell of a business, huh!"[70]

The complicated story of how this fractional reserve system works is ardently explained on these sites, but the bottom line tends to be that we have "a worldwide monetary system completely based on hot air."[71] Such articles argue that "only five percent of all the money is real money in the form of notes and coins, the rest is artificially created by banks and exists only as numbers on bank accounts."[72] Others emphasize that even *real* money is not so real anymore, since Nixon announced in 1971 that US dollars could no longer be exchanged for gold.[73] All we have is trust, faith, or hope that people will accept the intrinsically-worthless pieces of paper that we call money in exchange for their goods. Money is, in short, "a virtual illusion."[74] And while "banks continue to satisfy their greed by abusing their monopoly position in the market of illusionary money creation,"[75] the true winner a top this "pyramid scheme called high finance" is the bank of all banks: *independent* central banks.[76] Such articles compare the banking system to a game of poker, where the central banks "supply the people with (a limited amount of self-made) chips, say 50, but they don't play along. The players win or lose, but need to give back those chips they have lent at the end of the game, including a 10% interest."[77] It is incredibly paradoxical: "no matter what happens, at the end of the game you have to get back 55 chips, *more than there even exists*!"[78] The gravity of this worldwide scam is not even the exorbitant self-enrichment of bankers at the expense of all

ordinary *players*, but as such articles convey, the "fundamentally flawed" and "fundamentally unstable" nature of this monetary system.[79]

So how did we all end up in this dangerous pyramid scheme of greedy bankers, and why do we continue to pay interest to banks for money that was never there in the first place? To give one answer, articles on my source websites hold, we have to go back to Christmas Eve, 1913.[80] That evening the US Senate passed the *Federal Reserve Act* after months of fierce negotiations. This piece of legislation would permanently reform the monetary system by putting control of the nation's money supply in the hands of a Federal Reserve. Although a vote of 43 to 25 seems straightforward, it remains highly controversial today, since nearly thirty senators (out of 98) left for the coming holiday before the bill finally came to a vote.[81] This was no coincidence, according to conspiracy articles, but was consciously planned to ensure the results that the proponents sought.[82] A small group of the world's most powerful bankers devised the plan to create this act three years earlier during a secret stay at the private resort of Wall Street banker J.P. Morgan on Jekyll Island, Georgia.[83] Along with Senator Aldrich, attendees of this *First Names Club* were executive bankers associated with the Rockefellers, the Morgans, the Rothschilds, and the Warburgs.[84] The plan of these wealthy bankers was, following such conspiracy theories, "to steal the US dollar from the American citizens via the 'official route.'"[85] This meant that in order "to be sold to the public and to the politicians, it needed a trustworthy name," and so, the article continues, the name *Federal Reserve System* "effectively diverted attention from the *de facto* concentration of power with New York bankers."[86] The undeniable truth is, however, that the *Fed* was never really federal, nor a full reserve system, but was and has always been a privately-owned institution controlled by the largest banks.[87] Worst of all, these authors stress, the Fed is not accountable to anyone, not to the US Congress, neither to the US President, nor to the American public. Becoming aware of his "disastrous decision to create the 'Fed Monster,' president Woodrow Wilson allegedly made an apology that is widely shared on conspiracy websites: "I am a most unhappy

man, I have unwittingly ruined my country. A great industrial nation is [now] controlled by its system of credit…in the hands of a few men."[88]

These conspiracy theories about the world of banking are extremely popular in the conspiracy milieu, and considered by many as fundamental to an understanding of how the rest of the world works: as one article puts it, "money lies at the base of all wrongs."[89] This assumption of the financial grid of society determining the course of history—further popularized in conspiracy theory documentaries like *Zeitgeist*—clearly resonates with Marxian notions of the *Unterbau* (or Base) structuring society's *Überbau* (or Superstructure). Like Marx (and many of his followers), conspiracy theorists see the world as ruled by a financial elite consisting of powerful banking families, central banks, and those other institutions at the top of the financial pyramid. But next to such traditional characteristics that resemble modern conspiracy theories, these conspiracy narratives about the financial world give expression to the more diffuse feelings of awe and disquiet that are characteristic of postmodern paranoia. They reverberate with an ontological insecurity, an uneasiness and discomfort with a system as fundamental as our worldwide financial system. What seems straightforward and mundane to many—money is, after all, such an unquestioned object in everyday life—appears opaque, esoteric, and fragile to conspiracy theorists. Banking looks more like magic nowadays. The virtualization of our financial system that took off after the gold standard was set loose, but culminated in the financial crisis of 2008, only added to such convictions. Just what *is* the material reality of money nowadays?

3.4.2 The Media Masters: Monotony, Manipulation and Mind-Control

> *Whoever controls the media, controls the minds of the masses.*
>
> *—Jim Morrison, the Doors*[90]

In our mediatized global world where news images have unprecedented performative powers, the provision of information and entertainment is important weaponry in the battle for the minds of people, and is therefore a central concern for many in the conspiracy milieu. The ideal image of the media as democratic and emancipatory, guarding the political process with constant vigilance and providing people with trustworthy knowledge of what goes on in the world, has been shattered by scandals and baseness (Herman and Chomsky, 2008). Clearly the media is a marvelous instrument of mass-manipulation, as media outlets can shape public opinion in insidious ways, "so that the public thought such manufactured opinions were their own."[91] Articles on these conspiracy websites incorporate the thought and cite the works of early mass-opinion scholars like Walter Lippmann, Harold Lasswell, and Edward Bernays ("a nephew of Sigmund Freud, a fact never mentioned"[92]) to support their views.[93] To give an example, in an article on the manipulative powers of news and current affairs shows on television, which are said to "keep us fearful so that the state can 'guard our safety,'" one author makes explicit reference to the ideas of Edward Bernays:

> *[I]n his 1928 book Propaganda, Bernays said that "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind."*[94]

The belief that the *media controls our minds* is central to many conspiracy narratives and motivates the independent news platforms that regularly spring up from the conspiracy milieu.

A common starting point of such narratives is the so-called "death of the press,"[95] referring to the fact that the production of news is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few multinational corporations. These articles often refer to the US, where only six companies own ninety percent of the media: *General Electric,*

NewsCorp, Walt Disney, Viacom, AOLTimeWarner, and *CBS*.[96] Other articles report on a similar demise of independent journalism in Europe, and in the Netherlands in particular only one independent news outlet remains standing while the rest are part of conglomerates like *Bertelsmann, Sanoma*, and other powerful business families/investment funds.[97] Much to their dismay, such authors emphasize, "the cacophony of visions and standpoints in the sixties and seventies" has given way to a "homogenous mass of politically correct views and no alternatives."[98] Given the consolidation of media ownership into a powerful few, these articles hold, what can citizens expect from the news? *Manipulation in the interest of the rulers* is the univocal answer that can be heard on all conspiracy websites, and articles report on the many ways that the news is biased, ignored, and distorted in favor of a powerful elite.[99] While some speak of the power of international (and privately owned) news agencies like Reuters and AP to filter information,[100] others point to the "intimate relations" between journalists and high-government officials,[101] leading to a situation in which "the mass-media almost always parrot the bellicose language of the authorities."[102] The commonly-shared conviction that a corrupted media is distributing propaganda instead of news has been widely reaffirmed in the conspiracy milieu. A concrete example would be the recent revelations of former Frankfurter Allgemeine *whistleblower* Udo Ulfkotte, who wrote a book revealing how "journalists are bribed by intelligence agencies like the CIA and international think thanks to betray the people by writing pro-NATO articles."[103] Such revelations are—surprisingly? —not covered by the Dutch media at the time of this writing.

Besides the obvious forms of manipulation and propaganda via the distortion of news, contemporary conspiracy narratives also emphasize another, hidden force of the media located in the form of entertainment. Much like the Frankfurter critics of the culture industry, the articles on these websites describe the hypnotizing, mind-numbing, and mind-controlling workings of the entertainment industry. The television business is a first target of such conspiracy critiques, as "watching TV has proven hypnotizing effects. When you watch television, your mind is put into a state of hypnosis and is more

suggestible. Why do you think it is called TV *programming* in the first place?"[104] Many articles report on the many ways that the entertainment industry uses television to "keep us dumb, fearful, and docile by appealing to our 'lower self': sex, violence, ego, murders, looks, fame, wars, and competition."[105] An often-mentioned and much-despised strategy to *brainwash* people is subliminal messaging, the covert transmission of images and text "meant to sidestep cognitive perception and thus to influence people on a subconscious level."[106] "Without you knowing it," one article warns, "their convictions become part of your system."[107] These websites have whole exposés written about this controversial technique of manipulation in which authors refer to the works of Freud, Jung, and Bernays, or to the industry-funded research on the effective use of subliminal messaging.[108] The awe with which they conclude is common: "the subconscious is still a mystery."[109]

Another strategy used by the entertainment industry to manipulate us is the very opposite of subliminal messaging, it is a tactic used *to hide in the open*. Future plans of societal changes are presented as post-apocalyptic (science) fiction in major Hollywood blockbusters so that people can become accustomed to how their grim future will look and, when the time comes, accept it more readily. Meanwhile, "critics addressing these changes can be pushed aside as having watched too many movies, brilliant isn't it?"[110] This notion of *predictive programming* originally developed by Alan Watts is now widely shared in the conspiracy milieu, where films like *Minority Report*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* are interpreted as such.[111] There are also concrete allegations of connections between Hollywood and the CIA who "in exchange for insiders advise, know-how and material [allegedly] demand pro US script changes."[112] Similar to the *brainwashing* by Hollywood, the music industry is despised because it tends to "glorify debauchery, violence and extreme luxury."[113] Such articles explain how artists like Rihanna, Jay-Z, Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj are actually "Illuminati puppets," promoting an agenda of "oversexualization" befitting the greater strategy of an "occult elite" to loosen the morals of our populations.[114] The artists are, however, not to blame, since these powerful groups

force them to cooperate and hide satanic symbols (rain, snakes, triangles, etc.) in their music clips and performances because otherwise their career (or life) is in danger.[115]

Conspiracy narratives regarding the media industry express immense concern about the functioning of an institution that is vital to a well-functioning democracy. As the fourth estate is in the hands of a few gigantic media conglomerates nowadays, what can be expected from their critical analyses and power-checking ambition, conspiracy theorists wonder. Instead of news, we get propaganda. These critiques of the contemporary media landscape clearly resemble the influential work of media scholars (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, 2010[1944]; Champlin and Knoedler, 2002; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Jackson, 2009), but they also resonate with modern forms of conspiracy theorizing. Yet, such conspiracy narratives of a mediatized world also portray an unmistakable postmodern paranoia: *without us knowing it,* we are brainwashed by the manipulative powers of the culture industry. The sentiment of these articles is one of existential uncertainty: the *unseen mechanisms* of media masters can shape, mold, and influence what we feel, think, and like, and constitute an invisible force. Can we trust our own opinions anymore?

3.4.3 Big Bad Business and the Rise of the Corporatocracy

> *Multinational corporations do control. They control the politicians, they control the media, they control the pattern of consumption, entertainment, and thinking. They're destroying the planet and laying the foundation for violent outbursts and racial division.*
>
> *—Jerry Brown, 34th and 39th Governor of California*[116]

The contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories has often been related to the rise of a global free market in which giant multinational corporations increasingly rule the world. For some critics, Willman notes (citing Jameson in particular), conspiracy theory is a symptom of multinational capitalism (2002: 30). "Conspiracy," according to

Jameson, is a "desperate attempt to represent [...] the total logic of late capitalism" (1991: 286). He believes that conspiracy theorists have a troubled understanding of global economics and wrongfully identify secret plots instead of seeing the system itself as the cause of oppression (e.g. Mason, 2002: 42). Others are less inclined to criticize conspiracy theories for failing to adhere to their own (macro) economic ideology, and recognize the comforting or sense-making function they might have: "in a world in which the triumph of laissez-faire capitalism has come to be taken for granted, for many people there is no way of framing an analysis of what is happening or registering their dissatisfaction other than in the "crackpot" rhetoric of the conspiracy theorist" (Knight, 2000: 37). Whether conspiracy theorists imagine the global economic system of late capitalism accurately or not, what precisely do they have to say about the powers of multinational corporations?

A first and obvious observation is the extensive attention that these conspiracy websites pay to such matters of global free market capitalism. *Zapruder.nl* boasts almost five hundred articles on what they call "the most dangerous virus on the world: corporatism."[117] Others speak similarly of large corporations as "a perverted form of capitalism, always on the hunt for the world's most profitable projects, natural resources and businesses in an insatiable hunger for more."[118] Authors of such articles are eager to demonstrate how the yearly revenues of those giant companies often surpass the gross national products of whole countries: "Royal Dutch Shell is for example just as big as Greece."[119] and "Wall-Mart exceeds countries like South Africa, Singapore and Finland."[120] Naturally they question their power in light of their economic weight. When, in 2011, a trio of Swiss complex systems researchers revealed how out of a global network of transnational corporations (43,060 in number) a tightly knit core of only 147 corporations controlled a disproportionate 40% of that entire economic system (Vitali, Glattfelder and Battiston, 2011), many in the conspiracy milieu felt vindicated in their convictions. In the words of one, "a beloved conspiracy theory is that the world is ruled by a puissant and super rich elite, scientific research now proves there's a strong kernel of truth in it."[121] Most conspiracy

websites were quick to publish articles announcing this scientific recognition of what they were always saying.[122] If we believe governments to rule the world, such articles proclaim, we believe in an illusion; multinational corporations are simply more powerful than nation states.[123] Even stronger put, "corporations do not only have governments in their pocket, but complete countries and trade zones."[124] In short: "multinationals simply pull the strings."[125] This a huge problem, they argue, because "corporations only have one goal: *profit*. Profit at all costs. Profit at the expense of men, animals, rain forests, seas and oceans, all life on earth. The corporation is a parasite, an all-consuming monster, it has no remorse."[126]

Different from a purely anti-capitalistic discourse, since profit is not eschewed per se, the articles on these conspiracy websites mostly criticize the monopolization of whole industries by such giant conglomerates, their widespread political infiltrations, and the corporate colonization of the planet. Where conspiracy theories might have spoken before of the *military-industrial complex* to denote these rather unbridled powers of multinational corporations, today there is a particular prefix at our disposal to designate the precise corporate culprit. Conspiracy theorists speak now of Big Oil, Big Pharma, Big Food or Big Agriculture to refer to the group of multinational corporations that dominate these markets, and rule the planet. Although the conspiracy narratives about each of these *Big Bad Businesses* have their own particularities (and make no mistake: authors of such articles go to great depths to explain the precise causes and consequences of corporate foul play), there are nevertheless certain common trademarks that these websites all address. For example, such articles demonstrate how multinational corporations influence national and international legislation, such as new trade agreements and safety regulations,[127] and how they distort the scientific knowledge production of new products and technologies.[128] They investigate how multinational corporations massively avoid taxation by a *smart* funneling of profits through worldwide tax regimes,[129] how they exploit people all over the world, including their own labor force, even to the extent of causing mass suicides,[130] how they manipulate and deceive their own customers,[131] how they take

control of natural resources,[132] and sometimes even help to stage coups and start wars to their benefit here.[133] Whether such articles are about Big Oil, Big Pharma, Big Food or Big Agriculture, the allegations are markedly similar, as is the conclusion: "multinational corporations are almost by definition evil."[134]

To give an impression of how such conspiracy narratives look in more detail, I will take one industry as an example. While any of the *Big Bad Businesses* would qualify, I will concentrate on the industry that "controls what enters our stomachs,"[135] that is, Big Agriculture. One dominant conspiracy narrative about the oil-intensive agricultural industry is specifically about those in the seeds and crop-cultivation business, including Dow Chemical, DuPont, Cargill, Syngenta, and of course Monsanto. In total, they are said to control and dominate agriculture worldwide: "they want a monopoly on the world's food supply and on their way suffocate whole continents."[136] The most despised strategy to achieve this global domination is through the so-called *privatization of nature*. Since the US Supreme Court ruled in 1980 that living organisms could be patented if they were genetically changed into something new, a worldwide business started to develop around genetically-modified crops.[137] The next step for Big Agriculture was to enforce trade liberalizations, opening agricultural sectors worldwide in order to convince governments to allow GMOs. Finally they hard to entice farmers worldwide to use their unique seeds (and accompanying proprietary fertilizers and pesticides), based on the promise of reaping greater harvests and thus earning more money.[138] Articles on these websites report on the "aggressive lobby practices in European countries to break the resistance against GMO's,"[139] and make claims about how the US military and government are helping such efforts.[140] They also report on the way American diplomats have put local government officials in third-world countries under pressure to use such crops, even to the extent of widespread bribery in the case of Indonesia.[141]

Despite the promises, such articles hold, farmers using these seeds do not always fare well: food production may rise initially, but after some years the yields of these crops returns to its former level, while the soil on which they grow depletes completely. The long-

term contracts these (often illiterate) farmers sign with such companies leave them with huge debts, as these obligations far outweigh their diminishing earnings. Moreover, as newly-developed seeds are often made infertile, the traditional strategy to save a part of the seeds of one harvest for next year is made obsolete or simply illegal by contract. Every year, farmers are obligated to buy new seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. Articles on these websites repeatedly emphasize how this spiral of indebtedness forced over 200,000 farmers in India into suicide.[142] These conspiracy websites conclude that *the hidden agenda* of Big Agriculture and their brilliantly-marketed *green revolution* is "the establishment of full control over the very basis of human survival: the provision of our daily bread."[143] The allegation that Monsanto now (partly) owns the world's most powerful army (Academi, formerly Blackwater),[144] and its *revolving doors* connection with top CIA and US government positions, only adds support to these convictions.[145]

If this closer look at these *Big Bad Business* conspiracy narratives makes one thing clear, it is that they can hardly be dismissed as *degraded* and *desperate* attempts to imagine our current economic system (cf. Jameson, 1991). Many of these analyses are well-researched; they often draw from studies done in the non-profit sector or in academia, and portray an in-depth knowledge of the industry at stake. In contrast to the denigrating notion of conspiracy theorists as "people try[ing] to gain a handle on the complexities of social and economic causation in an era of rapid globalization" (Knight, 2002: 8), these conspiracy narratives express concrete and well-informed discontent with the way that giant multinationals operate at the expense of humanity. They are in this way not very different from the analyses of anti-globalist activists or leftist academic scholars (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Juris, 2008; Klein, 2007, 2015). These conspiracy narratives entail, on the one hand, concrete plots and schemes by a powerful cabal (in this case, the elites in charge of those multinational corporations), and are reminiscent of the modern conspiracy theories. But these narratives also involve the shadier practices in which it becomes unclear and ambiguous what really happens and who is involved. *Big Bad Business* is everywhere and

unavoidable, giving rise to the ontological insecurities so characteristic of postmodern paranoia. These multinational corporations manipulate our social and economic lives, and even penetrate our very bodies: they control what we eat, drink, put on our skin, and wash with. Suspicion abounds.

3.4.4 Corrupted Science: Financial Pollution and the Suppression of Dissidence

> *No science is immune to the infection of politics and the corruption of power.*
>
> —*Jacob Bronowksi*[146]

In a world where science is the most dominant epistemic authority and which relies heavily on scientific expertise to function properly (e.g. Brown, 2009; Gieryn, 1999, Harding, 1986), it may be no surprise that there is an abundance of conspiracy theories about the functioning of this very institution. Dutch conspiracy websites accordingly pay ample attention to scientific authorities and institutions, each with distinct categories dedicated to "the 'TomTom' of life itself."[147] These categories include articles discussing matters as diverse as the risks of new technologies, the strategic suppression of (allegedly) groundbreaking inventions, and the flaws in certain scientifically-acclaimed truths. A common thread in this diverse set of articles is the questioning of the popular image of scientists as critical and morally superior collectives on a disinterested quest for better knowledge of the world around us.[148] In reality, they argue, science is often dogmatic, not particularly noble, and easily distracted by ulterior motives. Science, thus, features in contemporary conspiracy theories most often as a corrupted institution. Scientific research, they argue, is all-too-often defrauded by "people for whom *doubt* is not the basis for new research, but money, fame and power."[149] Articles with titles like *The Cesspool of Fraudulent Scientific Publications*[150] or *The Quagmire of Science*[151] describe instances in which scientists manipulated test results, left out

inconvenient segments of their research, or even fabricated whole datasets (e.g. the Stapel affair). Although these are serious issues, and such articles stress that "it is high time to clean up this mess in science,"[152] the real problem in their eyes is the close connection with the corporate world, and the resultant financial interests that "pollute the pool of scientific knowledge."[153] Whether it is the food we eat, the cosmetics we put on our skin, the technologies we use each day, or the medications we take, "if scientific research panders to the interests of large corporations,"[154] these conspiracy websites argue, then the public is in serious peril because private profit is given preference over the public good.[155]

Although most articles speak of science in general terms, most often these critiques from the conspiracy world are targeted at medicine, 'the most visible form of applied science' (Epstein, 1996: 6). One particularly virulent example of such conspiracy narratives concerns the 'myth of vaccinations.'[156] In general, conspiracy websites have a negative stance towards vaccinations because they are, in their opinion, "unnecessary and even dangerous because they undermine the immune system."[157] Public health officials like to say that the widespread eradication of diseases like polio, measles, or smallpox is the result of national vaccination campaigns, but, these conspiracy websites hold, this is actually the result of better hygiene, better living conditions, and better nutrition.[158] The correlation found in epidemiological research between national vaccination campaigns and decreasing communicable disease is therefore a spurious one. In fact, the whole scientific foundation on which the efficacy of vaccinations rests proves a false one, such articles argue, as "immunity does not require anti-bodies"[159] and "the innate immune system is much more important than the adaptive."[160] However, as pharmaceuticals have clear financial benefits to promote vaccinations as being socially beneficial, and medical science is heavily dependent on their funding, much is done to keep the assumption alive that vaccinations protect us from diseases. Such articles speak of the manipulation of research designs, *data massaging*, and outright fraud of scientific test results to show the effectivity of vaccinations,[161] they expose how conflicts of interest influence public health policies,[162] or

show the propaganda techniques used to manipulate the public to maintain their "faith in the religion of sponsored science."[163] But more than feelings of being fooled by the pharmaceutical industry to buy into smart marketing campaigns, many conspiracy websites point to the dangers of vaccinations. They show, with scientific research, exposés of whistleblowers, and testimonies of affected parents, that vaccinations can lead to all kinds of autoimmune and neurological disorders, autism, diabetes, narcolepsy, paralyses and even to death.[164] These accusations are, of course, fiercely disputed by most of the scientific establishment, and the pharmaceutical industry in particular.

A second dominant frame through which conspiracy narratives picture science is the suppression of dissident thought. Although both mainstream scientists and conspiracy theorists would agree that science fares well with critique and skepticism, the latter group holds that science has increasingly lost this founding principle. As the author of one of such articles explains: "scientific doubt has become rather selective, yes, Descartian doubt comes now with a 'scientific' disclaimer.'[165] One of these scientific orthodoxies that does not allow for fundamental doubt or critique is, following these sites, climate change. "Is climate guru Al Gore right," one of these websites wonders,

> *when he says that man is responsible for global warming? And if not, who profits from that presupposition? More and more critical voices are heard, but media and politics do not seem to care. Why not? The WantToKnow team believes that critical voices deserve serious attention. Or do you want to believe Al Gore on his blue eyes?*[166]

These websites argue that "the mass hysteria around global warming is based on faith and not on science,"[167] they point to the many manipulations and extortions in the research supporting human induced climate change,[168] and praise *Mr. FOIA*, who leaked files disclosing a massive scientific conspiracy, later coined *Climategate*.[169] Besides substantive doubts about Anthropocene global warming, these websites express alarm about the treatment of skeptics, arguing that one "who dares to express a critical note is aggressively

silenced."[170] Such authors are similarly irked when "proponents of the global warming swindle use statements like 'but Science says…,' as if 'Science' speaks with one voice. Every scientist knows that every theory can always be challenged and refuted."[171] But there are more "holy cows" in science,[172] these conspiracy websites explain, with similar repercussions for dissidents: "try to doubt as a scientist openly about HIV as the cause of AIDS. You'll be fought with religious fanaticism until your professional death."[173] Yet, when "Nobel prize winners [in HIV research] are not convinced of a direct relation between HIV and AIDS,"[174] these sites argue, there is considerable reason to doubt this "popular and very profitable faith."[175] Especially, they argue, since "HIV [science] is religion, and to doubt religion is blasphemy."[176] These conspiracy websites criticize the *selective* limits of the methodological principal of doubt in science today, and contend that "scientists should not shun away from questioning commonly accepted science. That's what makes it scientific."[177] They conclude, however, on a more *realistic* note of self-awareness: "leave it to the tinfoil hatters to question everything."[178]

If we regard these conspiracy narratives about science without the normative position of morally prioritizing science and its practitioners that many scholars on conspiracy theories take, then a lot more than mere *emulators of science* (e.g. Byford, 2011: 89) becomes visible. We could then see such conspiracy narratives as forms of *proto-professionalization* (De Swaan, 1981), *pop sociology* (Knight, 2002: 8), or as laymen gaining scientific expertise (e.g. Epstein, 1996). Theoretically speaking, these conspiracy narratives also point to some fundamental dilemmas science sees itself confronted with. While on the one hand science is apt to advance doubt, critique, and dissent as some of its defining criteria and a crucial part of its public image (cf. Doyle McCarthy, 1996; Shapin, 2008; Toulmin, 1990), in practice, most of what it does is *normal science*, making these aspects hard to find (cf. Kuhn, T.S. 2012[1962]; Greenberg, 1999). And what of the scientific norm of disinterestedness (cf. Merton, 1973: 275), how to explain those increasing numbers of public private partnerships in science? Of course, this balance between the need for funding and the

preservation of one's own autonomy has always been a delicate issue for science (cf. Gieryn, 1999; Martino, 1992; Resnik, 2012), but the question of how to communicate this dilemma with a wider public acquires particular urgency when all such external influences are seen as corruption and pollution of the scientific enterprise.

After all, what can we expect of a public that has learned to see science as the free and disinterested pursuit of inquiry, who then finds out that its everyday practice is often far from that? In some way, scientists are seen in these articles as a power elite serving their own narrow interests, however, in many other ways, the normal order of things is suspect. Especially when science speaks with one voice, when it becomes one "meta-narrative" (Lyotard, 1984), people of the conspiracy milieu turn cautious, and suspect something to be going on behind the scenes. Truth can never be uniform, they argue. But more than doubting such overarching systems of belief, these conspiracy narratives also express a general distrust of scientific expertise that is on the rise in complex risk societies (cf. Beck, 1992; Inglehart, 1997). Why do some people with elite positions in the field have preferential access to truth, knowledge, or reality when others do not? These articles show the multiple and often ambivalent positions conspiracy theorists have towards science: sometimes openly critical, sometimes glorifying its moral project, sometimes dreading its current direction, but in general dismayed by perceived corruption. This "tendency to alternate between mythologizing and demonizing scientists" (Epstein, 1996: 6) is more common in the wider public (e.g. Collins and Pinch, 1993) and testifies to the complex position science occupies in Western societies.

3.4.5 Greedy States and the Invisible Government: "Orwell, Eat Your Heart Out!"[179]

> *The truth is that the State is a conspiracy designed not only to exploit, but above all to corrupt its citizens… henceforth I shall never serve any government anywhere.*
>
> —*Leo Tolstoy*[180]

Conspiracy theories about the government may be most familiar: virtually anybody would know about the conspiracy theories concerning government involvement in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, or about the secret activities of government agencies like the FBI and CIA in covert operations around the world. In the twenty-first century, the most popular conspiracy theories of this type are about 9/11. In fact, many people all around the world believe that the US government had some hand in the attacks of September eleventh.[181] Americans are no different, according to various opinion polls, a solid third to one-half of US citizens believe there was some form of government involvement.[182] These numbers may seem enormous, but Fenster shows that these were not that different in the post-Kennedy assassination era (2008: 244). Although Americans have always had a special relationship to conspiracy theories, Olmsted locates the origins of the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories about the government in a more recent era (2009: 4). She wonders 'why so many Americans believe that their government conspires against them', and relates this prevalence to a number of factors. Olmsted cites factors ranging from the rise of the modern state in the twentieth century, which grew significantly in power and reach, to the birth and expansion of intelligence agencies, and even includes the U.S. government's own activities in plotting conspiracies and spreading accusations of conspiracy (2009: 8-9). Although the Netherlands do not have a tradition of ingrained suspicion towards their government, maybe even to the contrary, conspiracy narratives about the state and its far-reaching arm nevertheless make up a considerable part of these conspiracy websites, to which I will turn now.

Such articles often start from an anarchist-inspired perspective that, as for Tolstoy, regards the state as a conspiracy against its citizens. They contend, for example, that "democracy may appear to give us freedom and a sense of participation and say through elections every four years," but what remains of freedom, they ask us rhetorically, when "we give a small group of people enormous powers and the unique privilege to use violence against us?"[183] Not much, is their obvious conclusion: "try to refuse paying taxes and you will see

how free you are!"[184] It might be hard to believe, they contend, but "governments are not at all concerned with serving the public interest."[185] It is therefore "puzzling where this belief in the government comes from"[186] and they are quick to mention that neither "terrorism, nor famines, wars or epidemics, but the government is the biggest threat to civilians as states are responsible for the deaths of 262 million civilians in the twentieth century only."[187] The events of 9/11 and subsequent security measures appear to have been a serious game-changer as conspiracy websites discuss now the many ways the national state infiltrates our lives. Such articles speak of 'the "War on Freedom"' the Dutch government is said to have initiated in order to "limit our civil rights under the false pretext of public security without any democratic consultation."[188] All websites feature similar articles on the introduction of such "STASI practices"[189] which transformed this country from "a privacy paradise to a control state."[190] They speak with suspicion of the introduction of compulsory identification, biometrical passports with RFID chips containing fingerprint and facial scans, which are saved in central databases, electronic health records (EPD), electronic child records (EKD), access to bank details and international payments, the storage of traffic records, facial recognition software in public transport and CCTV systems, and many others.[191]

The Dutch authorities, these sources generally agree, go further than most European countries in the obsessive urge to control their population, "even though they always tried to hide their role as advocates of such control measures in the European Union."[192] It is, in the words of the author of this similarly-titled sevenfold series, "the end of the Netherlands as we know it."[193] These narratives are certainly not reserved for the Dutch nation state, but refer similarly to the "many countries in the West [that] have seen an exponential rise of technological monitoring and a decrease of parliamentary and judicial control over police and secret services."[194] In all cases the pessimistic conclusion is similar: "we have built—almost imperceptibly—the foundations of an infrastructure no police state or dictatorship ever dreamt of. And even when you have done nothing wrong, you should worry. Greatly."[195]

Another dominant conspiracy narrative concerning the omnipotent powers of the state refers to the *invisible* or *deep government*. Such notions of factions within the government that covertly rule the country surely have a long history, but the influential role of intelligence agencies in the twentieth century gave strong impetus to allegations of secret services pulling the strings behind world events (Olmsted, 2009: 10). Citing the 1964 work of journalists David Wise and Thomas Ross, Knight explains how the idea of an invisible government operating as a "permanent political, covert force" often in "opposite direction" of official policy firmly established itself in post-World War II America (Knight, 2000: 28-9). The assassination of JFK, although forever unresolved, attracts theories of CIA involvement,[196] and as do the many coups and revolutions since the 1950s in countries all over that are openly hostile to the US.[197] The assassinations and terrorist attacks in cold war Europe perpetrated by "NATO's secret army," the CIA funded Gladio network, fall under the same category.[198] Other examples include, of course, 9/11, around which the dubious behavior of FBI, CIA, and other US secret services is of central concern.[199] The more recent allegations of CIA and Mossad involvement behind the rise of ISIS in the Middle East show the persisting popularity of secret government conspiracy narratives.[200] Therefore, when a distinguished professor of international law acknowledges that "you can vote all you want, the secret government won't change […]. [P]olicy by and large in the national security realm is made by the concealed institutions,"[201] these conspiracy websites take on an I-told-you-so tone. The narratives about the covert influence of intelligence agencies are too numerous to discuss here, but there are certain concepts in many of theories of secret service involvement that are worth exploring.

I have spoken before about false-flag attacks, which are a central ordering principle of the secret service conspiracy narratives. These covert inside jobs, generally said to be executed by secret services and designed to make the public believe that an enemy of the state is behind the event, often serve as the justification for military interventions that can count as such on the consent of the people. A related concept in these secret service conspiracy narratives is the

PsyOp, or psychological operations, which are planned (covert) operations intended to manipulate the emotions and thoughts of people in accordance with national interests through the careful selection and conveyance of information.[202] PsyOps are wars of the mind, and images are its primary weapon, such authors stress, "they determine our worldview."[203] Based on the science of public relations and of propaganda in general,[204] PysOps are tailor-made for a fully-mediatized culture and secret services therefore massively deploy them.[205] Having had ample opportunity to experiment (these conspiracy websites report heavily on MK-Ultra and other CIA mind-control programs[206]), we now all believe the *Arab Spring* revolutions to be the real and sincere outbursts of democratic urges amongst populations eager for their dictators to be removed, right? The truth is, such conspiracy narratives hold, that these so-called democratic revolutions were carefully planned and staged by CIA and related intelligence agencies years ago.[207] Having learned from history that grass roots revolts win the hearts and minds of people around the globe, the US achieve the same global domination as before, but without the ugly and violent coups.[208] Following a quoted veteran intelligence specialist: "there's not a single major protest or coup d'état that doesn't have the CIA's fingerprint on it."[209] And so, they conclude, it is "imperialism under the banner of 'spontaneous popular uprising.'"[210] The 2014 demonstrations in Hong Kong, coined in mediagenic terms as the *Umbrella Revolution,* are therefore watched with vigilance: is it "another CIA-coordinated 'revolution' in the making?"[211]

Conspiracy theories about a government *out to get us* could be said to be American in character, however, such narratives are similarly part of local versions of government intrusions, as this analysis testifies. In the Netherlands, conspiracy narratives about the government are framed in a broader discourse of cultural transformation: the idea that the Netherlands is no longer the tolerant and free country of the seventies is widely felt, and is central to the many debates over citizenship and national identity in the recent decades (cf. Lechner, 2008; Van Reekum, 2014). These Dutch conspiracy narratives portray a general distrust towards the state that

is anarchist in origin (Sartwell, 2008), and shares as such many characteristics with the many anti-globalist movements mobilizing '21st century dissent' (Curran, 2006). The rise of a totalitarian police states as envisioned in many books and film fuels a dominant cultural imagery through which technological and bureaucratic developments in population control and securitization are interpreted (Kellner, 1990). The strong emphasis on the secret services within these conspiracy articles testifies to the persistence of *modern* forms of conspiracy theorizing: a clear cabal carries out all kinds of covert actions hidden from the public. Yet, as these secret services have turned into fully-fledged bureaucracies within which nobody seems to know what precisely is going on, the fears and worries about the pervasive monitoring of ordinary citizens take on the unspecified and elusive shapes known as *postmodern paranoia*. Who, if anybody, actually controls these technological and bureaucratic developments anymore? Contemporary conspiracy narratives about the omnipotent state and their "greedy institutions" (Coser, 1974) appear in many forms and draw on a diverse range of anti-government discourses. What characterizes them all, however, is the conviction that the enemy indeed comes from within.

3.4.6 Exploring the Supernatural: Aliens and Higher States of Consciousness

> *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*
>
> —*William Shakespeare, Hamlet*[212]

In addition to all the conspiracy narratives about rather mundane matters, a great part of these conspiracy websites is devoted to the *secrets of the universe*. These websites abound with articles on extraterrestrial life, supernatural phenomena, and mysterious civilizations. Such explorations of the mysteries of nature, life, and divinity are generally rejected by the scientific community as pseudoscience, but are nevertheless widely popular in conspiracy

circles. Barkun argues that the "stigmatization" or exclusion from the mainstream canon of accepted knowledge is in fact a big part of their appeal (2006: 26-9). This "disdain for orthodoxy," according to Barkun, "is a major characteristic of the culture of conspiracy" (2006: 26), and he connects it as such with the "cultic milieu" (Campbell, 2002) and the New Age Movement (Heelas, 1996). Ward and Voas give this "hybrid of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality" the name "conspirituality," and they explore the emergence of this "politico-spiritual philosophy" that combines both as "forms of holistic thought" (2011: 103-4). Many websites discussing matters of the supernatural may indeed incorporate and promote a spiritual worldview, but I have found that the opposite is also true, as other sites explicitly position themselves in favor of a purely scientific approach. Both, however, share an interest in life beyond human existence on Earth. The range of these articles is immense, but I will highlight here some of these supernatural narratives that tend to be favored within the Dutch conspiracy milieu.

Almost all of the conspiracy websites that I studied start from the assumption that humans are not alone in the universe, and that there is more to know about extraterrestrial life than we are being told.[213] The reasons for this cover-up obviously vary considerably, but most explanations go back to the early days of the cold war, in which the US was caught up in an arms race with Russia "to benefit solely from the extraterrestrial technologies found inside the crashed UFO's in New Mexico and Arizona. It is no exaggeration to state what a quantum leap in technological progress that would mean. And so 'national security' demanded that this matter was kept a secret at all costs [...] and the most secretive project of the millennium was born."[214] Things are changing today, these websites hold, as "there is now an impressive case load gathered of how NASA is withholding information [but] official UFO-files are being released around the world, and many more whistleblowers who claim to have been part of projects with aliens come out in the open."[215] Such articles refer to the disclosures of Bob Lazar who has allegedly been working as a scientist on the reverse engineering of ET technology at the primordial grounds of UFO cover-ups, Area 51.[216] Or, per the

statements of Apollo 14 astronaut and 6th man on the moon Edgar Mitchell, "aliens have contacted humans several times, but governments have hidden the truth for sixty years."[217] Other revelations by knowledgeable figures such as high-government officials from both the USSR and the USA, add to the conclusion that extraterrestrial life is real. If we follow, for example, the disclosures of former Canadian minister of Defense, it is more than real: "1960's intelligence investigations decided that, with absolute certainty, there are at least four species that have been visiting this planet for thousands of years […] but the latest reports say there at about 80 different species."[218]

These conspiracy narratives about extraterrestrial life, however, go further than NASA cover ups and insider testimonies . Articles describe, for example, OOPArts (Out Of Place Artefacts), which are "historical objects found in illogical or impossible locations and therefore directly challenge commonly accepted historical assumptions."[219] Although not directly related to extraterrestrial life, their unusual characteristics challenge historical chronology by being too advanced for the location where they are found, such as "a hammer found in rocks over 100 million years old."[220] These "OOPArts suggest an alternative course of civilization than we always assumed,"[221] and give rise to speculations about the existence of "a forbidden history"[222] of lost civilizations (like Atlantis), giant mythical creatures (such as the Nephilim), and ancient aliens (called Annunaki).[223] Although mainstream science is generally skeptical about such assertions, these articles argue instead that "the scientific community has no sufficient explanation for the highly advanced knowledge of mathematics and astronomy the Sumerians, the Egyptians and the Middle- and South American Indians possessed."[224] The alternative histories of the earth in which extraterrestrial events play a significant role, e.g. the works of Erich Von Däniken (especially *Chariots of the Gods*), Immanuel Velikovksy (*Worlds in Collision*) and Zecharia Sitchin (*The Twelfth Planet*), do provide such explanations and are widely popular in the conspiracy milieu.[225] Following such works, the "conclusion is reached that our DNA is implanted with alien genes,"[226] and that "aliens are involved in the evolution of the human

species."[227] The mysteries of the universe and of life itself, these articles conclude, are only beginning to be known.

Next to these explorations of extraterrestrial life, a supernatural topic that receives considerable attention in the conspiracy milieu is what is often called "the mystery of consciousness."[228] These articles start with the wonder and awe of the phenomenon of consciousness, and ask "why are we the only species with consciousness? Where does it come from? And why have we never seen it with any other living species on earth?"[229] In contrast to materialist scientific conceptions of consciousness as an illusionary product of the mind,[230] in which human mental faculties are understood as an evolutionarily-developed epiphenomenon of brain functions, many of these websites concur that this is too limited of a perspective that cannot adequately explain how "consciousness continues to exist when the brain is completely inactive, for example in a coma."[231] Such articles not only cite the works of (pseudo)scientists Rupert Sheldrake and Graham Hancock, who explore the non-material dimensions of reality,[232] as well as other spiritual teachings on the soul and eternal consciousness,[233] but increasingly feature scientific research on supernatural phenomena. Authors draw focus to medical research on near death experiences,[234] and argue that 'these experiences cannot be dismissed as imaginations of a dying person [but] may point to the existence of another reality [...] and the possibility of life after death.'[235] With titles such as *Scientists find proof for life after death*,[236] and *Solid scientific proof: consciousness after clinical death*,[237] these articles make clear that "scientists are changing their views: the brain does NOT create consciousness."[238] They contend that "misleading concepts focusing on reductive materialism have kept us in the dark about the true nature of the human soul, but now we are entering a phase in which science will greatly expand its boundaries [...] and reach out to the greater cosmos of life."[239] In line with articles that argue for a view beyond the materialist paradigm, these websites similarly delve into paranormal phenomena like extrasensory perception, remote viewing, and telepathy. These "refer to any kind of phenomenon where someone obtains information in ways not coming from the five

physical senses."[240] Just like experimental research on consciousness, such articles argue that "studies on extrasensory perception are generally marginalized," but "parapsychologists have nevertheless shown the existence of ESP in 108 publications between 1974 and 2008."[241] Special attention is paid to Project Stargate, a CIA-funded study on psychic phenomena at the Stanford Research Institute, where physicists in the 1970s and 80s explored whether clairvoyance existed and whether extrasensory perception made remote viewing possible.[242] One of these websites even translated extensive parts of the autobiography of Ingo Swann, one of the psychics who, with Uri Geller, was centrally involved with this project.[243] The CIA officially stopped funding the project in the nineties because it never yielded any useful results, although these websites question such a conclusion, surmising that "remote viewing is undoubtedly still deployed behind the scenes."[244] "Who knows," they wonder, "if in secret much more has been achieved by now?"[245]

These conspiracy websites are often sympathetic to the supernatural. Whether they speak about the existence of extraterrestrial life, delve into the mysterious histories of lost civilizations, or hold that human consciousness is a portal to different realities, their point is that there is more to life here on earth than we commonly think. Such ignorance is not a coincidence, such websites argue, but the active result of the covert actions of groups like NASA, the CIA, governments, or the broader scientific community, all of whom hide proof of supernatural phenomena from the public and reject such ideas as illusionary. Theirs is a vision of epistemic gatekeepers who repress and stigmatize knowledge when it points in the direction of the supernatural. Barkun argues in this respect that "the marginalization of such claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error – universities, communities of researchers, and the like" would be, for most people, a signal that such ideas have no validity (2006: 26). For conspiracy theorists, however, this practice raises suspicion: why are the boundaries of legitimate inquiry put here and not there? The theoretically fascinating thing about these conspiracy narratives is therefore not so much that two worldviews come together (Ward and

Voas, 2011), but rather that they (try to) redefine the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, and indeed of science. We could denounce such "opposition to dominant cultural orthodoxies" as Barkun does (2006: 26), or we could empirically study why people contest *and* defend these orthodoxies, and how the lines between official and stigmatized knowledge are drawn (cf. Gordin, 2012; Hess, 1993; Pinch, 1979). My overall premise is to justify the latter approach, and a modest effort in that direction is made towards the end of this dissertation when I study how conspiracy theorists and their scientific debunkers draw *their own* lines of legitimate inquiry.

3.5 Conclusion: Modern Conspiracy Theories or Postmodern Paranoia?

The world of conspiracy theories is vast and diverse. In this chapter I have made an effort to provide empirical and analytical grip on the subject matter of the chapters that follow by offering a systematic categorization of the conspiracy theories that are popular today. Basing myself on the articles posted on seven major Dutch conspiracy websites, I have set out to explore and distinguish conspiracy theories by their *thematic content*, instead of the more problematic criteria of *scope* or *plausibility*. The guiding questions of this analysis are based on circumscribing the community involved and the bases of their worldviews: what are these conspiracy theories about specifically, who are (allegedly) involved, how are the conspiracies working, and what is their overall argument? The theoretical starting point of this chapter is the notion that conspiracy culture has radically changed, from the rigid convictions of conspiracy and deceit that characterize traditional conspiracy theories to the more diffuse suspicions of collusion and intrigue that inform postmodern paranoia (cf. Knight, 2000; Aupers, 2012; Melley, 2000, Olmsted, 2009). Whereas the former may have bolstered collective identities by scapegoating an allegedly dangerous Other, as scholars argue, conspiracy theories today are no longer about an alien force threatening a stable *us*, but are better characterized as radical suspicions about the workings of

societal institutions. Leading this exploration of the sheer variety of contemporary conspiracy theories is thus the questions of whether and how such discourses resonate with modern conspiracy theories about an exotic Other, or with postmodern paranoia about the enemy from within.

If we take a closer look at the conspiracy theories circulating on these websites, it can first be concluded that most of these narratives are indeed more about the workings of societal institutions and their role in everyday life than about the scapegoating of some exotic Other. They express worry and concern about the virtualization of the financial system, about how the media might control people's minds with their propaganda, about what multinational corporations do to the health of bodies and the environment in their endless search for profit, about how scientific knowledge is too easily polluted by ulterior motives, about how greedy nation-states monitor citizens with intelligence technologies, and about how knowledge of supernatural and extraterrestrial life is suppressed by epistemic gatekeepers.

Indeed, contemporary conspiracy theories have a strong *institutional* focus: they do not so much assume that a small cabal deceives us with a masterful plan, but rather point to the fact that the very way our routines, procedures, and formal legislations are institutionalized indicates conspiracy. The distinguishing line, therefore, between contemporary conspiracy theories and critiques of academics or activists is a very thin one, the implications of which I will turn to later in this book. Moreover, the narratives of conspiracy and deceit explored in this chapter clearly point to a widespread feeling that the normal order of things is corrupted. No longer indicating a temporary disruption of a healthy society, contemporary conspiracy theories give expression to the more general discontents of life in globalized capitalist societies, they convey feelings of being influenced and manipulated by large-scale yet elusive forces, and they articulate fundamental doubts about truth and reality in a world where it is increasingly difficult to know which fact, expert, or epistemic authority to trust. Conspiracy is, in other words, everywhere and always around us.

Given this apparent turn towards homeland institutions and the omnipresence of deceit in everyday life, scholars emphasizing this new type of conspiracy theory may be correct in addressing the societal surge of *postmodern paranoia*. The conspiracy theories featured on Dutch websites lack the demonizing thrust in which dangerous alien forces are said to be set on threatening stable and uniform collectives, and instead emphasize uncertainty and ambiguity. Yet I cannot help but wonder if such novel conspiracy narratives do not rely on a *new* exotic Other?

Among all of the categories of conspiracy that I have discussed, most still speak of small groups of mighty people orchestrating, or at least benefiting from, covert cooperation and collusion, despite the institutional focus that characterizes contemporary theories. Whether they refer to the elite banking dynasties, the Illuminati behind the culture industry, the old-boys-network ruling multinational corporations, the hotshots in science, or those in charge of secret services, most contemporary narratives assume power to be in the hands of some ruling class. Does this *power elite* that controls the institutions that govern our world not become a new sort of outside threat, a new exotic Other? In a world of increasing wealth inequality (e.g. Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012), the notion of a power elite, the *1%*, as a much-despised cultural Other has become widespread (e.g. Graeber, 2013). Contemporary conspiracy narratives resonate with and contribute to this idea of an increasing concentration and consolidation of wealth and power in the hands of the worldwide elite. Such widely shared perceptions of a democratic and economic deficit is an important impetus to the construction of a power elite as the new exotic Other in contemporary conspiracy narratives. These elite circles are not understood by conspiracy theorists as isolated islands of power, but, like in C. Wright Mill's original thesis (1956), as having close ties with each other.

Contemporary conspiracy theories share, to conclude, characteristics of both types of conspiracy discourse: they are very much about the functioning of mainstream societal institutions and the contested nature of truth and knowledge in Western societies, but

they often also involve suspicions of the (covert) machinations of a relatively small cabal, e.g. the power elites ruling the world. Given these findings it is hard to make a case in support of a historical trajectory from modern conspiracy theories to postmodern paranoia: contemporary conspiracy culture simply has a bit of each.[246] It is only to be expected that conspiracy theories today are different from a century ago. Like any other cultural expressions, conspiracy theories are products of their time. Thus the real added value of the *postmodern paranoia* theory is *analytical* instead of historical.

What I argue here is that the historical argument of scholars such as Aupers, Knight, Melley, and Olmsted helps to conceptualize *an ideal-typical contrast between conspiracy discourses:* on the one side are clear-cut descriptions of conspiracy, and on the other are radical suspicions towards such rigid and totalizing explanations. As such, they make it possible to grasp the many different forms that conspiracy theories can take today; their intervention expands the possible cultural meanings they can have. Instead of understanding conspiracy theories only as the products of scaremongering populists luring a public into hateful and exclusionary thought, this added perspective enables us to understand how contemporary conspiracy theories may (also) express anxieties about new forms of social controls, inform viewpoints about new technologies, or vent worries about private/public collusions. This new perspective shows how conspiracy theories are increasingly the products of ordinary people who *bricolage* and reconstruct truth in order to produce social critiques that were formerly the exclusive practice of public intellectuals. This ideal-type distinction between modern conspiracy theories and postmodern paranoia sharpens, in short, our conceptual toolkit and opens up an array of possibilities for understanding contemporary conspiracy narratives. In the following chapters I will build forth on these efforts of the aforementioned scholars to broaden the scope of what conspiracy theories can entail and what they mean by following the many directions contemporary conspiracy culture takes me.

4. From the Unbelievable to the Undeniable: Epistemological Pluralism, or How David Icke Supports his Superconspiracy Theory

4.1 Introduction

In the last chapter I assessed some of the most persistent categories of conspiracy theories that I observed in my research: critical views of the media landscape, worries about the far-reaching arms of the state, and beliefs in extraterrestrial beings and lost civilizations. Despite this broad spectrum of conspiracy theories, I have argued that a focus on the workings of mainstream epistemic institutions and their dominant role in everyday life is what unites these different types. More than mere explanations of events involving the covert action of a malicious cabal (e.g. Coady, 2006; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009), contemporary conspiracy theories are critical analyses of institutional regimes that are often not a far cry from more authoritative forms of

knowledge (such as social scientific analyses). A second characteristic I have brought to the fore is how these conspiracy theories usually point to the people overseeing these institutions as being the culprits behind their corruption. The gamut of conspiracy theories may be about vastly different domains, but they all assign a global *power elite* as the dangerous Other threatening social order.

In fact, these seemingly-distinct conspiracy theories are sometimes synthesized into a single vast scheme of manipulation, what Barkun calls *superconspiracies* (2006: 6). Barkun stresses the increasing popularity of such vast constructs: "superconspiracies have enjoyed particular growth since the 1980s" (2006: 6). Knight identifies a similar historical development: "over the last decades conspiracy theories have shown signs of increasing complexity and inclusiveness, as once separate suspicions are welded into Grand Unified Theories of Everything" (2000: 204). Moving beyond discussions of their *actual* truthfulness, I explore in this chapter how these superconspiracy theories *are made plausible* instead. One of the main and most popular propagators of such all-encompassing conspiracies of deceit is the flamboyant David Icke (Barkun, 2006: 103). He is best known for his controversial *reptilian thesis*, in which "reptilian human-alien hybrids are in covert control of the planet" (Robertson, 2013: 28). But he is also known for his synthesis of seemingly different or antithetical thought: he combines New Age teachings with apocalyptic conspiracy theories about a coming totalitarian New World Order (cf. Barkun, 2006; Ward and Voas, 2011). Lewis and Kahn rightfully note, "Icke's greatest strength is his totalizing ambition to weave numerous sub-theories into an extraordinary narrative that is both all-inclusive and all-accounting" (2005: 8). In this chapter I analyze his *discursive strategies of legitimation* based, especially, on Icke's 2011 performance in Amsterdam. I sought to understand just how he supports and validates his extraordinary claims in order to achieve epistemic authority in the conspiracy milieu.

4.2 Claiming Epistemic Authority

The conviction that *everything is connected* is, according to most scholars on the subject, one of *the* defining characteristics of conspiracy theories. Knight regards it as "one of the guiding principles of conspiracy theory" (2000: 204), Hofstadter as one of "the basic elements of the paranoid style" (1996: 29), and Barkun as "one of the principles found in virtually every conspiracy theory" (2006: 3). The wide variety of conspiracy theories we have explored in the previous chapter, including extraterrestrial ancestries and pharmaceutical collusions, is often welded together into one vast scheme in which everything is connected. While Knight makes a case for the rationality of this adage in a world of global relations (2000: 204-241), a majority of scholars hold this *unifying quality* of contemporary conspiracy theories to be their major epistemological flaw (e.g. Barkun, 2006; Byford, 2011; Hofstadter, 1996; Keeley, 1999, Popper, 2013; Pigden, 1995). They argue that conspiracies may be "typical social phenomena" (Popper, 2013: 307) but "these need to be recognized as *multiple*, and in most instances unrelated events which cannot be reduced to a single, common denominator" (Byford, 2011: 33, original emphasis). They state that to "regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the* motive force in historical events" (Hofstadter, 1996: 29) is simply ludicrous: social life is inextricably more complex (Barkun, 2006: 7).

Yet such grand, unified theories are immensely popular in the conspiracy milieu. They are present in the ideas of people consuming conspiracy theories, they are visualized in colorful diagrams that are circulated on conspiracy websites, and they form the thought of major conspiracy theorists like Icke. Drawing everything together in one master narrative may, for such scholars, involve the notorious "big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (Hofstadter, 1996: 38), but for many in the conspiracy milieu this the other way around. As David Icke argues in his show, "when you connect the dots, suddenly the light goes on and the picture forms" (15:00). The opposite strategy of assuming events to be unrelated, which is often called the coincidence theory[247] is seen as naïve and implausible. Scholars of

conspiracy theories may point to the irrationality of these superconspiracy theories, but for many people in the conspiracy milieu they are very plausible and real. What these scholars tend to gloss over in their dedication to debunk conspiracy theories is the fact that these overarching theories *need to be made plausible* if they are to have any legitimacy. Underlying conspiracy theorists' efforts to connect the seemingly-unrelated is a need for epistemic validation: they want their claims on truth to be believed, after all. But such *grand unified theories of everything* are not your everyday news: in them, the world as we know it is often turned upside down and inside out, connecting the most outlandish causes and effects to ordinary experiences of people. The question is therefore *how* do conspiracy theorists convincingly sell such ostensibly *unbelievable* theories?

