Contemporary Conspiracy Culture

In this ethnographic study, the author takes an agnostic stance towards the truth value of conspiracy theories and delves into the everyday lives of people active in the conspiracy milieu to understand better what the contemporary appeal of conspiracy theories is.

Conspiracy theories have become popular cultural products, endorsed and shared by significant segments of Western societies. Yet our understanding of who these people are and why they are attracted by these alternative explanations of reality is hampered by their implicit and explicit pathologization. Drawing on a wide variety of empirical sources, this book shows in rich detail what conspiracy theories are about, which people are involved, how they see themselves, and what they practically do with these ideas in their everyday lives. The author inductively develops from these concrete descriptions more general theorizations of how to understand this burgeoning subculture. He concludes by situating conspiracy culture in an age of epistemic instability where societal conflicts over knowledge abound, and *the* Truth is no longer assured, but "out there" for us to grapple with.

This book will be an important source for students and scholars from a range of disciplines interested in the depth and complexity of conspiracy culture, including Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Communication Studies, Ethnology, Folklore Studies, History, Media Studies, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology. More broadly, this study speaks to contemporary (public) debates about truth and knowledge in a supposedly post-truth era, including widespread popular distrust towards elites, mainstream institutions and their knowledge.

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Conspiracy Theories

Series Editors: Peter Knight, *University of Manchester*, and **Michael Butter,** *University of Tübingen*.

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Contemporary Conspiracy Culture

Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability

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Abbreviations

9/11	terrorist attacks on the USA, September 11, 2001
AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
CCTV	closed-circuit television
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COINTELPRO	counter-intelligence program
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid
EPD	*Electronisch Patienten Dossier* (electronic health records)
ESP	extrasensory perception
EU	European Union
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GMO	genetically modified organism
HAARP	High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
JFK	John F. Kennedy
LGBTQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
LIBOR	London Inter-Bank Offered Rate
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSA	National Security Agency
OOPArts	Out Of Place Artifacts
PR	public relations
PsyOps	psychological operations
RFID	radio frequency identification
SARS	severe acute respiratory syndrome
SOPN	Sovereign Independent Pioneers Netherlands
Stasi	State Security Service (Staatssicherheitsdienst)
UFO	unidentified flying object
UMTS	Universal Mobile Telephone System

1 Introduction

1.1 Conspiracy theories everywhere?

It seems hard nowadays for a week to go by without encountering challenges to officially sanctioned truths. A review of 2019 shows how anniversaries of key historical moments, like the first human on the moon, revive dormant doubts about what really happened. Various epistemic institutions, from mainstream media to public health institutes, face increasing popular suspicions regarding the integrity of their knowledge. Troubled persons find malign inspiration in dark ideas about supposedly concealed plans for racial-ethnic replacement. Institutionalized accusations of unlawful US presidential actions are evaded by invoking counter-imageries of a well-contrived manhunt. Dubious suicides, like Jeffrey Epstein's, are interpreted along longer-lasting worries about elite sexual (child) abuse networks. Well-controlled diseases such as the measles break out again in highly developed countries due to distrust of modern medical interventions. And innocuous ludic initiatives online bring about a worldwide hype to storm the secretive Area 51 allegedly hiding extraterrestrial life. Indeed, the diverse range of popular *and* elite allegations of pervasive deception and covert machinations behind the curtain of everyday reality, commonly framed as conspiracy theories, are a staple feature of contemporary cultural and political life in many Western countries.

Various opinion polls show that large segments of Western societies adhere, in one way or another, to conspiracy theories. Gallup, for example, has shown that half a century later a majority of US citizens "still believe JFK [US President John F. Kennedy] was killed in a conspiracy".[1] A 2013 survey by Public Policy Polling finds that "28% of [US] 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 15 percent believes "the US government to control our minds through television".[2] These are numbers that account for tens of millions of US citizens. A 2018 YouGov and Cambridge University nationally representative survey on conspiracy beliefs in the United States and eight European countries (United Kingdom, Poland, Italy, France, Germany, Portugal, Sweden and Hungary) showed that conspiracy theories are just as popular across the pond.[3] According to that poll, 30 percent of the German, French, Swedish and British populations "believed their

government is hiding the truth about immigration". A quarter of the French population holds that "the truth about the harmful effects of vaccines is being deliberately hidden from the public" and 40 percent of the Portuguese think that "a secret cabal control events and rule the world together". Similar numbers are found in The Netherlands, the national context of this study, where survey research concluded in 2015 that almost 40 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 20 percent "believes the US government to be behind the attacks of 9/11 [September 11, 2001], or at least had concrete foreknowledge about it".[4] A nationally representative survey conducted in 2019 showed that one in six Dutch citizens hold that "the mainstream media only cover what the government approves of" and over a quarter finds it (very) probable that "telecommunications companies and governments are aware of the risks of mobile phone (UMTS) radiation, but willfully keep secret confirmatory evidence".[5] These findings are increasingly corroborated by quantitative social scientific research as well. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood claim that 20 percent of US citizens hold their governments responsible for the attacks of 9/11 and that 10 percent believe that the "vapor trails left behind by aircrafts are actually chemical agents sprayed in a clandestine program directed by government officials" (2014: 956). Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent report that "a majority of Americans agree [that] much of the news from mainstream sources is deliberately slanted to mislead us" (2014: 76) and that about "thirty percent agrees [that] big events like wars, the current recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us" (2014: 78). Such polls and demographic research show that conspiracy theories cannot be seen as a marginal phenomenon on the fringes of society, but that they are considerable mainstream ways to think about the world.

