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1.8

CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND POLITICAL THEORY

Julien Giry and Pranvera Tika

Introduction

Although, today, the study of conspiracy theories is widely acknowledged and firmly established within the disciplines of political science and political theory, it is worth remembering that it is a relatively recent topic of research within the field. If Hofstadter's seminal work *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (1964) is usually mentioned as the first significant contribution, it is fair to say that, since antiquity (see Chapter 5.1), conspiracies, both real and imagined, have been a subject for analysis, with political philosophers and political actors over the centuries, like the ancient Roman Suetonius or Machiavelli during the Renaissance, addressing the issue. Later, in the nineteenth century, the French philosopher Guizot (1845) seems to be the first to distinguish, in pure political terms and taking into consideration the social context in which they occur, the real conspiracies to topple governments, the 'pseudo-conspiracies' forged by rulers to strengthen their power and silence their opponents, and the purely imagined conspiracy. Guizot also clearly warned against the temptation to believe in 'conspiracy theories' even though this expression does not appear as such: 'the number and frequency of conspiracies demonstrate the poor state of the society and the government misbehaviour' but it is nonetheless dangerous to 'seek or only see conspiracy where there is none' (132).

Despite these earlier contributions, it was after the Second World War that conspiracy theories really became a topic for political science and theory in tandem with its gradual development, institutionalisation and differentiation from other disciplines (Parish, Parker 2001). In Europe, in the 1940s, Popper introduced the expression 'conspiracy theory of society' to designate a defective social phenomenon. According to the Austrian philosopher, conspiracy theories are:

The view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has to be revealed) and who have planned and conspired to bring it about.

(1945: 94)

In the U.S.A., historians like Hofstadter (1955, 1964) or Davis (1971) are seen as the pioneers of conspiracy theory studies as designated by the 'paranoid style' in politics, i.e. 'a heated

exaggeration, suspiciousness and conspiratorial fantasy ... a feeling of persecution ... systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy ... the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture (or) a way of life' (Hofstadter 1964: 3–5). However, since the 1980s, U.S. and European scholars have followed separate paths in their development of conspiracy-theory research.

In the French-speaking world, historians of ideas like Poliakov (1980), Giradet (1986) or Taguieff (1992) addressed the issue of conspiracy theories that had been neglected since the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Vichy regime, during which antisemitism and anti-Masonry stood as official policies. It is only since the beginning of the twenty-first century that conspiracy theories have established themselves as a legitimate subject in French academia (Taguieff 2005; Jamin 2009; Taïeb 2010; Giry 2014).

Elsewhere in the world, research on conspiracy theories since the 1990s considered the fall of authoritarian communist regimes in the post-Soviet space (Ortmann, Heathershaw 2012; Panczová, Janeček 2015; Yablokov 2018); Middle Eastern countries (Ashraf 1992; Gray 2010; Butter, Reinkowski 2014; see also Chapter 5.8 in this volume) and South/Latin America (Pérez Hernández 2009; Taragoni 2018; see also Chapter 5.11 in this volume).

In brief, from the end of the Second World War to today, many political scientists throughout the world have embraced the issue of conspiracy theories and contributed to the institutionalisation and the internationalisation of a pluralistic academic field animated by intensive methodologic debates, intellectual controversies and theoretical discussions, which this chapter aims to summarise. First, we will consider elements of political science historical development, and then we will present the main topics and issues addressed by scholars and the different kind of methods they use to study conspiracy theories. We will synthesise the most relevant findings, which will lead us to attempt to give a definition of conspiracy theories that finds a consensus in the field of political science. Finally, we will try to open up some perspectives for stimulating future research.