Sociology has a history of studying the ways that people assert themselves as authoritative in making appeals to truth claims. Max Weber (2013) already pointed out that one can claim authority through charisma, tradition or, in modern societies in particular, through rationalized, juridical systems and procedures like the law (cf. Hammer, 2001). In the Western world, references to science and its systematic markers of truth are, however, the most prevalent and powerful way to lend credibility to the claims one is making (Brown, 2009). "If 'science' says so, we are more often than not inclined to believe it or act on it – and prefer it over claims lacking this epistemic seal of approval" (Gieryn, 1999: 1). The tremendous epistemic authority science enjoys today is, however, not uncontested: trust in science has gradually declined in most Western countries (cf. Achterberg et al., 2015, Beck, 1992; Inglehart, 1997). Other forms of knowledge and expertise are on the rise, such as alternative and complementary medicine, non-scientific nutritional regimes, and New Age philosophies of life (cf. Campbell, 2007; Hammer, 2001; Heelas, 1996). Conspiracy culture aligns well with a broader cultural trend that turns away from mainstream epistemic authorities. Not only do conspiracy theorists openly challenge the epistemic authority of science (Harambam and Aupers, 2015), but, like David Icke himself, they often advance other epistemic sources as more authentic and authoritative. Icke is therefore not just the archetype of the

contemporary *superconspiracy theorist* (cf. Barkun, 2006: 8; Knight, 2000: 204), but a typical proponent of the broader cultural movement discontented with mainstream societal institutions (i.e. science, politics, religion, media, etc.).

4.3 Method, Data, Analysis

In this chapter I will draw on the empirical material from Icke's performance titled *Human Race, Get Off Your Knees. The Lion Sleeps No More* in Amsterdam on December 10, 2011. I have selected this particular performance as a strategic case-study to research in more detail how the extraordinary claims of today's superconspiracy theories are made plausible (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2013). As one of the many attendees of Icke's show, I observed not just his performance, but also his audience, some of whom I spoke with only during that day, and some of whom I invited for further conversation elsewhere. I made field notes of Icke's performance, covering both the contents and his theatrical portrayal of it, and I noted the reactions of the attendees. These field notes, which fall under the designation of *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) were theoretically informative and valuable for the research at large, but I found that they lacked the precision that I would need to substantiate my claims in this chapter. My original fieldnotes capture much of its thematic content and my own subjective reflections on them, but are not intended to be an accurate transcription of what Icke said.

Amsterdam was, however, not the only place Icke performed this work, and he procured the services of professional videographers to document London's Wembley Arena show on October 27th 2012, and London's Brixton Academy show on May 2010. These videos are for sale on his website for £28,99 and £25,00 respectively,[248] but have also been made available for free on YouTube. The latter show is predominantly similar to the Amsterdam show, although few minor deviations exist. I have therefore chosen to use the Brixton Academy video recording as the source for the quotations used in this chapter. I have re-examined this show with a theoretical focus on Icke's epistemological strategies, and have transcribed the relevant parts.

The analysis presented here is therefore more textual than ethnographic. As all excerpts presented here are from that YouTube video,[249] and are therefore easily accessed by anyone, I have noted beside each quotation its time location on the video.

4.4 "The Day That Will Change Your Life"[250]: David Icke in Amsterdam

David Icke is a true conspiracy celebrity: he holds performances in large venues all over the world, attracting crowds of thousands, and has published more than twenty books in twelve different languages. He founded and runs a popular website with many videos and interviews, which maintains an active discussion platform with more than 100,000 registered users.[251] Icke manages to bring together an unlikely range of people (Barkun, 2006; Ward and Voas, 2009). As Lewis and Kahn argue: "Icke appeals equally to bohemian hipsters and right-wing reactionary fanatics [who] are just as likely to be sitting next to a 60-something UFO buff, a Nuwaubian, a Posadist, a Raëlian, or New Age earth goddess" (2005: 3). His fan base is, in other words, quite diverse: including various new religious movements, political anarchists, alternative healers, and anti-government militants from the extreme right. All of them, however, share a discontent with the current societal order, and specifically with the way our epistemic institutions work.

Despite his massive popularity in the conspiracy milieu, Icke's views are hardly uncontested, nor is everything that he says taken as fact. Being a celebrity in conspiracy circles means that one can easily become the target of other conspiratorial accusations. Alex Jones, another major U.S.-based conspiracy celebrity, recognizes that Icke has "good information" but calls him the "turd in the punch bowl," arguing that Icke discredits himself (and others) by "poisoning the well" with outlandish claims of alien shapeshifting races.[252] Jones, as a result, has been accused "by dozens of reliable colleagues in the truth movement as being a Judas Goat," collaborating with the enemy to "lead the herd into slaughterhouses."[253] Being "the world's two most popular conspiracy theorists," both Icke and Jones are

considered by others in the milieu as major "disinformation agents" and part of the "controlled opposition working directly with the government/corporate powers that be."[254] Despite critiques and suspicions, Icke remains a major player in the conspiracy world, and as such enjoys much (epistemic) authority and consent. He may not be believed in all that he says, but managing to remain "on stage" for over twenty years means that his fan base is both large and loyal in support of his opposition to the cultural mainstream.

Such support was apparent at his 2011 Amsterdam performance in the auditorium of the RAI convention center. He attracted a 1500-plus person crowd each of whom paid for a sixty-nine euro ticket to see him speak. It is a full day's program, from ten in the morning until seven in the evening, during which time, Icke promised, he would "put all the puzzle pieces together" (13.30). The attendees included fathers on a day out with their teenage sons, posh-looking couples in their thirties talking over coffee, working class men smoking rolled cigarettes outside, and groups of middle-aged women exploring the New Age bookstands that are provisionally set up in the hallways. Outside, a Christian man was handing out leaflets in protest, warning that the "New Age prophet" is the "anti-Christ." Inside, I spoke to people about Icke and heard about their motivations for coming here today: some are true followers and have read all of his books, others share his critique of the contemporary order but are at odds with his spiritual leanings; some hardly know him but were brought along by a friend. Indeed, diversity of people and (epistemic) positions abound.

The show opened on a large video screen showing a chain of iron links passing while we hear gloomy and grim music that increases in intensity. The chain wraps around the earth and each link has writing on it: "New World Order," "Rothshild Zionism" "Child Abuse", "Babylonian Brotherhood," "Bilderbergers," "Aspartame," "Religion," Club of Rome," "Chemtrails," "Fluoride," "HAARP," "Satanism," "Trilateral Commission," "Mainstream Media," "Fabian Society," "Intelligence agencies," "IMF," "World Army," "Police State," "Global Politics," "Big Pharma," "War on Terror," "Vaccines," "Tavistock," "Military/Industrial Complex," "War on Drugs," "Mind

Control." As the music became ominous, a lion with an image of the earth projected onto its skin, is shown bound in chains. The music reached its dramatic climax as the lion breaks out of his bondage and while he growls loudly the links fly about the screen. The message is clear: The lion sleeps no more, the world liberates itself. Primed by the video, the audience received Icke with an overwhelming applause. The conspiracy rock star is finally here.

Over the next seven hours, Icke passionately elaborated what he sees as "the elephant in the living room: that there is a multi-levelled conspiracy to enslave humanity in a global concentration camp" (15:30). Before I explore his strategies of legitimation in more empirical detail, it will be useful to provide here a succinct summary of what Icke's superconspiracy theory entails. Broadly speaking, he distinguished between "the five-sense level of this conspiracy" and the levels that transcend the here-and-now. The five-sense level of his grand, unified theory of everything sums up what has been described in the previous chapter: Icke speaks widely about the corruption of inherent in modern institutions. Media, science, politics, religion, and the rest are used as a "control system" to manipulate the way we experience reality, to "program our minds" into acquiescence (19:00-25:00). He discussed how these institutions are dogmatic and inward-looking: "politics, science, education and media. They all stand on the same postage stamp. And anyone who wants to step off it and explore another area is ridiculed and condemned" (31:00). Icke integrates all of these different institutions in one pyramidal view of society in which the centralization of power is the organizing principle (3:36:00). At the top of this pyramid, which is visualized as an illustration, resides the cabal who are leading us into a global totalitarian control state. The cabal is described as a network of secret societies and powerful families, sometimes captured under the phrase "Illuminati bloodlines" and at other times called "Rothschild Zionists." But, Icke explained, this is mere surface, since "there is this other-dimensional, non-human, level to look at" (1:41:00).

We now get to the "reptilian thesis" through which Icke gained his fame and notoriety (Barkun, 2006: 105). "So yes," Icke explained, "of course on one level [the conspiracy] manifests itself as

dark men sitting in suits around the table, but that's not its origin, it goes beyond them, out of this dimension [...] beyond the frequency range of visible light" (1:43:00). His theory "involves non-human entities that take a reptilian form [that] manipulate this reality through interbreeding bloodlines" (1:44:00), which become the Illuminati-hybrid family networks that rule the world. However normal they may look to us (Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Barack Obama, Queen Elizabeth) they are in fact controlled by an "an ethereal reptilian entity locking into their chakra points" (1:55:30). Sometimes these entities give themselves away and "this shift can happen where the reptilian field comes forward, and then shifts back. To our observation then, someone has gone from a human to a reptilian and then back to a human again" (2:23:00). This is what he famously calls "shape-shifting." As an explanation for their "evil" activities, Icke argued that "their hybrid DNA has eliminated empathy – the fail-safe mechanism of all behavior" (1:53:30), "and this lack of empathy explains why these guys do what they do" (2:07:00).

Throughout his show, Icke made it abundantly clear that "the road to tyranny began when these reptilian arrived here, before that the world was very different" (2:23:00). He sketched an image of a time long ago when people lived in harmony with the world around them and were connected to higher levels of consciousness. "And then there was a sudden change," Icke explained, when "an energetic schism at the level of the metaphysical universe" fundamentally altered life on earth "and we became distorted from the magnificence and harmony we were before" (1:49:00). Our DNA was changed because of this reptilian intervention so that we can no longer access the world beyond the five senses. We merely "operate through the reptilian brain," which keeps us in a continuous survival mode of fear and aggression (3:10:00). And this is part of the conspiracy: "they want to lock humanity in the five senses, so we don't perceive beyond it, we are locked in that prison." (3:27:30).

This prison refers to "the nature of reality itself" (17:00), and it is of prime importance, Icke argued, because "what the control system doesn't want us to know is that this reality—the one we think we are experiencing now—is an illusion!" (31:00). Icke proposed

that "the world we *think* we are experiencing outside of us, is [actually] inside of us. We are creating it." (43:00) Everything around us is, according to Icke, our own individual projection of the "metaphysical universe," "eternal consciousness," or what he often referred to as the "waveform base reality" (34:00). Pointing to his head, Icke said that "it's all going on in here" (36:00). This projection is, however, not entirely our own as "the control system is manipulating 24/7 the way that we decode reality" (32:30), because when "you can't control millions physically, you have to control the way they perceive themselves and the world" (21:00). Mainstream institutions play an important part in making these "prisons for our minds" (19:00-25:00), but Icke pointed to another method of mass mind-control: "the moon-matrix." He argued that the moon is actually a hollowed out planetoid brought here by these reptilian entities, which is most probably the cause of the energetic schism, and emits a frequency which distorts our interpretation of reality (2:30:00-3:08:00). And that is "the bottom line of this conspiracy": controlling our perception of what is possible and real so to enslave us while we believe ourselves to be free (3:18:00).

But a change is going to come, Icke told us optimistically toward the end of the show, "a totally new era is in the process of moving into human experience," a "new epoch of enlightenment and expansion, of love, harmony and respect" (5:12:00). His argument is that an "energetic change is coming," and that "truth vibrations" are going "to wake people up from this slumber" and ultimately "heal the schism" (5:03:00-5:23:00). And "it's going to be extraordinary," we are told; "we are going to emerge from the abyss—the suppression and all the rest of it—and remember the fantastic potential that humans once were and be who we really are" (5:25:30). In order to open ourselves to these "truth vibrations" and to "go down this road of freedom, we first need to free our minds from the programming of a lifetime," Icke urged us passionately. We need to unlearn what we were told in school, school being a primary mode of indoctrination:

> *It is not there to enlighten us, it's there to program us with a certain perception of reality which we carry through our lives so we will be*

> *good little slaves. Free our minds from the belief that the mainstream media is interested in telling people the truth about what is going on in the world! It's there to do the opposite! It is there to tell us the version of reality the control systems wants us to believe, so we will respond and react the right way. Free our minds from the fake "change" politics [we are offered]! Free our minds from the fake fraudulent false flag terrorist events! Free our minds from the idea that Big Pharma is in any way interested in human health, it's not about human health, it's about Big Pharma wealth! Free our mind from the fear that controls the world! Free our minds, more than anything else, from the idea that we are just 'Joe Public,' that we got no power. The choice is to become conscious! (25:00)*

Icke urged the audience "to remove the barriers of belief and perception that keep us from enlightenment" (5:27:00) "Enough!" Icke shouted as he brought the show to its end, "it is time to fly!" (6:42:00). Given the massive applause Icke received, his audience seemed ready for it.

Icke's superconspiracy theory merges stories of banking scandals and institutional corruption with theories about the supernatural potential of humankind and globalized networks of hybrid reptilian bloodlines. And yet all is put in one surprisingly cohesive narrative which captures his audience's attention for hours. In the following sections, I will show which cultural sources of epistemic authority Icke draws on to make his extraordinary conspiracy theory of everything plausible.

4.4.1 "Just Following the Clues": Appealing to Experience

One of the more general ways that Icke lends legitimacy to his superconspiracy is through reference to personal experience. Virtually the first thing Icke does when opening his show is to give a snapshot of his life, "the chain of events that had led to now" (6:30). He explained that, "when I look back, I can see very clearly in my life, what happens to all of us, you go through a series of experiences and they seem to be random, they don't seem to be connected. But when

you look back you see it's a journey of connected synchronistic experiences that are leading us in a certain direction" (06:00). Like the opening video of the chained lion, Icke made it clear that "everything is connected," including the course of one's life, but, as we will see later, many other matters as well. He spoke of being a professional soccer player having to deal with rheumatoid arthritis, "not recommended, by the way," how he went into television, "what that did was show me the inside of media: shite," and that he got into (green party) politics, "and I saw politics from the inside: how it's just a game" (08:00). Or, when he claimed that the global elites are actually shapeshifting reptilians, he supported this idea with his own personal experience of meeting former UK prime minister Ted Heath in television studio years ago. And "as he looked at me, his eyes went completely black [...] and as I looked into his eyes it was like looking into two black holes, it was, as I know now, like looking through him into this other dimension where he is really controlled from" (2:06:30). In other words, Icke explains that he *knows* because he has been inside prominent institutions and can speak from *experience* to say that it is rotten in there.

But there is another type of experience on which Icke draws to convince us of what he was saying. In search of a way to heal his arthritis, Icke told us, he visited a psychic who had a vision in which he "was going out on a world stage to reveal great secrets, that there was a shadow over the world to be lifted, there was a story that had to told" (09:30). And although "this sounded like complete bloody craziness" to Icke, his "life started to change, as I started to come across information that was pushing me into a certain direction" (10.00). To a mountain in Peru, that is to say, where he "went to on intuition" and "ended up having extraordinary experiences when energy was coming into my head and I was shaking for about an hour and after that everything changed..." (10:30). He told how "suddenly concepts, information, perceptions, were pouring into [his] mind," and afterward he "was seeing the world in a different way, and I was asking the big questions: who are we? where are we? and why is the world as it is? And from that time the puzzle pieces started to be handed to me in amazingly synchronistic ways" (12.00). Like a true

prophet, Icke received the wisdom he wrote down in his books from the gods above, "one of the psychic communications that came through was: 'sometimes he will say things and wonder where they came from. They will be our words,' Another one was, 'knowledge will be put into his mind and at other times he will be led to knowledge… And that's how the information for all the books has come. Another one: arduous seeking is not necessary, the path is already mapped out, you only have to follow the clues" (12:30).

Following the clues is what Icke has done for the last twenty years, he explained, "the first few years all the information was coming to me in incredible synchronicity, of meeting people, seeing documents, coming across information, having experiences. That first few years were about what I call the five sense level of this conspiracy: the banking scams, the police state, the Orwellian surveillance, the big pharmaceutical cartel, attack on the human body and immune system, engineered wars" (16:00). This Jungian concept of synchronicity or "meaningful coincidences" is prevalent in the New Age movement (Heelas, 1996: 46), and Icke's explanation of how he has gained wisdom is a clear example. The concurrence of seemingly separate events and coincidences are seen as meaningfully related: they happened for a reason. He continued with his personal narrative, 'then after a few years, I started to move, just through the synchronicity, just following the clues, I came across this reptilian connection to the families that are running our reality. And then the most important part: when the synchronicity started taking me into the nature of reality itself" (17:00). The knowledge that Icke shared with us that day moves between that which had been given to him mystically, and that which is the product of his own making. The recognition of synchronicity is the active result of "having insights and then five sense information—names, dates, places, documents, people—coming to support that insight" (13:00). This is what he called "putting the puzzle pieces together" (13.30) or "connecting the dots" (15:00).

Icke's life is full of extraordinary experiences, and it provides a rich and powerful source to tap in order to support his extraordinary claims. The experiences Icke brought to the fore are of a more

mundane nature when he spoke of his past involvements with politics and media, having been an *insider* allows him to insight into how things *really* work. This epistemological trope aligns well with the popularity of whistleblowers in the conspiracy milieu. Think of the scientists who argue that "most published research findings are false,"[255] or of insiders in the pharmaceutical industry who address institutional corruption,[256] or of former FBI officials reporting intelligence malpractices.[257] Those who have experiential knowledge from the inside are considered highly credible, and Icke clearly tapped this source of epistemic authority. But Icke appealed also to the supernatural in order to support his claims. After all, the knowledge Icke shared is not just his, but has been handed down to him. These "revelatory experiences in which spokespersons claim to have gained privileged insight into those spiritual truths they present in their texts" (Hammer, 2001: 369) have been an important source of epistemic authority in the history of religious traditions all over the world, but are just as often drawn upon by contemporary "prophets" in today's market of New Age spiritualties (cf. Hanegraaff, 1997; Heelas, 1996). Icke did not just receive his knowledge from above, but was actively involved in that he had to "follow the clues" laid out for him. Icke's appeal to revelation and prophecy as a cultural source of authority fits into the cultural setting of the conspiracy milieu in which "connecting the dots" is an important operational imperative. Icke's appeal to the epistemic authority of *experience* does not stand alone, but epitomizes a broader cultural trend in which the true or inner self is the most valuable and trustworthy source of knowledge (e.g. Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Heelas, 1996; Van Zoonen, 2012).

4.4.2 "All Across the Ancient World": Appealing to Tradition

An important part of Icke's argument is based on the allegedly perennial wisdom of ancient cultures. Icke supported his claims throughout his show by referring to the myths of African tribes, the sagas of Asian emperors, the dreams of Native-American shamans, and familiar biblical narratives. The best example of this appeal to

tradition, as Hammer (2001) names it, is Icke's reptilian thesis, for which he finds support in virtually all the different ancient cultures he referred to in his show, noting that "this interbreeding is talked about and recorded all across the world in the ancient accounts" (1:47:30). He started with an excerpt from the Old Testament which speaks of "sons of Gods coming into the daughters of men who bare children to them" (Genesis, 6:4), "but that's just the biblical version, all across the ancient world you see similar stories and accounts of this interbreeding" (1:48:30). He said that "these bloodlines were known in the ancient worlds under different symbols and codes as children of heaven and earth, children of the gods, children of the sky" (2:15:00). His first argument is to prove that there is a common ancient narrative of humanity as the product of the intervention of celestial beings.

The most dominant symbolization of reptilian interbreeding is visible, Icke argued, in the adoration and worship of "the serpent gods" all across the world, in all cultures, and in all religions. He started off by saying that "the oldest form of religious worship in the world has been taken back 70,000 years, to an area of the Kalahari desert in South Africa and it is the worship of the serpent or worship of the snake" (2:07:30). He supported this point by reference to an 1833 study of John Bathurst Deane titled *The Worship of the Serpent*, which holds that all cultures/nations around the world worshiped a snake or a serpent (2:08:30). Icke quoted extensively from this work, but he gave many more examples, such as

> *Chinese emperors used to claim the right to be emperor because of their genetic connection to the serpent gods. And this is a theme all across the world between the serpent gods and royalty, claiming the right to rule because of their DNA. (1:58:00)*

He continued with myths of old Mesopotamia, Ancient Egyptians ("who have their pharaohs represented as a cobra"), in ancient Japan and Asia ("the dragon is the most dominant symbol of that world"), in central and south America ("the Mayan 'Kukulkan' and 'Quetzalcoatl' of the Aztecs"), and the Druids, whose "folklore is full of serpents"

(2:07:00 – 2:10:00). Icke then told the audience about the confirmation he got from an African shaman, saying that he met

> *Credo Mutwa, the great Zulu shaman. He contacted me because he has read the Biggest Secret in which I introduced this reptilian stuff, and he said, "David, how do you know? How do you know about the Chitauri?" And I didn't know about the Chitauri, "tell me about the Chitauri." And he told me story of African history where the Chitauri, which translates as the children of the serpent, had taken over the world in the very same way as the other parts of the ancient world described it. (2:11:00)*

Similar symbols of serpent gods are found everywhere in contemporary culture and everyday life, Icke told us. They are in our myths and fairytales, in the coats of arms of the aristocracy, and in the logos of car companies. Icke saw this as telling, "it's amazing how many times you see the symbols of reptiles and humans, or part human, part reptile, overseeing the palaces, castles and churches of this elite" (2:17:00). His conclusion put it clearly: "all worship the serpent gods" (2:10:00).

However, Icke told his audience, "something else goes parallel with the reptilian story" (1:48:00), by which he refers to the rupture or break which he similarly sees represented universally in human mythology and religion. Icke said,

> *again, not just in the Bible with the Garden of Eden and so, but all across the ancient accounts is the connection of the reptilian connection and the Fall of Men. And again, this is universal. The ancient accounts again talk about a time when humans were so unbelievably different to how we are today. And then there was a sudden change, the fall of men as it was called, what I call this is "the schism." (1:48:30)*

In addition to framing the "energetic schism" within a discourse of technology, I saw here that Icke supported this theory of a "sudden change" by appealing to "the ancient accounts." He started off with the Old Testament because the schism was

> *of course symbolized by Noah and the great flood. And Noah is simply a biblical version of much older stories that tell exactly the*

> *same story of how the earth turned over, how there were great geological catastrophes and how humans lost their power of the connection they had to higher levels of consciousness. (2:24:30)*

Later in the show, Icke introduced the work of Carlos Castaneda, "who wrote a book based on the teachings of a Central American shaman called Don Juan Matus. Some say he didn't exist, some say he did, whatever, the words put in his mouth are just extraordinarily extremely accurate" (3:09:30).[258] He continued to quote large pieces of text from Castaneda's book that support virtually his whole thesis about "a predator that comes from the depths of the cosmos and took over the rule of our lives. Human beings are its prisoners" (3:10:00). Later, concerning the fall of man, Icke quoted Don Juan Matus again,

> *sorcerers of ancient Mexico reasoned that man must have been a complete being at one point with stupendous insights, feats of awareness that are mythological legends nowadays. And then everything seems to disappear. And we have now a sedated man. Man, the magical being that he is destined to be, is no longer magical, he's an average piece of meat. (3:17:00)*

In other words, Icke's claimed that his ideas about the "schism" or "distortion that brought an end to the world we knew before" (2:32:30) are supported by most, if not all, ancient cultures.

Throughout his show, Icke appealed to the wisdom of the *ancient world* to validate his own theories: if *they* have been saying it for thousands of years, it must be true. In a culture wary of modern institutions and the knowledge they produce, this makes sense as these older traditions represent a more authentic and a more pure basis of wisdom (cf. Campbell, 2007; Heelas, 1996; Roszak, 1995). This appeal to ancient cultures is what Hammer (2001) identifies as the epistemological strategy of tradition which involves basing one's truth claims in the source of non-European (often spiritual) lore. Icke appears to share this idolatry of a world before its corruption by modernity and therefore does not differentiate between the *ancient cultures* of Asia, Africa, or the Americas. They are *all* more pure ways of knowing, and as Hammer argues, these non-European and pre-modern cultures become in such circles modernity's "positive Other"

(2001: 87). In line with the "invention of a tradition" literature (cf. Shils, 1981; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), Hammer holds that such appeals are by no means references to "actual" practices and beliefs of "ancient cultures," but construct a radically "modern" reinterpretation of non-European tales and traditions (2001: 23). Like those in the modern esoteric tradition Hammer studies, Icke takes the legends of ancient cultures as containing factual truths (2001: 157). Whether these are in reality true or not—as Icke himself said in the case of Carlos Castaneda—is not that relevant: "the words put in his mouth are just extraordinarily extremely accurate" (3:09:30). Indeed, it all potentially being fiction is "not the point" here, as Hammer emphasizes, "the message is clear", such ancient cultures "possessed a vast wisdom, a spirituality lost to us" (2001: 136). Icke conveniently draws on this widely felt sentiment of cultural discontent and his appeal to *tradition* finds fertile ground.

4.4.3 "Living in the Cosmic Internet": Appealing to Futuristic Imageries

In contrast to supporting claims by appealing to the wisdom of ancient cultures, Icke also looked to the distant future as a source of authority when he invoked imageries that are brought to life by science fiction and digital technologies. In claiming that the world around us is an illusion that we all collectively create inside our heads by tapping the metaphysical universe, Icke made abundant use of such factual and fictional realities to support his claims.

Throughout his show, Icke spoke, for example, about human bodies as computers, saying that "our DNA is like a universal software code," "just like computers, we have a phenomenal anti-virus system we call the human immune system," and "what we call cultures are different sub-softwares of the human software" (1:10:00-1:12:30). These analogies were meant to add plausibility to Icke's argument that our bodies decode a universal energy field (the metaphysical universe) and bring the reality we experience every day into being. Icke argued that this "is just like the wireless internet, where you get a computer and pull the whole world wide web, a whole collection of reality, out

of the unseen, to appear on a screen, anywhere in the world" (36:30). Similarly, when Icke spoke of the "energetic schism" through which our "body-computers" became distorted and disconnected from higher levels of consciousness, he supported this notion with a comparison to digital technologies:

> *in China you can't access vast tracks of the internet because the computer system has been firewalled off to stop Chinese people accessing that area of the internet that the authorities don't want them to see. What happened as a part of this [reptilian] intervention is that human genetics were manipulated to do exactly the same: to firewall us off from the levels of reality we could access before. So we went into this prison we call visible light that we have been in ever since. (2:26:00)*

Such references to digital technologies to support his ideas were common throughout his show. For example, when Icke explained why life feels and appears "real," he said that it is "because we are living in a virtual reality universe. A fantastically advanced version of a gigantic computer game" (32:30). He pointed to new digital technologies that have made moving 3D holographs possible, like news readers in a television show or Michael Jackson appearing on stage long after his death. "[S]ome of these digital holograms look so solid,", Icke held, that "people are afraid to walk through them. And that's what this is: digital holograms are the reality we're experiencing" (1:24:30). These examples of the *realness* of virtual realities were deployed by Icke to convince the audience of his understanding of reality as an "illusion" created inside our heads: "we live in a very advanced equivalent of the holographic internet, the only place that it 'exists' is on the screen, we live in the cosmic internet" (40:30).

The futuristic imagery developed in science fiction provided a secondary source of epistemic authority for Icke to tap from. When he described reality to be an illusion created inside our heads, he made an explicit reference to *The Matrix*:

> *this scene from The Matrix—which is absolutely right—where the Neo character says, "but this isn't real!" And Morpheus says "well,*

> *what is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, taste and see, then 'real' is simply electronic signals interpreted by your brain." That's all it is…so imagine if you can manipulate the way the brain interprets reality … think of the potential for manipulating the way we see reality individually and collectively. (38:00)*

This obvious reference to *The Matrix* movie is a popular one—both in the conspiracy milieu and generally—and Icke quoted this extensive excerpt twice in his show:

> *…in the Matrix that scene where Morpheus says, "The Matrix is everywhere, it is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window, or you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." Neo, "What truth?" Morpheus, "That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage… born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind." I would say that prison for your mind is the Moon-Matrix, which has put us in a vibrational prison" (42:30 and 2:59:00).*

The main idea put forward in that movie—that we all live, without really knowing it, in an artificial non-existent simulated world—resonates remarkably well with what Icke was trying to tell the audience, and proved a powerful metaphor in convincing us. The irresolvable philosophical quandary on which this movie is based entertains many. How to tell, after all, if the world around us is not a well-crafted illusion?

But the appeal to science fiction goes further. Icke supported, for example, his claim that the moon is an alien instrument of mind-control by referencing *Star Wars*, "in a galaxy far, far away… I don't think so. This is much closer at home" (2:48:00). He also cited John Carpenter's *They Live* as a reliable representation, "I thought it was symbolically accurate when I first saw it, but now I know it's unbelievably accurate" (3:02:00). Icke deliberated on *They Live* at length, arguing that the plot is useful in light of his own theory: the

protagonist discovers that people are manipulated to consume and accept the dictatorial status quo through subliminal messages in mass media and advertisements by a ruling class that are in fact aliens who conceal their real nature in daily life. He described the possibility that our sensory perceptions are manipulated, "the reason the people cannot see [the truth out there] is because there's a frequency being transmitted which is preventing the population from seeing what they would normally see" (3:05:00). The moon-matrix "is the equivalent of that broadcast dish on the top of TV tower in that movie" (3:07:30). For Icke, the film sums up what he argued in his show. The same literal truths can be found in *Star Wars*, Icke revealed:

> *the Death Star is very much of course like the moon. And it was constructed to move in on planets and take them over. In the same bloody way as I am talking about the moon. In many ways this is so symbolic of what we are looking at here, and that's no accident with George Lucas involved. (2:50:00)*

Both movies confirm what Icke had been saying all along, and referencing them should help Icke convince his audience.

Virtual reality universes, holographic morphing, and indoctrinating frequency transmissions may all sound like futuristic science fiction, and in many cases they are. But what was outlandish science fiction yesterday, is concrete possibility today. We live in a world unimaginable for people living only a century ago: talking to moving images of real people on a small device in our hand, or spending days in simulated game environments where we fight alongside dwarves against other mythical creatures. The merely-imaginable has become very real. Digital technologies have not only fundamentally changed the way we live, but they have altered the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. And just like how new technologies for erasing distance in the nineteenth century (like the telegraph) made *spirit communication* apprehensible and popular (Stolow, 2008), so too do digital technologies of the twenty-first century contribute to the understanding of the world as a *virtual* reality. Icke seemed to give just such a cultural-sociological explanation himself, albeit with a curious twist:

> *[T]oday it's much easier to talk about reality, because technology is starting to mirror the very reality we are experiencing: it's getting closer and closer to real. The projection is that not too long from now they will have computer games which you can hardly tell the difference between that [virtual reality] and this [our virtual reality]. (33:30)*

Technological advancements have normalized futuristic imageries that Icke can conveniently use to support his ideas about the world-as-virtual-reality.

Besides his appeal to once futuristic imageries turned real that function to convince people that much more *unbelievable* stuff has potential reality, Icke referred to science fiction as *factual* descriptions of reality. In his own words, "so much of science fiction ain't fiction at all, they're getting it from facts" (2:51:00). Barkun argues that this "fact-fiction reversal" is common, "conspiracy literature is replete with instances in which fictional products are asserted to be accurate factual representations of reality' (2006: 29). One can therefore critique the fact that popular culture "mainstreams" conspiracy thought by further blurring fact-fiction distinctions, as Barkun does (e.g. 2006: 33/179-181). But it is hard to deny that works of science fiction have established themselves firmly in our collective imagination. The appeal to futuristic imagery, I argue here, normalizes the rather outlandish ideas that Icke offered. Having been exposed to so many exotic stories of outer space and alien realities, the notion of living in the cosmic internet seems to many not so farfetched. Whether Icke is appealing to these futuristic imaginaries as literal, or is using them as metaphors, the role these references play is clear: they help people imagine (and believe) what he is talking about is.

4.4.4 "What Scientists Are Saying": Appealing to Science

In a context dominated by a scientific worldview, anyone trying to legitimize their claims to truth would do well to base it in science. As Tom Gieryn puts it, "science often stands metonymically for

credibility, for legitimate knowledge, for a trustable reality: it commands assent in public debate" (1999: 1). Olav Hammer convincingly argues that this is just as much the case for spiritual advocates proselytizing their claims on truth (2001). He states that "one of the most striking characteristics of the esoteric tradition is precisely its use of contemporary science as a source of legitimacy" (2001: 203). Icke based a great deal of his claims on the epistemic authority of science, even though he is very critical of it, "because it puts you in the box, on that postage stamp" (1:21:30). Be they natural or supernatural forms of knowledge, if one wants their understandings of the world to be acknowledged, invoking science appears imperative.

Icke alluded to science first by using scientific works as *the building blocks* of his own theories. When he argued, for example, that the moon is not what we think it is, he quoted many different scientists to support the conclusion that the moon is a hollowed-out planetoid from outer space. He began with scientists who question the common understanding of the moon as Earth's satellite: Isaac Asimov, a Russian professor of Biochemistry and Irwin Shapiro from the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics both argue, Icke noted, that given its size and position the moon should not be there (2:36:00). He continued by citing scientists from NASA who concluded after seismic experiments that "the moon is more like a hollow than a homogenous sphere" (2:36:30), findings that were supported, Icke said, by Dr. Frank Press and Dr. Sean Solomon from MIT (2:37:00). To argue ultimately that the moon is a construct from outer space, Icke extensively quoted two scientists from the Russian Academy of Science, Michael Vahsin and Alexander Shcherbakov, who "wrote an article in *Sputnik Magazine* titled, "Is the Moon the Creation of Alien Intelligence?" (2:38:00). After presenting their findings Icke advanced their marvelous conclusion: "they say it's a hollowed-out planetoid! 'What we have here is a very ancient spaceship, the interior of which was filled with [...] everything necessary to enable this caravel of the universe to serve as Noah's ark of intelligence'" (2:40:00). Icke's effort here is meant to give his

audience the impression that his theory of the moon is actually supported by real scientists.

Icke also alluded to science as *stepping stones* to reach his own more extravagant ideas. He starts in such cases from a position of scientific quandary and then advances his own rather extraordinary notions just at the point where science leaves matters unexplained. For example, when Icke explained that our "body-computer" can no longer reach higher levels of consciousness, he turned to unresolved theories in cosmology and astronomy and used them as a starting point,

> *the range of frequencies our body-computer can decode is extraordinarily tiny. We are virtually blind, in terms of [seeing] what exist. The vast majority of this universe is what scientists call dark energy or dark matter and they call it dark not because it's pitch black, but because we cannot decode it. Therefore it's not within our realm of experience. We have to work it out by its impact on things we can see. (59:00)*

Later in the show Icke drew on another scientific mystery in order to support his idea that we have been genetically modified to keep us away from the truth:

> *there was a genetic manipulation to stop us accessing the ranges of frequency we did before. It is a major reason why scientists call 95% of human DNA junk DNA, because they don't know what it does. Well, they're switched off! (1:51:00)*

In all such cases, science is the base from which Icke ventured into unexplored territories. Scientists may point in the right direction, Icke said, but because "they're focusing on their own discipline, their own individual dots, and they don't connect the dots, they can't see the picture" (1:26:00).

Icke drew on science lastly for its rich repertoire of cultural imagery to make his thoughts intelligible. When he was talking about how *ethereal reptilian entities* are actually controlling people like Obama and Queen Elizabeth, Icke turned to the image of the sterile laboratory:

> *[W]hen these scientists in a laboratory are working with something they can't touch because it's too dangerous. What they are working with will be in a tank, and they'll put gloves on, which allows them to be outside the tank, but to manipulate inside the tank. Well, that is a very good symbol of what I am talking about, these illuminati bloodlines, these hybrid bloodlines operate like with those gloves, operating inside this reality. (1:56:00)*

Later in his show when Icke discussed the *control system* that he said has trained us into acquiescence and obedience, he made reference to the image of a classical conditioning experiment,

> *[I]t is a mind game. More and more fine details of our life are being dictated. It is to turn us into a version of this [shows picture of a mouse in the middle of a maze]. When you put shock equipment down different channels [the mouse learns where not to go]. After a while, not long, you can take that shock equipment away, that mouse will never go down there again, because you've changed his behavior patterns. And what they are doing is [the same]: giving us punishments for doing this, punishments for doing that, so we become subservient totally to the system, never challenge it. (5:00:00)*

Science, to conclude, is an important part of our cultural imaginary, and Icke draws from it regularly to make his ideas intelligible.

Despite all the challenges to the institution of science, appeals to its epistemic authority remain by far one of the most effective ways to lend credibility to knowledge (e.g. Gieryn, 1999). Even "spokespersons for religious outlooks" need to position themselves in one way or another to the dominant scientific worldview (Asprem, 2014; Hammer, 2001: 202). Hammer distinguishes multiple ways in which such religious advocates relate to science which are similar to Icke's appeals. When Icke drew, for example, on the knowledge, methods, and cultural imagery of science to support his arguments, he did what Hammer calls "scientism" (2001: 206). This line of reasoning proposes, as Icke did, that "good scientific arguments exist for accepting [supernatural phenomena]" (Hammer, 2001: 203), or in this case, for accepting superconspiracy theories. But Icke also drew on science in a way similar to what Hammer identifies as "God

of the gaps" arguments when he claimed domains of life that science has yet to find an explanation for (2001: 202). In science's inability to provide answers to the mysteries of black holes, dark matter, and junk DNA, Icke stepped in and contended that he *dares* to go further by providing explanations. Science performed, in other words, a dual role in Icke's thought: firstly as a positive Other when it confirmed what he is saying, and secondly as a negative Other when he framed science as the signpost of limitation. Either way it was used, it is evident that science proves a resourceful cultural source of authority to tap from, if only because it can be invoked rather flexibly. And in his show, Icke sure knew how to use it.

4.4.5 "The Incessant Centralization of Power": Appealing to (Critical) Social Theory

After exploring the multidimensional level of his superconspiracy, Icke explained "how it all plays out in this five sense reality" by drawing on notions developed in the social sciences (3:27:00). His main question "how do a few control the many?" is unequivocally answered in sociological terms, that is, "by the way they have structured society" (3:27:30). In the following, I will show that Icke's argumentation of how we are all manipulated into acquiescent and obedient slaves to the system draws heavily on sociological theories. Although he did not make direct references to the work of social scientists, he used their discourse, concepts, and mechanisms, which tells us something of their cultural authority outside of academia.

The allusion to social theory is clear when Icke identified the centralization of power/knowledge in hierarchical systems as the organizing principle of society:

> *[C]rucial all the way through is to structure society as a pyramid. The idea is to hold advanced knowledge in the upper levels of this structure, where a few at the top are the only ones who know how it all fits together, and they keep the general population in ignorance of what they know, therefore they have the power to manipulate the masses. (3:28:00)*

Knowledge is power, Icke explained after Foucault. Akin to sociological understandings of modern societies, Icke's "pyramid of manipulation" is also vertically structured along "the major institutions that affect our daily life," such as religion, finance, military, education, politics (see: *Figure 1*). Each column/institution maintains the fundamental principle of the hierarchical centralization of power/knowledge, resulting in an image of society as a nested pyramid. In portraying a pyramidal view of society, Icke underscores the rationality of functionally differentiating society in order to most efficiently control it, which is reminiscent of Weber's bureaucratization theories (2013[1922]). By focusing on how such systems operate through hierarchical structures, in which, for example, lower level officials need not have any idea about what they are part of, but need only *do their job* and *follow commands* (cf. Arendt, 2006), Icke argued that society can be manipulated with the cooperation of those being manipulated:

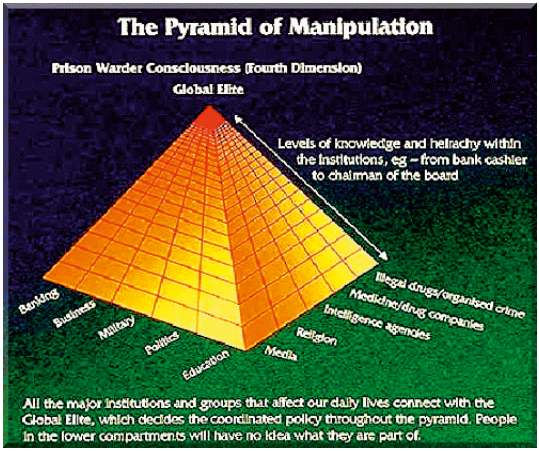

Figure 1

> *[T]hey [just] go to work, earn money, go on holiday, they don't try to manipulate anybody, they don't try to create a Fascist Orwellian totalitarian. But they don't know how their apparently innocent contribution individually connects with other apparently innocent contributions around the system. And that's how they keep what's going on in the hands of the few. (3:30:00)*

Social theory from thinkers like Marx, Weber, Foucault and Arendt has found its way to the superconspiracy theories of Icke who reminds us of the profound cultural impact these theories have.

The pyramidal image of society is dominant in the conspiracy milieu, and although it circulates in many forms[259], each has a large, uniform base (often called "workers," "debt slaves," or "labor units") which is pitted against a tiny elite that dominates them (see *Figure 1*). Besides the obvious populist tenet in such a view of society, the legacy of Marxian thought is especially apparent when compared to "The Pyramid of the Capitalist System" (*Figure 2*), a satiric cartoon published in a 1911 edition of *Industrial Worker*.[260] Although the dominant institutions may have changed slightly, the idea is the same. As Icke put it, "humans have been put in this circular lifestyle, just a repeating cycle of work and sleep and eat and work and sleep and eat… so that we spend so much time surviving and do not lift our head up to see what's going on" (3:35:30). The ruling class enjoys a privileged life, while the major institutions guarantee order and stability. Even the operating logic is similar: just "follow the money" and you will get to the cabal.

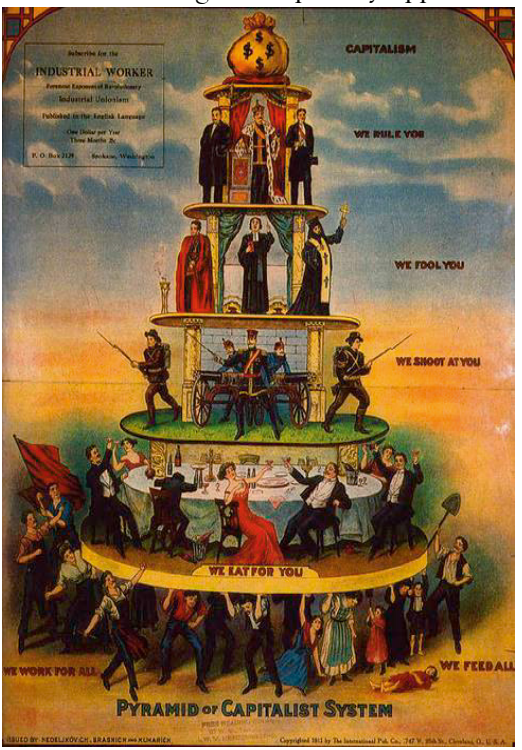

Figure 2

The resemblance to Marxian thought goes further. Icke spoke, for example, about the "institutions that affect our daily life" and how they "program us with a certain perception of reality which we carry through our lives so we will be good little slaves" (22:30). This is not a far cry from the Marxian mainstay of a "superstructure

of society" (its culture, religion, ideology, values, education, politics, media) that maintains and legitimizes the dominant "forces and relations of production" by advancing it as normal, just, and legitimate (Marx and Engels, 1970[1845]). Icke reiterated Gramscian notions of how these institutions, and especially the education system, socialize people to obediently serve in their designated (labor) roles in society, "which is why the education system is not about educating, it's about programming" (3:28:00). Such acquired "hegemonic beliefs," Antonio Gramsci argues, thwart critical thought and ultimately obstruct the "revolution" (2011[1948]). Icke urged us for the same reasons to "free our minds from the programming of a lifetime if we are to go down this road to freedom" (22:00). The "control system" may have been set up in myriad ways "to divert us, to confuse us, and to keep us from the understanding that would set us free" (14:00), but, so Icke told us in rather Marxian terms, "we can break out of this maze" by understanding the reality of the world we live in, "the choice is to become conscious!" (25:00). Class conscious?

When Icke talked about the increasing centralization of power, he provided a form of historical sociology as well:

> *[W]e started with tribal situations, and as part of this centralization process, the tribes came together in what we call nations. And now a few people at the center of the nation are dictating to all the former tribes that make up that nation. We are now welling to the next stage of that, which is bringing nations together under unions, like the European Union, so a few people at the center are now dictating to all those nations, which are made up of all the tribes of before. And the next stage of that, which they are already preparing for, is to take us into a world government that would dictate to these unions that are building up – European Union, American Union, Pacific Union, evolved out of like organizations as the APEC and the African Union, already in place. (3:37:00)*

The notion of a coming totalitarian world government is central to many conspiracy theories (e.g. Barkun, 2006; Byford, 2011), but the fears and worries about the increasing centralization of decision making in pan-national institutions like the EU are more widespread.

They are, for example, held to be a core cause of the rise of populism in Europe since the early 2000s (e.g. Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2004), or to the 2016 *OUT* vote in the EU referendum of the United Kingdom. Icke clearly drew on such populist sentiments to support his claims, saying for example that "what they have done in many of these unions is to start off as free trade zones—'no, no, just for jobs, that's all it is, no worries'—and then they turn them in fully fledged dictatorships, which is what happened in the European Union" (3:37:30). His discourse is not unlike that of many Western European populists.

More important for my argument here than this recourse to a prevalent anti-EU sentiment in Europe, is that Icke essentially gave a socio-historical explanation of how we got into the "centralized dictatorship [that] the EU is now" (3:43:00). He described the current situation by making reference to long-term historical processes that are normally the territory of historical sociologists. When Icke referred to "globalization" as part of the strategy of the cabal, his explanation is noticeably similar vein to those sociological theories standing in Wallerstein's *World-Systems Analysis* tradition (2011[1974]):

> *[G]lobalization is the constant centralization of power. Which is more and more power in the in the hands of a few. More and more, the globalized economy is making every country dependent on every other country, therefore has no power of individual action and decision making [and] no self-sufficient ability to make decisions in their own lives, own communities, and their own countries. And the reason they want to do this is to make everyone dependent on something outside their control, because dependency equals control. (3:45:30)*

Icke supported his superconspiracy of a coming totalitarian world government by reference to socio-historical mechanisms that social scientists know as *dependency theory* (e.g. Ghosh, 2001; James, 1997; Wallerstein, 2011).

In contrast to his appeal to science, where Icke literally quoted natural scientists, the reference to social-scientific knowledge

is less explicit. But the way he explained our current situation and how we got there is clearly reminiscent of sociological thought, especially of the critical or (neo)Marxist signature. Obviously, Icke gave a conspiracy twist to his socio-historical explanations, and they are inevitably simplified in his show, but a full one-to-one similarity is not the point here. What is relevant is that Icke unmistakably drew authority from a discourse of explanation that has its origins in the social sciences, but which is now widespread. Whether he spoke of the functional differentiation of society along "the institutions that control our daily lives," how they manipulate us into thinking what the control system wants, or how globalization processes decrease a country's autonomy, "because dependency equals control," his arguments are what can be called a form of *pop-sociology* (cf. Birchall, 2006; Knight, 2000). Such discourse testifies to the trickling down of (social) scientific notions in wider society (e.g. Giddens, 1991). Critical social theory seems to have become a popular idiom for conspiracy celebrities and ordinary people alike to express their discontent with the current social order.

4.5 Conclusion

David Icke brings the heavens and Earth together in one extraordinary master narrative of banking scams, multidimensional universes, reptilian races, and institutional forms of mind-control. During the seven hours in which he *connects the dots*, Icke taps a multitude of epistemic sources to convince his audience that the *unbelievable* is indeed *undeniable*. His claims to truth are a hodgepodge of discursive strategies of legitimation: he draws on personal experience, perennial narratives in ancient cultures, futuristic imageries, and science and critical social theory to support his superconspiracy theory. And as with Hammer's spokespersons of the esoteric tradition, these 'discursive strategies seldom appear in splendid isolation' (2001: 45). Indeed, they follow each other in remarkable speed, and without hesitation. Some academics may find this eclecticism problematic and deplore how such *charlatans* unsettle the boundaries between fact and fiction, or warn of the political and cultural ramifications of a world

that succumbs to *relativism* (e.g. Barkun, 2006; Pipes, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). But this sort of critique from a positivistic stance does little to help understand Icke's enormous popularity from a cultural sociological perspective. Based on this analysis, I develop two sociological explanations here as to why Icke's epistemological pluralism—drawing from different sources of knowledge—only adds to the plausibility of his superconspiracy theory. These hypotheses about the cultural reception of superconspiracy theories suggest new routes for further research.

First, I contend that Icke is attractive for *epistemological omnivores*, people who afford credibility to multiple sources of knowledge in their search for the truth. Although science may be the most commanding epistemic authority (cf. Gieryn, 1999; Brown, 2009), it faces today decreasing levels of trust and confidence in its ability to deliver reliable and truthful knowledge about the world (cf. Achterberg et al., 2015; Beck, 1992; Inglehart, 1997). To be sure, science is still regarded with great esteem, but it has no monopoly on truth. Epistemological purists may believe there is only one superior way to arrive at good knowledge or the truth, *epistemological omnivores* find this strict reliance on one system of knowledge suspect and argue that it makes more sense to complement it with other sources, such as tradition, experience, fictional narratives, and imageries. Icke clearly thinks the same, or at least he believes this strategy of epistemological pluralism to be most opportune when claiming knowledge. If science alone cannot explain it all, for whatever reasons, the best one can do is to draw from a multitude of epistemic sources (cf. Lyotard, 1984). That is, at least, what epistemological omnivores would say. In a culture wary of dominant epistemic institutions and their sole reliance on science as the pathway to truth, Icke's *bricolage* of many different sources of knowledge may therefore find much resonance.

However, Icke's eclecticism may not just serve the epistemological omnivores; his superconspiracy theory would appeal equally to different social groups, each with distinct worldviews and lifestyles. Many scholars have pointed to the fact that Icke manages to bring together a diverse range of people, from leftist spiritual seekers

to right wing reactionaries (e.g. Barkun, 2006; Lewis and Kahn, 2005; Ward and Voas, 2009). This is confirmed by my own observations and interviews in the field. On the one hand, I found many *spiritual seekers* in the conspiracy milieu who might be particularly fascinated by Icke's appeal to personal experience and ancient mythologies. After all, such sources of knowledge are at the core of modern esotericism, New Age spiritualties, and the cultic milieu generally (cf. Campbell, 2002; Hammer, 2001; Heelas, 1996). The references to science and technological imageries may, on the other hand, attract quite another audience, like amateur-scientists, technicians, hackers, and fans of the science fiction genre. And what about the references to critical social science, are these narratives particularly appealing to social activists or neo-Marxists fighting an unfair social system of modern alienation, stratification, and globalization? My second suggestion, then, is that Icke's reliance on multiple sources of knowledge attracts distinctly different audiences. His text is highly *polysemic*: each follower can extract from all the different ingredients of his superconspiracy theory a particular narrative that resonates with her own social identity and subjective reasoning. In short, I argue that Icke's epistemological pluralism strengthens the plausibility and explains the popularity of his superconspiracy theory, but whether it predominantly attracts the epistemological omnivores, or different social groups with distinct epistemological preferences, *or both*, remains an open question for further empirical research.

Icke's epistemological pluralism should, however, not be considered a strictly idiosyncratic enterprise, but has wider cultural resonance. Many religious groups operating in today's globalized world have, for example, a similar type of *syncretism*, blending different, often contradictory belief systems and schools of thought into one coherent narrative (Stewart and Shaw, 1994). Such epistemological pluralism is similarly characteristic of *the cultic milieu* where it has been described as constituting a "common ideology of seekership" (Campbell, 2002: 15). Likewise, many postmodern religious movements *pick-and-mix* from different epistemic sources such as film, books, mythologies, music, etc. to construct their holy

scriptures (e.g. Lyon, 2000; Possamai, 2005). Icke's fusion of science and tradition, folklore and futurism is also found outside the domain of religiosity as it reminiscent of the many *pastiches* in the arts and culture (cf. Jameson, 1991; Best and Kellner, 1997). In all these ways, it is hard to set Icke's epistemological pluralism aside as a deviant and eccentric way of claiming knowledge, since it aligns well with many contemporary cultural trends that unsettle stable boundaries between different categories of knowledge.

5. Breaking Out of the Matrix: How People Explain Their Biographical Turn to Conspiracy Theories

5.1 Introduction

With the rapid popularization of conspiracy theories in the last twenty years, the question of why people today adhere so strongly to these alternative explanations of reality acquires considerable urgency. From all corners, academic scholars provide explanations of the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories. Broadly speaking, there are three overarching arguments embedded in their particular research traditions, but none pays much empirical and conceptual attention to those people who are actually engaging with conspiracy theories. For a first and rather dominant strand of research that draws on the early works of Popper (2013) and Hofstadter (1996), conspiracy theories are the delusional ideas of (more or less) paranoid minds (e.g. Barkun, 2006; Byford, 2011; Pipes, 1997; Robins and Post, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). As these scholars *a priori*

dismiss conspiracy theories as irrational and dangerous forms of thought, not much conceptual leeway is given to the motivations and reasons people might have for engaging with them. They are, bluntly put, mentally disturbed. Out of a dissatisfaction with these morally-tainted, psychopathological accounts, some scholars have sought to understand the popularity of conspiracy theories by relating them to the uncertainties of living in globalized, risk-saturated societies, and argue that "the idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort in an uncertain age" (Melley, 2000: 8, cf. Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2000; Marcus, 1999). These cultural explanations may be more compelling, but as engagements with conspiracy theories become some sort of coping mechanism with a monolithic *postmodern condition,* they similarly gloss over and exclude the diversity of motivations, concerns, and experiences that usually underpin those engagements. Finally, despite their valuable theoretical contribution, the more Foucauldian analyses of Birchall (2006) and Bratich (2008) leave almost no room for conspiracy theorists as living people, who instead become discursive positions in contemporary regimes of truth, they become "subjectivities" produced via discourses *on* conspiracy theories.

In light of this humanistic lacuna, I want to bring the conspiracy theorist back in as an embodied, reflexive, and social being by putting her culturally embedded life at center stage. Instead of understanding engagements with conspiracy theories as the result of some psychological or cultural condition, I believe it is more fruitful to take a biographical approach and study *how* people get involved with conspiracy theories (cf. Plummer, 2001; Roberts, 2002). People are not born conspiracy theorists, nor are they mere sufferers of our times. Conspiracy theories, I argue here, come to make sense over the course of people's lives; they come to make sense in light of people's *own* experiences of being in the world. But how it happens that people turn to conspiracy theories as explanations of reality that are more plausible and sensible than those offered by epistemic authorities is hitherto unexplored. Drawing on my field research, I study in this chapter the stories people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu shared, detailing how they got drawn to conspiracy theories. Instead

of a strict focus on objective truth and reality, I follow instead people's own (retrospective) understanding of how that process unfolded subjectively. My interest lies in how *they* explain their becoming a conspiracy theorist. I intend in this chapter to explain the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories from a sociological perspective that is radically centered on the viewpoints and experiences of the actual people who are turning to and perpetuating conspiracy theories.

