Criminology, conspiracy theories and theorising conspiracy

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Abstract

This article challenges criminologists to adopt a more critical orientation to conspiracy theories. The first part of the article suggests that a moral panic over conspiracy theories has given rise to a conspiracy theory research agenda that has pathologised and criminalised conspiracy theories. The second part of the article argues that although conspiracies are important sociological and political phenomena, the term 'conspiracy theory' functions to stigmatise certain narratives. The article traces the origins of conspiracy denial in the social sciences. The final part of the article argues that criminologists should take conspiracy theories seriously and seek to investigate conspiracies. If popular conspiracy theories about elite wrongdoing are invalid, criminologists should develop better explanations of how and why conspiracies take place, as well as who conspires and to what ends. The article outlines some existing concepts and approaches that criminologists might utilise to this end.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories; Deep politics; Disinformation; Parapolitics; State-corporate crime; State-organised crime

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Introduction

In recent years, conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists have been lambasted and ridiculed by politicians and journalists, and psychologised, pathologised and criminalised by academics. This article challenges criminologists to adopt a more critical orientation to conspiracy theories and theorising conspiracy. Rather than dismissing conspiracy theories out of hand, criminologists should consider hypotheses about elite wrongdoing on the basis of their merits and the evidence available to us. Conspiracies are important sociological and political phenomena. History shows that political, corporate, financial and military elites routinely conspire to do harm and to deceive and mislead the public. If popular conspiracy theories about elite wrongdoing are invalid – based on incorrect information or unsound reasoning, as many certainly are – it is up to criminologists, in part, to develop better explanations of how and why conspiracies take place, as well as who conspires and to what ends.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first part of the article suggests that we are in the midst of an ongoing moral panic over conspiracy theories, and that this conspiracy panic has given rise to a *conspiracy theory research agenda* in the social sciences, which has pathologised and criminalised conspiracy theories. The second part of the article argues that while *conspiracies do exist*, the term 'conspiracy theory' is not a neutral description for hypotheses about elite political criminality, but rather a label that functions to stigmatise and exclude certain narratives from the boundaries of acceptable public discourse. The article then traces the origins of conspiracy denial in the social sciences. The third and final part of the article argues that criminologists should take conspiracy theories seriously and seek to investigate and theorise conspiracies as a social and political phenomenon. The article identifies existing concepts and approaches that criminologists and other social scientists might utilise to this end, before outlining a prospective research agenda for critical criminological research into conspiracies and conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy panic and the counter-disinformation complex

A golden age of conspiracy theories?

We are living through a 'golden age' of conspiracy theories, or so we are told (Masco and Wedeen, 2024; see for example, Freeman and Freeman, 2017; Tilley, 2019; Hanley, et al., 2023). In recent years a number of bestselling and critically acclaimed books have criticised, derided and psychologised conspiracy theories and those who believe them (see, for example, Ronson, 2002; Aaronovitch, 2010; Storr, 2014; Joly, 2023; Spring, 2024). Journalistic and academic attention to conspiracy theories has increased exponentially since the 1990s. A Nexis search for the term 'conspiracy theory' in *The Guardian* and *The Times* reveals that citations for the term have more than doubled in each of the last four decades (cf. Husting and Orr; 2007; Bratich, 2008; deHaven-Smith, 2013). According to one recent review, academic 'research on conspiracy theories is booming, with more than half of the academic articles' written on the topic having been published since 2019 (Hornsey et al., 2023: 85; discussed below).

Conspiracy theories and their adherents have also been constructed as a dangerous, criminal, extremist and even terroristic threat to the social order. The recent Khan Review on Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience, commissioned by the British government, declared that 'the unprecedented global rise and spread of dangerous conspiracy theories and disinformation' poses severe 'threats to social cohesion and democracy' (2024: 8, 90). And Members of Parliament have called for new policy interventions and legislation to tackle what they have claimed is the growing spread and influence of conspiracy theories (see, for example, Hansard, 2024). From 2020 onwards the metaphor of an 'infodemic' became synonymous with the apparently rapid and wide-spreading of (false) information and conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic in a manner similar to viral contagion afflicting the social body (Gagliardone et al., 2021; Quinn, Fazel and Peters, 2021; Simon and Camargo, 2023).

Conspiracy panic

It is certainly the case that a high proportion of people believe in conspiracy theories (Duffy and Dacombe, 2023). However, despite increasingly shrill claims by journalists, scholars and policymakers to the contrary, recent findings suggest that the assumption that beliefs in conspiracy theories have increased or become more widespread over time is unfounded (Uscinski and Parent, 2014; Uscinski et al., 2022a). Uscinski and Parent analysed 'over 121 years of letters to the editor of the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*—more than 100,000 in total' (2014: 55). They conclude that, 'despite popular hoopla, the prevalence of conspiracy talk has *waned* in the United States since 1890. [...] The data suggest one telling fact: *we do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not done for some time*' (ibid: 110-111, emphasis added). More recently, research by Uscinski et al. (2022a) conducted in both the United States and Europe found no systematic evidence that beliefs in conspiracy theories are increasing.

