"John Birch Blues": The Problematization of Conspiracy Theory in the Early Cold War Era

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that the status of conspiracy theory changed from legitimate to illegitimate knowledge in the mid-20th century. By tracing the academic, cultural, and political discourses of the early Cold War era, I show how the experience of World War II, the Red Scare of the 1950s, and the rise in political extremism from the right in the 1960s significantly contributed to the delegitimization of conspiracy theory.

KEYWORDS: Conspiracy Theory; Knowledge; Cold War; John Birch Society; Anti-Communism

Introduction

Former intelligence analyst Edward Snowden's disclosures about surveillance programs caused a stir among believers in and critics of conspiracy theories alike. *New York Times* op-ed columnist Ross Douthat worried that "[i]n this atmosphere, […] paranoia will be more reasonable, and conspiracy theories will proliferate," while conspiracy theorists expressed great satisfaction at the Snowden leaks. For a long time, they claimed, politicians and the mainstream media had dismissed their warnings of large-scale surveillance programs as paranoid fantasies of a lunatic fringe, but now these warnings finally proved to be true. "Feels good to be a gloating conspiracy theorist, doesn't it?," a user remarked on Ron Paul's website *Daily Paul* ("Feels"), and Mike Adams complained on *NaturalNews* that "[a]nyone who suggested [government surveillance] was taking place—like Alex Jones—[had been] branded a loon." He continued to wonder: "Will the media now apologize to him for warning of this exact thing?"

What resonates in these comments is not just the question of narrative authority, but the question why the terms 'conspiracy theorist' and 'conspiracy theory' respectively carry such a negative connotation today. To propagate conspiracy theories has become almost socially unacceptable, and more often than not the term is used in a pejorative sense to prevent someone from participating in an ongoing debate.[1] As Peter Knight observes, "[c]alling something a conspiracy theory is not infrequently enough to end discussion" (11). Yet, at the same time, conspiracy theories also seem popular and ubiquitous, from alternative news

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[1] I broadly define the term 'conspiracy theory' as the belief that a secret group of conspirators is responsible for causing or having caused certain events or circumstances.

websites, such as Adams's *NaturalNews* or Alex Jones's *Prison Planet*, to TV shows such as *Homeland* or *Hostages* and the political discourse surrounding the Tea Party. This perceived omnipresence of conspiracy theories has caused some scholars to contend that conspiracist worldviews have become "the lingua franca of many ordinary Americans" since the late 20th century (Knight 2), in particular since the Kennedy assassination and the Watergate scandal, and that conspiracy theories are today more influential and popular than ever before (Melley vii; Fenster 7).

However, in this article, I argue that the status of conspiracy theory underwent a significant shift in the middle of the 20th century. While conspiracy theories have enjoyed great popularity throughout American history, I claim that they have increasingly lost value in political culture since the early Cold War era because they have been marginalized by mainstream discourse. In part I thus agree with scholars such as Michael Barkun, Jack Bratich, or Clare Birchall, who believe that conspiracy theories represent and produce illegitimate knowledge. In keeping with the Foucauldian distinction between "official" and "subjugated knowledges" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 82), they suggest categorizing conspiracy theories as "stigmatized knowledge" (Barkun 26), "subjugated knowledges" (Bratich 7), or "popular knowledge" (Birchall 4). Birchall, for instance, defines conspiracy theories as knowledge that "traditionally ha[s] not counted as knowledge at all" because it has been disqualified or found to be unscientific (1, 11). At the same time, she holds, conspiracy theories "still enjoy mass circulation" (1), as the proliferation of conspiracy theories in the wake of the September 11 attacks demonstrates (60).

