



MICHAEL BUTTER

THE NATURE OF
CONSPIRACY
THEORIES

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The Nature of Conspiracy Theories

Michael Butter
Translated by Sharon Howe

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Introduction, or: What's the plan?

On 8 February 1920, the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* published a short speech by Winston Churchill with the title 'Zionism versus Bolshevism: A Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People'. In this speech, delivered to Churchill's old regiment at Aldershot a few days earlier, the future British prime minister reflects on the role of the Jews in the Russian communist revolution of 1917, and the ongoing civil war it has sparked. Drawing on a plethora of anti-Semitic stereotypes, Churchill distinguishes between three types of Jews, 'two of which', he suggests, 'are helpful and hopeful in a very high degree to humanity, and the third absolutely destructive'. The two groups of Jews that Churchill views positively - "'National" Jews' and Zionists - have in common that they subscribe to the spirit of nationalism so prevalent in Europe at the time, and not only among conservatives. The ones he eyes suspiciously are the 'International Jews' who he aligns with the menace of communism.¹

Churchill expresses respect for those Jews who, 'dwelling in every country throughout the world, identify themselves with that country, enter into its national life, and, while adhering faithfully to their own religion, regard themselves as citizens in the fullest sense of the State which has received them'. Still, as the final words of this sentence - resonating with the idea of the Jews as homeless and wandering - make clear, Churchill cannot quite shed the idea that the Jews do not properly belong to the national body politic. In his view, they are guests in the nations that have offered them a place to live and should behave accordingly. He also has only praise for the attempts to create 'by the banks of the Jordan a Jewish State under the

protection of the British Crown', a project he presents as both significantly driven by British Jews and 'in harmony with the truest interests of the British Empire'.

By contrast, he views the alleged activities of the third group - the 'International Jews' - as highly problematic and a threat to the stability of the global order in general and to Britain and its political system in particular. 'Most, if not all' of these Jews, he writes, 'have forsaken the faith of their forefathers, and divorced from their minds all spiritual hopes of the next world'. In their minds, religion has been replaced with ideology. Having turned communist, they now want to abolish not only religion but also the nation state. Their goal, according to Churchill, is to establish 'a world-wide communistic State'.

Somewhat surprisingly at first sight, Churchill claims that this idea is much older than communism itself, and it is here that his text becomes truly relevant for a book on conspiracy theories:

This movement among the Jews is not new. From the days of Spartacus-Weishaupt to those of Karl Marx, and down to Trotsky (Russia), Bela Kun (Hungary), Rosa Luxembourg [*sic*] (Germany), and Emma Goldman (United States), this world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilisation and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing. It played, as a modern writer, Mrs. Webster, has so ably shown, a definitely recognisable part in the tragedy of the French Revolution. It has been the mainspring of every subversive movement during the Nineteenth Century; and now at last this band of extraordinary personalities from the underworld of the great cities of Europe and America have gripped the Russian people by the hair of their heads and have become practically the undisputed masters of that enormous empire.

According to Churchill, then, the rise of communism in Russia is the latest chapter in a 'world-wide conspiracy', led by 'extraordinary personalities', that has been going on since the eighteenth century.

It is therefore hardly surprising that scholars have not only labelled Churchill's speech anti-Semitic but also classified it as a conspiracy theory.² Conspiracy theories have become a focus of public attention over the last two decades, and it is no longer just academics who are quick to discover them in the past and the present. Long ignored by the public, conspiracy theories have now been omnipresent for some time. The suspicions regarding Jews, Freemasons and the Illuminati perpetuated in Churchill's speech remain all-pervasive. And they have been compounded ever since by a host of new allegations expanding on the older conspiracy theories, or in many

