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**»Nothing is as it seems« - On Conspiracy Theories**

(Original German title: »Nichts ist, wie es scheint« - Über Verschwörungstheorien)

271 pages, Softcover with flaps

Release: March 2018

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Translation sample of the introduction and first chapter (pp. 9-56) by Michael Lipkin

***Introduction***  
***What's the Plan?***

On August 31st, 2015, Angela Merkel made her famous remark on the subject of the thousands of refugees who were arriving to Germany every day that year: “We can do it.” The same day, the magazine *Compact* published an article by former *Tagesschau* anchor Eva Herman addressing the same topic. The approximately ten page long essay had already appeared several days before on the website *Wissensmanufaktur*, on whose media advisory panel Herman sat at the time, under the title: “Immigration Chaos: What is the Plan?” *Compact*—which, like *Wissensmanufaktur*, belongs to the populist right-wing alternative media that has enjoyed such success in the last twenty years—published the essay under the title: “Refugee Chaos: A Remarkable Plan.” In many respects, the article is the reverse side of Merkel’s speech. Where the chancellor expressed optimism about the crisis, Hermann saw the imminent downfall of western civilization. From every page her article screams: “We *can’t* do it.”

“Europe,” according to Herman, “is being flooded with Africans and Orientals. Our old strength, our Christian culture, our beliefs and traditions are being destroyed. The identities of individual peoples are being wiped out and being dismantled step by step.” Though here she briefly uses the image of a natural catastrophe, the rest of the essay is dominated by a very different metaphorical language. For Herman the refugee crisis is “a campaign against Europe.” By the same token, Germany “is a battlefield,” a “warzone [...] which is now being swallowed up, piece by piece, by countless asylum-seekers.” The refugees, who seem to consist “overwhelmingly of young, strong men” are, in Herman’s view, “an explosive material” that is slowly developing “into a weapon against the native population.”

This war- and invasion-imagery matches the substance of Herman’s argument: that the migration crisis is not only a man-made catastrophe, but one that is being quite consciously carried out. She emphasizes in the first paragraph that the real “adversaries” are not “to be found in the millions of fleeing migrants.” The migrants are rather only the visible instrument, while “the enemy works in many subtle ways, at points that most people cannot see.” In the end, the responsible parties, according to Herman, are “a particular group of powerful people in the global finance system, who want to subjugate

the world to themselves with their reservoirs of capital.” No where does she explain how the destruction of Christian Europe, which she predicts, is supposed to help the agenda of these “powerful people who control the fate of the globe. She does emphasize, however, that these mysterious puppet masters control the political system as well as the media. She repeatedly mentions the “Brussels puppet show” and the “politically correct mass media” who, instead of serving the people, “confuse them” and “lead the nation to its doom.”

Eva Herman’s ideas quickly spread throughout the alternative public spaces of the internet, where they soon found broad support, as the user comments beneath the essay show. Since Herman had been a beloved figure on television several years before—until her controversial comments on feminism, gender roles and National Socialism—the “mainstream media” also picked up the story. On August 31<sup>st</sup>, the website for the newspaper the *Stern* devoted an article to her “contentious remarks.” To wit: Herman is afraid “that our country will be destroyed by the many migrants” and is spreading “all kinds of conspiracy theories.”

In the contemporary context, the *Stern*’s judgment of Herman is no less illuminating than it is predictable. It is plain that, in recent years, conspiracy theories have found their way into the center of public debate. For a long time, they carried on a niche existence. Recently, they have become all-pervasive: that the government of the United States was responsible for the attacks on September 11th; that we are being controlled secretly by a New World Order that keeps us docile using chemtrails and vaccinations; that the Maidan protests in Ukraine were orchestrated by NATO; that Barack Obama is, depending on your preference, either not born in the United States or that he is—together with Angela Merkel and George Bush—part of an elite class of extraterrestrial lizard people that feeds on our negative energy; that the moon landing never took place; and that John F. Kennedy was assassinated by the CIA. Revelations about the alleged conspiracies of the United States, the European Union, the intelligence community, the Jews, the Illuminati, as well as other secret groups no longer circulate among various subcultures, but have finally found a wide public audience.

As a result, many observers have come to the conclusion that conspiracy theories are far more acceptable in polite society than ever before, and, by the same token, that the number of those who believe in them has grown by leaps and bounds. This development has, in turn, given cause for alarm to those who regard such theories with skepticism—still the majority of the population, and the overwhelming majority of the media. The notion of the “conspiracy theory” has become a permanent fixture of our daily public discourse: the phrase can be encountered on a regular basis in the nightly news or the daily newspaper. In most cases, however, what makes a given idea a “conspiracy theory” goes unexplained. “I know it when I see it,” as a justice of the American Supreme Court once famously said of pornography—so it is with most of us as far as conspiracy theories are concerned. Consequently, almost everyone—apart from those of us who might agree with Herman’s accusations, and who would reject the designation as defamation—would categorize Herman’s essay as a conspiracy theory.

But what exactly makes Herman’s essay a conspiracy theory? And is it true that conspiracy theories are becoming more and more popular? What role does the internet play? And since when have conspiracy theories existed? What is the relationship between

conspiracy theories and populism? Who believes in conspiracy theories and why? Are conspiracy theories dangerous? And, if so, what can one do about them?

We will see that the answers to these questions are considerably more complex than conspiracy theories themselves. There is a glaring disparity between the excitement with which the topic is discussed today and the knowledge that, in most cases, informs these discussions. Ideas are often dismissed as conspiracy theories even though they aren't conspiracy theories at all. Opponents of vaccinations might be drawing on erroneous information, but they are not conspiracy theorists. Again and again, different types of conspiracy theories are all tossed together, regardless of whether—for example—they are directed against elites or minorities, whether they are racist or not. By the same token, a blanket connection is often made between conspiracy theories and violence, or at least, the readiness to commit violence—a topic that receives an entire excursion in the German Wikipedia entry on the subject, without a single example being mentioned.

In recent years there has been increasing confusion regarding the causes for the growing populism in European and American politics. The election of Donald Trump in particular has made the public debate around conspiracy theories more heated and less precise; accordingly, the boundary between conspiracy theories and “fake news” has grown quite blurry. Conspiracy theories can be regarded as “fake news” in the sense that they deliberately spread false information to discredit particular individuals or to achieve other goals. In any case, not all conspiracy theories are “fake news,” and vice versa. Many proponents of conspiracy theories are convinced that they have uncovered an actual conspiracy, while not every bit of false information deliberately circulated insists that a conspiracy is at hand.

But the problem extends beyond the imprecise use of the term. Those who deal with the problem of conspiracy theories—this goes for social scientists as well as for those in the media—often lack an adequate understanding of how conspiracy theories come to be, what function they serve for those who believe in them, and what consequences they might actually have. That is not least because, until today, there has only been one work that has brought the problem into public view: Richard Hofstadter's famous essay on “the paranoid style in American politics” from 1964. Even in the United States, where since the 1990s there have been a dozen compelling studies of the subject, no one can think of a response to Donald Trump's daily flirtation with conspiratorial thinking that does not refer to Hofstadter's essay.

