

*Annual Review of Anthropology*Conspiracy Theories as
Productive Practices: Toward a
Theory of Conspiratorial Style,
Agency, and Politics

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Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 2024. 53:261–75

First published as a Review in Advance on
July 25, 2024The *Annual Review of Anthropology* is online at
anthro.annualreviews.org<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-041422-125802>

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**Keywords**

conspiracy theory, narrative, agency, truth, subjectivity

Abstract

This article reviews anthropological explorations of conspiracy theories—in dialogue with insights from other disciplines, primarily political science, philosophy, and social psychology—to frame conspiracy theories as productive social practices. While conspiracy theories are often depicted through their epistemological shortcomings and associated with social and political margins, this article traces the nascent threads across anthropological scholarship to reach an emic understanding of those narratives and their sociopolitical reverberations and proposes approaching conspiracy theories through their style, agentive implications, and political effects. Conspiratorial style, the article argues, pertains not to the content of the narrative but to its incessant seeking of covert operations beyond readily visible forms as well as a growing flexibility regarding the narrator's belief in the narrative's veracity. The agentivizing dynamic generated through conspiracism differentiates contemporary conspiracism from its predecessors and involves an empowering current. Finally, the article focuses on how contemporary conspiracism is intricately linked to political contestations.

Conspiracy: from Latin root, *conspīrāre* (v.), meaning to breathe together, indicating secret collusion to advance ones' interests

INTRODUCTION

Wherever we look these days, there seem to be conspiracy theories about wildly diverse topics as well as, with ever-increasing pace, social scientific analyses of the reverberations these theories generate across the sociopolitical terrain. Amid the advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic, international conflicts and crises, destabilizations of democratic institutions and norms, and the ever-accelerated integration of our social lives into the World Wide Web, the questions arising from the unprecedented visibility and credibility of conspiracy theories acquired a new sense of urgency—often striving to come up with strategies to correct the destabilizations they generated: How do we prevent people from believing in them? How do we hinder the transmission of these theories? How do we contain their adverse effects? From conventional media outlets' eagerness to provide fact-checking platforms to supranational agencies that aim to tackle the spread of conspiratorial narratives, the sense of urgency felt across such questions underlines their ever-increasing appeal, visibility, and efficacy.

Throughout this article, I survey studies around conspiracy theories—mostly studies by anthropologists but also some by philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists—to account for both the growing transdisciplinary interest in these theories as well as their shortcomings. This article presents an anthropologically inflected picture to pinpoint their common characteristics, nascent dynamics, and social functions. I first briefly explore conspiracy theories as a term in an attempt to highlight its conceptual roots and its transdisciplinary configurations in order to draw attention to its changing deployments in different disciplines. This discussion frames conspiracy theories as narratives that claim to reveal the secretive machinations by malicious others at the expense of the narrator's in-group. This anthropologically grounded formulation, I demonstrate, highlights how conspiracy theories cannot be reduced to pathology, manipulation, or epistemological inadequacy but must be treated as a productive social practice through which various effects are generated. Drawing especially on the insights from studies conducted in the past two decades, I then demonstrate how anthropological accounts capture the intricacies of conspiratorial narratives in three interlinked steps: I discuss (a) how the definition of conspiracy theories as a term should clearly be denoted by its stylistic characteristics and idiosyncratic operations that delink narrative from belief and truth; (b) how, unlike conspiracy theories of the twentieth century, these narratives issue forth competent and powerful agents who can act on their conspiratorial outlooks; and finally (c) how their enunciation and circulation generate sociopolitical reverberations, both for the individuals involved and for the wider communities.

TERMS AND DISCIPLINARY LIMITS

In almost every scholarly discussion of conspiracy theories, researchers refer back to three now-classic sources, deployment of which underpins the transdisciplinary quality of the issue at hand: the first one by historian Richard Hofstadter, the second by philosopher Karl Popper, and the last by anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard. Hofstadter's [2012 (1965)] now seminal text, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, is often cited to underline the ever-presence of conspiratorial worldviews *qua* "paranoid style" in US politics, reaching its institutional zenith in the McCarthyist antigay and anticommunist hysteria in the 1950s. Even though Hofstadter's use of paranoia did not reduce the issue to individualized pathologies and employed a more social perspective (Barkun 2003, p. 8), he was still criticized for his outright rejection of conspiracy theories "as pathological forms of thinking common among peripheral and marginalized groups" (Butt 2005, p. 417). Along the same lines, Popper's [2020 (1966)] analysis of conspiracy theories in his seminal text, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, puts conspiracism as "the *mistaken* theory that, whatever happens in society—especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty,

