

Introduction

The new conspiracism moved into the White House with the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2017. It seems that hardly a day goes by without a new charge of conspiracy, from “fake news” to “rigged elections,” from “enemy of the people” to a “coup” perpetrated by the Department of Justice. Conspiracist thinking that was once on the margins of American political life now sits at its heart. No president—indeed, no national official—has resorted to accusations of conspiracy so instinctively, so frequently, and with such brio as Donald Trump.

Presidential conspiracism is unique; it is shaped by the character of the man and by the authority granted to the executive office. But Trump is only the most powerful and dangerous conspiracy monger. He shares a state of mind with those who invent conspiratorial charges and, using new broadcast technologies, disseminate them with astounding speed and reach. He is joined by many people, even his first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, who are drawn to conspiracist claims,

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assent to them, and pass them along;¹ by men and women in government who understand conspiracism's destructiveness but submit to it, thinking to use it to their political advantage; by the many elected representatives who acquiesce and remain silent; by civil servants who, deflected from their regular business, accommodate themselves to serving conspiracism's obscure purposes. Conspiracism has many adherents—some gullible, some sinister.

Conspiracy theory is not new, of course, but conspiracism today introduces something new—conspiracy *without* the theory. And the new conspiracism betrays a new destructive impulse: to delegitimize democracy.

Classic conspiracism—conspiracy *with* the theory—has not been displaced by the new conspiracism. Sometimes far-fetched, sometimes accurate, and sometimes a vexing mix of the two, classic conspiracism tries to make sense of a disorderly and complicated world by insisting that powerful people control the course of events. In this way, for both people on the left and those on the right, classic conspiracism gives order and meaning to occurrences that, in their minds, defy standard or official explanations. The logic of classic conspiracism makes sense of things by imposing a version of proportionality: world-changing events cannot happen because of the actions of a single obscure person or a string of senseless accidents. John F. Kennedy's assassination could not be the doing of a lone gunman. Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone could not defy the entire United States government and change the course of history.² The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, could not have been the work of nineteen men plotting in a remote corner of Afghanistan.

And in insisting that the truth is not on the surface, classic conspiracism engages in a sort of detective work.³ Once all the

facts—especially facts ominously withheld by reliable sources and omitted from official reports—are scrupulously amassed, a pattern of secret machinations emerges. The dots are woven into a comprehensive narrative of events. Warranted or not, classic conspiracism is conspiracy with a theory.

The new conspiracism is something different. There is no punctilious demand for proofs,⁴ no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of the operators plotting in the shadows. The new conspiracism dispenses with the burden of explanation. Instead, we have innuendo and verbal gesture: “A lot of people are saying . . .” Or we have bare assertion: “Rigged!”—a one-word exclamation that evokes fantastic schemes, sinister motives, and the awesome capacity to mobilize three million illegal voters to support Hillary Clinton for president. This is conspiracy without the theory.

What validates the new conspiracism is not evidence but repetition. When Trump tweeted the accusation that President Barack Obama had ordered the FBI to tap his phones in October before the 2016 election, no evidence of the charge was forthcoming. What mattered was not evidence but the number of retweets the president’s post would enjoy: the more retweets, the more credible the charge.⁵ Forwarding, reposting, retweeting, and “liking”: these are how doubts are instilled and accusations are validated in the new media. The new conspiracism—all accusation, no evidence—substitutes social validation for scientific validation: *if a lot of people are saying it, to use Trump’s signature phrase, then it is true enough.*

The effect of conspiracist thinking once it ceases to function as any sort of explanation is delegitimation. The new conspiracists seek not to correct those they accuse but to deny their standing in the political world to argue, explain, persuade, and

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decide. And from attacking malevolent individuals, conspiracists move on to assaulting institutions. Conspiracism corrodes the foundations of democracy.