While widespread use of the internet and social media is frequently cited as a cause of the purported increase in conspiracy beliefs, this claim appears to be similarly unfounded. For example, one recent review found 'no compelling evidence for an average increase in conspiracy beliefs in the internet era' (Enders et al., 2023: 784). Rather, it seems that social media presents something akin to an optical illusion: since we can now observe conspiracy theories online, researchers have assumed that there are more of them (Uscinski, 2022: 563). Furthermore, although studies have found that 'use of social media containing conspiracy theory content is *correlated* with conspiracy theory beliefs' (Uscinski, et al., 2022b: 2, emphasis added), a causal relationship between the two is far from certain. Many recent studies conceive of conspiracy theories as a virus – an 'infodemic' – the spread of which from person to person begins with exposure. This tendency has led some to assume that 'exposure' to conspiracy theories causes people to adopt conspiracy theory beliefs (ibid). However, there are diverging views, even among 'symptomatic' studies that assume conspiracy theory beliefs are irrational and pathological (discussed below). A significant body of evidence suggests that conspiracy theory beliefs are best accounted for by durable predispositions, worldviews and identities that precede 'exposure' via social media or otherwise (Uscinski, et al., 2022b; seem, for example, Douglas et al., 2019; Imhoff et al., 2022; Meuer et al., 2021).

Attention to and alarm over conspiracy theories – and the threat we are told they pose to society and democracy – is everywhere increasing. Yet there is little evidence for a rise in conspiracy beliefs themselves. How are we to make sense of this disjuncture? I argue, following Bratich (2008), that we are witnessing a protracted moral panic over conspiracy theories.[1] Although the concept of moral panic has undergone numerous developments and modifications (see, for example, McRobbie and Thornton, 1995), Cohen's original formulation is worth quoting at length:

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions. (2011 [1972]: 1)

The current moral panic over conspiracy theories advances an interrelated set of claims. In addition to their becoming more widespread, and that this is a result of internet and social media use, it is claimed that conspiracy theories are being propagated by nefarious actors such as pro-Kremlin and Russian state agents or the domestic far right (Sakwa, 2023; see, for example, Yablokov, 2015, 2022). Conspiracy theories are also constructed as 'a pervasive and nonspecific' threat to democracy (Bratich, 2008: 11-12; see, for example, Thomas, 2022; Papaioannou, et al., 2023; Khan, 2024). Finally, conspiracy theories are discursively associated with extremism, violence and terrorism (see, for example, Bartlett and Miller, 2010; Basit, 2021; Rottweiler and Gill, 2022; HM Government, 2023; Khan, 2024). Panic over conspiracy theories now pervades the popular imagination, as well as journalistic, academic, policymaking and government circles, and has given rise to a *conspiracy theory research agenda* in the social sciences.

Pathologising and criminalising conspiracy theories

[1] Uscinski and Parent trace recurrent 'conspiracy scares' back at least as far as the 1960s (2014: 106).

A booming *conspiracy theory research agenda* in the social sciences has pathologised and criminalised conspiracy thinking. This body of work does not focus on conspiracies *per se* but rather on beliefs in what 'researchers regard as "non-existent" conspiracies', who holds these beliefs, why, and with what consequences (Hellinger, 2023: 16). Around the turn of the millennium, several scholars produced book-length analyses of conspiracy theories and a sustained programme of research into conspiracy theories has since followed (Bratich, 2008: 17; see, for example, Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2001; Barkun, 2003). Criminologists have also gotten in on the action (see, for example, Lavorgna and Myles, 2021; Murphy et al., 2022; Rottweiler and Gill, 2022). This emerging research domain has spawned research centres, networks, conferences, journal special issues and multimillion-pound research grants.[2]

Much of the resulting literature regards belief in conspiracy theories as symptomatic of a pathological 'social-psychological disposition' (Hellinger, 2023: 16; for reviews see van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018; Douglas *et al.*, 2019; Pilch *et al.*, 2023). This tendency bears striking similarities to the 'psychologisation' of Muslim political agency by the counter-extremism or 'counter-radicalisation industry' within the context of the so-called War on Terror (Younis, 2021; see Kundnani, 2014). Indeed, counter-extremists and 'crime science' scholars have described conspiracy theories as 'radicalisation multipliers' (Emberland, 2020; Rottweiler and Gill, 2022). The recent Khan Review – which draws extensively on this psychologising literature – employs the deeply contested and problematised discourse of 'radicalisation' in discussing how people come to subscribe to conspiracy theories (2024: 93, inter alia). The Review also repeatedly associates 'extremism' with 'disinformation' and 'conspiracy theories' – terms for which it offers no definitions. 'Symptomatic' research on conspiracy theories also tends to focus almost exclusively on those 'associated with violence, bigotry, or what seems to be ipso facto beyond the pale of science or common sense' (Hellinger 2023: 31; see, for example, Bartlett and Miller, 2010; Basit, 2021; Rottweiler and Gill, 2022). Citing such research, the most recent iteration of the UK government's CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy asserts that 'conspiracy theories can act as gateways to radicalised thinking and… violence' (HM Government, 2023: 13). The European Union's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator has also speculated about the 'rise of new forms of terrorism,

[2] For example, the European Research Council-funded 'Consequences of Conspiracy Theories' project, based at the University of Kent, was awarded €2,499,185 in 2022. The Leverhulme Trust-funded 'Conspiracy and Democracy' project, based at the University of Cambridge, was awarded £1,584,611 in 2012.

rooted in conspiracy theories' (quoted in Pantucci, 2020: 12). Some commentators have recently proposed criminalising conspiracy theories in a manner similar to hate speech or Holocaust denial (Cíbik and Hardoš, 2022). Elsewhere, policymakers have even suggested that state operatives should 'infiltrate' and 'undermine' 'groups... that purvey conspiracy theories' (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 226). The irony of proposing that government agents conspire to infiltrate, 'weaken' or 'break up' such groups and their ideas appears to be lost on the authors who only note that, were the tactic to become known, 'the conspiracy theory may become further entrenched' (ibid: 225).