5.2 Biographies in Context: On the Fundamental Connectedness of Individual Lives and Societal Developments

Biographical research is often said to bring to surface the perspectives of marginal groups who may have been excluded from the mainstream scientific canon (cf. Becker, 1963; Plummer, 2001, Roberts, 2002). This chapter can be seen in the same light, in that the ideas, experiences, and histories of conspiracy theorists are similarly hidden by their stigmatization as delusional and paranoid. While *giving voice* is a legitimate and laudable effort, there is more at stake in my study of lived experiences. Since the early days of the Chicago School, the sociological importance of researching "real living human beings," who interpret and give meaning to their lives, has been put forward against the dominance of abstract formal theory and bleak empiricism in the social sciences (e.g. Becker, 1970; Blumer, 1979; Denzin, 1989). Scholars in this biographical tradition argue that it is important to "study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual" (Denzin, 1997: xv) and to prioritize "human subjectivity and creativity—showing how individuals respond to social constraints and actively assemble social worlds" (Plummer, 2001: 14). (Auto)biographical accounts are thus not mere idiosyncratic life-stories, but sociologically relevant data in that they show "the interrelation between individual and society, and how broader perceptions and modes of thought are represented and monitored within the situation and outlook of individuals" (Roberts, 2002: 34;

Bertaux, 1981). This potential to grasp larger societal developments and cultural change from the perspective of the individual is precisely why Thomas and Znaniecki argued in their groundbreaking work that "life-histories constitute the perfect type of sociological material" (1958[1918-1920]: 1832-3).

Moreover, Becker reminds us, "the life history, more than any other technique except perhaps participant observation, can give meaning to the overworked notion of *process*" (1970: 69, original emphasis). An important analytical tool that came to be widely used in biographical studies of personal development—what Becker calls process, is the concept of a *career*. Introduced to sociological research during the early days of the Chicago School in the 1920's and 1930's (Barley, 1989: 41-65), the *deviant career* gained real sociological currency through the works of Goffman (1959), Becker (1963), and Matza (1969). This temporal-phase model consisting of (about) three moments along the trajectories of all kinds of avocations has since found its way into many studies on deviance, including studies of male and female prostitutes, mental patients, nudists, fencers, homosexuals, professional criminals, skid row alcoholics, gamblers, drug dealers, racists, tattoo collectors, world savors, hit men, and terrorists (Clinard and Meier, 2010: 47-74; Faupel, 2011: 195). A simple Google Scholar search shows that articles and books with titles such as "Becoming a [insert any avocational group imaginable]: A Deviant Career" are numerous. Given the deviant status of conspiracy theorists and the social stigma associated with that label, it would be logical to conceptualize the becoming of a conspiracy theorist as a *deviant career*.

However, two main problems with the analytical model of a deviant career lead me into a different direction. First, its strict formalism. The working assumption of this model is that people necessarily pass through identifiable stages in their deviant career, or else the model requires adaptation (Becker, 1963: 45). Most likely burdened by the institutional strains of his time, Becker tries "to arrive at a *general* statement of the sequence of changes in individual attitude and experience which *always* occurred [and argues that] the method requires that *every* case collected substantiates the hypothesis"

(Becker, 1963: 45, *my emphasis*). Although this universalist imperative has largely been abandoned by most qualitative researchers, there remains a strong tenet of sequentiality in the concept of a career. While there can be similarities in the experiences people have had in becoming *deviant* (in my case, how they have turned to conspiracy theories), but if such phases need to be applicable to all people involved as *necessary* stages, then it seems to me that biographical diversity is sacrificed for the sake of the model. More concretely, the life-stories of people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu are markedly different, and it is precisely those differences that add, I argue here, to the understanding of why so many people are attracted by conspiracy theories today (cf. Barkun, 2006; Knight, 2000; Ward and Voas, 2011). Moreover, too often the model is no longer a to help us understand the trajectories of *deviant* lives, but is instead a conceptual goal in itself, a popular and easy short-cut to conceptualize *process,* but with little reference to the complexity and contingency of actual biographical developments. I wonder therefore if the analytical model of a deviant career, with its strong focus on temporal *communalities*, is really helpful in the understanding of how and why people move away from the mainstream and into the world of conspiracy theories.

A more important impediment to such an understanding is the fact that such analytical models, with their micro-sociological focus, ignore and obscure the historical periods in which people live and the attendant cultural frameworks of meaning of those points in time. Like Becker in his study of the marijuana user, scholars in the symbolic interactionist tradition generally focus on the minute details of the interacting individuals who drift into deviancy, but leave aside the larger cultural contexts that give these trajectories shape and meaning. They show (often quite brilliantly) how individuals start performing deviant acts, how they then are treated by others, and finally, how they manage to live with that stigma, but such accounts give little attention to the cultural developments along which those acts come to be seen as deviant. Most importantly, they cannot explain *why* these changes occur. If we are to sociologically understand how and why so many people turn to conspiracy theories now, we cannot focus on the micro-sociological level of the lives of

these individuals only. To do so would fail to notice how such biographical trajectories are intimately tied in to larger cultural developments, encompassing changing perceptions of truth, reality, power, inequality, and so on. To an extent, I follow C. Wright Mills argument that "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (2000: 3). The *deviant career* of a 1960s conspiracy theorist is simply not the same as the one living in the early 2000s, and it is precisely those differences that give insight into the plurality of reasons that people turn to conspiracy theories. Put differently, when biographical developments are seen in isolation from the larger contexts of which they are inextricably part, we simply miss the bigger picture. A contextualized approach is called for.

In the following analysis, I will therefore delve into the lives of the people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu with a focus on instances in which where their "private troubles" meet the "public issues" of Western societies (Mills, 2000: 8). My research question is simple: how do these people explain their involvement with conspiracy theories? I am interested in the moments in life they assign as significant and meaningful to this process. What are the experiences and/or events that pushed them away from the mainstream, and how do they frame these? I will show that my respondents draw, on the one hand, from a culturally-shared narrative of *awakening* in order to explain their becoming a conspiracy theorist (cf. DeGloma, 2010), but I argue that this uniform template masks the plurality of culturally embedded life-experiences. If we take a closer look at the life-stories people tell, then it becomes obvious that their private experiences are empirical exemplars of greater cultural changes, and it is to these that I will turn thereafter. It is my argument here that the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories is best explained by the societal developments that are tangible in people's personal biographies. Some have argued for the historical *continuity* of conspiracy theories, both in their contents and attraction (e.g. Pipes, 1997; Byford, 2011), but I show in this chapter how the appeal of conspiracy theories is historically and culturally situated.

5.3 Beyond the Social Logic of Awakenings: Turning to the Richness of Life-Stories

The world of conspiracy theories often feels like a parallel universe hidden from the public. Once you go down that road, or *down the rabbit hole*, as conspiracy theorists often say, everything looks different and nothing stays the same. "It's like taking the red or the blue pill, *The Matrix*, you know. I took the red pill. With the red pill you see things how they *really* are. With the blue pill everything stays the same. That's how it feels" (Neil, 58). It may be no surprise that this particular Hollywood blockbuster is an appealing and useful reference in the conspiracy milieu. *The Matrix*, after all, is about the fact that we, humans, unknowingly exist in a fully-immersive, simulated reality, and it captures for many people in this milieu their biographical turn to conspiracy theories and helps them to make sense of their current situation. Michael (23) tells me that he likes *The Matrix* because "it gives such a good illustration of the world we are living in… you see so much… 'do you take the blue or the red pill?' [he winks]." The central protagonist, Neo, is the idealized *awakened* figure who takes the red pill to confront the [conspiratorial] truth. "I am thankful I have seen the light," Michael says in line, "that I *know* now. Otherwise I would have still lived in the Matrix. Many people would prefer to stay in the Matrix, prefer to be a slave and be 'happy.' Well, I prefer to be maybe less 'happy' but at least more aware, aware of the things happening around you."

Indeed, it is common in the conspiracy milieu to speak about this process of becoming a conspiracy theorist through a discourse of "waking up." One of the major Dutch conspiracy websites is called "wijwordenwakker" (we are awakening), and the website of one of my respondents is known by the name "slaaptgijnog" (are you still asleep?).[261] Many more articles on various Dutch conspiracy websites use this metaphor in a variety of ways,[262] and it frequently appears in the comments section.[263] The narrative of awakening is so widespread that even critics use it: "conspiracy theorists are convinced to be serving the good by 'waking people up!'"[264] My interviewees use that

discourse as well. They speak in general terms about "the process of waking up" (George, 38), but also in particular, how they themselves "woke up one day" (Julie, 31) or were not "awake enough back then" (Nicole, 63). Some of them actively "want to wake people up" (John, 34), whereas others "expect that the masses will wake up soon" (Pauline, 67). Some see this process already happening, "people are slowly starting to wake up" (Michael, 23). In my research, the rhetoric of waking up consistently appears in each conspiracy theorist's life story.

But what exactly do they mean by *waking up*? Liam (67) explains:

> *This is essential, and I also think it is representative for most people. Something happens with you that you could describe as waking up. That means to open your eyes and really see what is going on. Because before you might have been looking, but you couldn't see anything. Because you had the wrong ideas. Ideas wrapped as truth, but which are lies instead. And they keep you oriented towards the wrong direction. But yeah, first something must happen… But you don't decide it, it happens to you… and I can't describe it better as "waking up."*

Norman Denzin describes these moments of truth as "epiphanies," in that "they alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life" (1989: 70). Dwight (25) describes this happening "like a revelation. What I experience in my own life. To really see things. As if your purview expands. That's such a moment. Extra food for me. As if shutters open in my head. Clear information with which you can work." Waking up is a life-changing event, or so it seems.

Encapsulated in the metaphor of awakening is the *radical* moment of truth and the consequential sharp separation of a life before and after (cf. DeGloma, 2010: 521). And indeed, as these quotations show, *before* encountering conspiracy theories all is dark, false, and wrong; while *after* everything appears clear, right, and true. But despite this seemingly radical break implied in the concept of waking up, many of my respondents see such awakening as more of a gradual development. Yes, Julie (31) says, "it often goes hand in hand

with certain events: pregnancies, deaths. [But] it really is a process. You wake up one day, and then you head into food, but then you start deepening your knowledge vaccinations, and then you see there is more and more to start thinking about." George (38) speaks in a similar way about his awakening:

> *I gradually woke up, so to say, and then I found out that life can be very different, actually. It goes step by step, how do I explain it best? It is very difficult to pinpoint one thing as the cause. More and more pennies just start to drop as you look further, and that's why this whole waking up process is not something that happens at once. Change is… all little changes. That's the process of waking up.*

Pauline (67) frames this gradual process in terms of personal development:

> *I read a lot, I read the pros, I read the cons. And then I turn to myself, what's right to my feeling, what resonates with me? You just develop a feeling inside yourself for what's right and it's just very beautiful if you look at it that way. That we are all in this state of total sleep in which we only survive, but that we as human beings develop ourselves and through that development we wake up.*

Awakening narratives are not particular to conspiracy theorists, but are quite prevalent in other cultural milieus as well. Thomas DeGloma discusses and compares the awakening accounts of many different ethnic, religious, political, psychological, and sexual groups, and argues that "the root awakening story formula remains fundamentally the same" (2010: 522). Leaving the similarity of these accounts aside, a more important argument DeGloma raises is the social role of such narratives. He contends that "awakening narratives provide story templates and cultural tools that individuals use to construct their own personal awakenings accounts" (2010: 522). In other words, what we think of as individual stories of personal discovery contain a social logic and perform cultural work. It is therefore no coincidence that so many of my respondents speak of becoming a conspiracy theorist in terms of an awakening. Their individual stories are institutionalized ways of accounting for that transition from an unknowing citizen to a conspiracy theorist. The

discourse of *waking up* is learned and shared in the conspiracy milieu and is constitutive of a shared sense of community. But beyond that communal narrative lies a world of experiences that brings us closer to an empirically-rich understanding of the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories. People in the conspiracy milieu may have all been *waking up* at some point, but how they got there is complex and rich in historical detail. It is to these intersections of biography, history, and society that I now turn.

5.4.1 Secularization: Looking for Meaning and Purpose in a Disenchanted World

One of the most drastic changes Western societies have undergone is the massive turn away from institutionalized religion since the 1960s. When talking about how conspiracy theories started to play a role in their own lives, those I interviewed often spoke of a discomfort with the Christian church and an emerging disbelief in its teachings. Steven, a 28 year old employee of a green energy supplier, is raised as a Catholic, he told me that was baptized and that he prayed regularly, but "never saw the use of it. Yeah, the texts, beautiful texts, of course. But asking for forgiveness? I was so young, I could barely imagine why? I mean, I did nothing wrong, so why should I ask for mercy?" Many others, like Julie (31), spoke with similar dissent about such ideas: "I do believe that there must be a god or something, but I don't believe in the rules and that you go to hell, and all those other things based on fear and misery. I don't believe that God is vengeful. I don't believe that I will be punished later." Pauline (67) agreed: "I mean, if we talk about love, we're not talking about a vengeful god, are we? I always found that very strange." Robert (43) has a typical story:

> *I come from a religious background, Reformed Church, my mother is absolutely religious. I also went to a religious school, every day started with a prayer, every week I had to learn a psalm. I also had to go to church, but it never felt right, I could never explain it to myself until I knew what it was. It was just hypocrite, a god cannot judge. All the stories I learned in school about the crusades and the*

> *heathens, and the 'we' are good and 'they' are wrong. That's just not right. A god cannot judge, for god everybody is equal. Later, of course, I discovered that there is a whole different story behind it.*

The strict religious guidelines, the fear, shame, and guilt of Christian traditions, and the Abrahamic idea of a vengeful god were all off-putting elements to most interviewed respondents.

But there is another point, a "whole different story," as Robert put it, as to why this discomfort with religion led people into the world of conspiracy theories. Behind the beautiful façade of Christianity, respondents told me, the Church exists as a powerful political institution, serving its own interests and indoctrinating people into servitude. They told me how they started to question religion and in their search came to realize that the stories they are told radically differ from their historical origins. To continue with Robert:

> *I came across the Nag Hammadi writings years ago, in which parts of the original biblical scriptures, of the apostles are found. And it contains a whole other meaning than what the bible as an instrument of power has. Then I started to find out what was wrong. Then everything fell in place, this made sense to me, this is right, then I could finally identify what I always felt: the hypocrisy, the suppression of people, the origins of the Vatican, all the things I learned in schools, the indulgence letters, that you can buy off your sins, the pope. It's all just politics.*

Pauline (67) spoke in a similar vein about Christian teachings as "lies, all lies… look at the dead sea scrolls, there is a lot on script on how it truly was back then, but that has obviously been removed or stored somewhere away from us. Luckily the pressure to disclose is rising, partly because of the internet." She understands the powerful men in the history of the Catholic Church as having adapted and amended the teachings in ways that expulsed certain spiritual concepts and marginalized women:

> *"so then they decide at the Council of Nicea in the year 350 A.D. that reincarnation should be banned, and women, oh, no, women, no that's too much, let's not do that, and Maria Magdalena, oh well,*

> *let's make a whore out of her. That's being taught to our children, and so humanity keeps lingering in lies. Well, if you wanna talk about a conspiracy theory, this is something, huh…? So there it starts, that you start seeing things more sharply, that things don't make sense. My god, they made a mess, all religions make a mess. Because it's not about religion, it's about egos. It's about time the goddesses come to power!*

Besides such archeological findings of old biblical scriptures, other (scholarly) sources on themes of lost or manipulated histories prove equally important. Neil, a 58 year old real estate project manager, told me about a priest he met some years ago through work, to whom he

> *couldn't resist asking about the Da Vinci Code. 'Are those stories really true about those treasuries in the Church of Rome?' He stands up and says 'you don't wanna know what art treasures are there, from all countries of the world, you don't wanna know how much.' Well, I am not saying the Da Vinci Code is true, but that the power of the Church is immense, and they still exercise a lot of influence, I do believe.*

Liam (67) described a similar experience based on such a book:

> *I was raised very conservatively and very catholically. Every weekend I went to church, was in the board of local church and part of the community. But about fifteen years ago I started questioning Jesus Christ, who is our spiritual leader, our example. But what do actually we know about him? What is told to us? I started looking for information and came across books, for example, Holy Blood and Holy Grail. Well, that said it all, the Knights Templars and other secret societies. Then occurred the drama for the first time, of coming to realize that the truth you once held dear is not right, absolutely not right even. Everything is totally different, opposite even, from what we think it is. Then falls the first domino piece. It could have been a different subject, doesn't really matter, I think, but by looking for truth in one area, suddenly you enter a parallel universe: the world of seekers, of the independent critical thinkers.*

The discomfort these people share centers on the hypocrisy of the Christian Church, especially considering that its history is anything but peaceful and loving. Instead, it is defamed by periods of corruption, manipulation, political games, deceit, and a hunger for power. As the abovementioned quotes show, this realization led people not only to turn away from institutionalized religion, but also brought them to see plots and intrigues in other domains of life, or at the least, it bolstered their plausibility.

This negative attitude towards institutionalized religion and the societal process of secularization of which it is part did not, however, change people's need for an explanation of the origin of life and spirit. Many in the conspiracy milieu search for a spiritual understanding of their lives on earth that goes beyond the material here-and-now. Pauline (67) described this searching impetus explicitly:

> *I was about eighteen, nineteen, that I thought 'this can't be it, this can't be all… it's all way too simple, the stories in the bible and so'… and I had a friend who put me on that track, knew where to go and which bookstores to find… and then I entered a whole new world. Donald Walsh, Zecharia Sitchin, Drunvalo Melchizedek, yeah, those were the sixties and the seventies. I was reading and thinking 'yes, this is it! This is what I have been looking for, this feels right […] I always call it 'food for the soul', I need that. If I don't get my soul food I become deeply unhappy, I ask myself then what is life all about again? I am someone looking for the big lines, and there are always big lines, but where we are here, in the 3D world, it's all small and cramped. I just have this feeling in my body that I want to break free, because we are squeezed in this little body, but in the end, we are all light beings. So to break out of it I try to look for the big lines, because I know there is much more, and that makes me really happy. I especially need in times of trouble, that I think I need my soul food to get back in balance.*

She refers here to books that explore the mysteries of nature, life and divinity that are hugely popular in and characteristic of the "cultic

milieu" (Campbell, 2002) or the "New Age Movement" (Heelas, 1996).

Dissatisfied with the traditional religious authorities, many people look for alternatives, and find an entire industry of post-Christian spirituality (cf. Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Campbell, 2007). Although true for Pauline, these works, which often mix scientific knowledge with spiritual belief, or else feature alternative histories of the earth in which extraterrestrial events play a significant role, are generally rejected by the scientific community as pseudoscience. They are nevertheless immensely popular within and beyond the conspiracy milieu. Lucy, a 54-year-old holistic psychotherapist, explained how she got involved with conspiracy theories via New Age writings following the death of a loved one:

> *[T]hat process to look further started for me when my partner passed away in 1994. When I thought, 'what in God's name is this good for?' That got me thinking, 'maybe I should look at life differently, experience things differently'. I started reading books, many books. Somebody gave me The Celestine Prophecy, that was like, 'wow, this is right, this is how it is!' So from then on, such information came to me. How the universe is built and organized, and how we populate Earth as some kind of society of pawns. I read many spiritual books. One thing led to another. Reading about how the earth is governed and controlled, and from which energies these things are happening. I've read Zecharia Sitchin, then also thought, 'man, this is right'. And years later, I came across the Pleiadian Scriptures. Well, these all give you that helicopter view, so to say.*

For many people I spoke to, such books proved meaningful in times of trouble and distress. Like religion once did, these new forms of spirituality provide, in many ways, meaning to existence, providing answers about the nature of life, death, and suffering. They also provide a greater story for human existence on Earth, offering a satisfying, birds-eye view of life itself.

> *Originating from the countercultural movement of the sixties, such works are attractive to younger generations as well. Dwight (25) who was raised Christian is a typical example:*

> *I developed muscle injuries from football, but instead of only going to physiotherapy, I also looked into spiritual matters. I read a book by Deepak Chopra, The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success, and was busy with yoga, breathing exercises, combining the physical with spiritual. It brought me further. I was also busy reading societal stuff, where things go wrong, health care, schooling, these sort of things, so you start to broaden your knowledge. I don't shut myself off from these matters. I am always interested in the question 'why would that be the case', that you get a discussion. Because religions are stories created many, many years ago. They are stories to convince you of the only truth. But then there are multiple religions and then you see that that same story exists in many other religions too. So better delve into those, than just the bible. It felt like a revelation.*

As Dwight's excerpt shows, the cultural shift away from institutionalized religion not only gives way to new forms of spirituality, but makes people aware of the existence of multiple (religious) truths. In some cases, people find a more abstract spiritual truth to be present in these different religions. George (38) similarly spoke of the restrictiveness of having only one truth, of believing in one religion only, when he told a story about attending the wedding of Christian friends:

> *It was all very beautiful, we prayed together for the food, we praised the Lord, and out of respect I participated, but it's not my thing. Then comes this guy asking me to convert. So I say, "well, no, thanks." "Do you realize you are restricting yourself enormously now," he says to me. "Well," I say, "I think I have a pretty decent life." "Yes," he replies, "but God's truth is the only truth." I say to him, "well don't you think you are restricting yourself now? Because you only have one truth and I have many!" You know, I believe Buddhists are just as right as Christians. I look at the main thread in it all. If you put all religions over each other you will see that they overlap for seventy to ninety percent. But because we as humans like to focus on differences and even fight wars over them, we will never come together.*

Respondents argue how institutionalized religion enforces an outdated restrictiveness as it proclaims to hold in its hands *the one and only truth*. Such a limited understanding of religiosity cannot count on much support in the conspiracy milieu.

Our age is a secular one (Taylor, 2007). Ever since Marx and Weber, sociologists have argued that religious beliefs, practices, and institutions would lose cultural authority and social significance in proportion to the rise of modern science and the accompanying rationalization of society. This historical transformation of Western societies called secularization only accelerated in the past fifty years. Propelled by the countercultural revolution of the 1960s (cf. Roszak, 1995), there has been a widespread societal turn away from organized religion and a diminishing societal position of the clergy (e.g. Bruce, 2002; Casanova, 1994; Norris and Inglehart, 2002; Wilson, 1976). Although the secularization thesis has been subjected to diverse and well-grounded critiques (cf. Asad, 2003; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Taylor, 2007), fact remains that traditional religious institutions have lost much of their moral, political, and epistemic authority in most Western societies. But this does not mean that people in the West no longer need large-scale frameworks of meaning and purpose that transcend the material present. Modernization may have disenchanted the world, but it did not eradicate a *will to believe*. Indeed, the despairing feeling of living in a world without any existential meaning that Peter Berger et al. describe as "a metaphysical loss of 'home'" (1973: 82) only spurred new forms of religion, spirituality, and re-enchantment in Western societies (cf. Aupers and Houtman, 2010; Heelas, 1996; Lyon, 2000; Possamai, 2005).

This fact is apparent in the conspiracy milieu as well. The life-stories of the people I interviewed show how a disillusionment with the Church may have pushed people away from Christianity and into the world of conspiracy theories, but this did not lead to an altogether retreat from the spiritual world. In fact, part of the appeal of contemporary conspiracy theories lies precisely in their fusion of spiritual narratives and the more mundane assertions of intrigue and deceit by global power elites, a phenomenon called "conspirituality"

(Ward and Voas, 2011). Like Icke's superconspiracy, these people talk about works that advance alternative origin stories which situate daily life (and humankind more generally) within larger narratives of supernatural existence and connect in many ways the ordinary everyday experiences with mystical, esoteric, and occult understandings of reality. Moreover, as these respondents show, one religious master narrative is no longer attractive in a world where multiple spiritual traditions are on the market. Instead, people feel free and content to pick and choose the thought and practices that resonate with them, and create in this way new, pastiche forms of religion and spirituality (cf. Flory and Miller, 2000; Lyon, 2000; Possamai, 2005). A first explanation for the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories is that its occult, mystical, and spiritual components provide for many people in need of existential meaning and purpose in a disenchanted world.

5.4.2 Mediatization: Grappling with Fact and Fiction in a Mediatized World

With the proliferation of mass media, we are bombarded today with all kinds of messages (texts, photos, videos) about current affairs through various mediums (television, internet, smartphones). This has made, on the one hand, an *objectification of reality* possible, in the sense that (news) coverage of more or less distant places increases the awareness of what is going on in the world. But the reliance on mass media also engenders feelings of uncertainty, suspicion, and doubt since it appears easy to mold and manipulate (collective) perceptions. In chapter three I discussed the fact that conspiracy theory websites pay ample attention to the powers of the mass media as marvelous instruments of mass manipulation. These articles incorporate and cite the works of early mass-opinion scholars like Walter Lippmann, Harold Lasswell, and Edward Bernays to support their argument. The manipulative powers of the mass-media also appear in the stories people told me of how they turned to conspiracy theories. Neil (58), for example, took me back thirty years to when he started to doubt what the mass-media reports:

> *Or the story why they invaded Iraq [first time, 1991]. Do you remember that? Well, US public opinion was against it. So there was this story that the Iraqi army was stealing incubators from hospitals in Kuwait and left the babies to die. I saw a documentary about that. How they showed this woman, a girl, and "oh my child" and so on. But what really happened? The Kuwaiti government had hired an American PR firm to convince the public that they needed American support. So they made this documentary, and reports of what happened, because public opinion needed to be turned. So they pretended that Iraqi military actually stole incubators from Kuwaiti hospitals. But it was all manufactured in the US. The girl testifying turned out to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador in the US, and other people working at the Kuwaiti embassy. So that incubator media campaign was wonderfully done, suddenly there was consent for the invasion. So yeah, then you start to wonder.*

The same sort of stories about the possibilities of manipulation and the circulation of certain media (photos, videos, testimonies) to influence people's minds and hearts came up when respondents spoke about contemporary geopolitical matters. Martin (30) said, for example:

> *[S]o they say on television that Osama Bin Laden is behind it [9/11]. They have a video of Osama admitting that he did it. Well, if you have a bit of good sight, you can see that that guy is not Osama Bin Laden. He doesn't even look like him, well, yeah, a little, he has a beard and a turban, but that's it. Check it out! And then there are these documents from 1999 Or 2000 that he is in the hospital for kidney dialysis. How can you be an effective terrorist leader when you have kidney failures? Or there is this interview in 2003 or 2004 with a minister or something and then something is said about the murderer of Osama Bin Laden. She's found dead months after that. I think she spoke the truth. That Bin Laden is dead for a long time, that he wasn't killed just years ago. A strange story anyway. And when they "really" kill him, they throw him in the sea. Following Islamic tradition. Yeah right. Even more crazy. So yeah, then you start looking for all kinds of on YouTube…*

As Martin's quotation indicates, many of my respondents seriously doubted what the mass media reports, especially since they are increasingly owned by a handful of international media conglomerates. Since the vast majority of media outlets are in the hands of a few powerful groups, my respondents rhetorically ask, what can we expect from the information they give us? Not something that goes against their interests, is the unequivocal answer. This consolidation of media-ownership is not just an ideological issue, but plays out in the everyday life of people. Howie (65), for example, told me how he used to watch the evening news from different countries: "in the early nineties you would still have different takes on world events broadcasted in the evening news in France, Germany or here. That window to the world would be radically different in each country. Nowadays we all get the same video on our evening news due to the increasing internationalization of media corporations and press agencies. It's the same piece of film with that same crying person." The flipside, Howie acknowledged, is that "news broadcasts don't need big capital anymore. Nowadays, anyone can broadcast their news from a simple studio on the internet."

The mass media may be an effective tool of the elite to manipulate the public, my respondents argue, but the internet has radically changed their possibilities to do so: what was hidden can now be revealed and what was staged can be unmasked. Lauren (37) told me that "watching videos on the internet opened my mind. Since then I am awake. Because that's the reality you don't get to see. And then you find out why we see reality so differently, why there is a reality aside from the one they show us. It's all manipulated. I discovered how the owners of news agencies have interests in portraying the news in certain ways, so that people here only see this or that." But these powerful media corporations cannot easily control what is circulated on the internet, so these respondents actively browse the internet for alternative insights. Michael (23) told me how a friend from university who is "really illuminated, who really knows what's going on in the world" told him about *chemtrails*: "at first I said, 'you're crazy, that can never be true'. But then I started looking on the internet and you see all these movie clips of pilots who fly above

such an airplane and then you see the spray going on and off. Or you see other photos that have been leaked, photos of the inside of such a plane, for example." The internet is a game-changer, respondents hold. Dwight (25), told me how it all started for him by "watching these documentaries on YouTube. *Zeitgeist* was a true revelation. Man, you can find so much information on the internet. We simply become more aware. And that's because of the internet. That's why I think they want to gain control over the internet. Because I know for sure, without the internet I would have not had all this information."

Photos, videos and films circulating on the internet may play an important role in offering *proof* in opposition to the *propaganda* of the mainstream media, but just like those images and videos shown in their newspapers and television broadcasts, what is shared on the internet can just as well be manipulated, respondents acknowledge. Moreover, the same digital technologies also make it easier to fabricate images, so photos, films and videos from whichever source cannot simply be taken at face value. Neil (58), for example, tells me of his "neighbor [who] makes films for advertising agencies, and he consistently tells me: 'don't trust any video or film anymore, because we can do everything. You don't know what you're really looking at. You can't trust images anymore.' So these comments stick, you know." Faced with the reality that the information we are presented can be distorted, manufactured or in any other way manipulated, some of these people actively started examining film and videos in order to come closer to the truth. "Looking back," Michael said, "it all started with 9/11, that I thought this can't be true." It was years later that he got really into researching the topic,

> *let's say, five years later, I started learning more about false flag attacks… I started analyzing those images again, and again… videos from YouTube… I had never done that before, I mean all you do is watch television and then you hear from a reporter what you need to think. Well now that's different and because of my technical background I knew right away, this is not possible… it was physically impossible. I am also good myself in Photoshop, so I can*

> *see very well when something is Photoshopped and when not, when it's real or not.*

Michael may be quite confident about his ability to separate truth from falsity, but others in the conspiracy milieu acknowledge the difficulties in ascertaining the truthfulness of news images and videos. When I asked them how they decide what images or videos are real and which not, they gave me vague and ambiguous answers, such as "yeah, that is a tricky thing" (Lauren), or "you cannot really tell, it is so difficult" (Neil). Most people that I interviewed accepted that it was not easy to separate fact from fiction in our heavily mediatized world, but they were certain on the point that any image can be the result of digital manipulation.

The technological advancements that have made mass media communications possible have radically changed the way we experience and think of reality. Besides the ordinary, everyday life in the physical world, an additional reality has come into being. What started with images on print or screen developed into immersive virtual reality universes that may soon be indistinguishable from everyday reality. This "mediatization of our culture and society" (Hjarvard, 2013) unsettles common sense distinctions between fact and fiction and alters perceptions of what constitutes reality. As these conspiracy theorists told me in interviews, it is increasingly difficult to discern real from staged or manipulated depictions of the world. The two often collapse or flip sides. Jean Baudrillard has extensively written about the pervasiveness of media forms (symbols, signs, and sounds) in post-World War Western cultures. Such simulations and simulacra of reality are so ubiquitous that they have become more real than the world they used to represent; they have become hyperrealities (Baudrillard, 1994[1981]). Just like Neil, who cited the 1991 invasion of Iraq as a significant moment in his biographical move towards conspiracy theories because it showed the frailty of our reliance on media to access reality, so too did Baudrillard write of the war "that didn't take place" as a turning point in the role that media representations have in shaping perceptions of reality (1995[1991]).

For many people today, and especially for those in the conspiracy milieu, reality is no longer what it seems. The mediatized representations we take as real are all too easily manipulated, my respondents argue, leaving us vulnerable to the machinations of the powerful. Having experienced the run-up to the illegitimate wars in the Middle East, they argue that orchestrations of media representations are firmly embedded in politics, deployed by those in power in order to "manufacture consent" (Herman and Chomsky, 2008). Following Baudrillard, the reality that the mass media presents is not just a distorted representation of the real, but often has no reference to any empirical truth. The coverage of the Bush wars of 1991 and 2003 testifies to this; after all, where exactly are Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction but in the representations of the mass media? My respondents in the conspiracy milieu seem keenly aware of the dissolution of the real in our mediatized age, but find no easy way out of this politicized house of mirrors. The one thing they do know is that nothing can be trusted at face value anymore.

5.4.3 Democratization: Education and the Cultivation of a Critical Citizenry

A key societal aspect of modernity's overarching Enlightenment project is the emancipation of the masses (cf. Israel, 2006; Bauman, 1987). After the expansion of political rights and equality before the law to all adult segments of society, the democratization of Western societies took shape by the massive education of its citizens (cf. Dewey, 2004[1916]; Halsey, et al., 1996). With the rise of European welfare states came an expansive educational system that cultivated a critical, literate, and empowered citizenry. This historical development of the democratization of knowledge is clearly visible in the life-stories of my respondents, and many of them stress the role of their formal education in their turn to conspiracy theories.

Michael (23), for example, made numerous such references to his educational background when he explained to me why he is attracted to conspiracy theories. When we spoke about chemtrails, Michael acknowledged that it "does sound absurd. A few years ago, I

would have laughed at you, but those chemtrails are really true. Because I studied mechanical engineering and chemical technology, I know all about the relation between pressure, temperature and the gas and liquidity phases of matter." In technical language he explained to me how it is "physically and chemically impossible that a contrail stays up there for such a long time." Michael made other references to his educational background when we spoke of global warming: "that's one big hoax. In my current study, I have courses in which I have to do statistical tests now and I notice now how easy it is to mold and to manipulate the data in your own advantage. And all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place now. It's just so easy to cheat… to commit fraud." These allusions to knowledge gained from education surfaced as well when we spoke about media and the "culture industry." He told me that "in movies and cartoons that alleged elite, the Illuminati, continuously give hints, subliminal messages, to let people get used to… to prepare them unconsciously for what is coming, so they wouldn't be shocked… Because I have had marketing and psychology courses, I learned about how they can insert for a flash second, an image, a logo, a brand, so that people don't observe it consciously, but they do unconsciously!" The theories about subliminal messaging and psychological manipulation that he learned during his academic studies clearly add to the plausibility of such conspiracy theories. Throughout his studies, Michael has learned to adopt a *critical gaze* which he now employs to uncover the hidden realities that remain unseen to those without such an education.

Other interviewees speak of the role of education in their turn to conspiracy theories as it cultivated a *reflexive habitus*. William (25) told me that he started his conspiracy website after word came out that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq:

> *That triggered me, like, seriously, we are at war and the reason we are at war turns out to be false? So I got this feeling like I need to do something. To let people think about it. Yeah, it's a bit of a heavy title, "seekthetruth," but that was the purpose, to think about the truth. Not that I believe there is one truth, but to go into discussion about it. 'How do you see it? And why? And what are your arguments?' To incite others and myself to think about that, to ask*

> *questions. Look, in the end, that's why I went to study philosophy. So maybe that's why I chose that title, I wanted it to keep it as open as possible, to advance it as "critically looking for answers," to think about it, and not to accept it uncritically. Not to accept it because it comes from established authorities, and neither because it is the alternative theory. In both cases I say: don't just assume things, but try to form an opinion yourself! In the end, I studied philosophy because I am someone who appreciates looking at things from different perspectives. To turn the tables, so to say, and to learn from that. That's what I love about philosophy. That's what I got out of this website too. I got to learn so many different perspectives on societal issues from these people. And I just think that is amazing, to hear how other people think about: whether that is from a different culture, or a different ideological or political standpoint. That's in short why I started that website, yeah.*

William, in other words, sought to do in real life what he learned to do for his studies, that is, to "look at things from different perspectives" and to learn from it. He even has a societal objective for the reflexive habitus that he cultivated through his education: to bring people to understand each other's perspective. Such a relativist standpoint stands in stark contrast to those who see hidden truths with their critical gaze, like Michael, but both speak about their education as formative in their turn to conspiracy theories.

The same can be said about Lucy (54). Connecting the dots may be a reason why academics discard conspiracy theories (e.g. Barkun, 2006; Byford, 2011; Hofstadter, 1996; Keeley, 1999, Popper, 2013), but when this mental coach told me about her own attraction to conspiracy theories, she brings me back to her student days when she learned to "making connections across different terrains":

> *[D]uring my studies thirty years ago, I was a big admirer of Michel Foucault, the French philosopher. Extraordinary what that man did. He opened my eyes as to how to look at things. What did he do? He did transversal research. At a certain historical moment, what happens economically, what happens socially, what happens*

> *technologically? And then look at how these influence each other and what the lines of power and influence are. Beautiful! Great work! It changed the way I looked at the world, so ingenious. I thought, "yeah, yeah, this is what I think, this makes sense to me, to look in that way." Because it yields revelations. […] I just love Foucault's approach, it's captivating. So sad he died that young. What a phenomenon he was, of standing outside the box, of really breaking through. Just by looking, by really daring to look, he could see more […] Foucault never judged. He just showed: "you see what's happening." He didn't say what was best or not, just described what happened, how the whole thing develops."*

Lucy continued to speak in much detail about Foucauldian mechanisms when explaining her ideas about health care, the control state, surveillance, political institutions, and numerous other topics. In each instance, she put the idea of making "transversal" connections into practice, and thereby showing how her education strongly influenced the way she looks at the world today.

This cultivation of an educated and critical citizenry obviously reverberates in the everyday interactions within school and university classrooms, and respondents often speak of such moments where knowledge claims are openly critiqued and debated. Steven (28), for example, told me of his efforts to discuss his ideas in class, and although they were not always appreciated, he felt free to ask fundamental questions about what is taught and to have an open discussion based on the knowledge he sees as more truthful, e.g. conspiracy theories. He explains:

> *[D]uring my studies, commercial economics, three years ago, I wanted to find out more and ask questions. I noticed that I had certain information that goes against their theories. And the marketing teacher just says that free markets create equilibria and balance. Well, don't tell me that as a teacher. Then I think, "what do you want to teach me?" I wanted to go in discussion about that, but in class there's not really time for that, which I regret, so I discussed a bit in the hallway with my fellow students, but that's also difficult. All too easily you get the label of "hey, that's a conspiracy*

> *theory" attached, you know?…Once I gave a short presentation on money, and how it worked, in some economics class. I wanted to explain shortly how the banking system works. Central banks, private banks, and yes, I noticed the teacher was impressed. It was, after all, quite new information. She and the classmates thought it was interesting.*

Everyday situations, like this class in economics, become the sites where opposed worldviews come together and battles for epistemic authority are fought.

The mass education of citizens is commonly seen as imperative to the health of democratic societies as it brings forth a community of critical thinkers in search for
truth and justice (cf. Dewey, 2004; Halsey et al., 1996; Nussbaum, 1997). Those active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu often draw on the knowledge they acquired in their education when they criticize mainstream institutions and explain the plausibility of conspiracy theories. The well-developed and accessible educational systems of Western European welfare states have indeed cultivated a critical and reflexive habitus which then remains a fundamental trait of one's relation to the world. We are trained to critically assess the integrity and truthfulness of all knowledge claims and their bearers. As we will see in chapter seven, the challenge conspiracy theorists pose to the epistemic authority of science is informed by the democratization of knowledge. More generally put, it is fair to say that *expertise* has, as a consequence, become problematic in societies made up of well-educated and critical citizens. People generally know more about topics that were once the exclusive domain of a few experts. Professionals of all kinds, including teachers, doctors, scientists, are confronted with an ever-more demanding, knowledgeable, and critical populace who challenge their authority in myriad ways (cf. Epstein, 1996; Martin, 2008; De Swaan, 2009). The contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories, I argue here, fits into this historical development.

5.4.4 Globalization: Experiencing Truth and Reality in a Shrinking World

The world we live in today has never been so small. Tropical fruits are shipped to supermarkets in a matter of days, students spend semesters at universities on all continents, South American *telenovelas* are broadcasted in the West for our pleasure, Chinese consumers buy *safe* baby milk from the West via the internet, Bengali workers are dispatched to the Gulf, and any *Average Joe* flies with his family to exotic beach locations for a winter break. Indeed, the ties that bind us today span the globe, which has become a true *global village*. I argue here that the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories cannot be seen separately from these historical developments. My respondents emphasize in many ways the ways that globalization plays an important role in people's turn to conspiracy theories.

The possibility to travel and see different parts of the world, and how such experiences changed the way respondents looked at the world, was often brought up in the conversations I had. Robert (43), for example, notes that the international travels during his early adulthood were an important influence on his later interests:

> *I was nineteen, twenty, when I first started traveling, I had seen enough of school, and started working for a company that was doing international business. They sent me to East Germany right after the wall was torn down, and not very long after that to Russia, and you know, that was just scary, because it still was the big red danger you know, people were telling me like "wow, that's super dangerous, what are you going to do there?" But when I came there, it was all like jeez. Just friendly people over here, you know, people who have feelings of love and emotions and so on, so I had a great time over there. And then I really started travelling, I went to South America, different African countries and China, well, everywhere I came, I saw it was not like what I had been told. It's just not true what's being told here about there, and vice versa, it's just all not true. An image is created of there, like with the Cold War, the 'us and them' rhetoric, the indoctrination of people by the mainstream media, by television. So yeah, you can say it really started with the travelling yeah, that*

> *I saw that the information we get is not true. That has been the biggest eye-opener yeah, that I started searching.*

The experiences Robert had when travelling through distant countries, seeing for himself what these places look like, have to be situated in a time when the media landscape was more uniform and dominated by television. Yet his story also shows how the contemporary ease of worldwide travel enables people to see for themselves that the world may be quite different from the one presented in Western media. Moreover, they see that the world looks different from different places. Howie (65), to give another example, explained such perspectivism:

> *I lived for about twenty years in France. As a result, I saw the world from a different point of view. What for others just remained normal and the way things are, I had to question. Because nothing really is "normal" anymore once you settle abroad. Then everything that was once normal, that place from which you see the world, needs to find its own new place. And because you compare two different things or ways of doing, you can also better identify them. If you only have one thing, it is very hard to capture its characteristics. If you have multiple things, you can say that one is red and that one is blue. If you only have one think you can say it has a color, but you can't say which, because you can't compare it. I believe that such an international experience broadens your horizon.*

Howie traced his turn to conspiracy theories back to his time living in France, when he experienced first-handedly that the world can look very different from a different place. These experiences made him realize that one's own perspective is only one of many, and therefore that explanations of reality or truth might well omit other equally or even more convincing perspectives.

That living abroad and in different cultures expands one's sense of what is possible or real is clearly illustrated by the stories Neil (58) told me about a period in the early eighties during which he lived in Suriname, a former Dutch colony in South America:

> *I experienced a lot of Winti*[265] *ceremonies over there. The Western explanation is that these people come into trance. I have seen it myself*

> *– chewing glass, eating whole eggs in their shell, or people thinking they are snakes – they transform into something else. We call it a trance, they think they are seized by a spirit, a winti, and they transform instantly, start speaking French, smoking cigars, crazy things. It was fantastic to experience, really, I was sitting there with my eyes wide open. But especially with an open mind. I never had something like 'this is non-sense', or connected a truth-value to it. I mean, it could be true. What do I know? Can I prove it is not true? I just sit back and experience it. So these – and other experiences in my life – led me to believe that there is so much more possible than we think there is. That door is opened now. I wish I could feel it more, but I can't, I really can't.*

The exposure to different ways of seeing truth and reality, of experiencing different cultural frameworks of meaning while living in countries throughout the world engenders personal reflections on one's own way of thinking. As Neil's example shows, people bring back home the experiences they have had while living abroad. The beliefs and rituals of *exotic* cultures do not stay put, but travel with the movement of people across the globe. Moreover, such intercultural experiences radically change the perceptions and outlooks of people. Having been confronted with different ways of seeing the world, one's own ideas of truth and reality are put into perspective and under critical reflection. How can it be that *they* see things that differently, and what does that mean for my own understanding of reality?

Globalization is a much-discussed and arguably over-theorized concept—it yields 1,570,000 results on Google Scholar and many influential scholars have written extensively on it (e.g. Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 1998; Beck, 2000; Sassen, 1998). And although globalization as a buzzword might have reached its climax years ago, it is undeniable that the cultural effects of a shrinking world are immense and far-reaching, yet visible in the tiniest details of life. Globalization has, in other words, many faces. In this section I have shown how globalization shapes the stories people told me of how they got involved with conspiracy theories. They spoke of the way global travels made them realize that the world is often rather

different from what they were told back home. These culturally relativist understandings become even more fundamental when time spent abroad is extended to longer spans of time. Living in another country, experiencing other realities and participating in local cultural and religious practices uproots one's own cultural frameworks and taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world. This facet of globalization proves a true door opener to other—and in this case, conspiracy—understandings of the world.

5.5. Conclusion

Because most explanations of the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories leave little space for the motivations of the real living beings involved, I have made central in this chapter the culturally-embedded lives of a sample of people who have turned to conspiracy theories. Following a biographical methodological approach (Plummer, 2001; Roberts, 2002), I asked people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu to narrate their experience of becoming a conspiracy theorist, with a focus on their personal motivations. I sought to understand what specific moments in life *they* assigned as significant and meaningful in their emerging engagements with conspiracy theories. Although such autobiographical accounts are fictional in the sense that they are retrospectively constructed narrative expressions of lived experiences, I analyze them as "truthful fictions," in that they are real and meaningful to the people involved (Denzin, 1989). This is, after all, how *they* reflect and think about their historically developed turn towards conspiracy theories. In contrast to the formalism and micro-sociological focus of an analytical model of the *deviant career* (Becker, 1963; Clinard and Meier, 2010; Faupel, 2011), I have argued for the importance of historically contextualizing such biographical trajectories. Following C. Wright Mills, who stresses the fundamental relatedness of individual lives and larger societal developments, I have focused on those instances where the *private troubles* of these people meet the *public issues* of our societies to explain the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories (2000).

Although respondents draw on a culturally-shared *awakening* narrative (cf. DeGloma, 2010), the analysis of their distinct life stories showed more complexity and brought four cultural-historical developments into relief. The first is *secularization*: dismayed by the (ab)use of power by traditional religious authorities, many respondents have left their churches behind, but still look for larger frameworks of meaning and purpose that transcend the here and now. Conspiracy theories that situate the more mundane analyses of corruption and deceit in such narratives of supernatural existence and occult folklore clearly provide for those needs. Second, *mediatization*: how we experience and think of reality has radically changed in a world where all kinds of media saturate everyday life. Respondents spoke of the manipulative role media representations have in the shaping of perceptions of reality and grapple with what is fact versus what is fiction, even in their everyday lives. Thirdly, *democratization*: this long historical process finds a contemporary expression in the cultivation of a critical, literate, empowered citizenry, of which my respondents are no exception. They draw on the knowledge acquired in their education to challenge the truths put forward by the epistemic authorities and to explain the plausibility of alternative theories. And finally, globalization: the myriad opportunities to see and experience the world from a different place and with different cultural lenses has given rise to a cultural relativism that unsettles the stability of the normal and opens the door to alternative explanations of reality, like conspiracy theories.

In contrast to the majority of academic explanations that explain conspiracy culture in uniform terms, I have shown that it is sociologically more rewarding to explore the variety of reasons that draw people to follow conspiracy theories—if only because conspiracy theories mean different things, perform different functions, and satisfy different needs, and do so for different people. More specifically, I argue in this chapter that greater societal developments taking shape in the private biographies of people best explain the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories, for the simple reason that cultural change implies changing perceptions of truth, knowledge, and power, thus changing an individual's

perception of the plausibility of conspiracy theories. What is remarkable, however, is that these connections between personal experiences and larger societal developments are made not just by the scholar, in this case myself, but by the interviewed people themselves. Unlike those who see it as the "task and promise" of sociologists to make these connections between the everyday lives of ordinary people and the larger socio-cultural developments of which they are part (Mills, 2000: 6, cf. Elias, 1978), my analysis shows that the people we study *themselves* make such references to larger cultural developments when they explain their own biographical trajectories. Scholars may identify larger cultural processes over the backs of the people they study, to put it crudely, but I highlight people's *own* socio-historical sense-making of the lives they lead and the choices they have made. What C. Wright Mills famously coined *the sociological imagination* (2000) is therefore not just an operating imperative for social scientists, but seems part-and-parcel of how ordinary people think and reflect about their historically developed and culturally embedded lives.

On a more theoretical note, what do these four cultural changes, which are tangible in the biographies of Dutch conspiracy theorists, mean and signify sociologically? How do they explain the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories? It is my argument here that all of these historical developments set in motion the dissolution of a stable and absolute truth, which opens a cultural space for conspiracy theories to thrive. Processes of *secularization* unsettle the religious truths once held absolute, but as the metaphysical longings of people remain, a wide variety of alternative spiritual truths are on the rise instead. *Mediatization* speaks of a (digital) world where symbol and reference, fact and fiction, are increasingly difficult to distinguish, and what we think of as reality can be easily manipulated. The *democratization* of knowledge cultivates a critical and reflexive habitus that prompts people to continuously assess the truthfulness of all knowledge claims and their bearers. And finally, *globalization* shows how one's own cultural truths are put in perspective when other outlooks on the world are presented. The empirical consequence of these four societal developments is that the truth is now *out there*. No

longer fully guaranteed by one epistemic authority, institution, or tradition, the truth becomes something people actively grapple with by searching, analyzing, deconstructing, and recomposing information. In this cultural climate of what I call *epistemic instability*, absolute truths become implausible. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, may be more convincing as they often do the opposite by unsettling commonly accepted truths. Instead of deploring how these societal developments have led to a situation where commonsense distinctions between fact and fiction are blurred and *truth* is increasingly on the table, like Barkun does (e.g. 2006: 33/179-181), we should be content as (cultural) sociologists because there are just many more ways of world-making and many more many battles for epistemic authority to study.

6. "I Am Not a Conspiracy Theorist" Relational Identifications in the Dutch Conspiracy Milieu

6.1 Introduction

When exploring the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories, I have argued in the last chapter for a contextual approach in order to emphasize that the personal experiences of people are intricately related to larger cultural-historical developments. If conspiracy theories are not regarded as a pathological abnormality, then it only makes sense to regard people's engagements with them as situated and developing in such cultural contexts. In a time and place where the traditional epistemic authorities of religion, media, science, and politics have been losing cultural legitimacy, conspiracy theories come to make sense in relation to people's everyday lives. Indeed, my interviewees articulate the ways that their private troubles overlap with the public issues of contemporary Western/European societies. The previous chapter demonstrated already some variety of people

active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu, but here I set out to explore in more detail the personal differences and similarities between these people. My guiding question was this: who are the people actually engaging with conspiracy theories, and more precisely, how do they see themselves and others in the milieu?

A common view of the conspiracy theorist is an image of an obsessive, paranoid, militant loner who sees fire at every instance of smoke and finds coherence between seemingly random events. Conspiracy theories may have become mainstream in contemporary societies, but their normalization did not alter our cultural imagination: the public image of the conspiracy theorist remains morally tainted. As I show in the introduction, a minor newspaper article on conspiracy theories perpetuates the image of the conspiracy theorist as a petty-minded, insecure, socially disenfranchised, distrusting, militant, and authoritarian; in short, a stubborn narcissist looking for attention and control in a complex and unsettling world. Academics have only contributed to this potent public image of a conspiracy theorist. A dominant group of academics unambiguously taps on and reproduces this pejorative image (Aaronovitch, 2010; Barkun, 2006; Berlet, 2009; Byford, 2011; Pipes, 1997; Robins and Post, 1997; Showalter, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Knight confirms that "the usual photofit picture of the conspiracy theorist is an obsessive, petty minded right wing paranoid nut, a proponent of extremist politics with a dangerous tendency to single out the usual suspects as scapegoats" (2000: 3). Such pejorative images of conspiracy theorists and their theories are not without their consequences. Labelling someone a conspiracy theorist is an easy way to "end a discussion" (Knight, 2000: 11). In other words, it is a discursive strategy to disqualify an argument and to exclude the speaker effectively from public debate, "no matter how true, false, or conspiracy-related your utterance is. Using the phrase, I can symbolically exclude you from the imagined community of reasonable interlocutors" (Husting and Orr, 2007: 127).

Even though the diverse range of conspiracy theories (see chapter 3) might already allude to the difficulty of conceiving of them as a distinct social category, academic research has largely glossed

over diversity and ideological variation in the conspiracy milieu as they construct conspiracy theorists as a coherent collective: internal variety in the field is sacrificed for a clear, external demarcation. Even those scholars who refute the moral alarmism in academic studies of conspiracy theories and seek to explore their cultural meaning still tend to portray conspiracy theorists as a single, homogenous group. The paranoid is all too easily exchanged for the anomic. In recent years, efforts have been made by political scientists and psychologists to examine the demographic characteristics and personality traits of those endorsing conspiracy theories (cf. Brotherton et al., 2013; Oliver and Wood, 2014; Uscinsky and Parent, 2014; Wood and Douglas, 2013). These quantitative studies go some way in explaining the diversity of conspiracy theorists, but all construct analytical categories in which conspiracy theorists are fit. By contrast, I open up that uniform identity of *the* conspiracy theorist by empirically studying people's *own* self-understanding, and how they deal with that pejorative image. In particular, I focus here on the different ways in which people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu make distinctions between self and other: how do they associate with some and disassociate from others? And consequently, what in- and outgroups do they enact with these identifications?

In the study of identities it has long been argued that to recognize similarity with some and differences with others is fundamental to the formation of meaningful identities, and indeed, to social life itself (cf. Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Simmel, 1950). The idea that identity is always and continuously constructed in relation to meaningful others is a mainstay in symbolic interactionalist sociology (cf. Becker, 1963; Calhoun, 1994; Elias 1978; Goffman, 1963; Jenkins, 2014). In the study of conspiracy culture, however, this focus on identification and the mechanisms of in- and exclusion is completely absent. This may also be the result of methodological choices. The majority of studies on conspiracy theories analyze these discourses on their own or in secondary sources such as films and literature. By doing so, they fail to grasp the interactional context, which would foreground the way that conspiracy theorists deal with such texts, and their consensus and conflicts with each other. I base

myself here on my ethnographic fieldwork in the Dutch conspiracy milieu, but for the purposes of this chapter I will draw predominantly from my interview material.

6.2 Identification: Similarity and Difference

I situate this chapter on identification processes in the conspiracy milieu firmly in the sociology that takes *relationality* seriously (cf. Emirbayer, 1997). Self-identity is, from this perspective, always constructed within a broader network of social relations; it is a knot in a larger *figuration* of interdependencies (Elias, 1978). At a micro-level, theories about the social basis of personal identity have been developed by symbolic interactionists like Cooley, Mead, and Goffman. In 1902, Cooley wrote about personal identity as a *looking glass self*. Who we personally are, meaning the way that we experience, perceive and understand ourselves, is always informed by social relations. Our self, he argues, is by and large a mirror image of the way others perceive us, or at least the way we think others perceive us. Through *role-taking* in primary socialization and in the social interactions with *significant others* like parents and friends, individuals develop a self-identity that is distinctly social (Mead, 1934). In a more abstract sense, people develop a *generalized other*, understood as a derivate of all social encounters that is internalized and functions as a moral compass in everyday life. In line with this view, Richard Jenkins (2014: 6) holds identity to be

> *the human capacity to know "who's who" (and hence "what's what"). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on. This is a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities.*

Such relational underpinnings of identity formation form the backdrop of this chapter, but three elements are particularly important to highlight here.