shortages, which people as a rule dislike—is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups” (p. 306, emphasis added). Popper’s depiction of conspiracism hence “equated conspiracies [*sic*] with secularized religious beliefs but concluded that, as such, they were wrong” (Sanders & West 2003, p. 13). Popper’s and Hofstadter’s focus on the epistemological shortcomings of conspiracy theories has become influential in prevailing social attitudes as well as in scholarly formulations—especially in political science and (social) psychology—toward the turn of the twenty-first century. One of the most cited texts on this subject, by Sunstein & Vermeule (2009, p. 204) for instance, concocts the term “crippled epistemology” to frame conspiracism as a symptom of individuals having “a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources,” leading to a misrecognition of the social world (see also Douglas & Sutton 2023).

Since reflections by Hofstadter and Popper failed to account for the enduring appeal of conspiratorial narratives across the world, anthropologists have gradually turned to Evans-Pritchard’s [1976 (1937)] seminal work on the Azande to explain the alternative cosmologies instantiated by conspiracism. Evans-Pritchard’s openness to comprehending the inner workings of local belief in witchcraft, despite his stern objection to its veracity, has provided anthropologists with tools to explore “occult cosmologies”—especially in non-Western settings (see Sanders & West 2003). As anthropologists are uniquely positioned to capture the emic perspective through participant observation (Rabo 2020), how local anxieties, ambiguities, suffering, marginalization, disillusionments, or aspirations are voiced through conspiracy theories has slowly but steadily become the focus of anthropological explorations (Barkun 2003, Sanders & West 2003, Stewart & Harding 1999). In so doing, anthropologists have attended to the peculiar forms that conspiracy theories took in concrete sociocultural settings to underline their situatedness as well as “the sense-making effects of conspiracy theorizing” (Pelkmans & Machold 2011, p. 68), especially for subaltern groups (Stewart & Harding 1999). Rather than being a “crippled epistemology” of fringe social groups, conspiracism, for anthropologists, is increasingly taken as “indexes of social relations, political tensions, cultural disquietude, and moral uneasiness” (Fassin 2021, p. 128). The themes of conspiratorial narratives, which anthropologists attended as textualized reiterations of wider social processes, took many forms: colonial heritage and (under)development (Bovensiepen 2016, Bretfeld 2018), antivaccination attitudes (Azak & Wigen 2022, Drązkiewicz Grodzicka 2021), HIV/AIDS (Butt 2005, Fassin 2011, Johnson 2013, Niehaus & Jonsson 2005, Sivelä 2015), new technologies such as 5G (Sturm & Albrecht 2021), public health measures (Sobo & Drązkiewicz 2021), economic or political disruptions (Boyer 2006; Douglas & Sutton 2023; Pelkmans & Machold 2011; Rakopoulos 2020, 2022; Sağlam 2020; Sutton 2003), socioeconomic inequalities (Bastian 2003), climate change (Mathur 2015), violence and international conflict (De Poli 2018, Iqtidar 2016, Johnson 2013, Keenan 2006, Moore & Sanders 2002, Oushakine 2009, Rabo 2014), authoritarianism (Berridge 2018, Gray 2010), and surveillance and control over bodies (Fassin 2021, Panchenko 2016, Sağlam 2021, Stewart & Harding 1999). A growing anthropological corpus has slowly but steadily weaved a new understanding of conspiracism together as “social and cultural criticism” (Harding & Stewart 2003, p. 260).

Yet the term conspiracy theory itself remained more or less ambiguous, possibly due to its ever-present intermingling with occult cosmologies, misinformation, and fake news as well as what Butter & Knight (2015) refer to as the “great divide” (p. 18)—the dissensus among academic disciplines around the conceptualization, measurement, and analysis of conspiracy theories. While political scientist Barkun (2003, p. 7) defines conspiracy theories as “a closed system of ideas about a plot that is believed not only to be responsible for creating a wide range of evils but also to be so clever at covering its tracks,” some social psychologists treat “conspiracy theory as a [false] belief that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome” (Douglas & Sutton 2023, p. 282). These attempts, no doubt, pertinently pinpoint a number of aspects of conspiracy

Conspiracy theory: narratives that claim to reveal the secretive machinations by malicious others at the expense of the narrator’s in-group

theories: a presumed conspiracy and its secrecy. They nevertheless still leave out important elements, possibly due to their prioritization of the epistemological shortcomings of the narratives over their stylistic features as well as their social functions.