Conspiracy actualities and conspiracy denial

Conspiracy actualities

The cumulative effect of conspiracy theory research has been to reinforce the idea that a belief in conspiracies 'is either an …individual mental condition' or a 'collective delusional state of mind' and to 'discredit[] not only claims of a cabal in control of major events and socioeconomic forces but even the idea that powerful, wealthy elites might engage in complots to create or maintain a world that serves their interests and that to some extent they may have succeeded' (Hellinger, 2023: 17). But conspiracies do exist. Conspiracy is a clearly defined concept in law: the agreement of two or more people to commit an unlawful act (R v. Mulcahy, 1868). And conspiracies – secret plans by groups of powerful actors to do unlawful or harmful things, some of real political significance – are a matter of public record, although they tend to be euphemistically referred to as 'scandals' or 'affairs' (Parenti, 1996: 172). Indeed, history is 'littered' with conspiracies successful and otherwise (Pigden, 1992: 3), and today '[g]overnments and corporations routinely conspire to deceive people' (Basham and Dentith, 2016: 12). The Watergate break-in was a conspiracy – indeed, the Watergate 'plumbers' were later convicted of conspiracy. The Iran-Contra affair was a conspiracy (Walsh, 1997). The House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that, 'on the basis of the evidence available... President John F. Kennedy was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy' (1979: 95). In 2021 it was revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) drew up plans – *conspired* – to kidnap or assassinate Julian Assange in London (Dorfman, et al., 2021).

Other accounts remain unproven but are highly plausible and merit serious investigation. One example is the so-called Clockwork Orange plot: an alleged conspiracy by right-wing elements in the British security services and military to oust former Prime Minister Harold Wilson. In 1974, the British Army occupied London's Heathrow Airport without Wilson's foreknowledge. Ostensibly on the grounds of a training exercise, the operation was widely perceived as a warning to Wilson or a rehearsal for a coup d'état. Allegations of the 'Wilson plot' have been widely corroborated, including by former employees of the British Security Service (MI5). A recent academic treatment describes the alleged plot as an 'interesting and unresolved debate in contemporary intelligence history' (Moran, 2014: 161). As of 2023 MI5 continued to withhold files related to the claims (Norton-Taylor, 2023).

Stigmatised knowledge

Taken at face value, the term 'conspiracy theory' would be apt to describe accounts, such as those just detailed, that allege intrigue behind political or historical events.[3] Some of these conspiracy theories are now proven or otherwise widely accepted; others remain unproven but are nevertheless testable 'hypotheses about specific actions by identifiable persons or groups' that can be put forward for disproof (deHaven-Smith, 2013: 84). However, it seems that '[n]ot every theory that alleges a secret plot qualifies as a conspiracy theory' (deHaven-Smith, 2010: 797). In 2017, the leaked 'Steele dossier' – a piece of political opposition research into Donald Trump's connections to Russia and the Kremlin, compiled by a former UK foreign Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) agent on behalf of the Democratic National Committee – became the basis of the so-called 'Russiagate' discourse that alleged widespread

[3] For the sake of clarity, a *conspiracy* is a secret plan by two or more people to do unlawful or harmful things. *Conspiracy theories* are accounts or narratives that allege intrigue behind political or historical events. The types of conspiracies with which conspiracy theories tend to be concerned typically involve wealthy and powerful individuals (such as Bill Gates, or George Soros) or groups (often either elite networks and forums, such as the Bilderberg Meeting or the World Economic Forum – or state security agencies, such as the CIA or MI6) colluding in ways that undermine democracy. However, as is explored in this section, the term conspiracy theory now has negative connotations and in popular usage often refers to claims of a conspiracy when other explanations for events are more probable, or in opposition to consensus amongst experts.

collusion between the Russian government and Trump (see Boyd-Barrett, 2019). The dossier alleged that that there was an '*extensive conspiracy* between Trump's campaign team and Kremlin' officials, and that Russia's Federal Security Service had exploited Trump's 'sexual perversion in order to obtain' sufficient ''*kompromat*' (compromising material)' to be able to blackmail him (Bensinger, Elder and Schoofs, 2017, emphasis added). In effect, the subsequent Russiagate discourse asserted that Trump was a Manchurian Candidate – a puppet – of the Kremlin, able to be coerced or manipulated to do Russian president Vladimir Putin's bidding: an extraordinary claim. The main investigation into the alleged collusion between Trump's presidential campaign and Russia, headed by the U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller, found no evidence of Russian blackmail material or of a widespread conspiracy between the Kremlin and Trump's campaign team. Yet no mainstream media outlets have described the enduring 'Russiagate' discourse as a 'conspiracy theory', although some may concede that such claims are unverified, flawed or even discredited (Hellinger, 2023: 8).