Political science and its context: A brief introduction

Although its origins are widely recognised to lie in the philosophical debates on politics since the time of ancient Greece, political science as a structured discipline engaged in empirical research only began to emerge at the end of nineteenth century. There followed a period of rather modest gains during the interwar period, followed by a gradual development towards acquiring more 'genuine professional characteristics' (Almond 1996: 50) to ensure academic independence and a more systematic way of researching within the field. Indeed, throughout its academic establishment process, political science faced three structural obstacles: Institutional, intellectual and cultural (Baudouin 2017). Despite the foundation of the American Political Science Association in 1903, political science faced an institutional obstacle, due to politics being divided over different disciplines, with a blurring of lines between, say, history, law, philosophy, etc. Because of this, it was difficult to develop and establish a 'science of politics' as a genuine academic discipline with its own department, methods, subjects, etc. This lack of consensus among scholars on the scope, purpose and central arguments of the emerging discipline created in turn intellectual and cultural obstacles, hindering the creation of a dynamic scholarly community able to legitimate the discipline.

Nonetheless, after the end of the Second World War, the International Political Science Association was established in 1949 under the auspices of UNESCO and the development of political science was expressed in the form of the delimitation of its own domain of scientific inquiry (Lipset 1950, 1969; Crick 1959), i.e. the allocation and transfer of power in decision

making, the roles and systems of governance, including governments and international organisations, political thoughts and behaviours, or social movements. Hence, under the influence of behaviourists, political science developed several lines of argument. First, it sought to differentiate itself from political philosophy and speculation about the best system of government by excluding from its domain moral estimations, to focus instead on the collection and analysis of empirical data. Second, it distanced itself from public law by focusing the research on real processes rather than formal-legal ones. Third, it distinguished itself from history, where an analysis of empirical data was aimed more at generalisations, by focusing on knowledge of a specific reality in space and time.

To summarise, political science today can be defined as the ‘the study or the research with the methodology of empirical sciences on different aspects of the political reality for explaining it as totally as possible’ (Della Porta 2008: 12). More generally speaking, political science is considered the academic discipline that studies formal and informal, conscious and unconscious, visible and invisible relations of power, authority and domination amongst individual and/or collective actors of all kinds. Political science is then divided into several sub-disciplines such as (social) history of ideas, political sociology, public policies, public institutions, government studies, comparative politics or international relations.

Topics and methodologies: How political scientists deal with conspiracy theories

If issues of power and its relationship with conspiracy beliefs constitute a theoretical issue for political science, and even though studies on right-wing extremism in American history constitutes one of the first contributions on conspiracy theories in political science (Lipset, Raab 1970; Thurlow 1978; James 2000; Quinn 2000), the period after the election of Barack Obama – a time particularly rich in conspiratorial claims (Barkun 2013; Fine 2015) – constituted a further point in the development of empirical inquiries in political science about conspiracy theories (Uscinski 2018). Indeed, if some investigations in conspiracy theories have flourished before the beginning of the 2010s, most of them adopted theoretical rather than empirical perspectives. Thus, due to their persistence and wide dissemination across a broad political spectrum, the study of conspiracy theories is now considered a mainstream topic. If pioneering research had originally adopted Hofstadter’s conceptualisation in terms of ‘paranoid style’ (Davis 1971; Pipes 1997; Melley 2000; Taguieff 2013), theoretical approaches (Thurlow 1978; Fenster 1999; Goldberg 2001; Jamin 2009; Byford 2011; Barkun 2013; Giry 2015a) are well-established today. However, other research initiatives have recently renewed methodological perspectives. While social psychology–inspired quantitative methods based on polls, questionnaires or Internet data about conspiratorial items are now dominant (Bronner 2013; Uscinski, Parent 2014; Frampton *et al.* 2016), qualitative methods dealing with interviews and empirical observations are finding increasing application (Giry 2015b, 2018b; Harambam, Aupers 2016; France, Motta 2017).