Anthropological explorations since the turn of the twenty-first century have contributed significantly to addressing this seemingly ever-present ambiguity regarding the term's very definition. In their exploration of conspiratorial gaze toward the turn of the century, Harding & Stewart (2003, p. 260) approach conspiracism as a praxis rather than a simple epistemological failing. They underline that conspiracy theory "tracks signs and surges of power, surveils banal surfaces to discover hidden threats and promises, pieces together obscure, disparate details in search of the key to an ultimate puzzle." This processual characterization is helpful to delineate the features that are only partially hinted at in other attempts to demarcate the term: the presumed secrecy of the conspiracy, malicious actors colluding to further their interests, and a Manichaean dialogism between conspirators and the narrator's in-group. If we stick to these stylistic features rather than their epistemological shortcomings, conspiracy theories may be defined as narratives that claim to reveal the secretive machinations by malicious others at the expense of the narrator's in-group. This framing of conspiracism would ensure that conspiracy theories are not solely a pathology or false politics but a productive social practice, or as "a texting of everyday life" (Stewart 1999, p. 17).

CONSPIRATORIAL STYLE: PRESUMED SECRECY, BELIEF, AND TRUTH

While attending to conspiracy theories as productive social practices is, no doubt, important, even this formulation leaves certain aspects of conspiracism unattended. Whether those who circulate conspiracy theories actually believe in the veracity of their accounts, for instance, is largely taken for granted and so is the centrality of the truth (claims) for such accounts. How contemporary reconfigurations of conspiracism force us to rethink these fundamental tenets thus emerges as one of the underlying themes of anthropological literature since the turn of the century, which crucially demonstrates that neither the secrecy of the presumed conspiracy nor the narrator's belief in the conspiracy theory's veracity should be taken at face value.

While "[t]he tension between secrecy and transparency is at the center of all conspiracy theories" (Drażkiewicz & Rabo 2021, p. 3), both Mahmud's work with the Freemasons (Mahmud 2012, 2020), the penultimate secret society of classic conspiracy theories, and the prevalence of conspiratorial outlooks across wide sections of populations across the globe require us to read secrecy not as a strict concealment of knowledge but as a different modality of its marking, revelation, transmission, and communication. For this reason, conspiratorial narratives around the most secretive operations of the deep state or Bill Gates's plans to transform humans into his docile androids do not necessarily imply that the conspiratorial narrative's content is actually a secret known solely by an exclusive group—especially given the fact that they seem to be recounted widely all across the globe—but underline that the knowledge transmitted is of a special status and that the narrator is "in the know" (Stewart 1999, p. 17).

In a similar way, passing on conspiracy theories does not necessarily mean that the narrators believe in the content of those accounts because, as Delouvé (2015, p. 58) emphasizes, "it is possible to spread knowledge of and belief in something without necessarily or actually believing it." While psychologists and political scientists (e.g., Barkun 2015, Goertzel 1994, Swami et al. 2010) often assume conspiracism to be "monological", i.e., they serve as a complete worldview, such that people who believe in one conspiracy theory, tend to believe in them all" (Butter & Knight 2015, p. 19), anthropologists present a radically different picture complicating the relationship between the transmission of the narrative and the narrator's belief in the said narrative's veracity. In his exploration

of rumors, Delouvé (2015) underscores that “it is not because one believes the rumor that one recounts it and the reverse may also be true” (p. 60). In their exploration of new spiritual groups and their circulation of conspiracy theories, for instance, van Eck Duymaer van Twist & Newcombe (2018, p. 173) argue that “the point of the [conspiracy] theory is not necessarily about its truth” but how people come to identify with their community despite not believing in some of the narratives they recount. In a similar vein, Johnson (2013, p. 1060) recounts how his interlocutors’ depictions of conspirators were “shifting and shallow” with “one shadowy group supposed to be plotting behind the scenes is quickly replaced by another.” The nationalist-conservative communities I worked with in northeast Turkey similarly demonstrated considerable flexibility in their conspiratorial outlooks, frequently changing the conspirators as well as the plots involving them, possibly because they also did not necessarily believe in the content they circulated (Saglam 2021, 2025).