Conspiracy theories are an important trope in contemporary politics as well. While the United States is surely known for its aggressive campaigning often rife with conspiratorial accusations, the 2016 presidential elections showed most visibly how conspiracy theories are great ways to stir up constituents and they were deployed by all candidates running for the presidency. Most attention is often paid to Donald Trump who unmistakably triumphed in the use of conspiracy theories: from accusing his rival Ted Cruz that his father was connected to the assassination of JFK, to the various conspiratorial attacks on Hillary Clinton that were meant to unsettle people's beliefs about her health, integrity and connections. Trump's main election theme—political, economic and cultural elites willfully work together to set aside the interests of ordinary Americans in favor of their own establishment benefits—is a conspiracy theory *par excellence*. But Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton were no exception either: whereas Sanders continuously spoke of the "one percent" as deceiving and extorting the broader population, Clinton attacked Trump by frequently insinuating that he had covert ties to and plans with Russia to manipulate the coming elections.

Again, this is not just happening in the United States: various authoritarian leaders of countries in Europe (e.g. Viktor Orbán) and across the globe (e.g. Jair

Bolsonaro) similarly deploy conspiracy theories in their campaign and current rule. The UK's exit from the European Union ("Brexit") referendum campaign was similarly rife with conspiratorial accusations and fears about "Brussels" covertly disadvantaging Great Britain and its ordinary people as it would continue to diminish British sovereignty. Anti-immigrant party leaders garner support by invoking images of covert plans to "flood" assumed pure homelands, and even replace native populations. In the Netherlands, the new and highly popular extreme-right political party, *Forum voor Democratie*, openly flirts with such "great replacement theories", and more broadly espouses "cultural Marxism", the idea that all kinds of Western progressive elites, including feminists, LGBTQ activists, and anti-racism activists, manipulate public opinion and mainstream institutions to destroy traditional Western (read: conservative) values. And most, if not all, populists in Western Europe make use of various other conspiracy theories to persuade potential constituents into believing that they are the real outsiders able to fight back again the concerted machinations of the (political) establishment (while often they are very much part of it). Politics is nothing today without conspiracy theories.

The implications of the popularity of conspiracy theories in terms of governance, policy making and institutional behavior are noticeable too. Public health offices need to think much more carefully today about how they frame their vaccination campaigns so that they don't throw grist to the mills of anti-vaccination movements, but do respond well to concerns and questions of the broader population. Diplomats negotiating for improved trade agreements are forced to take into account popular distrust of new technologies (such as the engineering of genetically modified organisms—GMOs) deployed in various industries or their efforts are bound to fail. Meteorological institutes are confronted with questions about extreme weather reports and need to explain better how their measurements are indeed indicative of signs of global warming. High school teachers face difficulties teaching their curricula on subjects such as the Holocaust and geopolitical affairs in the Middle East as various kinds of students challenge the Western media's (Islamist terrorism) coverage. Educational training programs respond by arguing for the incorporation of specific materials to prepare teachers for such conspiratorial student distrust in everyday classroom interactions. Legacy media corporations are framed as being partisan or too closely connected to vested powers and need to explicate more clearly how they guarantee objectivity in their reporting. Social media platforms are called on to respond to the widespread proliferation of conspiracy theories on their platforms, and are forced to reconsider their assumed neutrality regarding the contents they help circulate. They increasingly engage therefore in the moderation of "harmful" contents and the blacklisting of "untrusted" sources, which is a thorny business in itself. This has, in turn, led to much societal concern regarding the fact that private tech companies now decide on (the limits of) free speech. In other words, the ubiquitous presence of conspiracy theories in Western societies has unsettled and changed many citizen-institution relations.

Conspiracy theories figure prominently in popular culture as well. The TV series *The X-Files* (1993–2002) is a classic: it centered on two Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents, skeptical Agent Scully and the gullible Agent Mulder, who investigate unsolved cases of supernatural phenomena that turn out to be related to government cover-ups of extraterrestrial life. "Trust No One", the series' iconic slogan, became a cult theme featuring widely in today's popular culture. The same can be said 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. The bestselling novels of Dan Brown (and the movies based on them), delving into the dark undercurrents of the Vatican, 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), *House of Cards* (2013–2018) and *The Blacklist* (2013–present) all play with the themes of conspiracy theories: political intrigues, government cover-ups, clandestine operations by secret services and so on. Conspiracy theories are a popular trope in many different genres of music, perhaps most notably in the countercultural ones, since both share a deep suspicion towards the government, or towards the establishment and their moral order more broadly: think of the many early punk bands, like The Dead Kennedys, or the later albums of rock band Muse in which the lead singer (often accused of being a conspiracy theorist by music reviewers), Matt Bellamy, sings about government oppression, civil uprising, drone warfare, propaganda and even Baudrillard's simulation theory as popularized by *The Matrix*. This counts for hip-hop music as well, where rappers like KRS-One and groups such as Public Enemy vocalize various conspiratorial ideas to challenge US racial inequality. British rapper/singer M.I.A. sings in her 2010 song "The Message" about mass surveillance and how communication technology companies are all too closely connected to governments and their secret services, and in The Netherlands Lange Frans has rapped consistently for the past 15 years about government cover-ups, chemtrails and ISIS as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) prop. The multi-billion-dollar video game industry features many conspiracy themes too: *Assassin's Creed* (2007) plays with occult histories and centers around the battles between the secret orders of the Assassins and the Templars who covertly pull the strings behind much of our history. Or take the hugely successful video game *Splinter Cell* (2003–2013), which revolves around Sam Fisher, a special service agent of a secretive black-ops division within the National Security Agency (NSA), and plays with the post-9/11 cat-and-mouse games between terrorists, secret services and government cover-ups. In sum, the logic and rhetoric of conspiracy theory features abundantly in today's mediatized popular culture and has helped institutionalize conspiracy theories as a broad-based cultural phenomenon.