In addition, studies that address the reasons for supporting conspiracy beliefs have become a predominant theoretical mantra halfway between political science and social psychology. At the global level, scientific contributions commonly interrogate the relationship between (mis) information (Sunstein, Vermeule 2009; Bronner 2013), extremisms or ideologies in democratic regimes (Bronner 2009; van Prooijen *et al.* 2015), partisanship (Berinsky 2011; Nyhan 2012; Uscinski, Parent 2014) and conspiracy theories. Furthermore, at the individual level, researchers investigate the social determinants that make people prone to believe in conspiracy theories. They question the links between beliefs in conspiracy theories and social needs, such as the maintenance of a positive image of the self or the in-group (Cichočka *et al.* 2016; Giry 2017b), social status or positions (Crocker *et al.* 1999), income level (Uscinski, Parent 2014), understanding and

trust in politics (Uscinski, Parent 2014; Miller *et al.* 2016), prejudices against others (Campion-Vincent 2005; Imhoff, Bruder 2014) or – political – alienation (Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999). Researchers also focus on the consequences of conspiratorial beliefs, both for individuals and for society (see Chapter 2.7). They investigate the effect of exposure to conspiracy theories in terms of institutional trust (Einstein, Glick 2014) and participation in politics (Jolley, Douglas 2013).

It is no surprise, then, that political science investigations concentrate on the understanding of conspiracy beliefs in relation to politics. That is to say, conspiracy beliefs are considered an outcome deriving from the institutions and expectations associated with contemporary democracies. As Moore notices, ‘they bear directly on central themes in democratic theory, from the public sphere and public deliberation, to partisanship and polarisation, to theories of elite power and influence’ (2017: 8–9).

Main findings and debates: What political scientists know and dispute about conspiracy theories

Taking these investigations and concerns as a point of departure, it is now possible to present the main findings in this discipline. In brief, it appears that conspiracy theories are not a marginal phenomenon and their presence extends throughout the entire political spectrum and up and down the social ladder (Goertzel 1994). No ideology, no party, no social class, no gender, in short, no one, is immune to beliefs in conspiracy theories by virtue of inherent nature or acquired education. Oliver and Wood argue that ‘predispositions are widely distributed across the population and vary by a wide variety of political and psychological variables. These predispositions are not a uniform expression of any one demographic or psychological characteristics’ (2014: 961). That is to say, there is a wide range of social actors who are involved in conspiracy theories at different levels or intensity. We will first present them as ideal-types. Then, we will explore whether there is any potential correlation between some social properties and beliefs in conspiracies or whether some social actors are more prone than others to believe in conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories concern at least five categories of actors. Some are characterised as conspiracist leaders, i.e. professional conspiracy theorists or political entrepreneurs in conspiracy theories (Giry 2014; see also Chapter 3.2 in this volume). Generally well-educated, they produce and publically endorse, even sometimes before the courts, conspiratorial claims and narratives as a worldview. On the basis of either conviction or (economic) opportunism, they offer structured alternative explanations to tragic events in terms of large-scale conspiracy or sophisticated plot. Among this category are Alex Jones, an American radio personality who hosts the website Infowars; Lyndon LaRouche, the former leader of a cult organisation who ran eight times for the U.S. presidency (Giry 2015b, 2018a); Louis Farrakhan, the leader of Nation of Islam, a black supremacist organisation; or Alain Soral, a French self-proclaimed national-socialist activist. Distinct from such leaders, is a second category, ‘citizen sleuths’ (Olmsted 2011). Like fictional detectives (Boltanski 2012), they are ordinary people who progressively come to promote a conspiracy theory focused on a specific event (the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the 9/11 attacks, the Charlie Hebdo massacre, etc.). Step by step, they come to devote their lives to investigating the case. Some of them, like Edward Epstein and other prominent ‘Warrenologists’ (Penn Jones, Lilian Castellano or Sylvia Meagher), or the 9/11 ‘Jersey Girls’ (Kristen Breitweiser, Patty Casazza, Lorie Van Auken and Mindy Kleinberg – four widows who pressed the American administration to commission investigations on the 9/11 attacks), for example, manage to gain visibility in the public sphere, and even sometimes to professionalise. Notice that, if conspiracist leaders are nearly always

