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Introduction

[...] even the most horrid deeds perpetrated during the French Revolution, every thing was foreseen and resolved on, was combined and premeditated: they were the offspring of deep-thought villany, since they had been prepared and were produced by men, who alone held the clue of those plots and conspiracies, lurking in the secret meetings where they had been conceived, and only watching the favourable moment of bursting forth.

—Augustin Barruel,
Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism,
1799: xii

This movement among the Jews is not new. From the days of Spartacus-Weishaupt to those of Karl Marx, and down to Trotsky (Russia), Bela Kun (Hungary), Rosa Luxembourg (Germany), and Emma Goldman (United States), this world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing.

—Winston Churchill in *Illustrated Sunday Herald*,
8 February 1920: 5

How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy

so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men.

—Senator Joseph McCarthy,
addressing the United States Congress, 14 June 1951,
cited in Hofstadter (1967: 7)

In September 2001, the World Trade Centre was attacked allegedly by terrorists. I am not sure now that Muslim terrorists carried out these attacks. There is strong evidence that the attacks were staged. If they can make *Avatar*, they can make anything.

—Former Malaysian Prime Minister
Mahathir Mohammad, addressing the Conference
for the Support of Al-Quds (Jerusalem),
Kuala Lumpur, 20 January 2010

The above passages, written at different times over the past 250 years, reflect the beliefs of four individuals of dissimilar social, cultural and political backgrounds, citizens of different countries across three continents. The quoted observations have been made in response to diverse historical and political events, ranging from the French Revolution to the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. And yet, despite these and other differences, the remarks of a French Jesuit priest, a British Conservative politician and future Prime Minister, an American Republican Senator and the former head of the Malaysian government share an important similarity. All contain within them the view that a historical or political event (or a series of events) occurred as a consequence of a carefully worked out plan, plotted in secret by a small group of powerful individuals. The passages invoke different conspiratorial bodies – the Illuminati, Jews, Communists or a shadowy elite within the American establishment – but they are permeated by the same fundamental claim of the conspiracy theory: that there is ‘an occult force operating behind the seemingly real, outward forms of political life’ (Roberts, 1974: 29–30), and that visible reality is no more than an illusion, a smokescreen that conceals the sinister machinations of some powerful, secretive and menacing cabal. Karl Popper referred to this worldview as the ‘conspiracy theory of society’ according to which the ‘explanation of a social phenomenon consists of a discovery of the men [*sic*] or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon [...] and who have planned and conspired to bring it about’ (1966: 95).

While the quoted passages suggest that conspiracy theories have been around for at least two hundred years, it is often argued that we live

in an 'age of conspiracism' (Alter, 1997: 47). There is not a single significant event in the world today – an election result, economic crisis, death of a public figure, terrorist attack, natural disaster, plane crash, political assassination, military conflict, meteorological anomaly or flu pandemic – that does not generate at least a flutter of conspiracist speculation. Conspiracy theories are said to have migrated from the margins of society to the centre ground of politics and public life and have become a ubiquitous feature of contemporary political and popular culture – an 'everyday epistemological quick fix to often intractably complex problems' of the modern age, including secrecy in politics, increased surveillance and threat to privacy, the rise in influence of transnational corporate bodies and the sense of diminished personal agency (Knight, 2000: 8, see also Fenster, 2008, Goldberg, 2001). Throughout the world conspiracy theories have also become a popular means of articulating an opposition to the forces of international capitalism, globalisation, America's military and political supremacy, and the more general rise of a transnational political order.

Given their global proliferation and persistence, it is not surprising that, over the years, conspiracy theories have been the subject of numerous books and scholarly papers, not to mention hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles and, increasingly, blogs. Communities of historians, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers as well as journalists, commentators and political pundits have sought to explain the enduring appeal of the conspiracy culture. They have looked for and found conspiracy theories in virtually every corner of the world, from Russia to Indonesia, from the United States to South Africa. They have delved into their past, present and future, scrutinising them from every possible angle, some with trepidation and contempt, and others with unconcealed fascination. They have sifted meticulously through thousands of pages of conspiracy materials, exposing even the smallest factual and logical flaws. They searched for the roots of conspiracy beliefs in every place imaginable, from the depth of the individual unconscious to something as impersonal as the 'postmodern condition'.