First, identity is not static nor essential, but is the momentary product of a dynamic and never-ending process of identification with various meaningful others (Bauman, 1995; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). At one time, sociologists argue, self-identity was something relatively stable since it was firmly embedded in predefined social structures, groups, ideologies, and religious values (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Questions about identity – who am I? what do I want? what do I believe? where do I belong? what do I stand for? – are nowadays more prevalent. Traditional worldviews have lost much of their plausibility and the world has become an increasingly plural space where choice abounds (Berger, 1967; Campbell, 2007). Although we might question just how *modern* such concerns with identity are (Jenkins, 2014: 32), it is undeniable that the rapid changes of the Western socio-cultural world uproot previously-firm notions of self and other. Self-identity has become a "reflexive project" (cf. Bauman, 1995; Giddens, 1991, Turkle, 1995). From this perspective, the conspiracy milieu is a relatively open social network providing cultural resources for identity construction. Conspiracy theorists are not individual loners; their search for the *truth out there* literally relates to others. They come together in both on- and offline worlds where they share and dispute each other's ideas, worldviews, and life-styles. As "prosumers" (Ritzer and Jergenson, 2010) they critically appropriate conspiracy theories, add elements, produce new insights, and offer them for further consumption. In and through these *inherently social activities*, identities are formed by relating to some and disassociating from others.

This brings me to a second important dimension of this analysis. Sociological theories about key elements of identity formation often stress either in-group cohesion or out-group resistance (Jenkins, 2014). This is already prevalent amongst classical social theorists: Emile Durkheim emphasized social cohesion as the cornerstone of collective identity, whereas Karl Marx located the essence of such relationships in the struggle over the means of production. But academic discussions about *sameness* or *difference* as the foundational aspect of identities are just as prevalent today (e.g. Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2014, DuGay, et al, 2000).

Following Richard Jenkins, identities are neither the result of in-group cohesion nor the product of resistance towards an out-group. Identity formation is both, and is shaped through processes of inclusion and exclusion, of aligning with some *and* opposing others. As Jenkins puts it succinctly, "it does not make sense to separate similarity and difference [...] we cannot have one without the other [...] to say who I am is to say who I am not, but it is also to say with whom I have things in common" (2014: 22). This frame of "similarity and difference" (Jenkins, 2014: 18), firmly grounded in a symbolic interactionalist tradition (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), guides my analysis of identity formation in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. Instead of conceiving of conspiracy theorists as one uniform social category constructed in opposition to a certain *normality*, I aimed to find out inductively who they think they are, and with which collectives, worldviews, and practices they associate. Based on such self-identifications, it remains to be seen whether conspiracy theorists can be considered an undivided and cohesive social group united by their stigmatization.

The issue of power is a third element important for the understanding of identification processes. Implicitly referring to Marx, Jenkins differentiates between "a collectivity which identifies and defines itself (a group *for* itself) and a collectivity which is identified and defined by others (a category *in* itself)" (2014: 45; original emphasis). Labelling theorists have pointed to the dynamic interplay between people's self-image and the way others perceive and define them as being constitutive in the formation of identity (e.g. Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Matza, 1969). These "internal-external dialectics of identification" (Jenkins, 2014: 42-3) are generally congruous, but they are often fraught with tension and struggle over whose definition of a situation counts. Identity formations of any kind are thus always subject to the structures in which they emerge, even to the extent that people's self-understanding is shaped by them (e.g. Foucault, 2006; Hall and du Gay, 1994). Identity formation is, in short, inherently political. But these power structures are not undisputed. As those labelling theorists brilliantly show, hegemonic identities are negotiated and

contested in everyday situations and in public discourse alike (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Matza, 1969). Appropriating popular culture is another means of emancipation, being the ways in which people use, abuse, and subvert mainstream and mass-produced products to create their own meanings (Fiske, 1993). Conspiracy theorists can be understood from this perspective. On the one hand, they are categorized as paranoid and dangerous militants. On the other hand, they actively fight back, and do not only resist the stigma of being labelled a *conspiracy theorist*, but openly contest the authority of the modern state, capitalism, and science (Harambam and Aupers, 2015) and are hence involved in 'interpretive contests' (Melley, 2000) or 'discursive struggles for power' (Bratich, 2008). In this chapter, my objective is not to reproduce the stereotypical image of the conspiracy theorist, but to explore instead how they see themselves, and how they align with and distinguish themselves from others in the conspiracy milieu and beyond. As such, I intend to show the relational differences *between* conspiracy theorists and their resistance to practices of exclusion and stigmatization based on their self-understanding.

6.3 Re-Claiming Rationality: "I Am Not a Conspiracy Theorist"

Although the social sciences have generally depicted conspiracy theorists as zealous believers, people in the conspiracy milieu are more likely to identify themselves as critical thinkers. Against the majority of the population, conspiracy theorists appropriate the image of the radical freethinker to differentiate themselves from the *sheeple*[266] who simply follow the crowd. Virtually all respondents emphasized that they "don't heave and roll on the grand waves of society" (Liam, 67) but instead are "skeptic by nature" (Michael, 23), "dare to think differently" (Pauline, 67), "think out of the box" (Lucy, 54) and "put question marks over nearly everything" (Steven, 28). What critical thinking encourages them to do is "to look at things from multiple perspectives, to consult multiple sources, but mostly to think for yourself and to be able to adjust previously held convictions"

(William, 25). Often this self-identification is informed by cultural ideals of autonomy and rebellion towards the "system." As Lauren (37) explained: "I've always had a desire for freedom, so when you feel that certain systems…are oppressive, you start looking for something that liberates you, and that's how I came here." Julie (31) felt similarly, "indeed, there is something rebellious in me, I've always had that, and maybe therefore I went this way." In the words of Pauline (67), "my father always told me… 'think for yourself, never assume anything to be just true'… he's ninety-six now and still asks me… 'and have you recently been civilly disobedient?' …fantastic, right?". Critical thinking is emancipatory, they argue, as it serves to "shed the shackles of society," Michael (23), a student of economics, explained.

The first conclusion, then, is that people in the conspiracy milieu collectively distinguish themselves from the mainstream by arguing that they are free and critical thinkers. They share a general discontent with modern institutions like the state, industries, the media, science, and technology, and take as propaganda what most other people take as truth. Unlike the sheeple, they are critical of what goes on *out there*. In these self-qualifications, respondents reverse the stigma of being irrational dupes and re-claim their rationality: it is those in the mainstream who are the gullible ones. But as much as they seem to conceive of themselves as critical freethinkers, they do not assign this label to others in the milieu. Quite the contrary, respondents collectively used the pejorative mainstream label of conspiracy theorists to distance them from the truly irrational types within the conspiracy milieu. *I am not a conspiracy theorist*, is the collectively-shared adage to stress one's own superiority and/or rationality. Respondents often emphasize how *stereotypical conspiracy buffs* may pretend to be critical thinkers, but appear uncritical of their own convictions. Howie, a 30 year old blogger on a conspiracy website, argued that "conspiracy theorists suffer from tunnel vision: they only see what they want to see. If you advance another theory, they start yelling right away that it is not true and don't even want to look at the facts anymore." "That's the sorry part," a philosophy student named William (25) told me,

> *they identify much with really thinking about stuff and not following the crowd, but in the end they all go with that herd in the same direction [...] but if you're really critical, you should not only be critical of all that is established [...] I am someone who is much more nuanced and critical, also of my own convictions.*

This comes much to the dismay of Tom (47) a 9/11 Truther and owner of the most visited Dutch website on this topic[267], who sees his credibility put on the line by

> *those stereotypical conspiracy buffs who always think according to the same grid and start screaming about bloodlines and so on. That's so confirming the stereotype, exactly what is constantly written in the newspapers about conspiracy theorists. A couple of lunatics stand up and speak of bloodlines, well, you're done then. But what I do that's completely different.*

The latter quote makes clear that my respondents are aware of the pejorative meaning of the *conspiracy theorist* label.

Interestingly, their self-identification as *critical thinkers* functions not only to differentiate themselves from the dormant masses, but also from the *real* conspiracy theorists in the field. This relational positioning towards other conspiracy theorists can be taken as a first indication that conspiracy theorists are no uniform group. All respondents emphasized a desire to be different from the mainstream and independent in their way of thinking, which is a distinction that is common in modern subcultures that emphasize the ethics of individualism and personal freedom (e.g. Houtman et. al, 2011). But the interviews also reveal clear internal divisions, in that respondents did not hesitate to make distinctions between *me* and *them* within the conspiracy milieu. They might generally agree that "to look critically at what is going on now creates space to imagine alternatives" (Steven, 28), but principally *disagree* on how to achieve that change. These discussions form the dividing line along which different identities in the milieu emerge.

6.3.1 Activists: "Get Off Your Knees!"

A big part of people I interviewed felt that critical thinking is necessary, but not sufficient for societal change. They asserted that people need to start making a difference by becoming *activists*. Steven (28), a local activist for the *Zeitgeist* movement, argued that

> *it is up to the people and the critical thinkers, it is up to the people who resist and long for change to finally unite with each other and actually start taking actions, because if everyone would indeed remain passive, you will hold back that change.*

And so they do: people in the conspiracy milieu take part in all kinds of civil initiatives and social movements because "the feeling I could make a difference, make society more peaceful and more just [made me] incredibly enthusiastic […] my passions finally materialized, this is what I wanted all of my life" (Daphne, 49). Daphne led a local chapter of the *SOPN*, the newly established political party running for Dutch national elections in 2012, which was a spinoff of a popular Dutch conspiracy website. I met her on a campaign night in Amsterdam where she was actively recruiting people to help promote the party. On other occasions we met while she was handing out flyers with SOPN enthusiasts at busy inner city transport hubs and when she invited me to her house. Daphne (49) described her activities within this movement as

> *doing things differently, we do not consider ourselves therefore a political party, we are a participation movement, we are by and for the people, and we go much further, we are more radical, we dare to call the problem by its name.*

Activism comes in many flavors. Some people avoid official politics and take a journalistic approach by confronting those in power and informing the public. Members of WeAreChangeHolland regularly hold "creative campaigns without any form of violence" with the objective of "confronting politicians and corrupt businessmen by asking questions mainstream media do not dare to ask,"[268] and post such exchanges on YouTube.[269] A recurrent topic of concern for them is the Bilderberg conferences, where the powerful of the world come together behind closed doors. Doors that remain firmly closed, as

their reports with Bilderberg invitees show: no one speaks about what happens inside. Nicole, a 63 year old psychotherapist, actively goes out into the public, "I inform people, I dare to make contact with different people, and I don't mind to tell them the truth. I am not afraid to be seen in demonstrations." Similar efforts, I found, were taken by Liam, who at one time was the mayor of a middle-sized town and is the founder of a citizen's platform arguing for governmental disclosure of issues like chemtrails, collective vaccinations, and European food regulations:

> *I am now more politically active than ever before, it's just no longer going along as representative of the government, but to rub against the grain, to tell the government: "you guys are not doing the right thing, this is going wrong," and so on. We need to do something, we need to go protest and go into resistance. So now I am constantly approaching politics, media, science and all other authorities to tell them, "guys, open your eyes, because this is serious, it's not going well." (Liam, 67)*

The activism of the conspiracy milieu can be understood as a form of "subpolitics" (Beck, 1997). Modern institutions have since the 1960s faced various critiques and can count on much popular distrust. Public awareness of ecological issues, the destructive side of technology, and corrupt politicians have given rise to a bottom-up form of politics outside of the formal political arena, Beck argues. "Subpolitics," then, "questions the status of existing systems, calls for a rethinking of the various schemes of classification (…), and asks for the invention of new institutional ways" (1997:52). *Activists* in the conspiracy milieu exemplify *subpolitics* in that they actively try to reform *the system* through public interventions and by establishing alternative political parties.

6.3.2 Standing on the Barricades?

These activist strategies of protest, resistance, confrontation, and going against the grain are not appreciated by all conspiracy theorists alike. In fact, the radical tone appeared a divisive element in the

conspiracy milieu, and mobilized considerable opposition. Respondents argued that "resistance only creates more resistance" (Robert, 43), and that "fighting has never resulted in anything but more fighting" (Lucy, 54). They emphasized that "yelling at the crowd how we are being screwed by the big bad world doesn't get you anywhere" (Tom, 47), and suggested that "if you want to generate more effect, you'll maybe just have to be a little bit more mild" (Julie, 31).

On the topic of militant activism, the people I spoke to frequently made reference to leading figures in the conspiracy milieu including Alex Jones, a libertarian, US-based journalist and radio host who militantly conveys conspiracy theories on his website; and David Icke, the prolific British conspiracy celebrity whose work I extensively explore in chapter four. According to my respondents, people such as Jones and Icke take too militant of a position and unjustly mobilize adherents by tapping into their fears. They argued that "these people really go too far, like Alex Jones or so, well, he's a true fear monger" (Michael, 23), and "David Icke for example, I find him terrible, I also warn people active with 9/11 to not refer to him, please don't, that man is crazy as a loon, just psychotic, a real demagogue" (Tom, 47). Even those who in general admire the work of these figures, only accepted it to a certain point:

> *well, David Icke for example, a very intelligent man, I think, who has really done his homework, has done a lot of research, so with eighty percent of what he is saying, I think yes, fine, feels good, I get it. But a certain point he completely tips the scales and goes way too far, way too fanatic. That's all based on fear. (Julie, 31)*

Similarly, Robert (43) enjoyed Icke's performance in Amsterdam until the militancy took over:

> *So I had that with David Icke at the end of his show, that's really a pep talk, like "yeah, let's fight, let's go into resistance." I don't agree with that, that's not the way to go, to stand up and "get off your knees." Those are powerful terms [...] it's a shame people are so easily lured into resistance, you'll hear that as the audience applauds and whistles when David calls for resistance, revolt and mutiny, well,*

> *that's exactly what not to do, it only works negatively. It generates counter-effects.*

Respondents spoke to me of the adverse effects such an aggressive attitude generates, and they argue that there must be another way than radical activism to bring about change:

> *David Icke, I've followed him for five years or so, but he is always in such a fighter's mood. That doesn't generate good responses. I don't agree with fighting, that only provokes counter fighting, provokes resistance. The same counts for ArgusEyes[270] [a Dutch conspiracy website] also in a fighter's mood, barricade work, barricades never worked, well, maybe, but they incite so much resistance, you know, I think there are other ways and entrances" (Lucy, 54).*

These examples of opposition to radical activism are relevant not so much because they show disagreement over what strategies to take, which one would find in every social movement, but because they disclose an internal differentiation related to self-identification. People active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu position themselves in alignment with some and in opposition to others. To repeat: conspiracy theorists are not one of a kind. Although the condemnation of activist strategies may seem unitary in its opposition, I will further demonstrate why these critiques are formulated and how they are motivated by two contrasting ideas about social change and reforming society. Two other formations of conspiracy identities emerge.

6.3.3 Retreaters: "Be the Change You Want to See in the World!"

The activism that dominates a considerable part of the conspiracy milieu was regarded in negative terms by some of the people I interviewed because the militancy of resistance and protest does not fit with their ideas of how to live life. Although they share with *activists* the importance of awakening oneself, that is, to critically investigate and understand what is really going behind the surface of society, they nonetheless base their resistance to activism on popular psychological grounds. Activism, several argued, comes out of negative emotions

like aggression and fear. One respondent's argument on this point was typical:

> *[Y]ou can easily turn fanatic, push matters over the edge and end up in frenzy. Instead of informing yourself, being aware about things, you're basing your decisions on fear. Basically, you have two choices: either you go along with that fear or you go along with what happens if your consciousness opens. And well, someone like David Icke for example, he drags you into fear. (Julie, 31)*

And that is not good, one person noted, because "fear is our biggest enemy. It destroys our own judgment, our feelings and discriminatory capacities so that we will comply with the arbitrary whims of others" (Lucy, 54). Instead, one should turn away from concentrating on the bad things in the world, because

> *if you only focus on the negative stuff around you, you will get nowhere, you know. You'll find yourself in a state of stagnation, it's harder to think freely, you cannot grow further, it's more difficult to come to new ideas, all because you're in a spiral of negativity. (Steven, 28)*

Based on these considerations, one begins to wonder just how much knowledge one should assemble about the malfunctioning of institutions and the secret schemes of powerful elites. Instead of enlightening, too much knowledge can damage people. As one respondent describes, the effect can be overwhelming,

> *so I stopped at a certain moment. I understand it by now, it's not that I know everything, but what difference would it make if you would suck up more information? It doesn't feed me with positivity, it feeds only a negative side, a dark side. (Robert, 43)*

But more than merely trying to curtail these undesired states of being by limiting the consumption of information, a strategy to deal with the *negativity* of conspiracy theories that many respondents made mention of relates to the importance of finding the good within oneself first. Here we see a distinct difference between *activists* and what I call *retreaters*, by which I mean a type who aims to transform the world by changing the self first. Referring to himself as "dreamer of a better world," Steven (28) asked, "couldn't it make sense that

whatever you see happen 'outside,' is actually a reflection of what happens inside? In the end, the revolution that is going on now, truly is an inner revolution." They argued that change is not going to come by convincing others of your truth, as *activists* would seek to do. Instead, they see the true transformation of our societies happening only if people change themselves. This is firstly so because "people don't accept that [activism] and turn away from you. But also, who are you to claim all that? First start feeling and living it, before you start preaching" (Lucy, 54). Julie (31) similarly remarked that "if you're imposing things, you're not doing it right. If you really believe in something, you *become* what you believe, you'll radiate and don't need to say anything at all." Indeed, Pauline (67) said, "if I make sure to raise my frequency, by being honest, treating people well and by loving, the rest will vibrate along, I don't need to interfere with other people's lives." In a similar vein, agricultural entrepreneur Robert (43) explained

> *I don't think resistance is the right way to go, what I do instead is to apply it to myself. And if other people notice it, ask about it, feel touched by it, then it will have effect, not by imposing it on people, I think that will have much more effect than pushing. To inspire others instead of terrifying them.*

Changing the world is, from this perspective, not a matter of standing on the barricades. It is primarily about retreating and improving yourself instead of converting others to your worldview in an aggressive way. Retreaters seek subtle change: they use terms like *radiation*, *vibration*, and *love* to spread the message of self-development. Such ideas and terms indicate a strong affinity with countercultural forms of spirituality, which have blossomed since the 1960s in Western countries and which have been institutionalized since the 1980s under the banner of the New Age movement (e.g. Houtman and Aupers, 2007; Heelas, 1996). In this milieu, there is much emphasis on *dropping out*, finding the *inner self*, and the relation between personal growth and societal change. Tellingly, an influential New Age best-seller like *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, written by Marilyn Fergusson (1980) develops the argument that *real* revolutions are not

built on political protest and activism, like in the 1960s, but on personal change and inner discoveries. A new age of peace and stability, she claims, can only emerge when individuals exemplify a better world through their own thoughts and interactions. An even broader perspective highlights the similarity of *retreaters* with what Troeltsch (1992[1931]) identifies in his study of Christian religious history as *mysticism,* which refers to the tradition prioritizing a fundamentally individual and subjective religious experience; and the tendency to renounce any institutionalized religious authority (cf. Daiber, 2002). From this perspective, the difference with *activists* becomes even sharper who, like Weber's *ethical prophets*, claim to have the truth in their hands and command it to others, whereas retreaters, like Weber's *exemplary prophets*, disavow such impositions and prefer to *demonstrate* the correct path by going down that road themselves (cf. Weber, 1993[1920]).

6.3.4 Mediators: "Start Building Bridges!"

Retreaters are not alone in their critique of activism and resistance; another group of people in the conspiracy milieu oppose such militancy as well, albeit for different reasons. George (38), for example, was heavily involved in political protests but eventually changed his mind. He explained how that change came about: "you know, to demonstrate brings you in a negative state, but I want to live in a positive state. I no longer want to be against things, I want to be in favor of something." He describes "conspiracy theorists" as "extremist descendants of alternative people" who are "so stuck at being against something they can't be in favor of something. They are only in favor of themselves. They only see obstacles and think the world can only change if the whole system is subverted". This group, like *retreaters*, explicitly disassociates themselves from *activists*. As Tom (47), owner of the most visited Dutch website on 9/11,[271] explained:

> *I don't behave like an idealistic activist who is anti-establishment, what happens a lot in the 9/11 truth movement. What you see is that they often scold and adopt an offensive attitude towards the*

> *establishment […] You see a lot of hate with them. I don't need to appeal to the feelings of hate of people. I don't get any further with that. I want to show them aspects of the reality they have been deprived of. That's what I want.*

But more than condemning the militancy of those activists, this group criticizes their strategies for not being fruitful since they do not reach the general public. If you want to inform the people, to wake them up, then it does not help to be offensive and rebellious. *Activists*, they argue, merely serve their own public. What George noticed "is that while there are so many small parties proclaiming their ideas, they are actually very much turned inwards, but don't try to send their message to the bigger public." How are they going to change the world, they wonder, if they only preach to the choir? Tom (47) agreed:

> *[T]hey trumpet a message that in their own view is perhaps world saving, but strangely enough is mostly directed at each other. My work is not directed at the people who are already convinced [9/11] is bullshit. I aim explicitly at those who are used to the mainstream. Otherwise you'll only get a rumination of the same information and a continuous self-confirmation. I want to bring down the wall between the mainstream and the critical current in society.*

Transcending these boundaries is, however, easier said than done. John (34), a holistic nutritional advisor and owner of the *Are You Still Asleep* website[272] acknowledged this challenge: "if I look at the crowd, it's always the same people, well, try to get beyond those people outside that clique. How do you reach the wider public?"

In contrast to both *activists* and *retreaters*, the objective of these people is to mediate between the truths of hardcore conspiracy buffs and the regular public. Hence, I call this group *mediators*. William (25) founded the website *Seek the Truth*[273] solely dedicated to this matter, because

> *on the one end there are those who fully believe all what they are being told on the news, while on the other end there are those who firmly oppose all official accounts and come up with the most delusional ideas. I find it interesting to pull both groups towards each*

> *other, to have them look critically at themselves, and to show them that the other is not completely crazy either.*

Against the self-directedness of many conspiracy theorists do *mediators* identify with its opposite:

> *[L]ook, a conspiracy theorist gets so caught up in his own ideas that the normal person doesn't get it anymore. So the further you'll take it to the extremes, the more society will disassociate from you. That's the biggest problem of the conspiracy theorist. You need to build bridges. That's the most important thing, that you build a bridge between your theory on the one hand and what society knows on the other hand. And I am much more of a bridge builder, because I lived in both worlds, I understand both worlds. (George, 38)*

They all expressed that this intermediary role is not an easy position and feel caught between the hammer and the anvil: "on my right I have the establishment, and they hardly listen. But on my left I have the activists. The strange thing is that they don't like me either. I'm sleeping with the enemy…" (Tom, 47). They keep trying nonetheless, as William (25) shows:

> *I feel socially responsible, and I think a lot of our problems come forth out of misunderstandings. Of people being stuck in their own ideas. I have the conviction that if you can let people really think about their ideas, they might become a bit more tolerant towards other ideas and other people.*

In this way, George (38) suggested, "we can come together at the top of the bridge and understand each other."

Mediators, in short, debunk activists as unproductive fundamentalists and critique *retreaters* for being too involved with personal growth. They argue that changing the world is primarily done by *building bridges* between the alternative and the mainstream, between different perceptions of truth, and between multiple perspectives on reality. A worldview that underlies this approach in the conspiracy milieu is cultural pluralism: *mediators* acknowledge that different outlooks on the world are fundamental to contemporary society and, from this postmodern position, act more as *interpreters* of

different cultural perspectives than as *legislators* of one master narrative or truth (Bauman, 1987).

6.3.5 Corresponding Epistemological Positions, Oppositional Ideas about Truth

The divergent identifications of people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu coincide with distinct epistemological positions. In other words: *activists*, *retreaters* and *mediators* think differently about truth and profess distinct ways of assessing the veracity of a situation. For each of these three subcultural groups, how they see themselves and how societal change should come about go hand in hand with corresponding ideas about what counts as truth.

What sets *activists* apart from the rest is the belief in an *absolute* truth. They spoke of "the *real* problems" and "the *real* truth" (Daphne, 47), and emphasized the uniformity of truth by referring to it in singular form. They said to be "looking for *the* truth" and "finding *the* truth" (Martin, 30), or they wanted to "expose *the* truth" (Michael, 23). They told me how "the media don't give you *the* truth," (Nicole, 63) but "erect smokescreens in front of *the* truth […] these are no conspiracy theories, that's *the solid truth*" (Martin, 30) (*all my italics)*. An often-expressed aphorism that "the truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off"[274] alludes to my point. Fundamental to discerning truth from falsity for activists is the role of *proof* and *facts*. Indeed, as Liam (67) stressed,

> *I think the truth can be assessed, that it is there. When you start thinking and depart from the assumption that what comes from above is true, on the basis of authority arguments, if you divert from that idea and start thinking for yourself, [then] you're looking for the truth, then you're looking for objective elements.*

These people argued that solid proofs and hard facts should distinguish "the truth they tell you from the truth as it is" (Martin, 30), and that such evidence enables us to separate "appearance from actuality" (Liam, 67). In some instances, they claimed that "proof… tangible proof" is what sets "conspiracy *theories* [apart] from conspiracy *facts*"

(Michael, 23), herewith ironically reproducing the connotation of conspiracy theories as fictitious, because "a theory is not based on proven facts, that's why I prefer to call it a conspiracy *praxis*" (Simon, 40). The truth of their beliefs therefore lies in the quality of their case: it needs to be "well substantiated" (Liam, 67) and "well documented" (Michael, 23). As Martin (30) put it, "bring on the proof!" Underpinning *activists*' strong beliefs of what is wrong and what society should look like instead, is a strong faith in the veracity of their ideas. Like Weber's *ethical prophets* (1992) in both religious and secular (utopian) projects, the conviction that there is an absolute, overriding, truth informs their understandings of the current situation. The truth may be hidden, but it is *out there*. In line with their positivist ideals, *activists* believe that the truth can be found with solid empirical research.

Where *activists* require hard facts *proving* the truth, *retreaters* speak about *feeling* what is right and emphasize *inner knowing* to assess the veracity of knowledge claims. Lauren (37) explained:

> *I always felt what is pure, pure information. What is right and what is wrong. You feel it in your hart. If it resonates or not. If it is right, you'll feel it. If something is wrong, if it is not true, if they are manipulative truths to deceive people because there are interests, well, somewhere you feel it is not right. Somewhere in your body it doesn't feel right, something is wrong, not in harmony. It's all subjective.*

For Pauline (67) the very notion of truth is personal too,

> *I don't think "truth" exists, it is always colored, it is always colored. It always comes through a person. So therefore it is always: what do you take out of it? What resonates with you? That's my only criterion, what resonates and what not.*

These epistemological assessments of the veracity of a situation do not only relate to *mainstream knowledge*, but are applied to conspiracy theories and their producers as well. Robert (43), for example, emphasized that he does not accept everything that David Icke says:

> *I don't just believe his stories. I verify them too. Is it right what he is saying? How does it feel? Does it feel right? It's just like buying a*

> *new coat. How does it feel? Does it fit well, does it feel comfortable? That's really how I base my opinions. I follow the feeling.*

Very much in contrast to those *activists* looking for solid proofs and hard facts, *retreaters* discard the notion that these positivist epistemologies should be guiding. Julie (31) explained,

> *[Y]ou know, the facts are just not that important. Because you'll never know that way. Not from thinking and facts. You will never, you can never really know, because there is always something disqualifying it, or research contradicting it, always, always, always, with everything. The only thing that is real, that is true, is your own self, it is your only advisor. Your higher self, higher knowing, that is very important, and that's the truth. Not all those stories, interpretations and researches, that's just not it.*

Similar to those of *activists*, the ideas of *retreaters* concerning how they see themselves and the world around them resonate with ideas about knowing and truth. Following the New Age imperative of *inner change* and *personal growth* as a means to achieve social change, they emphasize that truth is about knowing from the inside what is right and what is wrong. In contrast to the absolute truth of *activists*, *retreaters* emphasize, in harmony with a long mystical tradition (cf. Troeltsch, 1992; Daiber, 2002), *subjective* truth: truth that is personal and that is always colored and informed by feeling.

Mediators similarly oppose the idea of one absolute truth that *activists* hold dear. Instead, they argue, "the truth is the truth only at that moment, until a new truth comes along, yes truth is relative, or it always changes" (Tom, 47). But the notion of many subjective truths of *retreaters* is similarly discarded, "because then you come to a relativism that says that science is the same as religion, or whatever. I wouldn't go that far. But that's indeed the conclusion many conspiracy theorists take," William (25) explained. He continued,

> *it fits our time of course, that postmodern idea of "anything goes". But you don't need to say that either there is one absolute truth or that everything relativistically exists next to each other and they're all equal. I think there are ways imaginable in between.*

One of the ways to approach matters, *mediators* argue, is to see the reality of a situation from different perspectives, because "truth is always multiple" (George, 38). He went on to explain:

> *it's like when you're at a busy crossroad and there's an accident and you'll ask twenty people who saw what happened, what you'll get is twenty different truths. And they are all right, you know. Because from one angle it might have seemed like that car came from the right, so he should have been given way, but that person couldn't see the traffic light was red, so he was right. But the person standing there could see he crossed a red light, so he might have come from the right, but was nevertheless wrong. So you see, everyone has their own truth, it just depends where you stand. If we can come to a common conclusion on what happened, then, we'll get a truth than can be shared.*

Towards their objective to bring people and their diverging ideas together, *mediators* understand and value the *situated* truths of multiple actors. Truth is not absolute, not entirely subjective, they argue, but always the product of a certain position in time and place (cf. Haraway, 1991; Seidman, 1994).

6.4 Conclusion

The prevalent image of the conspiracy theorist as a paranoid and militant tinfoil hatter is a true social stigma (cf. Goffman, 1963) and a clear stereotype (Pickering, 2001). By conceiving of conspiracy theorists as one uniform group, be they paranoid or anomic, academics have only contributed to this potent public image. But such accounts leave a blind spot for diversity in the conspiracy milieu and obscure relational differences *between* conspiracy theorists. In this chapter, I have therefore set out to explore such variation through people's self-understanding. Instead of imposing external categorizations, I studied how people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu associate with some and disassociate from others. The frame of "similarity and difference" (Jenkins, 2014: 18) proved fruitful in

bringing to the surface the distinctions of *self* and *other* at work in this particular subculture.

My analysis shows that despite a common opposition towards the cultural mainstream, considerable self-assigned variety exists in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. I identified three distinguishable groups, which were *activists*, *retreaters* and *mediators*. Whereas the militancy of *activists* who are actively trying to change the status quo is vehemently rejected by the two other groups alike; these latter two groups differed again by either retreating into a psychological-spiritual worldview in which change is said to come from within (*retreaters*) or by working to build bridges between clashing worldviews on the road to progress (*mediators*). These three subcultural strands of the conspiracy milieu are not only characterized by their distinct conceptions of *self* and *other*, but, in line with these relational identifications, by divergent epistemological positions as well. Whereas *activists* believe in one absolute truth, *retreaters* prioritize their own subjective truths, and *mediators* explain how all truths are situated and, when possible, related.

Based on this unmistakable diversity, I conclude that it is problematic to speak in singular terms of "a distinct culture—conspiracism—which encompasses a specific system of knowledge, belief, values, practices, and rituals shared by communities of people around the world" (Byford, 2011: 5). When the effort is *verstehen*, conspiracy culture can hardly be understood as a monolithic whole, despite similarities involving distrust towards institutions and the elites who govern them. This plurality is confirmed by more recent studies as well. Uscinski and Parent, for example, show broad demographic diversity and concede that "conspiracy theorists differ substantially from their stereotypes" (2014: 86). Ward and Voas, to give another example, show how the conspiracy milieu is characterized by a "male-dominated, often conservative, generally pessimistic' realm and the 'female-dominated New Age, liberal, self-consciously optimistic" realm (2009: 103-4). However, they end up homogenizing this cultural milieu by arguing that it forms one "hybrid system of belief" they call "conspirituality" (Ward and Voas, 2009: 103). My analysis shows that there are indeed *streams* recognizable in

the conspiracy milieu (e.g. *activists* and *retreaters*), but when looked at from the perspective of the interacting individuals, it becomes apparent that these people are not easily grouped together into a single "politico-spiritual" movement (Ward and Voas, 2009: 103). Instead, their moral, political, and epistemological differences generate considerable opposition and show lines of conflict and disagreement *within* the conspiracy milieu. The conspiracy milieu can therefore better be seen as a fluid network of different groups of people, identifying with distinctly different worldviews, beliefs, values, and practices.

It is from such findings that I argued in the Methodology chapter to conceptualize the cultural and social worlds of conspiracy theorists following Colin Campbell's notion of the "cultic milieu" (2002). The conspiracy milieu is, in its conceptual flexibility, better able to encompass the heterogeneity of people, beliefs, practices, and ideological orientations that I encountered in my fieldwork, yet remains solid enough to acknowledge their shared opposition against the cultural mainstream. Such opposition takes shape, besides substantively comprising myriad "deviant belief systems and practices" (Campbell, 2002: 14), on the level of identification processes as well. In this chapter, I have shown ways in which people in the conspiracy milieu actively resist their stigmatization by distinguishing themselves from the mainstream as *critical freethinkers*: it is not they who are gullible, but the *sheeple* who simply take for granted what the epistemic authorities tell them. The adage *I am not a conspiracy theorist* functions as a trope to reclaim rationality in a cultural climate were *official* truth claims are increasingly contested (cf. Bratich, 2008; Gieryn, 1999). One can doubt, however, how powerful this resistance is when the exact same label and its pejorative meaning is used by people active in the conspiracy milieu to differentiate themselves from the *real* paranoids. This might be an effective discursive strategy for some to augment their own credibility, but it only strengthens the derogatory meaning of the conspiracy theorist label, and threatens to discard the whole group in question. As strategies of resistance paradoxically bolster people's own subjection, the difficulty of staging a revolution with the

(discursive) weapons of the oppressor can only be confirmed. Foucault meets Kafka, or so it seems. In the next chapter, I will show that conspiracy theorists make use of other arguments and deploy different tropes to resist their stigmatization and to gain epistemic authority in battles with science.

7. Contesting Epistemic Authority : Conspiracy Theorists on the Boundaries of Science

7.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have shown how conspiracy theorists are highly critical of the workings of mainstream epistemic institutions and in particular about authoritative claims on truth. Conspiracy theorists explicitly discard such truth claims of authoritative institutions as corrupt, and propose alternative accounts instead. Although each institution has its own operational logic and epistemic rules, most give their claims on truth credibility by referring to science[275] and its norms and procedures for arriving at reliable knowledge. When politicians hold that 9/11 was no inside job, and that the WTC towers indeed collapsed because of the planes, they strengthen such arguments with scientific reports proving that theory. When food manufacturers say that certain additives in their products are not harmful to human health, they put forward scientific research confirming that there are no damaging effects. When journalists

investigate the consequences of certain oil-drilling technologies on the local environment, they quote scientists and their work as authorities. Or when medical experts say that vaccinations are safe and effective, they refer to scientific research showing their benign functionality. To summarize, representatives of institutional regimes "all appeal to science as the tribunal of reason and truth" in times of a creditability crisis, as Tom Gieryn puts it (1999: 3). And not without due reason, because "what science declares to be the case [...] is taken to be true and relevant to the matter at hand" (Brown, 2009: 4). Harding goes further, saying that "neither God, nor tradition is privileged with the same credibility as scientific rationality in modern cultures" (1986: 16). Indeed, the voice of scientific expertise is commonly listened to with assurance and providence: "if 'science' says so, we are more often than not inclined to believe it or act on it—and prefer it over claims lacking this epistemic seal of approval" (Gieryn, 1999: 1). Science is, in other words, the most commanding *epistemic authority* in contemporary Western societies, and more than any other institution, has the right and ability to establish definitions of what is real and what is not, what is true and what is not.

It is therefore no surprise that contemporary conspiracy theories explicitly engage science. After all, if one believes prevalent truth claims are wrong, one has to confront the institution that has the "legitimate power to define, describe and explain bounded domains of reality" (Gieryn, 1999: 1). And so conspiracy theorists do: by formulating alternative accounts of the truth they openly contest the epistemic authority of science, and resist on a fundamental level this dominant "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1970[1966]). For many people, conspiracy theories are a plausible and trustworthy alternative to explanations authorized by science. Not insensitive to these widespread popular critiques, science retaliates both inside academia and in public discourse with fierce refutations of such competing explanations. Often it finds support from defenders of science outside of academia, notably journalists and members of skeptic organizations, who partake in similar assaults on conspiracy theories (see my Introduction and Methodology chapter).

In tandem with such refutations comes an argumentation as to why science is a superior way of knowing, and scientists the most trustworthy deliverers of such knowledge. As can be seen from such dynamics of mutual attack and assault, conspiracy theories and science have become rivals in a public arena where different claims to truth compete with each other for acknowledgement. Science may be society's most powerful epistemic authority, but it surely is not uncontested. Ready examples would include the climate change debates, discussions about the safety of E-numbers, or shale gas fracking disputes. These "credibility contests are a chronic feature of the social scene" (Gieryn, 1999: 1). What is at stake in these battles for epistemic authority is not only the legitimate power to define and explain reality, but consequentially the very contours and contents of what we designate as *science*.

These battles are not something new. The history of science can be characterized as a continuous border war, since the boundaries between intellectual activities has never been stable nor permanently settled (Haraway, 2001: 29). Since the early modern period, science had to fight for legitimacy against the prevailing powers of the church and aristocracy, while it simultaneously had to convince ever-changing publics of its beneficial qualities and practical capabilities (cf. Hanegraaff, 1997; Latour, 1993b[1984]; Shapin and Shaffer, 1984; Toulmin, 1990). What was once the exploration of a few revolutionaries entrenched in local turmoil turned into the unprecedented institutionalized network of ideas, objects, people, places, and practices we now call "science" (e.g. Brown, 2009; Taylor, 1996).

Unchanged, however, are the continuous battles on its tenuous borders for money, autonomy, and credibility, especially against competitor claimants on this domain of legitimate knowledge and truth (Gieryn, 1999). Religious groups advance creationism as a serious alternative to Darwinian evolution; populist currents challenge the authoritative status of scientific knowledge by designating it *just another opinion*; governments try to direct the orientation of science away from fundamental research into practical and profitable domains; business and industry fund and deploy science

in all kinds of ways for commercial advantage; and ideological opponents of science's technocratic rationality advance spiritual understandings of the meaning of life and death instead. Science may have a lot to say today, but it is certainly not the only voice out there. Despite all the practical and social advancements it has brought, the epistemic authority of science is challenged from more and more corners of society.

It is in this historical context of ever present (but arguably increasing) disputes over epistemic authority that I situate the dynamics between science and conspiracy theorists, which is what I explore in this chapter. In the most abstract sense, I am interested in the border conflicts science is embroiled in. How are its contours and contents shaped in these battles for epistemic authority? What is drawn inside science, and what is incidentally or consistently kept at bay? Most interestingly, *how* are those boundaries established? This implies a non-essentialist understanding of what science is, that is, the historical *product* of contingent attributions and local demarcations (e.g. Harding, 1986; Shapin, 1986). I conceive of science as the momentary and provisional outcome of all such instances of "boundary work" (Gieryn, 1999: 4). In this chapter I delve into on one of such border conflicts, namely that between conspiracy theories and science. Drawing on my interview material, I study how and why people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu challenge the epistemic authority of science. Taking a symmetrical approach here to the study of such battles for epistemic authority as developed in the social studies of science (e.g. Bloor, 1991; Gieryn, 1999; Hess, 1993), I analyze how academics pathologize conspiracy theories in works that operate as *de facto* strategies of boundary work. I focus on the rhetorical strategies deployed by both parties in efforts to secure/attack the bastion of science. What arguments and tropes do they use to delegitimize each other's claims to truth? While I am not interested here in the truth-value of any of these assertions, I set out to explore the meanings and rationales that inform them. These should, after all, give a deeper understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that install the provisional boundaries of science vis-à-vis conspiracy theories.

7.2 Science and Its Boundaries

Most people in Western societies would understand what is meant by *science*, and would intuitively understand that it is different from common knowledge, politics, or religion. I imagine, however, that few could manage to define it in unambiguous terms. Who can blame them? Even scientists have a hard time articulating the essence of science, the unique and invariant characteristics that differentiate it from *non-science*. This issue, which is known as the *demarcation problem* has haunted intellectuals since the Greek philosophers Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle sought to distinguish knowledge (*episteme*) from opinion (*doxa*) on the basis of some essential criteria (for good overviews, see Laudan, 1983; Gieryn, 1995; Taylor, 1996).

By way of an example, note that scholars belonging to the Vienna Circle tried to separate science from metaphysics by reference to its unique methodology by which, they argued, only knowledge that can be verified through strict empirical observation and/or experimental testing counts as science. Karl Popper, to name another, refuted their logical positivism and articulated "perhaps the most famous demarcation criterion: falsificationism" (Taylor, 1996: 27). Instead of arguing that science is different from metaphysics on its capacity to be proven true, known as the verifiability principle, Popper argued precisely the opposite: science is different from its imposters because it can be proven *false*.[276] Following Popper, Gieryn notes that "science is not a confirmation game (looking for evidence to corroborate a generalization) but a refutation game (looking for evidence to shoot it down)" (1995: 396). Robert Merton, a few decades later, left these matters of epistemology mostly aside and, as a true sociologist, sought to distinguish science on the basis of its social and normative structure, in other words, its *culture*, defined as "that affectively toned complex of values and norms which is held to be binding on the man of science" (1973: 268-9). He identified "four [unique] sets of institutional imperatives—universalism, communism, disinterestedness, organized skepticism—which are taken to comprise the ethos of modern science," and which guarantee

(and legitimize) the elevated status of its knowledge (1973: 270). But, as time and sociological inquiry has shown, these and other essentialists efforts never led to any conclusive ways to differentiate science from other cultural practices (e.g. Gieryn, 1995: 404; Harding, 1986: 41; Laudan, 1983: 112; Wallis, 1979: 6).

Constructivist scholars in the social studies of science have found a way out of this conundrum by shifting attention from identifying the unique building blocks of the ivory towers of science toward the presentation of science in everyday life (e.g. Barnes, 1974; Gieryn, 1983; Haraway, 1991; Shapin, 1986). Science, from this perspective, is essentially nothing, yet potentially everything: it is an empty cultural space filled with content through episodic negotiations and settlements over its unique qualities and the authority it should accompany (Gieryn, 1999: 1-31). The contours and contents of what we regard as science, in other words, are not intrinsic to the nature and practice of the institution itself, but are better thought as the provisional result of repeated and endless dynamics of the inclusion and exclusion of people, knowledge, and practices; efforts, that is, to carve *science* off from other domains of life.[277] This latter practice is what Gieryn calls *boundary work*: "the discursive attribution of selected qualities to scientists, scientific methods, and scientific claims for the purpose of drawing a rhetorical boundary between science and some less authoritative residual non-science" (1999: 4-5).

Taylor advances a similar "rhetorical perspective on the 'demarcation' of science" and argues that "the discursive practices of multiple social actors are taken as constructing the boundaries that mark off the domain of science from, for example, pseudoscience and politics" (1996: 5). To put it differently, what science is in this or that historical moment is intimately related to what it is not. As Gieryn reminds us, "properties attributed to science on any occasion depend largely on the specifics of its [excluded] 'other'" (1999: 22). As such scholars argue, it is of little (sociological) relevance how some philosopher of high esteem defines science to a better or worse degree, simply because the boundaries of science and its accompanying epistemic authority are decided "downstream," in the courtrooms, boardrooms, and living rooms where the jurisdiction of

science is being debated (Gieryn, 1999: 27). Within this frame, the sociological question does not concern what science *really* is, but how it is advanced and believed as a superior way of knowing. It focuses both on public understandings of the distinctive qualities of science and on the ways that scientists deploy certain representations of science in situations where their authority is contested.

This constructivist perspective on the boundaries of science puts the question of power at center stage. As Haraway reminds us, "all drawings of inside-outside boundaries in knowledge are theorized as power moves [...] scientists and their patrons have stakes in throwing sand in our eyes [...] science is a contestable text and a power field; the content is the form" (1991: 184-5). The privileges, such as status, money, and authority, that accompany inclusion in the domain of science are massive, making the demarcation problem not just an intellectual or analytic quandary, but a matter of politics as well. After all, Laudan argues, "the labeling of a certain activity as 'scientific' or 'unscientific' has social and political ramifications which go well beyond the taxonomic task of sorting beliefs into two piles" (1983: 21). Demarcation criteria are performative: they enact a domain called *science* and endow that which is included with power, funds, and prestige, while excluding others from those advantages. It is therefore no surprise that they are actively deployed in battles for epistemic authority. As Laudan argues, "no one can look at the history of debates between scientists and 'pseudoscientists' without realizing that demarcation criteria are typically used as *machines de guerre* between rival camps" (1983: 20). Demarcation criteria are essential dimensions of boundary work. They function as cultural repertoires or "flexible vocabularies" for scientists (and others) to draw from when faced with a need to distinguish science from its others (Mulkay, 1979: 72).

Descriptions of science are, as Gieryn makes clear, "contextually tailored selections from a long menu defined by the players and stakeholders, their goals and interests, and the arena in which they operate" (1999: 21). The point here is that "mythical 'origin stories' of science" (Harding, 1986: 197-215), "descriptions of science as distinctively truthful, useful, objective or rational"

(Gieryn, 1983: 792), or any other beneficial circumscription of science for that matter, should be seen and analyzed as *professional ideologies*. That is, optimally-customized narratives about the unique qualities of science, deployed in the pursuit of epistemic authority and thought to be the most convincing for the public at hand (Gieryn, 1983). In other words, narratives about the distinctive contents and qualities of science are utterly political. From this point of view, Haraway argues that "science – the real game in town, the one we must play – is rhetoric, the persuasion of the relevant social actors that one's manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired objective power" (1991: 184). Knowledge is power, and *science* is the product of power games, the product of battles for epistemic authority.

Despite the flexibility of how *science* takes shape, a particular set of characteristics historically stabilized into the image of science we are most familiar with today: science as skeptical, objective, rational, disinterested, and truthful. Although sociologists of science generally regard this image to be part of "the PR of science" (Shapin, 2012: 38), its "professional ideology" as Gieryn would have it (1983), this public image of science is the reason why we grant it its superior societal position. It is an extremely powerful and authoritative public image. Because we believe science to be a pure source of knowledge, untroubled by dogma, religion, politics, and material interests, we value it with resources and esteem. No wonder that rival parties will argue in battles for epistemic authority that they are *really* scientific (cf. Collins and Pinch, 1979; Hess, 1993). Creation scientists, parapsychologists, and other claimants of epistemic authority operating at the boundaries of science attempt to be more "royalist than the king" by elaborately displaying their scientificity, a phenomenon Shapin calls "hyperscience" (2012: 38). By contrast, Gieryn says, "boundary work to exclude an impostor 'scientist' will focus attention on the poser's failure to conform to expected methodological standards variously mapped out as necessary for genuine scientific practice: proper instrumentation, credentials, peer reviews, objectivity, skepticism" (1999: 22).

On a more abstract note, boundary work is thus the amplification of *difference*. When drawing rhetorical boundaries

between *us* and *them*, it is of the highest importance and most practical usefulness to distinguish oneself from an opposed *other*. Potential similarities must be obscured at all costs, since the perception that one might have affinity with that other undermines any efforts to justify one's own distinct societal position. Boundary work entails stereotyping in the making of a clear *self* and *other* (cf. Bhabha, 1983; Pickering, 2001), just like the contentious dynamics between conspiracy theorists and science. In this chapter, I study how and why conspiracy theorists challenge the epistemic authority of science, especially through attacking its esteemed public image. But first I show how science defends its boundaries through the stereotypification of conspiracy theorists as modernity's dark counterpart. In other words, the concrete rhetorical weapons used to obscure similarities and amplify differences in these border conflicts are precisely the tropes of that public image of science. I conclude with an interpretation of how to understand these dynamics and I situate them in a wider cultural context characterized by a democratization of knowledge.

7.3 Boundary Work: Construing Conspiracy Theories as Modernity's Dark Counterpart

In the following section, I use the works of academics who pathologize conspiracy theories as data to analyze their rhetorical techniques. These scholars come from a wide variety of social scientific backgrounds such as political science (Barkun, Berlet, Hofstadter, Robins), history (Aaronovitch, Groh, Pipes, Showalter), psychology (Byford, Goertzel, Kalichman, Post), law (Sunstein, Vermeule), and philosophy (Clarke, Keeley, Pigden, Popper). It might generally be assumed that their objective is informed by a scientific interest, but as I have argued in the Introduction and as is attested to by other scholars on the subject (e.g. Bratich, 2008; Knight, 2000), there is a moral alarmism in the way they write about conspiracy theories. This alarmism, I contend below, suggests that there is something more at stake for these scholars, something which creates an imperative to discursively construct conspiracy theories in the way they do. Note

that I do not set out here to debunk academic characterizations of conspiracy theories, nor to show that there are hidden intents behind them, I merely intend to analyze the particular ways these scholars frame conspiracy theories as *bad science* and *paranoid politics*. As will become obvious, these ways of framing conspiracy theories is part of a long tradition of distinguishing science from rival epistemic authorities.

Secular Remnants of A Religious Past. In the Introduction I discussed academic portrayals of conspiracy theories as *bad science* and *paranoid politics*. To briefly rephrase that argument, conspiracy theories are said to be the delusional thought of radical militants who see plots and intrigues where in fact there are none. In their obsessive search for evidence, they fall into confirmation bias and ignore falsification. Even stronger put, they are insensitive to contrary evidence, and have a self-sealing quality. Despite the air of scientific rigor, such scholars argue, conspiracy theories are anything but proper forms of inquiry as they violate all scientific norms and rules for establishing reliable knowledge. They may therefore mimic proper scientific practice and flaunt academic credentials to give their work respectability, but in the end conspiracy theorists are nothing but fraudulent pseudoscientists. More abstractly speaking, these academics contend that underlying such flawed, quasi-scientific practices is an outdated, premodern worldview that prioritizes design above chance and intent above randomness. To do so, they reduce highly complex phenomena to simple causes, and ignore the unintended and unforeseen consequences of human action. From this point of view, the flaw of conspiracy theories is that they think that everything that happens is the strategic product of a powerful few, but that is not how things really work. Or so they argue.

What I want to discuss here is the association made with religion throughout these characterizations of conspiracy theories as bad science and paranoid politics. This is first done *rhetorically*: words with religious connotations feature abundantly in the language they use. They commonly speak of conspiracy theories as "irrational beliefs" (Berlet, 2009: 5), casually use the verb *to believe* to describe the adherence to conspiracy theories (e.g. "pointing out that some

conspiracy theories are true does not show that it is rational to *believe* in those theories" (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 207)), and pose research questions like "why do some people *believe* in conspiracy theories while others do not?" (Byford, 2011: 6).

The association with religion goes further than a casual usage of such words, which could be argued to be the consequence of inadequate rhetorical or linguistic alternatives. Examples of how such associations with religion are made more substantively abound. Barkun argues that "belief in a conspiracy theory ultimately becomes a matter of faith rather than proof" (2006: 7). Pipes says that "conspiracy theorists devote themselves heart and soul to their faith. …[T]he truest believers devote their very lives to their cause" (1997: 23). Olmsted states that "conspiracists come to believe in their theories the way zealots believe in their religion: nothing can change their mind" (2009: 11). Berlet argues that "conspiracism is a belief system that refuses to obey the rules of logic" (2009: 5). In short, scholars argue that conspiracy theorists are just like religious fanatics because they are insensitive to skeptical reason and solid argumentation.

But scholars also make a *historical* argument when linking conspiracy theories to religiosity and corresponding worldviews. Following Popper, who sees conspiracy theories as "the typical result of the secularization of a religious superstition" (Popper, 2013: 306), such academics commonly argue that contemporary ideas of hidden powers who exercise influence and control over our social worlds are a clear remnant of a religious past. In place of the mythological gods that once were, conspiracy theorists now see more mundane yet equally powerful agents orchestrating worldly affairs. Conspiracy theorists, such critics argue, "are some of the last believers in an ordered universe [but] such beliefs are out of step with what we have generally come to believe in the late twentieth century" (Keeley, 1999: 123-4). Like the metaphysics of religion, this tendency to "order the universe in a comprehensible form" (Aaronovitch, 2010: 324) is said to run counter to modern notions of how the world works.

Another remnant of a religious past in the worldview of conspiracy theorists, these scholars argue, is their apocalypticism, dualism, or Manicheanism. Like those religious cosmologies, conspiracy theorists "cast the world in terms of a struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, and hold that this polarization will persist until the end of history, when evil is finally, definitively defeated" (Barkun, 2006: 2). "Although apocalypticism was forged in religious belief systems," Berlet argues, "today it heats up many secular movements [and is] a mindset common in conspiracist movements" (2009: 10). For Byford "the use of religious imagery to capture the essential iniquity of the conspirators is common even in the overtly secular conspiracy theories" (2011: 75). He concludes that "Manicheanism, as well as being a feature of the conspiracy theory's explanatory style, is also its condition of possibility" (2011: 83). Such scholars follow Hofstadter, who wrote about the "deeper eschatological significance" of conspiracy theories, and stated how "a spiritual wrestling match between good and evil which is the paranoid's archetypal model of the world struggle" (1996: 35). Conspiracy theories embody an outdated religious worldview, so goes their argument, and perpetuate age-old religious cosmologies of ultimate conflict.

Thirdly, these scholars associate conspiracy theories with religion by making a *functional* argument. Through envisioning such coherent and grand narratives of good, evil, and suffering in the world, conspiracy theorists construct what Max Weber called, a *religious theodicy* (1993). Groh explains that "in the search for a reason why such evil things happen to them, they soon come upon another group [which] causes them to suffer by effecting dark, evil and secretly worked out plans against them" (1987: 1). Like religious beliefs, it is argued, "the conspiratorial worldview offers the comfort of knowing that while tragic events occur, they at least occur for a reason, and the greater the event, the greater and more significant the reason" (Keeley, 1999: 124). Such discovered "truths" may be dark and evil, but understanding it "makes redemption possible" (Aaronovitch, 2010: 341) and provides "answers to all questions of and prescriptions for salvation" (Pipes, 1997: 22). Conspiracy theories provide just like

religious beliefs, these scholars argue, ultimate meaning in a world without any real significance and full of injustice and suffering.

Protecting the boundaries of science. When scholars frame conspiracy theories as bad science and paranoid politics, they infuse their analyses with implicit and explicit comparisons to religion. I have shown that in these scholarly works, conspiracy theories are associated rhetorically, historically, and functionally with religiosity. Such academics argue that conspiracy theories may look like modern scientific endeavors, critically searching for proofs and truth, but on closer inspection share more with religion: they have similar origins, contents, and functions. This is not to say that these analyses are unjustified or wrong, or that the comparison of conspiracy theories with religion cannot be fruitful.[278] However, what I want to foreground is just how this association operates in a field of knowledge contestation. What connotations does this analogy contain, and what effects does it establish in such battles for epistemic authority?