Even so-called high culture embraces conspiracy theory themes. In 2018, the NRW-Forum in Düsseldorf, Germany, hosted an international group art exhibition called *Im Zweifel für den Zweifel* (In doubt for doubt), which

explored "the power of conspiracy theories in times when increasing digitization raises uncertainty about what we see on the internet".[6] Bureau Europa in Maastricht, The Netherlands, organized in 2019 the exhibition *Digital Dilemma—The Architecture of Trust* which combined art, design, and architecture projects in an attempt to examine the current climate of institutional distrust and the role of modern technology herein.[7] New York saw its first major exhibition on the topic that year as well: the Metropolitan Museum of Art hosted *Everything Is Connected: Art and Conspiracy*, which explored "the hidden operations of power and the symbiotic suspicion between the government and its citizens that haunts Western democracies", and which presents works that "uncover uncomfortable truths in an age of information overload and weakened trust in institutions".[8] There have been theater productions by esteemed actors, such as De Verleiders in the Netherlands which has made political shows on the secretive manipulations of the banking industry leading up to the 2008 crisis (three successful tours across the Netherlands, 2014–2018),[9] and a bit later delved deeper into the dark practices of pharmaceutical companies, doctors and health insurers.[10] One of its actors, George van Houts, even developed a solo theater tour specifically about 9/11 in which he invited his audience to think critically about "the conspiracy theory of framing all unofficial readings of reality as conspiracy theory", and after more than 75 shows across the country, he is starting the sequel.[11] Swedish Musikteater Unna performed *KONSPIRATION!* in which "two journalists create a new conspiracy theory about mobile phone surveillance in order to reveal why we believe in such ideas".[12] Brooklyn Academy of Music Harvey Theater featured in 2015 *Real Enemies*, a show that used music, video and set design to explore the world of conspiracy theories.[13] The big band-dominated show began with the most credible conspiracy theories and gradually moved to the more outlandish ones "to think about conspiracy theory as a process … the show grapples with our fundamental urge to make sense of the world through storytelling".[14] Whether it is in music, design, theater, or visual art, the themes and probes of conspiracy theory appeal to many diverse artists and audiences today, and are therefore incorporated with verve into today's works of art.

Conspiracy theories are a hot conversational topic too. Introducing the subject at any random party or social gathering generally invites much engagement: almost everybody seems to have an opinion about these ideas challenging what most people take to be real, and many know somebody themselves who has become captivated by conspiracy theories. Such conversations vary between bewilderment by the idea of an alien race of shapeshifting reptilians secretly ruling the world—"how can people really believe that to be true?"—while others express their deep concern about widespread conspiratorial assaults on scientific consensuses such as man-made climate change and the public health benefits of vaccinations—"how can people deny such well-established facts?" And after some sensitive probing, some may even openly acknowledge that they too think that the trails that airplanes leave behind in the sky are actually nefarious tools of indoctrination deployed by the

powerful. It is simply not difficult to find someone who is or knows someone engaging with conspiracy theories. More interestingly, perhaps, is that conspiracy theories stir up any conversation, and arouse much emotion as well, in almost any which way, from anger to inspiration, and from amusement to confusion. Maybe even more than politics and religion, conspiracy theories are now *the* subject to be avoided at any official dinner party. To keep things cool, this Pandora's box should not be opened.

And last, but not least, conspiracy theories are increasingly well covered in the media. This may not be that surprising given their ubiquitous presence in everyday life, but it is striking to note how the frequency, the contents, and, arguably, the tone of reporting on conspiracy theories changed in the last decade. As Joe Uscinski notes as well, "until recently, prestigious news outlets treated conspiracy theories as fringe phenomena, but have since elevated them to top billing" (2018: 3). Indeed, all major quality newspapers in the US and Europe now regularly publish articles on conspiracy theories, and in many varied ways. For example, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, the top-quality German newspaper, has a special theme section, or feuilleton, on *verschwörungstheorien* boasting all its articles on the topic, ranging from chemtrails to extreme right-wing ideas of the great replacement, in one easy-to-navigate category.[15] *The Washington Post* has 1,263 articles in the last 12 months mentioning conspiracy theories, while the total of the last 15 years is a mere 7,250. The Dutch quality journal *NRC Handelsblad* published in 1996 about ten articles per year about conspiracy theories, while in the period 2014–2018 this reached on average 70 articles per year. But it is not just that the media report more on conspiracy theories; they increasingly publish background and research articles aimed at understanding why conspiracy theories are so popular nowadays, and what consequences this has had for the societies people live in. The headline of a 2019 *Le Monde* article reads "Mechanisms of conspiracy theorizing: France Culture unravels conspiracy theories", and speaks about its podcast series that delves into different conspiracy theories and how they are circulated (by certain actors and platforms like YouTube) to try to understand their attraction to people on both the left and far right.[16] Or take a 2019 article in *The Guardian*, "Trapped in a hoax: survivors of conspiracy theories speak out", which details the societal consequences of pervasive conspiracy theorizing by focusing on the "human toll paid by these falsehoods".[17] The point is that there is much and diverse media attention on the features and dynamics of conspiracy theories in Western societies, all in an effort to understand what is going on with truth and knowledge today.