cases even merging with them: that the USA carried out the 9/11 attacks itself; that we are being secretly controlled by a New World Order that keeps us docile via chemtrails; that the Ukrainian crisis was orchestrated by NATO; that Barack Obama was not born in the USA or that - along with Angela Merkel and George W. Bush - he belongs to an elite of extra-terrestrial reptilians that feeds upon our negative energy. Not to mention that the moon landing never happened, and that John F. Kennedy was murdered by the CIA.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the emergence of a plethora of highly publicized conspiracist allegations. Some versions claim that the virus is either a Chinese or an American biological weapon which was, depending on the individual story, intentionally or accidentally released. Other versions hold that the virus does not exist or is completely harmless, and that dark forces - the 'deep state', Bill Gates, the World Health Organization, the New World Order or others - are using the hysteria to hurt Donald Trump, reduce the world population, or achieve other malicious goals. For the most part, these coronavirus conspiracy theories are adaptations of much older conspiracy narratives. Quite frequently, the current crisis is imagined to be merely the latest chapter in an ongoing plot and is thus simply grafted onto long-existing narrative templates. At any rate, the popularity of these conspiracy theories shows that revelations concerning alleged plots by countries, intelligence services, international institutions or groups of powerful individuals are no longer confined to subcultures, but are now reaching a wider public.³

Accordingly, many observers have concluded that conspiracy theories are more socially acceptable today than ever before, and that there has been a surge in the number of people believing in them. This has in turn alarmed those

who remain sceptical – still the greater part of the population and the overwhelming majority of the media. Hence, the term ‘conspiracy theory’ has become a permanent fixture of everyday social discourse: barely a week goes by without it appearing in the evening news or the daily papers. Why a particular idea should be called a ‘conspiracy theory’ is never explained, however: apparently, this is something we all understand intuitively. ‘I know it when I see it’, an American judge once said about pornography, and the same applies to most of us when it comes to conspiracy theories. The present example is relatively clear-cut, and unless you subscribe to the myth of an international Jewish conspiracy and therefore believe Churchill to be simply stating a fact, you would probably describe his remarks as a conspiracy theory.

But what is it exactly about Churchill’s speech that earns it this label? What distinguishes his form of conspiracy theorizing from that of Nesta Webster, the source he draws on? And how does the open articulation of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory by perhaps the most important British politician of the twentieth century relate to the claim that conspiracy theories have recently been growing in popularity and influence? What role does the internet play in the spread of conspiracy theories, and how does it influence our belief in them? How long have conspiracy theories in general been around? What is the connection between conspiracy theories and populism? Who actually believes in them and why? Are they dangerous? And if so, what can we do about them?

The answers to these questions are much harder to find than conspiracy theories themselves. There is a glaring disparity between the heat with which the topic is currently discussed and the knowledge informing the vast majority of such discussions. All too often, ideas are described as conspiracy theories when they are not. Opponents of

vaccination may be misguided, but not all of them are conspiracy theorists. Time and time again, different types of conspiracy theories are lumped together, whether they are directed against elites or minorities, and whether they are racist or not. And it is often assumed that that all conspiracy theories encourage violence, when their link with violence is in fact far more complex, as we shall see in the conclusion to this book.

Because of the upsurge of populism in Europe and the USA, and now the COVID-19 crisis, the concern about conspiracy theories has grown exponentially in recent years. In particular, the Brexit campaign and the election of Donald Trump as US president have rendered the public debate over conspiracy theories even more heated and unfocused, resulting for example in a blurring of boundaries between conspiracy theories and fake news. The coronavirus pandemic has done nothing to alleviate this conceptual confusion. But conspiracy theories and fake news are not the same. Conspiracy theories can be fake news – that is, false information deliberately circulated in order to discredit certain individuals and/or achieve some other objective. But not all conspiracy theories are fake news, and vice versa. Many conspiracy theorists are genuinely convinced that they have uncovered a plot; equally, not all deliberately circulated misinformation pertains to an alleged conspiracy. There is an important difference between claiming that concern about COVID-19 is exaggerated and contending that the panic is intentionally manufactured by dark forces in pursuit of some sinister goal.

The imprecise use of the term is not the only problem, however. Those who engage with conspiracy theories – and that goes for academics and journalists alike – often lack an adequate understanding of how they arise, what they do for those who believe in them, and what their potential

consequences may be. This is due not least to the fact that only one study on the subject has so far had any notable and lasting impact on public perception: Richard Hofstadter's famous 1964 essay on the 'paranoid style in American politics'.⁴ Even in the USA, where some dozen compelling books on the subject have been published since the 1990s, few in the media have yet come up with a response to Donald Trump's daily flirtation with conspiracism that doesn't refer to Hofstadter's essay.