Despite this wealth of knowledge that has accumulated over the years, and the enduring public interest in and fascination with conspiracy theories, there has as yet been no attempt to offer a general introduction to this phenomenon and its historical, political and psychological dimensions. One reason for this is that writers on the subject tend to exhibit a certain reluctance to extend their enquiry beyond the bounds of their own discipline. For example, in the writing that belongs to the

fields of anthropology, philosophy or cultural studies, one seldom finds references to psychological research, even though the appropriation of psychological vocabulary is common. Psychologists, on the other hand, often view conspiracy theories rather narrowly, as a matter of individual belief or attitude, without looking at them as a broader cultural phenomenon and historically bounded worldview. Writers focusing on the conspiracy culture in the United States often take little notice of developments overseas and tend to treat their subject matter as a uniquely American phenomenon, just as those focusing on conspiracy theories as a feature of contemporary mass culture have the tendency to neglect the continuities and discontinuities in conspiracist thought through history. What is more, in literature on conspiracy theories, consensus has been lacking even on some basic issues such as precisely what kind of explanation constitutes a conspiracy theory, or whether the enduring presence of conspiracy theories in society is a good or a bad thing.

In providing a critical introduction to conspiracy theories, the present volume does not offer a detailed overview of the different approaches to, and perspectives on the topic, nor does it seek to reconcile them. Also, it does not set out to examine in detail specific conspiracy theories, contemporary or historical, with the view of exposing their factual and logical flaws. Instead, drawing on literature from a variety of disciplines, the forthcoming chapters address a set of specific questions – six to be precise – which cut to the core of conspiracy theories as a global social, cultural and political phenomenon, and which offer a suitable starting point from which to begin to deconstruct their logic and rhetoric and analyse the broader social and psychological factors that contribute to their persistence in modern society.

The six questions, which will be introduced shortly, explore conspiracy theories as a *tradition of explanation*, characterised by a particular *rhetorical style*. Anyone who has had the opportunity to engage with conspiracy theories about 9/11, AIDS or the machinations of the Bilderberg group, the Illuminati or Jews will be struck by the fact that they often sound remarkably alike. Tales of conspiracy – whether expounded in Washington, London, Moscow, Damascus or Beijing and regardless of whether they purport to explain a political assassination, the cause of a disease or a financial crisis – are marked by a distinct thematic configuration, narrative structure and explanatory logic, as well as by the stubborn presence of a number of common motifs and tropes. American historian Richard Hofstadter (1967) referred to the common features of conspiracy theories as markers of a distinct explanatory or rhetorical ‘style’ which he chose to call ‘paranoid’. He employed the term *style*,

‘much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style. It is, above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself’ (ibid.: 4). For similar reasons, conspiracy theories are said to constitute a distinct culture – *conspiracism* – which encompasses a specific system of knowledge, beliefs, values, practices and rituals shared by communities of people around the world (Pipes, 1997, Barkun, 2006).

The uniformity of the conspiratorial ‘style’ of rhetoric can be shown to persist over time. The worldview which defines contemporary conspiracy culture and the distinct manner of expression through which it is articulated bears a close resemblance to that found in the writings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century conspiracy theorists. Conspiracist interpretations of the 2008 financial crisis draw on the same armoury of arguments and tropes which were used to interpret the Great Depression of the 1930s. The 9/11 Truth movement draws extensively on the interpretative framework established in the 1940s, when the opponents of Franklin D. Roosevelt accused him of allowing Pearl Harbour to happen in order to create a pretext for taking America to war. Throughout post-communist Eastern Europe, criticism directed at the supposedly seditious and sinister activities of Western non-governmental organisations and human rights activists bears close resemblance to the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anti-Illuminati and anti-Masonic rhetoric. What is more, conspiracy theorists not only borrow their predecessors’ arguments, but also acknowledge the enduring relevance of their work. The opening paragraph of this chapter includes a quote from Augustin Barruel’s four-volume *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, one of the earliest elaborations of the Illuminati conspiracy theory, first published in London in 1797. For many conspiracy theorists today, the work of Barruel and his contemporaries is not just of historical significance. It is treated also as a body of knowledge which, if adequately interpreted, offers insight into the central problems of today. Other classics of the genre, including the writings of Nesta Webster, Henry Ford or Gary Allen, even the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, are treated in the same way.

The thread of continuity that runs through the culture of conspiracy theory is sufficiently robust to make it possible to speak of conspiracism not just as an explanatory style, but also as a *tradition of explanation* (Billig 1978, 1987a). This tradition consists of a corpus of ideas, arguments, ‘facts’, ‘revelations’ and ‘proofs’ pertaining to the alleged world plot, which have accumulated over time, and which are referred to, cited, quoted and perpetuated by successive generations of conspiracy theorists. As we shall see later in the book, the conspiracy culture is

defined (but also sustained) by the tendency among conspiracy writers to regurgitate, revamp and apply to new circumstances the body of knowledge, the explanatory logic and rhetorical tropes expounded in texts, books or pamphlets written and published by conspiracy theorists in the past.