Given all these different manifestations of conspiracy theory in Western societies today, it is fair to say that the problematization of official knowledge may be one of the most defining contemporary cultural and political issues. It is not for no reason that many commentators have branded this historical era as "post-truth", that dubious and confusing word meant to describe a world in which *the* Truth is not sacred anymore and "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal

belief".[18] Ever since the 2016 US presidential election and the UK's Brexit referendum brought many forms and varieties of the conspiracy theory genre to the surface and with allegedly pivotal consequences, post-truth is a topic of great societal and academic concern (d'Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017; Kakutani, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Sismondo, 2017). What happens to democratic societies when "basic facts" are set aside as "fake" and there is no longer a shared agreement on what previously was thought to be a collective reality?

Such worrisome commentators often invoke the work and thought of Hannah Arendt, who argued that the problem with pervasive lies in the public domain is not that people start believing them, but that they won't believe anything anymore, and that leaves people at the mercy of whichever demagogue is on the soapbox (e.g. Arendt, 1967). But are people really gullible enough to believe *anything*, or are there certain historical, societal, and cultural factors that explain better why people no longer adhere to official truths? And is *post*-truth actually an apt description to understand the current issues with truth and knowledge in Western societies? This book sets out to answer such questions by delving into the worlds of those people for whom officially sanctioned forms of knowledge are not that authoritative any more. In contrast to the dominant post-truth notion of having moved *beyond* truth, I argue in this book that we are exactly in the *middle* of public battles over truth. A key issue at stake here is who gets to decide what is true, on what grounds, and with what means.

1.1.1 A golden age of conspiracy theories?

The tell-tale signs of this increasing societal unrest with dominant truths were observed by various other (cultural studies and anthropology) scholars, who embodied the forefront of contemporary conspiracy theory research, more than two decades ago. Peter Knight, for example, argues that "since the 1960's conspiracy theories have become far more prominent, no longer the favoured rhetoric of backwater scaremongers, but the *lingua franca* of many ordinary Americans, [and] part and parcel of many people's normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works" (2000: 2). Studying the same time span, Timothy Melley similarly states that "conspiratorial explanations have become a central feature of American political discourse, a way of understanding power that appeals to both marginalized groups and the power elite" (2000: 7). Assessing the legacy of the Cold War, the collection edited by George E. Marcus shows how "the paranoid style in this fin de siècle is both detectable and manifest in different ways and with different intensities across a wide spectrum of situations" (1999: 2). Pointing to the new conditions of "increasing complexity brought about by networked computers and information" that could be today's, Jodi Dean contends that at the end of the 1990s the "social field of contemporary America consists of competing conceptions of the real" (1998: 7/24). Very much like today, the notion that (US) people increasingly live in isolated information communities with radically different

ideas about how the world works is the subject of much concern. Mark Fenster highlights from that perspective how "concerned commentators assert that conspiracy theory has poisoned our political system, culture, and public sphere to an unprecedented degree" (1999: xi). It may have only gotten worse, contemporary alarmists would say. Taking a more global perspective at the turn of the millennium, Harry G. West and Todd Sanders emphasize in their edited collection that "amid all this talk of transparency, many people have the sense that something is not as it is said to be—that power remains, notwithstanding official pronouncements, at least somewhat opaque" (2003: 2). What all these scholars argue is that conspiracy theories may have been the domain of dubious actors and communities on the fringes of society, but today they are popular, normalized, everyday ways of understanding the world that are tangible in many different manifestations of contemporary culture. Indeed, when so many different people engage with conspiracy theories in so many different ways and for so many different reasons, it is fair to say that these manifestations embody an unmistakable "culture of conspiracy" (Knight, 2000) or "culture of paranoia" (Melley, 2000). As both aforementioned authors make abundantly clear by referencing Don DeLillo in his 1978 book *Running Dog*: "This is the age of conspiracy, the age of links, connections, secret relationships" (Knight, 2000: 1; Melley, 2000: 7). In today's hyperconnected world, could this ring even more true?

While it is hard to deny the omnipresence of conspiracy theories in today's (internet) culture, several scholars have in recent years tried to nuance and downplay the aforementioned dominant notion of a unique contemporary conspiracy theory moment in time. Uscinski and Parent, for example, point to the fact that many commentators in the postwar period until now have coined their times "the golden ages of conspiracy theory" (2014: 106), although such proclamations may be more representative of public fears of, or moral panics about, conspiracy theories (Bratich, 2008). However, based on their analysis of 100,000 letters to the editor published in *The New York Times* between 1890 and 2010, Uscinski and Parent contend that the amount of conspiracy talk was relatively stable across that long period (2014: 105–129).[19] Taking an even longer time span, Michael Butter (2014) goes as far back as the 1692 Salem witchcraft crisis in his study of conspiracy theories throughout American history to argue that many more periods in time witnessed intense conspiracy theorizing. Analyzing various forms of text (sermons, stories, confessional narratives, books, pamphlets, and political speeches) from four different periods, Butter concludes that conspiracy theories were a much more common, legitimate and normal way of understanding historical events than in the last half century during which they were increasingly stigmatized. Delving deeper into that postwar period, Katharina Thalmann (2019) argues in line that, in contrast to widespread notions of conspiracy theories becoming more and more mainstream since the 1960s, they actually became problematized and set apart as a deviant and dangerous form of knowledge. Analyzing various forms of academic and media texts on conspiracy theory from the 1930s to the 1980s, she shows how the status and public opinion of conspiracy theory shifted from legitimate to illegitimate

knowledge. Instead of a mainstreaming of conspiracy culture, such scholars argue the opposite, and point to many more earlier points in time when conspiracy theories were acceptable as explanations of reality.