Conspiracism's Targets

Our concern is not with every conspiracy claim. We leave aside narratives with only a tangential connection to politics: the 2017 charge that the CEO of Chobani, the yogurt manufacturer, smuggled immigrant rapists into the country, for example.⁶ Such conspiratorial claims are always with us, tracking significant events. For example, the story that Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon was a NASA hoax designed to raise American prestige (the moon walk that people saw on television was a film directed by Stanley Kubrick, according to the conspiracy theory). Or the horrific conspiracist narrative that the 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, was not real but rather staged by "crisis actors" or that it was a government inside job. And some conspiracist claims have no connection to politics, like the "chemtrails conspiracy," which claims that "airplanes are spraying a toxic mix of chemicals through contrails, with supposed goals ranging from weather to mind control."⁷

We focus on the catalog of accusations that go to the heart of regular democratic politics: rigged elections; secret plans by the federal government to use the military to abrogate states' rights or to seize guns; an illegitimate president who is not a native citizen; a secretary of state who "created" the terrorist group ISIS and conspires to weaken and humiliate America in the world; a "deep state" that sabotages the government.⁸

Amid this storm, the new conspiracists return to two targets again and again; we focus on them for the same reason

conspiracists themselves do—because they are foundations of democracy: first, political parties, partisans, and the norm of legitimate opposition; and second, knowledge-producing institutions like the free press, the university, and expert communities within the government.

The new conspiracism has what we call a “partisan penumbra,” an alignment with radical, antigovernment Republicans. Not all Republicans or conservatives join these ranks, but as we discuss in chapter 7, they rarely speak out against conspiracist claims. They exhibit partisan reticence. And while the Left participates in its share of classic conspiracy theories, it has not yet taken up the new conspiracism. What we have, then, is an alignment between the extremes of the Republican Party and the new conspiracism—a congruence founded in hostility toward government. These conspiracist claims persist in the United States even when Republicans themselves control government. Today, conspiracism is not, as we might expect, the last resort of permanent political losers but the first resort of winners.⁹ Trump refuses to accept the terms of his own victory and incessantly conjures machinations against him, including coups d’état from within his own administration.

But partisan politics is far from the whole story. For what unites conspiracists is not ideological attachment to conservative causes or to the Republican Party but something deeper: disdain for political opposition, regulated party rivalry, and the democratic norm of “agreeing to disagree.” Each conspiracist assault is specific to one candidate or policy or party, but it eventually extends to them all. It is not contained.

The other consistent target is the domain of expertise and knowledge-producing institutions. The new conspiracism rejects the specialized knowledge of congressional committees, government agencies, scientific advisory boards, government

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auditors, and civil servants in the Census Bureau. It discounts specialized knowledge outside government—scientists, social scientists, public health and education professionals, and any group, especially the free press, that serves as a watchdog alert to distortion in the flow of information and explanation.

The conspiracist rejection goes beyond the now familiar charge that a source of information is tainted by partisan bias. It goes further, to undermine the credibility of the whole swath of people and institutions that create, assess, and correct the universe of facts and arguments essential to reasoning about politics and policy (and everything else). Disdaining basic facts, the authority of expertise, and the integrity of knowledge-producing institutions, the new conspiracism is all encompassing. Again, the charges are cumulative: each conspiracy story has weight beyond its own particulars. The birther conspiracy, which turns on the claim that Obama’s birth records were doctored, that he was actually born in Kenya and therefore was an illegitimate president, is a discrete charge about one government record and one person. But the blizzard of accusations, taken together, weakens the legitimacy of sources of knowledge and their role in regular processes of legislation and administration.

Conspiracism does not exist in a vacuum. It is one element among others that for decades have weakened democracy: “dark money,” rabidly polarized political parties, alarming rises in social inequality and social insecurity, and more. And conspiracism is one element among others that have weakened the authority of knowledge-producing institutions: misinformation campaigns, and charges of “partisan bias” leveled at universities, research institutions, and publishing outlets. But the new conspiracism is a special kind of assault, and it poses a dis-

tinctive challenge beyond its specific targets. It is disturbing and dangerous because it is a direct, explicit, and wholesale attack on shared modes of understanding and explaining things in the political world. It unsettles the ground on which we argue, negotiate, compromise, and even disagree. It makes democracy unworkable—and ultimately it makes democracy seem unworthy.

