

Conspiracy Panics

Political Rationality and Popular Culture



Jack Z. Bratich

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JACK Z. BRATICH

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

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Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Production by Dana Foote
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bratich, Jack Z., 1969–

Conspiracy panics : political rationality and popular culture / Jack Z. Bratich.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7914-7333-7 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-7914-7334-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Radicalism—United States. 2. Right and left (Political science) 3. Popular culture—United States. 4. Public opinion—United States. I. Title.

HN90.R3B725 2008
306.0973'090511—dc22

2007016960

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
Grassy Knolledges	
1	
POLITICAL SCIENCE FICTION	25
<i>Expert Monitors, Excessive Skepticism, and Preventive Rationality</i>	
2	
POP GOES THE PROFESSION	51
<i>Journalism, New Media Culture, and Populism</i>	
3	
TRUST NO ONE (ON THE INTERNET)	79
<i>Gary Webb, Popular Technologies, and Professional Journalism</i>	
4	
LEFT BEHIND	97
<i>AIDS, Biowarfare, and the Politics of Articulation</i>	
5	
GOING GLOBAL	123
<i>9/11, Popular Investigations, and the Sphere of Legitimate Dissensus</i>	
Conclusion	159
Appendix: AIDS Conspiracy Theory Chart	171
Notes	175
References	189
Index	219

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Any work on conspiracies, conspiracy theories, or conspiracy panics must confront the ur-claim that “everything is connected.” This is no more evident than in writing acknowledgments, as it seems that everyone I’ve met over the course of this project has some link to, or impact on, the result. This ranges from those who’ve had a direct influence on it to those whose brief encounter augmented some aspect. They appear in many guises—a turn of phrase, a borrowed metaphor, a sequence of questions, a synthesis of ideas, a tone.

The seeds of this project began at the Institute of Communications Research, a hotbed of cultural studies and a warm home for friendship and collegiality. So thanks first and foremost goes to my mentors, who have each provided an intellectual space for this work in addition to making a mark on it. Paula Treichler’s tireless efforts to hone my ideas and clarify the political stakes were vital. She continually urged me to remember why this project was important, furnishing me with a necessary grounding in concrete practices. I am truly fortunate to have had her mentorship.

James Hay provided consistent encouragement and support; in fact, the idea for this project emerged out of one of his seminars. James taught me how to appreciate the material and institutional contexts of ideas, and as a collaborator and friend he continues to shape my thinking on this and other topics. Cameron McCarthy’s inexhaustible enthusiasm gave me the strength and confidence to persevere. He persistently reminded me of my work’s political and intellectual tradition and challenged me to find my place in that tradition. Lawrence Grossberg provided me with invaluable ways of translating philosophy into theory, and his mark is on virtually every page here.

Other teachers have made invaluable impressions on me throughout my career. Norman Denzin was an immeasurable resource. Our daily interactions over the course of four years prepared me to be a professional, an intellectual, and a person. Biswarup Sen opened the door for me to cultural studies and to the Institute of Communications Research. His intellectual clarity and provocative humor are the standards for pedagogy, mentoring, and friendship. Even before this project took shape, many teachers sowed the seeds of my thinking that would eventually blossom in this book. Among them I count Stephen David Ross, John Tagg, Ladelle McWhorter, and David Gruber. They introduced me to and nurtured my interest in continental philosophy

and critical theory, especially the work of Michel Foucault. I have never recovered. Collectively, these mentors have formed a powerful intellectual constellation around me that I continue to call upon (whether they know it or not).

The friends, colleagues, classmates, and peeps from Champaign-Urbana in the 1990s have been priceless. Jeremy Packer and I traveled similar paths, riding many rollercoasters late into the night and holding a decade-long conversation about Foucault's work. Brian Michael Goss and I shared innumerable after-hours discussions—his sharp intellect and political commitments became a constant reference point. He also provided me with a model for disciplined research. It is difficult to imagine my writing and thinking without these fellow travelers. Others in this network of support and joy include Theodore Bailey, Richard Bradley, Mary Coffey, Greg Dimitriadis, Michael Elavsky, Kelly Gates, Lisa King, Sammi King, Marie Leger, Dan McGee, Jen Mercieca, Shawn Miklaucic, Radhika Mongia, Mark Nimkoff, Liz Perea, Carrie Rentschler, Craig Robertson, Gil Rodman, Milla Rosenberg, Gretchen Soderlund, Jonathan Sterne, Dan Vukovich, and many others. Their importance cannot be contained in a list of their proper names. Special thanks here goes to Cheryl Cambras, Natasha Ritsma, and Heidi Brush, each of whom provided patience, support, and love during different moments of this project. Each in their own way also taught me that there's more to life than writing.

Since moving to New York City and getting involved in a number of activist projects, I have met people who have provided clarity regarding the political relevance of conspiracy research, especially regarding 9/11 skeptics. The last chapter of this book grew out of this milieu, and so credit goes to Brooke Lehman, Spencer Sunshine, Stephen Shukaitis, Seth Weiss, and Kevin Van Meter.