Hofstadter, one of the most respected historians of his time, saw belief in conspiracy theories as bordering on clinical paranoia. By the same token, he claimed that, in the USA, the tendency to see conspiracies everywhere had always been confined to a minority on the margins of society. During the 2016 presidential campaign, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Salon.com, the *New Republic* and many other media outlets used Hofstadter's terminology to characterize Trump, and to some extent they still do. Even Hillary Clinton made reference to Hofstadter on one of the rare occasions when she commented directly on Trump's conspiracy theories. At a hustings in Reno, Nevada in August 2016, she accused Trump of exploiting prejudices and paranoia, and appealed to moderate Republicans to resist the takeover of their party by the radical fringe.⁵ Outside the USA, too, Hofstadter's text is still the most influential analysis of conspiracy theories to date. German media such as *Die Zeit* or *Die Welt* for example have also drawn on it in an attempt to understand the Trump phenomenon. Nor are things any better when it comes to other conspiracy theories: writing in August 2018, for instance, *Guardian* columnist Marina Hyde accused the followers of Jeremy Corbyn of 'do[ing] politics in the paranoid style'.⁶

Scholars who study conspiracy theories, however, have long since come to regard Hofstadter's text as outdated. While he makes many valid points, his pathologization of conspiracy theorists as paranoid is highly problematic. Moreover, given that - according to the latest empirical studies - half of the population of the USA, and nearly as many in most European countries, believe in at least one conspiracy theory, it is also completely meaningless.⁷ Other aspects of Hofstadter's argument have proved wrong, too. In short, when it comes to understanding what conspiracy theories are and how they work, neither our intuition nor the one study which has shaped the public understanding of the subject are of any help.

It is the purpose of this book to provide a more accurate account of conspiracy theories. By examining the underlying principles, functions, effects and history of conspiracist thinking, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon. Naturally, I focus on current developments, in particular the association of conspiracy theories with populist rhetoric, as well as the role of the internet in their dissemination. In order to make sense of the present, however, we need a historical perspective. After all, the history of conspiracy theories is also inevitably that of the changing public spheres in which they circulate, and of the media environments that shape them. If we want to understand how the internet - where counterpublics are formed so much more easily than outside the virtual environment, and where conspiracy theories can be continuously updated - influences the forms and functions of conspiracist suspicions, we need to know what things were like before: that is, what influence other media regimes exerted in earlier times.

The crux of my argument is that it is, above all, the status of conspiracy theories in public discourse that has changed most radically over time, and that it is now changing once

again. Even if it might feel like it at times, we are not living in a golden age of conspiracy theories. It is not true that conspiracism is more popular and influential now than ever before. On the contrary: conspiracy theories are currently generating so much discussion precisely because they are still a stigmatized form of knowledge whose premises are regarded with extreme scepticism by many people. And therein lies the difference between past and present. Up to the 1950s, the Western world regarded conspiracy theories as a perfectly legitimate form of knowledge whose underlying assumptions were beyond question. It was therefore normal to believe in them. Only after the Second World War did conspiracy theories begin to undergo a complex process of delegitimization in the USA and Europe, causing conspiracist knowledge to be banished from public discourse and relegated to the realm of subcultures.

On the one hand, the current 'renaissance' of conspiracy theories is partly connected with the rise of populist movements, in that there are structural parallels between populist and conspiracist arguments. On the other hand, the internet plays a key role because it has made conspiracy theories - which had flown under most people's radar for a while - highly visible and easily available again. In addition, the internet has been a catalyst for the fragmentation of the public sphere. What we are experiencing now is a situation where conspiracy theories are still stigmatized in some domains - particularly those we continue to regard as mainstream - but are being accepted once again as legitimate knowledge in others. It is the clash between these domains and their different conceptions of truth that is fuelling the current debate over such theories. While some people are fearful (once again) of conspiracies, others are (or remain) more concerned with the dire consequences of conspiracy theories. In this

respect, you could say we are entering a third phase in the history of conspiracism. After the long period of widespread acceptance and the short one of complete stigmatization, we in the West are now living in a world where conspiracy theories are simultaneously legitimate and illegitimate knowledge. Everything that is currently discussed regarding these theories – who believes in them and why and to what effects – needs to be understood against this background.