It is my argument here that when scholars associate conspiracy theories with religion, they do more than making a comparison. In effect, they situate conspiracy theories in a pre-modern past prior to the advent of modern rationality. As such, they are put on par with mythical beliefs of omnipotent gods as rulers of the universe and in stark opposition to rational and scientific understandings of how the world works. The association with religion thus functions as a trope to widen the gap between modern science and pre-modern conspiracy theories; between critical scientific analyses and gullible beliefs in conspiracy; and between those who base their truth claims on evidence instead of faith. It enacts what Bruno Latour calls the "Great Divide" (1993a: 11). The association with religion, in other words, is a prime example of scientific boundary work (Gieryn, 1999). By writing about conspiracy theories as remnants of a religious past, science emerges as radically modern, empirical, skeptical, and grounded in *proof* instead of *belief*. It is, in other words, filled with meaning and content in supposed opposition to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, are expulsed from the domain of legitimate knowledge, thereby deprived

of epistemic authority. They are, after all, only unlawful imposters: religious beliefs masquerading in utterly modern dress. Associating conspiracy theories with religiosity effectuates therefore what Latour calls "purification" (1993a): the extraction of belief and other *irrationalities* from the domain of science. And the boundaries of science are reaffirmed again (Gieryn, 1999).

These attributions to science are nothing new, but rooted in the history and ideology of the Enlightenment. Historically, science had to fight against the powers of the Church, esoteric spokespersons, and the spiritual beliefs of their publics. It had to carve its own identity and autonomy in opposition to religion through tropes of skepticism and empiricism (cf. Bauman, 1987; Gieryn, 1999, Hanegraaff, 1997; Toulmin, 1990). Today, the success of these efforts to establish science in opposition to (amongst others) religion is such that being associated with the latter is an easy way to devalue alternative truth claims. While science stands for modern, skeptical, objective, rational, disinterested, and truthful, religion stands for premodern, dogmatic, irrational, dangerous, and largely false thought (e.g. Dawkins, 2006). This dynamic is exactly what can be observed in the battles for epistemic authority science and conspiracy theorists are embroiled in.

Academic scholars argue that despite their "heroic strive for 'evidence'" (Hofstadter, 1996: 36) and immaculate scientific display, conspiracy theories are "just another religion, full of improvable beliefs, with nothing but faith to sustain them" (James, 2010). The irony is that conspiracy theorists themselves use the label of religion (and its accompanying dogmatism) to disqualify science in return. In his furious rebuttal of HIV/AIDS conspiracy theories, Kalichman shows how denialists "portray science as religion" and argues that "the tactic of redefining science as religion aims to reduce scientific evidence to faith" (2009: 101). In the next section, I describe a similar framing of science as dogmatic by my respondents. The fact is that the trope of religion proves an effective rhetorical strategy to disqualify an opponent's claims, and it is consistently deployed in many truth wars today.

At last, I would like to hypothesize as to why these scholars enforce the borders of science in this particular way. We have seen that they are clearly dismayed by conspiracy theories because the latter blur boundaries between fact and value, evidence and belief, and reality and fiction. But why is that? Given that conspiracy theories upset the distinctions on which the edifice of modern science is built, it is logical that scholars upholding positivist ideals cannot support such hybrids theories, lest they see the ivory towers of science crumbling down. But given the strong alarmism of these scholars, something greater seems to be at stake. This *modern divide* is after all not just fundamental to modern science, but informs our moral order as well. Western societies function and thrive on the belief in the strict separation of fact from value, and even of science from politics (cf. Haraway, 1991; Latour, 1993a; Taylor, 2007; Weber, 2009). It is my tentative argument here that because conspiracy theories unsettle these modern distinctions, such scholars fear the breakdown not only of science, but of society at large.

If conspiracy theories proliferate, then "we are lost and degrade to relativism" (Aaronovitch, 2010: 335), and end up in "a situation of radical epistemological pluralism in which different groups espouse completely different ideas of what is real" (Barkun, 2006: 188). If such relativism thrives, such scholars argue, then the doors are opened to all kinds of horrors: violence, terrorism, extremism, totalitarianism, wars, genocide, populism, antisemitism, oppression, demonization, and so on (cf. Byford, 2011; Pipes, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Postmodernism is therefore similarly despised since it popularized and normalized the idea that different ways of knowing are equally valid. In fact, as I argue above, postmodernism gives conspiracy theories intellectually respectable perspectives, to the consternation of positivist scholars. *Epistemological* relativism is, in other words, put on par with *moral* relativism. Defending the bastion of modern science seems therefore less an issue of protecting truth from falsity, but more an imperative to save humanity from its downfall.

7.4 Challenging the Epistemic Authority of Science: An Attack on Its Public Image

How do conspiracy theorists frame science instead, and what arguments do they use to characterize science in efforts to challenge its epistemic authority? In the following, I show how people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu formulate a threefold critique of science that is directed at the powerful and authoritative public image of science. As it turns out, this public image in which science is portrayed as distinctively objective, disinterested, and truthful – "the PR of science" (Shapin, 2012: 38) and its "professional ideology" (Gieryn, 1983) – is precisely the object of critique.

Critique No 1: Skepticism? What about the dogmas of modern science? An important trait science often presents itself with is skepticism. This characterization can be traced to early modern philosophers like Michel de Montaigne and David Hume, who revived the spirit of the Pyrrhonic school by putting all truth claims under critical scrutiny, both religious truths and scientific knowledge. They believe that no form of knowledge can be held as absolutely true and that there should always be room for fundamental doubt. The trope of skepticism became a powerful tool to set science apart from dogmatic belief systems like religion (cf. Brown, 2009: 51; Toulmin, 1990: 29). In contrast to religious beliefs in a single, all-encompassing truth, science takes a critical and incredulous stance towards whatever truth claim being presented, or so the story goes. Given the disparagement of conspiracy theories as a modern form of religion, this trope is still employed now in order to differentiate science as a distinctively superior way of knowing.

Yet skepticism is just as much a part of my respondents' self-identifications as it is of modern science. As I showed in Chapter Six, the people I interviewed regard themselves as being "skeptic by nature" (Michael, 23), as people who "dare to think differently" (Pauline, 67), "out of the box" (Lucy, 54), and who "put question marks over nearly everything" (Steven, 28). Motivated by a self-proclaimed skepticism, they criticize every form of dogmatism, particularly that which characterizes modern science. On the most

abstract level, they criticize the materialist foundations of the scientific worldview and treat such a worldview as dogma. Their critical narratives are centered on phenomena like telepathy, consciousness, and healing hands. They argue that modern science labels phenomena that are inconsistent with its materialistic worldview as illusionary, and they emphasize that parapsychological phenomena are discarded not on the basis of empirical research or counterfactual evidence (as proper scientists would have it) but simply because their materialist worldview does not allow for the existence of such phenomena. *They just don't want to see it*, respondents argue, and hence are such phenomena left unexplained.

To be sure, my respondents continually emphasize that they embrace the scientific enterprise to accumulate accurate knowledge about the self, the world, and the universe, but they argue that radical skepticism, that is, the free spirit of inquiry, has been smothered by dogma. This is why Rupert Sheldrake's *The Science Delusion*, which explores the non-material world and which is hugely popular in the conspiracy milieu, is described by the author as "pro-science" (2013: 7). Liam (67) explained this position in more detail:

> *[S]o religion has been replaced by modern science in the Enlightenment, which in my opinion only obscured matters. Because it said: "reality, what is that? That is matter! All that there is, is what we can observe. And everything that does not fit this logic is speculation, that's nonsense, that's for charlatans." But this is such an unimaginable reduction it is sad. If we know that of all there is in the universe matter only represents four percent, yet we come to the situation that science defines that four percent as the only reality. What we do is looking through a keyhole and everything we cannot see is simply nonsense.*

Material reductionism not only prohibits explorations into worlds unknown, respondents argue, but it simultaneously denies the existence of non-physical powers in everyday life. "[T]hat doesn't fit the regular way of thinking," Lucy (54) explained. She added,

> *if only we would start to imagine that when quantum physics shows how even the mood of scientists influences their test results, how far*

> *reaching this all is. If only we start to realize what this means, we would think twice saying what is real and what is not, what is ridiculous or not.*

Opinions about the existence and powers of non-physical phenomena are often grounded in and validated by personal experiences of the supernatural in everyday life. Neal (58), for example, told me how he got cured from permanent back aches:

> *[S]o there was this woman I knew via work. One day she put both her hands on my back. Three minutes or so, very quickly. "Do you feel anything?" she asked, I said "no, not really." The next day I woke up without any pain in my back. Just like that, in one strike completely over. … If you experience that first hand…what more may be possible? So since then much of my reticence towards people's odd stories disappeared. So from that moment on, because for me there is no doubt about it, you start looking at things differently. It has set the door wide open, because I was really a science kid.*

Despite his technical background, and against his preconceptions, something supernatural like hands-on healing proved real to him and fed his critique of science: "to know is to measure, and we measure nothing, so it isn't there," as he said. From a scientific paradigm, proper knowledge only comes from material observations, and if there is not a material entity to measure, then there is no event that could be said to take place. Neal implies that personal experiences of immaterial events can only be dismissed by science.

The dogmatism of science is made worse, my respondents argue, by the socialization of scientists into a culture of expertise with its own particular set of assumptions and beliefs. This results in the social exclusion and stigmatization of other, seemingly deviant forms of knowledge. Steven (28) described his encounters with scientists as contentious: "You know what it is, they have had a certain education, they have already received certain information, they are formed in a particular way. Their vision excludes therefore all others." A much-debated topic in this context is the effectiveness of vaccinations. Because of their education in modern medical science, it is argued, medical specialists no longer question the basic foundations of what

vaccinations are, how they function, or whether there are alternatives. And "if they are being educated like that, and it's a whole industry, there are hundred thousands making a living out of it. Yeah, well, that myth continues to exist then" (Liam, 67). John, a holistic food adviser (34 years old), encountered similar responses when talking about the topic of nutrition with an expert in the field: "I notice with this professor, in a simple discussion about vitamin B-12 deficits. 'Oh yeah, just buy some pills,' he replies when I speak of bad nutrition as its cause. Completely stuck in his own way of thinking. Pills don't do the same." Liam (67) who spoke to me in the beginning of our interview about his interactions with a philosopher of science at a local university who had been extremely critical about Liam's platform for governmental discretion on issues like chemtrails, collective vaccinations, and European food regulations:

> *I got to know him because he rallied against us and framed us as fools and morons and scaremongers. So I asked him to meet me and have a conversation. He agreed, and we talked for about four hours. He is a very intelligent, reasonable and articulate fellow. But he is totally not open to my perspective. Even hostile. And this astounds me, because I would say people at the university, scientists, have an open attitude. Shouldn't they say, 'okay, that man thinks completely different than I do, that puzzles me, I want to understand.' But that attitude is not there, at all. So that's I think the essence of what we are going to talk about.*

To conclude, these respondents challenge the public image of science as skeptical, and advance instead a version of it as dogmatic and narrow-minded. The *free spirit of inquiry* that once characterized science, they argue, has been stifled by the materialistic orthodoxy of mainstream scientists. Curiosity is replaced with doctrine and pre-established beliefs. Respondents, however, do not deny or dismiss the relevance of science. Their argument is that modern science *is not scientific enough*, since it has lost the openness and skepticism that should inform the habitus of the ideal scientist. If science is all about the free spirit of inquiry, they ask, then why don't we explore all unknown realms and let our curiosity run free? There is so much more

to find out, such respondents argue. Kuhn's (2012) *normal science* is an example of what these people rally against, calling instead for the more revolutionary version of it.

Modern science has always had two faces, since "science depends not [only] on the inductive accumulation of proofs but [also] on the methodological principle of doubt" (Giddens, 1991: 21). Although always standing in the shadow of the dominant Cartesian quest for certainty, radical skepticism about the epistemological foundations and methodological rules of science is just as intricate a part of the modern scientific enterprise (Toulmin, 1990). The conspiracy theorists that I interviewed argue that science should live up to its critical promise and practice the skepticism that it preaches. Like those sixteenth-century philosophers such as Montaigne, and their twentieth-century counterparts like Feyerabend, they critique the alleged dogmatism of science, its core assumptions, rules, and methodologies, and instead *put question marks over nearly everything*.

My respondents are especially skeptical about the limits of legitimate inquiry that science has set itself: materialism, yes; supernatural phenomena, no. Such endeavors to stretch the boundaries of science using the ethos of skepticism is more common on the *scientific fringe* (cf. Hess, 1993; Wallis, 1979). "Pushing the weird and the implausible," Shapin says, "they bang on about intellectual openness and egalitarianism, about the vital importance of seriously inspecting all counter-instances and anomalies, about the value of continual skepticism" (2012: 38). This discourse is often deployed in the conspiracy milieu[279]. For some scholars, such expressions of "hyperscience," to use Shapin's term again, is a way of designating some as "quacks" (2012: 38). But that seems to me another form of boundary work. My point is that the trope of skepticism and its accompanying limits is a contentious one. Who the *real* skeptic is, the mainstream scientist or the conspiracy theorist, proves far from straightforward.

Critique No 2: Objectivity? What about the pollution of scientific knowledge? Along with the idealized image of science as righteously skeptical is the purported neutrality or objectivity of science, which is the second object of critique within the Dutch conspiracy theory

milieu. As with the characterization of conspiracy theories, science (and its *allies* outside academia) consistently speaks about unique methods it has developed to arrive at objective knowledge. But, Lucy (54) noted "science may say to find universal and unbiased truths, but in practice it is never impartial. Science always tests on the basis of certain assumptions, yeah, one needs to start somewhere of course, but there are already conditionalities." Universality is therefore an odd sort of ideal because, as William, a 25 year old student explained,

> *to look at something scientifically is to look at things in a particular way, or from a particular point of view. It is never impartial, so there's no absolute truth either, because that is always approached from a certain perspective. It is always… biased.*

Respondents often point out how facts and data presented by the scientific community as *objective* are in fact the product of selection and exclusion. The controversy around *global warming* is a key instance, since "these reports showed how these scientists left out many data so that global warming figures appeared much stronger than it actually is," according to Neil (58 years old). Day-to-day experiences inform such critiques about the construction of *facts*. Michael, a 23 year old Business Administration major, noticed for example, "through my own practical experience" that groceries prices went up much higher than official inflation numbers like the *Consumer Price Index* accounted for:

> *I live on my own for six years now, and if I compare my grocery list from back then with today's, I see that prices went up by thirty to forty percent. So good luck convincing me that inflation is what the government tells us, two percent a year, ha, nobody believes that!*

After some research, Michael told me, he found out that some of the products used to measure inflation have, over the years, been excluded or substituted for lower quality (and thus cheaper) items to "artificially keeping inflation low." It is all too easy, Michael concluded, "to make us believe in certain things which are truly nonsense."

The ideal of objectivity and universality in scientific knowledge is built on an image of science as disinterested and free

from other interests, but, respondents argue, such is a naïve position. This is particularly so because scientists inevitably (and increasingly) depend on funding for research projects. John (34), for instance, argues that "scientific research is never independent, [because] from who do they receive money?" The example most mentioned in my interviews was medical research, since it is highly dependent on and interconnected with *Big Pharma*. Respondents argued that "those scientific studies [about the safety and efficacy of certain medications] are very often financed by the pharmaceutical companies producing those medications" (Julie, 31).

It is, however, not just the need for funding that inspires their critique, but more specifically, it is how the objectives of financers structurally influence the fabrication of scientific knowledge. What is often publicized as the result of scientific research, appears manipulated, "those studies that were not positive are 'coincidentally' left out, you know" (Julie, 31). Knowledge presented as the outcome of independent, disinterested, scientific research is, following my respondents, the outcome of power and interest structures. To understand how it works, they argue, we should look at the context in which knowledge is produced and the social, political, and economic forces that impinge upon it. As George, a 38 year old care giver, explained it,

> *You probably know that in all kinds of products there's a sugar replacement called aspartame, which is approved by the European Commission. Well, little by little it becomes clear that aspartame is really bad for us. But how does it work with scientific research? In order to sweeten the products with less costs, research is done to get a certain ingredient approved that is cheaper than sugar. Numerous studies are done, and if the research agency or university comes with results that don't satisfy the food producer they will look for another agency. They will do this until they can prove it is good, or at least not bad. That is the odd part: the food industry can command their own research and then have solid reports on the basis of which is decided whether or not it should be allowed. 'Hmmm thirty mice died, now let's try it on rats, hey, the rats don't die, it's a good product!' That's how crooked things are.*

The connection between research findings and financial interests, they argue, make it difficult to take an informed standpoint in controversies about global warming, food safety, and medications. Citizens can never know for sure who is right and who is wrong, or what is true and what is not in public debates between scientists. That said, it is generally assumed that the established and most powerful organizations are the least to be trusted. Robert (43) argued, for example, that "the strange thing is that those scientists confirming the conventional perspective are paid by organizations who have an interest in keeping us believing it as such. Those arguing against, don't have the means and resources to make their findings public".

In conclusion, respondents in the conspiracy milieu contend that the public image of science as objective, disinterested, universal, and impartial is highly problematic. Scientific facts are not so much *discovered* as *constructed* and this knowledge production is intimately related to political power and economic interests. Such popular claims resonate with institutionalized assumptions in the social sciences. Authors like Berger and Luckmann (1966), for instance, have contributed to the sociology of knowledge by theorizing that reality in all its manifestations is socially constructed. Postmodern theorists, in turn, have radicalized this constructivism by proclaiming the end of truth and reality itself (e.g. Baudrillard, 1994). Although conspiracy theorists are not radically relativistic, they do point to the *fuzzy*, and *messy* everyday practice of scientific knowledge production which is inherently *vulnerable* to external interests; a notion long articulated by scholars in the social studies of science (cf. Collins and Pinch, 1993; Law, 2004; Latour, 1987). The argument that scientific knowledge is deeply embedded in politico-economic power structures has a strong affinity with critical neo-Marxist theories in the social sciences. Herbert Marcuse (1991[1964]) along with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2010) have extensively argued that *Reason* (science, technology and the bureaucratic apparatus) has lost its neutral status since it is increasingly aligned with the cultural logic of capitalism. More recently, Stanley Aronowitz contended that "science cannot escape capital and has been subsumed under the dialectic of the production of needs of capital" (1988: 40). In the eyes

of such scholars, scientific objectivity is a legitimation to obscure the real interests of the modern capitalistic enterprise, including its hegemony, the material interests it strives for, and the social control it exerts. Likewise, my respondents argue that scientists have an interest in keeping us believing that scientific findings are objective, neutral, and uncontested. Not unlike scholars in this (neo)Marxist tradition, they hold that the general public—the *sheeple*—live in *false consciousness,* they consider it their moral task to reveal the operative powers behind the scenes, and free citizens from their ignorant views on science.

Critique No. 3: Equality? What about the authority of scientific experts? The voice of science, I explain in the introduction of this chapter, is primarily listened to with reverence. Building on its elevated cultural status, scientific experts enjoy an authoritative social position in society, which is, according to my respondents, problematic and unwarranted. They challenge therefore the public image of scientists as a moral citizenry working for the public good (e.g. Brown, 2009: 28; Merton, 1973). Instead, my respondents told me, scientists can often better be seen as authoritarian, arrogant, and elitist. For example, alternative sources of knowledge are structurally undervalued so that modern science can uphold its monopoly on truth. My respondents described feeling excluded, mocked, and stigmatized as *crazy* when they proposed alternative ways of looking at the world. John (34) experienced the credibility of his knowledge constantly disputed:

> *I am no medical expert, I am no doctor, so it's not true, right? They ask me what my scientific background is, so I tell them about the anthroposophical studies I completed in Germany. But that's not scientific, so it means nothing. Lately I've been asking my wife: "should I also attend university and get a medical degree? More people would believe me." But why is that? Who decides that? I find it ridiculous.*

More specifically, respondents question why the experiential knowledge people gather in the course of their life remains

unacknowledged by experts who prioritize the abstract and detached knowledge of science. As Julie (31) said:

> *I am also a human being and I have done my study of life, so why? I have my own feelings and emotions and experience so why? Because you've studied you know how it works, right? When you haven't studied you don't count in this society…*

The superior epistemological position and accompanying moral authority of science finds its translation in everyday interactions between laymen and experts. According to respondents, these are structured in a hierarchical fashion, making an open and egalitarian conversation virtually impossible:

> *It's all like: "I have studied, I am a doctor, I know more than you, so I will enlighten you. You are a layman." So already from moment A there's a hierarchy, and they just instruct you to have your baby vaccinated, because well, that's procedure. So I said, "listen, I've done my own research and I have this and that consideration." And the nurse at the clinic just sits there and does exactly what she's learned to do: just copy and paste, having no clue how vaccinations actually work. And there you are thinking, "I don't want to vaccinate my baby child, but what can I do?" So I went to this homeopathic doctor, who is much more open to discussion, I already appreciate that, it should not be like that you are being laughed at when you think differently about vaccinations. You know, [at the anthroposophical doctor] it's just more humane, they are less in the role of "we know it all and you as laymen don't know shit, because, well, you haven't studied." It's just…more relaxed, more accessible." (Julie, 31)*

Instead of being told what to do in an authoritarian way, respondents emphasized a need for personal choice and the possibility of an open discussion with experts. They argued that people are well-informed nowadays, and oftentimes have read and studied their topic from different angles which scientific experts should take into consideration when interacting with the public. Pauline (67) confirmed:

> *I find it strange that people think: "Oh these white coated people, they know it all, so we follow, we surrender." Because they don't know it all! As a human being I can decide how, I want to stay in charge and don't want to surrender to doctors like that! I would like to have conversations about how we are going to fix things, what the other possibilities are.*

Lucy (57) spoke similarly about her difficulties with authority, "authority in the Western world, is 'I am the boss, and you are subservient, obedient, docile. And I believe that's not right, that's no good." When I asked her about concrete situations when authority was an issue, she went into detail about her interactions with a university professor who remained stiff and authoritarian when faced with critique and a wish for discussion:

> *[H]e just cut us off, like an ulcer, because we went against him, that was, absolutely unheard of back then, "I am the professor," you get me? And before that in high school, my parents, you name it. I hated it when people told me what to do simply because they had a different status. We may have different roles, but we are equal. It's not because you have a different role, your truth is worth more than mine. There are some people I look up to, because I admire and respect how they share their knowledge, their capabilities, and their means without saying, "this is how it's done, and that's not how you should do it."*

The message of these people is that experts should not coast on their scientific credentials and cultural authority in their interactions with laymen. Instead, they should have a more open interaction with the public and should acknowledge the practical wisdom, subjective feelings, and (alternative) knowledge that ordinary citizens may have gathered along the way. Most especially, scientific experts should treat them as equals.

In addition, respondents pointed out that the social position of scientific experts is legitimated and guarded through practices of professional in-group protection. As members of a professional group with similar education, assumptions, and norms, medical specialists protect one another against outside threats and, collectively, cover up for failures. This protection, they hold, is not only a social in-group

dynamic but institutionalized in and legitimated by law. The social and juridical position of laymen is diminished by all kinds of laws set up to protect the medical profession, they argued. According to Simon, a 40-year-old self-proclaimed victim, "there's an oath of secrecy, and that oath is purely there for the protection of their profession. Even the experts informing the judges can exempt themselves, so how can there be any justice? That's Kafka, you know." The precarious position of laymen is particularly felt when social norms of in-group protection collide with institutionalized forms of professional protection. John (34) explains that when his baby attracted sepsis during a medical treatment, the hospital tried to avoid responsibility by reporting the parents to the "Counsel for Child Abuse." Their argument was that the baby was underfed by its parents and then brought to the hospital too late,

> *of course, the hospital tried to save itself. They know the fault is theirs. They just thought, "hey, before we get into trouble because of the death of that child, we report the parents and play it like they didn't take care of her, resulting in her death." Luckily it's all over now: we won in court, they acquitted us from further persecution. But are we going to do anything about the hospital? I mean, you always see, those in power just want to keep their dominant position. And they are very powerful. Doesn't this tell you something about the system? Doesn't a light bulb go off now? What is actually going on here with these hospitals and those in power?*

All stories thus point towards the structural inequalities between the educated, scientifically trained experts and ordinary laymen. Scientists are considered an untouchable elite exerting social and moral power over *ordinary* people, and are thought to operate in alliance with other elitist members of society such as politicians, multinationals, and medical industries. Such ideas, typical for conspiracy theorists, resonate with what C. Wright Mills called *the power elite*, meaning a small group of people in the higher echelons of major institutions and organizations who exert great influence (1956). Scientists, my respondents argue, are part of such a (globalizing) power elite that protects its own interests.

They are not alone in these suspicions. Theoretical-physicist-turned-sociologist-of-science Brian Martin similarly argues that "the dominant group of experts in any field is usually closely linked to other power structures, typically government, industry or professional bodies. The links are cemented through jobs, consultancies, access to power and status, training and other methods" (1996: 5). As a result, public interest is often ignored, suppressed, or excluded, my respondents argued. Such convictions strongly resonate with social scientific critiques of expertise (e.g. Haskell, 1984; Laski, 1932; Martin, 1996). These critics concede that scientific experts have great knowledge of the field they specialize in and have often shown very practically to be worth their credentials. They have, in Haskell's words, "in fullest measure the authority to which every expert aspires" (1984: xxvii). But these scholars also point out that (scientific) experts tend to become self-referential in their ideas and values, resulting in a collective arrogance and resistance to outside beliefs and the interests of ordinary people. My respondents similarly question the moral authority of scientists as they point to what Martin calls the "political mobilization of expertise" (1996: 3). They contest the structural under-validation of non-expert knowledge and experience, and challenge the hierarchical social and moral position of science. Their responses are captured in Martin's query, "what [should be] the role of expertise in a society based on equality?" (2008: 10).

A pop-sociological critique of the public image of science. In contrast to the dominant public image of science as skeptical, objective, and rational, my analysis demonstrates that conspiracy theorists do not accept that description and instead challenge epistemic authority. Instead of science's skepticism, they point to the (materialist) dogmatism of science; instead of its objectivity, they point to the pollution of its knowledge by external influences; and instead of its professed rationality, they point the multiple ways in which scientists exploit their expertise. Merton's "institutional imperatives" are not so much "taken to comprise the ethos of modern science" (1973: 270), but are seen instead as the efficacy of an ongoing scientific public relations campaign. However, conspiracy theorists

are not straightforwardly against science in describing and understanding the world. More than merely mimicking modern science to augment their own epistemic authority (an argument often used to debunk them in these credibility contests, e.g. Byford, 2011; Pipes, 1997), conspiracy theorists wish to purify science and re-install its free spirit of inquiry. Science is at once revered for its intentions and demonized for its manifestations. As my analysis has shown, conspiracy theorists praise science's original project, but critique it for having become dogmatic, polluted, and authoritative. The societal perseverance of the dominant public image of science explains why conspiracy theorists are suspicious of science. They question it because in our everyday reality, science doesn't live up to its idealized public image.

Ironically, this critique of science is visible in the discourse of the social sciences as well. Academic scholars have shown that that dominant public image of science is difficult to maintain when we look at the messy back-stage that is vulnerable to political influences and professional interests (cf. Collins and Pinch, 1993; Law, 2004; Latour, 1987). Many scholars in science studies have shown with theoretical and empirical arguments that scientific knowledge is not transcendent, but rather is the product of particular people in a particular setting at a particular time (cf. Doyle McCarthy, 1996; Hardin, 1986; Shapin, 2008). Conspiracy theorists popularize such notions as they deconstruct the public face of science and attempt to reveal the ideological, moral, social, economic, and political powers that complicate its findings. To be more precise: the discourse of conspiracy theorists resonates with postmodern skepticism of grand narratives, social constructivist accounts of knowledge production, neo-Marxist perspectives on the power of capital, and sociological research on experts-as-power elites. In all these ways, conspiracy theories prove some form of pop-sociology (Birchall, 2006; Knight, 2000), and show in detail how academic knowledge does not remain locked up in ivory tower, but finds its way into everyday life. The conspiracy theorists I interviewed exemplify this democratization of academic knowledge that Giddens coined the "double hermeneutic" (1984: 284). Gieryn would agree, having argued that "interpretations

and representations [of science] leak out everywhere and make themselves available for ideological projects" (1999: 28). And indeed, these conspiracy theorists critique the public image of science with arguments provided by the (social) sciences themselves.

But this elective affinity works both ways. Neo-Marxist theories from the Frankfurt School about the manipulative powers of *capital* to indoctrinate people with *false consciousness* easily conform to conspiracist sociology. Adorno and Horkheimer write pessimistically about the "culture industry" which is "interwoven" with "the most powerful sectors of industry," and can therefore do whatever it wants with consumers, "producing them, controlling them , disciplining them" (2010: 122/144). Volker Heins similarly points extensively to the "traps of conspiracy thinking" in critical theory when he says that "in the society imagined by Horkheimer as little as possible is left to chance (or the market), everything is interconnected and nothing is as it appears. Critical social theory is conceived as the attempt to uncover the coordinates of conspiratorial networks" (2007: 792). Martin Parker holds that "Marxism in general has functioned as a pervasive conspiracy theory for most of the century" (2001: 198). It is not for no reason that Popper saw the historicism of Marx as "a derivative of conspiracy theory" (2013: 306). Parker goes as far to say that "the holy trinity Marx, Durkheim and Weber all claimed access to some level of explanation which was somehow beyond the comprehension of ordinary people" (2001: 192).

The similarity of sociology to conspiracy theory may be extended far beyond Marxism: both the conspiracy theorist and the sociologist provide explanations of the social world; both set out to uncover hidden forces orchestrating the course of history; both appear to have access to some hidden plane only visible to their critical gaze; and both see it as their job to lift the veil of darkness from the gullible masses. Pierre Bourdieu reveals this influence of Marxism when he says that "the function of sociology, as of every science, is to reveal that which is hidden" (1996: 17). "Of course," Latour acknowledges, "we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of

greedy people with dark intents, but [there is] something troublingly similar in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below" (2004b: 229). Like conspiracy theorists, the self-identification of sociologists as righteous *myth busters* working to unmask the illusions that ordinary people believe in is widespread (Elias, 1978). Latour asks himself quite justifiably then, "what is the real difference between [a] conspiracists and a popularized version of social critique, inspired by, let's say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu?" (2004b: 228). Conspiracy theory as (pop) sociology, sociology as (intellectual) conspiracy theory: just *what* is the difference?

7.5 Conclusion: Science Wars Democratized

> *Maybe I am taking conspiracy theories too seriously, but it worries me to detect, in those mad mixtures of knee-jerk disbelief, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social Neverland many of the weapons of social critique. Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless. In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trademark: Made in Criticalland.*
>
> *–Latour, 2004b: 230*

The characterization of science as distinctively skeptical, objective, and rational has historically proven a powerful rhetorical gesture to secure the epistemic and moral authority of science (cf. Brown, 2009; Gieryn, 1999; Taylor, 1996). In opposition to the dogmatism of religion, the subjectivity of politics, and the irrationality of the common citizen, science effectively created its own cultural niche through this powerful public image. And so people generally believed science to be the beacon leading us out of the darkness and into the light of modernity, rewarding it therefore with money, resources, and authority. But they believed that public image of science to be an accurate description. Even today, defenders of science from all

corners, be they publicists, journalists of science, or those working for skeptic organizations, still appeal to this public image when the authority of science is challenged. As this chapter showed, it is also with that image of science that conspiracy theories are compared, and then found wanting. In other words, this public image still proves a powerful way to exclude rival claimants of epistemic authority.

Scholars in science studies have in the last half century started to understand that public image not so much as a realistic description of science, but instead as "professional ideologies" serving the interest of scientists in their pursuit of epistemic authority (cf. Gieryn, 1983; Laudan, 1983; Mulkay, 1979; Taylor, 1996). They have shown empirically that scientists advance an image of themselves even when it is inaccurate to their actual practice; the *PR* of science is different from its everyday backstage workings (cf. Doyle McCarthy, 1996; Latour, 1987; Law, 2004; Harding, 1986, Shapin, 1986). And as the interviewed conspiracy theorists show in this chapter, such ideas are no longer reserved for the ivory tower of academia. The public image of science as distinctively skeptical, objective, and rational is contested from all corners of society.

This situation posits conspiracy theories therefore not so much outside of science, but right in the middle of its most fierce battle: the science wars. These clashes between scientific *realists* and *constructivists* centered exactly on the reality of that public image (cf. Gross and Levitt, 1994; Ross, 1996; Sokal and Bricmont, 1999). But although the arguments of conspiracy theorists resonate with those in science studies, it appears imperative in these protracted science wars for the latter to disassociate themselves from conspiracy theories. Bruno Latour, who is one of the most influential exponents of the *constructivists* in these wars, writes about conspiracy theories as "an absurd deformation of our own arguments" (2004b: 230). He deplores "what has become of critique" now that their "weapons" are hijacked

> *by the worst possible fellows as an argument against the things we cherish [...] and yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated,*

> *unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. (2004b: 227)*

Latour's plea makes abundantly clear that when "outsiders" are starting to behave, talk, and look like "the established", we can expect efforts by the latter to highlight their differences (Elias and Scotson, 1994; cf. Bourdieu, 1984; Gieryn, 1999). The critiques of science as formulated by conspiracy theorists have simply become too similar to those in science studies. And so boundary work abounds.

Again, whether I am worried like Latour about the unlawful deployment of the weapons of social critique is not the point. What is relevant for the purposes of this study is how conspiracy theorists are subjected to a double-form of boundary work: they are excluded by academics defending the positivistic ideals of science for making soft what is actually hard, *and* by scholars of the social studies of science who see their weapons now being used by myriad imposters for all gruesome objectives. But conspiracy theories attract much more boundary work. Bratich, for example, shows how leftist academics and intellectuals like Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn differentiate "their own 'legitimate conspiracy theories' (called institutional research or structural analyses)" from real conspiracy theories, in order to preserve their own epistemic authority (2008: 127, 123-157). In their view, Bratich notes, "conspiracy theories are oversimplifying, distracting … a diversion from real issues [and] ignore society's institutions" (2008: 141)—arguments that sound remarkably familiar. Marxists, to add another assaulted party, are at pains to show

> *what's wrong with conspiracy theories as a worldview … what the fundamental differences are between Marxist analyses and conspiracy theories, and why the former are grounded in a much deeper understanding of societal structures and how power works than the latter. (Molyneux, 2013)*

Like the conspiracy theorists I encountered in my fieldwork, the pejorative connotation and the performative powers of being called a conspiracy theorist is reason for anyone who wants to expose the hidden forces of powerful groups to proclaim, *I am not a conspiracy theorist, but….*

The dynamics of boundary work in which conspiracy theorists are immersed, I conclude here, are much more complex and multilayered than the simple opposition between science and the conspiracy theories that I started out with in this chapter. As Nattrass argues,

> *boundary work in defense of science has not only adapted to the modern age by taking place online and with the help of electronic media, but it is being undertaken by members of the public. Whereas in the past, boundary work was conducted primarily by scholars seeking to develop and maintain public respect for science and to relegate "pseudoscience" beyond the pale of academia, today the battle is more diffuse, public and decentralized. (2012: 158-9)*

Indeed, the present-day defense of science comes from all corners, but so do conspiracy theorists and other critics of science. The *truth wars* science is engaged in are far from over; they are part and parcel of contemporary Western societies. Much sociological research from these battlefields is still to be done as more and more parties are involved, each advancing their own images of self and other in pursuit of epistemic authority. I question whether the public image of science as the impartial carrier of truth has done most of its compelling work. Has it lost its magical spell now that so many members of the public call out this beneficial self-description as mere PR? If this is so, what new ways to secure the epistemic authority of science can we expect?

8. Conclusion

In contrast to prevalent notions of conspiracy theories as the delusional thought of paranoid and militant minds endangering democratic societies, I have set out with this cultural sociological study to *understand* instead of pathologize the contemporary prevalence of conspiracy theories. My goal was not to condemn or discard them, but to grasp the meaning that these alternative forms of knowledge have for the people involved with them. Such an effort towards *verstehen* is largely absent in the academic study of conspiracy culture, but is central to the long interpretative tradition of the social sciences in which I situate this study. The overall research questions that I pursued throughout this study was directed at mapping *conspiracy culture*. What are the ideas, practices, biographies, and products of people making up this subcultural world, and how are these related to what I provisionally called the mainstream? And secondly, how can the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories be explained?

One of the most distinctive aspects of this study is its ethnographic focus. I studied conspiracy culture from the perspectives of the people who engage directly with conspiracy

theories. To do so, I immersed myself in that subculture for about two years, during which time I experienced firsthand how they see the world around us. During that period, I became involved with many people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu, and studied not only who these people are and what they think, but also what they do with these ideas. Those practices, then, showed me that conspiracy theories are not merely abstract, theoretical ideas, but spur significant real life action and incite cooperation among and conflict between conspiracy theorists. Following such lines of agreement and opposition, clear diversity between people in the conspiracy milieu abounds: ideological convictions, epistemological strategies and (self-) identifications differ markedly among the subculture. In the preceding chapters I have made efforts to explore and to demonstrate the variety and richness of conspiracy culture, I will now draw my findings together to theoretically reflect on my research and my project in total.

What is most common about conspiracy theorists is that they distrust the "official" story (always referred to in scare quotes). Mainstream society may think that the reality they are presented with is true, but conspiracy theorists do not readily accept what our epistemic authorities sanction as the *real truth*. What most of us take as self-evident is subject to extreme suspicion and distrust. Whether it is the news we see on television, the medications prescribed to us, or the heated debates between political opponents, conspiracy theorists tell us to think twice, because "nothing is as it seems" (Barkun, 2006: 4) and "appearances deceive" (Pipes, 1997: 45). Throughout this study I have demonstrated the many ways in which conspiracy theorists go against established ideas, norms, and widely-held assumptions. Terrorist attacks are seen as false-flag operations carried out by professional commandos; movies, television, and music are not there to entertain us, but to covertly indoctrinate us through subliminal messaging and other techniques of manipulation; the holy scriptures we read in church have been twisted and adapted by powerful men to hide their original meaning; large scale vaccination campaigns are not about public health but about securing private profit; the moon is not a natural satellite, but an alien

instrument of mind-control; the history of mankind we commonly learn in schools deliberately obscures our supernatural ancestry; the white lines airplanes leave behind in the skies are not condensed water molecules but toxic chemicals meant to indoctrinate us; and banks do not lend out money because they have it, but rather they create money out of thin air and charge us for it. Conspiracy theorists simply do not consider the stories that our epistemic institutions tell us to be truthful: *reality* is mere surface appearance, a symbolic facade to lure the public and disguise the fact that malicious, covert actions are taking place.

But why is it the case that conspiracy theorists distrust the official explanations to such an extreme degree, and why do they experience the everyday world we live in so differently? Besides the revelations of actual conspiracies in the recent past, which have undoubtedly prompted disbelief in the truths we are presented with (cf. Knight, 2000; Olmsted, 2009; Uscinski and Parent, 2014), I have shown in this work that the current popularity of conspiracy theories should be understood from its historical and cultural context. In the following, I will elaborate on what I consider the most crucial aspects in this understanding of conspiracy culture, namely the contested status of mainstream epistemic institutions and the knowledge they produce. Further, I argue that these developments feed on a cultural logic, a hermeneutic, of suspicion. This way of experiencing or *reading* the world is characteristic of conspiracy culture but has a broader intellectual history worth exploring. These three topics all direct attention to the fact that objective or unequivocal truths (as offered by our epistemic institutions) are for many people implausible today. Then again, we need some amount of solid ground under our feet, so how do people deal with the epistemic instability that results from such skepticism? It is with that topic, the difficulty of living in a world with loose foundations, that I will conclude this study.

Contested Institutions: Facing Corruption, Desiring Purification

The major institutions of our daily life including science, politics, media, and religion feature prominently in contemporary conspiracy theories. Throughout this study I have shown that they attract a great deal of suspicion and discontent in the conspiracy milieu; conspiracy theorists argue that mainstream societal institutions no longer function as they should and cannot be trusted. The Christian Church (and other institutionalized forms of religion) does not devote itself to spiritual matters only, but is seen by conspiracy theorists as a sinister organization ruled by men with many more interests instead. Conventional politics is similarly despised for being *just a game*, a mere charade to pretend that real choice and democratic influence is offered when all politicians care about is their own re-election and catering to *Big Business*. Science is another common target. No longer seen as the unfettered collective quest for new knowledge, science, for conspiracy theorists, is seen as corrupted by dogma and financial interests alike. The mainstream media, too, are seen as propaganda machines of the powerful. Instead of objectively informing us about what happens in the world and critically challenging those in power, they are giving us a version of reality that is beneficial to their corporate owners. In general, conspiracy theorists have lost their faith in the healthy-functioning of dominant societal institutions, they see institutional corruption in every domain and therefore no longer trust their activities and products.

Nor are they alone in their disillusion. It is often argued that societal trust in major institutions has been on the decline for decades. Many more people in Western European societies believe less and less that institutions deliver what they are meant to and therefore turn away from them (cf. Inglehart, 1997; Moy and Pfau, 2000; Misztal, 2013). To give a few examples: institutionalized religion has lost for many people its spiritual appeal, leaving once-full churches so disused that they are turned into concert halls or design hotels (e.g. Bruce, 2002; Taylor, 2007; Wilson, 1976). Many people have similarly lost their faith in institutionalized politics to adequately represent their

interests as evidenced by the decline of party membership and electoral turnout (e.g. Dalton, 2004; Kriesi et al., 2008; Mair, 2013). Mainstream science can count on much popular resistance as well and no longer enjoys the cultural authority it had only half a century ago. Science is not the societal panacea but part of the problem today (e.g. Beck, 1992; Brown, 2009; Gauchat, 2011). And the most common window to the world, the media, has just as well fallen from grace. Instead of the highly esteemed *Fourth Estate*, the mainstream media are often seen as aligning too easily with vested interests (be it in commerce or government) which results in the loss of their critical edge and power checking function (e.g. Gans, 2003; Kiousis, 2001; Street, 2011). In short, all of our major institutions face serious crises of legitimacy in contemporary Western societies.

This decline in trust and participation did not mean an altogether retreat from the goals and promises of these institutions. As Berger et al. (1973) argue in their now classic work, people in modern societies may feel alienated from the institutions that once provided structure and meaning, but this state of "homelessness" may just as well lead to new ways of giving shape to the ideals they once embodied. In each of those aforementioned domains we see efforts to restore the original meaning and ambition of the institutions at hand (cf. Houtman, Laermans and Simons, 2016). New religious and spiritual movements have emerged in the wake of the demise of the Church such as the Hare Krishna movement, the *Star Wars*-based Jediism, or the New Age movement (e.g. Heelas, 1996; Possamai, 2005; Wilson and Cresswell, 1999). In the field of politics are many civil initiatives and social movements active outside of the traditional domain of representative democracies, for example Greenpeace, the Occupy movement, and Black Lives Matter movement (e.g. Beck, 1997; Norris, 2002; Rosanvallon and Goldhammer, 2008). The popularity of "citizen science" (e.g. Irwin, 1995; Silvertown, 2009), and of the "biopunker" or *Do It Yourself Science* movements (e.g. Wohlsen, 2011), shows that while (mainstream) science as an institution may have lost some of its public authority, the scientific method and its accompanying principles can still count on wide appeal (cf. Achterberg, et al. 2015). The same can be said when *science*

adversaries such as creationists (Locke, 1999) or spokespersons in the esoteric tradition (cf. Hammer, 2001; Campbell, 2002) use its rhetoric and practice to advance their ideas. Disillusionment with mainstream media, at last, has only led to a plethora of new media outlets, which often self-identify as *independent* in direct opposition to moneyed establishment. Journalistic platforms like indymedia.org, antimedia.org, or the many individual vloggers and bloggers who cover world events through social media (e.g. Atton, 2015; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Hyde, 2002) are examples of such developments. Thus, while Western European societies have experienced strong processes of "de-institutionalization," it could only be expected that we would encounter new forms of institutionalization (Hooghe and Houtman, 2003), albeit markedly less bureaucratic, less corporate, less formal, less stable, and less hierarchical. Indeed, these newer institutions of the twenty-first century are, in their dynamism and flatness, clearly products of their time.

Conspiracy culture fits into this dual cultural development, considering that mainstream societal institutions are the main subject of contemporary conspiracy theories. My study has shown that people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu do not apathetically turn away from the aims of those institutions, but often start initiatives to counter their malfunctioning. The Catholic Church, for example, is widely seen as corrupted, but religiosity is in itself not rejected, which is apparent by the fact that myriad forms of contemporary spirituality flourish in the conspiracy milieu. Conventional politics is what conspiracy theorists generally despise, yet a newly established political party *for and by the people* began with a local conspiracy website and was successful enough that it mobilized significant numbers in the 2012 Dutch national elections. To top that off, a range of diverse demonstrations, (online) petitions, and social movements originated in the conspiracy milieu. While mainstream science is discarded for being too dogmatic, conspiracy theorists do not reject science out of hand, but wish to restore its original meaning and to bring back the *free spirit of inquiry* it once championed. Since the mainstream media is always regarded with suspicion in the conspiracy milieu, people have established their own news websites and social

media platforms to serve the need for independent coverage of world events.

The point is that while conspiracy theorists are highly critical, suspicious, and distrustful of mainstream institutions, their purpose and function is not at all rejected. Indeed, they often emphasize the beauty of religion, the importance of politics, the marvels of science, and the relevance of the media. It is all the more unfortunate, conspiracy theorists hold, that these institutions no longer fulfill their purpose: religion does not inspire spirituality, politics does not create a better world, science fails to establish truthful knowledge, and the media not a reliable news source. Such institutions have lost their true purpose and their real meaning due to myriad forms of corruption that include bureaucratization, political strategies, corporate alignments, ideological dogmatism, and the list continues. Conspiracy theorists emphasize the deplorable situation our institutions are in, and they see it as their task and moral duty to restore their original or true function. Even stronger put, they wish to purify them from the contaminants that have corrupted them in the first place. The underlying ideology of conspiracy theorists is ultimately idealistic: religion should only be about connecting people to the sacred, politics only about serving the public good, science only about the free pursuit of true knowledge, and media only about independent coverage of world events. Not unlike the modernist aim to protect the relative autonomy of these domains so that complex societies continue functioning effectively (cf. Latour, 2013; Luhmann, 1995; Weber, 2013), conspiracy theorists wish to preserve the uniqueness and purity of each societal institution.

It is a mainstay in sociology that processes of modernization, most notably that of institutional rationalization, result in widespread feelings of alienation. Weber, Simmel, and Marx all argued that the increasing formalization and differentiation of modern institutions detach people from the traditional assumptions of organized social life. In and beyond the conspiracy milieu, such increasingly bureaucratized institutions are thought to be *iron cages* that stifle creativity and dissipate human energy. But people do not sit still to suffer the consequences of modernity. Instead efforts at restoration

become subcultures in search of new ways of doing what these institutions were meant to do. Conspiracy culture should be seen as one manifestation of this broader societal current of *cultural purification*, which intends to rescue the goals and promises of modern institutions from their own degeneration (Houtman, Laermans and Simons, 2016). The broad suspicion and distrust of conspiracy theorists towards mainstream institutions is therefore not just a menace to democratic societies, but an impetus for social and cultural change as well.

Contested Knowledge: Popular Incredulity towards Objective Truth Claims

In line with the aforementioned discontent about the functioning of mainstream epistemic institutions is a distrust towards the knowledge they produce. Conspiracy theorists commonly challenge established or "official" claims on truth. When scientists say that vaccinations are safe or when politicians say that terrorists are behind certain attacks, conspiracy theorists generally doubt the facts on which these statements are based. The authorities may claim that conclusive scientific research proves that vaccinations are benign, or that extensive forensic research points to particular figures as the culprit of some malice, but conspiracy theorists doubt those claims to truth and call into question what those facts are actually worth. More specifically speaking then, my argument is that the distrust towards *official* or *objective* knowledge has all to do with how we legitimize claims to truth in contemporary Western societies.

Throughout this study, I have emphasized the centrality of science as the most commanding epistemic authority (cf. Brown, 2009; Gieryn, 1999; Harding, 1986). When politicians talk of which actions should be taken, or when journalists cover the gravity of a disaster, or when corporate communication officers report on the safety of their products, all resort to the institution, knowledge, methodologies, and ideology of science to support their claims. There may be criticism and there may be doubt, but we generally have faith that science provides truthful and expedient knowledge to navigate

our personal, social, and natural worlds. More than any other source of knowledge, we afford credibility, authority, and resources to science, for the simple reason that we believe in science to deliver us the truth, or at least what comes most close to it. In sharp contrast to the subjective ideas and experiences of ordinary people, political activists, moral crusaders, or ecstatic prophets, scientific knowledge is said to be *objective*. Science's unique methodologies and institutionalized culture expels social contaminants like feelings, values, interests, backgrounds, alliances, and loyalties, and thus produces *pure knowledge* (cf. Merton, 1973; Popper, 2002; 2014).

Despite a continuing affordance of trust in science, it is nevertheless this belief in the possibility of objective knowledge engrained in the "metanarrative of science" (Lyotard, 1984) that has become problematic in contemporary life. Philosophers (of science) assailed the possibility of any universal truth claims about reality, and they derailed on theoretical grounds the firm belief in science as a method and institution inherently leading to progress, emancipation, and ultimately truth (e.g. Feyerabend, 2010[1975]; Foucault, 1970; Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 2009[1979]). Meanwhile, sociologists (of science) began to understand that metanarrative of science as a *professional ideology* serving the interests of its practitioners, and they focused instead on what scientists actually do to reinforce that public image when they fabricate knowledge and mobilize support for claims on truth (e.g. Gieryn, 1999; Latour, 1987). Conspiracy theorists, then, embody one stream of a wider *popular* current in contemporary Western societies which puts that whole idea of objective knowledge under scrutiny. Instead of regarding scientific knowledge, including the realities that we are presented with daily, as more or less accurate descriptions of the world out there,[280] conspiracy theorists emphasize that this knowledge is the product of a certain people in a certain place and time. Like social constructivists in academia (cf. Hacking, 1999), conspiracy theorists prioritize human creativity: reality is not so much discovered, but is actively and continually constructed. Our knowledge of the world can therefore never be neutral or objective, they say, but should always be seen from the perspective of those producing it.

This understanding of the world as constructed by knowledge-producing activities opens up the possibility of manipulation. If reality is constructed, then the question not only becomes by whom and how, but most importantly for conspiracy theorists: *with what objective?* After all, they argue, the media do not just produce *certain* depictions of reality, they produce depictions of reality that are beneficial to certain people, such as those who have invested in them financially. Financial experts do not neutrally explain how rescue mechanisms for banks *too big to fail* work, they explain such workings according to their own professional position. Scientists do not just construct objective truths about global warming, they construct truths that align with their alliances and intellectual investments. Government officials do not just explain the impartial ins and outs of future trade agreements, they explain them in line with government objectives. What conspiracy theorists argue, in other words, is not only that knowledge is constructed, but that such knowledge production is intimately related to *interests*. In ways very similar to social constructivists, conspiracy theorists direct attention to the material, social, and historical contexts of knowledge production. In order to assess the truth value of knowledge, conspiracy theorists argue, we need to understand where it comes from, who produces it, and with what intentions.

The idea that knowledge production is intimately connected to interests, as conspiracy theorists would have it, puts the question of power at center stage. Who is, after all, capable of constructing knowledge about the world for their own benefit? How do certain groups achieve epistemic authority so that people believe their constructions of reality to be truthful? The answer I would provide cuts both ways: because the knowledge that the media, science, politics, business, and so on present as reality is predominantly legitimized by the metanarrative of modern science, such actors can claim the objectivity of their knowledge, while social, cultural, and material factors are allowed to play their part (funding, directing, altering, guiding, and funneling research). Large corporations can, for instance, fund research institutes producing scientific knowledge related to their products. As such, they have considerable influence

over the realities constructed, which are generally believed as truthful because they are scientific or objective realities. This is the power of the legitimatizing narrative of modern science: flexible enough to allow for profane intrusions, yet rigid enough to remain sacred (cf. Gieryn, 1999; Latour, 1993a).

It is precisely this narrative legitimizing the objectivity of knowledge that conspiracy theorists are critical of. Epistemic authorities, backed up by the meta-narrative of science, proclaim to have access to the truth, but conspiracy theorists doubt that. Instead they stage a *contest over reality*: when stripped of all the rhetoric that lends plausibility to claims on truth (a strategy academics might call deconstruction) what remains of the quality of your knowledge, conspiracy theorists ask? Like Berger and Luckmann (1966) who argued against the sociologies of knowledge of Marx and Mannheim, cultural elites are not alone in defining reality, despite their more powerful position to do so (Seidman, 1994: 81). Even stronger put, they encounter active resistance from ordinary people today. Conspiracy theories are nothing more than popular challenges to the reality constructions of the powerful (cf. Oliver and Wood, 2012: 953). There are many such *truth wars* out there today, like the controversies around E-numbers, the safety of vaccinations, and the dangers of electromagnetic radiation. In each of those cases, authoritative institutions contend that they are safe, but conspiracy theorists and the population at large refuse to trust those claims. More abstractly speaking, agonistic *language games* (Lyotard, 1984) thus abound: creationists advance religious narratives when claiming knowledge (e.g. Locke, 2014; Numbers, 2006), and alternative archeologists cite ancient mythologies and oral traditions to support their historical claims (e.g. González, 2016). These epistemic competitors to science are generally dismissed by the scientific establishment and its allies in media, politics, and skeptic organizations as quackery, irrational hype, and pseudoscience, yet embraced by millions of people in the Western world (cf. Campbell, 2007; Numbers, 2006; Heelas, 1996). Conspiracy culture represents, in other words, a broader societal conflict over

knowledge and truth in contemporary society, forcing a reconsideration of *what counts as legitimate knowledge, and why*.

Hermeneutics of Suspicion: "Nothing is what it seems"

Because conspiracy theorists hold that mainstream institutions no longer function as they should and suspect that they might be infiltrated by a power elite covertly pulling the strings, they have a hard time believing what is sanctioned as the "official" truth. Based on an understanding of knowledge production as intimately related to interests, they point to the ease with which facts can be manipulated, and conclude that *objectivity* is an insidious illusion for deceiving the masses. Official explanations of social phenomena are therefore seriously distrusted by conspiracy theorists who argue that those in power have seemingly limitless resources to create a reality that befits their interests. Taken to its extreme, their argument would imply that the world we experience as real is a well-crafted and all-encompassing illusion installed by the accumulated presence of such official narratives. This accumulation of official narratives creates an alternative universe which conspiracy theorists often refer to as *the Matrix*. Like that famous Hollywood blockbuster, they emphasize that the world as we experience it is one big lie, one giant illusion, one enormous simulated reality constructed to fool us into believing that we are free, autonomous individuals when in effect we are being used as if pawns in a chess game.