Much gratitude goes out to my family as well. Milovan Bratic and Vasilija Bratic, my parents, labored with great hardship in a land foreign to them so as to provide a better future for their children. This book is a result of their ceaseless encouragement, sustenance, and sacrifice. My sister Olivera gave me confidence that the future generation will be intelligent, politically active, and life affirming.

Much editorial help and thought clarification has come my way over the years. Peter Knight, Toby Miller, Alisdair Spark, Laura Marks, and the anonymous reviewers for this book have been invaluable in this regard. At State University of New York Press, Michael Rinella's initial faith in the project, his patience, and his shepherding all made the process a smooth and pleasurable one. Dana Foote kept the project and me on a timely production schedule, with her enthusiasm and gentle persistence. And thanks go to copyeditor Kay Butler for shaping up my writing style with her keen eye and to cover designer Amy Stirnkorb for the wonderful final look.

The students in my conspiracy culture courses (from UC–Berkeley to Rutgers University) reminded me of the significance and stakes of the topic, especially for the younger generation. A shout-out goes to the Lotus Café, Alt Coffee, and Drink Me, the spaces that tolerated my many hours of squatting with laptop and beverages. The staff members at these establishments as well as the fellow writers/squatters comprised a vital social network that alleviated the solitude of the book writer. A special note of thanks goes to Diana Good, whose presence at the Lotus was a true gift. She made the space live up to its name—a zone of transformation and becoming.

Finally, acknowledgment must be given to the unnameable. From the murmurings of ancestors whose names are forgotten to the future guests whose proper names are yet to be formed, these unknown figures haunt these pages. They make it clear that saying “everything is connected” must make room for a community without identity and a people to come.

Portions of this work have been published elsewhere:

Portions of chapter 1 appeared in Bratich, Jack Z. (2003). Making politics reasonable: Conspiracism, subjectification, and governing through styles of thought. In J. Z. Bratich, J. Packer, & C. McCarthy (Eds.), *Foucault, cultural studies, and governmentality* (pp. 67–100) Albany: State University of New York Press.

Portions of chapter 3 appeared in Bratich, Jack Z. (2004). Trust no-one (on the Internet): The CIA-Crack-Contra conspiracy theory and professional journalism. *Television & New Media* 5(2), 109–139.

Portions of chapter 4 appeared in Bratich, Jack Z. (2002). Injections and truth serums: AIDS conspiracy theories and the politics of articulation. In P. Knight (Ed.), *Conspiracy nation: The politics of paranoia in postwar America* (pp. 133–156). New York: New York University Press.

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INTRODUCTION

Grassy Knolledges

The scenario is familiar: On a clear morning at approximately 9 a.m. a building on U.S. soil is destroyed, causing numerous fatalities and a shock wave of horror. The U.S. media and government officials determine that the mastermind is one man, operating with sleeper cells in a network fueled by fanaticism and extremist ideology. Soon afterward, the U.S. president uses this terrorist event to pass sweeping antiterrorism legislation.

Another recounting of 9/11? Yes, but it also applies to the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. While public discourse has been replete with the phrase “9/11 changed everything,” it is obvious that that fateful day also mimicked and accelerated already existing events.

Beyond the details of the events, one other similarity emerges. In each case, the official account of responsibility for the attack resembles a *conspiracy theory*. One figure (McVeigh, Bin Laden) is placed at the head of a shadowy network (armed Patriot movement, Al Qaeda) responsible for the terrorist act. Obviously there are some differences in the accounts: One was a domestic conspiracy, the other global; McVeigh planned, funded, and actually carried out the act while Bin Laden only planned, funded, and inspired his version. In both instances, however, the official account assigned a simple solution to a complex set of events. This led underground “conspiracy theorist” David Ray Griffin to claim that there are two competing explanatory accounts for 9/11, both conspiracy theories—official (Bin Laden) and alternative (the U.S. government did it). Surely categorizing these official accounts as conspiracy theories is audacious and unfounded, but it performatively brings us to a seemingly simple question, What is a conspiracy theory?

WHAT IS “CONSPIRACY THEORY”?

On the face of it, defining it seems obvious. We can easily list a set of examples (the various agents behind the assassinations of JFK, RFK, MLK, Malcolm X, Princess Diana, Tupac Shakur; U.S. foreknowledge of Pearl

Harbor, the Oklahoma City bombing, and 9/11; we never went to the moon, we went to the moon but covered up alien presence there, U.S./extraterrestrial collaboration, downing of TWA Flight 800, CIA importation of crack into the United States, and AIDS as a bioweapon). Sometimes the very mention of certain terms, like New World Order, Freemasonry, Illuminati, or black helicopters, automatically places an account into the conspiracy theory slot.

But argument from example gets us very little, as the inductive reasoning obviously does not account for why other theories that share narrative characteristics (like Bin Laden and 9/11) do not get called a conspiracy theory. What we are often left with is a cultural version of Justice Potter Stewart's 1964 legal argument about pornography: when it comes to conspiracy theory we "know it when we see it." This rationale did not hold up as precedent for long, and it pertained to visual representations—materials more concrete than a "theory"!