Hofstadter, one of the most respected historians of his time, drew a connection between believing in conspiracy theories and clinical paranoia. Secondly, he asserts that only a tiny minority, located on the margins of society, has ever entertained a conspiracy theory. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Salon.com*, the *New Republic* and many other media outlets used Hofstadter's conceptual language to characterize Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign. For the most part, they still do so today. Even Hillary Clinton referred to Hofstadter on the one rare occasion when she referred directly to Donald Trump's way of thinking. At a campaign stop in Reno, Nevada in August 2016, she accused Trump of exploiting prejudices and paranoia, and she called on moderate Republicans to resist the takeover of their party by its radical fringes. Beyond the United States, too, Hofstadter's text is the most influential analysis of conspiracy theories today. German media like *Die Zeit* or *Die Welt* have made use of it to understand

the Trump phenomenon. Even the political scientist Christian Lammert, touted as an expert on American affairs, referred to Hofstadter's essay in March of 2017 in an analysis of Trump's behavior.

In the meantime, scholarship in the field of sociology has come to regard Hofstadter's text as obsolete. Hofstadter himself has admitted that his characterization of conspiracy theories as pathological, as paranoid, is highly problematic. In light of the fact revealed by recent studies that one out of every two Americans—as well as a smaller, but still statistically significant number of Germans—subscribe to at least one conspiracy theory, Hofstadter's analysis no longer holds water. Other aspects of Hofstadter's argument have also been proven wrong. In order to understand what conspiracy theories are and how they function, neither our institutions nor those studies that have until now shaped the public understanding on the subject seem to be able to help us.

In this respect, the title of this book—“*Nothing is as it seems*”—has two meanings. If it were typographically possible, the quotation marks would appear and then disappear for a moment. On the one hand, “nothing is as it seems” is, as I show in the first chapter, the fundamental premise of all conspiratorial thinking. Where others see only chance occurrence and chaos, conspiracy theorists recognize perfidious plots. On the other hand, the title also refers to the myths *about* conspiracy theories that circulate in a highly agitated media environment and, for that matter, in scholarly discussions.

My book aims to dispel these myths. My hope is to contribute to a better understanding of the conspiracy theory phenomenon, insofar as it presents the underlying foundations, functions, effects, and history of conspiratorial thinking. The vanishing point of my argument will of course be developments over the last several years, in particular the connections between conspiracy theories and populist rhetoric, as well as the spread of this thinking through the internet, and the effects that result from them. In any case, the present can only be understood against the background of the history of the conspiracy theory, because the history of conspiracy theories is also the history of the public sphere in which these theories circulate, as well as of the medial conditions that allow this circulation to take place. If we want to understand how the internet—where alternative public spheres form so much more easily than they do outside of virtual space, and where conspiracy theories can be perpetually updated—influences the forms and functions of conspiratorial thinking, we have to have a sense of how it was before, that is, of what sort of influence various medial regimes exercised on conspiracy theories in earlier times.

Above all, however, it is the very status of conspiracy theories in public discourse that has changed radically as time has passed. That status is changing once again. Even if it might sometimes feel as though the opposite is true, we do not, in fact, live in a golden age of conspiracy theories. Conspiratorial thinking is neither more popular than it was in the past, nor does it exercise more influence. On the contrary: conspiracy theories are so widely discussed precisely because they are still a stigmatized form of knowledge whose premises are largely regarded skeptically by the majority of people. It is this lack of legitimacy that was different in the past. Until the 1950s conspiracy theories were a completely legitimate form of knowledge in the western world, a knowledge whose underlying assumptions went unquestioned. Accordingly, it was an entirely commonplace thing to believe in a conspiracy theory. It was only after the Second World

War that conspiracy theories underwent a complex process of delegitimation, and the conspiratorial ideas were relegated to various subcultures.

The contemporary “renaissance” of conspiracy theories is connected, first of all, with the rise in power of populist movements, because there are strong structural parallels between populist and conspiratorial modes of argumentation. Second, the internet now plays a decisive role, because it has made conspiracy theories—which, to be sure, had never really disappeared—visible once more, and because it has contributed in no small part to the fragmentation of the public sphere. At the moment we are experiencing a situation in which conspiracy theories are still stigmatized in portions of the public sphere, particularly those which we might call “mainstream,” while in other partial public spheres they have been accepted as a legitimate form of knowledge once again. It is the clamor produced by these two rival public spheres and their different conceptions of truth that has conditioned the contemporary debates about conspiracy theories. While the one public fears conspiracies (once again), the other is concerned (once again) with the fatal consequences of conspiratorial thinking.

I develop this argument over six chapters. They are arranged so that they can be read individually, or in a different order than the one in which they appear here. In the first chapter I discuss various definitions and typologies of conspiracy theories. I give particular attention to the fact that the term “conspiracy theory” is not a neutral, descriptive one, but that, at least, in everyday parlance, the term also contains a judgment of value. The second chapter deals with the evidentiary procedures of conspiracy theories. How do those who subscribe to them argue, and how do they recount these alleged plots? In the third chapter, I analyze the different functions of conspiracy theories for individuals and groups. Here I also address the question of what sort of person is most likely to believe in such conspiracies. The fourth chapter sketches out the historical development of conspiracy theories from antiquity to the present. It ends with a discussion of the relationship between conspiracy theories and populism. The fifth chapter is devoted to the internet’s influence on the visibility, the status, as well as the rhetoric and argumentation of conspiracy theories. The final part concludes by determining whether and when conspiracy theories are dangerous, and picks up the much-discussed question of what one can do to combat them.

Since I am a German Americanist, my examples are taken primarily from the politics and history of Germany and the United States. The analysis, however, is not limited to these two cultures. What is more, I consider conspiracy theories from the perspective of a qualitative scholar working on literature and culture. Much of what I lay out in the following would be taken as consensus across the discipline. At certain points, however, opinions will diverge, and a quantitative psychologist, for example, would come to very different conclusion from mine. At various points throughout this book I will ask questions that no discipline has yet begun to answer, for the reason that there is hardly any research on the subject. In this respect, my book marks the end of the beginning of the scholarly confrontation with conspiracy theories. What is true for those who create conspiracy theories also holds true for those who study them: there is always something more to learn.