In what follows, I develop this argument in six chapters, arranged in such a way that they can also be read in isolation or in a different order. In [Chapter 1](#), I discuss various definitions and typologies of conspiracy theories, noting in particular that the term is not merely a neutral description but always implies – at least in everyday discourse – a value judgement. [Chapter 2](#) deals with the evidence used in conspiracy theories. What arguments are put forward by believers, and how do they tell the story of the plots they believe they have discovered? In [Chapter 3](#), I analyse the different functions of conspiracy theories for individuals and groups, and discuss the question of whether some people are more receptive to such theories than others. [Chapter 4](#) traces the historical development of conspiracy theories from antiquity to the present, and ends with a discussion of the relationship between conspiracy theories and populism. [Chapter 5](#) is devoted to the impact of the internet on the visibility and status, as well as the rhetoric and argumentation, of conspiracy theories. Using the coronavirus crisis as a point of departure, the book concludes by examining whether and in what circumstances conspiracy theories are dangerous, and tackles the current controversy over what to do about them.

As a German Americanist, I draw most of my examples from the USA, the UK and the German-speaking countries,

but my analysis is not limited to these cultures. Due to my systematic approach, my observations also apply to conspiracy theories and cultures that I do not mention at all. However, my perspective on conspiracy theories is that of a scholar trained in literary and cultural studies. Much of what follows is the consensus view across academic disciplines; on some issues, though, opinions are divided, and a quantitative psychologist would come to very different conclusions. I also raise questions at various points which no discipline is currently able to answer due to the fact that little or no research has been done in these areas. In this respect, my book merely marks, if anything, the end of the beginning of the study of conspiracy theories. What goes for conspiracy theorists goes for conspiracy theory researchers too: there is always more to learn.

Notes

- 1 Churchill, W., 'Zionism versus Bolshevism: a Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People', *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, 8 February 1920, p. 5, at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Zionism_versus_Bolshevism.
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- 4 Hofstadter, R., 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and*

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6 Jacobsen, L., 'Das Trump-Puzzle: Angstpolitik', *Zeit online*, 3 November 2016, at <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-10/donald-trump-puzzle-phaenomen-us-wahl-populismus>; Lepenies, W., 'Die Politik der Paranoia erreicht jetzt auch uns', *Welt.de*, 10 March 2016, at <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article153103845/Die-Politik-der-Paranoia-erreicht-jetzt-auch-uns.html>; Stein, H., 'Der gefährliche Glaube an die große

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7 For the USA, see Oliver, E. and Wood, T., 'Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion', *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4), 2014: pp. 952-66; for Europe, see Drochon, H., 'Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories in Great Britain and Europe?', in Uscinski, J. (ed.) *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 337-46.

1

‘Everything is planned’, or: What is a conspiracy theory?

Conspiracy theories assert the existence of a covertly operating group of people – the conspirators – who seek, from base motives and by underhand means, to achieve a certain end. The word ‘conspiracy’ comes from the Latin verb *conspirare*, meaning to be in harmony or act in concert. A conspiracy, whether real or imagined, is therefore never the work of one individual, but always of a group, whether large or small. But conspiracy theories have other typical characteristics, too, which I discuss in the first part of this chapter, once again using the example of Winston Churchill’s text ‘Zionism versus Bolshevism’. I then go on to consider some typologies that have been proposed for the classification of conspiracy theories. In particular, I distinguish between top-down, bottom-up, internal and external varieties, as well as between scenarios centring on a specific event, a specific group of conspirators or a combination of the above. Next, I address the question of what distinguishes the plots alleged by conspiracy theorists from actual conspiracies. I show that conspiracy theories usually imagine far more comprehensive and ambitious – and hence impracticable – plots than actual conspiracies, which are very limited in terms of their scope and objectives. Above all, conspiracy theories assume a false view of people and history in claiming that history can be planned and controlled over any length of time. This leads me to the observation that the term ‘conspiracy theory’, both in everyday parlance and in academic discourse, is nearly always an evaluative concept that is used to discredit the ideas of others – even

if they do not display the typical characteristics of conspiracy theories. That said, it is in my view nevertheless possible to use the term neutrally, as I argue in the fourth part of this chapter. Finally, I examine calls to replace the term 'conspiracy theory' with 'conspiracy ideology'. This discussion is limited to German-speaking countries; elsewhere, scholars seem either to have no problem with it or to accept that the term 'conspiracy theory' is already so well established that an alternative would fail to catch on anyway. The debate is, notwithstanding, of general interest, since it highlights the question of how far conspiracy theories are in fact theories, and what distinguishes them from scientific theories.