The view of conspiracy theories as a tradition of explanation opens up a number of important questions which will be addressed in the forthcoming chapters. What are the defining characteristics of conspiracy theories and their rhetorical style? How does one differentiate conspiracy theories from legitimate inquiries into real conspiracies in politics? How long have conspiracy theories been around and to what extent are contemporary versions similar to those of yesteryear? Why do conspiracy theories sound alike and what ensures their persistence in modern society? Why do some people believe in conspiracy theories while others do not? Are conspiracy theories necessarily bad, or does the distrust in government and mainstream institutions which they invariably perpetuate harbour a progressive potential?

Before engaging with these questions and embarking on the exploration of the conspiracy tradition, it is necessary to survey the phenomenon under investigation, provide a brief tour of the contemporary conspiracy culture and examine why it is that conspiracy theories are worthy of critical examination.

Mapping contemporary conspiracy culture

The contention that at the dawn of the twenty-first century the world is undergoing a period of 'fashionable conspiracism' (Aaronovitch, 2008: 3) is not difficult to evidence. Opinion polls carried out around the world reveal that a substantial proportion of the population readily admits to believing in some form of conspiracy theory. In the United States, for example, polls have consistently shown that between 30 and 40 per cent of the population believes either that the official account of 9/11 is a cover-up or that the US establishment was involved in the attacks, either directly, by planting explosives that brought down the Twin Towers, or indirectly, through a deliberate failure to stop them from happening (Sales, 2006, Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009, Gillan, 2006). This view is shared by between a fifth and a third of the populations of Germany and Canada, and according to one survey at least, close to 40 per cent of Britons (Connolly, 2003, Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009, 'US base leads poll's top conspiracy theories', 2008, Knight, 2008). A poll carried out in five predominantly Muslim countries in

2004 found that more than three quarters of the sample did not believe that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by Al Qaida, alleging instead a conspiracy involving the US and Israeli governments (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2004). In Egypt, the proportion of people who believe that Israel alone was behind 9/11 was found to be as high as 43 per cent (WorldPublicOpinion.org, 2008).

Other polls carried out in the United States, in Britain and elsewhere have also found that a high proportion of the population does not accept as true the official, non-conspiratorial explanations of a number of other dramatic events such as the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy, the 1996 explosion of the TWA 800 flight over the Atlantic, the death of Princess Diana or the Apollo moon landing (see Goertzel, 1994, Miller, 2002, Aaronovitch, 2009). What is more, recent surveys have found that between a half and two thirds of Americans agree with statements such as 'the US government know more about UFOs than they are telling us', which reveals not only that the majority of the American public believes in the existence of extra-terrestrial life, but also that such beliefs have become intertwined with the story of a vast government-sponsored cover-up (see Barkun, 2006, Goldberg, 2001).

The widespread popularity of conspiracy theories evidenced by the opinion poll data is reflected in (while at the same time being sustained by) what can be described as the veritable conspiracy theory industry, involving authors, publishers, the media, advertisers, event organisers, specialised tour operators and memorabilia vendors. In the past decade, conspiracy theory literature has featured on best-seller lists in the United States, Germany, France, Serbia, South Africa and China ('9/11 conspiracy theory books dominate debate at Frankfurt Book Fair', 2003, Connolly, 2003, Byford, 2006, Lewis and Kahn, 2005). In the 1980s, the number of books published in Japan on the topic of Jewish conspiracy was so great that some bookshops stocked them in a designated 'Jewish corner' (Kowner, 1997). 9/11 conspiracy theorists such as Thierry Meyssan or David Ray Griffin have become international celebrities after their work was published in dozens of languages worldwide.