Such an understanding comes close to the work of Jean Baudrillard. It is, after all, not a coincidence that a copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* is visible at the start of *The Matrix*. Baudrillard's theory of simulation argues that Western cultures progressively break away from what we considered Real into a world of constructed signs and symbol, called simulacra, that need not have any bearing on reality at all (1994). Baudrillard suggests that the experiences in a world saturated with simulations of reality look and feel even more real than real. American consumer culture is replete with examples, including the Big Mac, pictures on Instagram, and Baudrillard's favorite example, Disneyland. What is real and what is fake implodes with the

proliferation of such hyperreal realities. When fictional movies tell historical stories, like Oliver Stone's *JFK*, which is more *real*, that well-composed Hollywood production or the dull and dry Warren Report? Which creates reality more effectively? The same counts for the many mediatized realities like news, documentaries, Facebook posts, and blogs. Images can all be PhotoShopped and newsreel footage can be staged, so what is real? Conspiracy theorists emphasize a world where sign and referent, image and reality, truth and fiction are difficult to distinguish. The world has become, to them, as Baudrillard says, one "gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, … an interrupted circuit without reference or circumference' (1994: 6). The truth, or reality, of the world we live in has become elusive. As Morpheus says in *The Matrix* after Baudrillard himself: "welcome to the desert of the real."

Where Baudrillard contends that there is no way of getting at the source, the original reality, that lies beyond all simulations of the real *because there is none*, conspiracy theorists generally hold on to the idea of a deeper truth, a deeper reality that explains the simulated world we take as real. To get to that level of explanation, they start by critically assessing and deconstructing the realities we are presented with: what does this simulation of reality look like, who is involved in its making, how did that production precisely take place, and what does that tell us? In contrast to the *sheeple* who accept the realities we are presented as more or less accurate descriptions of a world out there, conspiracy theorists distrust that manifest plane of reality, and set out in search of hidden or latent meanings, asking if there any clues or symbols pointing to the *real truth*. Their goal is to unveil the illusion and to de-mask its creators. This interpretative style of looking for concealed truths hidden behind or beneath the ordinary level of everyday experience is not reserved for conspiracy theorists alone, but is part of a long intellectual tradition of being skeptically and suspiciously oriented towards the ordinary, everyday realities that people experience.

Paul Ricoeur names that style "the hermeneutics of suspicion," and locates it in the thought and writings of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud all of whom, in his eyes, share a commitment

to "demystify" the "lies and illusions of consciousness" (1970: 32). In sharp contrast to a "hermeneutics of faith," which takes seriously the manifest meanings of the symbols we encounter, these "three masters of suspicion," Ricoeur argues, refuse to take people's ideas, actions, and realities at face value. They are instead the starting point for other meanings and mechanisms at work that are disguised, concealed, and repressed. For Marx, such lies and illusions are the social, ideological, and ethnic categories that people identify with, which he famously names "false consciousness." Such ideas about one's identity are evidently false and only disguise the true relations between people, namely that of class distinctions between those who own the means of productions (the bourgeoisie) and those who do not (the workers). For Nietzsche, it is the "will to power" that people are unaware of. Human motivations of all kinds are covertly driven by a strong "lust to rule." Consciousness is a false illusion for Freud, too, because it serves to repress traumatic experiences from early childhood. All that we consciously say, think, and do is a skillful yet unconscious coping mechanism to disguise the unpalatable truths that hide in the unconscious.

The conviction that "appearances deceive" and that "nothing is as it seems," so often ascribed to conspiracy theorists (e.g. Pipes, 1997: 45; Barkun, 2006: 4), would also apply to those three masters of suspicion. For them, surface realities are viewed as false distortions and elaborate concealments of deeper truths. Moreover, conspiracy theorists perform a similar interpretative practice as they do, considering that "all three begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering" (Ricoeur, 1970: 34). Signs and symbols are not fully understood by their manifest content, but are skeptically assessed for what they hide, repress, or conceal. Freud's interpretation of dreams is the paramount example, because he established that the images we see and the things we do in dreams do not express a straightforward meaning but are symbolically distorted by the unconscious to disguise their references to repressed experiences. We should therefore not take dreams for what they appear to be, as appearances deceive, but

we should "suspiciously" assess and analyze them for such disguised meanings.

The same sort of search for hidden symbolism describes the methodology of conspiracy theorists, as evidenced by the many videos uploaded to YouTube that include elaborate interpretations of various signs of conspiracy (cf. Aupers, 2015). Such *analysists* point to covert Illuminati symbolism like the hidden eye or the triangle hand gesture in the music videos and live performances of artists like Rihanna and Beyoncé, or else they show subliminal and hidden sexual images in Disney cartoons, which are supposedly intended to sexualize children from a young age and indoctrinate them into black magic. This practice of reading between the lines to find hidden signs of conspiracy is also present in the analyses of official reports of events like 9/11 or about the safety of certain vaccinations. Conspiracy theorists do not follow the explicit contents of such official statements, but look for the omissions, discrepancies, and contradictions in those texts, of what lies beneath and remains hidden. In doing so, conspiracy theorists perform a sort of "oppositional reading" (Hall, 2006[1980]) or "textual poaching" (De Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 2012) through which the mass-mediatized realities and their apparent meanings are *read* or *decoded* in culturally particular (read suspicious) ways.

This practice of reading against the grain to expose hidden meanings is not particular to conspiracy theorists only. Ruthellen Josselson, for example, shows that a hermeneutics of suspicion is operative in many different traditions of narrative or life-history research, and argues that psychoanalytical, Marxist, Foucauldian, or feminist readings of people's life experiences all take those accounts as "not to be transparent to itself: surface appearances mask depth realities; a told story conceals an untold one" (2004: 13). Rita Felski notes in the same vein that "several waves of literary and cultural criticism that have encouraged styles of vigilant and mistrustful reading" and she points to "structuralist and poststructuralist modes of thought, with their in-built wariness of commonsense or everyday meaning," but also to "the impact of identity politics of race, gender and sexuality" that focus on "exposing hidden biases" (2011: 216-7).

In such suspicious readings of canonical texts and everyday life stories alike, Josselson says, "it is what is latent, hidden, that is of interest rather than the manifest narrative of the teller" (2004: 15). The same can be said about the field of semiotics more generally, in which interpreting or searching for the deeper structural and ideological meanings of the signs (of both texts and images) that surround us in everyday life is a core business (cf. Barthes, 2013[1957]; Eco, 1976; Hall, 2006). In all these academic traditions, Felski argues, "any truths to be gained must be wrested rather than gleaned from the page, derived not from what the texts says, but *in spite* of what it says" (2011: 223). This interpretative practice is hardly any different from what conspiracy theorists do, and applies to sociologists more generally as well. As I argued before in this study, sociologists tend to be *myth busters*: claiming to have insight into the real, true, or deeper meanings of life, situated behind, beneath, or beyond the everyday ideas and experiences of ordinary people (cf. Houtman, 2008; Latour, 2004b; 2005; Luhmann and Fuchs, 1994).

A hermeneutics of suspicion can therefore hardly be seen as a pathological interpretative style particular to conspiracy theorists alone, as some scholars would have it (e.g. Barkun, 2006: 4; Byford, 2011: 75; Pipes, 1997: 45). It is, rather, a characteristic of many traditions of thought that position themselves critically in relation to the given, the apparent, and the manifest. Felski even questions Ricoeur's larger argument that this is a distinctively *modern* style of interpretation, as she traces "a history of suspicious interpretation back to the medieval heresy trial" (2011: 219). Challenging what has become conventional wisdom on this point, Felski argues that this interpretive style should not be seen as the sole invention a "few exceptional thinkers" as it has a "larger cultural history that is part of the world, rather than opposed to the world … an interpretative practice embedded in a variety of institutional structures, tacit conventions and local norms" (2011: 220). But this interpretative style should not be seen as a pathology either, for the simple fact that it constitutes, as Ricoeur, Felski, and Josselson argue, one out of two ideal-typically opposed possible ways of interpreting information. While the first is animated by a faith in the truthfulness of the manifest

plane to transmit and express its real meaning, the other distrusts that surface reality based on the assumption that appearances deceive, and probes instead for the real meanings that are hidden, concealed, or disguised. From the cultural sociological perspective that I take throughout this study, it is not that relevant which hermeneutics is the right or the most plausible way of interpreting information, but rather what these different styles look like empirically, who deploys them, and what the reasons and motivations are that people do so.

Felski argues in this respect not to be "suspicious of suspicion", and in her effort "to understand why it has proved so attractive to contemporary scholars," she directs attention to the "pleasures" of this interpretative style (2011: 215). She speaks about "the satisfaction of detecting figures and designs below the text's surface, fashioning new plots out of old, joining together the disparate and seemingly unconnected, acts of forging, patterning and linking" (2011: 228). Such pleasures, she continues, are not only intellectual or cognitive but also emotional. Like the Victorian sensation novels that induced "visceral responses in its readers," it is only to be expected that the "revelation of shocking secrets, the pursuit of guilty parties, and the detection of hidden crimes" stimulates affective responses (Felski, 2011: 230). From this perspective, I believe too little attention has been given to the emotional dimensions of conspiracy theorizing, and future research might seek to find out in more empirical detail what sort of satisfactions a hermeneutic of suspicion engenders in conspiracy theorists.

One noteworthy exception is Mark Fenster who argues that conspiracy theorizing constitutes "a form of play" that induces "a sense of pleasure": "participants can 'experience' the rush and vertiginous feelings associated with discovering conspiracy" (2008: 14). Conspiracy theorizing is a hermeneutic practice, Fenster shows us, that is not purely cognitive, driven by ideological or political motivations, but an *affective* undertaking. The sifting of clues and the ferreting out of hidden truths offers satisfaction and excitement. Fenster quotes in this respect author Jonathan Vankin who describes these pleasures "the conspiracy rush," which he defines as the "zap of adrenaline that hits when you apprehend a higher truth; the revelation

of sensation, I call it. Your mind expands, or so you believe. Everyone else now appears slower, plodding through life a little stupider than you thought they were before" (2008: 157). As telling as this quote is about the emotional pleasures of conspiracy theorizing, it also speaks to the ways that conspiracy theorists differentiate themselves from others, a dynamics which I describe in Chapter Six as a crucial element in the formation of identities. By having found out the real truth, conspiracy theorists *feel* different than we ordinary people, who still believe in those false truths we call reality. Like some informants of mine who described their "waking up" in similar terms, the meanings of conspiracy theorizing are evidently multi-layered. Aspects of "pleasure" and "play" are something often left underexplored in the study of conspiracy culture as attention is mostly given to its "serious" or "dangerous" sides. Following the cultural sociological approach that I have, we can then ask how such affects explain the current popularity of conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy Culture: Living in an Age of Epistemic Instability

A central argument I make in this study is that conspiracy culture should be situated within and understood from its proper sociological context. By relating the individual with their social, cultural, and historical counterparts, we see many more meanings of conspiracy culture emerge. Moreover, by showing these relations, it becomes difficult to set conspiracy culture apart as a deviant or pathological phenomenon. Throughout this study I have shown how conspiracy culture relates to mainstream society first on the basis of *conflict*. As alternative explanations of reality operating in a broader field of knowledge contestation, conspiracy theories challenge on an abstract level the dominant "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1980). Conspiracy theorists strive for the public recognition of their ideas by sharing information widely and by contesting those officials in power like journalists, scientists, and politicians. The latter respond to such challenges by dismissing them as paranoid and dangerous allegations, in short, as conspiracy theories.[281]

Conspiracy culture does, however, not just stand in conflict with mainstream culture but has many *affinities* with it too. I have shown how the critiques conspiracy theorists formulate resonate not only with many *popular* sentiments concerning the functioning of mainstream institutions and the knowledge they produce, but also with the more *professional* analyses of critical scholars inside and outside of academia. Conspiracy culture shares much with the practice, thought, and history of the social sciences, especially those of a critical signature. Setting out to debunk the myths that people believe in, they see hidden forces at work below the manifest surface reality which are visible only to their critical gaze. Conspiracy culture may be eccentric and deviant at times, but it is hard and sociologically unproductive to deny its relations to mainstream society.

Based on my empirical material I argue that the historical developments of secularization, mediatization, democratization, and globalization has added to a mounting disbelief in the possibility of a single objective, unequivocal, irrefutable truth. Because of these cultural changes, we now live in a world where multiple takes on reality exist side by side. Whether these are the different cultural perspectives people encounter in their lives or the many different mediatized realities we are confronted with every day, the notion of one objective take on the world is for many people not plausible anymore. Especially because our epistemic institutions cannot provide us with a strong sense of security about the truthfulness of the knowledge they produce, it becomes difficult to trust the realities they present us. Instead, we see a plurality of often-competing versions of the real available for consumption; for example we might think of the many different scenarios of what really happened on 9/11, each creating their own more or less convincing reality. Each of them *could* be true. The same counts for the different and often opposed perspectives on the safety and quality of the food we eat (animal fat is bad for our health/animal fat is good for our health), the cosmetics we put on our skin (sunscreen prevents the development of skin cancer/sunscreen causes skin cancer), or the medications we take (cholesterol-lowering drugs help us live healthy longer/cholesterol-lowering drugs make us more sick). The situation

is such that we are bombarded today with different and often contradictory information and research about what really is the case. The truth of any one situation becomes more and more elusive. The sociological question that arises is how do people deal with this epistemic instability? How do people live their lives in a world where truth has become problematic and difficult to ascertain? Based on my analyses of the Dutch conspiracy milieu, I contrast here two ideal-typically opposed ways to do so.

On the one hand we find typical modernist quests for *the* truth. The world as we know it may be a well-crafted illusion we are all fooled to believe in, but solid research and firm logic can disclose the *real truths* that are concealed by the many illusory stories they tell us. In this study I show that quite a few in the Dutch conspiracy milieu occupy themselves, as true modernists (cf. Bauman, 1987; Giddens, 1991; Latour, 1993a), by ardently looking for real evidence and hard facts in their search for the truth. The mainstream media, institutionalized science, and conventional politics may throw sand in our eyes with all their gainsaying information, but if we look through their propaganda and manipulation, and focus on the bare facts, such conspiracy theorists hold, then the real truth will disclose itself. Convinced that official explanations are false, these people occupy themselves (sometimes obsessively) with detective-like *fact finding* (Boltanski, 2014). Hours are spent in search of information that has been left behind, hidden, or repressed, and they comb through the archives of government organizations and the websites of NGO's and research institutes. Their exposés are full of references to various kinds of research, publications, reports, and other documents that serve to support the factuality of their claims. Given their diagnosis of failing and corrupted epistemic institutions, these conspiracy theorists set out to be better journalists, better scientists, and better politicians. In their daily practices of collecting information, analyzing raw material, and theorizing about possible scenarios, such people profess to be more astute and committed than professional investigative journalists. As truly independent researchers, they claim to probe more deeply into the malpractices and hidden abuses of power that surround us, and they do not hesitate to question the

integrity and sincerity of the powerful. The truth may unnerve us at first, so they argue, but it will ultimately also *set us free*. In all of these ways, conspiracy culture represents a *radicalization of modernity*.

But as I have shown throughout this study, conspiracy culture should also be seen a materialization of what has been called the postmodern condition. Conspiracy theorists, for example, commonly express an incredulity towards objective truth claims, and especially towards the metanarrative of science as leading to progress, emancipation, and ultimately the truth (Lyotard, 1984). What our epistemic authorities sanction as *the real truth* is no longer taken as fact, but instead as forms of knowledge contingent on the context of their production (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1970). As a consequence, conspiracy theorists critically assess and deconstruct such truth claims, asking who was involved in the making and what does that tell us? Living in this age where constructed and heavily mediatized realities make up our world, conspiracy theorists often point to the dissolution of the real. All that is left to do, they conclude, is "playing with the pieces" that are left behind (Baudrillard, 1993: 95).

In contrast to the modernist focus on facts, we have seen in this study that conspiracy theorists prioritize other ways of knowing, making up, to quote Rosenau, "all that modernity has set aside, including emotions, feelings, intuition, personal experience, custom, metaphysics, tradition, cosmology, myth, religious sentiment, mystical experience" (1992: 6). One can bricolage from different ways of knowing and from different forms of knowledge brand new realities, brand new truths that are more appealing because they are not based on cold facts alone but also on those *warm* underpinnings of knowing. Truths need to *feel* right, instead of *be* right. Conspiracy theorists exemplify the legitimation crisis of traditional institutions that base themselves on the metanarrative of science, and demand from their spokespersons (intellectuals, experts, professionals) new and more egalitarian roles (Bauman, 1987; Giddens, 1990; Toulmin, 1990). Conspiracy theorists consider their own knowledge to be of equal value, implying that one's inner, subjective knowing says more than their distant so-called objective knowledge, as I often heard them

say. Conspiracy culture, I contend, embodies in all these different ways the characteristics of what can be called a postmodern culture.

When some intellectuals started writing about the arrival of a new historical era where modernist ideas about knowledge, truth, reality, ethics, and aesthetics seemed increasingly implausible and new ways of thinking, seeing, and doing were on the rise, they frequently faced laughter and contempt. Postmodernism was seen as a "fad," a "carnival," and a "freak show" (in: Ritzer, 1997: 1), proclaiming "fashionable nonsense" (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999), containing "nothing useful or enlightening" (Hitchens, 2005) and producing "meaningless buzzwords" (Hebdige, 2006). Even today, scholars and intellectuals are apt to regard the thought (and legacy) of postmodern intellectuals as a mere elitist fashion for academics that will or should go out of vogue. Yet despite the (arguably grounded) criticism of inaccessibility and vagueness, I hope to have shown in this study the relevance of postmodern theory for the understanding of many contemporary phenomena today, and for conspiracy culture in particular. After all, the processes of cultural change discussed in this study, including secularization, mediatization, democratization, and globalization, have made the thought of postmodern scholars not plausible from a theoretical perspective, but from the concrete perspective of everyday experience.

Obviously, the historical transition from modern to postmodern society is not as clear-cut and linear as impressions might give (e.g. Calhoun, 1993; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1987). I wonder if we should speak about a *transition* at all. Is our contemporary world not characterized by the simultaneous existence of both positions? The modernist promise of a knowable, controllable, moldable world that is made possible through the deployment of science may be something we can no longer believe in, but we also cannot seem to let go off it. We may increasingly have a relativistic attitude towards different types of knowledge, and we might even cherish that diversity since it prevents the totalitarian tendencies of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984). And yet we cannot seem to accept its radical consequence that anything goes and that all perspectives are equally valuable. It is my argument here that conspiracy culture

exemplifies the difficulty of living in an age of *epistemic instability*, a historical context where the truth can no longer be fully guaranteed by one epistemic authority, institution, or tradition, while its consequential relativism and ambivalence cannot fully be embraced either (cf. Bauman, 1991). In this study I have shown that modernist quests for facts, evidence, and ultimately the truth, coexist with a postmodern understanding of the contingency of knowledge and its production. But how these two opposed cultural outlooks go together in everyday life is something for further research. I have yet to address questions such as: in what ways is that coexistence harmonious, antagonistic, or up for negotiation? And does that play out at the individual or at the collective level, or both? For now, I hope to have shown the relevance of studying cultural understandings of knowledge and reality, especially in times of epistemic instability. Conspiracy culture speaks to us about such a world where *the truth* is no longer assured, but *out-there* for us to weigh, juggle, construct, assess, play with, remodel, measure**,** combat, analyze, and struggle with. And that is not an easy task, for none of us.

9. Epilogue: Whose Side Am I On?

Throughout this study, I have emphasized that I refrain from making any judgements on the truthfulness or morality of conspiracy theories. I do so, firstly, because I believe it is not within my capacity as a sociologist to assess the veracity of such alternative takes on reality. But I primarily refrain from making such judgements because it is not my intellectual objective to do so. Since I want to *understand* this popular phenomenon, the question of truth becomes irrelevant—even absurd. After all, if I would want to know why and how the San people of the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa do their rain dance rituals, I would not get far by arguing that their beliefs are false or superstitious. The same is true for my study of conspiracy culture, where holding on to the truth or falsity of conspiracy theories only obstructs a sociological assessment of their cultural meaning. The only thing that counts for my purposes are people's own understandings of what is real and true, *their* perspectives on the world, and not my

own. My ideas about conspiracy theories—whether I like them or despise them, think they are true or false, or consider them to be a menace or a blessing to society—are not relevant and should therefore play no role in the study of conspiracy culture. Nor do I take scientific accounts of conspiracy culture as necessarily true or objective, but understand these as distinct cultural ways of understanding the world. When studying the interactions between conspiracy theorists and science, I approach both positions symmetrically, that is, as equally truthful in the sense that they are both true for the people involved and should therefore be studied as such.

This position towards research objects, what can be called *methodological agnosticism*, is a central feature of the cultural sociological approach. As I discussed in the Introduction, such a position takes seriously the ideas, experiences, and practices of people without the need to compare or measure them against certain standards of normality. It is fully oriented at *verstehen*, and prioritizes the role of culture in the shaping of our worlds (cf. Alexander, 2003; Geertz, 1983; Weber, 2013). However appropriate and adequate this research strategy may seem in theory, it can be questioned whether taking a *neutral* position suffices in practice. Because all knowledge production is situated in fields where the interests, ideologies, and institutions of different players interact, influence, and oppose each other (cf. Gieryn 1999, Latour, 1987, Toulmin, 1990), so too is my own work part of the very dynamics of knowledge contestation that I wish to research. This study is *situated* in that my analytical thoughts and methodological practices are shaped by moral and epistemological considerations that I developed in relation to certain meaningful others along my career; it is driven by *interests* because I want to move conspiracy culture away from the pathological; it is *performative* because it gives shape and meaning to conspiracy culture, helps it as such into being, and has empirical consequences; and most importantly it stands *in direct relation* with others who are involved with and have a stake in conspiracy culture. I therefore cannot avoid being drawn theoretically and practically into the contentious

dynamics I set out to explore. As a result, my own work becomes another player in the very same battles for epistemic authority.

It is not my intention to get into a theoretical discussion about knowledge production in this epilogue, but I wish to analyze my own strategy in which I attempt to remain agnostic about conspiracy theories and to stay neutral in their battles for epistemic authority. Does such bracketing sufficiently work in my efforts to maintain autonomous in my study of conspiracy culture? Can I stay *neutral* or do I need to position myself after all? To assess these questions, I will first discuss some of the strategies that other sociologists have proposed and reflect on them from my own perspective and based on my experience with this study.

The Myth of the Neutral Sociologist

Because the world is essentially meaningless and all knowledge of the world is the product of our own meaning making practices, Max Weber argued long ago that nobody can claim to know or have the *real*, objective, and only truth about the world we live in (1993; 2009; 2013). Following Kant, the world *an sich* is essentially unknowable, and the only thing we can know from a scientific perspective, Weber holds, is *how* we as humans construct and attach meaning to that world. Some build elaborate theodicies to explain existence on Earth; some create utopian political projects to guide future actions; some pursue the sublime with their works of art; some study the world in search for general laws following logic and empirical evidence. All these institutionalized ways of giving meaning to our world have their own distinctive rules, goals, and cultural logic, and in order to maintain their autonomy and uniqueness, they should not be confused with each other; science is something different from art, politics, and religion.

It is precisely because they are different that they should not be judged with the criteria of other *modes of existence,* nor with any assumed universal standard (cf. Latour, 2013). When scientists proclaim to know the *real* or the *objective* truth, so goes Weber's argument, they become metaphysical and deny the fact that their

knowledge production is just as situated and value-laden as all other "ways of world making" (cf. Goodman, 1978). As Laermans and Houtman (2016) argue, Weber's plea that science should only speak about what *is* and not about what *ought to be* (the latter, he said, is reserved for politics or religion) should not be understood as a modernist belief in the possibility of discovering the *true* or *real* meaning of the world, but as a professional imperative to preserve the autonomy and singularity of each cultural domain. We do so by limiting science to its to humble task, that of understanding and describing the world by empirical scrutiny only. Moral and political opinions of the (social) scientist, Weber argues, should be kept at bay: "the prophet and the demagogue do not belong on the academic platform …whenever the man of science introduces his personal value judgment, a full understanding of the facts ceases" (2009: 146).

The position that I take throughout this study in refraining from making any value judgements about the morality and truthfulness of conspiracy theories clearly draws from this intellectual tradition. I keep my own opinions about conspiracy theories to myself and merely set out to "state the facts" (Weber, 2009: 146). In my case, this means that my aim is to describe and explain the contents and meanings of conspiracy culture. Obviously, an absolute "value-free sociology" is a well-crafted myth (Gouldner, 1962) that should be seen from the perspective of boundary work (Gieryn, 1999). After all, merely stating the facts and not our opinions guarantees our right to speak and our claims to truth (and sometimes even to recognition, and abundant resources). The choices we, as (social) scientists, make to focus on certain topics using certain methodologies are inevitably influenced by our moral, cultural, social, political, historical, and epistemological position in the world (cf. Foucault, 1970; Latour, 1987; Putnam, 2002; on Weber see Laermans and Houtman, 2016). Our (scientific) constructions of this world may be true in the sense of being empirically supported, but not in the sense of being a true "mirror of reality" (Rorty, 2009).

One strategy sociologists sometimes take to mitigate these problems of selectivity is known as *reflexive confession,* whereby one stakes out one's own situated position and explicitly reflects on it. As

Alvin Gouldner states, "the only choice is between an expression of one's values, as open and honest as it can be, this side of the psychoanalytical couch, and a vain ritual of moral neutrality which leaves it at the mercy of irrationality" (1962: 212). But that opens a paradox: how can you be aware of your tacit assumptions, implicit moral preferences, and ideological blind spots? That seems like an impossible task. Moreover, as Gouldner himself later clarified, "confession may be good for the soul, but it is no tonic to the mind" (1968: 112). We need to do more than explicating our values if we are already aware of them in the first place. Confessing one's moral position without assessing its consequences for the research at hand "becomes a meaningless ritual of frankness," to borrow from Gouldner (1968: 112). The question is not whether and how a value-free sociology is possible, but what to do with the *problem* of the positionality of the scholar.

The interference of scholarly positionality becomes especially salient in the study of social problems, when the sociologist finds herself studying different groups in conflict with each other. Where does she stand in such situations? A starting strategy, as formulated by Becker, is something called *partisan sociology*, in which the scientist explicitly takes a side. He argues that since "there is no position from which sociological research can be done that is not biased in one or another way—we must always look at the matter from someone's point of view—we can never avoid taking sides" (Becker, 1967: 245). According to his notion of partisan sociology, we ought to explicate the point of view from which we speak and to "use our theoretical and technical resources to avoid distortions" (Becker, 1967: 247). Gouldner, by way of an alternative strategy, argues that we should not take sides, but instead, the "outside standpoint [as] one source and possible meaning of sociological objectivity" (1968: 113). However, where precisely is that outside standpoint? Obviously not the Archimedean meta-position some sociologists have assumed from which they claim to objectively describe what is going on, *pace* Bourdieu (2004; cf. Latour, 2005). Gouldner would agree, suggesting that "no one escapes a partisan standpoint. But aren't some forms of partisanship more liberating than others? [...] It is only when

we have a standpoint somewhat different from the participants that it becomes possible to do justice to their standpoints." (1968: 113).

In this work, I have taken something of a combined or middle position, where I study the world from the perspectives of people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu, but analyze those perspectives from the standpoint of an outsider. Doing so, I tried to bring to the surface a cultural milieu hitherto stereotyped and marginalized without necessarily taking their side since I remained agnostic on their truth claims. Nor did I side with their opponents as I positioned myself outside of and then amidst the battles for epistemic authority in which conspiracy theorists and science are embroiled. I merely described and analyzed the ideas, practices, and struggles of *both* sides.

This *neutral* position is more common in the social studies of science, particularly in the study of "scientific controversies" (Scott, et al., 1990) and of "fringe" phenomena on "the margins of science" such as parapsychology, astrology, mesmerism, and ufology (e.g. Wallis, 1979; Hess, 1993). When studying such contentious dynamics between scientists and other parties, the sociologist *ignores* the prevalent hierarchical power relations between scientists and their assailers by treating their competing truth claims "symmetrically" (Bloor, 1991). Both the scientific account and their alternatives are analyzed with the same conceptual tools and with the same moral presumptions. Scholars do not side with the position of science and do not regard its knowledge claims as the truth (like positivists would do), but take a *neutral* position between rival camps and study instead how *all* claims on truth are assembled, deployed, and contested. To give an example, Collins and Pinch study the construction of the paranormal as a class of existing phenomena worthy of scientific recognition from "a relativistic thesis within which consideration of the 'actual existence' of a phenomenon is redundant" (1979: 212). They merely study *the tactics* deployed by both parapsychologists and orthodox scientists in their efforts to gain/deny recognition for their claims. Such constructivist scholars may or may not tacitly side with science and accept its understandings as truth, but for the purposes of the analysis, the issue of truth is set aside as irrelevant to the study itself. The *real* truth is, in other words, put in brackets.

This sounds, theoretically speaking, like an adequate position to take when studying contentious dynamics between different social groups. I have followed this strategy not without due reason. But the practical reality shows that it is often difficult to stay neutral in studies concerning battles for epistemic authority. Drawing on their own experiences of doing research on scientific controversies, Pam Scott, Evelleen Richards, and Brian Martin show "that analysts, whatever their intentions, cannot avoid being drawn into the fray" (1990: 474). This is so because the sociological study itself will be taken as a resource or weapon in such battles for epistemic authority. After all, "the combatants have a good deal at stake in the sociologist's interpretation and presentation of news from the war zone" (Scott, et al., 1990: 490). Our work simply *matters*: the authority sociological analyses embody make it relevant for rival parties to deploy it to their advantage. Scott et al. argue furthermore that "epistemological symmetry often leads to social asymmetry," meaning that neutral analyses tend to be more useful to the parties with less credibility and epistemic authority (1990: 490). Those latter groups will interpret and advance the neutral study as supportive of their cause, while more powerful groups will see such studies as threatening to their authority and are likely to react in public with hostility. Like Gouldner (1962), Scott et al. conclude that "symmetrical analysis is an illusion: the methodological claim of a neutral social analysis is a myth that can be no more sustained in actual practice than" the widespread belief in a *value-free sociology* (1990: 491).

Thus, besides the obvious theoretical difficulties, is it also practically difficult to maintain neutral and outside of the dynamics between conspiracy theorists and their meaningful others. It is only to be expected that my study too will be "captured" (Scott, et al., 1990: 476) in these battles for epistemic authority. Some will say that my agnostic stance on conspiracy theories is problematic because it legitimizes them by providing conspiracy theorists a platform, while others will feel acknowledged in their efforts to destigmatize the ideas and practices they are committed to. Although I expect the bulk of such *capturing* to happen after publication of this study, I have already experienced such forces. In the following, I advance three *scenes* which

illustrate the difficulties of staying outside of the contentious dynamics I explore, even despite my claim to neutrality.

Scene 1

Around the year 2014, Stef Aupers and I submitted a manuscript that was a version of Chapter 7 to the *Public Understanding of Science* journal for publication. As is common in academic journals, our manuscript was sent by the editors to two peers (scientific experts in the field) who reviewed the anonymized manuscript on the basis of quality, originality, craftsmanship, readability, and suitability for publication. Several months later we received a "revise and resubmit" decision on our manuscript. One reviewer was generally positive and recommended that the journal accept the paper with minor revisions. The other reviewer was a bit more critical, saying that "the article deals with an important and worthwhile topic [and] utilizes interesting data [but it] displays important shortcomings that need to be addressed before the paper can be published." It is these alleged shortcomings that I will analyze here. To do so, it will be useful to quote at length from the reviewer's feedback:

> *[T]he analysis…merely describes (uncritically) the conspiracist point of view…the authors fail to analyze the claims made by their respondents as essentially rhetorical. For example, they observe that many of their respondents' suspicion of science is based on "personal encounters with medical specialists, doctors, university teachers and other academics." However, regardless of whether or not these encounters actually occurred, they need to be examined, first and foremost in the context of their argument. References to personal experience are a well-established rhetorical device used to strengthen a particular truth claim, and is used particularly when justifying a belief that others might perceive as problematic. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the authors' engagement with conspiracy theories is devoid of any critical edge. Of course, one can read conspiracy theories is a way that reveals traces of Collins and Pinch, Latour or Bourdieu, but only if one reads them selectively. The key aspect of conspiracy theories is that they involve a lot more than skepticism*

> *about authority. They will draw on mainstream discourses of suspicion and criticism of mainstream institutions, but what differentiates them from other types of social critique are precisely the features so accurately analyzed by the likes of Hofstadter and Popper: conspiracy theories have a pervasive, unfalsifiable quality and the conspiracist argument always contains a "leap of imagination" from the undeniable (science is imperfect) to the unbelievable (mainstream science is fundamentally wrong). The analysis of the conspiracy theorists' view of science must take account of this essential feature of conspiracy theories. [my italics]*

In short, the reviewer argues that our analysis is not critical enough: instead of agnostically describing and analyzing the views of conspiracy theorists about science from their point of view, we should have debunked and de-masked these views as "rhetorical devices" used to strengthen their "unfalsifiable truth claims." We thus failed with our agnostic approach to "take into account" that conspiracy theories are essentially wrong (making that "'leap of imagination' from the undeniable to the unbelievable") and we consequentially legitimized, albeit implicitly, their flawed understandings of science.

We responded with an explanation of why we take such an approach and revised our manuscript according to the useful comments we received from both reviewers. It is fair to say that this particular reviewer ultimately "agreed to disagree about the merits of analyzing conspiracy theories 'non-judgmentally'" and thanked us for "taking on board most of [his] suggestions and comments." And because the other reviewer was similarly content with our revisions, our *neutral* manuscript got accepted for publication.

Scene 2

In the summer of 2012, I wrote an op-ed for SciencePalooza.nl, a well-known science blog in the Netherlands titled "Why Conspiracy Thinking Should Not Be Discarded Too Easily."[282] I was in the midst of my fieldwork when I read an interview in a major Dutch newspaper with a well-established professor of Medical Biotechnology, who was

also a member of the Dutch Medicines Evaluation Board (CBG). This person elaborated the wrongs of the pharmaceutical industry in ways similar to the critiques I was hearing from my respondents. These latter voices were, however, consistently silenced as *conspiracy theories*. Because of the unmistakable similarity, I decided to write an op-ed about to explain my agnostic research approach in more detail. I illustrated my point with the empirical example of Anneke Bleeker, who runs a citizen's movement website called *Concerned Mothers* (verontrustemoeders.nl) which advocates against the mass-vaccination of girls for cervical cancer. The argument made was that such popular critiques should not too quickly be discarded as (ludicrous) conspiracy theories, since they often point to structural inequalities and societal problems that are worthy of an open debate. Especially in a time where large corporations like pharmaceuticals have tremendously more abilities to produce research for their benefit, and in a time when populations are increasingly deprived of a means to counter and challenge such market forces, I argued for democratic reasons that *counter-publics* like conspiracy theorists should be able to participate in prevalent battles for truth. In other words, I argued, let us think of ways to incorporate alternative views in an open and public field of knowledge contestations, where factual details are assessed and discussed, instead of blanket dismissals based on stereotypes. And then, I concluded, may the best truth win.

The op-ed generated considerable discussion, both on this particular blog and elsewhere on the internet. One the one hand, it was read as a defense of conspiracy theories, a legitimation of the views of certain "certifiable lunatics" who are "anti-scientific, do not endorse the scientific method, deny facts," and "spread misleading information which can be dangerous to public health."[283] The choice to illustrate my point with Bleeker was met with serious critique, such as the comment that read, "that example is really unfortunate, because Anneke Bleeker is typically someone who sees conspiracies everywhere. A true loonie, with whom there is, by definition, no reasonable discussion possible." Another person wrote, "give us one good reason why we should have taken that walking barrel full of delusions seriously? Really, again a sociologist who does not know

anything, yet loves to publish. Go shame yourself man."[284] My argument to *democratize knowledge production* was received with both curiosity ("can somebody explain me what he means??" and "how should that exactly look like?") and contempt ("subsidizing ordinary people to direct scientific research will get us into societal mayhem," and "I think that the influence of opinions guided by knee-jerk reactions and bigotry is already too large"[285]).

On the other hand, conspiracy theorists felt supported by my op-ed. Some people posted comments on that blog in praise of conspiracy theories: "apparently it is only a minority of highly intelligent people who are able to see through the conspiracies," read one comment, and another reader wrote that "facts are today—where political and financial interests weigh heavy—only relative. Who is right and who is selling crap? That's hard to say nowadays. I believe people generally feel this and therefore start thinking themselves."[286] I even received emails from some of the people that I interviewed for my research. Liam (67) wrote

> *I just read your article that was sent to me by our Central Intelligence Agency, Citizens in Action, [the civil initiative he runs]. You are more than right: everything that we try to raise awareness about is invariably dumped as "conspiracy theory" or "internet phantasy." Rarely, if ever, are the facts themselves discussed. That you have the intellectual courage to think nuanced about it and come out does you great credit.*[287]

One of the major contributors to the Dutch conspiracy theory website Zapruder.nl linked to my op-ed on his personal blog.[288] Even Bleeker, who was not part of my research, wrote to me by email that I "expressed it well. We will publish this on our site, you deserve it."[289]

Scene 3

During my visiting scholarship at Northwestern University (Illinois, USA), which was awarded jointly by the Fulbright Program and the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, I was invited to attend a four-day seminar with fellow Fulbright grantees from all scientific disciplines

in Baltimore, Maryland (March 25-28, 2015). The seminar was intended "to feature the unique interplay between Baltimore's public health infrastructure and the city's urban life challenges."[290] Across those four days we made several field trips to local non-profit organizations and listened to many different speakers who work in various ways on public health in that *challenged* city. It was truly a wonderful experience of getting to know that unmistakably American way of dealing with those unmistakably American public health problems in more detail, and I was amazed by the progressive, holistic approach most of these people pursued. One particular lecture proved relevant for my research on conspiracy theories. On that Thursday, Dr. Robert Gallo, director of the Institute of Human Virology at the University of Maryland School of Medicine at Baltimore, came to speak about his co-discovery of HIV as the cause of AIDS in 1984. I was particularly excited about the lecture not only for the fact that he is a world famous and widely esteemed scientist, but more precisely because Gallo features in some of the conspiracy theories that I was acquainted with.

In his lecture he explained the historical pathway leading to his successful discovery of the virus causing AIDS, and after we had ample opportunity to ask questions. I could not resist, and I explained who I was and what my research was about. I told him that there are many conspiracy theories about HIV as the cause of AIDS, for example that the virus had actually never been found or properly isolated, that our immune system can get rid of HIV within a few weeks, or that anti-retroviral medication actually causes AIDS. But before I could even ask a question, Gallo exploded in fury about these "AIDS denialists" who "don't have their facts straight" and "just don't understand how virology science works." I noticed that I hit a raw nerve, which I did not expect, since conspiracy theories about HIV/AIDS are widespread. Unexpectedly, I was then made the target when Gallo shouted with equal agitation that *I wasn't doing my job right!* "You have to tell these people that what they think is completely wrong. There is no controversy, the facts are clear, there is a wide scientific consensus that HIV causes AIDS." I responded that my job as a sociologist is not to tell people what is true or right, but instead

is to understand people's views and their practices. I explained that they speak to me about the French virologist Luc Montagnier[291] who argues that one can be exposed to HIV many times without being chronically infected if one has a good immune system, which is why so many Africans attracted the virus. Again, Gallo responded furiously that Montagnier's ideas "are not backed up by scientific research" and that he "has lost his credibility in the scientific community." Before the microphone was given to somebody else, Gallo continued by saying that "these people create the illusion of a debate among scientists that simply doesn't exist. I repeat, HIV is the sole cause of AIDS. That's a matter of fact!" I was stupefied.

Conclusion: Taking a Stance without Taking Sides

I hope to have shown that my agnostic stance on the truth of conspiracy theories and my neutral position in their battles for epistemic authority is a productive sociological strategy to take. But what makes a good intellectual stance does not always work in the real world, where other parties have interests in drawing such research into their own political struggles. As Scott et al. (1990) argue, symmetrical analyses will be more favorable for the underdog. The above reactions are therefore precisely what can be expected. Those in favor of science "react with hostility and suspicion," interpreting my neutral analysis as lending support for conspiracy theories (Scott et al., 1990: 490). I am not *critical enough* and I *fail* to debunk conspiracy theories as essentially *unfalsifiable*, *unreasonable*, and *unscientific*. Conspiracy theorists, on the other hand, "react more sympathetically to the analysis" and interpret my neutral stance as support for their cause (Scott et al., 1990: 490). They feel recognized and acknowledged by my study since I *discuss the fact themselves*, and they congratulate my efforts. Given that these scenes all occurred prior to the publication of this study, I can only expect that such efforts to draw my work into people's own political campaigns will increase. The disinterested claims that I make throughout this study will in the outside world be taken up and deployed in real struggles for epistemic authority and public legitimacy. Science, in other

words, may proclaim to be *impartial*, *disinterested*, and *neutral*, in practice that stance is hard to maintain. Our knowledge is easily captured and we are not infrequently forced to *take a side*.

What to do? We can continue to insist on our neutrality as scientists, proclaim even more emphatically that we only describe *what is* and refrain from making any moral or political judgements, but this seems rather naïve and smug to me. Naïve because it assumes that we can actually stay neutral, and smug because it assumes that such neutrality is the moral thing to do. As Hess argues in his study of parapsychologists, skeptics, and New Agers, "in a postconstructivist world there are no neutral positions, and therefore one must eventually articulate a position lest someone else do it instead" (1993: 155). Scott et al. argue in a similar line of reasoning that "the political role of the researcher must be addressed…since the social scientist is automatically part of the controversy…the analyst should be critically involved, in the role of citizen" (1990: 491). I quite agree: whereas I still believe that an agnostic stance on the truth of conspiracy theories is the best position to take when empirically studying them, and while I still believe that a neutral outsider position is the best one to take when studying battles between different social groups, we cannot afford to stay insensitive to the forces dragging us into this or that political struggle. That stance will leave us at the mercy of whoever sets out to take advantage of our analyses.

The question is therefore not how to stay neutral, but how to give shape to our situated position as sociologists in society. Zygmunt Bauman (1987) argues that with the transition from modernity to postmodernity, intellectuals should no longer take the role of *legislators* (saying what is right or wrong by siding with epistemic powers), but instead should *interpret* the many different and competing value- and belief systems we are confronted with today. This is, generally speaking, what I have tried to do with this study, e.g. to make the cultural world of conspiracy theorists intelligible for others. Bruno Latour (2013) makes a similar argument when he proposes that with the demise of science as the high arbiter of truth, sociologists should be more like *diplomats* by taking seriously the ontological claims of the people we study and to negotiate between

the different claims they make: "when there is no common overarching principle that would allow for agreement … the only solution is to set out as precisely as possible why the account given of such and such a value is shocking, admissible, compatible, or incompatible with some other account."[292] Following Gouldner, the objective then, is not "to bring parties together, but to do justice. Doing justice does not mean, as does mediation, [to] distribute costs and benefits equally between the parties, but rather, that the allocation of benefits and costs is made in conformity with some stated normative standard" (1968: 113).

The normative standard that I put forward as a way out of this *science is neutral/science is politics* stalemate is our most cherished way to settle disagreement peacefully: democracy. This is no simple slogan to complacently flaunt, nor a hollowed-out phrase used to legitimize imperialism, but democracy in the original sense of the word is a workable and morally justifiable value on which to position ourselves as social scientists. As an institutionalizable procedure to deal with difference and conflict in a productive and non-violent manner, I contend that democracy, and the open debates that underlie it, is what social scientists should strive for as the implicit moral goal of their academic work. We should not need to *take sides*, we should not say what is true or just, but we ought to make sure that the best available truth—whatever we define as *best*—will prevail.

To do so, we need to think about how all different parties can properly participate in such open and public battles for knowledge. This is vital to the future of social science itself, recalibrating the legitimacy of our societal position and of our knowledge claims, just as it is vital to our future as open societies. Because scientific knowledge increasingly plays a major role in any political dispute it is of utmost importance to have fair possibilities of engaging in such debates about what is true and what not. In a world where nation states and large multinational corporations have tremendously more possibilities to produce knowledge to their advantage, we need to think about ways of giving scientific voice to the interests of us, ordinary citizens and all other inhabitants of the world who lack such possibilities. Otherwise, the scales always tip to powerful. I do not

have any concrete answers on how to do this, although viable efforts have been made by some (e.g. Latour, 2004a), but I firmly believe that this moral goal—the democratic participation of different publics in knowledge contestations—is one worth striving for.

Just what does this mean for my position as a scholar on conspiracy culture; where do I stand; whose side am I on? Clearly, I am not on the side of those critical of conspiracy theories, since I argue against objectives to debunk and pathologize them. But although I have predominantly studied conspiracy culture from the perspective of conspiracy theorists and have striven to bring their cultural milieu to the surface, I do not side with their objectives either. What I do believe is that it is important for our public and private well-being that critique and dissent are not marginalized, ridiculed, or suppressed. In that way, I champion and welcome conspiracy theories since they actively challenge the most dominant powers. Some conspiracy theorists may, in my personal opinion, go wrong in this or that direction, and other conspiracy theorists may be stubbornly unapproachable for debate, but in light of the aforementioned moral goal of science, I can only be content that there are people willing to go against the stream of dominant ideologies.

The price we ultimately pay for societal obedience is far greater than price we pay for the public distrust of epistemic authorities. As Brian Martin argues,

> *[S]ociety will be better off if more people are able and willing to openly question standard views. This holds true even if critics, by later judgement, turn out to be wrong. What is important is the process of open debate. When debate is inhibited or squashed, the potential for abuse of power is magnified enormously. (1996: 7)*

I couldn't agree more.

With this study I hope to have contributed to the moral goal of science that I outlined earlier, to facilitate conspiracy theorists in their democratic participation of knowledge contestations by making intelligible their ideas, worldviews, and experiences to a wider public. This does not mean that I endorse all of their ideas. While I may side with conspiracy theorists on *procedural* terms, I do not

(necessarily) side with them on *substantial* terms. In light of this argument, I would like to close this epilogue with a quotation by Sir Karl Popper:

> *O]ne of the best senses of "reason" and "reasonableness" is openness to criticism—readiness to be criticized, and eagerness to criticize oneself; and I tried to argue that this critical attitude of reasonableness should be extended as far as possible…implicit in this attitude is the realization that we shall always have to live in an imperfect society… There always exist irresolvable clashes of values, which are insoluble because moral principles may conflict. [However,] clashes of values and principles may be valuable, and indeed essential for an open society.' (1992: 132/3)*

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English Summary

Conspiracy theories—explanations of social phenomena involving the covert actions of certain (powerful) people—are everywhere today. Narratives about the *real truth* behind terrorist attacks (like 9/11 and the November 2015 Paris attacks) or behind collective vaccination campaigns (for example, the Swine flu, or the HPV-virus) feature widely in Western societies. Conspiracy theories have become, for many, a normalized idiom to account for what *actually* happens out there. They also feature widely in popular culture: films, books and TV- series like *The Matrix*, *The Da Vinci Code*, or *The X-Files* attract immense crowds. But although conspiracy theories have moved from the cultural margins to the center, our understanding of them remains limited. Both inside and outside of academia, the prevalent assumption is that conspiracy theories are paranoid, delusional, and irrational interpretations of reality. And the people who believe in them must, therefore, be similarly delusional.

This pathological understanding of conspiracy theories draws from the seminal works of Karl Popper (2013[1945]) and Richard Hofstadter (1999[1966]), and undergirds much scholarly work on the subject ever since their respective publication (e.g. Barkun, 2006; Byford, 2011; Pipes, 1997; Robins and Post, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Following Popper, conspiracy theories are firstly seen by such scholars as *bad science*: they reduce complex phenomena to simple explanations, make flawed use of evidence, selectively look for confirmation instead of falsification, and are resistant to contrary evidence. Conspiracy theories are, following this argument, a secular remnant of our religious past: they envision a universe governed by design instead of randomness. Following Hofstadter, conspiracy theories are secondly seen by these academics as *paranoid politics*: they are the systematized, delusional fears of conspiracy and deceit, and they cast the world rather unproductively in an apocalyptic battle between absolute good and absolute evil. Going against the political virtues of moderation, deliberation, and consensus, conspiracy theorists do not do *good politics,* or so they argue. Given this twofold pathological framing of conspiracy theories, scholars warn for the

societal dangers if conspiracy theories proliferate and paranoia thrives: demonization, scapegoating, cultural conflicts, political extremism, radicalization, violence, terrorism, and more. From this perspective, conspiracy theories threaten the health and functioning of democratic societies.

This *pathology frame* which dominates academic work of conspiracy theories is problematic for a number of reasons. It can, first of all, be questioned how illusory and paranoid conspiracy theories really are when there are so many cases of state-run conspiracies in the past that have actually happened. Think of the Watergate scandal, the CIA mind control program MK-Ultra, FBI's counter intelligence program COINTELPRO, the Iran-Contra Affair, the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments, and more recently the LIBOR scandal or the NSA intelligence operations revealed by WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden. More important than their potential veracity is that the pathology frame does not help in any way to understand the huge appeal conspiracy theories have for many people. Unless one wants to contend that we are surrounded by a bunch of delusional and angry minds set out to destroy us (and regress in a conspiracy theory of one's own), this rather dominant perspective gives no sociological grip on a cultural phenomenon as prominent as conspiracy culture. Thus, if we want to grasp why so many people today engage with these alternative forms of knowledge, then we should explore such conspiratorial understandings *without* the need to disqualify or compare them to certain moral or epistemological standards. This is what I set out to do with this ethnographic study of what I call the Dutch conspiracy milieu: to see the world from *their* perspective and to grasp *their* motivations, practices and products. Such an effort towards *verstehen* is largely absent in the academic analysis of conspiracy culture, but is central to the long interpretative tradition of the social sciences in which I situate this study.

I build on the work scholars who have similarly moved away from such psycho-pathological accounts (Dean, 1998; Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000). Mostly coming from the field of cultural studies, such scholars dissect and analyze the many cultural forms in which the themes of paranoia and conspiracy theory surface

in Western societies: from alien abduction stories to major Hollywood movies, and from rap music that discuss life in the *hood*, to highbrow tales of Kafkaesque bureaucratic entrapment in postwar literature. Deploying a discourse of conspiracy is, according to these scholars, a broad, cultural attempt to grapple with the complexities, anxieties, and inequalities induced by large-scale social developments (globalization, mediatization, technocratization, corporatization) and the autonomous workings of opaque systems (bureaucracies, capitalist systems, mass-communication technologies). The idea of conspiracy offers an odd sort of comfort: it makes sense of unexplainable, complex events. However ingenious their analyses generally are, their sole reliance on conspiracy *texts* (books, films, social theory, music lyrics, newspapers, urban legends, TV-series, etc.) leaves a blind spot for the variety of *people*, *meanings*, *practices*, and *experiences* that one might assume exist in the conspiracy milieu; let alone for the disagreement, opposition, and conflict *within* that subcultural world itself.

I therefore depart from this line of research by *sociologizing* the study of conspiracy culture. This means, firstly, that I explore it as a culture in its own right: conspiracy culture should be seen as a relatively autonomous constellation of categories of meaning that are shaped by (and direct) social behavior (Alexander, 2003; Houtman and Achterberg, 2016). It also means that I follow an ethnographic approach, whereby I research *the actual people engaging with conspiracy theories*. Who are they and what do they think and do? The explicit goal is to get into the lives of these people: to understand *their* ideas of what the world looks like, to understand *their* ways of making sense of reality, and to understand *their* experiences of being in this world. This brings me to my overall research question: what does conspiracy culture empirically look like? What are the ideas, practices, biographies, and products of people who inhabit this subculture, and how are these related to the mainstream? And secondly, how can the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories be explained?

To answer these research questions, I immersed myself in the Dutch conspiracy milieu for about two years, during which time I got acquainted with a range of different people, attended many of their

social gatherings, built *rapport*, and was recognized by insiders as a trustworthy person. I read their posts, articles, and books; held in-depth interviews with them in the safe surroundings of their own homes; visited their performances in public venues; participated in the (political) activities they organized; watched their documentaries; and stayed connected and informed through their social media. I immersed myself into this subculture in order to gain as much of an insider's perspective as possible. I studied not only who these people are and what they think, but also what they actually do with these ideas. Their various practices, showed me that conspiracy theories are not merely ideas formulated in the abstract, but that they spur much real-life action and incite both cooperation and conflict between their adherents. In the following, I will draw the many different findings of this study together along the three conceptual moves that I advance in the introduction towards a more complex and empirically rich sociological understanding of this phenomenon: a focus on *meaning*, *diversity* and *relationality*.

Meaning. To take into account the sociological problematics of pathologizing conspiracy culture, I have studied the thought and practice of conspiracy theorists without the need to measure these against certain (unquestioned) standards of normality. My argument is that when the effort is *verstehen*, the question whether conspiracy theories are in fact illusory, paranoid, or dangerous is simply not relevant. As with anthropological studies of non-Western cultures, in which it would be considered an error to measure beliefs and practices against one's own conceptions of causality, truth, and reality (e.g. Geertz, 1973; Taussig, 1987), so too is it not important for my research to determine whether conspiracy theories are actually right or wrong, true or false, rational or delusional. What *is* relevant to study—and empirically feasible—is what people (and, in this case, conspiracy theorists) think and do in their everyday lives; in other words, how they make *meaning* in an essentially meaningless world (cf. Alexander, 2003; Berger and Luckman, 1966). This is then exactly what I have done throughout this study by focusing on how people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu construe and understand

themselves (chapter five and six), others (chapters six and seven) and the world around them (chapter three and four).

The first and foremost meaning that conspiracy theories have in a contemporary post-industrial Western world is the expression of a clear discontent with the way our societies work, and in particular with how modern institutions such as finance, media, business, science and politics function (chapter three, four, and five). Conspiracy theorists are bothered by the fractional reserve system virtualizing the money supply, they deplore what has become of the watchdog function of journalism as media ownership consolidates, they are worried about the powers of large multinational corporations in a globalized market, they mourn the pollution of science by other interests than a pure quest for knowledge, and they follow anxiously the long-arm of the (Orwellian) state when surveillance technologies proliferate. Moreover, conspiracy theories provide a framework for people to formulate and channel their criticism and discontent about the incessant concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a mighty few—a concern that is now quite widespread (cf. Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012).