Characteristics

According to the American political scientist Michael Barkun, conspiracy theories are characterized – in addition to the premise of a group of conspirators – by three basic assumptions: 1) Nothing happens by accident; 2) Nothing is as it seems; 3) Everything is connected. The English historian Geoffrey Cubitt, who formulated another influential definition of conspiracism, takes a very similar view. For him, intentionality, secrecy (which he refers to as occultism) and the dualism of good and evil constitute the essence of conspiracy theory. Intentionality and secrecy correspond almost exactly to Barkun's first two components in that the conspirators follow a plan and act in secret, while dualism is highlighted elsewhere by Barkun. The conspirators are invariably imagined as evil, and their actions as causing harm to the wider mass of innocent people.¹

All these characteristics can indeed be found in Churchill's short text, especially in the paragraph on 'International Jews', which I will therefore cite again at greater length:

In violent opposition to all this sphere of Jewish effort rise the schemes of the International Jews. The adherents of this sinister confederacy are mostly men reared up among the unhappy populations of countries where Jews are persecuted on account of their race. Most, if not all, of them have forsaken the faith of their forefathers, and divorced from their minds all spiritual hopes of the next world. This movement among the Jews is not new. From the days of Spartacus-Weishaupt to those of Karl Marx, and down to Trotsky (Russia), Bela Kun (Hungary), Rosa Luxembourg [*sic*] (Germany), and Emma Goldman (United States), this world-wide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality, has been steadily growing. It played, as a modern writer, Mrs Webster, has so ably shown, a definitely recognizable part in the tragedy of the French Revolution. It has been the mainspring of every subversive movement during the Nineteenth Century; and now at last this band of extraordinary personalities from the underworld of the great cities of Europe and America have gripped the Russian people by the hair of their heads and have become practically the undisputed masters of that enormous empire.

In a single paragraph, Churchill paints the picture of a global conspiracy that has been operating at least since 1776, when the Order of the Illuminati was founded by Adam Weishaupt - 'Spartacus' to his brethren within the secret society - in the Bavarian town of Ingolstadt. According to Churchill, this 'world-wide conspiracy' secretly orchestrated the French Revolution, was behind various revolutions throughout the nineteenth century - he is surely thinking in particular of the series of failed and successful revolutions of 1848 - and is now, more

successfully than ever, orchestrating events in Russia. Admittedly, Churchill is slightly more careful than other conspiracy theorists, as he does not entirely disregard other influences. Still, the conspirators 'played ... a definitely recognisable part in the tragedy of the French Revolution' and have 'been the mainspring of every subversive movement during the Nineteenth Century'. In a manner characteristic of conspiracy theorizing since the eighteenth century, Churchill thus considers world history largely the result of a conspiracy. He denies that the revolutions in different countries were the result of a number of complex and interrelating factors, some local, some national, some transnational, and reduces history to the secret workings of a group of conspirators who are pursuing a single goal - 'the overthrow of civilization' - and have therefore plotted all of these events.

Moreover, in the short vision of history that Churchill provides here, nothing is as it seems. Not only does he unveil a global conspiracy that has been operating for more than 200 years; without offering any kind of evidence for his claims, he also maintains that Adam Weishaupt, who in reality was raised as a Catholic but later rejected the more traditional versions of religion in favour of Deism, was a Jew, one of those who gave up 'the faith of their forefathers, and divorced from their minds all spiritual hopes of the next world'. In fact, in Churchill's logic, the masterminds behind the various revolutionary efforts he considers are all either Jews who keep their real identities a secret or are controlled by Jews. These explicit and implicit claims allow him to construct a teleological historical narrative that spans from the Illuminati to the Bolsheviks, from Ingolstadt to St Petersburg. What we see here in a nutshell, then, is how the characteristics of conspiracy theory identified by Barkun and Cubitt are interconnected. Once one looks beneath the surface of

things, the hidden connections become apparent.