## *Chapter 1*

### **“Everything is planned”, or What is a conspiracy theory?**

Conspiracy theories claim that a group working in secret—namely, the conspirators—is attempting, for murky and impenetrable reasons, to destroy or control an institution, a country, or even the entire world. The English word *conspiracy theory* comes from the Latin verb *conspirare*, which means to agree with, or to work together. A conspiracy, whether real or imagined, is therefore never the work of an individual, but rather always attributed to larger or smaller groups of people. Nonetheless, conspiracies possess other typifying characteristics, which I will present in the first part of this chapter. Eva Herman’s article on the refugee crisis will once again serve as my example. Afterwards, I will discuss the individual typologies that have been proposed for classifying conspiracy theories. I will draw particular distinctions between conspiracies from above and conspiracies from below, from outside and from inside, as well as between scenarios that revolve around a particular event, a particular group of conspirators, or a combination of these elements. Finally, I will turn to the question of what it is that distinguishes the plots imagined by conspiracy theorists from actual conspiracies. I will show that conspiracy theories always imagine much more comprehensive and ambitious and therefore impossible to realize conspiracies. Actual conspiracies always very limited, as far as their scope and their goals are concerned. Above all, conspiracy theories subscribe to an erroneous image of human beings, as well as of history, when they claim that history can be planned and controlled over an extended period of time. This point will lead me to the observation that the term “conspiracy theory,” as it is used in daily as well as in scientific discourse, is almost always a judgment of value used to disqualify the ideas of others. It is also often used to describe ideas do not, in fact, display the typical characteristics of conspiracy theories. As I argue in the fourth part of this chapter, it is entirely possible to use the term in a neutral and scholarly manner. And, by way of conclusion, I will respond to the demand among certain scholars that that the term “conspiracy theory” be replaced by “conspiracy ideology,” as, in their view, conspiracy theories are not theories in any

actual scientific sense of the term. This substitution might seem, at first glance, to be a helpful one. But we will see that the actual facts of the matter are far more complex.

### *The Typical Characteristics*

If one follows the American political scientist Michael Barkun, there are three fundamental assumptions that are constitutive of conspiracy theories: first, that nothing happens by accident; second, that nothing is what it seems; and third, that everything is connected.

The English historian Geoffrey Cubit, who has also formulated one of the most influential definitions of the term “conspiracy theory,” sees the matter quite similarly. For Cubit, intentionality, secrecy, and the duality between good and evil are the essence of the conspiracy theory. Intentionalism and secrecy correspond quite precisely to the first components of Barkun’s definition: the conspirators act in secret and follow a plan; Barkun, too, emphasizes the dualistic aspect of these theories. The conspirators are invariably imagined to be evil. Their deeds hurt innocent people.

In fact, all three of these signs are already visible in the first paragraph of Eva Herman’s text:

Whoever watches with concern the growing flood of refugees arriving in Germany, in Europe, will certainly have many questions. And yet, the official opinion-makers have few conclusive answers. To a small number of people, it will be clear, in the meantime, that they have been affected, as citizens of a country that has been declared a warzone, now being taken from them by asylum seekers, piece by piece. A subversive and perfidious strategy, which lead to the destruction of Rome. Then, too, the people saw their imminent destruction, without being able to do anything about it. Our native patterns of life are now being destroyed, the old order is breaking apart. The citizens’ despair is growing, though most have no inkling of the plan at work. Their frustration is directed against the politicians and the refugees. The unrest that has already occurred between these different cultures paints an ugly picture of the future. But it is important to realize that our adversary is not to be found among the millions of fleeing migrants—the enemy works in much subtler forms, at points most people cannot see. Because these forms are merely a shadow of the violence that has been occurring, it is admittedly difficult for most people to recognize the connections.

Naturally, these introductory sentences offer no conclusive answers. But, in a single paragraph, they present the idea that Herman develops throughout the rest of her article: that the refugee crisis is no accident; that it is not the undesired result of complex geopolitical entanglements, but rather the result of an implemented “plan,” behind which there lurks an “enemy.” Herman leaves this enemy extremely vague, but since “the politicians” are among its ranks, we are dealing with a collective. By contrast, those whom one might at first glance suspect, the “refugees” themselves, do not belong to the enemy’s camp. Things are therefore not as they initially seem. Instead the real enemy is hidden from view, and acts “in many subtle forms at points that most people cannot see.” This does not necessarily mean—as in Barkun somewhat exaggerated formulation—that everything is connected with everything else. But once it is accepted that there *is* an enemy, an enemy who is following a secret plan, a great number of connections that could not have seen before are suddenly revealed. And Herman “reveals” these connections in the text that follows.

As is typical of most conspiracy theories, she paints a picture of a hierarchically-organized community of conspirators, comprising several levels and divisions. No less

typical of *contemporary* conspiracy theories is the fact that the leaders of the conspiracy are not precisely identified. Herman writes somewhat nebulously of “a certain group of powerful people in the global system of finance [...], who want to subjugate the world with their reservoirs of capital.” Who exactly these mysterious conspirators are, however, and how the staging of the refugee crisis contributes to the realization of their plans remains unclear. On the one hand, this vagueness seems to be strategically useful for Herman, because it allows the reader to project his or her own fears into the text. On the other hand, Herman concentrates on the conspiracy’s lower rungs, namely “the representatives of politics and the media” at the national level—as well as on the refugees themselves.

What is clear is that the conspiracy uses “migrants as weapons.” However, Herman makes contradictory claims about whether the migrants are in on the plot themselves. The passage just cited suggests that they are merely puppets, though a later point in the text—“Why, of everyone in the world, are we being reaching overwhelmingly by young, strong men from the hot continents, who are brought here by unknown bands of human smugglers? Where do they have the money—nearly 11,000 euros per refugee? Why do they all arrive here in possession of a smart phone? Who gave it to them, and why?”—implies that the refugees themselves have been deliberately recruited and therefore have at least some sense of why they have been deployed. To the critical reader, this point might appear as a notable omission in the text. But to those who are already inclined to believe Herman, this vagueness gives them the opportunity to have their own personal disposition towards the migrants confirmed.

In any case, Herman’s text uses the dualism of good and evil emphasized by Cubitt to structure her texts in two ways. First, Herman sees an irresolvable contradiction between the people, the *Volk*, among whose number she counts herself (as is indicated by her use of first person plural “we” throughout) and the politicians, who lead the people “as though by remote-control [that is, guided by the upper echelons of the conspiracy] to their destruction.” Secondly, she diagnoses a struggle between cultures and religions. With barely concealed racism she describes again and again how “our western homeland” is threatened “by the strangers.” She positions “Europe” against “Africans and Orientals” and “our Christian culture” against “Islam.” The migrants might not be part of the conspiracy—they might simply be its puppets. But in no way is there anything positive about them.

More than anything it is Islam that appears as the greatest threat “to our western culture,” even if it is never explicitly mentioned in the text. The danger of Islam for Herman is clear when, for example, she asks rhetorically: “Why don’t the prosperous oil monarchies take in their suffering countrymen? Wouldn’t it be much easier for the people who want to help them to reach them, since because they subscribe to the same beliefs? Wouldn’t they be much better understood there than they would here, by people like us, who have never read the Koran?” She gives the answer later in the text: “One knows exactly what the consequences will be when two cultures of belief like ours and theirs are let loose on one another in a contained space.” The conflict provoked by this confrontation is the central element of conspirators’ plan, even if it is never said what it is precisely that they hope to achieve.

Not only does Herman emphasize again and again that these developments have been planned—the word “plan” appears twelve times through the text, in various forms—

but she also insists that this plan has been prepared well in advance. This is another typical feature of conspiracy theories: the plots are already underway, in this case “for years and decades,” and now the individual puzzle pieces are yielding a recognizable whole with disturbing speed. At the same time, Herman remains quite vague when it comes to the specifics. After those in power kept these cultures and religions separate for a long time, for the sake of peace, “at some point there was a change in thinking among our politicians and media representatives, as the plan came to fruition. The tempo of immigration was sped up, barriers and border were dismantled by the establishment of the Schengen zone and other ‘simplifications.’” The use of the passive voice allows the subject of the sentence to disappear, creating a vagueness that is only still vaguer because Herman has not yet identified any of the conspirators. And this “at some point” is also extremely woolly, of course. When the reader discovers that the first Schengen Agreement was made in 1985, it becomes clear that the conspirators’ plan has been carried out step for step for the last thirty years, and that the conspiracy itself is accordingly much older.