Now how to understand these oppositional readings of the role and status of conspiracy theories in contemporary Western societies? I would argue that both claims are actually not mutually exclusive, meaning that they both can be true. As I will show in the next sections, conspiracy theories and the people who traffic in them *did* get seriously stigmatized in the long postwar period by various academics and public commentators alike. It is not for no reason that the common (stereotypical) image we have of conspiracy theorists is one of a dangerously paranoid tin-foil mad hatter who simply sees enemies behind all bushes imaginable and has lost any sense of reality. It is also not for no reason that there is so much public concern about conspiracy theories, from policy makers to journalists to high school teachers. They are all accustomed to the idea that conspiracy theories are deluded and irrational forms of knowledge that need to be corrected otherwise they will do harm to society. Calling something or someone a conspiracy theory/ist really is a powerful rhetorical weapon to exclude that thought or person from the domain of legitimate (political) debate. This is all no coincidence: conspiracy theories are severely stigmatized. But conspiracy theories *did* also get more mainstream and become part and parcel of contemporary culture. The many examples with which this introduction started, from conspiracy theories in movies, films and art exhibitions to their everyday presence in the news, politics and on social media, testify to this unmistakable popularity of conspiracy theories. Indeed, conspiracy theories are both stigmatized and normalized at the same time. How does that work?

This apparent paradox about the cultural presence of conspiracy theories (either stigmatized or normalized) can only be understood, so goes my argument in this book, by being sensitive to the multiplicity of conspiracy theories, their different meanings, themes, actors and audiences, but also to the wider cultural contexts in which conspiracy theories are appropriated, endorsed, critiqued, shared, produced, circulated, transformed, applauded; in short, where they acquire meaning. The point is that conspiracy theories are many different things at once, and they mean different things for different people. They are objects of concern and insanity for some, but of admiration and plausibility for others. Conspiracy theories can thus be both stigmatized and normalized at the same time since these processes happen through the practices of different people with different ideas, backgrounds and interests, yet living in the same societies and historical moments in time. The question is thus for *which* people are conspiracy theories plausible, interesting and fun, and for which *other* people are they dangerous, delusional and disgusting, and most importantly, why is that the case? But also, what do the interactions between these different people and positions look like, and how do they shape each other through these confrontations? Indeed, more revealing than arguing for or against the *real* golden age of conspiracy—which is a complicated matter anyway due to the limitations of (quantitative) research methods[20] and

the availability of comparable data across time—it is much more insightful to find out what conspiracy theories look like in each different historical period and cultural location, and to contextualize them in their social, cultural, and political settings.

This is then exactly what I set out to do with this study: to find out what the specificities are of today's conspiracy culture, and to relate these to the broader contexts in which this dynamic and heterogenous subculture is embedded. Such a perspective will make better understandable how the two supposedly contradictory developments of conspiracy culture (normalization and stigmatization) may not only be both true, but, paradoxically, may even be reinforcing each other. To show these complex dynamics of the contemporary situation well, I follow a cultural sociological approach, which I will explain in more detail, and deploy several ethnographic research methods to stay close to, and be able to grasp, the lived realities of people for whom conspiracy theories make sense. This is very much needed: while there is ample media and scholarly attention to the role and manifestations of conspiracy theories in Western societies, only few of these efforts actually start from the perspectives of those engaging with conspiracy theories. We may thus have quite some understanding of how *outsiders*, in all their variety, regard the presence and popularity of conspiracy theories in Western societies, but we have rather little understanding of how *insiders*, who embody and give shape to contemporary conspiracy culture, make sense of it all. That is problematic for sociological and political reasons alike, but it also begs the question why so few people have felt inclined to engage with conspiracy theorists to find out who they are, and why they believe the things they do. Especially since the stigmatization of conspiracy theories in contemporary Western societies already obscures and makes suspect the meanings, rationales and actions of these people, there is actually much reason to foreground them. What other understandings and explanations do we gain by taking insiders of the conspiracy milieu seriously and by studying how *they* regard their own ideas and practices? What more do we learn if we focus on *their* perspectives of self and other, and how they think of (and potentially resist) the stereotypical and stigmatized images that are often applied to them? To understand the presence and popularity of conspiracy theories in contemporary Western societies, in all of their depth and variety, we simply need to start from the everyday perspectives of the people attracted by them.