For Bratich, to label something as a conspiracy theory is not 'simply a neutral description of a type of account': it is 'a term of derision, disqualification and dismissal' (2008: 2-3). Likewise, Hellinger argues that the term 'conspiracy theory' is primarily used to describe 'deluded, often crazy, and often dangerous beliefs' – it is also 'a term of approbation and stigmatization of all knowledge, narratives, beliefs and theories that diverge the bounds of "common sense"' (2023: 6). Conspiracy theories, which are almost always '*counter*theories... posed in opposition to official accounts of suspicious events' are thus a form of *stigmatised knowledge* (deHaven-Smith, 2010: 798, emphasis in original). Sociologists Husting and Orr analyse the rhetorical function of the phrase 'conspiracy theorist' and conclude that the label acts as a mechanism of deflection and exclusion:

> If I call you a "conspiracy theorist," it matters little whether you have actually claimed that a conspiracy exists or whether you have simply raised an issue that I would rather avoid. [T]he label does conversational work... no matter how true, false, or conspiracy-related your utterance is. Using the phrase, I can symbolically exclude you from the imagined community of reasonable interlocutors... Specifically, when I call you a "conspiracy theorist," I can turn the tables on you: instead of responding to a question, concern, or challenge, I twist the machinery of interaction so that you, not I, are now called to account. In fact, I have done even more. By labeling you, I strategically exclude you from the sphere where public speech, debate, and conflict occur. (2007: 127).

To designate something as a conspiracy theory is thus to declare it beyond the pale. In this way, the 'conspiracy theory' label also functions as part of what Foucault termed the 'regime of truth', policing the boundaries of acceptable public discourse (1980). The breadth of the 'conspiracy theory' label also functions to conflate unfounded and outlandish beliefs about flat Earth and extra-terrestrial aliens building the Egyptian pyramids with 'reasonable suspicions warranting investigation' (deHaven-Smith, 2010: 798) – and to stigmatise 'all knowledge, narratives, beliefs and theories that diverge' from official accounts (Hellinger, 2023: 6). In these ways, the conspiracy theory label functions to 'discredit[] any explanations offered for specific social or historical events "regardless of the quality or quantity of evidence"' (quoted in deHaven-Smith, 2013: 11).

Conspiracy theories then, are a category of 'dangerous knowledge': clearly demarcated and excluded from academic enquiry and knowledge production, the boundaries of which have been conditioned and determined by existing power relations (see Hayward and Young, 2004). It is perhaps for this reason that, as we will see shortly, critical scholars from sociology, criminology, political science and elsewhere have been so reluctant to engage conspiracy theories and evaluate them on their merits. Instead, the terrain of conspiracist thought has largely been ceded to a cynical marketplace of right-wing 'conspiracy entrepreneurs' (Birchall, 2021) that only serves to direct its adherents' alienation and anger in ways that pose no threat to any actual centres of power.

Conspiracy denial in social science

As those accounts labelled as conspiracy theories have come to be stigmatised and derided in popular discourse, hypotheses about elite collusion and political criminality have also been excluded from social scientific enquiry. Lance deHaven-Smith has traced what he calls 'conspiracy denial' in the social sciences to Karl Popper's highly influential *The Open Society and its Enemies*. For deHaven-Smith, 'It would be only a modest exaggeration' to say that Popper's work, first published in 1945, 'blamed conspiracy theory for totalitarianism in Europe, World War II, and the Holocaust' (2013: 78: see, for example, Popper, 1945: 341). For Popper, conspiracy theories are a modern, secularised form of religious superstition

(1945: 306). Popper acknowledges that conspiracies *do* happen – indeed, 'they are typical social phenomena' (ibid: 307). However, he argues that the conspiracy theory of society – the view that every social phenomenon can be explained by 'discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon... and who have planned and conspired to bring it about' – is disproved by the fact that few conspiracies are ultimately successful (ibid: 306). Put simply, Popper – who is concerned with reorienting the social sciences away from 'studying history and changes in the overall structure of society, and... toward piecemeal social engineering' – conflates *all* conspiracy theories with a unifying conspiracy theory of society that attempts to explain *every* event and social phenomenon with reference to secret plots and so on: a straw man argument (deHaven-Smith, 2013: 94; see Pigden, 1995). Popper's work was extremely influential, and today, powerful and enduring norms in academia continue to discourage researchers from hypothesising about elite collusion or political criminality. Even those critical of elites and capitalism are at pains to distance themselves from the charge of conspiracism. The sociologist William I. Robinson has written about the catastrophic damage wrought by the rise of a 'transnational capitalist class', yet insists that this network 'is not a conspiracy' (in Alvarez, 2022). Political scientist Inderjeet Parmar has argued that billionaire-owned philanthropic foundations have engaged in a systematic effort to cultivate an elite network of 'think tanks, research institutes, universities, and media organizations... close to the leaders of both main political parties and to relevant state agencies' – including the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – with the purpose of advancing American hegemony and free-market capitalism (2012: 255). Yet while this network is 'secretive', colludes with state agencies, and 'operate[s] "behind the scenes,"' Parmar caveats that since 'it is not a criminal enterprise', it is 'not a conspiracy' (2012: 260). Critical criminologists have likewise argued that the prison-industrial complex is 'not a conspiracy' (Reiman and Leighton, 2017: 171, inter alia). And this despite revelations that private prison companies lobby legislators for harsher sentencing laws and guidelines (see, for example, Justice Policy Institute, 2011). In fact, throughout the social sciences, 'in almost every case the potential for public officials in liberal democracies to subvert democratic institutions has been disregarded' (deHaven-Smith, 2013: 13). In the face of rising socioeconomic inequality, the growing influence of 'dark money' in politics (Mayer, 2016), the massive expansion of the security state, its resources and powers, and plummeting public trust in governments and authorities, it is striking that all major research and theoretical traditions in the social sciences have neglected to investigate allegations of elite political criminality and wrongdoing.