Herman also turns the history of European unification into the unfolding of a gigantic conspiracy. Once the existence of this conspiracy has been accepted, then one quickly realizes that everything “that the EU octopus, led by its finance system” has done in the last decades—and that includes the politicians in Brussels as well as those in Berlin—was part of an ongoing conspiracy. The introduction of the Euro was a “tool” for preparing the current crisis, as were “the newly created equally laws for all spheres of human life.” And if that weren’t enough: through “feminism and gender mainstreaming, German women and their husbands were talked out of their natural desire to have children, and talked *into* the belief that a career would make them happy.” Consequently, the population shrunk. At the same time, “our entire society was re-educated, every person in the country was deliberately made to think that the increasing presence of immigrants would enrich our country.” Herman’s upshot in light of the now upcoming confrontation with the numerically superior multitudes of migrants is hardly surprising: “No possibility of survival!”

The conspiracy is by no means limited to Europe: “It is above all American organizers who finance the bands of border-crossers and human smugglers that bring the asylum-seekers from Africa and the Middle East to Europe.” And it is the North American Treaty Organization—that is, the United States of America—that has instigated all of the wars that led to the refugee crisis in the first place. In best conspiracy theory fashion, Herman sees the rise of Islamic State as well as the catastrophic situation in Syria not as the unintended consequence of the West’s actions, but rather their true goal: “In the end, were these predictable problems simply crucial conditions for the remarkable campaign that is taking place against Europe? After the horrendous massacres in Libya the barriers came down just as planned, the masses of migrants began to come to Europe.” There is no room in Herman’s argument for blind chance and unintended consequence.

In Herman’s text, the entire history of the last decades appears to be the result of a conspiracy. The essay is a paradigmatic articulation of the belief that history can be planned and controlled, which lies at the heart of every conspiracy theory. In the world as seen by Herman, a small group of conspirators determines the entire course of history with the aid of their puppets in order to take power over humanity. And so there is truly

nothing that happens by accident, nothing is what it seems, and many things that one would never have surmised are all interconnected. We will see in the section on the differences between real and imagined conspiracies why this image of the world is absurd.

### *Typologies of Conspiracy Theories*

There are conspiracy theories that insist that the moon landing was staged in by the American government in a television studio, or that the Central Intelligence Agency was behind the attacks on September 11th, 2001. Others hold that the secret society of the Illuminati have secretly been guiding world history for the last centuries. The National Socialists saw a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy at work, and in the nineteenth century many French citizens believed that the Jesuits were slowly but surely bringing the institutions of the state under their control. Conspiracy theories are plainly not all alike. There are significant differences as far as the reach, the level of the conspiracy, and also the group of conspirators. Several helpful differences for the classification of conspiracy theories will be presented here. We must not forget, in any case, that typologies are always heuristic instruments that are meant to bring certain phenomena into view. Naturally, there are always mixed forms that cannot be precisely classified and that challenge the selected categories.

The first important point of differentiation is the question of the conspirators' position. Do they already have control over the institutions of the country against which they are conspiring, or even the entire world? Does their conspiracy serve primarily to secure their power or to expand it? Or is it their goal to take over power by infiltrating these institutions and subverting society? In other words: are we dealing with a conspiracy "from above" or "from below"?

The most popular conspiracy theories circulating in Germany between the late eighteenth and the middle of the twentieth centuries all revolved around a conspiracy "from below," as the German historian Johannes Rogalla von Bieberstein showed in the 1970s. Freemasons and Jews, together with socialists and liberals, were seen as "conspirators against the social order" (the subtitle of his book) whose behind-the-scenes takeover of state power had to be stopped by the authorities. The matter was much the same with the American senator Joseph McCarthy, during the "Red Scare" in fifties. He claimed to have discovered Communists in schools, colleges and in the Department of State. But for McCarthy the real centers of power—Congress and the White House—were still in the hands of "real" patriotic Americans.

By contrast, the opponents of the so-called "Slave Power" conspiracy, one hundred years before McCarthy, saw things differently. In their view, the state was already in the hands of a conspiracy of radical supporters of slavery, who they believed wanted to make slavery compulsory throughout the entire United States. Here the conspiracy theorists saw a plot "from above." In the famous speech in which he calls the United States a "divided house," Abraham Lincoln, who would later become president, charges then-President James Buchanan, his predecessor Franklin Pierce, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Roger Taney, and the influential Representative Stephen Douglas of standing at the head of a gigantic conspiracy of slaveholders. According to

Lincoln this conspiracy had organized various crises during the previous year in order to attain its true goal: the introduction of slavery in all of the United States.

The difference between conspiracies from above and conspiracies from below is in many cases closely connected with the difference between conspiracies “from outside” and conspiracies “from inside.” Do the conspirators belong to the country or the organization that they are now seeking to bring low? Or have they always belonged to it, and simply begun at some point to pursue their own goals? Conspiracies from outside almost always tend to be conspiracies from below, because the state and its most important institutions are obviously not yet in the hands of the conspirators. Conspiracies from inside, on the other hand, can unfold from above as well as from below. The government can manipulate the people, and parts of the population can attempt to take power secretly. In the last decades the tendency in the west has been to identify conspiracy theories from inside and from above.

An example of a conspiracy theory that revolves around a plot from below and from outside is the wide-circulated belief in America in the eighteen thirties and forties that the Pope and the royal families of Europe were secretly directing Catholic immigration into the United States. The goal, as many Protestant pastors and intellectuals of the time believed, was to overthrow the American government, in order to destroy the world’s shining example of freedom and democracy, since the United States supported the oppressed masses of Europe and was consequently a thorn in the side of the absolutist monarchies. As far as we know, the voices that warned of Catholic infiltration were genuinely convinced of the threat. It appears to be a different story with the former Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. During his eight years in office (2005-2013) Ahmadinejad repeatedly asserted that conspiracies led by the United States and Israel were responsible for grievances, misfortunes, and attacks in his country. Consciously or unconsciously, he made use of the chimera of a conspiracy from outside in order to relax Iran’s internal tensions. In conspiracy theories that are directed against outside enemies, the nation mostly appears as an organic unity whose true enemies are to be found beyond its borders.

The various groups of alleged conspirators feared by the nineteenth century German conservative I mentioned above were, by contrast, not considered as being led by foreign powers, even if they were influenced by foreign ideologies. In that case, the conspiracy was from inside and from below. Finally, the conspiracies that have been particularly popular in the western world for the last decades can be categorized as being from inside and from above. As far as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the moon landing, or the attacks on September 11th are concerned, most conspiracy theorists assume that the United States government is behind them. The tendency to regard one’s own elite class as potential conspirators already suggests the close proximity between conspiracy theories and populism, which I discuss in the fourth chapter.