The problem with these scholars' view is that it focuses entirely on conspiracy theories in the late 20th and early 21st century and does not take into consideration that conspiracy theories have not always produced and represented illegitimate knowledge. From the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 to the Civil War and the Red Scares of the 20th century, from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln—fears of conspiracy often framed important political events and found prominent believers who took allegations of conspiracy very seriously. George Washington and the revolutionaries, for instance, justified their struggle for independence by arguing that the American colonists had become the victims of a conspiracy designed by the British crown (see Bailyn ch. IV). Abraham Lincoln accused the so-called Southern Slave Power of plotting to nationalize slavery (see Butter ch. 4). For a long

time, conspiracy theory served as an established epistemological model that produced what was still considered legitimate knowledge—to reverse Birchall's definition: conspiracy theory *traditionally* counted as knowledge.

The aim of this paper is to investigate when the shift in the status of conspiracy theories occurred. As I will show, it is, above all, academics, elite journalists, and intellectuals who, from the mid-20th century onward, began to problematize conspiracy theories. According to Michel Foucault

> [p]roblematization doesn't mean representation of a pre-existing object, nor the creation by discourse of an object that doesn't exist. It is the totality of discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.). (*Politics* 247)

By tracing the delegitimization of conspiracy theory in the political, cultural, and academic discourses of the time, I will demonstrate how the term conspiracy theory was constituted as an object for thought in a play of binaries between what was considered true and false, rational and irrational, political and anti-political. This delegitimization process can be broken down into three phases: the first phase encompasses the beginnings of conspiracy theory research published between the 1930s and the early 1950s; the second phase follows the height of the Red Scare in the mid-1950s; and the third phase runs from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s. In response to political, historical, and socio-cultural events such as the Second World War and the emergence of totalitarian regimes in the East and West, the anti-communism of the 1950s, and the rise in extremist political movements on the left and right, academics, journalists, and intellectuals denounced conspiracy theory as an outdated, irrational, and inherently dangerous worldview in order to distinguish between what they considered to be legitimate and illegitimate knowledge and legitimate and illegitimate politics. I will now use the example of 1950s anti-communist conspiracy theories to briefly show when these demarcation lines emerged and when the epistemological concept of conspiracy theorizing first drew widespread criticism.

The Red Scare of the 1950s: From Legitimate to Illegitimate Knowledge

When in 1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy began to propagate his warnings of a communist conspiracy, "a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in

the history of man" (135-36), he was neither the first nor the only public figure to spread such anti-communist conspiracy theories. The belief that the Soviet Union was secretly plotting to win control over the United States and the rest of the non-communist world was widespread during the Red Scare. As early as 1946 President Truman saw in communist subversives "a national danger […,] a sabotage front for Uncle Joe Stalin" (qtd. in Fariello 31) and as late as 1958 the director of the FBI J. Edgar Hoover cautioned that "communist puppets throughout the country" had begun to infiltrate American society and institutions (81). These anti-communist conspiracy theories fueled a hunt for communist conspirators and spies which impacted many Americans' lives and had serious political and social consequences (Schrecker, *Many* xvi; Doherty 14). From Hollywood actors to high-school teachers and government employees, those who were suspected of serving the communist conspiracy often had to face the scrutiny of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).[2] While some of the alleged communists lost their job or faced imprisonment, most of them were victimized as disloyal and 'un-American' citizens (Schrecker, *Many* 360-61). The hunt for communist subversives also unfolded on screen in television shows such as *I Led 3 Lives*, in which former communists testified to the atrocity of the alleged conspiracy, and in science-fiction films such as *Invaders from Mars* (1953), which represented communists as extraterrestrial Martians in green velvet suits. On a deeper level, the anti-communist propaganda that came to be known as 'McCarthyism'[3] encoded larger socio-cultural and political concerns such as the transformations in gender roles or anxieties about a nuclear war (Jacobson and González 39), but nevertheless there existed a broad anti-communist consensus in the early 1950s.

However, when Robert Welch—a former candy manufacturer from Massachusetts—founded the John Birch Society in 1958 with the goal of fighting against the so-called 'Red Menace,' his anti-communist conspiracy theories met with extreme criticism. In Welch's version of the theory, the United States had turned into a Roman Republic on the verge of destruction because it "ha[d] been pushed down the demagogic road to disaster by

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[2] Initially called the Special House Committee on Un-American Activities, HUAC was founded to investigate what was perceived to be "un-American propaganda" (Schrecker, *Many* 91). It was made into a permanent committee in 1945 and played a crucial role in the institutionalized hunt for communist subversives during the Red Scare.