Conspiracy literature features even in catalogues of major mainstream publishing houses. The commercial success of *Rule by Secrecy* (2000) and *The Rise of the Fourth Reich* (2008), two books by Jim Marrs, one of the doyens of contemporary American New World Order conspiracy theory, is undoubtedly linked to the fact that they were published and marketed by a reputable mainstream commercial publisher, HarperCollins. In China, *Currency Wars*, a bestseller by Song Hongbing, which alleges that a whole series of disparate events, from the battle of Waterloo,

through the rise of Hitler, to the Japanese economic boom and climate change, are attributable to the machinations of the Rothschild family, was published by an imprint of the state-owned publishing house CITIC. Originally published in 2007, it is said to have sold more than 200,000 legal copies, and maybe twice as many pirated ones. Despite containing assertions such as that 'at present, 90 percent of the financial power on Wall Street is in the hands of Jews', the book received praise in state-controlled press in China (e.g. Jin, 2009) and attracted the attention of the higher echelons of the country's business and financial establishment (McGregor, 2007). In 2009, at the time when Song Hongbing was writing the sequel to *Currency Wars*, the website of *Bloomberg Business Week* included him on its list of 'China's most powerful people' (Bloomberg Business Week, 2009).

Recent years have also seen a proliferation of books such as *The Rough Guide to Conspiracy Theories* (McConachie and Tudge, 2008), *The Mammoth Book of Cover-ups* (Lewis, 2008), *Conspiracy Files* (Southwell and Twist, 2007) and others which offer an overview of the 'best known' or 'most bizarre' conspiracy theories of all time. Revised, updated or expanded editions of these compendia are printed every couple of years, ensuring a steady stream of new and old claims. A classic in this genre, Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen's *Fifty Greatest Conspiracies of All Time*, was updated four times between 1995 and 2004, eventually becoming *Eighty Greatest Conspiracies of all Time* (Harper, 2008). By 2010, the authors appear to have lost count, so the most recent edition is simply called *The World's Greatest Conspiracies* (Vankin and Whalen, 2010). These works, alongside a multitude of books devoted to conspiratorial explanations of single events such as the death of Princess Diana, 9/11, the origin of AIDS or the assassination of John F. Kennedy, reflect the recognition among publishers that there is a market for material of this kind.

Another branch of media industry involved in the dissemination of conspiracy theories is network television. Over the past decade, practically every major TV channel or network in the US and the UK has featured documentaries investigating one conspiracy theory or another. Meanwhile, cable networks specialising in historical documentaries, such as the History Channel or Discovery, have perfected the genre of 'speculative history'. This particular style of documentary is devoted to 'controversial' events which have been the topic of conspiracist speculation and which are set up in the programme as still awaiting a satisfactory and conclusive explanation. Although 'speculative history' documentaries tend not to endorse conspiratorial interpretations

outright, they nevertheless fail to dismiss them as groundless. It is an inherent feature of the genre that conspiratorial and non-conspiratorial interpretations are presented as equally reasonable positions in a legitimate debate. Contributors to the programmes – be they scholars, engineers, forensic experts, trained historians, amateur enthusiasts, UFOlogists or conspiracy buffs – are typically accorded equal treatment as ‘experts’, and it is left to the viewer to weigh the arguments, consider the evidence and determine which of the rival interpretations is most plausible (Popp, 2006). The inevitable outcome of this approach, which shuns any firm conclusion or narrative closure in favour of doubt and ambiguity, is that the status of ‘counterknowledge’ and conspiratorial pseudohistory is enhanced, at the expense of genuine scholarship (Thompson, 2008).

Conspiracism features in the mainstream electronic news media too. In 2008, at the time of the US presidential election campaign, CNN’s Lou Dobs and several Fox News commentators and anchor men and women, publicised the agenda of the so-called Birther movement, which alleged that Barack Obama faked his birth certificate to conceal the fact that he was born in Kenya, which would have precluded him from standing for the US presidency. The Birthers, and their supporters within the mainstream media, were not simply pointing towards an individual act of fraud – the faking of a Hawaiian birth certificate – but hinted instead at a vast multi-million-dollar conspiracy to conceal the future president’s real birthplace. This tale of conspiracy quickly became an important element in right-wing populist propaganda which used the ‘doubts’ and ‘questions’ about Obama’s origins to emphasise the Democratic candidate’s anti-Americanness, and the supposedly alien and ‘un-patriotic’ character of his ‘socialist’ policies (Pilkington, 2009a).

The rise of national 24-hour news channels has created new opportunities for the international dissemination of conspiracy theories. Russia Today, the English-language 24-hour news channel funded by the Russian state, which is available globally via cable or satellite, is a case in point. Established in 2005, the channel hoped to shake up the world of international news media by providing a fresh alternative to the likes of CNN or Sky News, which were seen, by RT’s founders, as unquestioningly promoting the foreign policy agenda of Western powers. However, in the attempt to provide a novel ‘critical’ perspective on world affairs (the channel’s motto is ‘question more’), Russia Today opened its doors to conspiracy theorists from around the world, many of them from the US. The channel has provided the likes of Alex Jones, Webster Tarpley, David Ray Griffin and Jim Marrs with the opportunity to promote, to

an international audience, their ideas about the New World Order, 9/11, the Bilderberg group or the climate change conspiracy, all while being treated with absolute deference by the channel's journalists. Embedded video clips of appearances on Russia Today have become a regular feature on the websites of American conspiracy theorists, where they are brandished as a sign of credibility and mainstream recognition.