However, when looked at from the perspective of the interacting individual, it becomes clear that conspiracy theories mean much more than the channeling of societal discontent (chapter five). For example, the occult, mystical, and spiritual components of many conspiracy theories provide existential meaning and purpose in a disenchanted world. Alternative origin stories, narratives of supernatural and extraterrestrial existence, and Eastern philosophies of life make up an important part of the conspiracy milieu and fill the existential gap for those who have separated from traditional religious institutions. But conspiracy theories also speak to changing ways of experiencing reality. In this digitalized and mediatized world, fact and fiction easily collide and *manipulated* depictions of reality are often difficult to separate from truthful ones. The practices of many conspiracy theorists, such as searching, watching, analyzing, deconstructing, and reassembling news items and videos, might be seen as popular ways to grapple with this dissolution of *the Real*. Likewise, conspiracy theories signify the cultivation of a critical

citizenry and the democratization of knowledge. Many of us are trained to critically assess the integrity and truthfulness of all knowledge claims, as well as their bearers. People active in the conspiracy milieu often pointed to their education as formative in their position of skepticism towards *official* explanations. Many of us no longer readily accept the knowledge claims that experts make, and such professionals can expect instead an ever more demanding, knowledgeable, and critical populace challenging their authority. The contemporary ease with which we can travel and experience different people and cultures engenders, furthermore, personal reflection on one's own way of thinking about truth and reality. Some of my respondents spoke of these intercultural experiences as radically changing or uprooting their own taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world. In a globalized world, where cultural relativism becomes increasingly sensible, conspiracy theories are just another way of understanding reality.

Lastly, I argue that we should assess the meaning of conspiracy theories from the perspective of identity formations (chapter six). Since traditional worldviews have lost much of their plausibility and the world has become an increasingly plural space where choice abounds (Berger, 1967; Campbell, 2007), *identity* is no longer stable, given, or destined, but has become a *reflexive project* (cf. Bauman, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Turkle, 1995). We now need to actively think, choose, reflect on, buy, oppose, experiment, and play with the elements that make up our sense of self. The conspiracy milieu is, from this perspective, a relatively open social network providing cultural resources for identity construction. By following conspiracy theories, and by being active in that milieu—sharing and disputing each other's ideas, worldviews, and life-styles; adding novel elements; producing new insights and offering them for further consumption—people position themselves in the world as certain human beings, as *conspiracy theorists*. In and through these inherently social activities, identities are formed. My respondents are well aware of the social stigma surrounding the particular identity of conspiracy theorist, but they are not passive victims. Instead, they appropriate the image of the radical freethinker to differentiate themselves from

the dormant masses or *sheeple* who simply follow the crowd. As such, they reverse the stigma of being irrational dupes and re-claim their rationality: they in the mainstream are in fact the gullible ones. Despite the active reversal of the stigma surrounding conspiracy theories, people in the Dutch conspiracy milieu nevertheless reclaim that pejorative label to distance themselves from the truly irrational ones. Conspiracy theories are, in other words, multifunctional tropes for identity formations.

Diversity. Whereas the majority of scholars homogenize conspiracy culture by focusing on its alleged uniformity (in terms of style, thematic content, narrative structure, and explanatory logic), I have argued that this is not a sociologically productive strategy as it obscures diversity in the conspiracy milieu, leads to stereotypes, and enables processes of Othering (cf. Bhabha, 1983; Pickering, 2001; Weis, 1995). Instead, I explicitly set out in this study to explore the diversity of conspiracy culture following my ethnographic approach. There is, first of all, variety in the conspiracy theories themselves (chapter three). Although quite some of them share the notion of a secret group pulling the strings of world affairs behind the scenes, the designation of *who* exactly constitutes that secret group leads to a diversity of opinions. Some speak of a worldwide network shapeshifting extraterrestrial reptoids, whereas others assign the relatively mundane cabals of an international *power elite*. But, as Knight (2000) and Melley (2000) argued some time ago, contemporary conspiracy theories also often lack a concrete and clearly-defined enemy or cabal, and instead tend toward more elusive and intangible webs of conspiring powers. In the Dutch conspiracy milieu, I encountered conspiracy theories that detailed the functioning of entire societal systems like the banking, pharmaceutical, and food industries in which there were no concrete conspiring agents, yet the often bizarre alignments of interests "can only be described as conspiratorial, even when we know there has probably been no deliberate plotting" (Knight, 2000:32). Moreover, where some scholars argue for the historical continuity of conspiracy theories (e.g. Byford, 2011; ; Pipes, 1997; Uscinski and Parent, 2014), I have observed that many conspiracy theories that are popular

today detail societal and political issues that are unmistakably contemporary, such as the 2008 financial crisis or advanced surveillance technologies. Diversity in conspiracy theories exists, in other words, across history and location. Like any other cultural phenomena, conspiracy theories are products of their time and place.

A second feature of diversity in the conspiracy culture is in regards to epistemology. While conspiracy theorists are often said to be obsessively searching for *facts* and *evidence*, my study suggests that besides such modernist quests for *proofs*, there are many more epistemologies popular in the conspiracy milieu, such as feeling, experiencing, and imagining. As David Icke's super-conspiracy theory shows (chapter four), conspiracy theorists do not base their claims on scientific facts alone, but treat a variety of sources of knowledge as reliable: the perennial knowledge of ancient cultures, the practical wisdom of gained experience, or the emotive imageries technology and science fiction are examples. This epistemological pluralism, drawing from different sources of knowledge, is characteristic of the contemporary world of conspiracy theorists. In an age where no epistemic authority has a monopoly on truth, the best one can do is to draw from a multitude of epistemic sources.

Nevertheless, there are certainly divergent ideas of truth in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. Some people prioritize solid facts and clear evidence, and hold firm beliefs in an absolute truth. Others are more permissive towards *other ways of knowing* and may see truth as something subjective or situated (chapter six). They argued that truth is personal, and is measured according to what resonates with somebody. People are therefore free to pick-and-mix from various epistemic sources of knowledge that are available. By contrast, others argued that all knowledge of the world is the product of local circumstances and there can therefore be no privileged truth. The best one can do is assess and compare the different truths and underlying epistemologies. Thus, while some prioritize the scientific method in their search for truth, others allow for epistemological strategies when claiming knowledge. Whether and how this epistemological pluralism operates at the level of the individual (fusing multiple sources of knowledge) or at the collective level

(different subcultures prioritize different epistemologies) is a matter of future research.

This brings me to a third feature of diversity in the conspiracy milieu, which has to do with the people themselves. In contrast to the dominant stereotype of the conspiracy theorist as a petty-minded paranoid espousing hatred and bigotry, the Dutch conspiracy milieu harbors many kinds of people. Over this period of fieldwork, I came into contact with young urban do-it-yourselfers, baby boomers drawn to eastern philosophies of life, technical pundits, libertarian vagabonds, and many more. As recent quantitative studies affirm, the popularity of conspiracy theories cuts across age, gender, ideological conviction, religion, income, education, and ethnicity (e.g. Oliver and Wood, 2012; Uscinski and Parent, 2014). There is not a typical conspiracy theorist, but as the saying goes, "we are all conspiracy theorists now" (Fenster, 2008, Knight, 2002). Basing myself on people's understandings of themselves and others, I have further explored this diversity in the Dutch conspiracy milieu (chapter six). Following their own ways of associating with some and opposing others, three *types* of conspiracy theorists emerge: *activists*, *retreaters*, and *mediators*. Although these three subcultures of the conspiracy milieu are alike in their opposition to the cultural mainstream, they have radically different ideas about what conspiracy theories mean to them and integrate those ideas into their daily lives in distinctive ways. Bringing people with different ideas together (*mediators*) or improving oneself first so as to be a model that others can emulate (*retreaters*), are ideals to live by formulated against the militant activism of some conspiracy theorists. A focus on diversity brings these lines of agreement and dispute to the surface, which otherwise would have remained hidden under the header of one uniform and deviant culture.

Relationality. Whereas most scholars have studied conspiracy culture *in isolation* by focusing on inherent characteristics, I have argued for the need to take a relational perspective and study conspiracy culture in its social, political, and historical contexts. Conspiracy culture does not exist in a cultural vacuum, but is shaped and formed by the interactions with these meaningful others. When

studied in isolation, such relations with other actors (e.g. media, politics or science) are obscured and larger contexts within which they operate are neglected. My relational perspective took practical shape in this study first by conceptualizing the research object, that is, the conspiracy theory/ist, as the product of labelling practices (cf. Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). I have taken lists from both conspiracy theory debunkers and conspiracy theory adherents as tools to delineate my research object on the basis of a relational instead of an essentialist understanding of what conspiracy theories are (chapter two and three). Much agreement exists about what sites can be considered conspiracy theory websites. Surprisingly, both lists largely coincide and the selection of websites I took is hardly controversial. Controversy, I would say, exists much more on the level of each particular conspiracy theory and on the level of identification processes.

The dominant, stereotypical image of the conspiracy theorist is, after all, vehemently contested by people active in the Dutch conspiracy milieu. They actively resist definitional practices of marginalization and stigmatization by distinguishing themselves from the gullible mainstream as *critical freethinkers* and by identifying others in the milieu as the *actual* conspiracy theorists (chapter five). Moreover, by following the ways in which people identify with some and disassociate from others, I have shown that there are considerable lines of disagreement within the Dutch conspiracy milieu, especially about the militant activism that is often ascribed to conspiracy theorists. Following these divergent views on how to live with conspiracy theories, three different *types* or *subcultures* of the conspiracy milieu become apparent: the aforementioned activists, retreaters and mediators. The point here is that a relational perspective on identity formations, focusing on people's *own* ideas of self and other, led me to see beyond the stereotypical image of the paranoid conspiracy theorist.

This relational perspective also helped me to conceive of the popularity of conspiracy theories in the light of larger societal developments. When people are asked to explain their turn towards these alternative forms of knowledge, they situate their biographic

trajectories firmly in larger processes of cultural change: secularization, mediatization, democratization, and globalization (chapter five). They show, in other words, how biography, society, and history are fundamentally connected (cf. Elias, 1978; Mills, 2000). I argue that these historical developments set in motion the dissolution of a stable truth, opening a cultural space for conspiracy theories to thrive. Processes of secularization unsettle religious truths, but as the metaphysical longings of people remain, a wide variety of alternative spiritual truths are on the rise. Mediatization speaks to a (digital) world where fact and fiction are increasingly difficult to distinguish and truth is able to be manipulated by those making representations of the world. The democratization of knowledge cultivates a critical and reflexive habitus that stimulates people to continuously assess the truthfulness of all knowledge claims and their bearers. Globalization, at last, shows how one's own cultural truths are put into perspective when other outlooks on the world are encountered. These large-scale sociological processes, tangible in the life stories of my respondents, explain the contemporary popularity of conspiracy theories for the simple reason that cultural change implies changing perceptions of truth, knowledge, and power, and thus changing perceptions of the plausibility of conspiracy theories.

The relevance of a relational approach to the study of conspiracy culture is perhaps greatest when situating conspiracy theories in a broader field of knowledge contestation. Following such a perspective as developed in the social studies of science (e.g. Bloor, 1991; Gieryn, 1999; Martin, 1996), conspiracy theories are agnostically put on par with other (e.g. scientific) claims on truth and sociological attention is directed to the rhetorical and practical strategies of *both* parties whose efforts are partly to secure epistemic authority. In chapter seven, I have shown that social scientists appeal to the positivist virtues of modern science when discarding conspiracy theories, while conspiracy theorists challenge that potent public image of science with constructivist arguments coming from the social sciences themselves. This elective affinity between conspiracy theories and sociological theories comes back time and again when

studying conspiracy culture, and although I could only treat it marginally here, it is surely worthy of more sociological research, if only because such affinity fuels the boundary work against conspiracy theories in the first place.

Since I have only started situating conspiracy theories in broader fields of knowledge contestation, I believe further research on the more acute instances of such battles for truth and authority could particularly benefit from this relational perspective. The popular resistance against vaccinations which are thought to be harmful, possibly causing autism; the idea that chemicals are spread by airplanes over clear skies; or the efforts made by some to put the banking system on the political agenda are all ways to challenge the official explanation of a situation. To be sure, each approach can count on steep resistance from established parties who deploy myriad strategies in their defense. However, this approach to the study of such *truth wars* would, sociologically speaking, be sensitive to the arguments and tropes deployed by *all* parties involved, whether they are socially sanctioned or culturally marginalized. If I will not be doing such empirical research from the battlefields myself, I hope to see others doing it because the proliferation of such societal battles for truth demand an agnostic instead of a privileged sociological approach.

Conclusion. The question of *truth* plays a central role in this study. Conspiracy theorists commonly distrust the official story: while mainstream society may think that the reality we are presented with is true, they have a hard time believing what epistemic authorities sanction. What most of us take as self-evident and true is subject to suspicion and distrust among conspiracy theorists. In the conclusion, I elaborate further on what I consider to be crucial aspects in the understanding of conspiracy culture, namely the contested status of institutions, the knowledge they produce, and a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Throughout this study I have shown that major societal institutions such as science, politics, media, and religion attract a great deal of suspicion and discontent in the conspiracy milieu. Conspiracy theorists argue that our institutions are corrupted by

bureaucratization, political games, corporate alignments, ideological dogmatism, and many other consequential things. They hold that social institutions no longer function as they should and cannot be trusted. And they are not alone, as societal trust in major institutions has been on the decline for decades (cf. Inglehart, 1997; Moy and Pfau, 2000; Misztal, 2013). But while conspiracy theorists are highly critical towards mainstream institutions, the purpose and function of those institutions is not entirely rejected. Indeed, they often emphasize the beauty of religion, the importance of politics, the marvels of science, and the relevance of the media. There are all kinds of initiatives in the conspiracy milieu to *purify* these institutions from the *contaminants* that have corrupted them in the first place. For example, new political parties and media platforms are erected and myriad forms of alternative spirituality flourish. This is a broader trend, since Western European societies have experienced strong processes of de-institutionalization which allow for new forms of institutionalization to appear. Conspiracy culture should be seen as part of that broader societal current of *cultural purification*: protecting our institutions from their own degeneration into meaningless form (Houtman, Laermans and Simons, 2016). The broad suspicion and distrust of conspiracy theorists towards institutions is not just a dangerous menace to society, as some would have it, but an impetus for social and cultural change as well.

Along with a discontent about the functioning of institutions, is a distrust towards the knowledge they produce. I argue in the conclusion that this has all to do with how we in the Western world legitimize claims on truth, namely supporting them with the "metanarrative of science" (Lyotard, 1984). Yet it is precisely this belief in the possibility of objective knowledge or *truth* that has become problematic in contemporary societies (Seidman, 1994). Like social constructivists, conspiracy theorists emphasize that knowledge is always the product of a certain people in a certain place and time. This understanding opens up the possibility of manipulation and puts the question of *power* at center stage: if reality is constructed, then the question not only becomes by whom and how, but also *with what objective?* Conspiracy theorists stage a *contest over reality*. Stripped

from all the rhetoric that gives plausibility to your claims on truth, a strategy academics might call deconstruction, what remains of the quality of your knowledge, conspiracy theorists ask. There are many such *truth wars* out there today, such as the controversies around E-numbers, climate change, vaccinations, the dangers of electromagnetic radiation, and many more. Conspiracy culture represents this broader societal *conflict* over knowledge and truth in contemporary societies in which questions of *what counts as legitimate knowledge and why* are frequently posed.

Given the corruption of mainstream institutions and the easy manipulation of facts, conspiracy theorists distrust official explanations and look for a deeper truth, an alternate reality that explains what is *really* the case, since "nothing is what it seems." To get to that level of explanation, they start by critically assessing and deconstructing the realities we are presented with: what does that *simulation of reality* actually look like, who is involved in its making, and are there any clues or symbols pointing to another truth? Their goal is to unveil or de-mask the official story, which most people uncritically accept as the truth. This interpretative style of looking for concealed truths hidden behind or beneath the ordinary level of everyday experience is not reserved for conspiracy theorists alone, but stands in a long intellectual tradition by which people approach the ordinary and mundane with skepticism and suspicion. Paul Ricoeur calls that style "the hermeneutics of suspicion" and locates it in the thought and writings of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (1970), but it drives many contemporary scholarly approaches in a wide range of academic traditions as well, including literary and cultural studies, narrative research, semiotics, feminist theory, critical theory, and sociology as a whole (cf. Birchall, 2006; Felski, 2011; Houtman, 2008; Josselson, 2004; Latour, 2004b). They all tend to be *myth busters*, claiming to have insight into the real, the true, or the deeper meanings of life, which are situated behind, beneath, or beyond the everyday ideas and experiences of ordinary people. Given this larger cultural history, it is hard to set conspiracy theorists aside as deploying a pathological interpretative style, as most scholars have (e.g. Barkun, 2006: 4; Byford, 2011: 75; Pipes, 1997: 45).

These three topics all direct attention to the fact that the objective, unequivocal truths offered by our epistemic institutions are for many people quite implausible. Based on my empirical material, I argue that historical developments of secularization, mediatization, democratization, and globalization add to a mounting disbelief in the possibility of a single objective, irrefutable truth. Because of these broad cultural changes, we live in a world where multiple takes on reality are able to exist side by side. Especially because these epistemic institutions cannot provide us as before with a strong sense of security about the truthfulness of the knowledge they produce, it becomes difficult to trust the realities they present us. Instead, we see a plurality of competing versions of the real available for consumption. For example, one might think of the many different scenarios of what happened on 9/11, each of which creates its own more or less convincing reality—each of them *could* be true. Since we are bombarded today with different and sometimes even contradictory information about what is the case, the truth of the situation becomes more and more elusive. The sociological question that arises is, how do people deal with that epistemic instability, living their lives in a world where truth has become problematic and difficult to ascertain?

Based on my analyses of the Dutch conspiracy milieu, I conclude this study by contrasting two ideal-typically opposed ways to do so. On the one hand is a *modernist* quest for *the* truth in which people ardently look for *real evidence* and *hard facts*. This strategy holds that solid research and firm logic can disclose truths concealed by the many illusory stories we are told (cf. Bauman, 1987; Giddens, 1998; Latour, 1993a). But conspiracy culture embodies many *postmodern* characteristics as well, such as an incredulity towards objective truth claims, a prioritization of other ways of knowing (emotions, feelings, intuition, personal experience, custom, metaphysics, tradition, cosmology, myth, religious sentiment, mystical experience), the bricolage of new realities from different forms of knowledge, and a demand for egalitarian roles in relation to the experts (cf. Bauman, 1991; Ritzer, 1997; Rosenau, 1992). Conspiracy culture, so goes my last argument, speaks to us about a world where *the* truth is no longer assured, but "out there" for us to weigh, juggle, construct, assess,

remodel, measure**,** combat, analyze, play with, and struggle with. And that is no easy task, for none of us.

Nederlandse Samenvatting

De waarheid op losse schroeven: complotdenken in een tijd van epistemische instabiliteit

Complottheorieën—verklaringen van sociale verschijnselen door te wijzen op de verborgen handelingen van bepaalde (groepen) mensen—af zijn alomtegenwoordig vandaag. Zulke verhalen over de *echte* waarheid achter terroristische aanslagen (denk aan 9/11 of Parijs 2015) of achter collectieve vaccinatieprogramma's (denk aan de Varkensgriep of het HPV virus) zwermen massaal rond in onze Westerse samenlevingen. Ze zijn voor velen een genormaliseerde manier geworden om te begrijpen wat er *daadwerkelijk* gebeurt in onze wereld. Complottheorieën komen ook veelvuldig voor in de populaire cultuur: films, boeken en tv-series zoals *The Matrix*, De *Da Vinci Code* of de *The X-files* trekken enorme publieken. Maar ondanks dat complottheorieën zich van de marge naar het hoofdpodium van onze maatschappij hebben bewogen is het begrip van dit verschijnsel nogal beperkt. Zowel binnen als buiten de wetenschap heerst het idee dat complottheorieën paranoïde waanvoorstellingen zijn, irrationele lezingen van de *echte* realiteit. De mensen die erin *geloven* moeten daarom wel net zo gek zijn.

Dit gepathologiseerde begrip van complotdenken leunt sterk op het werk van wetenschapsfilosoof Karl Popper (2013[1945]) en geschiedkundige Richard Hofstadter (1999[1966]) en het onderbouwt veel academisch werk sindsdien (e.g. Barkun, 2006; Byford, 2011; Pipes, 1997; Robins and Post, 1997; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). Zulke geleerden zien complottheorieën, in navolging van Popper, ten eerste als *slechte wetenschap*: ze reduceren complexe verschijnselen tot simpele verklaringen, maken verkeerd gebruik van bewijs, zoeken selectief naar bevestiging van hun ideeën, zijn ongevoelig voor tegenstrijdig bewijs, enzovoort. Complottheorieën zijn, volgens deze redenering, seculiere overblijfselen van onze religieuze geschiedenis: ze zien een wereld die met opzet in plaats van willekeur geordend is. Deze wetenschappers

zien complottheorieën, in navolging van Hofstadter, ten tweede als *paranoïde politiek*: ze zijn de gesystematiseerde imaginaire angstbeelden van samenzwering en bedrog, en bezien de wereld als een apocalyptische strijd tussen absoluut goed en kwaad. Omdat complotdenkers tegen de politieke deugden van gematigdheid, overleg en consensus in gaan, bedrijven zij geen *goede politiek*, zo is hun argument. Aan de hand van dit tweevoudig gepathologiseerde beeld van complottheorieën waarschuwen deze denkers voor de maatschappelijke gevaren van een populairder wordend complotdenken: het zou leiden tot een demonisering van bepaalde groepen, culturele conflicten, politiek extremisme, radicalisering, geweld, terrorisme, en ga zo maar door. Complottheorieën zijn, volgens dit perspectief, een groot gevaar voor de gezondheid en het functioneren van onze democratische samenlevingen.

Maar deze gepathologiseerde, en nogal dominant aanwezige lezing van complottheorieën is voor een aantal redenen problematisch in de wetenschappelijke studie naar dit fenomeen. Het kan, ten eerste, sterk afgevraagd worden in hoeverre complottheorieën nu echt ingebeeld en paranoïde zijn wanneer er zo veel voorbeelden te noemen zijn van daadwerkelijk gebeurde samenzweringen. Denk aan het *Watergate* schandaal, het CIA hersenspoelprogramma *MK-Ultra*, FBI's staatsveiligheidsprogramma *COINTELPRO*, het Iran-Contra schandaal, de Tuskegee syfilis experimenten, en meer recent, de afluisterpraktijken van de NSA die door Wikileaks en Snowden onthuld zijn of het LIBOR schandaal waaruit bleek dat banken jarenlang belangrijke rentepercentages in hun voordeel manipuleerden. Maar misschien nog wel belangrijker voor mijn betoog is wel dat zo'n gepathologiseerd begrip geenszins helpt bij het *begrijpen* van waarom zo veel mensen nu aangetrokken zijn tot complottheorieën. Tenzij iemand wil beargumenteren dat we tegenwoordig omgeven zijn door grote groepen gekke en gevaarlijke mensen die erop uit zijn om ons te vernietigen (en zo af te dwalen in een eigen complottheorie), geeft dit dominante beeld geen sociologische grip op een cultureel verschijnsel zo populair als complotdenken vandaag. Als we willen begrijpen waarom zo veel mensen vandaag met deze alternatieve vormen van kennis omgaan,

dan moeten we de beweegredenen van deze mensen onderzoeken *zonder* deze te (willen) meten aan bepaalde epistemologische of morele standaarden. Dit is dan ook wat ik precies van plan ben met deze etnografische studie van wat het Nederlandse complotdenkersmilieu genoemd kan worden: de wereld (laten) zien door de ogen van *deze* mensen en *hun* motivaties en praktijken begrijpen. Deze poging tot *verstehen* is grotendeels afwezig in de wetenschappelijke studie naar complottheorieën, maar staat centraal in een lange interpretatieve traditie binnen de sociale wetenschappen waarin ik deze studie situeer.

Ik bouw voort in deze studie op het werk van een andere groep academici die eveneens wijzen op de tekortkomingen van zulke psychopathologische verklaringen (Dean, 1998; Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000). Deze geleerden, voornamelijk afkomstig uit de *cultural studies* discipline, ontleden en analyseren de verschillende verschijningsvormen waarin de thema's van paranoia en complottheorieën in onze cultuur voorkomen: van getuigenissen over buitenaardse ontvoeringen tot grote Hollywood producties, en van rap muziek uit de achterbuurten van Amerikaanse steden tot Kafkaiaanse verhalen over bureaucratische beknelling in de moderne literatuur. Het inzetten van complottheorieën is, volgens deze auteurs, een veralgemeende culturele manier om om te gaan met de moeilijkheden, angsten en ongelijkheden die voortgebracht zijn door grote sociale veranderingen (denk aan globalisering, mediatisering, technocratisering, commercialisering, etc.) en de autonome werking van ondoorzichtige sociale systemen (bureaucratieën, kapitalisme, massa media en informatietechnologieën). Het idee van een complot geeft, volgens hen, een eigenaardige vorm van troost en gerief: het maakt het onverklaarbare in deze wereld begrijpelijk. Hoe vernuftig deze verklaringen ook zijn, hun nadruk op complot *teksten* (zoals in boeken, films, sociologische theorie, muziekteksten, kranten, mythes en tv-series) laat een blinde vlek voor de veelzijdigheid van mensen, betekenissen, praktijken en ervaringen die verwacht kunnen worden te bestaan in het complotdenkersmilieu, laat staan voor de onenigheden, tegenstelling en conflicten *binnen* die subculturele wereld.

Ik vertrek daarom van deze groep wetenschappers door de studie van complotdenken te *sociologiseren*. Dat betekent ten eerste dat ik het onderzoek als een cultuur op zichzelf: complotdenken moet gezien worden als een relatief autonome constellatie van betekenissen die gevormd zijn door sociaal gedrag en deze ook weer beïnvloeden (e.g. Alexander, 2003; Houtman and Achterberg, 2016). Het betekent eveneens dat ik een etnografische benadering volg en *de daadwerkelijke mensen die zich bezighouden met complottheorieën* ga onderzoeken. Wie zijn deze mensen, wat denken ze nu precies en wat doen ze eigenlijk daarmee? Het expliciete doel is om *in* de levens van deze mensen te kruipen: om *hun ideeën* van hoe de wereld in elkaar steekt te begrijpen, om *hun* manieren van betekenisgeving te begrijpen en om *hun* ervaringen van bestaan in deze wereld te begrijpen. Dit brengt mij tot de algemene onderzoeksvraag van deze studie: hoe ziet de cultuur van complotdenken er empirisch gezien nu eigenlijk uit? Wat zijn de ideeën, praktijken, biografieën en producten van de mensen die onderdeel zijn van dit milieu, en hoe verhouden deze zich tot de mainstream? Ten tweede, hoe kan de huidige populariteit van complottheorieën verklaard worden? Om deze vragen te beantwoorden heb ik mijzelf twee jaar lang ondergedompeld in het Nederlandse complotdenkersmilieu. In dit tijd heb ik een hoop verschillende mensen ontmoet, veel van hun sociale ontmoetingen bijgewoond, vertrouwen in het milieu opgebouwd waardoor ik langzamerhand gezien werd als een betrouwbaar persoon, hun websites, Facebook posts, artikelen en boeken geanalyseerd, geparticipeerd in de (politieke) activiteiten die zij organiseerden, hun optredens in publieke ruimtes bezocht, diepte-interviews gehouden in de veilige omgeving van hun eigen huis, hun documentaires gezien en was ik verbonden aan en werd ik geïnformeerd door hun sociale media. Ik bestudeerde niet alleen wie deze mensen zijn en wat zij denken maar ook wat ze nou met die ideeën doen. Deze praktijken lieten mij zien dat complottheorieën niet enkel ideeën in het abstracte geformuleerd zijn, maar daadwerkelijke handelingen in het *echte* leven stimuleren en zowel samenwerking als strijd opleveren tussen complotdenkers. In het volgende zal ik de verschillende bevindingen van mijn studie

bijeenbrengen langs de drie conceptuele *bewegingen* die ik in de introductie uiteenzet om de wetenschappelijke studie naar complotdenken op een empirisch en theoretisch hoger niveau te krijgen: deze bewegingen leggen een nadruk op *betekenis*, *diversiteit* en *relationaliteit*.

Betekenis. Gezien de sociologische problematiek van het pathologiseren van complotdenken, bestudeer ik de ideeën en praktijken van complotdenkers zonder deze te willen vergelijken met bepaalde (onbevraagde) morele en/of wetenschappelijke standaarden. Mijn punt is dat wanneer we dit fenomeen willen begrijpen het simpelweg niet relevant is om ons af te vragen of complottheorieën nu *echt* ingebeeld, paranoïde of gevaarlijk zijn. Net zoals het onzinnig zou zijn om in de antropologische studie van niet-westerse culturen hun ideeën en praktijken af te meten aan onze ideeën van causaliteit, waarheid en werkelijkheid (e.g. Geertz, 1973; Taussig, 1986), zo zou het voor het sociologische begrip van complotdenken eveneens onzinnig zijn om te onderzoeken of complottheorieën goed of fout, waar of vals, rationeel of irrationeel zouden zijn. Wat *wel* relevant is om te onderzoeken—en bovendien empirisch haalbaar—is wat mensen (en in dit geval complotdenkers) denken en doen in hun dagelijks leven. Met andere woorden, hoe zij *betekenis* maken in een in essentie betekenisloze wereld (cf. Alexander, 2003; Berger and Luckman, 1966). Dit heb ik dan ook voortdurend gedaan in deze studie: hoe construeren en zien mensen in het Nederlandse complotdenkersmilieu zichzelf (hoofdstukken vijf en zes), anderen (hoofdstukken zes en zeven) en de wereld om hun heen (hoofdstukken drie en vier).

De eerste en meest voorname betekenis die complottheorieën hebben in onze huidige postindustriële wereld is de uiting van een helder ongenoegen met de manier waarop onze samenlevingen, en in het bijzonder hoe onze moderne instituties zoals de media, wetenschap, politiek, handel, en zo voort functioneren (hoofdstukken drie, vier en vijf). We hebben gezien dat complotdenkers zich storen aan het financiële systeem van fractioneel bankieren wat onze geldvoorraad virtualiseert, het betreuren wat er over is van waakhondfunctie van de journalistiek nu vele media zich

consolideren in enkele grote bedrijven, bezorgd zijn over de macht van grote multinationals in een geglobaliseerde markt, de vervuiling van de wetenschap door andere belangen hekelen en de lange arm van de (Orwelliaanse) overheid kritisch in de gaten houden nu allerlei surveillance technologieën in opkomst zijn. Complottheorieën voorzien bovendien in een raamwerk voor mensen om hun kritieken en ongenoegen over de toenemende concentratie van macht en rijkdom in de handen van een kleine groep te kunnen formuleren en kanaliseren, een zorg die nu wijdverspreider is (cf. Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012).

Maar wanneer we complotdenken bekijken vanuit het perspectief van het handelende individu, dan zien we dat het veel meer behelst dan simpelweg de uiting van maatschappelijk onbehagen (hoofdstuk vijf). Om een paar voorbeelden te noemen: de occulte, mystieke en spirituele componenten van veel complottheorieën voorzien voor nogal wat mensen in de behoefte naar existentiële betekenis en zingeving in een onttoverde wereld. Alternatieve oorsprongsverhalen, narratieven over bovennatuurlijk en buitenaards leven, en Oosterse levensfilosofieën beslaan een groot deel van het complotdenkersmilieu en vullen de existentiële leegte die overbleef nadat men de traditionele religieuze instituties de rug toekeerde. Maar complottheorieën spreken ook over veranderende manieren van het ervaren van realiteit, zo botsen feit en fictie in onze gedigitaliseerde en gemediatiseerde wereld makkelijk met elkaar en zijn gemanipuleerde beelden van onze wereld maar moeilijk te onderscheiden van waarachtige. De praktijken van complotdenkers (zoeken, kijken, analyseren, deconstrueren, en herschikken van nieuwsonderdelen en video's) moeten dan ook gezien worden als populaire worstelingen met deze ontbinding van het *Echte*. Op eenzelfde andere manier wijzen complottheorieën op de cultivering van een kritische bevolking en de democratisering van kennis. Velen van ons zijn opgeleid om de integriteit en waarachtigheid van kennisclaims en hun producenten kritisch te beoordelen. Mensen actief in het complotdenkersmilieu refereren vaak naar hun opleiding als vormend in de sceptische houding naar *officiële* verklaringen. Men accepteert de kennisclaims van experts niet zomaar meer, en zulke

professionals kunnen op een steeds kritischere, veeleisendere en meer geïnformeerde burgers rekenen die hun autoriteit als zodanig betwisten. Het gemak, ten slotte, waarmee tegenwoordig gereisd kan worden en verschillende volkeren en culturen aan de levende lijve ondervonden kunnen worden leidt tot persoonlijke reflecties over onze eigen ideeën over waarheid en realiteit. Sommige van mijn respondenten spreken over zulke interculturele ervaringen als radicaal veranderend of ontwortelend in de manier waarop zij tegen hun eigen, vanzelfsprekende, manieren van de wereld interpreteren aankijken. In onze geglobaliseerde wereld waar cultuurrelativisme steeds aannemelijker wordt, betekenen complottheorieën simpelweg een andere manier om de werkelijkheid te begrijpen.

Ik beargumenteer ten slotte dat de betekenis van complottheorieën bekeken moet worden vanuit het perspectief van identiteitsvorming (hoofdstuk zes). Omdat traditionele overtuigingen veel van hun plausibiliteit hebben verloren en de wereld in toenemende mate een veelvoudige ruimte is waar *keuze* overvloedig is (Berger, 1967; Campbell, 2007), is *identiteit* niet langer iets stabiels, gegeven of voorbestemd, maar het is een *reflexief project* geworden (Bauman, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Turkle, 1995). We moeten nu actief bezig zijn met het nadenken over, kiezen tussen, en experimenteren met de elementen die ons idee van wie we zelf (willen) zijn—onze identiteit—vormgeven. Het complotdenkers-milieu is vanuit dit perspectief bezien een relatief open sociaal netwerk dat voorziet in culturele hulpbronnen voor identiteitsconstructies. Door het aanhangen van complottheorieën, en door actief te zijn in dat milieu, dat wil zeggen, door het overnemen, betwisten en herschikken van elkaars ideeën, wereldbeelden en leefstijlen, positioneren mensen zichzelf in de wereld als bepaalde personen, als *complotdenkers*. In *en* door deze inherent sociale praktijken worden identiteiten gesmeed. Mijn informanten zijn zich terdege bewust van het sociale stigma dat aan de identiteit van *de* complotdenker kleeft, maar zij zijn geen passieve slachtoffers. Integendeel, ze eigenen zich het beeld van de radicale vrijdenker toe en onderscheiden zichzelf van de slapende kudde mensen—of *sheeple* in hun terminologie—die maar gewoon met de

meute mee gaat. Complotdenkers draaien zo het stigma van irrationele dwazen om en herclaimen tegelijkertijd hun eigen rationaliteit. Zij, de mainstream kudde makke schapen, zijn nu de onnozele goedgelovigen. Ondanks die actieve omkering van het stigma, gebruiken deze mensen merkwaardig genoeg datzelfde pejoratieve label om zichzelf van de *echte* complotdenkers in het milieu te onderscheiden (hoofdstuk zes). Complottheorieën zijn, in andere woorden, multifunctionele figuren voor allerlei identiteitsconstructies.

Diversiteit. Waar de meerderheid van wetenschappers complotdenken homogeniseert door zich te richten op de (vermeende) uniformiteit in stijl, thematische inhoud, narratieve structuur en verklarende logica, beargumenteer ik dat dit niet een sociologisch productieve strategie is om te volgen daar het diversiteit in het complotdenkersmilieu verdoezelt, tot stereotypen leidt en processen van *Othering* mogelijk maakt (cf. Bhabha, 1983; Pickering, 2001; Weis, 1995). In plaats daarvan zoek ik door middel van mijn etnografische benadering juist variëteit op in deze studie. Een eerste manier waarop verscheidenheid geobserveerd kan worden is op het niveau van de complottheorieën zelf (hoofdstuk drie). Ook al delen velen het idee van een geheim groepje dat de touwtjes van het wereldtoneel in handen heeft, er zit volop variatie in de toewijzing van *wie* nu precies die geheime groep nu precies is. Waar sommigen over een wereldwijd netwerk van gedaanteveranderende buitenaardse reptielen spreken, doen anderen dat over een meer wereldse elite van internationale bankiersfamilies. Maar zoals ook Knight (2000) en Melley (2000) beargumenteren, het ontbreekt hedendaagse complottheorieën vaak aan een duidelijk omschreven vijand of kliekje kwaadwillenden. In plaats daarvan zien we veeleer meer ongrijpbare bewegingen van samenzwerende krachten waar het maar onduidelijk is wie of wat er achter zit. In het Nederlandse complotdenkersmilieu zien we bijvoorbeeld complottheorieën over het functioneren van abstracte sociale systemen zoals het bancaire stelsel of de farmaceutische industrie waarin concrete samenzwerende personen ontbreken, maar waar de verontrustende samensmelting van belangen 'alleen maar beschreven worden als

samenzweerderig, ook al weten we dat er waarschijnlijk geen opzettelijk plan aan voorafgegaan is' (Knight, 2000:32). Waar sommige wetenschappers de historische continuïteit van complottheorieën benadrukken (e.g. Byford, 2011; ; Pipes, 1997; Uscinski and Parent, 2014), heb ik juist gezien dat veel huidige complottheorieën spreken over sociale en politieke zaken die onmiskenbaar hedendaags zijn, denk bijvoorbeeld aan de financiële crisis of nieuwe surveillance technologieën. Diversiteit in complottheorieën bestaat, in andere woorden, ook in tijd en plaats. Net als elk ander cultureel fenomeen zijn complottheorieën simpelweg producten van hun plek in de geschiedenis.

Een tweede dimensie van diversiteit in het complotdenkersmilieu betreft epistemologie. Waar van complotdenkers gezegd wordt dat zij obsessief bezig zijn met het zoeken naar *feiten* en *bewijzen*, laat mijn studie zien dat naast zulke modernistische zoektochten naar de waarheid (welke er ongetwijfeld zijn) er nog vele andere epistemologieën populair zijn in het complotdenkersmilieu zoals voelen, ervaren en verbeelden. Zoals David Icke's super complottheorie briljant laat zien (hoofdstuk vier), baseren complotdenkers zich niet alleen op (wetenschappelijke) feiten, maar leunen zij ook sterk op de vereeuwigde kennis van antieke culturen, de praktische wijsheid van opgedane ervaring, of de vervoerende beelden voortgebracht door technologie en science fiction als betrouwbare bronnen van kennis. Dit epistemologisch pluralisme—het zich baseren op verschillende vormen van weten—is karakteristiek voor het hedendaagse complotdenkersmilieu. In een wereld waar geen epistemische autoriteit een monopolie heeft op *de* waarheid, is het beste wat men kan doen leunen op verschillende bronnen van kennis. Er zijn, desalniettemin, duidelijk verschillende ideeën over de waarheid te vinden in het Nederlandse complotdenkersmilieu. Waar sommigen inderdaad een voorkeur hebben voor harde feiten, duidelijk bewijs en sterk geloven in een absolute en onomstotelijke waarheid, zijn anderen meer toegeeflijk naar andere manieren van weten en zien zij waarheid als iets subjectiefs ofwel gesitueerd (hoofdstuk 6). Wat waar is, is volgens die eerste groep wat waar is *voor jou*, wat resoneert met jou. Men is

daardoor vrij om te kiezen en plukken van welke epistemische bron van kennis dan ook, zo vertellen zij mij. In contrast hiermee beargumenteren anderen in het complotdenkersmilieu dat alle kennis van de wereld het product is van lokale omstandigheden, er kan daardoor geen bevoorrechte of *echte* waarheid zijn. Wat volgens hen overblijft is het beoordelen en vergelijken van zulke verschillende waarheden en onderliggende epistemologieën. Waar sommigen een voorkeur hebben voor de wetenschappelijke methode in hun zoektocht naar de waarheid, laten anderen in het claimen van kennis meer epistemologische strategieën toe. Ofwel en hoe dit epistemologisch pluralisme nu voornamelijk werkt op het niveau van het handelend individu (het mengen van verschillende vormen van kennis) of op dat van het collectief (verschillende subculturen met verschillende epistemologische voorkeuren) is voor toekomstig onderzoek om uit te vinden.

Dat brengt mij tot een derde dimensie van diversiteit in het complotdenkersmilieu: mensen. In tegenstelling tot het dominante stereotype van complotdenkers als paranoïde aluminiumhoedjes dragende gekkies, huisvest het Nederlandse complotdenkersmilieu veel meer typen mensen. Gedurende de lange periode van veldwerk kwam ik in contact met jonge stedelijke *do-it-yourself*'ers, babyboomers aangetrokken tot Oosterse levensfilosofieën, digitale techneuten, vrijzinnige alternatievelingen, en ga zo maar door. Zoals recente kwantitatieve studies laten zien: de populariteit van complottheorieën slaat dwars door categorieën heen als leeftijd, geslacht, ideologische overtuiging, religie, inkomen, opleiding, etniciteit en zo voort heen (e.g. Oliver and Wood, 2012; Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Er is, in andere woorden, niet één typische complotdenker, maar zoals tegenwoordig vaker gezegd wordt, zijn we misschien allemaal wel complotdenkers vandaag (Fenster, 2008, Knight, 2002). Mij baserende op het *eigen* begrip van zelf en ander, heb ik diversiteit in het complotdenkersmilieu nog verder onderzocht (hoofdstuk 6). Volgens deze eigen manieren van zich identificeren met sommigen en distantiëren van anderen worden drie duidelijk te onderscheiden *typen* complotdenkers zichtbaar: *activisten*, *terugtrekkers* en *bemiddelaren*. Ook al delen deze subculturen van het

complotdenkersmilieu de weerstand en het verzet tegen de culturele hoofdstroom, zij hebben desalniettemin radicaal verschillende ideeën over wat complottheorieën voor hen betekenen en hoe deze kennis in het dagelijks leven te integreren. Mensen in contact brengen met andere ideeën (*bemiddelaars*) of het verbeteren van jezelf zodat anderen volgen (*terugtrekkers*) zijn idealen om naar te leven in tegenstelling tot het militante activisme van sommige complotdenkers. Een nadruk op diversiteit brengt niet alleen zulke lijnen van overeenstemming en conflict naar voren die anders verborgen zouden zijn gebleven achter het uniforme en deviante beeld van deze subcultuur, maar opent ook mooie ingangen voor fascinerend toekomstig sociologisch onderzoek.

Relationaliteit. Waar de meerderheid van wetenschappers complotdenken gewoonlijk bestudeerd *in uitzondering*, zich richtend op zijn vermeende inherente eigenschappen, beargumenteer ik om een relationeel perspectief te nemen en complotdenken in zijn sociale, politieke en historische contexten te bestuderen. Complotdenken bestaat natuurlijk niet in een of ander cultureel vacuüm maar is gevormd en vormt zich door de interacties met betekenisvolle anderen. Wanneer complotdenken wordt bestudeerd in uitzondering, worden de relaties met andere actoren (zoals de media, politiek of wetenschap) verduisterd en de grotere verbanden waarbinnen het opereert genegeerd. Mijn relationele perspectief krijgt allereerst praktisch vorm doordat ik mijn onderzoeksobject—de complottheorie/denker—conceptualiseer als het product van de labellingspraktijken van verschillende partijen (cf. Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). Ik heb aan de hand van lijsten van zowel tegenstanders als van aanhangers van complottheorieën mijn onderzoeksobject omschreven in *relationele* in plaats van een essentiële definitie van wat een complottheorie/denker zou zijn (hoofdstukken twee en drie). Overeenstemming is er over welke websites als complotdenkerswebsites gezien kunnen worden. Verrassenderwijs komen beide lijsten goed overeen en is de selectie van websites die ik genomen heb amper controversieel te noemen. Controverse, zou ik zeggen, bestaat vooral op het niveau van elke

afzonderlijke *complottheorie* en op het niveau van identificatieprocessen.

Het dominante (en stereotype) beeld van de complotdenker wordt namelijk grondig bestreden door mensen in het Nederlandse complotdenkersmilieu. Zij verzetten zich actief tegen deze marginaliserende en stereotyperende benoemingspraktijken door hunzelf te onderscheiden van de goedgelovige massa als *kritische vrijdenkers* en door anderen in het milieu te bestempelen als de *echte* complotdenkers (hoofdstuk vijf). Door de verschillende manieren te volgen waarmee men zich identificeert met sommigen en distantiëert van anderen, heb ik belangrijke lijnen van onenigheid in het complotdenkersmilieu laten zien, vooral betreffende het militante activisme dat zo vaak aan complotdenkers toegeschreven word. Volgens deze verschillende ideeën van hoe met complottheorieën te leven, heb ik drie verschillen *typen* of subculturen van het complotdenkersmilieu zichtbaar gemaakt (de hiervoor genoemde *activisten*, *terugtrekkers* en *bemiddelaars*). Mijn punt is dat een relationeel perspectief op identificatieprocessen—zich richtend op de eigen ideeën van zelf en ander—meer laat zien dan het stereotype beeld van de paranoïde complotdenker.

Maar dit relationele perspectief maakt het mij ook mogelijk de huidige populariteit van complotdenken te begrijpen vanuit grotere sociologische ontwikkelingen. Wanneer ik mijn respondenten vroeg om hun wending naar deze alternatieve vormen van kennis te verklaren, situeerden zij hun levenspad stevig in grotere processen van culturele verandering: secularisering, mediatisering, democratisering en globalisering (hoofdstuk vijf). Zij laten hiermee goed zien hoe biografie, samenleving en geschiedenis innig met elkaar verbonden zijn (cf. Elias, 1978; Mills, 2000). Ik beargumenteer dat deze historische ontwikkelingen de ontbinding van een stabiele waarheid in gang hebben gezet waardoor er een culturele ruimte is ontstaan waarbinnen complottheorieën kunnen floreren. Seculariseringsprocessen ontmantelen religieuze waarheden, maar, blijkend uit de vele alternatieve spirituele praktijken die in deze leegte zijn ontstaan, niet de behoefte naar metafysica zelf. Mediatisering laat een (digitale) wereld zien waar feit en fictie steeds moeilijker van

elkaar te onderscheiden zijn en waarheid eenvoudig te manipuleren is door hen die behendig films en video's maken kunnen. De democratisering van kennis spreekt over de cultivering van een kritische en reflexieve habitus welke mensen stimuleert om continu de waarachtigheid van alle waarheidsclaims en hun dragers te onderzoeken. Globalisering, ten slotte, laat zien hoe de eigen culturele waarheden in perspectief worden geplaatst wanneer andere zienswijzen zich aandienen. Deze grote sociologische processen, tastbaar in de levensverhalen van mijn respondenten, verklaren de huidige populariteit van complottheorieën het beste, zo concludeer ik in hoofdstuk vijf. Dit om de simpele reden dat culturele ontwikkelingen veranderende ideeën over waarheid, kennis en macht, en dus veranderende ideeën over de plausibiliteit van complottheorieën met zich mee brengen.

De relevantie van een relationele benadering in de studie van complotdenken is wellicht het grootst wanneer complottheorieën gesitueerd worden in een breder veld van *kennisstrijd*. Volgens zo'n perspectief, zoals ontwikkeld in de wetenschapsstudies (e.g. Bloor, 1991; Gieryn, 1999; Martin, 1996), worden complottheorieën agnostisch gelijk gesteld aan andere (bijvoorbeeld wetenschappelijke) waarheidsclaims en wordt de sociologische aandacht gericht op de retorische en handelingsstrategieën van verschillende partijen in hun inspanningen om hun waarheid en epistemische autoriteit veilig te stellen. In hoofdstuk zeven laat ik zien dat sociale wetenschappers zich beroepen op de positivistische deugden van de moderne wetenschap wanneer zij complottheorieën afwijzen, terwijl complotdenkers juist dat krachtige publieke beeld van de wetenschap aanvallen met constructivistische argumenten afkomstig uit de sociale wetenschappen zelf. Deze innige affiniteit, of *Wahlverwandtschaft* in Max Weber's bewoording, tussen complottheorieën en sociologische theorieën komt veelvuldig naar voren in deze studie van complotdenken. Helaas heb ik dit slechts marginaal heb kunnen bestuderen, maar het is duidelijk meer sociologisch onderzoek waard, alleen al gezien deze affiniteit grenswerk tegen complottheorieën lijkt aan te wakkeren (hoofdstuk zeven).

Omdat ik slechts begonnen ben met het situeren van complottheorieën in een breder veld van kennisstrijd geloof ik dat toekomstig onderzoek naar de meer acute voorbeelden van deze gevechten om de waarheid vooral kan profiteren van een dergelijke relationele aanpak. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan de groeiende weerstand tegen vaccinaties welke gezien worden als schadelijk voor de gezondheid en mogelijk zelfs leidend tot autisme, het idee dat chemicaliën door vliegtuigen over onze hemel verspreid worden om onze bevolkingen kalm te houden, of de inspanningen van sommigen om het financiële systeem op de politieke agenda te zetten daar het een grote oplichterij betreft. Al deze pogingen om de *officiële* verklaringen te betwisten kunnen rekenen op veel weerstand van de meer gevestigde partijen die in hun verdediging verschillende strategieën hanteren. Deze meer gelijkwaardige conceptualisering van zulke *gevechten om de waarheid* (truth wars) zou sociologisch gezien het meest gevoelig zijn voor de ingezette argumenten en strategieën van *alle* betrokken partijen, of ze nou sociaal bekrachtigd zijn of cultureel gemarginaliseerd. Als ik zelf niet dit soort empirisch onderzoek ga doen vanuit deze epistemologische slagvelden, dan hoop ik dat anderen dat in mijn plaats zullen doen, want de groei van dit soort maatschappelijke gevechten om de waarheid vereist een agnostische in plaats van een geprivilegieerde (lees: modernistische) sociologische blik.

Conclusie. De waarheid staat centraal in deze studie. Complotdenkers wantrouwen gewoonlijk het *officiële* verhaal: de massa's mogen geloven dat de werkelijkheid die zij gepresenteerd krijgen waar is, complotdenkers hebben meer moeite met het geloven van wat onze epistemische autoriteiten bekrachtigen als de *echte* waarheid. Wat velen van ons als vanzelfsprekend en waar zien, is voor complotdenkers onderwerp van achterdocht en wantrouwen. In de conclusie werk ik een drietal, in mijn ogen cruciale, aspecten voor het begrip van complotdenken verder uit: de betwiste status van onze instituties, de kennis die zij produceren, en de hermeneutiek van wantrouwen.

Door deze studie heen heb ik laten zien hoe onze voornaamste maatschappelijke instituties, zoals de wetenschap,

politiek, media, religie enzovoort, een hoop wantrouwen en ongenoegen oproepen in het complotdenkersmilieu. Deze mensen beargumenteren dat onze instituties gecorrumpeerd zijn door bureaucratie, politieke spelletjes, verstrengeling met het bedrijfsleven, ideologisch dogmatisme en ga zo maar door. Als gevolg hiervan functioneren deze instituties in hun ogen niet naar behoren en kunnen zij hen niet langer vertrouwen. Complotdenkers zijn niet de enigen. Het maatschappelijke vertrouwen in onze instituties is al decennia tanende (cf. Inglehart, 1997; Moy and Pfau, 2000; Misztal, 2013). Maar waar complotdenkers zeer kritisch zijn over onze instituties wordt hun doel en functie niet verworpen. Integendeel, zij benadrukken vaak de schoonheid van religie, het belang van politiek, de wonderen van de wetenschap en de relevantie van de media. En zo zien wij allerlei initiatieven binnen het complotdenkersmilieu om deze instituties te *zuiveren* van de verontreinigers die deze gecorrumpeerd hebben: nieuwe politieke partijen en mediaplatforms worden opgericht en verschillende vormen van alternatieve spiritualiteit floreren. Dit is een bredere maatschappelijke trend. Waar West-Europese samenlevingen sterke processen van *de-institutionalisering* hebben gekend, zien we tegelijkertijd nieuwe vormen van institutionalisering. Complotdenken moet daarom gezien worden als onderdeel van deze bredere maatschappelijke stroom van *culturele purificatie*: het beschermen van het doel en functie van onze instituties tegen het verval in betekenisloze vorm (cf. Houtman, Laermans and Simons, 2016). Het wantrouwen van complotdenkers tegenover instituties is daarom niet alleen maar een gevaar voor de samenleving, zoals sommigen beamen, maar evengoed een impuls voor sociale verandering.

Naast dit ongenoegen over het functioneren van onze instituties, wantrouwen complotdenkers de kennis die zij produceren. Ik beargumenteer in de conclusie dat dit alles te maken heeft met hoe wij waarheidsclaims legitimeren in onze huidige Westerse samenlevingen, namelijk door het te ondersteunen met het 'meta-narratief van de wetenschap' (Lyotard, 1984). Het is echter precies dit geloof in de mogelijkheid van objectieve kennis welke problematisch is geworden in onze huidige samenlevingen (Seidman,

1994). Zoals de (sociaal) constructivisten in de wetenschap, zo benadrukken (veel) complotdenkers dat kennis altijd het product is van bepaalde mensen in een bepaalde tijd en plaats. Dit begrip opent uiteraard de mogelijkheid van manipulatie en zet het onderwerp van macht stevig op de kaart want als de werkelijkheid geconstrueerd is, dan is de logische vraag niet alleen door wie en hoe, maar ook met welk doel. En zo voeren zij een strijd over de werkelijkheid op: ontdaan van alle retoriek die de plausibiliteit van jouw waarheidsclaims moeten ondersteunen, een praktijk die academici *deconstructie* zouden kunnen noemen, wat blijft er over van de kwaliteit van jouw kennis, zo vragen complotdenkers zich af? Er zijn nog veel van dit soort "gevechten om de waarheid" vandaag, denk aan de controverses rondom E-nummers, klimaatverandering, de veiligheid van vaccinaties, de gevaren van elektromagnetische straling, en ga zo maar door. Complotdenken representeert, in andere worden, een breder maatschappelijk conflict over kennis en waarheid in onze huidige samenlevingen: wat geldt als legitieme kennis en waarom?

Gegeven de corrumpering van onze instituties en de al te gemakkelijke manipulatie van feiten, staan complotdenkers wantrouwend tegenover het *officiële* verhaal en zijn zij op jacht naar een diepere waarheid, een diepere werkelijkheid welke zou verklaren wat er *echt* aan de hand is. Niets is namelijk wat het lijkt. Om tot dat verklarende niveau te komen beginnen complotdenkers met het analyseren en deconstrueren van de werkelijkheden die wij gepresenteerd krijgen: hoe ziet die *simulatie van de werkelijkheid* er eigenlijk uit, wie is er bij de productie ervan betrokken en zijn er enige aanwijzingen of symbolen te vinden die wijzen naar de *echte* waarheid? Hun doel is om het officiële verhaal wat de meeste mensen voor waar aannemen te ontmaskeren. Deze interpretatieve stijl—het zoeken naar verborgen waarheden achter of onder de gewone, alledaagse werkelijkheid—is niet voorbehouden aan complotdenkers alleen, maar past in een lange intellectuele traditie welke sceptisch en wantrouwend staat tegenover de alledaagse realiteit die mensen ervaren. Paul Ricoeur noemt deze stijl de *hermeneutiek van wantrouwen* en situeert deze in het werk en gedachtegoed van Marx, Nietzsche en

Freud (1970), maar het is evengoed te vinden in de verschillende academische tradities van vandaag de dag: literatuur en cultural studies, narratief onderzoek, semiotiek, feministische theorie, kritische theorie en niet in de laatste plaats, de sociologie zelf (cf. Birchall, 2006; Felski, 2011; Houtman, 2008; Josselson, 2004; Latour, 2004b). Wetenschappers in al deze tradities neigen echte *mythejagers* te zijn: beweren dat zij inzicht hebben in de *echte*, *ware* of *diepere* betekenissen van het leven, welke *achter*, *onder* of *voorbij* de alledaagse ideeën en ervaringen van gewone mensen liggen. Door deze grotere gedeelde culturele geschiedenis is het moeilijk om complotdenken apart te zetten als een pathologische interpretatieve stijl, zoals sommigen doen (e.g. Barkun, 2006: 4; Byford, 2011: 75; Pipes, 1997: 45).