Delegitimation

The new conspiracists claim to reveal odious plots against constitutional order, the fabric of society, national values, and national identity—but not for the sake of affirming any precise constitutional understanding or social order. Conspiracist charges claim that institutions, practices, policies, and political officials are malignant, but what exactly should be put in their place is unstated. Perhaps nothing at all. The new conspiracism is the pure face of negativity. Delegitimation is its product.

Delegitimation is not the equivalent of opposing, discrediting, undercutting, or sowing mistrust (though all this is conspiracists' handiwork as well). Delegitimation poses a unique threat to democracy: it rejects the meaning, value, and authority of democratic practices, institutions, and officials. Delegitimation is a process of falling away from the judgment that government has rightful authority. The people associated with these institutions, it is believed, no longer have standing to persuade or legislate, to reason or coerce, to lay claim to our consent or at least compliance.

The new conspiracism corrodes the legitimacy of democracy but does not hold up an alternative. There is no positive account of politics or justice in the background. It is not on the

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side of equality and it is not against equality. It is not on the side of tradition and it is not on the side of progress. In saying that the new conspiracism lacks political theory or ideology, we dissent from those who see a move to subvert democracy in order to transform it into something else—authoritarianism or protofascism or illiberal populism. For the company of conspiracists, there is no avowed and no discernable agenda of “regime change.”

The new conspiracism is politically sterile. It is *de* all the way down: destabilizing, degrading, deconstructing, and finally delegitimizing, without a countervailing constructive impulse. It is as if whatever rises from the detritus of democracy is less important and less exciting than calling out the catastrophes and humiliations wrought by the malignant agents who claim to represent us. We’re witness to the fact that it does not take an alternative political ideology—communism, authoritarianism, theism, fascism, nativism—to delegitimize democracy. Angry, sterile conspiracism does the work.

Disorientation

The new conspiracism cannot be ignored or cabined off as simply quixotic or inconsequential. A part of us may step back and wonder at the sheer absurdity of this culture of conspiracy. Yet the insult to what we think of as political reality, to our common sense, is precisely what alerts us to danger. Our over-riding response is anxiety and disorientation.

The allegations of the new conspiracism are often baffling and agitating, and we acknowledge at the outset conspiracism’s intellectual and emotional toll. Bizarre and magnetic, coming at us with velocity, conspiracist charges compel the attention of reporters and commentators, social scientists and psychol-

ogists, and ordinary citizens. The attack on shared modes of understanding is fatiguing. The consequences of incessant charges of secret plots and nefarious plotters are political, but at the same time they affect us personally and individually.

Also unsettling is the knowledge that a large number of people assent to conspiracist charges.¹⁰ Affirmations of conspiracy seem to envelop us—and not only because conspiracism has moved into the White House. More than half of Americans “consistently endorse some kind of conspiratorial narrative about a current political event or phenomenon.”¹¹ It is as if conspiracy-minded officials and citizens suffer what the philosopher John Dewey called “a conscription of thought.”¹²

The most striking feature of the new conspiracism is just this—its assault on reality. The new conspiracism strikes at what we think of as truth and the grounds of truth. It strikes at what it means to know something. The new conspiracism seeks to replace evidence, argument, and shared grounds of understanding with convoluted conjurings and bare assertions. Among the threats to democracy, only the new conspiracism does double damage: delegitimation and disorientation.

Some Conspiracies Are Real

Complicating our reaction to the new conspiracism is our recognition that conspiracies have sometimes been exposed in defense of democracy. Conspiracy theories have revealed the corruption of political officials in league with criminal forces and the covert machinations of hostile powers. By probing and uncovering the nefarious intentions and actions of agents opposed to the public welfare, conspiracy theory sometimes has been an instrument for reforming democratic politics. So we have good reasons not to dismiss the charge of conspiracy out of hand.