[3] I am aware of the limits of the term 'McCarthyism' (see, e.g., Schrecker, *Many* 265), but since it is widely used in the political and scientific discourses of the Cold War era I sometimes make use of it as well.

conspiratorial hands" ("Republics" 104). These conspiratorial hands, Welch believed, not just belonged to communist spies but also to President Eisenhower, who served as the major agent of the conspiracy (*Politician* 5-6), as well as the secret society of the Illuminati, which strove to impose the New World Order (Bennett 317). Although the John Birch Society initially attracted a steady but small following of about 80,000 members in the early 1960s (Bennett 319), the Birchers never represented a mainstream phenomenon as McCarthyism had been.

One of the reasons for that is that both conservatives and left-wing intellectuals widely attacked the Society from its beginning. With the 1964 election in view, Republicans such as the presidential candidate Barry Goldwater and editor William Buckley, who had been an admirer of McCarthy (Rovere, *Senator* 22), feared that Welch would damage their Party's reputation and put it in danger of losing the election. "We cannot allow the emblem of irresponsibility to attach to the conservative banner," Goldwater demanded while Buckley criticized Welch's conspiracist views for being "so far removed from common sense" (qtd. in Buckley). Even the staunch anti-communist Hoover labeled Welch a "self-styled expert […] on communism" who was merely causing "hysteria" (qtd. in George and Wilcox 216). The most effective criticism, however, came from historian Richard Hofstadter, who famously dismissed the Society's beliefs in particular and conspiracy theories in general as a "paranoid style" (*Paranoid* 7).

As I have briefly demonstrated, the status of anti-communist conspiracy theories underwent a significant change in the late 1950s to mid-1960s. For academics such as Hofstadter and intellectuals such as Buckley the Manichean worldview of conspiracy theory no longer produced and represented legitimate knowledge. Even Republican Barry Goldwater renounced the conspiracist views of the John Birch Society in order not to alienate centrist or left-wing voters. This, of course, raises the question how this status shift occurred and how the demarcation lines between legitimate and illegitimate politics and between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge were drawn. A look at the three phases of delegitimization shows that academics had already begun to problematize the epistemological model of conspiracy theories years before Robert Welch founded his right-wing organization.

The Three Phases of Delegitimization

Phase 1: Early Conspiracy Scholarship

Since the 1930s various disciplines, such as political psychology, sociology, and philosophy of science, had turned to conspiracy theory as an object of study. Marked by the experience of the two World Wars and the rise in totalitarianism, scientists set out to explain why people subscribed to conspiracist and stereotyped propaganda, above all to the anti-Semitic propaganda of Nazi ideology.[4] There were also growing concerns that anti-Semitic sentiments proliferated in American culture of the 1930s and 1940s as the anti-Semitic rants of Father Coughlin and Gerald Smith filled the airwaves while the fundamentalist preacher Gerald Winrod proclaimed his belief that the United States had become the target of a combined Zionist-communist conspiracy whose chief conspirator was "the blackest, most ferocious, diabolical character the world has ever known, a counterfeit Christ, energized by a demon power, a veritable Judas-Nero-Napoleon-Mussolini-Nietzsche" (28). By investigating the nexus between ethnocentric prejudices, anti-Semitism, and propaganda, academics also began to investigate the role that conspiracy thinking played in anti-Semitic propaganda.