To further our investigation, I pose another question: Is a conspiracy theory defined primarily by its internal narrative characteristics or by its external discursive position? In other words is it something inherent in the theory itself or is it more about the forums it appears in, its relation to other theories, and the legitimation accorded it? To start exploring this, we can turn to an accepted textual authority on definitions. We look to a dictionary reference work not to discover the term's true meaning, but to locate its appearance as *meaningful*.

A conspiracy theory is different from a conspiracy. A conspiracy exists when two or more persons agree privately to commit a reprehensible, illegal, or criminal act, especially in relation to sedition, treason, or murder, hence especially against the state (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971; paraphrased, not quoted). It is traced by the OED back to Chaucer in 1386. By contrast, Alisdair Spark (1998) remarks that "in July 1997 the supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* included the term 'conspiracy theory' for the first time. This was a recognition that in recent years conspiracy has become increasingly popular as an explanation for unfolding events, most overtly in the United States" (*Conspiracy Thinking and Conspiracy Studying*, <http://www.wkac.ac.uk/research/ccs/index2.htm>). Here I want to make the first attempt at defining this book's project by adding this: it is not primarily the rise of conspiracy theories as such that makes them appear in the dictionary, but rather the increased *degree of scrutiny paid* to conspiracy theories that pushes the term into the official lexicon.

The question, What is a conspiracy theory? presupposes a stable object and assumes our term is merely descriptive. For some reason, when it comes to conspiracy theory, many semiotically savvy analysts adhere to a reflectionist model of language. While other terms are afforded a deconstructive analysis, this one somehow escapes the linguistic turn, circulating in a world where language simply refers to already existing objects. But let us not deceive ourselves in thinking that calling something a conspiracy theory is simply a

neutral description of a type of account. We know it is also a term of derision, disqualification, and dismissal. To elucidate, let's take a quick look at the Warren Commission's findings regarding that grandfather of U.S. conspiracy theories, the JFK assassination.

Technically, a conspiracy theory would be any theory that posits multiple shooters acting in concert to assassinate Kennedy. In this case, the Warren Commission itself *could have* promoted a conspiracy theory if it had found more than one assassin involved, regardless of the sinister intentions or nefarious organizations behind the assassination. Under this legal definition of conspiracy, it becomes clear that federal prosecutors have often promoted conspiracy theories: examples include the actions of the Chicago Seven at the 1968 Democratic Convention, the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the Murrah Federal Building bombing in 1995, and some cases associated with the post-9/11 terror/war. Defendants in these cases were often charged with precisely that—conspiracy. At the denotative level, conspiracy theories (as accounts that posit a co-ordination of multiple agents as the cause of criminal or violent acts) are mundane and pervasive.

But defining conspiracy theories in this legalistic manner is both semiotically dissonant and highly selective. Conspiracy theories *could have* this meaning in a neutral marketplace of ideas; they *could be* one kind of descriptive narrative among many. But this is not the case. Conspiracy theories exist as a category not just of description but of disqualification.

For example, when Oliver Stone's film *JFK* entered the sphere of Kennedy assassinology, it was rarely dismissed at the level of evidence. The film was, however, often called a "conspiracy theory" (Stone & Sklar, 1992). This did not eliminate it as false but disqualified it from the JFK assassination's "sphere of legitimate controversy" (Hallin, 1986). In Michel Foucault's terminology, *JFK* does not engage in the "game of truth" appropriate to JFK assassination accounts. The game of truth is "a set of rules by which truth is produced. It is not a game in the sense of amusement; it is a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing" (p. 297).

Conspiracy theories are not just false; they are what Christopher Hitchens (drawing from science's procedures) calls "not even wrong" (2004). That is, they do not reach the threshold of acceptability to even be tested, to be falsifiable. If the mind is that sphere that can distinguish between truth and falsity, then conspiracy theories are beyond that sphere. They are *para* (beyond or beside) the *nous* (mind). They are *paranoid*.

Conspiracy theories are defined not merely by their strictly denotative, inherent properties, but by their discursive position in relation to a "regime of truth." As Foucault (1980a) defines it:

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms

and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

Once we recognize that conspiracy theories are simultaneously a type of narrative and a sign of narrative disqualification, we can say that this book is “about” conspiracy theories. But unlike the vast majority of analyses, I examine the latter: its discursive position. In other words, the question is no longer What is a conspiracy theory? but What counts as a conspiracy theory? To make this clearer, it is helpful to lay out some synonyms that get linked to conspiracy theories. This constellation of concepts should give some sense of the slipperiness and the political stakes in defining conspiracy theories as an object of study.

The Synonyms

The paranoid style. Coined by Richard Hofstadter (1967) in his germinal essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” this term transformed a multiplicity of beliefs in conspiracy into a *style* of thought. Transposing a clinical psychology term onto the field of politics, Hofstadter not only pathologized conspiracy theories, he gave them formal coherence, historical persistence, and intelligibility as a genre of political knowledge. Hofstadter’s essay also marks a moment when conspiracy theories were articulated to political extremism. Most serious contemporary analysts of conspiracy theories (on various points of the political spectrum) cite Hofstadter. In so doing, they use conspiracy theories as paradigmatic instances of “the paranoid style.”