Recuperating conspiracy thinking

Conspiracy theory in 20th Century social science

The pathologisation and stigmatisation of 'conspiracy theories' has been correlated with a reluctance to allege conspiracy within the 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980) – the boundaries of acceptable political, academic and journalistic discourse (see McKenzie-McHarg and Fredheim, 2017). In their place, official accounts of suspicious events have answered conspiracy theories either with 'cock-up theories', which represent events as the unintended effects of mismanagement and incompetence (ibid), or with 'coincidence theories', which represent events as the result of a series of improbable or coincidental but unrelated occurrences. Academics critical of elites, capitalism and the security state may concede that conspiracies do occur from time to time, but insist that they are of minor importance and a distraction from the real problem of structural power that determines the course of historical developments (Parenti, 1996). Thus, a third answer to 'conspiracy theories' comes in the form of a structuralist determinism that seeks to discount the role of human agency entirely (ibid: 186, inter alia). However, 'conspiracy and structure are not mutually exclusive dynamics' (ibid). Just as grand conspiracy theories, which attribute all social and historical developments to the machinations of a secret cabal are 'irredeemably flawed... so is the idea that the only "hidden hand" guiding globalization and world affairs [is] the impersonal and ineluctable force[] of the market, beyond any control' (Hellinger, 2023: 17).

The present article follows Hellinger in arguing that while conspiracism can be a social pathology, conspiracies are also 'important political phenomena, a form of political behavior that in some (not all) circumstances help us put agency back into explanations' of harmful, anti-democratic and inegalitarian policies and actions (2023: 32). Hellinger urges academics to 'devote more attention to theorizing conspiracy as a political phenomenon' (ibid: 36). Conspiracism, after all, is not just 'a mode of thought but... a way of "doing politics," especially by elites' (ibid; Oglesby, 1976). Before conspiracy denial took hold in the social sciences, hypotheses about elite wrongdoing and 'anti-democratic intrigues were central to the study of… politics and government' (deHaven-Smith, 2013: 78). For much of the first

half of the 20th Century, the historian Charles Beard argued that American democracy had been manipulated for personal gain by political insiders and put forward several theories that alleged elite intrigue (DeHaven-Smith, 2013: 89). Beard hypothesised that the United States Constitution had been written to benefit the financial interests of the Constitution's framers; that railroad interests manoeuvred the drafting of the Fourteenth Amendment to benefit corporations; and that President Roosevelt manipulated the United States into World War II by withholding intelligence about the impending attack on Pearl Harbour (ibid).

In the aftermath of World War II, social scientific theorising of conspiracy and elite political criminality, wrongdoing and anti-democratic intrigue became increasingly marginalised (see Parmar, 2012: 261). In recent years, conspiracy panic within and outside the academy has reached a fever pitch (Bratich, 2008; Basham and Dentith, 2016). Despite Parmar's caution in his aforementioned (2012) study of elite foundations and think tanks, one reviewer immediately accused him of 'peddl[ing a] conspiracist worldview' (Boden, 2012).[4]

Nevertheless, through the second half of the 20th Century we can trace a thread of renegade academic enquiry acknowledging conspiracy as a political phenomenon. For political scientist Hans Meisel (1962), writing in the 1950s, conspiracy was a *defining feature* of elites. Later, historian Carroll Quigley (1966, 1981) studied the Round Table movement, an association of elite semi-secret lobbying groups that manoeuvred to influence foreign policy. And C. Wright Mills, in his seminal study of military, corporate and political elites, wrote that – although the emergence the 'power elite' was not predicated on 'a secret plot, or… a great and co-ordinated conspiracy of the members of this elite'– 'There is… little doubt that the American power elite—which contains, we are told, some of 'the greatest organizers in the world'—has also planned and has plotted' (1956: 292-3). Crucially for Mills, while it is the social and economic structure that gives rise to the power elite, once established, 'plans and programs did occur to its members and indeed it is not possible to interpret many events and official policies... without reference to the power elite' (ibid). The 'conspiracy theory' label should not dissuade us from developing hypotheses and analyses of the role of both structure and agency in state-corporate relations, elite networks and political criminality. Should we choose to do so, a number of concepts and approaches are at our disposal.

[4] This critical reviewer happens to be a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, an organisation generously funded by the Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations that are the focus of Parmar's work.

Theorising conspiracy

The final part of this article outlines some existing concepts and approaches that criminologists and other social scientists might utilise to make sense of elite political criminality, wrongdoing and harm, before outlining a prospective research agenda for critical criminological research into conspiracies and conspiracy theories.

State-organised crime and state-corporate crime

To begin with, criminologists need not look too far: existing criminological literature on state-organised crime and state-corporate crime is of clear relevance to theorising conspiracies. William Chambliss introduces the concept of state-organised crime: 'acts defined by law as criminal and committed by state officials in the pursuit of their job as representatives of the state' (1989: 184). Chambliss gives as examples the CIA and other intelligence agencies' involvement in drug smuggling, arms trafficking, money laundering, assassinations, murder, acts of terrorism and other criminal activities. Chambliss explains these state-organised crimes as a result of both the structural contradictions inherent in nation-states, and the culture and ideology of the military-intelligence establishment. Laws protecting property and personal security are fundamental to maintaining the state's legitimacy, its monopoly on violence, and protecting commercial interests. However, under certain circumstances laws prohibiting, for example, smuggling, contradict other interests of the state – or of groups within it. One example of this is the American military-intelligence establishment's fanatical commitment to fighting the spread of communism during the Cold War. As political, financial and legal support for the CIA's anti-communist crusades from the presidency and congress fluctuated and waned, many within the Agency remained steadfast in their belief that 'the work they were doing [was] essential for the salvation of humankind' and sought out 'alternative sources of revenue to carry out its mission' *off the books* (ibid: 197). State officials were thus 'caught between conflicting demands… constrained by laws that interfere[d] with other goals demanded of them by their roles or their perception of what [was] in the interests of the state' (ibid: 201-2).

