

Conspiracy Theory and International Relations

Written by Tim Aistroke

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TIM AISTROPE, FEB 1 2024

While conspiracy theories have always been around, they are more often lunch time curiosities than the focus of International Relations (IR) research programmes. Yet recently the connection between conspiracy theory and world politics has been difficult to ignore. For instance, the rhetoric of conspiracy has been notable in the public statements of world leaders, particularly among populists like Trump, Erdogan, Bolsonaro, Orban, and Putin. Conspiracy theories have featured in online disinformation efforts that target elections and shape perceptions around international crises. Moreover, conspiracy theories have been identified as an important aspect of radicalisation and violent extremism. In what follows, I first outline three broad approaches to the study of conspiracy theories that have emerged mainly outside of IR, which will be useful for understanding their international political dimensions. Subsequently, I aim to highlight the challenges that new research in this area must navigate.

The common sense understanding of conspiracy theory – the one that springs to mind in corridor chats and furnishes newspaper op-eds – takes its cue from Richard Hofstadter's (1964) famous essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'. The recurring theme in this ready-made view is that conspiracy theory is the wide-eyed delusion of outlying characters. It evokes a quasi-medical diagnosis of paranoia and irrationality (Aistroke 2016a). Hofstadter himself had a significantly more nuanced perspective that still offers much to contemporary scholarship. His account is best understood in terms of a liberal critique of populism. Writing in the context of the American presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater, he sought to defend an ideal of normal politics centred on deliberation, bargain, and compromise, against a resurgent far right movement that, amongst other things, alleged Soviet infiltration of the political establishment (Bratich 2008). Hofstadter argued that a resentful status anxiety in response to rapid social and economic change in the post-war decades was the engine of this way of thinking, which had appeared routinely across American history at times of great uncertainty.

In the normal course of things, Hofstadter thought such views existed at the fringe of political discourse. However, in times of socio-economic hardship, populist demagogues stoke anxieties and fuel a suspicious worldview filled with likely villains and their malign plots. Under these circumstances, conspiracy-charged populism could force its way into the public square and undermine the sober practices of liberal democracy. The paranoid style tradition has been the subject of sustained critique over the last twenty years, not least for its lack of analytical clarity about what constitutes a conspiracy theory and the suspicion that it often amounts to ad hominem dismissal – more on this later (Dean 2000a, 2000b; Goshorn 2000; Pratt 2003). Yet there is much here that still resonates. Indeed, Hofstadter's observations about status anxiety, demagogues, and the suspicion of elites seems of renewed relevance.

A second approach, less familiar to IR researchers, positions conspiracy theory as a much more common part of political culture than we might think. Far from the fringe beliefs of deluded malcontents, contemporary circumstances have made conspiracy theory eminently understandable (Aistroke 2016b; Mason 2002; Marcus 1999). Here the scale and complexity of global political and economic forces, alongside the pervasive secrecy of the national security state, are read against the historical reality of elite malfeasance, high-crimes, and covert activities (see Knight 2000; Olmsted 2009; Goldberg 2004). Contextualising sci-fi literature and films like *Three Days of the Condor* and *The Parallax View*, Friedrich Jameson (1991) positioned conspiracy theory as 'a degraded attempt... to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system'. Drawing on Kevin Lynch's account of alienation in the modern city, he argued that conspiracy theory is 'the poor person's cognitive mapping', which stands in for a coherent view of the whole that is no longer possible (Jameson 1988).

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Jameson helpfully crystallises in an international political context two strains of conspiracy theory research that have emerged over the last two decades. On the one hand, researchers have focused on the extent to which conspiracy theory is a crude but nevertheless productive aspect of populism, which identifies structural inequalities and systemic hypocrisies that may well feel orchestrated (see Fenster 2008). Here the idea that the system is rigged can play a powerful role in galvanising activism, despite inaccuracy in the specifics and the potential for vilification of individuals and groups. On the other hand, researchers have been increasingly aware that conspiracy narratives have proliferated in popular culture portrayals of politics and international relations (Nelson 2003; Jones 2008, 2012; Der Derian 2009). Here widespread cynicism about the machinations of powerful elites intersects with speculation and an ironic playfulness that sits alongside rumour, gossip, urban legend, and other forms of lay knowledge in everyday reckonings of global affairs (Birchall 2004, 2006; Jones 2010; Fluck 2016).