male, there are many women amongst the citizen sleuths. Like many social fields, it seems that conspiracism, too, has a glass ceiling (Giry 2018b). In the third category is the vast number of people who, mostly using pseudonyms, nicknames or avatars, post, relay or spread conspiratorial videos, content, speeches or comments on the Internet. They are more opinion *dealers* than *leaders* because they do not properly initiate conspiracy narratives. Fourth, there are countless mere believers, viewers or consumers of conspiracy theories, mostly through Internet videos. Finally, it is necessary to mention the ‘debunkers’ (Jane, Fleming 2014) i.e. individual or collective social actors (Dunbar, Reagan 2011), websites like HoaxBuster, Snopes, Debunkin911 or ConspiracyWatch (Giry 2014), short (web) television programmes (*Le Complot* on the French network Canal +, YouTube videos, etc.) or educational material (*On_te_manipule.fr* in France or *America.gov/conspiracy_theories* in the U.S.A.) engaged in the deconstruction, denunciation or even mockery of conspiracy theories.

Many political scientists agree that conspiracy theories are a political myth (Girardet 1986; Giry 2015a), a global vision of the world that can espouse different kinds of ideologies even though they have, in democratic countries at least, affinities with government distrust (Moore 2017), extremism (Bronner 2009; Bartlett, Miller 2010), populism (Bergmann 2018; see also Chapter 3.6 in this volume) and far-right activism (Hofstadter 1964; Sunstein, Vermeule 2009; Appelrouth 2017). More generally speaking, in terms of affiliation, political scientists have found that people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when they feel involved, when they tend to exonerate them or the group they belong to (Waters 1997; Russell *et al.* 2011; Frampton *et al.* 2016) and when they implicate their political opponents (Oliver, Wood 2014; Uscinski, Parent 2014). Hence, conservative or right-wing social actors are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories that implicate liberal actors or the left, and vice-versa. Moreover, Uscinski and Parent argue that ‘conspiracy theories are for losers’ (2014: 130; see also Crocker *et al.* 1999), i.e. the political camp that loses the election is more likely to endorse conspiratorial views than the winning side. Consequently, it seems that conspiracy theories are a misleading form of politicisation. To some extent, conspiracy narratives constitute ethnosociologies – ‘theories that ordinary people or laymen use to explain social phenomena’ (Waters 1997: 114; see also Jameson 1981) – and theories of power that try to give and make sense of harmful social phenomena (unemployment, drug addictions, epidemics, etc.) or political dysfunctions (misrepresentation of certain social groups, power confiscation, etc.). Going further, Uscinski considers that, in democratic regimes, conspiracy theories are ‘necessary for the healthy functioning of society’ because they act like ‘defense lawyer(s)’

They are opposing counsel in the war of political ideas, where the establishment is the prosecution, and they challenge prevailing wisdom.... Fundamentally conspiracy theories are about the views of the strong versus the weak, the pros versus the amateurs, and the experts versus the novices.

(2018: 238)

The link between education level and conspiracy theories is widely disputed. Some researchers argue that actors with some cultural capital and political resources are more likely to believe conspiracy theories than those with less education (Simmons, Parsons 2005; Frampton *et al.* 2016). Other studies suggest that those with fewer academic qualifications are more prone to believe conspiracy theories (Stempel *et al.* 2007; Uscinski, Parent 2014; Ifof 2018). In accordance with Waters (1997), Renard (2015) assumes that beliefs in conspiracy theories follow an inverted ‘U-shaped’ curve, with those with high-school degrees or little higher education more supportive of conspiracy theories than others. Contrary to common assumptions, however,

conspiracism does not seem to be an expression of political ignorance (Nyhan 2012) and people ‘who endorse conspiracy theories are not less informed about basic political facts than average citizens’ (Oliver, Wood 2014: 964). In contrast to preconceived notions prevalent in the media (Locke 2009; Giry 2017a), conspiracy theory believers are not solely paranoid kooks or cranks, naive young people with little education and/or individuals from lower classes raised in economically deprived areas.

Indeed, if recent studies have shown that teenagers or young people are more likely to support conspiracy theories than older people, it is still not clear, regarding longitudinal approaches (Appelton 2000) or sociological hypothesis (Boltanski 2012), if this testifies to an age effect – conspiracy theories have always been more appealing to the young –, a generation effect – the current young generation is particularly receptive to conspiracy theories – or something in-between.