More recently, Canning and Tombs have noted the continued lack of attention paid within the social sciences to 'harms or criminalised activities… perpetrated by states, corporations [and] political elites' (2021: 11). The notion of 'state-corporate crime' was first developed in 1990 by Michalowski and Kramer to describe 'illegal or socially injurious actions that occur when one or more institutions of political governance pursue a goal in direct co-operation with one or more institutions of economic production and distribution' (2006: 15; Kramer and Michalowski, 1990). However, the concept has assumed heightened relevance under neoliberalising capitalism as states increasingly come to '*collude* in the production of crime and harm through… symbiotic relationships with private companies… following privatisation [and] deregulation' (Tombs, 2020: 122, emphasis added). Punch's (1996) work on state-corporate crime explores several topics long the subject of conspiracy theorising including the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (which engaged in money laundering for arms dealers, drug cartels and intelligence agencies), and intelligence-connected media mogul and fraudster, Robert Maxwell. Furthermore, Chambliss's notion of state-organised crime can be usefully synthesised with the concept of state-corporate crime, as today intelligence agencies increasingly come to rely on private consultants and contractors to circumvent restrictions and to provide plausible deniability (see, for example, Chittenden and Rufford, 2001; Borger, 2009).

Operational conspiracies and State Crimes Against Democracy

Approaches from within criminology can be further augmented by concepts developed in the political science literature on conspiracies and conspiracy theories. Hellinger (2023) proposes the notion of *operational conspiracies* to describe conspiracies of political import that sit somewhere between the commonplace petty criminal conspiracies of the type committed by graffiti writers, drug dealers, and cash-in-transit thieves, and the grand conspiracies posited by theories that seek to explain every event with reference to secret plots. Operational conspiracies include 'attempted cover-ups [of] embarrassing or illegal abuse of authority and power', as well as the 'proximate causes of coups, rigged elections, [and] destabilization of other nation's politics' through covert operations, black propaganda campaigns and so on (ibid, 2023: 51). Operational conspiracies are by no means limited to the realm of the security state and are also perpetrated by large corporations such as tobacco and oil companies (which we now know conspired to hide from public view evidence of the

harm caused by both tobacco smoking and anthropogenic climate change) (see, for example, Milman, 2024). Operational conspiracies can thus have 'devastating consequences for enormous numbers of people' (Hellinger, 2023: 52). Operational conspiracies, Hellinger argues, 'are the most fruitful areas for examination of how conspiracies shape political events and processes—though they are never sufficient explanations for outcomes and so must be placed within the context of history and socioeconomic structures' (2023: 48).

A similar concept has been developed by deHaven-Smith in the form of State Crimes Against Democracy (SCADs). DeHaven-Smith defines SCADs as:

> concerted actions or inactions by public officials that are intended to weaken or subvert popular control of their government... SCADs include not only election tampering, vote fraud, government graft, political assassinations, and similar crimes when they are initiated by public officials, but also more subtle violations of democratic processes and prerequisites. (2006: 333)

The SCAD concept thus describes – and aims to provide a framework for studying – '*the type of wrongdoing about which the conspiracy-theory label discourages us from speaking*' (deHaven-Smith, 2013: 9, emphasis in original). The SCAD concept goes beyond the criminological concepts of state crime – criminality committed as a matter of policy by states and governments – and governmental deviance, which describes 'activity that, although illegal, flows from an agency's culture and is approved by the agency's dominant administrative coalition' – for example, torture – although some SCADs might meet such criteria (deHaven-Smith, 2006: 334). SCADs also include 'actions by rogue elements of an agency operating in secret as well as conspiracies that extend across agencies or include non-governmental parties, or both' (deHaven-Smith, 2006: 334). The alleged Clockwork Orange plot against Wilson described above would thus qualify as a suspected SCAD.

Crucially, '[i]n contrast to conspiracy theories, which speculate about each suspicious event in isolation, the SCAD construct delineates a general category of criminality and calls for crimes that fit this category to be examined comparatively' (deHaven-Smith, 2010: 795). Thus, the concept of SCADs allows for the comparative analysis of proven and suspected SCADs to identify commonalities and patterns in timing, targets, policy consequences and likely aims and suspects. Since its original formulation the SCAD concept has been further

developed to include, for instance, economic SCADs: conspiracies among political insiders primarily aimed at financial gain (Kouzmin et al., 2011).

Parapolitics and deep politics

The field of parapolitics departs from a comparative analysis of discrete instances of elite wrongdoing, and instead aims to describe and analyse the 'strange, powerful, clandestine and apparently *structural*' connections between the security state, big business, organised crime, terrorist networks, and so on (Cribb, 2009: 1, emphasis added). Former diplomat and international relations scholar Peter Dale Scott first developed the notion of parapolitics, with the CIA in mind, to refer to the 'the conscious manipulation of covert forces' (Scott, 2003: 236). More broadly, the concept refers to 'a system or practice of politics in which accountability is consciously diminished'; 'the conduct of public affairs not by rational debate and responsible decision-making but by indirection, collusion, and deceit'; and 'the political exploitation of irresponsible agencies or parastructures, such as intelligence agencies' (Scott, 1972: 171).