A third approach centres on the extent to which the term 'conspiracy theory' – and the discourse associated with it – delegitimises criticism of elite power and secures the political status quo. Here the identification of a 'conspiracy theory' directs attention away from the substance of a specific claim and towards the social-psychological competency of the person making it (Hustings and Orr 2007; Bratich 2008; Goshorn 2000). This delegitimising effect is most powerful in the first account of conspiracy theory, where the connection with paranoia is especially strong. It is facilitated by widespread definitional ambiguity such that claims about trans-dimensional lizard overlords and faked lunar expeditions can be read alongside claims about corporate corruption or secret assassination programmes. These dynamics are particularly important in the international political context where controversial events like terrorist attacks, coup d'états, false flag actions, and covert interventions – all recurring features of the historical record – are the subject of contested real-time interpretation (Aistroke and Bleiker 2018; Zwizerlein and De Graff 2013; Kiiik 2020). The process through which an authoritative account emerges, or fails to emerge, within and across interpretative communities can be as much about power relations as the assessment of evidence, which is often undisclosed in view of national security imperatives.

These three approaches provide IR researchers with different ways into the study of conspiracy theory. Each emphasises certain aspects of conspiracy discourse and each has its limitations. The paranoid style tradition offers insights into the way populist leaders mobilise conspiracy narratives and how they gain traction with broader constituencies (see Wojczewski 2021). Yet this approach too often pathologizes its subjects and dismisses the political content of specific claims out of hand. This tendency is amplified in the international political context where researcher almost inevitably cross cultural horizons.

At its worst, the identification of conspiracy thinking in foreign leaders maps onto a western geopolitical imagination where the right-minded international community is confounded by the irrational policies of rogue states (Aistroke 2016b). Likewise, a prominent policy discourse during the War on Terror identified cultures of conspiracy and misinformation across the Muslim world as significant drivers of radicalisation (e.g., White House 2006). While every political discourse contains views that are wrong, the association of entire regions, religions, and cultures with problematic ideation intersects with long running orientalist tropes that have been the subject of thoroughgoing criticism (Aistroke 2016a).

The second approach is better positioned to take the political content and wider context of conspiracy theories seriously, but there remain important questions about the extent to which some conspiracy narratives are beyond consideration. For instance, there is a very strong case that racist conspiracy theories are irredeemably vile and that there is nothing to be gained by rescuing a grain of political insight, particularly if doing so is in any way affirmative. Distinguishing between competing conspiracy narratives is also an issue for the third approach, which emphasises the relationship between power and knowledge. While there are rich insights to be gleaned about the production of foreign policy knowledge, especially around moments of crisis and controversy, focusing on the way narratives operate in a discursive field risks treating them as equally valid.

It is certainly the case that the opaque and contested character of international politics exerts limits on the available evidence. Yet this cannot mean abandoning the task of judging between better and worse claims. One promising way to begin this task is to draw a distinction between conspiracy narratives that are part of a wider ideology or worldview, and self-contained conspiracy narratives that address discrete circumstances (Schindler 2020). The

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former are susceptible to motivated thinking and are often immune to criticism, while the latter can be rigorously examined on their own terms.

One theme that links all these approaches together is a recurring concern with the international – both in terms of the circumstances that drive conspiracy thinking and the content of conspiracy theories themselves. While an emerging body of IR scholarship draws on these resources, this remains a rich and under-explored research area that should be of interest to many, and especially those working at the intersection of popular culture and world politics.

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