Similar to the age issue, the question of affinities between ethnocultural minorities and conspiracy theories is highly debated. Whereas some psycho-sociological studies suggest that racial minorities are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen *et al.* 2018), political scientists argue that there is no correlation (Frampton *et al.* 2016). However, researchers agree that racial or religious minorities are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories that make specific sense or appeal to their communities (e.g. conspiracy theories about A.I.D.S. for African Americans or conspiracy theories about purported Zionist control over Islamist terrorism for European Muslims) (Ross *et al.* 2006; Russell *et al.* 2011; Frampton *et al.* 2016). To summarise, Knight concludes that:

Conspiracy theories are a popular explanation of the workings of power, responsibility, and causality in the unfolding of events. They have appealed to both the Left and the Right, both the uneducated and intellectuals, and have been told both by and about those at the very heart of power. Sometimes they take the form of racist scape-goating, and at others counterattacks on the powerful. They have offered alternative explanations of a vast range of topics, from the economic to the religious, and the political to the cultural. They are sometimes without foundation and at others beyond doubt.

(2003: xi)

This diversity of aspects compels us to consider the issue of defining conspiracy theories.

Definitions and labels: Conspiracy theories according to political scientists

Despite the different approaches, methodologies and findings, it is nonetheless possible to reach a consensus on the key features that characterise conspiracy theories as a political science subject (Giry 2015a). But, let us first remind ourselves of some seminal definitions: Fenster considers that conspiracy theories express ‘the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof circulates solely on the margins of society’ (1999: 1). This corresponds closely to Taïeb, who believes that

we can identify the conspiratorial thinking when it is postulated that the course of history and its striking events are uniformly caused by the secret action of a small group of people keen to achieve a project of population control and domination.

(2010: 267)

Following those definitions, Uscinski and Parent consider conspiracy theories as ‘an explanation of historical ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good’ (2014: 32), while Sunstein and Vermeule describe ‘an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)’ (2009: 205). Moreover, Goldberg says that:

The script has become familiar: Individuals and groups, acting in secret, move and shape recent ... history. Driven by a lust for power and wealth, they practice deceit, subterfuge, and even assassination, sometimes brazenly executed. Nothing is random or the matter of coincidence. Institutional process, miscalculation, and chance bend to the conspirators’ single-minded will

(2001: ix)

In sum,

conspiracy theory, in accordance with academic literature, is a text that falsely accuses a group of individuals of orchestrating a plot that has harmed or will harm society ... and that simplifies the complex workings of society by creating causal relationships between tangentially related evidence.

(Hall 2006: 207)

We propose to build on these definitions to create one as consensual as possible from a political science point of view. We, therefore, consider that conspiracy theories can be characterised by a couple of common patterns or key features. First, conspiracy theories are a worldview based on the fear of ‘could-be-true’ (Uscinski 2018: 327) but ‘not yet proven’ (Olmsted 2009: 3), impossible/unable to prove or fantasied conspiracies. Of course, this is not to say that genuine conspiracies – commonly defined as the illegal and secret action of a small group of people to do something bad or harmful to other people or to take over the power – do not exist. Thus, in accordance with the paradoxical formula ‘conspiracies *do* exist, but the Conspiracy does not’ (Goldschläger, Lemaire 2005: 7), we suggest that ‘a conspiracy theorist is not someone who simply accepts the truth of some specific conspiracies. Rather, a conspiracy theorist is someone with a certain general methodological approach and set of priorities’ (Albert, Shalom 2002). Acknowledging that everyone is prone to endorse one conspiracy theory, if a conspiracy theorist is someone who believes in a single conspiracy theory, we are either all conspiracy theorists ... or there is none. In that respect, conspiracy theories are not the fear, the denunciation or the belief in certain purported conspiracies but a hegemonic and systemic political worldview in which the idea or the hypothesis of a conspiracy is omnipresent – or at least, overspread – but never questioned. It is a theory of power, of its practices and representations in which plots, pacts, secrecy and concealment play a decisive and central part. Consistent with Simmel’s pioneering investigations (1906), secrecy takes on three complementary forms: The (so-called) secret itself, the socialisation of the (so-called) secret within a (so-called) secret/discrete group/society, and the (so-called) secret activities of this (so-called) secret/discrete group/society. In the case of conspiracy theories, the issue of secrecy interacts with those three levels. Indeed, conspiracy theories aim to reveal to the public the purported conspiracy of silence, the dissimulation of the conspiracy or the cover-up operated by powerful actors. They deal with the purported harmful activities or manipulations orchestrated by secret (Illuminati, shape-shifting reptilians, etc.) or discrete (Jesuits, Freemasons, etc.) groups, minorities (Jews, communists,