Political paranoia. Often used synonymously with the paranoid style, this more recent term gives conspiracy theories a dangerous edge. Perhaps most thoroughly elaborated by Robert Robins and Jerrold Post in *Political Paranoia and the Psychopolitics of Hatred* (1997), “political paranoia” is closer to a clinical diagnosis than is the paranoid style. The label is so intertwined with political beliefs that “extremism” becomes not so much a point on the political spectrum as a category of social psychology. Conspiracy theories designate the bodies of knowledge produced by these politically pathological individuals and groups.

Conspiracism. Also a recent invention, this term drops some of the psychological baggage. It gathers conspiracy theories together under the unity of an “ism” to describe a body of thought that regards conspiracies as a driving force in history. The term preserves a dangerous quality by linking conspiracy theories to other isms: racism, extremism, Stalinism, Nazism. Commentators from a variety of political positions employ this term. Chip Berlet, a progressive researcher, calls the militia movement’s ideology “conspiracism.” In Berlet’s case, conspiracism is akin to supremacism—a broad ideological vision of how things are—and a militia member would be defined

as a “conspiracist.” Daniel Pipes (1997) and Christopher Buckley (1997) also wield the term, aiming it both at militias and at “leftism.” For Buckley, “conspiracism” leads to the spread of “hate crimes” and ultimately to “democide” (the wholesale annihilation of a people) (p. 44).

The above terms are in essence more sophisticated ways of calling someone a crackpot. In these three cases, conspiracy theories are understood as false, irrational, even pathologically dangerous. In these formulations, conspiracy theorizing is not the harmless pastime of a few obsessive loners; it is a social threat that reflects profound political malaise. At best, conspiracy theories are a distraction from real politics and real social problems. At worst, conspiracy theories represent dangerous knowledges, potentially fostering domestic terrorism. “The paranoid style,” “political paranoia,” and “conspiracism” are used by debunkers, or “theorists of conspiracy theories.” I will primarily refer to these debunkers in this book as “problematizers,” “conspiracy theory experts” (not experts *in*, but *on* conspiracy theories), or part of the conspiracy panic discourse.

But these are not the only meanings at play. Most often employed by those considered “conspiracy theorists,” other terms not only avoid the disqualifying articulations but also deliberately refuse them.

Conspiracy research. This term attempts to authorize and legitimize the knowledge claims of the enterprise. Calling it “research” obviously tries to give the accounts intellectual grounding in social science or journalism. It is often used interchangeably with *political research* and *investigative research*. In a sense, it takes the existence of conspiracies to be true, and studies their occurrence and effects much as one would study policy and political institutions.

Conspiratology. Moving one step closer toward legitimacy, this term attempts to consolidate *conspiracy research* into a body of work that asks to be considered scientific. Conspiratologists are those researchers who study conspiracies.

Conspiracy narratives or *conspiracy accounts.* Used by analysts who are neither quick to disqualify nor to valorize conspiracy theories, these terms try to accentuate the descriptive component. In this view, a conspiracy narrative is simply any narrative that accounts for an event by positing a collusion of agents who seek to determine the course of the event according to the agents’ agenda, and at the expense of others’ agendas. In addition, the collusion, the agenda, and/or the determination are shrouded in secrecy. I would also add here that a conspiracy narrative often (but not always) suspects the agendas embedded in other accounts.

Besides its synonyms, conspiracy theory is a contested term within the conspiracy research community. While some do not mind calling their work a conspiracy theory, others reject it as a media buzzword that derides, ridicules, and even demonizes its referent (see Alan Cantwell, 1995, “Paranoid/Paranoia: Media Buzzwords to Silence the Politically Incorrect”; Michael Parenti, 1995, “Conspiracy Phobia”). As Barry Zwicker puts it, “conspiracy

theory is a thought stopper" (2004, p. 7). Finally, some conspiracy researchers use the label ironically; recognizing it as a category of subjugation, they nevertheless reclaim it as a strategy of conceptual counterattack (see Vankin and Whalen (2001), pseudonymous book from the National Insecurity Council 1992, and zines like *Paranoia!*).

Conspiracy theory is thus a *bridge* term—it links subjugating conceptual strategies (paranoid style, political paranoia, conspiracism) to narratives that investigate conspiracies (conspiratology, conspiracy research, conspiracy account). *Conspiracy theory* is a condensation of all of the above, a metaconcept signifying the struggles over the meaning of the category. We need to recognize where we are on the bridge when we use the term.

In addition to being a bridge, I argue that conspiracy theory is a *portal* concept. Conspiracy theories are like doorways into the major social and political issues defining U.S. (and global) political culture since the end of the cold war. Among these issues are the rise of new technologies; the social function of journalism; U.S. race relations; the parameters of dissent; globalization, biowarfare, and biomedicine; and the shifting position within the Left. It is difficult to separate the public consideration of these pivotal social issues from their intertwinement with conspiracy theories. In a number of cases (especially the rise of the Internet and the limits of dissent), conspiracy theories were a *defining* trope through which social phenomena were discussed. Bringing conspiracy theories into the deliberation over these social concerns meant bringing *rationality* into the discussion.