There are some exceptions, however, especially in the field of journalism. Take, for example, Jonathan Kay who delved into the world of the 9/11 Truth Movement by attending their conventions, analyzing their online texts and conversations, and by interviewing some of these people, all in order to try to say something about "America's growing conspiracist underground" (2011). While his effort is laudable, and he acknowledges that these people cannot be easily set aside as "street corner paranoiacs", like the common stereotype would have it, he nevertheless ends up describing his "correspondents" in rather denigrating ways ("the midlife crisis case", "the failed historian", "the damaged survivor", "the crank", "the evangelical doomsayer" (2011: 150)), and regards their

motivations in similarly pathological ways ("a flight from reality […] induced by any number of causes—midlife ennui, narcissism, profound psychic trauma, spiritual longing, or even experimental drug use (2011: 150)). Kay ultimately explains the appeal of conspiracy theories as secularized, *ersatz* religion, providing people with psychological comforts, while he sees their contemporary popularity as both symptom and cause of a larger societal and intellectual crisis that people would now call "post-truth": experts and institutions are no longer trusted, values or fantasies are prioritized over facts, and so-called "rational intellectual criteria are treated as optional" in the evaluation of information (2011: xix). Kay's work—dismissing his interlocuters and merely lamenting the proliferation of conspiracy theories and their alleged consequences for the health of democratic societies—can therefore hardly been seen as a sincere attempt to understand contemporary conspiracy culture from within.

Jonathan Kay's book is, however, exemplary of the way journalists and academics conventionally write about conspiracy theories and their adherents. First, such authors start from an unambiguous and often rather explicit denial of the plausibility of conspiracy theories, even though they often stress that real conspiracies *do* happen. The driving assumption underlying most texts covering conspiracy theories is simply that they are flawed understandings of how reality works, too outrageous and improbable to be true. Second, the adherence to such "irrational ideas" can only be explained by reference to some pathology. Like Kay's various diagnoses detail, conspiracy theorists would suffer from all kinds of psychological ailments, ranging from traditional paranoia, to repressed spiritual longings, or even unresolved trauma. And third, there is always a moral alarmism present in such discussions of conspiracy theories. Linked with the demise of shared consensus reality, rising distrust of (and alienation from) experts and mainstream institutions, and even with (violent) political extremism, conspiracy theories are said to pose sincere threats to democratic societies as they would tear apart the basic foundations of how we live together peacefully. There are more and more nuanced investigations into contemporary conspiracy cultures in which authors really try to probe into lived daily lives of people attracted to conspiracy theories in order to say something meaningful about their cultural presence. Take, for example, the recent (journalistic) work of Anna Merlan (2019) that greatly shows such engagements. However, most authors on the topic seem unwilling or unable to move out of the shadow that the ubiquitous stigmatization of conspiracy theory has cast on them, and simply stay far away from those "looneys".

1.2 Academics on conspiracy theories: stigmatization and normalization

To intellectually situate this study on contemporary conspiracy culture, it is necessary to review the history of conspiracy theory research. While this section is not just meant to show how academic scholars have contributed to the stigmatization of conspiracy theories, several others have made sufficiently good efforts (Bratich, 2008; Butter and Knight, 2018; Thalmann, 2019), and it should

make clear the landscape of conspiracy theory research—its different positions and arguments, their merits and pitfalls. I distinguish ideal-typically between two main approaches: one that pathologizes and is highly normative about conspiracy theories (stigmatization), and another which regards them more neutrally and explores their meanings (normalization). A critical review of both approaches should ultimately lead me to explain why I argue for a methodologically agnostic and ethnographic study of today's conspiracy culture.

1.2.1 The pathological Other: bad science + paranoid politics = societal danger

Whereas the subject of conspiracy theories was addressed by social scientists after World War II (Popper, 2013) and at the height of the Cold War (Hofstadter, 2012), it was in and after the 1990s that the academic knowledge production on this matter substantially expanded. Scholars from a wide range of different academic backgrounds have since then started to write about conspiracy theories: what they are, where they come from, and how they are to be understood (see for another overview: Butter and Knight, 2018). 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. Their founding texts have helped establish a tripartite pathology model as the dominant frame to understand conspiracy theories: they are seen as bad science, paranoid politics, and combined together, as great societal danger.

Bad science

Academics writing on conspiracy theories conventionally start from the assumption that they are flawed understandings of reality. They follow 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. 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" (Popper, 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, 2012: 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, 2012: 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 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, 2012: 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: 33–34; 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.

Paranoid politics

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" (2012: 3–4). Writing in the early 1960s, Hofstadter is worried about the polarized political climate of his time and warns against the Manicheanism (a dualistic (religious) worldview 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" (2012: 39). "The paranoid is a militant leader" (2012: 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" (2012: 3), his usage of the term, however, "has the tendency to slip from the realm of metaphor to the original clinical meaning" (Byford, 2011: 122). 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 (1997) 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: 450). What becomes clear is that such 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: 126–128; Bratich, 2008: 25–50; Knight, 2000: 14–18). Yet, the pathologization of conspiracy theorists, in particular by invoking the concept of paranoia, persists to various degrees in a burgeoning experimental research tradition of social psychology and political science (see for a discussion: Butter and Knight, 2018; Imhoff and Lamberty, 2018; Swami et al., 2010). Some scholars do this very explicitly and argue that "conspiracy belief is strongly associated with paranoid ideation and schizotypy" (Barron et al., 2014; Darwin et al., 2011: 1292), while most others supply a whole variety of more general psychological factors and personality traits that would lead certain individuals to endorse conspiracy theories (cf. Brotherton, 2015; Douglas et al., 2017; Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). These range from exhibiting more cognitive biases (e.g. confirmation bias and illusory pattern recognition), to suffering more from various psychological afflictions (anxiety, stress, uncertainty, exclusion, narcissism, victimization, anomie, cynicism, distrust, etc.). Hofstadter's assertion of paranoia as a relevant analytical category in the understanding of conspiracy theories is, however, never far away, as the edited volume called *Power, Politics and Paranoia* testifies (2014). 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 point is that while the clinical attribution of paranoia may be dubious and decreasing in prevalence, the notion that there is something mentally "wrong" (or at least deviating from the "normal") with conspiracy theorists is still widespread in these research traditions.