etc.), powerful elites (governments, bankers, media tycoons, etc.) or committees (Council on Foreign Relations, Trilateral Commission, Bilderberg group, etc.) to take power, strengthen their positions and/or harm the people (Campion-Vincent 2005). Consequently, conspiracy theories are based on a simplistic dualism in which ‘us’, the ordinary and innocent vast majority of people, are endlessly threatened by an evil ‘them’ motivated by the quest of absolute economic and political power. In this dualistic vision, the conspirators are not only the enemies of the people but also genuine *outsiders*.

Furthermore, according to these definitions, it seems that conspiracy theories ignore notions such as randomness, contingency, misfortune, fatality, coincidence or simply fate. On the contrary, those who believe in conspiracy theories imagine themselves to be rational and logical, for they assume that nothing happens accidentally, nothing is as it seems and everything is connected into a large-scale plot orchestrated by evil forces. Necessary causal connections and determinism are key motivations for supporting conspiracy theories. Hence, remarkable events (Kennedy’s assassination, the 9/11 attacks, etc.) or catastrophes (epidemics, economic crises, etc.) necessarily originate from malevolent intention, cruelty or evil agency. ‘Official versions’ are mere smoke screens created by the conspirators to hide the ‘true truth’ from the people. Consequently, conspiratorial thinking proceeds from a paradox that leads to a victim and accusatory pseudo-form of criticism. Despite the hypercritical claim that nothing – no institutions, no experts, no officials, etc., – can be trusted, conspiracy theories are meanwhile trapped into an infra-critical position in which the hypothesis of a conspiracy led by omnipotent evil enemies against innocent peoples is never questioned (Giry 2017a).

Resulting from those definitions, key features and characterisations, it is imperative to recall that conspiracy theories, with the exception of stigma reversal strategies (Goffman 1963),¹ constitute a heteronomous label given by researchers, government officials, journalists or anti-conspiracy-theory militants that produces many effects of disqualification in different social fields (Taïeb 2010). From this perspective, Barkun (2013) rightfully presents conspiracy theories as fringe and stigmatised knowledge in opposition with mainstream representations and learnings. Therefore, because conspiracy theories constitute a real, but conceptually delimited, social and political phenomenon, we recommend that researchers make prudent use of this disqualification label and not to apply it to each and every form of social criticism directed towards established institutions or neoliberalism, whatever our personal beliefs and preferences. Conversely, a legitimate, even radical, form of social criticism must be on guard against the temptation of conspiratorial thinking (Corcuff 2009). Indeed, there are two difficulties that must be avoided in the study and appraisal of conspiracy theories from a political science point of view (Giry 2017a), which are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. On the one hand is a tendency to over-extend the scope and use of the ‘conspiracy theory’ label intentionally to disqualify² a wide range of fringe political or social behaviours, beliefs or speeches criticising, for instance, the E.U., governments, big companies or the media. This tendency is often observed in the ‘paranoid’ approaches of conspiracy theories (Giry 2018c) – see for instance Taguieff (2013: 149–52) – and with some dominant social actors or ‘anti-conspiracist’ militants. On the other hand, we face a kind of denialism that tends to consider the ‘conspiracy theory’ label simply as a concept forged on purpose by the dominants to automatically disqualify left-wing and anti-capitalist movements.

In sum, conspiracy theory as a political-science and political-theory label arouses epidemiologic problematics very similar to populism (Berlin 1965) and antisemitism. If the existence of those phenomena is no longer under debate for most academics, the discussions and even controversies are now about their uses, scopes and appraisals.