On the one hand, academics like Harold D. Lasswell and Theodor Adorno used psychoanalytic concepts to argue that the predilection to believe in conspiracy theories ran strongest in certain personality types which they called "the agitator" (Lasswell 78) or the "authoritarian personality" (Adorno et al. 611). In true Freudian fashion, they linked these personality types' paranoid tendencies to their sexual drives (Adorno et al. 612, 776) and explained that agitators used conspiracy theories to channel certain psychological problems, such as the inability to sustain lasting interpersonal relationships, a blocked libido, or the repression of homosexual desires (Lasswell 78). By dressing symptoms as causes, these authors pathologized conspiracy theories and, as Lasswell's definition of politics as "the arena of the irrational" suggests (184), portrayed them as highly irrational products of the unconscious (also see Dunst 297).

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[4] In fact, many of the researchers who studied conspiracy theories were marked by the events of the Second World War. Both Adorno and Lowenthal had emigrated from Nazi Germany, and Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab explained in the preface to *The Politics of Unreason* that the fact that they were "Jews of the generation of the holocaust […] must affect all that [they had to] write, say, and do about extremism [and conspiracy theory]" (xviii).

On the other hand, academics looked for social and cultural reasons to explain why people believed in conspiracy theories. For instance, Leo Lowenthal, a member of the Frankfurt School as well, and Norbert Guterman worried that conspiracy theories would fall on particularly fertile ground in increasingly complex modern mass societies. In *Prophets of Deceit* they stated that demagogues provided overly simplistic solutions for the complex problems that haunted modern society—such as the economic depression, the alienation of the individual, and changes in gender roles (14-15)—by suggesting that these transformations were caused by a group of conspirators acting in secret (24-25). "The agitator," as Lowenthal and Guterman called the demagogues of the 1930s and 1940s, "does not spin his grumblings out of thin air" (15). While they problematized the simplistic conspiracism of these demagogues (7), Lowenthal and Guterman emphasized that conspiracy theories were not "a lunatic product beyond analysis" (14) and had to be seen in the specific historical and socio-cultural context from which they originated. For Lowenthal and Guterman, conspiracy theorizing was a meaning-making cultural practice that was worth analyzing and studying.

By venturing into the fledgling field of conspiracy theory research, Lasswell, Lowenthal and Guterman, as well as Adorno and his colleagues helped to establish conspiracy theory as an object of study and an object for thought. They also provided two main arguments which strongly influenced later research on conspiracy theory: (1) that conspiracy theory, as a symptom of and outlet for psychological problems, was inherently irrational; and (2) that conspiracy theory could be seen as a reaction to social, political, and cultural problems. Philosopher Karl Popper presented another important argument: (3) that conspiracy theory was unscientific.

In his book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Popper disqualified conspiracy theory as a quasi-religious worldview. As "a version of […] theism" (*Conjectures* 165), Popper argued, conspiracy theories had emerged in the wake of the secularization during the Enlightenment. For him, they represented simplistic models of agency and causality which held that the mechanisms of society were shaped by a continual conflict between evil conspirators and morally upright citizens (*Open* 94-97). Conspiracy theory thus served as a prime example of certain "erroneous beliefs" (*Conjectures* 10) that continued to prove popular even though they did not adhere to the standard criteria of scientificity. "*The*

conspiracy theory of society," as Popper called it, constituted the complete "opposite of the true aim of the social sciences" (*Open* 94; emphasis in orig.) because it was a theory that could not be argued with or refuted (95).

Discipline	Major Theorists	Goals	Argument
Political psychology	Harold D. Lasswell Theodor W. Adorno et al.	Study the link between certain (political) personality types and the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories	Conspiracy theory as an expression of psychological problems (irrational)
Sociology	Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman	Examine the socio-cultural causes for the proliferation of conspiracy theories	Conspiracy theory as an expression of socio-cultural problems (symptomatic)
Philosophy of science	Karl Popper	Determine how to distinguish between science and pseudoscience	Conspiracy theory as pseudoscience (unscientific)

Fig. 1. The Three Phases of Delegitimization.