Instead of regarding conspiracy theories more neutrally as dissenting forms of (political) knowledge or practice, they are framed in this tradition as the delusional allegations of paranoid and extremist minds. The discourse and rhetoric of these academic works carries, despite their disclaimers, clinical notions of mental illnesses and psychological disorders. 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" (Fenster, 2008: 25). The point made 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.

Societal danger

Given their framing as bad science and paranoid politics, these scholars warn of 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, which is dubious at best.

Hofstadter's aversion to political extremism reverberates through many academic works on conspiracy theories. 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 (2012) 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).

1.2.2 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 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 worldview, 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 points 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, the FBI's counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO), the Iran-Contra Affair, the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment,

and more recently the LIBOR (London Inter-Bank Offered Rate) 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 (Coady, 2006; deHaven-Smith, 2013; Dentith, 2014, 2018; Knight, 2000; Olmsted, 2009). Such unwarranted assumptions should not therefore 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" (Bale, 2007; Byford, 2011: 24; Heins, 2007; Keeley, 1999; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009). They argue that we need 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). Philosophers like Lee Basham, Matthew Dentith and David Coady go even further as they find aforementioned rule-of-thumb watersheds not good enough in terms of intellectual sincerity and practical reason; instead they argue to treat conspiracy theories seriously, and assess their veracity piece by piece (Coady, 2006; Dentith, 2018). This all seems to make good sense, but such efforts are easier said than done. If determining truth and falsity were 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 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2010), Hannah Arendt (2006) 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.

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, and where multinational corporations have a strong hand in the writing of legislation and the production of scientific knowledge, 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 of 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 as 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 7.

But most 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 so that we can 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. That is the objective of this study: 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 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.

1.2.3 The normal Other: 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 unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and 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's 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 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 emphasis).

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 "the 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 (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.

1.3 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" (Clifford, 1988; Wagner, 2016; Wolf, 1982: 6), 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 (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Weber, 2013); they also "possess relative autonomy in shaping [future] actions and institutions" (Alexander, 2003: 12; Houtman and Achterberg, 2016). Culture, to put it 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 it (Houtman, 2008; Latour, 2005), 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 for about two years in the social worlds of people active in what I call the Dutch *conspiracy milieu* (more on that in Chapter 2). 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 by 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 put 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 (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). 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 (the Dutch) 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 in Western countries 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.

1.3.1 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 as it would be irrelevant in the sociological study of religion to be bothered by the question of whether God or other supernatural phenomena actually exist (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 (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 (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). 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 every day (Elias, 1978; Houtman, 2008; Weber, 2013). 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 (Chapters 5 and 6), others (Chapters 6 and 7), and the world around them (Chapters 3 and 4).

1.3.2 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 militant, scholars commonly construe the idea of a uniform conspiracist worldview. This idea—whether termed "the paranoid style" (Hofstadter, 2012), "conspiracism" (Pipes, 1997), or "conspiracist ideation" (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 (Byford, 2011: 4). Now of course conspiracy theories may have similarities or historical continuities, and these may be illuminating to point out (Butter, 2014), but a sole focus on their (alleged) uniformity obscures the diversity of conspiracy culture that can and should be of great interest to anyone setting 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 (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 3), epistemologies (Chapters 4 and 6), biographies (Chapter 5), practices (Chapter 6) and people (Chapters 5 and 6) is there in the Dutch conspiracy milieu?

1.3.3 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 (Bratich, 2008; deHaven-Smith, 2013; Fiske, 1993). 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 labeled 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 (Husting and Orr, 2007; Pelkmans and Machold, 2011). In this study I conceptualize conspiracy culture therefore in *full relational terms* (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 (Chapters 2 and 3) and focus on the strategies of resistance towards those (Chapter 6). I situate people's lives (Chapter 5) and practices (Chapters 4 and 7) in their social, historical, and cultural contexts, and show the affinities and conflicts with other epistemic cultures (Chapters 4 and 7). 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.

1.4 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 3, "Contemporary conspiracy discourses: how a power elite controls the 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 insiders 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 Chapter 4 I take that performance as a strategic case study to research Icke's discursive strategies of legitimation in more detail.

Chapters 5 and 6 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 autobiographical 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 or 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 (Elias, 1978; Mills, 2000).

In Chapter 6, "'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 (Becker, 1963; Elias, 1978; Jenkins, 2014), I focus in the 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 exists 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 (Bloor, 1991), 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 skeptical, 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 (Hess, 1993; Mulkay, 1979; 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.