The definition of conspiracy theory, which inaugurates this book "on" conspiracy theories, is precisely part of the clash of interpretive forces. Rather than assuming we know what one is, I am arguing for the need to examine the very conditions of recognition, the contexts that make this object visible and intelligible. Conspiracy theories are portals to specific issues, but more importantly they collectively function as doorways to a broader *context*. It is this context that is at the heart of this project, and that can be reached via what I call "conspiracy panics."

CONSPIRACY PANICS

While conspiracies have engrossed political analysts for centuries, conspiracy theories have only recently become a significant object of concern in political discourse. Throughout the 1990s, books and articles on conspiracy theories multiplied, for both academic and popular audiences. After the Oklahoma City bombing in the spring of 1995, published commentaries rose significantly. A Lexis-Nexis search for the term *conspiracy theory* in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* found a combined total of 685 hits in the ten years from 1985 to 1994. From 1995 to 2004 this number jumped to 1625. A scan of *Time* magazine found no citations in the first half of the decade, but 21

in the second half. In the first five years of the 1990s, the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* cites a total of 20 articles on the topic of "conspiracy" or "paranoia," with a total of 88 listings for the years 1995–1999. In 1995 alone this number jumped to 22 articles.

The *fact* of increased attention doesn't tell us much about the *form* of attention. Instead of belaboring the obvious by proving that conspiracy theories were disparaged by mainstream sources, I will begin with the assumption that commonsense constructions (not necessarily the commonly held beliefs of a population, but the hegemonic meanings) positioned conspiracy theories as illegitimate knowledges. One is hard pressed to find mainstream sources that are anywhere but on the side of the bridge that equates conspiracy theories to paranoia and conspiracism.

To understand this form of attention, I borrow a line from Dick Hebdige on youth culture and say that conspiracy theory emerges as a category only when it is a *problem*. Put another way, conspiracy theories are "subjugated knowledges." In the first of his "Two Lectures," Foucault (1980b) distinguishes "official knowledges" from subjugated knowledges. Subjugated knowledges are "blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematic theory" (p. 80). They "have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (p. 83). In other words, "not even wrong."

These buried and popular knowledges can, through research and analysis, emerge to reveal the "ruptural effects of conflict and struggle that the order imposed by functionalist or systematizing thought is designed to mask" (p. 80). Studying conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledges would demonstrate how some accounts become dominant only through struggle. An official account comes to *be* official only through a victory over, and erasure of conflict with, conspiracy accounts. Among the competing accounts for any event, the official version is not merely the winner in a game of truth—it determines who the players can be.

These constitutive and disqualifying practices are my main topic. Certainly this project will discuss particular conspiracy narratives or case studies. Yet I will focus primarily on *strategies of subjugation*, for they succinctly foreground the relations between power and knowledge. Despite the value of analyzing conspiracy theories as unified narratives (elaborating their characteristics, delineating their rhetorical tropes), I am more interested in assessing the forms of rationality and politics that lead us to be *concerned with* interpreting these narratives. In John Fiske's (1994) terms, I evaluate "the strategies by which . . . disbelief is validated and . . . counterknowledge is discredited" (p. 192). Rather than positing the conceptual unity of conspiracy theories in order to identify their deep meaning, I analyze the discursive practices that channel, shape, incite, and deploy conspiracy theories as meaningful.¹

But here I want to stress that this method is more than labeling theory. A strategy of subjugation is not just a repressive practice (though it can be that, too). Conspiracy accounts are not just excluded with sheer conceptual power by official knowledges from the public sphere. For one thing, power often incites us to discuss these subjugated knowledges (in popular culture, in journalism, in legislative bodies, in courts). These conceptual practices have a *productive* power for official apparatuses. Rather than being suppressed, conspiracy theories are, if anything, useful.

We can begin to see this usefulness in the kinds of metaphors often employed in making sense of conspiracy theories. Numerous articles described the 1990s as an “age of paranoia” or a “culture of paranoia” (Alter, 1997; Mishra, 1995; Fukuyama, 1995; Gardner, 1997).² “Paranoia—not the clinical but the cultural kind—may well be our national religion,” says Richard Leiby (1995) in the Style section of the *Washington Post*. Especially in the Oklahoma City bombing aftermath, pundits had a habit of turning “the paranoid style” (already a synthetic and abstract concept) into a sign of the historical conjuncture. The ineluctable *Zeitgeist* was invoked through repeated environmental tropes, as in an “atmosphere” or “climate” of paranoia. This naturalized imprecision gives the conspiracy theory “problem” the status of a mood, a tone, and an indeterminate quality.

Even in scholarly analyses, meteorological metaphors abound. Elaine Showalter (1997) goes one step further, linking the weather with epidemiology:

Cultural hysteria and its paranoid accelerators have caused much harm: the hysterical epidemics of the 1990s have already gone on too long, and they continue to do damage: in distracting us from the real problems and crises of modern society, in undermining a respect for evidence and truth, and in helping support an atmosphere of conspiracy and suspicion. (p. 206)

Here we see a prime example of what I’m calling “conspiracy panic.” The term *panic* is borrowed from a sociological framework, best known in the work of Stanley Cohen. The theory essentially argues that Western society maintains its identity via the management and expulsion of deviance. A moral panic defines a minority group as folk devils, “a condition, episode, person or group of persons [who] become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen, 1972, p. 9).