Conspiracy explanations also feature in the press, and not just in tabloid publications such as the *National Enquirer* or *Weekly World News*, which have attained notoriety for their penchant for bizarre stories of conspiracy and cover-up. Over the past decade, a number of US periodicals, including *Discover*, a popular magazine devoted to issues related to 'science, technology and the future', as well as *Harper's Magazine*, *American Spectator* and *National Review*, have provided a platform for various conspiracy theories about the origins of AIDS (see Kalichman, 2009). In the United Kingdom too, since 1997, the Diana-related conspiracy theories have been the 'main marketing ploy' of the *Daily Express*, which frequently sought to boost circulation by adorning its front page with a photograph of the glamorous Princess of Wales, accompanied by a claim casting doubt on the official version of her death (Aaronovitch, 2009: 152).

A particularly regrettable instance of conspiracism in the mainstream British press was the front cover of the 14 January 2002 issue of the left-wing news magazine the *New Statesman*, which featured an image of the Union Jack pierced by a glittering, golden Star of David, accompanied by the caption 'A kosher conspiracy?'. The contemptible conspiratorial motif reminiscent of the Nazi propaganda of the 1930s, which portrays Jews as using the power of gold and money to work against the interest of the nation, was clearly signified on the cover, announcing the issue's headline story – an exploration of the workings of Britain's 'pro-Israel lobby'. Although the outrage that followed the magazine's publication led to a swift apology from the editor-in-chief, the fact that it was ever published reminded the British (and international) public that antisemitic motifs and conspiracy theories are not the prerogatives of the Right, but an increasingly common trope in the rhetoric of some left-wing critics of Israel and its policies (see Hirsh, 2007 and Harrison, 2006).

The principal medium for the transmission of conspiracy theories today, however, is neither the press nor television, but the internet. The kind of conspiracy theorising that a generation ago was disseminated in photocopied newsletters and pamphlets, in books sold in specialist bookshops or through mail order catalogues, or in amateur videos that

were costly to produce and distribute can now reach, via the world wide web, a large proportion of the (developed) world instantly and at minimal cost. Over the past 15 years, conspiracy theories have spread like wildfire through the internet, to the point where, in September 2010, the search-term 'conspiracy' yielded close to 30 million results on Google. A more recent development in the online dissemination of conspiracy theories, which has enabled them to reach a new generation of consumers, has been the emergence of video-sharing websites such as YouTube or Google Videos. Amateur documentaries are today an indispensable tool of conspiracy theorists, alongside websites, internet chartrooms and forums. One of the most successful postings on YouTube to date has been the 9/11 conspiracy film *Loose Change*, created by a group of 20-something year-olds on a laptop, using unauthorised footage from news channels and some basic graphic design and animation software. Within a month of being posted on the internet in April 2005, *Loose Change* was viewed by 10 million people, rising to number one on the Google video chart (Sales, 2006). The success of this film inspired a whole generation of amateur documentary makers, who have posted, over the past five years, thousands of conspiracy-related videos on YouTube and other similar websites. Crucially, YouTube, and the internet more generally, are used by conspiracy theorists in conjunction with traditional media, including books and radio (Fenster, 2008). The popular syndicated daily radio show produced and presented by Alex Jones, one of America's best known conspiracy theorists, is today part of a sophisticated and lucrative multimedia franchise which includes books, DVDs, a website (infowars.com), a web-based television channel (prisonplanet.tv), a YouTube channel, daily podcasts and merchandising.