For much of the field's history, parapolitical enquiry has been marginalised within the academy – where the fields of intelligence and security studies are closely aligned with the security state[5] – and has instead been developed in a number of grey literature periodicals such as *The Lobster* (UK) and *CovertAction Magazine* (US). However, in recent years, Robert Cribb (2009), Eric Wilson (2015; Wilson and Lindsey, 2009) and others have sought to shore up and integrate a parapolitical approach into critical criminology. Cribb, for example, has developed the concept of 'criminal sovereignty' to refer to the 'systematic, extensive and influential' nexus of interrelationships between 'security and intelligence organisations, international criminal networks and quasi-states' (such as Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon) studied by a parapolitical analysis (2009: 8).

The notion of parapolitics has also gained traction in mainstream investigative journalistic accounts. For instance, Seumas Milne – who exposed a clandestine campaign of infiltration,

[5] For example, the editorial board of one of the leading journals in the field, *Intelligence and National Security*, includes former and current members of the Council on Foreign Relations and Chatham House, former intelligence agency directors and analysts, and the official historian of MI5.

'dirty tricks' and smears by MI5 and the British media to undermine the 1984-5 miner's strike and its leaders – invokes Scott's concept to describe 'the hidden agendas and unaccountable, secret power structures at the heart of government' (2004: 34). Parapolitics, for Milne, describes 'an entire dimension of politics and the exercise of power' that is either missing or intentionally omitted from conventional reporting and analysis (ibid).

A broader, yet complimentary concept developed by Scott is that of *deep* politics. Parapolitics, for Scott, is only one manifestation of deep politics: 'all those political practices and arrangements, deliberate or not, which are usually repressed rather than acknowledged' (1996: 7). In contrast to conventional *conspiracy theories*, which presuppose 'conscious secret collaborations towards shared ends', deep political analysis posits 'an open system with divergent power centers and goals' (ibid: xi). As Carl Oglesby writes in his classic deep political analysis of American history, *The Yankee and Cowboy War*:

> The arguments for a conspiracy theory are indeed often dismissed on the grounds that no one conspiracy could possibly control everything. But that is not what this theory sets out to show. [...] The implicit claim, on the contrary, is that a multitude of conspiracies contend in the night. [...] The whole thrust of [this] interpretation in fact is set dead against the omnipotent-cabal interpretation... in... that it posits a divided social-historical... order... in which results constantly elude every faction's intentions because all conspire against each and each against all. (1976: 27-8)

In line with the discussion above, Scott also makes it clear that he proposes deep political analysis not as a substitute or alternative to structural analysis but rather as an extension of it (1996: 11).

Deep politics, then, on the one hand encompasses parapolitics: covert action, disinformation operations and dirty tricks by security and intelligence agencies and their plausibly deniable fronts. However, deep political arrangements can also evolve out of parapolitics, such as when 'covert forces are no longer securely under the control of their creator' (Scott, 2003: 236). One example Scott highlights is the use of imported American mafia figures by allied occupying forces to oppose left-wing movements in post-war Italy. This parapolitical stratagem 'helped spawn a deep political system of corruption… beyond anyone's ability to call it off' (Scott, 1996: xi).

Furthermore, deep politics also encompasses all manner of unacknowledged, clandestine, and informal political practices and arrangements: from private members clubs (see, for example, Gentleman, 2024) and old boy networks, to invitation-only foreign policy forums such as Le Cercle: a highly secretive 'international coalition of rightwing intelligence veterans', diplomats and politicians working behind the scenes to promote conservative election candidates and denigrate their opponents (Teacher, 2011: 4). Also included under this rubric would be so-called 'corporate interlock', whereby corporations share members of their boards of directors, as well as the revolving door that exists, for example between the security state and big oil and gas companies.[6] Deep political arrangements of relevance to criminology include the 'mechanics of accommodation' between law enforcement authorities and the criminal underworld (Scott, 1996: xii). Whereas from the viewpoint of conventional criminology, the state and its agencies are opposed to and continually struggle to gain control over organised crime, a deep political analysis acknowledges that in practice, efforts at control often result in arrangements ranging from tolerance and accommodation to corruption and police-crime symbioses (ibid). Other deep political practices range from state involvement in the global illicit drugs trade (McCoy, 2003), to what some commentators have described as 'managed democracy', whereby elites focus on manipulating rather than engaging the public, in order to achieve the desired outcomes from elections (Wolin, 2017).