Naturally, categories like “from above” and “from below”, “from outside” and “from inside,” are very difficult to differentiate from one another in practice, as the last paragraphs might suggest. That is because any assessment of a conspiracy depends on when, and in which phase, one discovers the plot, since the goal of the conspirators in all of these theories consists of attaining power and holding onto it. In this respect, the Communist conspiracy that Senator McCarthy “discovered” is one from below—the White House has not yet been seized. By contrast, the Communist conspiracy that John

Welch, the founder of the extreme right-wing John Birch Society, claimed to have exposed several years later in his book *The Politician* was one from above—for Welch President Eisenhower was one of the conspirators. The conspirators had gained control of the White House. One reason why the assassination of John F. Kennedy appears so frequently in more expansive conspiracy theories is that, to many conspiracy theorists, it appeared to be the moment when the coup succeeded, when the conspirators finally took power and the conspiracy was no longer one from below, but one from above.

Eva Herman's article is also typical of the contemporary conspiracy theory in that it sketches out an alleged conspiracy from above, since the shadowy puppets master have long since taken power, and want only to extend it. The conspiracy controls the politicians in the United States and Germany, the European Union, as well as the media. I consciously use the singular—"the conspiracy"—here, by the way, because Herman does not spread "conspiracy theories" in the strict sense, as the *Stern* claims, but rather one conspiracy theory in which countless elements, each of which would *already* comprise a conspiracy theory on its own, come together like the gears of a clock. We might say, with Michael Barkun, that in Herman's vision we are dealing with one super-conspiracy theory in which various elements and system-conspiracy theories all run together.

Event-conspiracy theories revolve, as the concept suggests, around a defined, more or less clearly delimited event, which they claim is the result of a conspiracy. 9/11, the moon landing, the Kennedy assassination, the suicide of Uwe Barschel or the death of the Polish president Lech Kaczynsky when his plane crashed in Smolensk in April 2010—all of these have given rise to event-conspiracy theories. System-conspiracy theories, on the other hand, focus on a particular group of conspirators and attribute responsibility to them for a wide range of events, events that they have carried out in order to achieve their dark ends or in order to maintain power. Such theories are usually attached to groups like the Communists, the Illuminati, the Jews, or the CIA.

Super-conspiracy theories, finally, are conglomerations of event- and system-conspiracy theories. The National Socialist theory of the Jewish-Bolshevik world-conspiracy is one such super-conspiracy theory, because in it two system-conspiracy theories—that of the Jewish conspiracy and that of the Communist conspiracy theory—run together. It is exactly the same with the scenario John Welch describes in *The Politician*. He ultimately traces the Communist world conspiracy back to the secret society of the Illuminati in the late eighteenth century. Still more extreme is the conspiracy theory of the former professional football player David Icke, which has many followers, mostly in the English-speaking world. Icke believes that the world is governed by an elite class of reptiles, originally from outer space, who landed on Earth in prehistoric times and who feed on the negative energy of human beings. These extraterrestrial conspirators are responsible for practically every single event and behind every single group that attracts the interest of conspiracy theorists. The idea that everything is connected with everything else plays a particularly significant role here.

Eva Herman's conspiracy theory does not go quite so far overboard, but in her text, too, a whole series of events and groups are connected, starting with the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Herman more or less assumes that her readership believes that the United States government is responsible for the attacks when she writes: "It takes only a small amount of research to refute the official position of the western world, which is that the attacks were too clumsily carried out in order to have been planned." Feminism is another

important piece of the conspiracy puzzle, a deliberately scattered ideology that only serves to topple the natural order of the sexes and to lower the birth rate. And of course the refugee crisis has, like the various wars of the last decades, only been staged to cement the conspirators' power.

Herman's text is swarming with groups—the Americans and the European Union, the media and politicians in Berlin—each of which has long been the focus of conspiracy theorists. For Herman, however, they are only elements of the main conspiracy, led by a mysterious group of “powerful people in the global finance system”—an extremely vague designation that evokes both the idea, favored by conspiracy theorists since the end of the Cold War, of a “new world order,” as well as centuries-old anti-Semitic stereotypes. Her image of the “EU-Octopus” has a long anti-Semitic tradition. Herman implicitly invites the reader to blame the Jews for the “misdeeds” of the European Union. At the same time, she can feign outrage when charged with advancing an anti-Semitic argument. The octopus is an appropriate image for her entire project, since it plays on the highly anti-Semiticly charged image of the New World Order, and since the conspiracy in her crosshairs has at least eight armies at its disposal. This enormous size of the plot, which Herman's conspiracy shares with many other similar theories, is an important criterion for distinguishing imaginary conspiracies from real ones.

### *Conspiracy theories and real conspiracies*

Until now I have implicitly set aside the question of the truth content of conspiracy theories. In any case, the definition that I offered at the beginning of this book, namely, that conspiracy theories “claim” that that this or that is the case, suggests—as does my choice of examples—that I, like the great majority of scholars, consider their falsity to be another identifying feature of conspiracy theories. That does not mean that there are no conspiracies, of course. From the conspiracy of Catalina to the very probable attempt of the Kremlin to influence the most recent American presidential election, there have been, and will be, many conspiracies throughout history. However, real conspiracies are quite distinct from those plots that conspiracy theorists claim to have discovered. Accordingly, there has not yet been a single conspiracy theory that has turned out to be true.

The first difference between real and alleged conspiracies concerns the duration of the alleged plot. According to the scholar Armin Pfahl-Traughber, who studies extremism, proven conspiracies usually consist of “a plan, carried out relatively quickly, with a concrete goal in mind”—a coup, for example, or an assassination. Conspiracy theorists, on the other hand, almost always postulate a “far greater temporal dimension of conspirative action,” with far more ambitious, and, at the same time, far vaguer goals, including world domination. And so a wide range of crimes is usually attributed to the conspirators, who are frequently real or imagined groups like Jews, Communists, Illuminati, or aliens. These crimes in service of their murky goals have been committed over years, sometimes decades, and in some cases even centuries. In these scenarios, the alleged conspiracy comprises multiple generations of conspirators.

Glancing back at this typology of conspiracy theories, one might object that, while this point disqualifies system- and super-conspiracy theories, it does not hold for event-conspiracy theories, which revolve around assassinations and coups or other clearly

delimited events, like the moon landing. Indeed, it is easier to conceive of such conspiracy theories as being true. But even when one disregards the fact that event-conspiracy theories often expand quickly into much larger scenarios, they are still very, very unlikely, because event-conspiracy theories are still distinct from real conspiracies in one crucial respect: the size of the conspiracy.

Real conspiracies are, as a rule, carried out by a “a small group of people.” Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, develop scenarios in which sometimes dozens, and usually significantly more people must have taken part. An enormous deception like the staging of the moon landing in a television studio, or the attacks on September 11th, which took place before the eyes of the entire world, would require hundreds, if not thousands, of confidants and assistants. For their part, conspiracy theorists object that even an event of seismic proportions like 9/11 would require only a small circle of planners, who could bring all of the other participants—the pilots of the Air Force, who deliberately did not attack the planes; the agents in the intelligence community who were quickly put on the trail of Al-Qaeda, and many others—could quickly be brought in line with false facts. But this argument is not conclusive, because the assistants of the assistants would later realize what they had helped to bring about against their will. They would be confidants of the conspiracy after the fact.