Conspiracy-related themes have also become an unavoidable feature of fictional genres. The global success, in the 1990s, of *The X-Files* is an obvious and much written about example of the popularisation of conspiracy theories through fictional narratives (see Kellner, 2003, Fenster, 2008). Conspiracy motifs have also featured in Hollywood blockbusters such as *JFK* or *Conspiracy Theory* and (in a somewhat watered-down form) in a number of successful recent American TV productions such as *24*, *Prison Break* and *Lost*. Tales of occult knowledge, plots and cover-ups have featured also in a number of bestselling novels published in the past decade. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *Angels and Demons* (2000) and *The Lost Symbol* (2009) are obvious examples. The plot of *The Da Vinci Code* was influenced by the central claim of Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln's 1982 bestseller *The Holy*

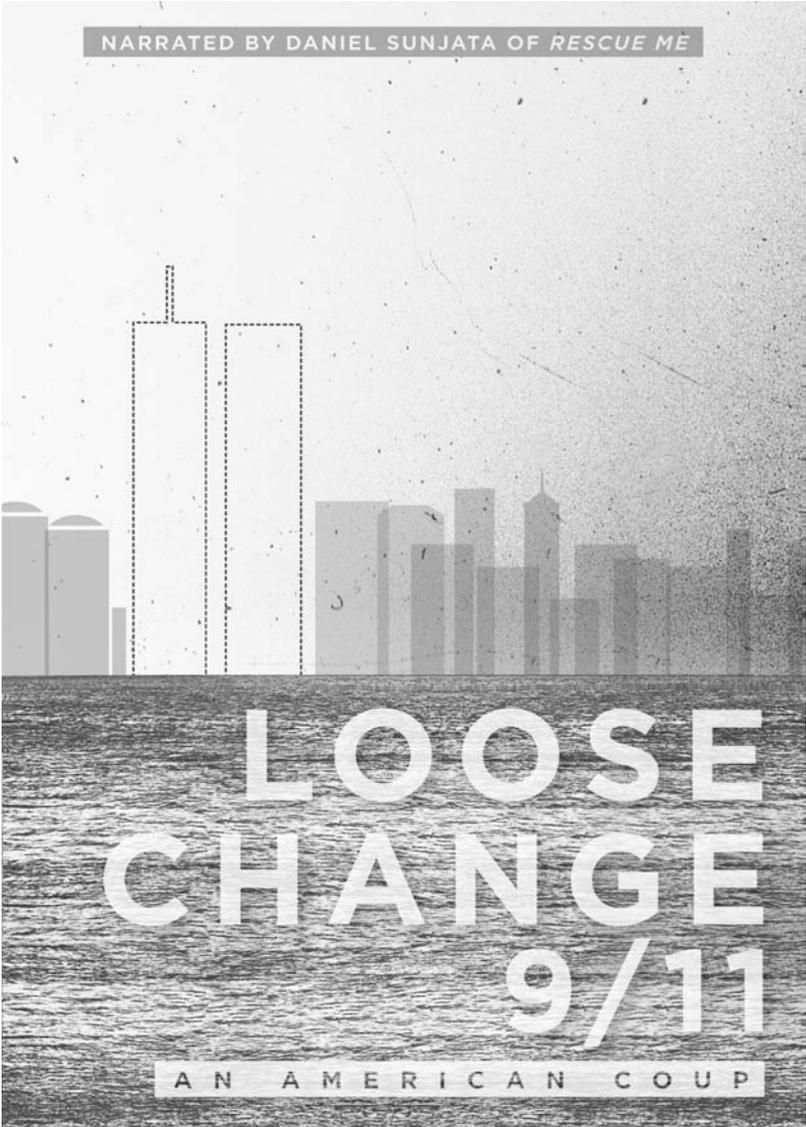


Figure 1.1 *Loose Change 9/11: An American Coup* (2009) DVD sleeve (with permission from Microcinema International)

Blood and the Holy Grail, a book which by the time Brown's novel hit the best-sellers list had already attained cult following among conspiracy theorists worldwide (see Barkun, 2006, Aaronovitch, 2009). *Angels and Demons* focuses on the epitome of secret societies, the Illuminati, while in Brown's most recent work, *The Lost Symbol*, attention is turned to the Freemasons and the idea that Washington D.C. was built in accordance with Masonic teachings, a claim that has featured in anti-Masonic conspiracy theories for decades (Barkun, 2006). Arguably, the popularity of Brown's novels is not unrelated to their underlining conspiratorial theme. Writing in the *Guardian*, journalist and literary critic Mark Lawson attributed the success of the *The Da Vinci Code* to the fact that 'this story of a conspiracy lasting two millennia [...] chimed with a time of paranoid suspicion about official institutions and religions' ('What we were reading', 2009: 2). What Brown's novels did was to take a number of motifs out of the world of conspiracy theory, 'sanitise' them by incorporating them into a fictional genre, while at the same time obscuring, deliberately and cleverly, the boundaries between fact and fiction, between conspiracy theory and genuine history. This blurring of boundaries continues in a variety of spin-offs in the form of books and documentaries purporting to 'unlock' the mysterious Da Vinci code or 'decode' the lost symbols of the Freemasons.