Cohen studied mod and rocker subcultures and the means by which they were depicted as antisocial. While most of the time the cultural target is a definable group, at times it can inform phenomena like the introduction of new technologies (e.g., the early 20th-century condemnations of film and radio by religious leaders, see Bratich, 2005). Now the term applies to moral outrages over the violent effects of media on youth, video games, pornography, drug use, AIDS, cyberculture, satanic ritual abuse, pedophilia, immigra-

tion, cults. They often involve protecting some dominant group (children, white women, heterosexuals) from perceived pernicious influences.

Jeffrey Weeks, in his famous work on the historical regulation of sexuality, says that a panic “crystallizes widespread fears and anxieties, and often deals with them by not seeking the real causes of problems and conditions which they demonstrate but by displacing them onto . . . an identified social group (1981, p. 14; quoted in Soderlund, 2002). For Cohen these panics spread through informal channels (rumor, gossip, and urban legends) but to become a broader public discourse they circulate through mass mediated news outlets. They are “amplified” by journalism (Young, 1971). As Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts argue in their groundbreaking cultural studies work, *Policing the Crisis* (1978), panics over “mugging” were promoted by mainstream news outlets and fed into a greater public outcry for more law and order. They expanded the sociological studies to place a greater emphasis on journalism’s ideological role, making moral panics a matter of hegemonic maintenance and paradigm repair (Soderlund, 2002).

The moral panics framework has undergone numerous modifications. Its explanatory power has been challenged, especially in light of sociological analyses based on a notion of risk society (Ungar, 2001). Others have responded that trumping the moral panic framework with risk society presumes a rational basis for social anxieties in “real” risks while neglecting the construction and mobilization of crises (Hier, 2003; Packer, 2008). As Jeremy Packer argues with regard to the governing of/through automobility,

The question then is not “*how risky is motorcycling or hitchhiking,*” but “*why have these forms of mobility come to be thought of in terms of risk and safety at certain moments,* while at other times they have been largely understood in economic or phenomenological terms?” (p. 9)

Packer also notes that the moral panics/cultural constructionist approach offers a political analysis difficult to find in risk society frameworks, since the former “examines the cultural production of risk and its use as a tool in political struggles” (p. 11). In a similar way, I would argue that rather than accept conspiracy theories as a real danger to the health of the body politic, we need to ask how the risky thought encapsulated in the conspiracy theory problem is generated discursively, under what conditions, and to what ends.

Kenneth Thompson (1998) argues that the number and types of moral panics are increasing, and thus need to become more central to social analyses (see also Peter Jenkins, 1998; 1999). For Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton (1995), moral panics are now such common strategies by various groups in cultural public discourse that they do not represent isolated instances, but a normal mode of operation (especially on the part of the Right). They are the “the norm of journalistic practice, the way in which daily events are brought to the attention of the public” (McRobbie, 1994, p. 202),

no longer an “unintended outcome of journalistic practice, [but] a goal” (McRobbie & Thornton, p. 560). In addition, a moral panic can constitute a “priceless PR campaign” as with the case of youth rave culture (p. 565). In other words, not all panics are hegemonic—some can be contested.

For McRobbie and Thornton, classic moral panic theory needs updating. Its own traditional reliance on a notion of reality to arbitrate “exaggerated” or “spectacular” panic representations blocked its ability to understand the ideological power of the panics (p. 564). A postmodern moral panic involves recognizing the constructed nature of the panic discourse, as well as refusing an appeal to some nondiscursive reality to combat it. Moral panics, according to McRobbie and Thornton, have also changed insofar as they circulate in a multimedia environment, not just through mainstream journalism. They appear in a broader public sphere (including pundits and experts who appear both in print and in person). Finally, it should be noted that moral panics are not just labeling rhetoric. As conceptual devices they provide the underpinning for material practices such as legislation, social policy, and policing techniques. In addition, they can inform the very constitution of some institutions, including professional journalism (Soderlund, 2002).

While moral panic sociologists have tended to focus on subcultures, panics have a longer history. Mary Douglas’s anthropological classic *Purity and Danger* (1966) examines social boundary maintenance where a social order seeks to cleanse pollutants from itself, and has been updated around the question of risk (Douglas, 1992). This social hygiene is a function of many kinds of societies in many eras. Anthropologists have been discussing the social function of these exile rituals for at least a century. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer examines the social ritual of scapegoating (Frazer, 1922, p. 629). In his examples, the scapegoated target is not an external threat. It is an internal instability, a slackening of hygienic practices and a weakening of the immune system in the political body. The threat is not an invasion, but subversion. A sluggish regime (or a new one) needs revitalizing, or, as Frazer puts it, the “main object of the ceremony is a total clearance of all the ills infecting a people.”