As the philosopher Brian Keeler argued almost twenty years ago, the large number of initiates without which these scenarios could not take place speaks against the existence of these conspiracies, since it makes practically impossible to keep the conspiracies a secret. Recently, the mathematician David Grimes has gone so far as to develop a model for calculating how quickly conspiracies of this size might logically become public. The staging of the moon landing would, according to his calculations, have only remained a secret for about four years. This claim might be more a back of the envelope calculation than an adequate description of the reality. Nonetheless, to this day nobody has come out in public and admitted to playing a role in the staging of the moon landing, the assassination of Kennedy, or the attacks on September 11th, or accused others of having made him a participant without his knowledge. There are journalists who have “defected” from the “mainstream media,” as conspiracy theorists call it, into the camp of the believers, and who claim that they were made to spread lies. However, they have yet to provide concrete proof of any plot. This, too, shows, that such conspiracy theories belong to the realm of fantasy.

A further argument against the existence of such largely planned conspiracy scenarios has already been mentioned by Keeley: “The world, as we understand it today, consists of an extremely large number of interacting actors, all of whom have individual goals.” For a conspiracy to be successful, all of its members would have to set their interests aside in service of the conspiracy itself, which would be extremely unlikely, if not impossible. The psychologist Jovan Byford develops this idea in an excellent English-language introduction to the logic of conspiracy theories. A strong argument against the existence of conspirators, as conspiracy theorists believe them to exist, is that in reality there is not only one, but many powerful competing conspiracies—not various groups tied not together by one thread, as conspiracy theorists believe, but many groups, following various goals often in opposition to one another. It follows that there is no one group that orchestrates events undisturbed, out of sight, over a long period of time, but rather a great number of factions (camps within a government, competing security

services of a country, opposing divisions of a secret service, etc.) that attempt to carry out their agenda, using conspiratorial means if necessary. And as they do so they would regularly with one another, because it is nonsensical to assume that one group, for years and years, would be able to steer the fate of an institution, a country, or even the entire world.

Perhaps the strongest argument against conspiracy theories is that, at their core, they contain an image of human beings and of history that clashes radically with that of the modern social sciences. Conspiracy theories base their assumptions on the belief that human beings can intentionally steer the course of history, and the corresponding belief that history can be planned. They ascribe the ability to determine the fate of a country or even the world to the conspirators. Often they understand history itself as a series of conspiracies, planned by one or various groups. In doing so, they see the world in a radically differently light than does psychology, sociology, or the political sciences. According to psychology, man is not his own master, as Sigmund Freud concisely put it. Man often does not know what he does and does not want, and finds it accordingly difficult to acting on his own intentions. And even if man *did* know what he wanted, it would be impossible for him to achieve it, since social systems, of the kind demonstrated by sociology and the political sciences, carry on their own existence, generating effects that no one intended.

This insight has never been quite so significantly formulated as it was by Karl Popper. In the second volume of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, in the chapter titled “Marx’s Methods,” he explains, broadly at first, why human beings, “if anything, are sooner the creatures of life in society than its creators.” He does not deny, naturally, that the “structure of our social environment is, in a certain sense, created by men.” But he emphasizes that that is only part of the truth: “Even those institutions and traditions that come into being as the result of conscious and intentional human actions are, as a rule, the *indirect, unintended, and often undesired results of their actions.*” As a result, the task of the social sciences is to investigate these unintended effects, and, ideally, to be able to predict them.

This understanding of history and society clearly stands in diametrical opposition to that of conspiracy theories. Popper illustrates his general observations with the example of what he refers to as “the *conspiracy theory of society*” in order to show that conspiratorial thinking rests on an erroneous understanding of social processes:

It must be admitted that conspiracies do occur. But the striking fact that refutes the existence of conspiracy theories despite the existence of conspiracies is that only few conspiracies are successful in the end. *Only rarely do conspirators enjoy the fruits of their success.*

What is the likely reason for this? Why do the results of a conspiracy deviate so sharply from their intentions? Because in social life this deviation is the general case—with or without conspiracies. Social life is not only a contest of strength between opposing groups; social life also means acting within a framework of institutions and traditions that offer more or less resistance against the individual. And this resistance leads, even if one consciously counteracts it, to many unforeseen reactions within this framework, many of which are entirely unpredictable.

History confirms Popper’s theoretical assertions. In cases where a conspiracy is initially successful, consequences arose in the medium-term, if not sooner, that were definitely

not intended by the conspirators. The murder of Julius Caesar did not secure the continued existence of the Roman Republic; instead, it transformed Rome into the Roman Empire. It was much the same with “Operation Ajax,” when the Central Intelligence Agency and the British Foreign Service MI6 overthrew the Iranian president Mohammed Mossadegh because he had nationalized the oil production of the country. The 1979 Iranian revolution, which resulted from this coup, was certainly not the intention of the western conspirators. The experience of real conspiracies shows, therefore, that history is cannot even be planned in the short term, let alone over years and decades.

For all of these reasons, not one single conspiracy theory has proven itself to be true. It has not yet occurred, as I have asserted again and again, that a theory that initially seems to belong in the realm of fantasy has turned out to be real. The assumptions of conspiracy theorists regarding the reach and the size of these alleged conspiracies already makes these plots impossible. It is entirely thinkable that at some point it will be proven beyond a doubt that there was a second shooter on the Grassy Knoll, and that there were others besides Lee Harvey Oswald behind the assassination of John F. Kennedy. But the conspiracy theorists are not satisfied with such a manageable scenario. Instead, they postulate connections between the highest circles of the CIA, the government, the Mafia, exiled Cubans or even the Freemasons and the same extraterrestrials presumably responsible for the building of the pyramids. The conspiratorial tendency towards the connection of disparate elements leads to assumptions contradicted by all probability.

One example that is frequently mentioned as proof that ostensible conspiracy theories can turn out to be true is the Watergate Affair. Before anyone was arrested, however, there were no public suspicions at all, that is: there were no theories that focused on Nixon or his associates. And when the public accounting of the affair began to unfold, all of its members—from the members of the senatorial commission was investigating the incident, to the investigative journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who were immortalized in the film *All the President's Men*—were extremely circumspect about expressing any suspicions for which there was no proof. The well-documented revelations about the affair could not differ more from unproven assertions of conspiracy theorists, who always consider the official version of events either the tip of the iceberg or for a deliberate smokescreen. They connect Nixon to the Mafia, see him as the victim of the CIA, and consider the entire affair as merely one puzzle piece in a series of super-conspiracies comprising practically every single occurrence in recent American history.

The Watergate Affair once again confirms, however, that the enormous plots of conspiracy theorists do not correspond to reality. If the American president, whom we generally consider the most powerful man on the planet, cannot even spy on the party headquarters of his political opponents without it becoming public, and if he is forced to resign as a result, how are the moon landing, 9/11, or the refugee crises supposed to be staged, with the plot kept secret over years and even decades? In this respect, it is indeed characteristic of conspiracy theories that they are wrong.