Notes

1 www.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed-conspiracy.aspx, last retrieved October 11, 2019
2 www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP_Release_National_ConspiracyTheories_040213.pdf, last retrieved October 14, 2019
3 https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2018/12/14/brexit-and-trump-voters-are-more-likely-believe-co, last retrieved October 14, 2019
4 www.quest.nl/artikel/ruim-40-procent-gelooft-de-overheid-volgt-stiekem-alles-wat-we-op-internet-doen, last retrieved October 16, 2019
5 www.trouw.nl/binnenland/complotten-kiezers-van-fvd-pvv-en-50plus-zweren-erbij~b2138a0d/, last retrieved October 16, 2019
6 www.nrw-forum.de/en/exhibitions/im-zweifel-f%C3%BCr-den-zweifel, last retrieved October 19, 2019
7 www.bureau-europa.nl/en/manifestations/digital_dilemma_the_architecture_of_trust, last retrieved October 19, 2019
8 www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2018/everything-is-connected-art-and-conspiracy, last retrieved October 19, 2019
9 www.de-verleiders.nl/doordebankgenomen, last retrieved October 19, 2019
10 www.de-verleiders.nl/slikkenenstikken/, last retrieved October 19, 2019
11 www.komplot.info, last retrieved October 19, 2019
12 www.musikteaterunna.se/konspiration.html, last retrieved October 21, 2019
13 http://23.23.137.178/music/2015/real-enemies, last retrieved October 21, 2019
14 www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/nov/16/real-enemies-brooklyn-academy-of-music-conspiracy-theories-isaac-butler, last retrieved October 21, 2019
15 www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/thema/verschwoerungstheorie, last retrieved October 22, 2019
16 www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2019/09/11/mecaniques-du-complotisme-france-culture-detricote-les-theories-du-complot_5508999_3246.html, last retrieved October 22, 2019
17 www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/23/conspiracy-theories-internet-survivors-truth, last retrieved October 22, 2019
18 https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016, last retrieved October 22, 2019
19 They signal two exceptions: in the mid-1890s and the 1950s, when there were widespread suspicions of big business and communists, respectively.
20 It is even difficult to intelligibly measure contemporary adherence to conspiracy theories, since all depends on framing and definitional criteria, who or what counts as a conspiracy theory/ist after all? See Smallpage et al. (2020) for a great review of these problematics in quantitative studies.

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Notes

Chapter 1

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19 They signal two exceptions: in the mid-1890s and the 1950s, when there were widespread suspicions of big business and communists, respectively.
20 It is even difficult to intelligibly measure contemporary adherence to conspiracy theories, since all depends on framing and definitional criteria, who or what counts as a conspiracy theory/ist after all? See Smallpage et al. (2020) for a great review of these problematics in quantitative studies.

Chapter 2

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4 http://skepsis.nl, last retrieved October 21, 2014
5 www.nieuwemedianieuws.nl, last retrieved October 21, 2014.
6 This website further specifies the difference between the new and mainstream media "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).
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31 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
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33 http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Thrive, see for more criticism: www.quora.com/Who-is-Foster-Gamble-who-presents-the-documentary-Thrive, last retrieved March 3, 2016
34 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.
35 Website known to me. Anonymized by request of the owner, last retrieved November 18, 2014

Chapter 3

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9 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 it 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 November 18, 2014
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23 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 Washington Post website of December 21, 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 November 20, 2014
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37 This refers to *De Groene Amsterdammer* (a weekly). 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).
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Chapter 4

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11 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*."
12 Indeed, this anthropological work is very much disputed for being fraudulent/fictional and a perfect example of scientific controversy. (See e.g. Hammer, 2001: 136; Plummer, 2001: 219.)
13 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 multinational 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 April 8, 2015
14 *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

Chapter 5

1 www.wijwordenwakker.org; www.slaaptgijnog.nl, last retrieved September 3, 2015
2 E.g. 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
3 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

4 http://nl.hoax.wikia.com/wiki/Complotdenker, last retrieved September 3, 2015
5 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, and its rituals contain magic and sorcery. Winti shares with Voodoo in Haiti and Candomblé in Brazil.

Chapter 6

1 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.
2 www.wacholland.org/content/acties-demonstraties, last retrieved February 10, 2013
3 www.youtube.com/user/wearechangeholland, last retrieved February 10, 2013
4 www.argusoog.org, last retrieved February 10, 2013
5 www.slaaptgijnog.nl, last retrieved August 11, 2013
6 www.zoekdewaarheid.nl, last retrieved August 15, 2013
7 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.

Chapter 7

1 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 who 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.
2 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, 2013: 45).
3 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 (e.g. 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.
4 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", European Association for the Study of Religions, Liverpool, 2013). Another good effort is a 2013 article of London School of Economics and Political Science scholars (Franks et al., 2013), or the article by Stef Aupers and myself in the *Brill Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (Aupers and Harambam, 2018).
5 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.

Chapter 8

1 In the sense of being guaranteed by the modernist belief in the progressive accumulation of objectivity through competition in scientific knowledge production.
2 A sociologically interesting case of such dynamics is documented by some of the social psychologists mentioned before (Lewandowksy, 2018).

Chapter 9

1 www.sciencepalooza.nl/2012/08/waarom%E2%80%9Ccomplotdenken%E2%80%9D-niet-zomaar-afgeserveerd-moet-worden/, last retrieved May 2, 2016
2 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
3 https://cryptocheilus.wordpress.com/crypto-nieuwsbox/comment-page-2/, last retrieved May 3, 2016
4 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
5 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
6 Personal email from Liam, August 22, 2012
7 http://zaplog.nl/zaplog/article/waarom_complotdenken_niet_zomaar_afgeserveerd_moet_worden, posted August 26, 2012, last retrieved May 3, 2016
8 Personal email from Anneke Bleeker, August 21, 2012
9 Fulbright Enrichment Seminar Invitation Letter, February 6, 2015
10 Dr. Montagnier discovered HIV 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 US 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.
11 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

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