Deze drie aspecten wijzen allemaal op het feit dat objectieve of vaststaande waarheden (zoals aangeboden door onze epistemische instituties) voor veel mensen onwaarschijnlijk zijn geworden. Gebaseerd op mijn empirisch materiaal beargumenteer ik dat de historische ontwikkelingen van secularisering, mediatisering, democratisering en globalisering geleid hebben tot een groeiend ongeloof in de mogelijkheid van één objectieve, eenduidige en onweerlegbare waarheid. Door deze culturele veranderingen leven wij tegenwoordig in een wereld waar *verschillende* waarheden naast elkaar bestaan. Vooral omdat de epistemische instituties ons niet meer kunnen voorzien (zoals vroeger wellicht) met een sterk gevoel van zekerheid over de waarachtigheid van de kennis die zij produceren, wordt het moeilijk om hun koers te volgen en de werkelijkheden die zij produceren te vertrouwen. In plaats daarvan zijn er tegenwoordig meerdere vaak wedijverende versies van de *echte* werkelijkheid voor consumptie beschikbaar. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan de vele verschillende scenario's van wat er *echt* gebeurd is op 9/11, welke allemaal hun eigen, min of meer overtuigende, werkelijkheid creëren. Ze *kunnen* elk waar zijn. Omdat we elke dag gebombardeerd worden met verschillende en soms zelfs tegenstrijdige informatie over wat er "echt" aan de hand is, wordt de werkelijke gang van zaken steeds ongrijpbaarder. De sociologische vraag die deze ontwikkeling oproept is, natuurlijk, hoe gaan mensen dan om met deze

epistemische instabiliteit? Hoe leven mensen in een wereld waar de Waarheid problematisch en moeilijk vast te stellen is geworden? Gebaseerd op mijn analyses van het Nederlandse complotdenkersmilieu, contrasteer ik twee ideaaltypisch tegengestelde manieren. Enerzijds vind ik typisch modernistische jachten op de "echte" waarheid: vurig zoekend naar *bewijzen* en *harde feiten*, deze strategie komt voort uit het idee dat gedegen onderzoek en sterke logica de waarheden kan openbaren die verborgen blijven achter de vele misleidende verhalen die ons verteld worden (cf. Bauman, 1987; Giddens, 1998; Latour, 1993a). Maar de cultuur van complotdenken belichaamt ook vele *postmoderne* eigenschappen: een ongeloof ten opzichte van objectieve waarheidsclaims, ruimte geven aan andere manieren van weten (emoties, gevoelens, intuïtie, ervaringen, gewoontes, metafysica, traditie, mythe, religieuze affecten, mystieke ervaringen, enzovoort), het "knutselen" van hele nieuwe werkelijkheden uit al deze verschillende vormen van kennis, en een eis tot meer egalitaire persoonlijke, sociale en culturele verhoudingen met experts (cf. Bauman, 1991; Ritzer, 1997; Rosenau, 1992). De cultuur van complotdenken, zo is mijn laatste betoog, spreekt over een wereld waar *de* waarheid niet langer verzekerd is, maar op losse schroeven is komen te staan waardoor wij haar continu moeten wegen, opgooien, deconstrueren, beoordelen, herschikken, meten, bestrijden, analyseren, bespelen en beworstelen. En dat is geen gemakkelijke taak, voor geen van ons.

Notes

[1] Personal email from Liam (67).
[2] http://themindunleashed.org/2015/11/the-paris-attacks-what-you-really-need-to-know.html, last retrieved November 20 2015.
[3] http://www.collective-evolution.com/2015/11/15/whats-really-going-on-with-paris-terror-attacks-summed-up-in-4-minutes/, last retrieved November 20 2015.
[4] http://www.ninefornews.nl/analist-aanslag-parijs-was-mogelijk-valse-vlag-operatie/, last retrieved November 20, 2015.
[5] http://www.ninefornews.nl/video-dit-interview-over-de-aanslagen-in-parijs-zul-je-niet-op-tv-zien/, last retrieved November 20, 2015.
[6] http://www.ninefornews.nl/historicus-aanslagen-in-parijs-uitgevoerd-door-professionele-commandos/, last retrieved November 20, 2015.
[7] http://www.ninefornews.nl/duitse-minister-syrisch-paspoort-dader-parijs-was-mogelijk-valse-vlag-om-mensen-bang-te-maken-voor-vluchtelingen/
[8] As I explain later on, the terms conspiracy theorists and conspiracy theory are far from neutral but are powerful in and off themselves: they discard the referent as irrational and untrue. I speak in more detail about the power of language, i.e. labelling certain people/forms of thought as conspiracy theorist/y, in the introduction and the methodology section, but the problem boils down to the fact that using these terms without any reflexivity simply reproduces the stigmatized connotations they have. However, for reasons of clarity and esthetics I have chosen to use these terms nonetheless. This does not imply that I am insensitive to or ignorant about the effects of calling the people in my study and their beliefs conspiracy theorists/ies, but simply that any other term, or putting the "conspiracy theorists/ies" within brackets (which I tried before) would make the reading less clear and more difficult to read. One could even say that my usage of these terms neutralizes or lessens the negative connotations they have, as I write about them in neutral ways.
[9]http://www.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed- conspiracy.aspx,
[10] http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP_Release_National_ConspiracyTheories_040213.pdf
[11] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/15/alien-believers-outnumber-god_n_1968259.html
[12] http://www.quest.nl/artikel/ruim-40-procent-gelooft-de-overheid-volgt-stiekem-alles-wat-we-op-internet-doen
[13] Think of the militant rhetoric of Senator McCarthy and later Senator Goldwater, and reactionary groups like the John Birch Society.

[14] Hofstadter states: 'I have neither the competence nor the desire to classify any figures of the past or present as certifiable lunatics. In fact, the idea of the paranoid style would have little contemporary relevance if it were applied to people with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant' (1996: 4)

[15] Hofstadter's historical treatment of political movements exemplifying this paranoid style – from the anti-Masonic and anti-Catholic movements of the nineteenth century through the anti-communist right-wing groups gaining popularity in the middle of the twentieth century – often moves from describing 'paranoid modes of expression' in the history of American politics to classifying such 'figures of the past or present' as paranoid persons. Or when Hofstadter explains how 'the paranoid' conceives of the enemy, Freudian presumptions surface: 'the enemy seems on many counts a projection of the self: both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him' (1996: 32). He goes on to speak of how 'the fantasies of true believers serve strong sadomasochistic outlets' as they can 'project and freely express unacceptable aspects of their own minds' onto the enemy: their 'sexual freedom', their 'lack of moral inhibition' and 'a preoccupation with illicit sex' (1996: 34).

[16] Pipes speaks about conspiracy theories as 'phobias' (1997: 25), Showalter as 'psychogenic syndromes' (1998) and Robins and Post (1997) at last use words like 'parasite', 'bacillus', 'infection' and 'virus' to describe the 'epidemic' of conspiracy theories that allegedly encroach our societies. But also more recently: when Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) speak in their title of 'causes and cures' they simply allude to conspiracy theories as a pathology.

[17] These are no hypothetical assertions, but refer to real world happenings: the NSA scandals, the global war on terror, Bush and Blair on the (inexistent) weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the powerful lobby industry in Brussels and Washington, the corporate financing of research institutes, and so on.

[18] The same sort of political function of conspiracy theories is found in the works of John Fiske (1996) and Patricia Turner (1993) who particularly focus on the African American communities and their suspicions of a "black genocide" through, most notably, the spread of HIV/AIDS as a bio-warfare weapon. Given the systematic discrimination of African Americans in the United States, and a history of intentional abuse against them (think of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment), these scholars argue that such fears of white aggression are well justified. Moreover, like Dean, they hold that their conspiracy theories can be politically affirmative: they provide ways to account for the economic and social exclusion, and offer strategies for political resistance. Knight (2000: 143-167); Fenster (2008: 279-289) and Bratich (2008: 97-122) provide additional and interesting analyses of conspiracy theories in the African American communities, and of the

works of Fiske and Turner in particular.
[19] Of course, I realize that my selection of their descriptions of the world is theoretically informed. This is however, something different from any normative or moral considerations.
[20] Such experimental psychologists test for the existence of such a general and systematized way of thinking and follow Goertzel's notion of 'monological belief systems' (1994) to argue that the belief in conspiracy theories becomes a 'unitary, closed-off [and] self-sustaining worldview comprised of a network of mutually supportive beliefs' (Wood et al, 2012: 767; cf. Brotherton, et al, 2013: 12; Lewandowksy et al, 2013a)
[21] Byford, for example, argues how 'tales of conspiracy – whether expounded in Washington, London, Moscow, Damascus or Beijing and regardless of whether they purport to explain a political assassination, the cause of a disease or a financial crisis – are marked by a distinct thematic configuration, narrative structure and explanatory logic, as well as by the stubborn presence of a number of common motifs and tropes' (2011: 4, my emphasis).
[22] http://nl.hoax.wikia.com last retrieved October 21, 2014.
[23] www.wikia.com/about last retrieved October 21, 2014.
[24] http://nl.hoax.wikia.com/wiki/Complotdenkers last retrieved October 21, 2014.
[25] http://nl.hoax.wikia.com/wiki/complottheorieënwebsites last retrieved October 21, 2014
[26] http://skepsis.nl/ last retrieved October 21, 2014
[27] http://skepsis.nl/mainsite/inhoud/uploads/2015/10/Stichting-Skepsis-Financiele-verantwoording.pdf last retrieved October 21, 2014
[28] www.nieuwemedianieuws.nl (last retrieved October 21, 2014)
[29] The difference between the new and mainstream media is further specified as 1) being independent, instead of dependent; 2) researching events instead of reporting events; 3) having a critical attitude towards information from the government, instead of trusting it; (4) being critical towards press agencies like ANP and Reuters, instead of trusting them; (5) actively researching suspicions towards the government instead of ignoring them; (6) being financially independent instead of relying on government funds or commerce (www.nieuwemedianieuws.nl, last retrieved October 21, 2014).
[30] I need to make one disclaimer here, however, as I have chosen to omit a particular type of conspiracy website: namely the solo projects of certain "conspiracy theorists." As personal interests and old enmities often fuel these projects, and the thematic relevance of these rather idiosyncratic websites is questionable, I believe this omission is legitimate.
[31] http://zapruder.nl/portal, last retrieved March 4, 2014
[32] As they say on their site, last retrieved March 4, 2014

[33] http://niburu.co/, last retrieved October 21, 2014
[34] http://www.ninefornews.nl/over-ons/, last retrieved October 21, 2014
[35] http://www.ninefornews.nl/over-ons/, last retrieved October 21, 2014
[36] http://www.wijwordenwakker.org/intro.asp, last retrieved October 25 2014
[37] http://www.marcelmessing.nl/content.asp?m=M6andl=NL, last retrieved October 25, 2014
[38] http://argusoog.org, last retrieved October 21, 2014
[39] http://argusoog.org, last retrieved October 21, 2014
[40] http://www.wanttoknow.nl/about/, last retrieved October 21, 2014
[41] http://www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/over/#.Vs7vzJwrLIU, last retrieved October 21, 2014
[42] http://anarchiel.com/, last retrieved October 21, 2014
[43] "Ostrich Politics" is a Dutch expression for politics that turns away from the real problems by ignoring them (that is, sticking one's head in the sand, like an Ostrich).
[44] http://www.pateo.nl/PDF/PartijprogrammaSOPN.pdf, last retrieved February 29, 2016
[45] http://www.pateo.nl/PDF/PartijprogrammaSOPN.pdf, last retrieved February 29, 2016
[46] http://www.ad.nl/ad/nl/1012/Nederland/article/detail/3246108/2012/04/25/UFO-partij-rekent-op-tientallen-Kamerzetels.dhtml; http://www.telegraaf.nl/binnenland/20045066/___UFO-partij__wil_tientallen_zetels__.html; http://www.volkskrant.nl/politiek/ufo-partij-sopn-rekent-op-minimaal-76-zetels-op-12-september~a3288796/; http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2012/07/19/deze-lijsttrekker-gelooft-niet-zozeer-in-ufos-wel-in-76-zetels (last retrieved February 24, 2016)
[47] www.frontierworld.nl, last retrieved February 25, 2016
[48] http://wearechange.org/about/; http://www.wacholland.org/; https://www.youtube.com/user/wearechangeholland/about (last retrieved February 24, 2016)
[49] http://wearechange.org/about/
[50] https://www.youtube.com/user/WeAreChangeRotterdam
[51] http://barracudanls.blogspot.nl/2009_05_01_archive.html; http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Luke_Rudkowski (last retrieved February 24, 2016)
[52] http://www.thezeitgeistmovement.com/mission-statement, last retrieved March 3, 2016
[53] E.g. http://www.hpdetijd.nl/2011-10-15/occupy-amsterdam-voorman-911-was-een-complot/, https://www.olino.org/articles/2011/01/21/wat-is-de-zeitgeist-movement/, last retrieved March 3, 2016
[54] http://www.davidicke.com/about-david/, last retrieved February 25, 2016

[55] E.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeitgeist_(film_series); https://skeptoid.com/episodes/4196; http://peterjoseph.info/top-five-zeitgeist-movie-myths/ (last retrieved February 24, 2016)
[56] http://www.thrivemovement.com/the_movie, last retrieved March 3, 2016
[57] http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Thrive, see for more criticism: https://www.quora.com/Who-is-Foster-Gamble-who-presents-the-documentary-Thrive, last retrieved March 3, 2016
[58] Partij voor de Dieren was founded in 2002 and currently has two of the 150 seats in the Dutch House of Representatives and one of the 75 in the Senate. Among its main goals are animal rights and animal welfare, but it claims not to be a single-issue party, and should be seen as part of the environmental and sustainability movements.
[59] Website known to me. Anonymized by request of the owner (last retrieved November 18, 2014)
[60] Although this criterion is often used to demarcate the research object itself and not so much to categorize conspiracy theories.
[61] E.g. William S. Burroughs, Joseph Heller, Margaret Atwood, Betty Friedan, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and William Gibson.
[62] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/rampvlucht-mh17-een-false-flag-operatie, last retrieved November 5, 2014
[63] E.g. www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/is_ebola_a_mass_mediated_fraud, last retrieved November 5, 2014
[64] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/britse_centrale_bank_geeft_toe_geld_gebakken_lucht or www.wanttoknow.nl/economie/geld, last retrieved 18th of November 2014)
[65] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/weg_met_geld_weg_met_de_banken, www.argusoog.org/2011/09/banken-zijn-overbodig-tenzij…, last retrieved November 18, 2014
[66] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M26ands=M69andss=P2098 andI=NL, last retrieved November 18, 2014
[67] www.ninefornews.nl/de-grootste-zwendel-aller-tijden-video, last retrieved last retrieved November 18, 2014
[68] www.ninefornews.nl/britse-centrale-bank-geeft-toe-geld-gebakken-lucht, last retrieved last retrieved November 18, 2014
[69] Such notions are popularized in the conspiracy milieu by Paul Grignon's documentary "Money as Debt." Each of these sites has links to it—and is present in the works of David Icke (e.g. "The Biggest Secret"). Ad Broere is the most active Dutch exponent of this standpoint, who wrote a book "Geld komt uit het niets: de financiele goocheltrucs ontmaskerd" ("Money Out of Nothing: The Financial tricks of Magic Revealed"). He presents these ideas on the conspiracy websites, see for example: www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2254,

www.wanttoknow.nl/inspiratie/john_consemulder/john-en-ad-broere-over-geld-economie-en-de-bankenzwendel, last retrieved last retrieved November 18, 2014

[70] www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2012/02/recht-op-geldcreatie-afnemen-van-de-banken, last retrieved last retrieved November 18, 2014

[71] www.argusoog.org/2011/10/van-staatsschulden-naar-staatsgulden, or www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/kapitalistisch_bankieren_volgens_complotters, last retrieved last retrieved November 18, 2014

[72] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2098, last retrieved last retrieved November 18, 2014

[73] www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2013/11/het-wijdverbreide-misverstand-over-het-begrip-geld, last retrieved last retrieved November 18, 2014

[74] This is the title of the section "Geld" (money in Dutch) of the www.wanttoknow.nl website, www.wanttoknow.nl/economie/geld, last retrieved last retrieved November 18, 2014

[75] www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2012/02/recht-op-geldcreatie-afnemen-van-de-banken, last retrieved last retrieved November 19, 2014

[76] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M26ands=M69andss=P1480andI=NL or www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2012/11/ex-bankier-doet-boekje-open-over-het-geldsysteem, www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/de_macht_van_de_centrale_banken, last retrieved last retrieved November 19, 2014

[77] www.anarchiel.nl/display/het_pokerspel_van_de_centrale_banken_deel1/2, last retrieved last retrieved November 20, 2014

[78] www.anarchiel.nl/display/het_pokerspel_van_de_centrale_banken_deel1, last retrieved last retrieved November 20, 2014

[79] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/the_great_depression_is_coming, last retrieved last retrieved November 20, 2014

[80] A similar and more recent story could be told about the how the European Stability Mechanism was ratified in the countries of Europe. Many people in the conspiracy milieu have expressed serious doubts about a system of "economic dictatorship" that would indebt the people ever more. E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/het_esm_paard_staat_binnen, or www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M26ands=M69andss=P1411andI=NL or www.argusoog.org/2012/05/esm-een-zwarte-dag-voor-de-democratie, last retrieved last retrieved November 20, 2014

[81] These articles almost all refer to the work of G. Edward Griffin, especially "The Creature of Jekyll Island," and to the work of Dutch (financial) journalist Willem Middelkoop, especially his book *Als de dollar valt* (*When the Dollar Collapses*).

[82] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P268, or

www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/de-us-dollar-sterft-een-roemloos-einde, last retrieved last retrieved November 20, 2014

[83] See, for example, the work of Neil Irwin, a senior economic correspondent at the *New York Times* and author of "The Alchemists," particularly his blog on the washingtonpost.com of 21st of December 2013 (www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/12/21/the-federal-reserve-was-created-100-years-ago-this-is-how-it-happened) , last retrieved last retrieved November 20, 2014

[84] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M26ands=M69andss=P1690andI=NL or www.ninefornews.nl/connectie-tussen-fed-en-jekyll-island-ontmaskerd-video, last retrieved last retrieved November 19, 2014
but the attendees are nowadays not so secret anymore.

[85] www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/de-us-dollar-sterft-een-roemloos-einde, last retrieved last retrieved November 19, 2014

[86] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P268, last retrieved last retrieved November 19, 2014

[87] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/de_macht_van_de_centrale_banken, www.wanttoknow.nl/economie/geld or www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P268, last retrieved last retrieved November 19, 2014

[88] The unabridged version is found on e.g. www.wanttoknow.nl/economie/geld/goud-en-zilver-terug-als-betaal-middel-in-vs, last retrieved November 19, 2014

[89] www.wanttoknow.nl/economie/geld, last retrieved November 19, 2014

[90] Quote found on the Facebook page of www.ninefornews.nl, last retrieved November 19, 2014

[91] These are the words of Edward Bernays, quoted on: www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/the_elite_great_game_and_world_war_iii, last retrieved November 19, 2014

[92] www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/the_elite_great_game_and_world_war_iii, last retrieved November 19, 2014

[93] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P943, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/the_elite_great_game_and_world_war_iiiwww.zaplog.nl/zaplog/article/evil_bernays_de_elite_koopziekte_en_mindcontrol, last retrieved November 19, 2014

[94] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M5ands=M113andI=NL, last retrieved November 20, 2014

[95] www.anarchiel.nl/display/de_pers_is_dood, last retrieved November 11, 2014

[96] www.ninefornews.nl/vertrouwen-in-reguliere-media-blijft-op-dieptepunt, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M6ands=M64andss=P888andI=N, last retrieved November 11, 2014

[97] This refers to De Groene Amsterdammer (a weekly). The "De Persgroep" (Major Dutch and Belgian newspapers (e.g. Volksrant, Parool, Trouw), TV- and

radio stations) is owned by the Belgian entrepreneurial family Van Thillo, the family Brenninkmeier (C&A) owns the NRC Media Group, the family Fenterer van Vlissingen is said to own the Dutch Press Agency (ANP), the Van Puijenbroek family owns the Telegraaf Media Group. The eight biggest commercial TV channels are owned by RTL (Bertelsmann) and SBS (Sanoma).

[98] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1857, last retrieved November 11, 2014

[99] E.g. www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/klokkenluider-elke-dag-vervalste-ik-het-nieuws, www.zapruder.nl/portal/rubriek/huichelmedia, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1857, www.anarchiel.nl/display/de_pers_is_dood_vervolg, last retrieved November 12, 2014

[100] www.anarchiel.nl/display/wie_bepalen_het_nieuws_in_nederland, last retrieved November 12, 2014

[101] www.ninefornews.nl/bepaalt-de-overheid-het-nieuws-de-knusse-relatie-tussen-journalisten-en-hoge-ambtenaren, last retrieved November 12, 2014

[102] www.zapruder.nl/portal/rubriek/huichelmedia/P80?#n8658, last retrieved November 12, 2014

[103] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/journalisten-laten-zich-omkopen-en-heulen-met-machthebbers, www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/klokkenluider-elke-dag-vervalste-ik-het-nieuws, www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/09/journalisten-worden-omgekocht, last retrieved November 12, 2014

[104] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1857 link to: files.meetup.com/348941/no_tv_flyer—6pieces.pdf, last retrieved November 12, 2014

[105] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P943, www.ninefornews.nl/zet-de-televisie-uit, last retrieved November 12, 2014

[106] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/subliminaal_boodschappen_doen, last retrieved November 13, 2014

[107] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1857, last retrieved November 13, 2014

[108] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/een_wereldwijde_samenzwering_mind_control_van_miljarden, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P943, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/the_elite_great_game_and_world_war_iii, last retrieved November 13, 2014

[109] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/subliminaal_boodschappen_doen, last retrieved November 13, 2014

[110] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1857, last retrieved November 13, 2014

[111] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M6ands=M135andss=P1614andI=NL, last retrieved November 13, 2014

[112] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P997, last retrieved November 13, 2014
[113] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1857, last retrieved November 13, 2014
[114] www.ninefornews.nl/mtv-awards-onderdeel-van-propagandaoffensief-illuminatie, last retrieved November 13, 2014
[115] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/rapper-moest-offer-brengen-voor-illuminati-in-ruil-voor-roem, www.argusoog.org/2013/01/waarom-worden-sommige-artiesten-en-hun-liedjes-beroemd, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/when_insiders_expose_the_dark_side_of_the_entertainment_industry, last retrieved November 13, 2014
[116] Quote found on the Facebook page of www.truththeory.org, linked by ninefornews.nl, last retrieved November 24, 2014
[117]www.zapruder.nl/portal/rubriek/corporatisme_het_gevaarlijkste_virus_ter_wereld_deel_1, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[118] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1698, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[119] www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/05/grootkapitaal-maakt-de-dienst-uit-in-europa, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[120] www.zapruder.nl/portal/more_power_to_the_corporations, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[121] www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/wereld_gecontroleerd_door_147_bedrijven, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[122] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl147-superbedrijven-controleren-wereldeconomy, www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2011/10/1-van-bedrijven-controleert-40-wereld economie, ww.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/147_bedrijven_besturen_wereld, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[123] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2019, www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/11/de-financiele-wereld-is-machtiger-dan-de-politiek, or www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/the_corporation, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[124] www.zapruder.nl/portal/rubriek/corporatisme_het_gevaarlijkste_virus_ter_wereld_deel_1, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[125] www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/04/vakbonden-niet-opgewassen-tegen-elite or www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/de_wereld_is_een_grote_corporatie, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[126]
www.anarchiel.com/display/nederland_wieg_van_corporatie_en_wereldbank, last retrieved November 20, 2014
[127] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/perfect_genethics_deel_2, or www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M4ands=M30andss=P813andI=NL

, www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2013/12/monsanto-staat-op-het-punt-hun-grootste-coup-ooit-te-plegen or www.anarchiel.com/display/onze_democratie_werkt_voor_geen_meter, last retrieved November 20, 2014

[128] E.g. www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/het-geraffineerde-vaccinatie-spel-van-de-farmaceutische-industrie, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/bp_wil_stilzwijgen_wetenschap_kopen, or www.argusoog.org/2012/11/wetenschapper-die-gevaren-van-ggo-voor-gezondheid-ontdekte-werd-direct-ontslagen-en-team-opgeheven, last retrieved November 20, 2014

[129] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/shell-en-grote-banken-ontwijken-belasting, www.wanttoknow.nl/nieuws/26-van-30-grootste-corporaties-betalen-0-belasting, or www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/spaanse_burgers_betalen_belasting_terwijl_de_grote_bedrijven_de_belasting_ontduiken, last retrieved November 20, 2014

[130] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/wereldwijde-mars-tegen-monsanto-van-start, www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/02/voedselmaffia-vernietigt-de-natuur, or www.wanttoknow.nl/nieuws/apple-iphone-productie-ligt-stil-door-arbeidsonrust, last retrieved November 20, 2014

[131] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/zap_cinema_food_inc_2008, www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/het-pillenbedrog/comment-page-1, www.anarchiel.nl/display/de_misleiding_van_voedsel_labels, last retrieved November 21, 2014

[132] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/de_grote_diamanten_hoax, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1070, or www.ninefornews.nl/oud-topman-nestle-water-als-basisrecht-is-extreem-video, last retrieved November 21, 2014

[133] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/de_slag_om_oekraine_1/6, www.ninefornews.nl/911-excuus-om-oliegigant-te-laten-profiteren-van-val-irak, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M26ands=M118andss=P2351andI=NL, www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/mind-control/gadaffi-moest-weg-waarom-eigenlijk, last retrieved November 21, 2014

[134] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/monsanto_moet_dood1, last retrieved November 21, 2014

[135] www.ninefornews.nl/de-ongebreidelde-macht-van-monsanto, last retrieved November 21, 2014

[136] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/monsanto_moet_dood1, last retrieved November 10, 2014

[137] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1554, last retrieved November 10, 2014

[138] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/monsanto_een_bijbelse_plaag, last retrieved November 10, 2014

[139] www.ninefornews.nl/aggressieve-lobby-voor-genetisch-gemanipuleerd-

voedsel, www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/hoe-monsanto-en-het-amerikaanse-leger-samenwerken, last retrieved November 10, 2014
[140] www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/hoe-monsanto-en-het-amerikaanse-leger-samenwerken, last retrieved November 10, 2014
[141] www.ninefornews.nl/de-ongebreidelde-macht-van-monsanto, last retrieved November 10, 2014
[142] E.g. www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/02/voedselmaffia-vernietigt-de-natuur, www.wanttoknow.nl/economie/200000-boeren-in-india-al-tot-zelfmoord-gedreven, www.wanttoknow.nl/gezondheid/voedsel/oorlog-op-je-bord, last retrieved November 10, 2014
[143] www.anarchiel.nl/stortplaats/toon/the_hidden_agenda_of_genetic_manipulation_f._william_engdahl, last retrieved November 10, 2014
[144] www.argusoog.org/2010/12/oorlogsmachines-blackwater-monsanto-en-bill-gates, last retrieved November 10, 2014
[145] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2190, www.argusoog.org/2009/01/monsanto-wie-de-voeding-beheerst-beheerst-de-wereld, last retrieved November 10, 2014
[146] Jacob Bronowski was a British mathematician, historian of science, theatre author, poet, and inventor. This quote circulated on the Facebook page of www.wanttoknow.nl, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[147] www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/wetenschappelijk-onderzoek-toont-wetenschaps-fraude-aan, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[148] Note there is a considerable difference between the US and the Netherlands, where religious (creationist) arguments hardly fuel conspiracy critiques of science.
[149] www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/wetenschappelijk-onderzoek-toont-wetenschaps-fraude-aan, last retrieved November 25, 2014
[150] www.gewoon-niews.nl/2013/11/de-beerput-van-frauduleuze-wetenschappelijke-publicaties, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[151] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2229, last retrieved November 25, 2014
[152] www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/wetenschappelijk-onderzoek-toont-wetenschaps-fraude-aan, last retrieved November 25, 2014
[153] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2123, last retrieved November 25, 2014
[154] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2123, last retrieved November 25, 2014
[155] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/wetenschap_volgens_kary_mullis_een_aannemelijke_fabel, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2229, www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/wetenschappelijk-onderzoek-toont-wetenschaps-fraude-aan, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/sp_wil_einde_aan_dubbele_petten_wetenschap, last retrieved November 25, 2014

[156] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M4ands=M22andss=P309andI=NL, last retrieved November 25, 2014
[157] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1444, but also www.wanttoknow.nl/gezondheid/vaccinaties-ondergraven-de-immuniteit, www.anarchiel.com/display/vaccinaties_en_hun_werkzaamheid, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[158] www.zapruder.nl/portal/vaccinaties_a_bigger_picture, www.wijworden wakker.org/content.asp?m=M4ands=M22andss=P829andI=NL, or www.argusoog.org/2009/11/historische-feiten-die-de-gevaren-en-doelmatigheid-van-vaccinaties-onthullen, www.wanttoknow.nl/inspiratie/meelezen/vaccinaties-bezint-eer-ge-begint, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[159] www.zapruder.nl/portal/vaccinaties_a_bigger_picture, www.argusoog.org/2012/11/basis-van-vaccinatie-theorie-fout, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[160] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M4ands=M22andss=P829 andI=NL, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[161] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/farmaconcern_merck-ontmaskerd-wegens-vaccinfraude or www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/onderzoeker-van-big-pharma-geeft-grove-fraude-toe, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M4ands=M22andss=P829andI=NL, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[162] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/officiele-transcripten-vaccinatieprogramma-gebaseerd-opleugens, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M4ands=M22andss=P1558andI=NL, www.wanttoknow.nl/gezondheid/geraffineerde-mazelen-leugens-van-het-rivm-naieveteit, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/amerikaanse_gezondheidsraad_gefinancierd_door_vaccinproducenten_en_defensie, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[163] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/evolutie_vs_hpv_vaccinatie_1_0, but also www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/steek_dat_mazelenvaccin_maar_in_je_reet, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M4ands=M22andss=P687andI=NL, www.anarchiel.com/downloads/vpo.pdf, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[164] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/de_mexicaanse_griepvaccin_kwik_en_autisme, www.ninefornews.nl/zo-werkt-het-vaccinatieprogramma-in-het-echt, www.argusoog.org/2012/02/vaccins-blazen-het-anti-immuunsysteem-van-kinderen-op, or www.wanttoknow.nl/vaccinaties-gezondheid/waarom-je-ook-geen-tetanus-vaccinatie-nodig-hebt, www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/08/fraude-in-officiele-verklaring-over-bmr-vaccin, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[165] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/twijfel_aan_alles_maar_niet_aan_hiv, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[166] "To believe someone on his blue eyes" is the literal translation of a Dutch expression meaning to assume somebody speaking the truth, without substantiation (www.wanttoknow.nl/dossiers/wetenschap/klimaat, last retrieved November 27, 2014

[167] www.argusoog.org/2009/12/lord-monckton-spreekt-een-greenpeace-actievoerder-aan-over-global-warming, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[168] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/ipcc-overdreef-klimaatverandering-tientallen-jaren, www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/06/gegevens-opwarming-aarde-vervalst-door-nasa-en-vs, www.anarchiel.nl/stortplaats/toon/klimaatleugens_dateren_van_1996, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[169] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/climategate_30_de_leaker_spreekt, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[170] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/climate_truth_1, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[171] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M6ands=M64andss=P1550 andI=NL, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[172] www.argusoog.org/2012/10/niet-twijfelen-niet-aarzelen-vaccins-zijn-en-blijven-veilig, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[173] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/twijfel_aan_alles_maar_niet_aan_hiv, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[174] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/dertij_jaar_aids_oplichting but also www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P8, www.anarchiel.com/display/afrika_het_nieuwe_imperialisme_en_aids, last retrieved November 26 2014
[175] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/wetenschap_volgens_kary_mullis_een_aannemelijke_fabel, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[176] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/dertij_jaar_aids_oplichting, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[177] www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/streepjes_in_de_luchie, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[178] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/wat_betekent_een_100_dna_match_zapruder_goes_csi, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[179] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/orwell_eat_your_heart_out, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[180] www.anarchiel.com/display/een_wereld_zonder_overheid, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[181] E.g. According to WorldPublicOpinion.org, last retrieved January 19, 2015
[182] For an overview of the different polls, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polls_about_9/11_conspiracy_theories, last retrieved January 19, 2015
[183] www.anarchiel.com/display/een_wereld_zonder_overheid, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[184] www.anarchiel.com/display/een_wereld_zonder_overheid, last retrieved November 26, 2014
[185] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1857, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[186] www.ninefornews.nl/geloof-in-onze-overheid-het-meest-gevaarlijke-bijgeloof,

last retrieved November 27, 2014
[187] www.anarchiel.com/index.php/display/262_miljoen_doden_de_grootste_bedreiging_van_de_burger, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[188] www.anarchiel.com/display/de_war_on_freedom_van_kabinet_balkenende, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[189] www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/11/hergeboorte-stasi-in-nederland, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[190] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M6ands=M85andss=P870andI=NL, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[191] The articles are numerous and many websites have special categories devoted to these forms of control, for example: www.zapruder.nl/portal/rubrieken/politiestaat, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M6ands=M85andI=NL www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/tag/overheid, ww.anarchiel.com/index.php/tags/tag/politiestaat, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[192] www.anarchiel.com/display/nederland_leverde_europa_sleutel_tot_controlestaat, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[193] This "the end of the Netherlands" series (explicitly echoing Naomi Wolf's *The End of America*) tracks "the development of an open to a closed society; from the Netherlands as sovereign constitutional democracy with relative freedoms, to a nation in which an all-controlling (technocratic) fascisms increasingly assumes clearer forms. It is the end of the Netherlands as we know it." It consists of seven extensive articles 1) "The Terrible Enemy"; 2) "The World Gulag"; 3) "The Silent Revolution"; 4) "Dawn of the Technotronic Era"; 5) "Secret Service as Criminal Arm of the State"; 6) "Are You On The List?";7) "The Silent Purification" and 8) "The Press is Dead." All can be found on www.anarchiel.com/display/het_einde_van_nederland, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[194] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M26ands=M118andss=P2363andI=NL, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[195] www.wanttoknow.nl/geschiedenis/geheime-genootschappen/de-fundamenten-voor-een-nieuwe-dictatuur, last retrieved November 27 2014
[196] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/amerikaanse-jury-cia-betrokken-bij-moord-op-president-kennedy, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[197] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/operatie_nijptang_de_volgende_cia_coup_in_venezuele_onthuld, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=1512, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/ukrainian_general_cia_behind_kiev_coup, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[198] E.g. www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/geheime_oorlogsvoering_als_hoofdpunt_van_de_buitenlandse_politiek_van_de_vs, www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/mind-control/operatie-gladio-tegen-eigen-volk, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[199] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/rubriek/9-11, last retrieved November 27, 2014

[200] E.g. www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/mind-control/hoe-cia-en-mossad-isis-in-het-leven-riepen, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/corbettreport_who_is_really_behind_isis, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[201] www.ninefornews.nl/het-maakt-niet-uit-op-wie-je-stemt-de-geheime-overheid-gaat-toch-niet-veranderen, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[202] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/mediaster_al_zarqawi, or www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P2575, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[203] www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/mind-control/psy-ops-manipuleren-ons-wereldbeeld, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[204] E.g. www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/psywar_-_wake_up, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[205] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/zap_cinema_the_war_on_democracy_2007, www.ninefornews.nl/amerika-het-land-van-bedrog-en-massahypnose-video, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1706, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/anonymous_government_controlled_opposition_psyop, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[206] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/worstelaars_geitjes_en_mkultra, www.ninefornews.nl/overheid-vs-experimenteerde-op-veteranen-onder-mk-ultra, www.argusoog.org/2012/06/het-rapport-van-iron-mountain-illuminati-mind-control, www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/mind-control/the-secrets-of-mind-control, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/must_see_docu_blackops_human_experiments_mindcontrol_torture_political_con, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[207] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/de_marskramer_van_de_arabische_revolutie, www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/media/midden-oosten-revoluties-spontaan-mooi-niet, www.argusoog.org/2011/04de-oorzaak-van-de-orgie-aan-destabilisaties-in-2011, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/de_door_het_westen_geregiseerde_arabische_lente_otpor_etc, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[208] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P1442, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[209] www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/media/midden-oosten-revoluties-spontaan-mooi-niet, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[210] www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/media/midden-oosten-revoluties-spontaan-mooi-niet, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[211] www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/11/12-stappen-van-vrede-naar-burgerooglog, last retrieved November 27, 2014
[212] Hamlet to Horatio, Hamlet (1.5.167-8). This quote is often cited or used in articles on conspiracy websites, e.g. "we understand that there is more between heaven and earth than our scientists would like us to believe" on www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/intro_weird_science_week, or "like Hamlet said in the

similarly titled play of William Shakespeare: 'there's more between heaven and earth.' Science cannot explain what happens on all these places" on www.ninefornews.nl/de-m-driehoek-geeft-russisch-area-51-zijn-geheimen-prijs , or "the winged expression 'there's more between heaven and earth' is an apt description here" on www.wanttoknow.nl/inpsiratie/gastcolums/werkelijkheid-of-fictie, last retrieved November 27, 2014

[213] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/rubriek/buitenaards, last retrieved December 8, 2014) www.wijworderwakker.org/content.asp?m=M53ands=M92andI=NL, www.wanttoknow.info/dossiers/universum, www.anarchiel.com/dossiers/ufo-aliens, last retrieved December 1, 2014)

[214] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M53ands=M92andss=P713andI=NL, last retrieved December 1, 2014)

[215] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/wat_we_van_nasa_niet_mogen_weten, last retrieved December 1, 2014)

[216] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/video-de-man-die-de-geheimen-van-area-51-blootlegde, last retrieved December 1, 2014)

[217] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M53ands=M92andss=P446andI=NL, last retrieved December 1, 2014)

[218] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M53ands=M92andss=P2241andI=NL, or www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/aliens_could_share_more_tech_with_us_if_we_warmonger_less, last retrieved December 1, 2014)

[219] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/ooparts_deel_1_onbekend_en_onbemind, last retrieved December 2, 2014

[220] www.ninefornews.nl/deze-hamer-100-miljoen-jaar-oud, last retrieved December 2, 2014

[221] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/ooparts_deel_3_buitenaardse_schedels_en_astronauten, last retrieved December 2, 2014

[222] www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/de_verboden_geschiedenis, last retrieved December 2, 2014

[223] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M6ands=M135andss=P1745andI=NL, www.wanttoknow.nl/universum/documentaire-mayas-en-buitenaards-contact, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/mysteries_of_the_gods_1977_-_William_shatner, last retrieved December 2, 2014

[224] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/ooparts_deel_2_verloren_wetenschap, last retrieved December 2, 2014

[225] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M26ands=M90andss=P427, www.argusoog.org/2009/10/mysterious-world-search-for-ancient-technology-strange-archeology, www.wanttoknow.nl/inspiratie/alternatieve_archeologie, last retrieved December 2, 2014

[226] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=P58, last retrieved December 2, 2014
[227] www.wanttoknow.nl/nieuws/franse-dna-onderzoekster-en-astronaute-doet-zelfmoordpoging-wat-heeft-ze-ontdekt, last retrieved December 2, 2014
[228] www.argusoog.org/2007/07/bewustzijn-zelf, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[229] www.zapruder.nl/protal/artikel/zelfbewustzijn_is_onnatuurlijk, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[230] They refer here to the works of philosopher and cognitive scientist Dan Dennett, who argues that "human consciousness and the free will are the result of physical processes in the brain […] the brain's circuitry fools us into thinking we know more than we do, and that we call consciousness—isn't" on: www.ted.com/speakers/dan_dennett, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[231] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M3ands=M122andss=P2429andI=NL, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[232] E.g. www.ninefornews.nl/wetenschap-wordt-beperkt-door-aannames-video, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M6ands=M64andss=P2075I=NL, or www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/graham_hancock_-_the_war_on_consciousness_banned_ted_talk, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[233] E.g. www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M3ands=M122andss=P2425andI=NL, www.wanttoknow.nl/inspiratie-bewustzijn-en-creatie, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/het_pleiadisch_perspectief_uit_de_doofpot, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[234] For example, the works of Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel, who wrote the international bestseller *Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near-Death Experience*, or those of the American neurosurgeon Eben Alexander, are often cited and circulated.
[235] www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/hard-wetenschappelijk-bewijs-bewustzijn-na-klinisch-dood, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[236] www.ninefornews.nl/wetenschappers-vinden-bewijs-voor-leven-na-de-dood, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[237] www.wanttoknow.nl/hoofdartikelen/hard-wetenschappelijk-bewijs-bewustzijn-na-klinisch-dood, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[238] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M3ands=M122andss=P2429andI=NL, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[239] www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M3ands=M122andss=P2429andI=NL, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[240] www.ninefornews.nl/toegang-krijgen-tot-buitenzintuiglijke-waarneming, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[241] www.ninefornews.nl/buitenzintuiglijke-waarneming-wetenschappelijk-bewezen, last retrieved December 9, 2014

[242] E.g. www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/cia_en_de_mensenrechten_part_3, www.wijwordenwakker.org/content.asp?m=M6ands=M85andss=P714, www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/09/de-aanslagen-van-9-september-en-remote-viewing, www.anarchiel.com/stortplaats/toon/helder_zien_als_wapen, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[243] www.wanttoknow.nl/universum/ingo-swann, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[244] www.gewoon-nieuws.nl/2014/03/remote-viewing-en-de-piramide-van-gizeh, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[245] www.zapruder.nl/portal/artikel/cia_en_de_mensenrechten_part_3, last retrieved December 9, 2014
[246] These scholars are ambiguous about this historical change in conspiracy culture: Knight, for example, argues that "*alongside* these familiar demonologies there have emerged significant new forms of conspiracy culture, which operate in very different ways to the more traditional modes of the conspiratorial style. Moreover, even those traditional forms of right-wing extremist conspiracy thinking take on new meanings and serve new purposes" (2000: 23, my emphasis). Whether they see this change as all-encompassing and without exceptions is therefore unclear. Despite these small caveats, their argument in favor of such a historical change remains significant.
[247] E.g. www.wakingtimes.com/2014/01/27/conspiracy-theorist-vs-coincidence-theorist-importance-alternative-media/, last retrieved May 9, 2015
[248] www.davidicke.com/shop/dvds, last retrieved February 27, 2015
[249] www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2vlegEBuO0, last retrieved February 27, 2015
[250] This was one of the slogans that David Icke used to promote his show, e.g. http://www.purityevents.nl/david-icke-the-lion-sleeps-no-more, last retrieved March 4, 2015
[251] www.davidicke.com, last retrieved May 7, 2015
[252] www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtVyrayu7Tc, last retrieved May 7, 2015
[253] www.atlanteanconspiracy.com/2012/11/alex-judas-goat-jones.html, last retrieved February 15, 2016
[254] www.atlanteanconspiracy.com/search/label/David%20Icke, or www.acceler8or.com/2012/09/shocking-shocker-alex-jones-david-icke-are-illuminati-disinfo-agents/, last retrieved February 15, 2016
[255] E.g. Ioannidis, JP (2005). Why most published research findings are false. PLoS medicine, 2(8), e124.
[256] E.g. John Virapen, MD, who has worked over 35 years in the pharmaceutical industry and was general manager of Eli Lilly and Company in Sweden, wrote the best seller *Side Effect: Death. Confessions of a Pharma Insider* (2010); or Peter Rost, MD, who has been vice-president of Pfizer, one of the world's largest

pharmaceutical companies, wrote *The Whistleblower: Confessions of a Healthcare Hitman* (2006).

[257] E.g Sibel Edmonds, a former FBI translator and founder of the National Security Whistleblowers Coalition (NSWBC), and the Boiling Frogs Post, a site offering nonpartisan investigative journalism, published a memoir in 2012 called *Classified Woman: The Sibel Edmonds Story*."

[258] Indeed, this anthropological work is very much disputed for being fraudulent/fictional and a perfect example of scientific controversy. See Plummer, 2001: 219 or Hammer, 2001: 136.

[259] Although who or what makes up the top parts of the pyramids differs between each conception, they all share several characteristics. The first thing to note is the fundamentally populist nature of these pyramids, as they all conceive of a general population as the big and uniform base pitted against a tiny elite. Slightly different from the nationalism in most populist conceptions of the "people," the big uniform base is called "workers," "debt slaves," or "labor units: a.k.a. the unthinking, hard-working, law-abiding, tax-paying, god-fearing, death slave." Above this level, one generally finds a layer called "population control," which is horizontally differentiated by the major institutions: corporate media, law enforcement, religion, and education. These institutions are there to "keep the people manageable": they "indoctrinate us with propaganda and censorship" (media), "teach untrue principles and doctrines" (religion) and "brainwash the people into 'what' to think, not 'how' to think" (education). One layer up, the multi-national conglomerates are depicted as controlling the world's resources, and above these corporations are the institutions that control all finances (the big banks, central banks, World Bank and the IMF, a.k.a. "the financial elite"). Ultimately, on top of the pyramid, we find the real cabal who controls these financial institutions.
E.g. http://files.abovetopsecret.com/files/img/sa4f476a9d.jpg;
http://4.bp.blogspot.com/c0sJx2ZgYpQ/Uw4VFRGWXnI/AAAAAAAAAdw/OUvjtI-YclI/s1600/illuminati%20pyramid.jpg;
http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m5x8dvmKns1qkwdrko1_500.jpg;
https://s3.amazonaws.com/thrivemovementassets/resources/images/000/000/535/original/FollowTheMoney-Bank-Pyramid.jpg, last retrieved 8th of April 2015

[260] *The Industrial Worker*, "the voice of revolutionary industrial unionism," is the newspaper of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), published by The International Publishing Co., Cleveland, Ohio, USA.
www.iww.org/projects/IW, last retrieved March 5, 2015

[261]www.wijwordenwakker.org; www.slaaptgijnog.nl, last retrieved September 3, 2015

[262] E.g. http://www.ninefornews.nl/zwarte-zwanen-over-gesjoemel-met-je-

pensioengeld-nederland-zou-wakker-moeten-worden/, zaplog.nl/zaplog/article/wat_is_wakker_worden, www.argusoog.org/2007/04/hallo-wakker-worden/, last retrieved September 3, 2015

[263] E.g. www.wanttoknow.nl/overige/het-complot-van-de-complot-theorieen/, www.ninefornews.nl/ijsland-overweegt-radicale-ommezwaai-het-moderne-geldwezen/, last retrieved September 3, 2015

[264] http://nl.hoax.wikia.com/wiki/Complotdenker, last retrieved September 3, 2015

[265] Winti is a traditional Suriname religion that was brought over there by African slaves and got mixed with Christian and indigenous American beliefs, a central feature is the belief in a pantheon of spirits, called Winti, its rituals contain magic and sorcery. Winti shares with Vodou in Haiti and Candomblé in Brazil.

[266] Sheeple, e.g. sheep combined with people, is a commonly used portmanteau to describe the gullible mainstream who do not think for themselves, but just go with what everyone else is doing.

[267] www.waarheid911.nl , last retrieved October 2, 2015

[268] www.wacholland.org/content/acties-demonstraties, last retrieved February 10, 2013

[269] http://www.youtube.com/user/wearechangeholland, last retrieved February 10, 2013

[270] http://www.argusoog.org/, last retrieved February 10, 2013

[271] http://www.waarheid911.nl/, last retrieved June 17, 2013

[272] http://www.slaaptgijnog.nl/, last retrieved August 11, 2013

[273] http://www.zoekdewaarheid.nl, last retrieved August 15, 2013

[274] This aphorism is allegedly from feminist Gloria Steinem, although whether the conspiracy theorists who invoke it know about that history and identify with her project is unexplored. David Icke and his followers commonly proclaim this phrase as a truism.

[275] For reasons of clarity, I use science in this chapter as a singular whole as if it designates a clear and bounded reality, but I am obviously aware of the continuous discussions about what and whoever counts as science, as well as the plurality of topics, methods, practices, institutions, and so on that can be grouped under this uniform header. In fact, this is exactly the topic of this chapter.

[276] Popper argued that proponents of Marxism, astrology, and psychoanalysis have no difficulties finding confirming evidence. In their eyes "the world was full of verifications of the theory. Whatever happened always confirmed it" (Popper, 2014: 45).

[277] This does not mean, of course, that science can be "made up" in any which way: boundary work can be a very creative practice, but is inevitably restricted (egg. yet not determined) by (pre)existing repertoires of attributable meanings and qualities (Gieryn, 1999: 18-23). Taylor similarly sees an "inexorable elasticity of

the multiple discursive formations constituting science," but "historically productive patterns, norms and assumptions, do constrain the future discursive outlines of the culture as they accumulate epistemic and practical presumption" (1996: 6). Science, these scholars hold, can be many—but not an infinite amount of—things.

[278]For example: the session I attended at the 2013 Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion, which intended to explore the "intersection between conspiracy theories and contemporary religious and spiritual narratives," "focus on the common epistemological features of religion and conspiracism," and "analyze the complex cosmologies of conspiracy theorists as religious systems, which could elucidate both their social function and internal dynamics" (panel abstract, "Conspiracy Theories and Religion," EASR Liverpool 2013). Another good effort is a 2013 article of LSE scholars Bradley Franks and Martin Bauer, or the article by Stef Aupers and myself in the *Brill Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (forthcoming).

[279] Take, for example, the debate about whether the TED talks of Rupert Sheldrake and Graham Hancock should be removed from the site: http://blog.ted.com/graham-hancock-and-rupert-sheldrake-a-fresh-take/, last retrieved August 10, 2015.

[280] In the sense of being guaranteed by the modernist belief in the progressive accumulation of objectivity through competition in scientific knowledge production.

[281] An interesting case of such dynamics is documented by some of the social psychologists mentioned before: these scholars put their study about the rejection of (climate) science and conspiracist ideation (Lewandowksy et al, 2013a) on a number of climate blogs to incite reactions which were studied in another article (Lewandowski, et al, 2013b). They performed a content analysis of the responses of "climate skeptics" in the "climate denialist blogosphere," which critiqued that particular first study. These responses ranged from complaints to the university alleging academic misconduct, submissions of freedom-of-information requests, and the posting of multiple re-analyses of the data showing that the effects reported in that study did not exist. When funding for this research was publicized in the media, the research proposers received many emails from people who were critical of their approach. The interactions between conspiracy theorists and other actors are numerous and have continued throughout this study.

[282] www.sciencepalooza.nl/2012/08/waarom%E2%80%9Ccomplotdenken%E2%80%9D-niet-zomaar-afgeserveerd-moet-worden/, last retrieved May 2, 2016

[283] See the comments section underneath the article, http://www.sciencepalooza.nl/2012/08/waarom%E2%80%9Ccomplotdenken%E2%80%9D-niet-zomaar-afgeserveerd-moet-worden/, last retrieved May 2, 2016

[284] https://cryptocheilus.wordpress.com/crypto-nieuwsbox/comment-page-2/, last retrieved May 3, 2016

[285] See the comments section underneath the article, Www.sciencepalooza.nl/2012/08/waarom%E2%80%9Ccomplotdenken%E2%80%9D-niet-zomaar-afgeserveerd-moet-worden/, last retrieved May 2, 2016

[286] See the comments section underneath the article, http://www.sciencepalooza.nl/2012/08/waarom%E2%80%9Ccomplotdenken%E2%80%9D-niet-zomaar-afgeserveerd-moet-worden/, last retrieved May 2, 2016

[287] Personal email by Liam, August 22, 2012

[288] http://zaplog.nl/zaplog/article/waarom_complotdenken_niet_zomaar_afgeserveerd_moet_worden, posted August 26, 2012, last retrieved May 3, 2016

[289] Personal email by Anneke Bleeker, August 21, 2012

[290] Fulbright Enrichment Seminar Invitation Letter, February 6, 2015

[291] Dr. Montagnier discovered the HIV virus with his team at the Pasteur Institute Paris, around the same time as Dr. Gallo. The two virologists ignited a major scientific controversy about who actually was the first and sole finder of HIV, which led to serious diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and France until the dispute was resolved at the end of the 1980s by co-crediting both scientists and splitting the royalties from their discovery equally.

[292] http://modesofexistence.org/, under the header: "Phase Three. For the negotiators: how can we find the most acceptable account through a series of 'diplomatic' negotiations?", last retrieved May 10, 2016

The truth is out there. What was once the motto of an American science fiction TV-series is now ordinary reality. Millions of people in the Western world no longer trust their epistemic authorities (be it science, media or the government) and resort to alternative explanations to account for what *actually* happened. Conspiracy theories are formulated about the terrorist attacks of 9/11, about Big Pharma aggressively selling their malign products, or about the Illuminati secretly ruling the entertainment industry. They feature in popular culture as well: films, books and TV- series like *The Matrix*, *The Da Vinci Code*, or *The X-Files* have attracted millions. And at any random party one is bound to encounter someone who will not believe what the authorities tell us. Conspiracy theories and their followers are simply everywhere today.

But although conspiracy theories become more and more mainstream, a good sociological understanding of their popularity remains limited by their consistent pathologization in and outside academia. The stereotypical image of conspiracy theorists as paranoid fanatics is prominent, and the ideas they have about reality are easily put aside as irrational and preposterous. But is the suspicion of a conspiracy orchestrating world affairs that farfetched when secretive government operations and corporate collusions are a clear reality? Moreover, and this is the argument throughout the book, if we are to understand why so many people engage with conspiracy theories nowadays, then we need to explore the meanings they have for them.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Dutch conspiracy milieu and following a cultural sociological approach, Jaron Harambam explores such meanings in this book. He shows what contemporary conspiracy theories are about, which people are involved in the milieu, how they see themselves and what they actually do with these ideas in their everyday lives. Reality turns out to be much more complex than common stereotypes would suggest… and yes… the truth *really* is out there…

Jaron Harambam works at the Rotterdam Centre for Cultural Sociology of the Erasmus University Rotterdam and defends his PhD thesis on conspiracy culture in the Netherlands in October 2017. He was a Visiting Fellow at Northwestern University near Chicago, US (2015) and has published on conspiracy culture, digital culture and online games in international journals like *Cultural Sociology* (2016), *Public Understanding of Science* (2015), *Information, Communication and Society* (2013) and *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2011). He is editor of the Dutch peer-reviewed journal *Sociologie* where he co-edited a special issue on actor-network theory (2014). Jaron is mostly interested in sociological phenomena at the crossroads of science, religion, popular culture and media.