The detective work of classic conspiracism can reveal important truths about government that are otherwise covered up. Think of what it took to expose the actions of Michigan officials whose violation of public health guidelines allowed the lead poisoning of water in Flint, Michigan, in 2015. Their persistent stonewalling and denial increased the damage to public health. Despite their obstruction, over time the Environmental Protection Agency, doctors and researchers at hospitals and universities, and watchdog groups like the American Civil Liberties Union finally unravelled the truth about this act against the public and the conspiracy to cover it up.¹³

Sorting out what is plausible from what's not would be easier if all conspiracist claims could be dismissed as wholly unwarranted or as delusional. But there is nothing that makes conspiracy theories as such irrational or erroneous. To consult the recent history of actual governmental conspiracies—Iran-Contra, Watergate, or Tuskegee, for starters—is to confront the fact that “there are elements of treachery in the contemporary political and economic order.”¹⁴ Government officials do lie and do conspire, sometimes for what they see as protecting the public interest, often in the name of national security. For instance, after an exhaustive effort to uncover the truth about Osama Bin Laden's capture and killing in 2011, the *New York Times* reporter Jonathan Mahler concluded that the true account of those events may never be known because of the delicate American alliance with Pakistan. “The more sensitive the subject, the more likely the government will be to feed us untruths,” Mahler says. “Of course, when enough people are obscuring the truth, the results can seem, well, conspiratorial.”¹⁵

Distinguishing warranted from unwarranted conspiracist claims is further complicated by the way conspiracism aligns

with partisan identity. Democrats are more likely to say that Trump colluded with Russia to cripple Hillary Clinton's campaign. Republicans are more likely to say that the media are manufacturing fake news to bring down the president.¹⁶ We find ourselves navigating a political world buffeted by warring conspiracist claims. Is the miasma of conspiracism settling over politics wholesale? Is there a symmetry of untethered accusation launched from all sides?¹⁷

As we write, one set of claims has a grip on the nation's attention and has high stakes for our constitutional order. Robert Mueller, a special counsel appointed by the Justice Department, is investigating a massive conspiracy to breach national security and subvert American elections. Intelligence agencies have confirmed what is euphemistically called meddling in the presidential election of 2016. Russian actors hacked email accounts associated with Hillary Clinton's campaign and the Democratic National Committee with the goal of publicizing information that could assist Trump. Russian tactics also included staging rallies, targeting divisive messages to voters in closely contested districts, and exploiting social media platforms to urge African Americans to withhold votes for "Killary" Clinton.¹⁸ The Mueller investigation also focuses on whether the Russian state conspired with individuals in the Trump campaign.

On the other side, Trump and his allies equivocate about whether they accept the known facts of Russian intervention. For example, John Bolton, appointed by Trump to be national security adviser in 2018, had earlier told Fox News, "It is not at all clear to me . . . that this hacking into the DNC and the RNC computers was not a false flag operation." It was, he suggested, possibly the work of the Obama administration.¹⁹ New conspiracists charge that the investigation itself is a nefarious plot.

Special counsel Mueller is engaged in a “witch hunt,” looking for something he knows in advance does not exist. In the most incendiary language, Trump’s supporters cast the investigation as the entering wedge of a coup d’état.²⁰ And Republicans on the House Intelligence Committee ostensibly inquiring into Russian interference spin their own counternarrative in which Hillary Clinton’s campaign—not Trump’s—colluded with the Russians by gathering anti-Trump information and delivering it to a friendly FBI.

The warring charges have made many of us for whom conspiracist thinking is an entirely alien way of approaching politics veer toward classic conspiracy theory ourselves. Classic because it is not a matter of meeting “witch hunt!” with “treason!” but rather of connecting the dots, discerning the patterns, and constructing a narrative that makes sense of Trump’s behavior toward Russian president Vladimir Putin—a narrative that makes sense of the refusal of many elected officials to “get to the bottom” of the Russia probe and guard against the dangers to national security.