Drawing on the Cartesian-liberal tradition’s articulations around subjectivity and reason (Song 2011), the presumption of belief in the narrative(s) one enunciates seems to be shared rather widely by scholars despite findings to the contrary (see Delouvé 2015). Drażkiewicz Grodzicka’s (2021) work on conspiracism surrounding the vaccine hesitance in Ireland directly tackles this “rationalist assumption that if people have the right knowledge they will act reasonably and follow the correct information” (p. 74). Her account demonstrates how narrators may feel disconnected from the narratives despite participating in their circulation. In the Middle East, too, Berridge (2018, p. 310) details how Islamist ideologues strategically deployed conspiracism for the political “purpose of bolstering the Muslim community against British imperialism” despite not believing in such accounts. Furthermore, as Rice (2020, p. 56) argues in her discussion of conspiracy theories and evidence, “conspiracy theorists often possess contradictory beliefs about a single conspiracy,” revealing a much looser connection among narratives, belief, and the truth than conventionally presumed. Thus, a growing number of researchers also underline that conventional debunking strategies, which are premised on the aforementioned rationalist assumption, do not seem to have much effect on the appeal and transmission of conspiracy theories (Harambam 2021, Nyhan & Reifler 2010, Uscinski 2018). On the contrary, these counternarratives (e.g., evidentiary refutation via fact-checkers) often fail to reach out to the demographics targeted for different reasons (e.g., polarization of media ecosystems), and, when they do, they may actually create the opposite effect because of the confirmation bias and happen to be incorporated into the very conspiratorial narrative they are supposed to refute through what political scientists Nyhan & Reifler (2010) call a “backfire effect” (p. 307). When Johnson (2013, p. 1060) confronts his Thai interlocutors, who circulate conspiracy theories depicting “foreign plots” to overthrow the monarchy, with information contrary to the conspiracy theory, for instance, his interlocutors seem to perceive “just another sign of the deviousness of the villains involved” without necessarily adjusting their plot.

This relative autonomy of the narration from belief and truth, however, should not be seen as a reflection of the psychosocial pathology of narrators, who are otherwise competent in weaving their social networks and may hold relatively high social positions. It must hence be underlined that conspiracy theories of the twenty-first century, as Harding & Stewart (2003, p. 260) hint, differ from their twentieth-century counterparts in terms of their truth kernel and consistency. While their predecessors focused primarily on relatively fixed themes (e.g., governmental cover-up or the secret control of governments by Jews) and had specific objectives attached to their circulation (“disclosing secret cabals”), the new conspiracism seems to have dispensed with such solidity, with its primary function morphing into an ostensibly endless reiteration of a narrative, the content of which seems to be in constant flux (Rice 2020; Saglam 2021, 2022). This growing independence of the conspiratorial style from the content it purports to convey generates a push for an incessant reconfiguration and transmission of the narrative as “the work of conspiracism requires a constant uptake of materials from outside established conspiracist traditions” due to

being “driven by textual desire, deriving pleasure from exploring and participating in the intricacies of conspiracist rhetoric” (Reyes & Smith 2014, p. 412; Soukup 2008). Reyes & Smith (2014) underline that

[t]he perfection of a conspiracy theory does not come from achieving the status of scientific knowledge, historical fact, or religious dogma. Rather, as an adversary to these modes, the best conspiracy theory is one that most powerfully deploys conspiracism as an aesthetic *end unto itself*. Therefore, the entelechy of conspiracism lies not in dialectically refining its research program to match the methods of its critics but in constantly revising its arguments in the interest of maintaining the spin, oscillation, or blur that is the hallmark of conspiracist aesthetics. (p. 412, emphasis added)

Thus, the circulation of conspiracy theories grows ever-more independent of the veracity of its content—explaining the ineffectiveness of the countermeasures—with the primary objective being not the replacement of the scientific truth per se but the transmission of a narrative with a wildly unstable constellation as content. Rice (2020) notes that the overwhelming spin of conspiracy theories can no longer be reduced to a desire to communicate their content, centered around its kernel with a claim to consistency, coherence, and truthfulness, to the audience. Rather, its dynamism stems from the very transfiguration of conspiracism into a pure narrative form with its content dizzyingly branching out to different subnarratives and accumulating evidence without much concern for consistency or coherence. For Rice (2020), “the [very] work of accumulation is a way of keeping the spin going, since the spin is what conspiracy theorists are ultimately after” (p. 48).

Since “the social function of a conspiracy theory [...] does not lie in its truth-value,” as Song (2011, p. 73) argues in his exploration of rural white communities in the contemporary US, conspiracy theories cannot be reduced to epistemological shortcomings but must be comprehended as productive practices through which concrete sociopolitical effects are created. While Johnson (2013, p. 1062) underscores this aspect through positing “conspiracy theorizing as a questioning of hegemonic sources of power via the suggestion that truth is shifting and contingent,” I argue that the findings from the ever-expanding corpus of anthropological explorations of conspiracism hint that such enunciations have three important implications: the induction of the narrator into a benign in-group, the cultivation of agentic capacity, and the bottom-up politicization and mobilization.