Further perspectives: What political scientists could/should do about conspiracy theories

If conspiracy theories or conspiracism is a relatively new field of investigation for political scientists, there is very little doubt that this subject is rapidly becoming a mainstream issue. First limited to the American case study, recent stimulating studies consider new domains, methods and geographic areas. Let us briefly introduce some of them.

First, Moore (2017: 10) is right to notice that political science should develop comparative and comprehensive approaches of conspiracy theories in post-colonial states, transitional democracies, authoritarian regimes (see Chapter 3.5) and, more generally speaking, in countries with restricted public spheres and liberties. Even though there is promising research emerging for the cases of Russia (François, Schmitt 2015; Haluzík 2015; Hagemeister 2018; Yablokov 2018), Eastern European countries (Heathershaw 2012; Ortmann, Heathershaw 2012; Panczová, Janeček 2015), the Arab Muslim world (Gray 2010; De Poli 2018; see also Chapter 5.8 in this volume), Iran (Ashraf 1992), Turkey (Baer 2013; Nefes 2013; Yazmaci 2014) and South/Latin America (Pérez Hernáiz 2009; Taragoni 2018; see also Chapter 5.11 in this volume), it seems that earlier political scientists do not have enough data to provide robust conclusions about the conspiracy-theory phenomenon in those areas or to draw relevant comparisons with the better-known American case. Again, it seems to be too early to affirm or deny any specificities or common features.

Another necessary development is to investigate on a large scale the role played by conspiracy theories in contemporary violent radicalisation processes in Europe and North America (Frampton *et al.* 2016; Cicchelli, Octobre 2018; Giry *et al.* 2018; Steiner, Önnersfors 2018; see Chapter 3.7 in this volume). Against the backdrop of a revival of Islamist terrorism, relevant data is urgently needed, particularly with regard to studying conspiracy theories amongst Muslim minorities in Europe (van Prooijen *et al.* 2018). It is also pressing to lead investigations on emerging anti-Islamic conspiracy theories like the so-called ‘Eurabia’ or ‘Great Replacement’, which until now are little studied by scholars (Zúquete 2008). In view of changing demographic dynamics and the development of Islamophobia throughout the West, it should be a crucial field for political scientists in the coming years.

Third, political science has until now provided very little empirical qualitative research on specific organised groups of conspiracy theorists. To our knowledge, fieldwork and interviews with Truthers have been conducted by France and Motta (2017), Giry (2015b, 2018a) has studied the LaRouche movement since 2010, and Harambam and Aupers have investigated the Dutch conspiracist milieu (2016), yet the research in political science is widely focused on individual adhesion to conspiracy theories or views from the top dealing with conspiracist leaders. Hence, we recommend developing ground-up and grassroots perspectives dealing with ordinary people engaged in structured conspiratorial organisations or movements.

Last, if conspiracy theories in popular culture have been the focus of research for cultural studies since at least the beginning of the 2000s (Bale, Bennion-Nixon 2000; Knight 2000; Melley 2000; Coale 2005; Arnold 2008), political scientists could fruitfully provide new perspectives, examining the process of reception as it takes place among consumers of conspiracy theories. It has been hypothesised that cultural objects like conspiratorial films, television series or books participate in or contribute to a culture of conspiracy or conspiratorial socialisation, but no empirical study has conclusively demonstrated these effects. The Internet, and the role it plays in the dissemination of conspiracy theories, needs also decisive and specific attention from scholars in the coming years (Uscinski *et al.* 2018). This is a big issue and political science, along with communication science, should take a leading role in examining how the Internet and

social media promote conspiracy theories in the context of both democratic and non-democratic forms of political culture.

Notes

- 1 Goffman considers stigma reversal strategies as the claim and re-appropriation operated by some social actors of slanderous or disqualification labels.
- 2 McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim (2017) noticed that, in more codified and polite circles, the British parliament in the case they studied, the expression ‘cock-ups’ had progressively replaced ‘conspiracy theories’ to disqualify government failures in terms of incompetency rather than evil intents.

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