The 'paranoid suspicion about official institutions' which Lawson identified as a factor fuelling the proliferation of conspiracy theories is apparent not only in the stance towards religious institutions, but also towards the mainstream of science. Scepticism about the authority of science permeates contemporary conspiracy culture. For many conspiracy theorists, the whole of science is in the service of greedy pharmaceutical companies, pressure groups, international organisations and other sinister bodies set on manipulating and exploiting the public. Evidence of global warming is often dismissed, even in the mainstream press, as a manipulation, a scare tactic, and an instrument of an international plot orchestrated by those benefitting from 'climate change industry', including the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the World Wildlife Fund and multinational insurance companies (Booker, 2010, North 2010). Conspiracy theories have been embraced also by exponents of creationism and intelligent design. *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, the 2008 documentary by the filmmaker Ben Stein, which banked up to 10 million dollars and became the thirteenth highest grossing documentary in US history, alleged that Darwin's theory of evolution owes its popularity to centuries of systematic suppression of disconfirming evidence by exponents of sec-

ular and materialist philosophies who dominate the scientific establishment.

The most dramatic example of the conspiracist suspicion of science, which illustrates poignantly also the lethal potential of conspiracy theories, are the claims about HIV and AIDS. For the past 30 years, what has become known as the denialist movement has questioned the well established link between HIV and AIDS, attributing the public concern about the spread of HIV to a vast conspiracy by the pharmaceutical industry and (Western) government agencies. Denialists claim that antiretroviral drugs administered to HIV patients are more harmful than the virus itself, and that their use is motivated either by greed or by the more sinister aim of genocide. Over the years, the AIDS denialist movement has become sufficiently influential to affect public policy. The reliance of the former South African president Thabo Mbeki on the 'expertise' of some of the world's most prominent AIDS denialists (including Peter Duesberg and David Rasnick) and the opposition, from within his administration, to the use of antiretroviral drugs caused important delays to the treatment of millions of those affected by HIV in South Africa (Kalichman, 2009). According to some estimates, the delay contributed to the death of as many as 330,000 HIV patients between 2000 and 2005 (Chigwedere et al., 2008, Nattrass, 2008).

Another, somewhat different set of AIDS-related conspiracy theories have been shown to be especially common among the African American community in the United States (Bird and Bogart, 2005, Simmons and Parsons, 2005). Bird and Bogart (2005) found that 70 per cent of respondents from an African American sample reported believing that 'a lot of information about AIDS is being withheld from the public', half reported believing that a cure from AIDS exists but is being withheld from the poor, while 40 per cent agreed that recipients of antiretroviral drugs are guinea pigs for the US government (for data from earlier opinion polls see Thomas and Quinn, 1991, 1993). The high percentage of African Americans who reportedly believe in conspiracy theories is not limited to AIDS-related claims. In the 1990s, 60 per cent agreed with the statement that 'the government deliberately makes sure that drugs are easily available in poor black neighbourhoods in order to harm black people' (Crocker et al., 1999, Goertzel, 1994). Also, as many as 50 per cent of African Americans surveyed endorsed the claim that the government is taking measures to keep the numbers of black people down, with between 20 per cent and 30 per cent believing that birth control is being used for this purpose (Bird and Bogart, 2005). Although the impact of these beliefs has not been as dramatic as in South Africa,

their prevalence has become an important obstacle to the success of public health campaigns in the United States.

The example of AIDS-related conspiracy theories clearly illustrates how dangerous it would be to dismiss conspiracism as a mere curiosity or a harmless feature of contemporary mass culture. In addition, a number of dramatic events over the past 20 years have provided unwelcome reminders of the link between conspiracy culture and mass violence. Timothy McVeigh's 1996 terrorist attack on the federal building in Oklahoma, for instance, turned out to have been inspired by *The Turner Diaries*, a dystopian account of American society caught in the grip of a dictatorship by Jews and Blacks, which was popular in the 1990s among far-right conspiracy theorists and supporters of supremacist movements. Members of the pseudo-Buddhist Aum Shinrikyo sect who, in 1995, released sarin gas on a Tokyo subway killing 16 and injuring 5,000 commuters were also motivated by the desire to strike a blow to the sinister plot by Jews and Freemasons (Goodman, 2005). To the present day, conspiracy theories remain the staple ingredient of the propaganda not just of far-right militias or totalitarian sects but also of terrorist movements around the world. The charter of the Palestinian terrorist organisation Hamas cites the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as evidence that 'Zionists' are striving for world domination and uses the antisemitic hoax to legitimise its attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets. It has been suggested that even in the case of 9/11, Al Qaida's choice of target reflected the preoccupation, within the radical Islamist movements, with Wall Street and the whole of New York's financial district as the centre of Jewish power in the US (Küntzel, 2007).