CONSPIRATORIAL SUBJECTS: FASHIONING AGENCY THROUGH NARRATION

As conspiracy theories moved from the margins to the mainstream (cf. Fassin 2011, Robertson 2018), the reverberations they generated for the wider society and politics have been a major point of attraction. While there is a tendency to focus on their adverse ramifications for democratic norms and processes (e.g., Balta et al. 2022) as well as the efficacy of public health policies (e.g., vaccination), how the circulation of conspiratorial narratives affects individuals and communities is often less engaged in the literature—all despite growing interest in the formations of subjectivity in anthropological scholarship since the turn of the century (see Mahmood 2004). In this section, I argue that the narration and social transmission of conspiratorial narratives do not necessarily generate a “pervasive sense of powerlessness and a politics of resentment” but, as hinted by Stewart & Harding (1999, p. 294), may very well “resurrect agency and the sense of a privileged community ‘in the know,’ and an otherwise bleak present can become charged with purpose and focus.”

One of the most mentioned aspects of conspiratorial enunciations in the literature seems to be the deployment of a Manichaeic worldview “in the sense that they cast the world in terms of a struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, and hold that this polarization will persist until

the end of history, when evil is finally, definitively defeated” (Barkun 2003, p. 2). This instantiation of a relatively stable dialogism between malicious conspirators and the narrator’s benign in-group (Bale 2007, Butter & Knight 2015, Byford 2011) is further complemented by the induction of the narrator into the benign in-group through the very act of iteration (Mahmud 2012). Induction occurs as a result of the moral boundaries established alongside this Manichaeic binary since, as Silverstein (2002, p. 647) argues in his exploration of conspiratorial worldviews during the Algerian Civil War, “the production and circulation of conspiracy theories map out particular speech communities and networks of sociality.” Narrating a conspiracy theory or being designated as a conspirator, as Mahmud (2012, p. 429) hints in her analysis of discretion among Freemasons in Italy, “meant participating in a heuristic set of practices that [...] also made it possible for that same knowledge to be shared among the members of a selected group. In turn, it was the ability to partake in the practices of discretion that confirmed the experience of belonging in the group.” Mahmud’s assertion around her interlocutors’ practices of discretion can very well be extended to those who incessantly look for covert plots by her Freemason interlocutors: The ability to participate in the practices of revelation confirms the experience of belonging in the benign in-group through pinpointing Freemasons as the malicious actors conspiring in secret against us.

This induction is consolidated through a number of mechanisms, ranging from the selection of the repertoire and scapegoats to political representations. Reflected best by the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, as the conspiracism’s targets “always belong to a minority or marginal group with respect to a given society or culture,” the most evident dynamic in this demarcation of the in-group would involve the designation of a scapegoat “accused of being at the heart of all the ills, crises or catastrophes affecting the society” (Giry 2015, p. 31). My research with vigilante Turkish groups, for instance, hints at how enunciation and transmission of nationalist conspiracy theories around malicious foreign forces “mark the narrator as a loyal citizen of the Turkish nation, underlining how conspiratorial accounts operate through mutually exclusive binaries and consolidate the limits of the social group” (Saglam 2021, p. 221). Complementing this long-held tradition of designating scapegoats as the others within and outside society, Delouvé’s (2015, p. 59) articulations around the strategic cultivation of cultural repertoire across rumors and conspiracy theories underline how “social thinking” generates moral boundaries through each iteration:

Whether we talk about and spread a particular rumour depends on who we are and to which groups we belong; we draw on particular stereotypes or we call on specific events in the collective memory of those groups. The same is true for how we talk about and pass on to others certain conspiracy theories and not others. In these cases, that which seems to us to be irrational in normal life now seems logical, according to a social logic, and that which normally seems wrong or biased no longer seems so. It makes sense.

While Delouvé pinpoints identities as the ultimate element of the conspiratorial narratives’ repertoire of in- and out-groups as well as the narrator’s location within this binary, I would suggest, in line with the social constructionist theorizations of identity (Jenkins 2014), a reversed relationship—or a reciprocity—within which social identities and the individual’s identification with the social groups are dependent on these everyday reiterations.