While Popper did not see conspiracy theories as symptoms of paranoia and psychosis, as he eschewed the psychoanalytical approach of Lasswell and Adorno and his colleagues, he also emphasized the irrational character of conspiracy theories (95). Instead of focusing on the psychological problems of the conspiracy theorist, however, he focused on the forms and workings of conspiracy theories and concluded that they represented the opposite of official, scientific, legitimate knowledge. Unlike Lowenthal and Guterman, who believed that conspiracy theories were not yet a mass phenomenon (138), Popper thought that conspiracy theories were "very widespread" (*Conjectures* 166) and would continue to proliferate because they "ha[d] an astonishing power to survive, for thousands of years, in defiance of experience, with or without the aid of conspiracy" (10). The 1950s, in the eyes of many of his academic colleagues, proved him right.

Second Phase: McCarthyism

When McCarthy took the stage in the 1950s he seemed to represent the epitome of the demagogic agitator that the early research on conspiracy theory had described years before. Many academics and journalists, in particular those on the left, viewed McCarthy's rise to fame with great concern. They did not perceive the invasion of communist conspirators to be the threat of their age but the invasion and pervasiveness of anti-communist conspiracy

theories—even more so since the conflict between communists and anti-communists raged in classrooms as well. As throughout the nation, there were both collaborators and victims of the Red Scare to be found among academics, but those who were labelled a communist often lost their position and income (Schrecker, *No* 340, 160). Increasingly, intellectuals worried that the intrusion of politics and ideology into the academic world posed a challenge to the autonomy of the sciences and scientists (Gordin 99-100). Consequently, in keeping with Popper's demarcation line, many academics in the 1950s defended science and the academe against the propaganda of McCarthy and other demagogues and against the interventions of the HUAC by branding anti-communist conspiracy theories as irrational pseudoscience. Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin summarized the academics' concerns when she warned that in "these days of loyalty oaths," it was important for scientists to stick "to principles, not to dogmas; to respect for evidence" (qtd. in Gordin 99)—in other words, to eliminate the unscientific, the irrational, and the heterodox.

The sociologists Edward Shils and Seymour Martin Lipset, consensus historian Richard Hofstadter as well as the political journalist Richard Rovere tried to eliminate the irrational by continuing to disqualify conspiracy theory as illegitimate knowledge. In a 1956 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Rovere, for example, criticized that

> [c]onspiracy theories seem to me the great intellectual plague of our time. They bother me so much that I sometimes have to check myself to make certain that I am not becoming Senator McCarthy […] of conspiracy theories—talking, that is, as if there were some dark plot afoot to undermine our way of life with talk of dark plots. ("Easy" 12)

His commentary shows that many intellectuals and academics in the 1950s did not so much fear the communist plot itself but rather the exploitation of fears about a communist plot by demagogues such as Senator McCarthy. In order to prevent this exploitation through anti-communist propaganda they called into question the legitimacy of conspiracist worldviews in general. Lipset and Hofstadter thus argued that conspiracy theories served as outlets for the discontented fringes who felt economically and socially neglected by the changes in postwar society. Instead of making themselves felt in politics, they interpreted their predicament as the result of a conspiracy by political elites (Hofstadter, "Pseudo" 43-44; Lipset, "Sources" 168). Shils, in return, viewed anti-communist conspiracy theories as a form of populism and demanded that they should "be confined to the alleys and bars and back

streets and to the hate-filled hearts of the miserable creatures who espouse [them]" (15). If the heterodox could not be completely eliminated, Shils and the other intellectuals believed, it could at least be marginalized to the fringes of American society.