There are no truth-in-advertising labels that tell us which conspiracist claims are warranted. There are no bright lines.²¹ Some conspiracy theories are true, and some are false, and, increasingly, many are not theories at all. Confronted with a conspiracist claim, the question is, on one hand, whether we can set aside disbelief in the possibility of a conspiracy and entertain the charge and, on the other hand, whether we can set aside preconceived notions that agents are always out there, plotting with malignant intent. The question is how we assemble facts and draw inferences from those facts. When considering the possibility of conspiracy, do we consider contrary evidence and argument? Can we hold in mind facts that are in tension with one another? Can we maintain the capacity

to acknowledge, for instance, that the same Centers for Disease Control that lied about the Tuskegee experiments (which pretended to offer free health care while deliberately withholding treatment from syphilis-infected African American sharecroppers) may not be lying when it publicizes proof that vaccines do not cause autism? Or that the CIA, which engaged in coups against foreign governments and experimented with LSD on its own unwitting agents, can contribute materially to an investigation of a conspiracy to defeat a presidential candidate?

Sorting out conspiracist claims requires willingness to entertain new information as it emerges. It requires a capacity for self-correction.²² It requires resistance to resorting to round after round of spurious conspiracist counterclaims. If the Mueller probe finds no prosecutable evidence that the Trump campaign colluded with the Russians, would we say that the special counsel has shown himself to be party to a right-wing conspiracy? Or would we be open to the possibility that the Justice Department investigated the matter with integrity and did not find sufficient grounds to prosecute? Assessing conspiracist claims requires skepticism and common sense—both democratic virtues.

This Moment and Beyond

The delegitimation of fundamental political institutions and the disorientation that follows from the contest over who owns reality are grave developments. But they do not constitute a crisis—we are not at an inflection point where democracy is fatally undermined. We are not in transition to another form of government—to an authoritarian or radical populist regime. Delegitimation does not entail revolution or uprising; it

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does not have the shape of a sudden authoritarian coup. What, then, is the danger? Delegitimation hollows out democratic institutions little by little, day by day. It incapacitates and enervates democracy. It works slowly on democracy's foundations by eroding not just trust in institutions but their meaning, value, and authority. Combatting it requires identifying conspiracism for the threat it is.

We identify two responses to the new conspiracism. The first recourse is to call out conspiracists' claim to own reality. Speaking truth to conspiracy is a moral imperative—particularly for elected officials. Speaking truth can be effective, even if it is ineffective with respect to dedicated conspiracists. We can mitigate the corrosive effect of the new conspiracism if partisans of all stripes cooperate in speaking out, if watchful and engaged civil society groups and the media do their work, and if each of us serves as a witness by speaking out to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

In addition to speaking truth, there is what we call “enacting democracy”: the scrupulous and explicit adherence to the regular forms and processes of public decision-making. We are talking about a deliberate pedagogical response to the process of delegitimation. Enacting democracy makes government legible. That is, it gives citizens reasons to understand and appreciate the meaning and value of institutional integrity and ordinary democratic processes—exactly what the new conspiracism attacks.²³

Reversing the damage means relegitimation. We can say with confidence only that it is a long haul requiring patience and stamina. For conspiracist claims have an extended half-life. The charges outlive discrediting by reliable sources, refutation of the claimed facts by experts, reports by bipartisan commissions, and Justice Department findings. And conspiracism is

abetted by technological developments that add fuel and velocity to its claims. Moreover, these claims have evident appeal, both political and emotional. Still, we argue that delegitimation of democratic foundations is a danger we can meet.

Max Weber's 1919 treatise on politics as a vocation has long been a touchstone for thinking about political legitimacy.²⁴ The types of legitimacy and conditions for creating legitimate authority are well studied. *Delegitimation*, however, especially in presumptively stable, wealthy democracies, is barely studied at all.²⁵ Here we are on our own, confronting the unanticipated alien force we call the new conspiracism.

After Trump's presidency passes from the scene, the new conspiracism will remain. Yet if we do our work as honest witnesses speaking truth to conspiracy and demonstrate the integrity of core institutions, we will succeed in exiling conspiracists from public life and returning them to the realm of entertainment or to their natural habitat at the political fringe. In preparation, there is the work of understanding the danger.