Another rather neglected aspect of conspiracism pertains to its cultivation of agency as capacity to “effect change in the world and in oneself” (Mahmood 2006, p. 42), all despite the fact that conspiratorial worldviews are widely portrayed as a persecutory model of subjectivity through which the self is narratively disempowered vis-à-vis what is imagined to be an omnipotent clique of conspirators [e.g., Bale 2007, Byford 2011, Fenster 2008 (1999), Knight 2002, Niehaus & Jonsson 2005, Rabo 2014]. As Melley (2000, p. vii) discusses through his take on “agency panic” across American cultural production, conspiracism has long entailed “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else or that one

Agency: socially situated capacity to act and “effect change in the world and in oneself”

has been ‘constructed’ by powerful, external agents.” Reacting to the US dominance in the Middle East, for instance, the narratives from the region have been taken largely as a text of powerlessness, with the local conspiracy theories depicting local political actors as “merely puppets whose strings are pulled by Americans” (Butter & Reinkowski 2014b, p. 22). Similar to historian Abrahamian’s (1993, p. 111) remarks on the conspiratorial outlooks in Iran that treat “Iranian politics as a puppet show in which foreign powers control the marionettes—the local politicians—by invisible strings,” Rabo’s (2014, p. 222) anthropological insights from Syria depict a conspiracism replete with self-perception of impotence alongside the prevalence of the “it-has-all-been-planned” talk, which posits a “consensus only on the far-reaching influence and capability of Israel and the USA.”

While these conspiratorial depictions of an omnipotent other—alongside depictions of a powerless self—have been the defining aspects of conspiracism in the twentieth century, proliferation of conspiratorial dynamics as well as their mainstreamization and ever-increasing credibility in everyday life since the turn of the twenty-first century have also generated a more agentive function through which the conspiratorial subject is empowered. It must be underlined that this agentive dynamic was latently present in all conspiratorial enunciations due to conspiracism ascribing a special status both to presumed conspirators, due to their capacity to affect structural changes in history, and to the narrator, due to their capacity to know what is not readily available to all (e.g., Bale 2007, Barkun 2015, Maldonado 2023). Yet the stigmatization of narrators as well as the conspiracist depictions of the other as omnipotent simultaneously hollowed out this agentive process to issue forth a destitute, paranoid, emasculated, and marginalized subject, exemplified best by narrators recounting Area 51 and the governmental conspiracy to cover up the existence of aliens (Hellinger 2003).

Over the past few decades, however, this disempowering dynamic seems to have been superseded by a new agentive function, which posits a conspiratorial subject as both knowing and capable of acting on this knowledge to effect change. Rabo’s (2014, pp. 212–13) aforementioned exploration in Syria, for instance, pinpoints a radical rupture through which disempowerment gave way to a new sense of potency in the past two decades:

My last visit to Syria was from February to March 2011, after the downfall of the presidents in Tunisia and Egypt, just at the beginning of the civil war in Libya, but before the real turmoil started in Syria. During my travels in the country I was surprised by the disappearance of “it-has-all-been-planned” talk. . . . This novel silence. . . marks a crucial alteration in the perception of political action among many Syrians.

This radical change in the tone of conspiracism was not limited to contexts that experienced an unprecedented political opportunity for social groups to exert pressure on previously disconnected authoritarian states (Gray 2010). In his exploration of conspiracism at the interfaces of Nazi legacy, the sudden collapse of the socialist East Germany [i.e., German Democratic Republic (GDR)], and the demands of the new German identity in the 2000s, Boyer (2006, pp. 331–32) argues that the circulation of conspiratorial narratives in contemporary Germany “cannot be reduced to a local epistemic response to a global condition of estrangement” since such accounts could very well be seen as instantiations of “an agency of knowing the ‘epistemic black hole’ of state power in the GDR [as well as the] strategies for disentangling selfhood from the presence of history and its ethnological legacies.” The conspiratorial accounts that Boyer observes in Berlin hence emerge as agentive occasions through which subjects come to “emancipate. . . [their] sense of self, however fleetingly, from history and identity” (p. 336), which Boyer’s interlocutors experience as paralyzing and disempowering.

Rakopoulos’s works (2020, 2022) on conspiratorial milieus in contemporary Greece, too, demonstrate how conspiracy theories may very well take an empowering turn. In his accounts,

conspirators (e.g., the Epsilon group) emerge as secretive and benevolent actors who promise to provide much-needed assets to address the country's ongoing financial difficulties. My research in Trabzon similarly demonstrates that conspiracy talk narratively forges a knowing subject who can act on this privileged position to engage in sociopolitical practices, such as vigilantism and paramilitary violence to counter the covert threats (Saglam 2025).

Incessant reiterations of conspiratorial narratives, even when neither the narrator nor the audience adhere to the veracity of those accounts, issue forth an occasion through which the subjects are endowed with an agentive capacity with considerable autonomy vis-à-vis the sociopolitical structures surrounding them. This ever-growing capacity of the reiteration of conspiratorial narratives to instill agency, no doubt, generates rather complicated political effects, ranging from opposition to democratic rights and processes to active participation in societal violence.