*The concept as a means of deligitimization.*

The term “conspiracy theory” therefore designates, on the one hand, a specific understanding of the world that rests on various underlying assumptions about the development of historical processes. On the other hand, the concept always already implies that the view so designated is false. This duality in its modern application has been inscribed into it from the beginning by Karl Popper, who was the first to use the word as we use it today. As the historian Andrew McKenzie-McHarg has shown, the English expression *conspiracy theory*, which Popper renders in the original, already existed in the nineteenth century and had a different meaning until Popper’s *Open Society*. A conspiracy theory was, together with a suicide or a murder theory, one of the possibilities that investigators took into account when a corpse was found and its cause of death was unclear. In this context, a conspiracy theory simply means that it is conceivable that the dead person has been killed by at least two perpetrators, and that the legal conditions for a conspiracy have therefore been met. Since Popper’s openly derogatory statements about the “conspiracy theory of society,” however, the term has been used to designate the scenarios described above—whereby it is suggested that they are completely without substance.

Consequently, someone else is always a “conspiracy theorist”; no one ever uses the term to describe him- or herself. And precisely those people who are most often considered conspiracy theorists, are the ones most aware of the term’s stigma. As a result, they avoid using it when it comes to their own suspicions. Instead, they use the “conspiracy theory” designation to disqualify the suspicions of others, when they themselves or others who share their worldview are attacked. This tactic is referred to in the scholarship as *reverse labeling*. One makes use of the very label that others wish to pin to you, thereby dismissing the accusations as so many conspiracy theories. One’s own suspicions, by contrast, are presented as well-founded and already substantiated. “Who is really spreading conspiracy theories here?” Eva Herman asks rhetorically, in her article on the refugee crisis. For her and those who believe her, the answer is could not be clearer: the bought-off politicians and the *Lügenpresse* spreads conspiracy theories, while she is telling the truth.

Similarly, since Donald Trump’s election the authors and the comments on the right-wing populist website *breitbart.com*, whose former editor-in-chief Steve Bannon was, for a time, the most important adviser to the President Trump, discredit as a conspiracy theory any suggestions that there is a connection between Trump’s campaign and Russia, as well as any suggestion that the Kremlin could have influenced the 2016 election. At the same time, the site itself produces an endless stream of accusations that, for others, would clearly meet the conditions for a conspiracy theory. The users who commented on an article about the Russia affair, published on December 12, 2015, overwhelmingly agree with the author that the Democratic Party is spreading conspiracy theories for their own strategic purposes. After this assertion, many users promptly made counter-accusations without referring to themselves as conspiracy theorists, of course. It was immediately demanded of Trump that, among other things, he immediately begin investigating the investor George Soros, who, in the users’ opinion, was already undermining American democracy with his “187 radical organizations.”

In light of the negative associations with the concept “conspiracy theory,” it is hardly surprising, that there are conspiracy theories about the origin of the term itself. If one Googles the phrase “origin of the term conspiracy theory” or its German equivalent,

hardly anything turns up about Karl Popper. Instead, one finds countless sites insisting that the CIA invented the term in order to discredit those people who doubted the official version of the Kennedy assassination. Often, there is a link to CIA memo 1035-960, from 1967. This memo was not, as is often claimed, only recently made public. Rather, it was published in 1976, as can be gleaned from the document itself. Most important is the fact that the document does not prove the conspiracy theory about the origin of the term “conspiracy theory.” It simply offers arguments in order to discredit the already popular theories about Kennedy’s death. “Conspiracy theories often regard our agency with suspicion,” it says. It continues: “The goal of this dispatch is to offer material that discredits and disproves the claims of conspiracy theorists.” One might find this goal problematic, but the memo’s use of the term the “conspiracy theories” and “conspiracy theorists” without further definition or explanation shows that at the time of the writing, these usages were already fixed, and were not being coined by the memo’s writers.

But even if the concept of the “conspiracy theory” was not put out into the world in order to discredit unpopular alternative versions of the Kennedy assassination, it is nonetheless true that delegitimation is one of its most important functions in daily discourse. In his book *Conspiracy Panics* (*Conspiracy Theory Panics* might also have been an appropriate title), the media scholar Jack Bratich therefore argues against the popular scholarly position—to which I subscribe—and pleads for an alternative usage. For Bratich the term “conspiracy theory” is not distinguished by the double nature of its defining characteristics, which might be the basis for a neutral use of the term, or by their stigmatization, which make precisely such a neutral application difficult. For him the concept of the “conspiracy theory” is entirely a tool of delegitimation.

Bratich is strongly influenced by Michel Foucault’s idea that power generates knowledge, not the other way around. In the end, positions of power that decide what counts as knowledge and what does not. Bratich argues that it is impossible to decide by means of distinguishing characteristics alone—a group acting in secret, an evil plan, etc.—what is a conspiracy theory and what is not. Something is designated as a conspiracy theory in public discourse in order to disqualify it: “In other words, the question is no longer, ‘what is a conspiracy theory?’, but rather, ‘what counts as a conspiracy theory?’” The term “conspiracy theory” is a weapon used to brand certain views as illegitimate and false. No more—but also, no less.

It does frequently happen that ideas are defamed as conspiracy theories even though they possess none of the defining characteristics of one. Consequently, not every opponent of vaccinations is a conspiracy theorist in the sense of the term as I have been using it. Only a person who believes that the fatal consequences of vaccinations have been hidden from the public, or that the public is being manipulated, made more obedient by vaccinations can be designated as a conspiracy theorist. All too often, the concept is applied indiscriminately in order to defame those who take a critical view of vaccinations.

At the same time, there are structures of thought that meet the characteristics of conspiracy theories but are not—or at least, not initially—designated as such because those who circulate these ideas are powerful enough to determine the discourse on the subject. One fatal example from the recent past was the insistence on the part of the Bush administration that Saddam Hussein was connected with Osama bin Laden, and that both had planned together to attack the United States. That might sound absurd from a

contemporary (and German) perspective, but in 2003, significant numbers of Americans truly believed it. This assertion helped to legitimate the invasion of Iraq. And without a doubt this assertion deserved to be called a conspiracy theory: it postulated that two villains—Saddam and Osama—as well as their subordinates collaborated in secret and followed a deadly plan. It even creates connections between two disparate figures that normal observers would not make. It was—as it would turn out—false.

The example of the Iraq War also suggests a problem in Bratich's argument: namely, he assumes that a view designated as a conspiracy theory always contradicts an official version of events. He is not alone in this: many researchers, even those who do not view the term "conspiracy theory" critically, see the matter similarly. And in fact, over the last decades in the western world, most conspiratorial suspicions have been directed against the elite, the media, and a version of events, accepted by most of the population, that might be called the official version. However, the claim of the Bush administration that Saddam Hussein was secretly affiliated with Al-Qaeda was, for a time, the official version. And in other countries, for example in Eastern Europe and the Arab World, elites and established media often express conspiratorial suspicions. Finally, many of the examples mentioned above show that the idea that conspiracy theories are directly mostly against an official version is, historically considered, not at all true for Europe and for North America. Until the middle of the twentieth century the assertion that the state was being threatened by a large shadowy plot was often itself the official version.