One can update this anthropological ritual with recent social theory. In contrast to an analysis of society based on contradiction (the classic Marxist framework), Gilles Deleuze posits that “what is primary in a society are the lines, the movements of flights,” “its points of deterritorialization” (Deleuze, 1990a, p. 171; 1977, p. 135; Patton, 1985, p. 65). Examining the integrity of a regime entails giving methodological primacy to those elements that cannot be contained within the regime, and thus need to be expelled. The scapegoat, according to Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “incarnates that line of flight the signifying regime cannot tolerate” (1987, pp. 116-117). The condemned scapegoat is the vehicle that “carries away”

the ills of the social before it “carries off” the mainstream and ruptures the social fabric.

Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), especially chapter 3, also discusses the antagonisms and expulsion practices infusing social identity. In their deconstructive analysis, society is defined by the effort to constitute itself as identity by erasing antagonism. Antagonism must be sent to flee: “every ‘society’ constitutes its own forms of rationality and intelligibility by *dividing* itself; that is, by expelling outside itself any surplus of meaning subverting it” (pp. 136–137, italics added). And “it is only through this cutting out that the totality constitutes itself as such . . . only through negativity, division, and antagonism that a formation can constitute itself as a totalizing horizon” (pp. 143–144). Fusing these theories and interdisciplinary studies together, we can say that moral panics are profoundly linked to the constitution and health of a homeostatic society.

My argument is that “conspiracy theory” functions as an intolerable line and an antagonism. While occasionally linked to particular groups (militias, African Americans, political extremists) the panic here is over a particular *form of thought* (and its potential links to action). The scapegoating of conspiracy theories provides the conditions for social integration and political rationality. Conspiracy panics help to define the normal modes of dissent. Politically it is predicated on a consensus “us” over against a subversive and threatening “them” (Fowler, 1991; Dean, 2000).

We can update the panic model also via noting changing political contexts. The panic model, when tied to labeling theory or deviance studies, tended to focus on threats that could be clearly defined as a social group. As borne out by the climatological metaphors, the conspiracy theory threat is different. It is nonspecific, a vague menace. I will discuss this further in the chapter on dissent and extremism, but for now I’ll just note that framing conspiracy theories as a symptom of a culture or climate of paranoia makes for a diffuse threat. This mirrors the nascent reorganization of U.S. political culture in a post–cold war landscape. As Brian Massumi, Paul Virilio, and others note, the nineties classification of ‘otherness’ changed from the Soviet Bloc to the “unspecified enemy.”

For Peter Knight, this context of diffuse enemies is expressed in the changing nature of conspiracy theories *themselves*. Conspiracy culture expresses not a fear of a secure enemy like communists, but an anxiety over a network like terrorism or a viral outbreak. The history of political demonology (as Michael Rogin [1987] calls it) as a construction of enemies thus changes over time.

For my purposes, the unspecified enemy is less significant regarding how conspiracy theories have changed *their* enemies (from clear to diffuse). Rather than look at how conspiracy theories construct their “others,” I examine how conspiracy theories are taken to *be* enemies, to be a pervasive and

nonspecific threat against democracy. Conspiracy panic is directed against a mood, style, mindset, tendency, or climate.

Perhaps the best cultural example here is the film *Arlington Road*. This film's villains comprise a shadowy network of domestic dissenters, whose cunning lies in their ability to disguise themselves as "good neighbors." While the threat is embodied in a few characters (e.g., Oliver Lang), they are merely foot soldiers in the real menace: "millions of us" as Tim Robbins's character puts it, a ubiquitous and occasionally violent populism dressed up as friendly suburban homeowners. In some ways, this free-floating version is closer to the true meaning of panic. It is more pervasive—a diffuse anxiety over a pandemic that could emerge in many places and many forms. A panic is not a fear-induced condition (which has a specific object) but an anxiety-induced one (whose very nonspecificity is an instigator) (see Massumi, 2005).

And this is where the moral panics research can expand. As Sheldon Ungar (2001) notes, Stanley Cohen's own original analysis did not presume the moral panics necessarily led to the construction of a folk devil or target a specific social group. The diffuse and unspecified enemy thus makes the folk devil model less specific. Threat detection in a conspiracy panic is not focused on the visible (as in behavioral conduct), but on the *virtual* (signs of danger). Not from a specific threat, but an omnipossible menace. Nikolas Rose (1999) notes this shift as similar to the biomedical one from normalization of deviance to preventive behavioral modifications. Robert Castel, in an early essay connecting risk to governance, notes this diffusion when he states that the governance of risk is designed "not to confront a dangerous situation, but to anticipate all the possible forms of eruption of danger" (1991, p. 288). Placing moral panics within a series of prevention strategies for dissent avoids some of the more mechanical applications of the framework. This shift also demonstrates that moral panics are themselves strategies in a combative context, not simply tools for the maintenance of a social order, or a stabilizing technique. Unlike a notion of risk society, there is no need to totalize a panic into the social field—there is no "conspiracy panic society."