CONSPIRATORIAL POLITICS: FROM DESTITUTE TO MOBILIZATION

Closely related to the cultivation of agency through the reiteration of conspiratorial narratives, anthropological explorations underline the growing political effects generated through their circulation. The intricate relationship between conspiracism and politics may be grouped in three categories, where we can trace different dynamics of instrumentalization, exclusion, and mobilization.

First, the very term conspiracy theories can be deployed politically to (de)legitimize certain attitudes and arguments. Rakopoulos's (2022, p. 46) work with conspiracy theorists—"arbiters"—in contemporary Greece strives to comprehend "who gets to label something a conspiracy theory (or theorist) within a wider field of power." Mathur's (2015, p. 104) research in India similarly traces how, through the deployment of the term conspiracy theories by bureaucrats, "practices of state categorization allowed for the narratives emanating from anxiety, anger, and very real material deprivations to remain unheard and for the state to remain unaccountable."

In their discussion on the interrelationship between conspiracism and the truth, Pelkmans & Machold (2011, p. 68) note that anthropological scholarship has long focused on how "conspiracy theories serve as commentaries on the world, or as interrogations of obscure power mechanisms" but failed to account for how they "can also be potent tools in discrediting opponents and in rallying supporters." Through attending to the ways in which the post-9/11 war politics has been legitimized through a politics of fear, Pelkmans & Machold point at how "when evidence that undermined the official rationale for war began to emerge, elements within the [US] administration began to seek ways to discredit their opponents" (p. 67) and relied heavily on conspiracy theories as a stigmatizing term to discredit counterclaims. For Pelkmans & Machold, the very fact that "the theory that Saddam Hussein secretly possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and was conspiring with Al Qaeda to level new attacks on the United States" was never designated a conspiracy theory "even after it was disproved" (p. 67) demonstrated the political differentials in the way the term is allocated in a given field of power. Criticizing philosopher David Coady's (2006, p. 3) articulations, which contrast conspiracism with "an explanation that has official status at the time," the authors underline that the "theories of conspiracy produced by those who are not in power tend to remain 'conspiracy theories,' no matter their location along the truth-axis" (Pelkmans & Machold 2011, p. 75), whereas those by relatively more powerful stakeholders often avoid the denigrating label even when their narratives are ridden with epistemological problems and falsehoods. One result of such selective clinging of the term to certain groups is the term's conventional and rather frequent association with marginalized, powerless groups. Pelkmans & Machold conclude that "the 'conspiracy theory' label is a tool for oppression because its irrational connotations will push subaltern theories that allege an official conspiracy to the margins, where it easily becomes the subject of ridicule" (p. 77).

Yet, as discussed above, the transformations since the turn of the century have reversed this dynamic through both the mainstreamization of conspiracy theories (e.g., Mădroane 2021) and the agentive dynamic unlocked in contemporary conspiracism. The first counterpoint to be noted here is hence that conspiratorial narratives today are circulated not solely by fringe groups but also—perhaps more worryingly—by powerful political actors. This mainstreamization forces us to reflect on how the deployment of these narratives across elite circles cannot be reduced simply to a state of misinformation. While various studies on Turkey, Russia, and the Middle East, for instance, note the growing incorporation of conspiratorial narratives of imminent threats from international actors into governmental discourses (Borenstein 2022; Gray 2010; Gürpınar 2020; Nefes 2013, 2017), conspiracism seems to gain considerable ground in the Global North too (e.g., Astapova et al. 2020), hinting at how its deployments cannot be regarded simply as a symptom of authoritarian governance (cf. Gray 2010). Various political actors in contemporary Europe, such as Viktor Orbán, draw on the infamous “great replacement theory” to designate themselves as the true guardians of Christian heritage and white-European identity (Bergmann 2021), which, according to electoral results, resonates rather well with the electorate. Drażkiewicz’s (2023, p. 656) comparative discussion of conspiratorial transmissions in Ireland and Poland similarly detects how “the government [in Poland] is often responsible for using state-owned media to spread misinformation and foster conspiracy cultures.” The ever-growing normalization of reiterations of QAnon conspiracy theories (McIntosh 2022) by US political elites (e.g., Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene or ex-president Donald Trump) similarly underlines how conspiracism neither belongs to the fringes nor is undergirded by a power asymmetry but “[has] gradually become integrated into mainstream political and media discourses, public argumentation, and rhetoric” (Mădroane 2021, p. 142). While opponents of these powerful actors resort to the derogatory effect of “conspiracy theory” as a term, the presumed effects of delegitimization, marginalization, and emasculation do not seem to pursue their conventional pathways, hinting at a radical reconfiguration in power differentials in the past two decades (Hellinger 2018).