Towards a critical criminological research agenda

Armed with this conceptual toolkit, let us consider some possible directions for critical criminological research into conspiracies and conspiracy theories. To begin with, criminologists should *take conspiracy theories seriously* (Dentith, 2018). Rather than dismissing conspiracy theories and those who believe them, we should assume a 'particularist' position and evaluate conspiracy theories on a case-by-case basis, according to their individual merits (ibid). One remarkable example from within criminology is Hamm's (2002) treatment of the Oklahoma City bombing. The 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building spawned a multitude of conspiracy theories alleging government complicity

[6] For example, all three of the most recent heads of MI6 have gone on to work for multinational oil and gas companies immediately after leaving the Secret Intelligence Service.

in the bombing and / or a subsequent cover-up. The U.S. government and the FBI have emphatically declared that the bombing was *not* the result of a conspiracy and that Timothy McVeigh acted as a "lone wolf". However, a year after the bombing most Americans believed that the FBI had failed to identify and capture all those involved. Furthermore, many believed that the U.S. government itself was somehow involved in the bombing. Rather than dismissing such conspiracy theories out of hand, Hamm attempts to evaluate them based on their merits. His research offers evidence in support of the leading alternative theory, which posits 'that the bombing was carried out by a team of four to six men, with several others playing supporting roles involving financing' (ibid: 190). Moreover, Hamm's work points to the involvement of one Peter Langan: a 'rogue government informant for the United States Secret Service' (ibid: 21). There is no shortage of political or historical events where official narratives are found wanting and counter-narratives (of varying plausibility) abound: from the suspicious deaths of government weapons experts, cryptographers and shadowy financiers to the covered-up connections between intelligence agencies and terror groups (see Curtis, 2010). Criminologists should shrug off the stigma attached to theorising that diverges from official accounts and carefully excavate the deep political contexts of such events.

The conspiracy theory research agenda described earlier in this article now forms part of a broader, sprawling *counter-disinformation complex*: a nexus of journalists, academic research centres, NGOs, think tanks and state intelligence and security apparatuses that are collectively concerned with problematising and prescribing solutions to conspiracy theories and 'disinformation' (Bratich, 2020). Together these actors 'shape public discourse through journalism but also via sponsored "independent" research units' (ibid: 319) whose funders and advisory boards include (representatives of) billionaire-owned philanthropist foundations, arms companies, and security and intelligence agencies. A critical criminology of conspiracy theory should investigate and map this counter-disinformation complex and examine its role in pathologising and criminalising conspiracist thinking.

Recent research by Massoumi and colleagues (2020) has investigated the role of the British security state in research on 'extremism'. Students of conspiracy (panic) would do well to follow their lead. Noteworthy here are interrelationships between academic research centres and private think tanks and the security state. The Lancaster University-based Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST), which describes itself as a 'hub for behavioural and social science research into security threats' is funded by, and collaborates

with, British intelligence agencies (ibid). Academics affiliated with CREST are engaged in research addressing the interrelationship of conspiracy theories and 'extremism'. A critical criminology of conspiracy (theory) should also investigate such collaborations. What concepts, theories and narratives are being developed in and through this academic-security nexus, and to what extent might they be used to shape public discourse or discredit dissenting opinion?

To evaluate – and formulate – conspiracy theories, criminologists must utilise and develop new methodological orientations and methods of enquiry. Although space precludes a fuller discussion, we can consider some pertinent approaches, sources and methods. Conspiracies are, by their very nature, secret and therefore pose methodological challenges – and opportunities – to those who seek to research them. Douglas's (1976) proposal for an *investigative* paradigm of social research is instructive here. Put simply, in contrast to the 'cooperative' paradigm typically favoured by social scientists – in which respondents and sources are generally taken at face value – Douglas proposes that we take a leaf from the notebooks of investigative journalists and detectives in adopting a more adversarial approach: one with 'suspicion' as its guiding principle (ibid: 55). Such an approach seems well suited to research that seeks to investigate those with an interest in concealing the truth. Peter Dale Scott's work, which begins from such an orientation, gestures towards further methods of enquiry. One example is what Scott terms a 'negative template': when patterns in redacted, omitted or suppressed information or evidence are themselves 'a clue for further investigation' (1996: 60). Criminologists should apply this investigative approach to the full spectrum of open sources (ranging from political memoirs, declassified documents, leaked material and official archives to social media posts), as well as utilising Freedom of Information requests, court disclosures, company filings and financial statements – in addition to other more conventional sources of data (interviews, field notes, and so on).

Conclusion

This article has suggested that criminologists would do well to regard alarmist claims about conspiracy theories and disinformation with caution, even suspicion. Journalistic, academic, policymaking and government circles are gripped by an ongoing moral panic about

conspiracy theories. We are told that belief in conspiracy theories is becoming more widespread, that conspiracy theories are being propagated by nefarious actors, that conspiracy theories are a threat to democracy, and that they are associated with extremism, violence and terrorism. A burgeoning conspiracy theory research agenda has emerged in response, sprouting research centres, networks, conferences, journal special issues and generous research grants, and prescribing policy solutions that pathologise and criminalise conspiracy theories and those who subscribe to them.

The cumulative effect of the conspiracy theory research agenda has been to reinforce the notion that belief in political conspiracies is *a priori* delusional, and to discredit the idea that wealthy and powerful individuals and groups might collude to protect their shared interests at the expense of others. The broader stigmatisation of conspiracy thinking has resulted in the exclusion of hypotheses about elite collusion and political criminality being from social scientific enquiry. While we can trace the origins of conspiracy denial in the social sciences to the work of Karl Popper, today powerful and enduring norms in academia continue to discourage researchers from hypothesising about elite political criminality, wrongdoing and harm. This article has argued not only that conspiracies exist, but that criminologists and other social scientists should acknowledge them as important political and social phenomena that merit investigation and analysis. In short, our focus should shift away from psychologising, pathologising and criminalising conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists, and towards *theorising conspiracy*. The article concluded by identifying several concepts and approaches that scholars might utilise to this end, and by outlining a prospective research agenda for critical criminological research into conspiracies and conspiracy theories.

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