Returning to the inaugural question, What is a conspiracy theory? then, we can say that the inability to define conspiracy theory is no failure or flaw. It is precisely the motor that allows a conspiracy panic to operate. By never having final criteria for what counts as a conspiracy theory, the term can be wielded in a free-floating way to apply to a variety of accounts. It is no wonder then, that the genealogy of *conspiracy theory* so closely approximates that of the *terrorist* (as a "whatever enemy"). Here, in this twinning of conspiracy theories with terrorism, is where we can glimpse a core claim of this book: that what we see in conspiracy panics is a consequential linkage of thought to action.

IRRATIONAL THOUGHT/EXTREMIST ACTION: ITINERARY OF AN ARTICULATION

In July 2005, the White House announced a change in the name of its post-9/11 mission. No longer was the United States fighting a “war on terror”; it was now a “global struggle against extremism.” This corresponded to the newly emerging commonsense that the real U.S. enemy was not an entire people (Muslims) nor simply a tactic (terrorism) but an *ideology* (at various points called fanaticism, fundamentalism, hateful ideology, or extremism).

The phrases “struggle against extremism” and hateful ideology are sensible partially as a result of a decade-long process of linking irrational thought to extremist action. Hateful ideology does not emerge suddenly into public discourse; it is an outgrowth of a conceptual context that took time to forge. It is this context, formed in part via conspiracy panics, that needs to be studied.

Rewind a decade: It is no accident that the spike in attention to conspiracy theories comes after the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995. Beliefs about a New World Order replete with black helicopters and concentration camps were seen as providing tinder for domestic terrorism. During Timothy McVeigh’s trial, his alleged obsessive viewing of a Waco conspiracy videotape was brought in as evidence of the mindset that leads to violent action. The militias, culturally (though never juridically) blamed for the bombing, were consistently associated with a “conspiratorial worldview.” This armed populist movement was considered the concrete embodiment of conspiracy theories. In the militias, one could find the figure of extremism par excellence: the dangerous hybrid of hate speech and violent action.

This fusion of thought and action, irrationality and extremism, has obviously changed in a decade. We have moved from domestic terror to a foreign network, from a national problem to a global concern. But at a conceptual level we have inherited a context where forms of thought, styles of thinking, have become an “unspecified enemy.” A material consequence of this has been the determination by the U.S. State Department that “subcultures of conspiracy and misinformation” are one of the sources that terrorism “springs from” (*National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*).

Conspiracy panics, with a diffuse anxiety over a diffuse menace, “problematize” conspiracy theories as a relation between power and thought. Foucault (1988c) defines “problematization” in the following manner: it is

not the representation of a pre-existing object, nor the creation by discourse of an object that does not exist. It is the totality of discursive and nondiscursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought. (p. 257)

Thinking of conspiracy panics this way, as part of a conceptual context, forces us to update the conspiracy panics model in one more methodological

way: by considering thought as part of what Foucault calls “political rationality,” specifically its liberal and neoliberal forms of governance.

LIBERALISM, POLITICAL RATIONALITY, THOUGHT

To study conspiracy theories as a zone where politics and reason meet means taking *thought* seriously as it is folded into strategies of governing. Part of this book’s agenda is to bolster links between philosophy and cultural studies. Philosophy, as a set of analytic tools, gives primacy to what Paul Patton (1996) calls “conceptual politics.” While thought has often been relegated to the anemic status of idealism (in the more materialist strains of cultural studies), I wish to argue here that conceptual practices—not the same as ideas—are constitutive of cultural practices. As we’ll see in the chapter on liberalism and dissent, some problematizers certainly believe that conspiracy theories have such a constitutive power and thus deserve scrutiny. While that chapter will examine conspiracy panics and U.S. liberalism in greater detail, here I will sketch as background the relation between thought and governing.

For Foucault, studying what he calls liberal “governmentality” means assessing the specific “political rationality” that composes liberal arts of governance. Essentially, liberalism’s political rationality requires governing at a distance, respecting the immanent dynamics of society, and seeking to incorporate freedom as a formula of rule. An autonomized and responsabilized citizenry is the goal, and can be accomplished via the use of reason. Liberal political rationality thus signifies both a form of governing (at a distance, indirect regulation) and its content (a subject that relies on the exercise of reason and thought). A political rationality is not an ideal type or universalizing logos: “It’s not ‘reason in general’ that is implemented, but always a very specific type of rationality” (Foucault, 1988a, p. 73). But while it is not universalized, political rationality does seem to act as a generalizing or coordinating force. That is to say, a rationality cannot be located within any particular institution as *its* logic, or in a specific program as *its* means and ends. Political rationality exists prior to the specific programs and institutions being formulated and implemented, since programs “either articulate or presuppose a *knowledge* of the field of reality upon which it is to intervene and/or which it is calculated to bring into being” (Gordon, 1980, p. 248).³

What is the political rationality that produces conspiracy panics? To investigate this context, this project employs the method of discourse analysis, but one that could also be called a “symptomatology.” As we’ll see, symptomatology is a typical conspiracy panic approach to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are usually taken as a sign of something else (individual mental condition, collective delusional state of mind, a cultural/political slackening). The conspiracy accounts take on the status of being a kind of