Conspiracism, no doubt, has always been an attribute of political imaginaries. As Bretfeld (2018, p. 259) notes, conspiracism can very well “provide a basis for official state policies, popularized by social and political elites and believed by a significant part of the population.” Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the Nazi regime or paranoid outlooks of the states in the postcolonial Middle East testify to this political rhythm generated by the circulation of such narratives. Contemporary studies also tap into this affinity between conspiracism and the antidemocratic discourse and practices through which radical right groups (e.g., Pasięka 2017) fuel discrimination, prejudice, and racism. And yet, the conspiracism of the twenty-first century seems to have acquired further momentum—possibly in conjunction with the destabilizations caused by statecraft, globalization, information technologies and the Internet, and aggravation of inequalities and conflicts—to generate bottom-up pressure on political norms, processes, and institutions.

Bastian’s (2003, p. 67) work in Nigeria, for instance, traces how ostentatious differences in wealth and consumption as well as the accompanying conspiratorial narratives generate societal violence by mobilizing impoverished social groups against those whom they accuse of “conspiracy to garner riches at the expense of the ordinary Nigerian people.” In Bastian’s account, one can trace this agentivizing and mobilizing dynamic of conspiracism: Narratives around ritual murder by the elites as well as their collusion with the security forces in the Nigerian town of Owerri both instantiate a moral boundary between the benign ordinary folk and the “malicious elites” and then mobilize the narrators and the audience to take action against the conspirators through riots and destruction of property. In Turkey, too, the circulation of conspiratorial narratives generates a paranoid political milieu within which citizens are appealed into undertaking vigilante control

over the landscape and, when they detect a threat, into exerting paramilitary violence (ranging from surveillance to shoot-outs) (Saglam 2021, 2025).

This eruption of societal violence in conjunction with conspiratorial outlooks, however, cannot be limited to the Global South, where anthropologists tend to see the malfunction of the state and the law. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the very conspiratorial political praxis seems to have donned many new forms and spread across the globe, generating similar extralegal endeavors in the Global North as well as in the postcolonial and postimperial settings. Recent anthropological work on urban vigilantism in Italy and Germany (Ivasiuc 2015, 2022), for instance, demonstrates how “neighborhood patrols reproduce imaginaries of a state unable or unwilling to protect its citizens that draw upon representations of ‘failed’ states” (Ivasiuc 2022, p. 106). In a similar vein, Ilieva’s (2022) work traces how conspiratorial depictions of refugees fuel the forgings of “refugee hunters” as political agents of the nation alongside the Bulgarian-Turkish border, endowing them with a state-like capacity to engage in (political) action and to effect change. In Germany, too, the famous case of the *Reichsbürger*, who “claim the Federal German Republic is not legitimate, as in their view the old German Empire never ceased to exist” (van Buuren 2023, p. 91), took a dramatic twist after it was revealed that the group is not simply a disparate and heterogeneous constellation of “sovereign” citizens but also included a more committed radical subgroup, composed of ex-parliamentarians and ex-officers, conspiring to overthrowing the political system. Herrberg’s (2021) work on the *Reichsbürger* movement underscores that, despite its socioeconomic heterogeneity, the movement is held together by a strong religiously inflected ethos to fight against the existing German authorities, whom the members see as infiltrated by the conspirators (see also Buchmayr 2021).

CONCLUSION

While it has explored new analytic threads emerging in contemporary anthropological scholarship, this review also pinpointed how the discipline of anthropology and its deployment of ethnography are uniquely positioned to provide comprehensive insights that elude other conventional methodologies and analytics. By emphasizing emic approaches, anthropology has long provided a more sociopolitically situated analysis of phenomena, revealing both elements that had already been deployed rather extensively in earlier anthropological work on/around conspiracism as well as nascent dynamics. In line with the ever-increasing visibility and impact of conspiracy theories since the turn of the century, a new wave of anthropologists has started paying attention to the social dynamics undergirding conspiracism as well as its effects on individuals and communities. This article strives to provide an assessment of what has been accomplished in this anthropological endeavor so far, in hopes that future researchers will advance our comprehension of these thoroughly intriguing social practices through which societies and politics everywhere are radically changed.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author extends his gratitude to Dr. Zeynep Sariaslan, for providing feedback on a draft of this article, as well as the *Annual Review of Anthropology* reviewer, who engaged with the text rather generously and with an open mind.

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