Admittedly, not everything is connected in Churchill's text – in that regard Barkun exaggerates slightly – but many links between events and people one would not have thought of as related are highlighted.

The dualism of good and evil that Cubitt particularly emphasizes structures Churchill's text in twofold fashion. On the one hand, there is the conflict between the malevolent conspirators, 'schem[ing for] a world-wide communistic State under Jewish domination', and the innocent victims of their plot. On the other hand, there is the conflict that frames Churchill's conspiracy narrative, the conflict between 'Good and Bad Jews', between those subscribing to nationalism and those plotting for international communism. As he claims early in his text, 'The conflict between good and evil which proceeds unceasingly in the breast of man nowhere reaches such an intensity as in the Jewish race.'

When it comes to providing evidence of the alleged plot – a topic I discuss in detail in the next chapter – Churchill's speech is rather untypical. It deviates from what we usually find in conspiracy theory texts in that he does not provide a lot of evidence for his claims. Because of the genre of the text – a short speech that simply does not allow for an in-depth analysis – he does not quote any sources to prove that there really is a plot. In fact, he places the burden of proof on another conspiracy theorist, 'a modern writer, Mrs Webster, [who, he claims] has so ably shown' that the conspirators orchestrated the French Revolution. Such a reference is quite typical of conspiracist discourse, however. Conspiracy theorists often back up their feeble assertions by referring to sources who have made the same claims, usually without offering any convincing evidence themselves. All too often, the conspiracy theorists thus quoted refer back to those who cited them, engaging in a

circular logic that creates the impression of serious research and a foundation in facts.

It is no coincidence that Churchill refers to Nesta Webster (1876–1960), a member of the British upper class and wife of Arthur Templer Webster, the Superintendent of the British Police in India. Webster is one of the most significant conspiracy theorists of the twentieth century, whose influence on contemporary conspiracist visions that merge suspicions about secret societies, Jews and communists cannot be overestimated. She single-handedly resuscitated the Illuminati conspiracy theory that had gone out of fashion by the second half of the nineteenth century, and is thus the most important link between late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century conspiracy theorists like John Robison, Augustin Barruel and Johann August von Starck, who blamed the Illuminati and the Freemasons for the French Revolution, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers who do the same.²

The book by Webster that Churchill has in mind is *The French Revolution: A Study in Democracy*, from 1919, in which she breathed new life into the allegations of Robison, Barruel and Starck. In the book's epilogue, she also connected the alleged plots around the French Revolution to other revolutions in the nineteenth century and current events in Russia. Still, Webster did not (yet) explicitly argue that the same group of conspirators was behind all of these events. She rather highlighted what she perceived as the overarching structural parallel: all these upheavals were rooted in bottom-up conspiracies. Thus, Churchill is far more extreme in his claims about the reach and longevity of the conspiracy than the source he refers to. However, in subsequent writings Webster caught up with and surpassed Churchill. In *The French Terror and Russian Bolshevism* (1920), *World Revolution: The Plot against Civilization* (1921), *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* (1924)

and a number of other texts, she merged – as the titles of these books already indicate – allegations against Jews, communists, Freemasons and Illuminati far more aggressively. It is tempting to speculate that the way Churchill adopted her argument at least helped to push Webster in that direction.³

Typologies

There are conspiracy theories that claim the moon landing was staged in a television studio by the American government, or that the CIA was behind the 9/11 attacks. Others accuse the Illuminati of secretly controlling the destiny of the world for centuries. The Nazis believed that a global Jewish-Bolshevist conspiracy was at work. And in the nineteenth century large numbers of French people believed that the Jesuits were slowly but surely taking control of state institutions. Clearly, not all conspiracy theories are the same. There are significant differences in the scope and degree of advancement of the conspiracy, as well as the nature of the group of conspirators, and it is therefore necessary to introduce a few distinctions at this point. At the same time, we should bear in mind that typologies are heuristic instruments designed to sharpen our awareness of certain phenomena. Needless to say, there will always be hybrid forms that resist precise classification and call into question the choice of categories.

One of the first key distinctions concerns the position in which the conspirators find themselves. Have they already gained control over the institution or country they are plotting against, or indeed over the entire world? Are their plots primarily about consolidating their power or increasing it? Or are they still in the process of assuming that power by infiltrating institutions and subverting