Also, because conspiracy theories are so often stories of *global* power and influence, they tend to fall on fertile ground among political cultures, societies and movements which feel in some way marginalised, threatened or victimised by the global political order. Critics of Western military, economic and diplomatic supremacy, and those eager to challenge the authority of the liberal-democratic political agenda and values, often project their fears and discontents into a general thesis of conspiracy. Leaders of authoritarian regimes in particular readily reach out for conspiracy theories as a means of reinforcing their grip on power and as a source of convenient excuses for economic failures, and their respective countries' marginal status in world politics. In Serbia in the 1990s, under the regime of Slobodan Milošević, conspiracy theories were the dominant paradigm for interpreting the country's conflict with the international community (Byford, 2002, 2006, Byford and

Billig, 2001). In 2009, the Libyan president Muammar Qaddafi delivered an hour-and-a-half-long speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations in which he claimed that the swine flu virus was manufactured in a laboratory, that Kennedy was assassinated because he ‘wanted to investigate the nuclear reactor of the Israeli demon’ and that the assassination of Martin Luther King was the result of a government-sponsored plot (Pilkington, 2009b). In recent years, the Iranian regime has not only offered patronage to Holocaust deniers and 9/11 conspiracy theorists from around the world, but even pinned the 2010 Haitian earthquake and the harsh winter that struck Europe that year on a conspiracy orchestrated by ‘the US-Zionist regime’ (IRIB, 2010). Dramatisations of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* showing Jews plotting world domination have been broadcast on state-sponsored television channels in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria.

On the opposite side of the world, in Chavez’s Venezuela conspiracy theories have also become an intrinsic part of the regime’s missionary politics, used to justify the suppression of political dissent and cement the president’s grip on power (Pérez Hernáiz, 2009). The pro-regime



Figure 1.2 Screen shot from the TV series *Ash-Shatat* (The Diaspora) broadcast in 2003 on Hezbollah’s TV station Al-Manar in Beirut (courtesy of The Middle East Media Research Institute, www.memri.org)

press routinely links Chavez's political opponents not just to the US or the CIA but also to Israel and Jews, blaming economic problems on 'Semitic bankers' or 'Israeli-Zionist associations', which are said to have the Venezuelan ruler's opponents in their grip (Pantin, 2008, Lomnitz and Sánchez, 2009). Chavez, like his political hero Fidel Castro, has also promoted conspiracy theories about 9/11 as well as about the US military's supposed use of secret tectonic or meteorological weapons against nations in Asia and South America (Tran, 2007, Wood, 2007). The fact that stories of plot and subversion have made their way into the rhetoric of a whole host of regimes from around the world, right wing as well as left wing, religious as well as secular, Christian as well as Muslim, exposes not just the popularity and geographical spread of conspiracy theories, but also their disregard for ideological barriers and their remarkable ability to 'bend the political spectrum and fuse its extremes into an endless circle of paranoia' (Olmsted, 2009: 174).

Chapter outline

This brief survey of the contemporary conspiracy culture illustrates the extent to which conspiracy theories have become a global phenomenon, one that pervades contemporary societies, from the wider margins inhabited by extremists of various persuasions, to the mainstream of politics, media and entertainment industry. Of course, among the plethora of conspiracy theories in circulation at any one time, some will be of passing relevance and local consequence and will remain confined to a small proportion of the world's population. Others, such as those about 9/11, about the assassination of Kennedy, or about the Jews ruling the world's finances and the media have, by contrast, become part of a more 'robust belief system' which, as well as being widespread and persistent, acquired symbolic significance and the capacity to mobilise sections of the public (Heins, 2007: 791). The forthcoming chapters focus primarily on the latter, as these form the core of the conspiracy theory as a tradition of explanation.

As already mentioned, the approach taken in this book is to offer a critical introduction to conspiracy theories through six specific questions. The first question concerns the definition of the term 'conspiracy theory'. Defining conspiracy theories is not as straightforward as it seems. In everyday conversation, 'conspiracy theory' is not a neutral term. To refer to an explanation as a 'conspiracy theory' or its exponent as a 'conspiracy theorist' implies criticism and alludes to a tendency towards faulty reasoning, irrationality or political bias. At the same