If one argues from a historical standpoint, one encounters a second problem. Following Bratich's strict Foucauldian intervention, conspiracy theories would only have come into existence with the modern application of the term—somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century. What do we do then with obviously conspiratorial assertions from previous centuries? What do we do with texts like Samuel Morse's anti-Catholic pamphlet *Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberty of the United States*, that, together with countless other examples from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, offered much more than suspicions? Texts that described the alleged conspiracy in detail over hundreds of pages, offered a number of "proofs", and that in their rhetoric, structure and worldview have much in common with Eva Herman's article? Do we not lose much more than we gain when we refuse to regard these texts as conspiracy theories?

Amid the skepticism that Bratich justifiably brings to the concept of the conspiracy theory, its significance is not exhausted with the disqualification of unpopular structures of thought. The concept can be applied in a scientifically neutral manner because, as I have shown above, it is possible to formulate criteria to decide when its use is appropriate, and when it is not. That the concept is often applied incorrectly does not disqualify the concept itself. These criteria offer us a diachronic perspective that allows us to identify as conspiratorial texts and speeches from times when the concept did not exist by their underlying assumptions and arguments. And a neutral use is even possible when it is assumed, as it is here, that conspiracy theories are false. Across disciplines, many scholars skeptically set aside the truth-content of their area of study—we might think here of the work of medievalists or early modern scientific historians, or scholars of religion. In fact, it is precisely this perspective that allows us to recognize the social causes and effects of the phenomenon in which we are interested. Had the historians Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum believed in the existence of witches they would not have

succeeded in showing how an economic crisis in Salem Village unleashed the famous witch trials of 1692. Whether we are dealing with witchcraft or with conspiracy theories, it is important not to devalue or pathologize the ideas we are studying. We should not insist, too hastily and too generally, that there is a natural connection between conspiratorial thinking and political extremism or the readiness to commit violence. That this is assumption about conspiracy theories is unfortunately widespread in the conversation, as well as the scientific, discourse about conspiracy theories obliges us to take particular care with any scholarly application of the concept. But that does not mean a neutral application is impossible.

### *Conspiracy theories as theories*

Jack Bratich's claims are the most theoretically grounded criticism of the "conspiracy theory" concept. He is, however, far from the only one scholar who rejects the term itself. Conspiracy theorists themselves reject it, because they do not claim to be spreading theories—they claim to have uncovered the truth. They understand "theory," in its conversational meaning as something vague and unfounded, as the opposite of truth and practical experience. On the other hand, several scholars—interestingly enough, they are exclusively German—disapprove of the term "conspiracy theory" because, in their view, theories are something noble, possessing of a scientific character that these scholars deny conspiracy theories. They hold that conspiracy theories argue in a circular and unsystematic way and cannot, therefore, be refuted. Accordingly, Armin Pfahl-Traugher prefers the term "conspiracy ideology." The historian Wolfgang Wipperman agrees. The concept is more appropriate, according to Traugher, because unlike actual theories conspiracy theories "cannot be corrected with evidence to the contrary," and for that reason cannot be falsified either. Instead, conspiracy theories display a "firmly established, monocausal and stereotypical disposition," with a "one-sided fixation." What is more, conspiracy theories cannot reflect on the "appropriateness of their fundamental assumptions"; rather, they take these assumptions to be "an unchangeable dogma." According to Pfahl-Traugher, the concept "conspiracy theory" should only be used with quotation marks, but it is ultimately better to use the term "conspiracy ideologies."

Such a usage only sidesteps the problem, however. Pfahl-Traugher is obviously operating within a very specific tradition and therefore with narrow concept of ideology, a tradition that equates ideology, as Marx uses the term, with false consciousness. For him it is possible and desirable to leave behind the ideology-led "misunderstanding" of the world behind and to reach an ideology-free understanding of the world. In the cultural and social sciences, on the other hand, the view that there is no such thing as knowledge that is free of ideology has gained traction. Our understanding of the world is always guided by fundamental assumptions that we cannot grasp and of which we are often unconscious. Consequently, Pfahl-Traugher's proposal cannot solve the problem he identifies, since the concept of "ideology" is itself a value judgment—a judgment that he intends, but that many others would reject.

What is more, though conspiracy theories differ in many respects from scientific theories, they nonetheless share a number of common features. The philosopher Karl Popper emphasizes that conspiracy theories deliver scientific answers to questions of knowledge and thereby enable a “a better understanding of the world.” This might be objectively false: subjectively, however, conspiracy theories deliver precisely what one expects of theories in general: on the one hand, they explain events that have already happened, while on the other hand, they allow predictions to be made about the future. Thus Eva Herman prophesizes in her text that the events unfolding in Europe general and Germany in particular will lead to a war between two cultures and religions, between native citizens and migrants—which follows from the logic of the conspirators’ plan, and which is already visible in the clashes reported in the news: “The unrest that has already occurred between these different cultures paints an ugly picture of the future.”

Above all, the argument that, unlike scientific theories, conspiracy theories are not falsifiable is incorrect. Conspiracy theories can be disproved—they are disproved constantly. This “debunking” is not as popular on the internet as the formulation of such theories, but it is no sense rare. And often it is because of the transparently problematic assumptions of conspiratorial thinking, as far as their image of human beings and the world are concerned, that is quite easy to disprove them. The problem, in any case, is that convinced conspiracy theorists usually do not accept conclusive proof to contradicting their beliefs. Instead, they ignore it, seek to discount it, or even set in service of their own suspicions. I will explore this latter tendency in more detail in the next chapter, where I describe the argumentation strategies of conspiracy theories. The problem, therefore, is not the theory itself, but rather the behavior of those who believe in them.

But this behavior too is not so radically different be distinguished from that of scientists who subscribe to certain scientific theories. This behavior might not correspond to the ideal image of science; in practice, however serious scientists have only with great difficulty accepted that their ideas have been refuted. They, too, hold fast to their views for a time, although the facts refute them, and behave in a way that might be considered irrational. In the 1960s, Thomas S. Kuhn has shown that that is true for the great paradigm shifts of science in the western world. It is also true of scientific theories in the narrow sense. So many economists still hold fast to the belief that consumers behave in a way that is completely rational, while psychologists claim to have long since refuted this notion. Similarly, social and cultural scientists of the traditional Marxist school hold to views that those belonging to other theoretical schools consider obsolete. In these debates each side accuses the other of mistaking reality. And since both parties have reached their conclusions from very different positions, it is highly unlikely that anyone will let themselves be convinced by any argument that originates from the other side.

What is considered “refuted” and what is not is, therefore, another matter of perspective. It depends on the underlying assumptions of the participants, and these can be no less irreconcilable across the individual scientific disciplines than the gap between those who believe in conspiracies and those who do not. As far as the confrontation between these latter two is concerned, however, one might say with Kuhn that here the opposing parties exist in different paradigms. One finds logical what the other finds absurd, and the other way around. The problem with conspiracy theories, therefore, is not that these are incorrectly designated as theories. There are sufficient arguments for them. What is problematic is that these theories are based on assumptions about human ability

to act, and about the course of historical processes, that are not shared by the modern sciences. This explains the attraction, as well as the stigma, of conspiracy theories in the present.