While it seems that with Rovere's dismissal of the everyday uses of conspiracy theory in *Harper's Magazine* the debates on the problems and pitfalls of conspiracism had entered mainstream discourse by the mid-1950s, there are two striking observations to be made about this second phase. First, most of the writing that attacked conspiracy theories in the 1950s, like Rovere's column, was only published after the height of the Red Scare and after McCarthy had been censured by the Senate. Many writers conceded that they believed in the existence of a communist conspiracy themselves—or, at least, did not dare to publicly profess otherwise—and preferred to assess the effects of 'McCarthyism' from a distance. Rovere admitted, for instance, that "[c]ommunism [wa]s, after all, an international conspiracy" (*Senator* 42), while Daniel Bell warned that communism, "[a]s a conspiracy, […] [wa]s a threat to any democratic society" (29). What differentiated these writers' conspiracist views from that of the fringes was, as Shils emphasized, that theirs was more "realistic"—to excessively worry about and propagate conspiracy theories, on the other hand, was "unrealistic" (32). Second, the writings in the 1950s often carry optimistic overtones. "It is extremely doubtful that the radical right will grow beyond the peak of 1953-54," Lipset stated in 1955 ("Sources" 217), while Shils believed that the Red Scare had been a mere "lapse," albeit "a humiliating and unjustified" one, in American history (9). In the early 1960s, however, Lipset, Hofstadter, and other academics were beginning to have doubts if the chapter on the radical right and its belief in conspiracy theories was indeed closed.

Third Phase: Political Extremism

While Shils, Lipset, and other academics in the 1950s had problematized anti-communist conspiracy theories in the hope that conspiracy theorizing could be confined to the back streets of American society, they felt their hopes shattered when the John Birch Society and other extremist movements, such as the Christian Crusade or the Life Line Foundation, followed McCarthy's example in the early 1960s. Consensus historians and pluralist political scientists, among them Richard Hofstadter, John Bunzel, and Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, felt that this political extremism threatened to unsettle American society, which was already weakened by the ideological skirmishes of the Cold War (see Fenster 24). For them,

American democracy was built on rationality, order, and shared power among a variety of social and political groups, which strove for consensus—not conflict (Rogin 10-12). As a consequence, they argued that political extremists, such as the John Birch Society, disturbed this balance because their conspiracist worldviews were irrational and their ultimate goal was to create conflict. Drawing on the insights from earlier research by Lasswell, Adorno as well as Lowenthal and Guterman,[5] consensus historians and pluralists hence drew demarcation lines between rational and irrational, political and anti-political, democratic and anti-democratic behavior and thought (Lipset and Raab 6, Bunzel 3) and defined conspiracy theories as the pathological expressions of political extremists for which there was no place in a pluralist American democracy.

These writers of the 1960s and 1970s thus forged a link between anti-democratic extremism on the one hand and irrational, unscientific conspiracy theories on the other (also see Bratich 25; Fenster 24). While Lipset and Raab, for instance, conceded that political extremism "[wa]s, of course, more than [conspiracy theory] conceptually" (7), they nevertheless saw in conspiracy theories the "constant companion of […] extremist movements," their unmistakable "political baggage" (490). In the intellectual battles between consensus and pluralist scholars and right- and left-wing extremists, conspiracy theories moved to the front lines because they helped to identify political extremism: they represented the worldview and style of the radical. In order to outlaw what they considered to be the "absolute political evil" of extremism (Bunzel 4), the consensus and pluralist scholars also portrayed conspiracy theories as an absolute evil and fully delegitimized the epistemological concept of conspiracy theorizing. Proper political dissent, they stated, would only be heard if it was *not* voiced in the form of conspiracy theories.

This third phase between the early 1960s and mid-1970s saw a steady rise in academic and journalistic writings that attacked conspiracy theory as an epistemological concept. Thus it was constituted as an object of thought in the play of Cold War binaries between what was considered democratic and anti-democratic, political and anti-political, right and wrong. From today's perspective, Mark Fenster remarks ironically, "this overproduction of worried scholarship seems rather neurotic, if not paranoid" (30). In short, intellectuals had caught

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[5] Hofstadter himself mentions Lasswell in the introduction to *The Paranoid Style* (xxxiii), and in his 1955 book *The Age of Reform* he gives credit to the study by Lowenthal and Guterman (72-3).

the "John Birch Blues," to borrow from the title of Bob Dylan's 1962 song. Like the Bircher in Dylan's song, who sees "them Reds everywhere," the academics and journalists of the 1960s and 1970s saw extremists and conspiracy theorists everywhere.

Contested Knowledge

By arguing that conspiracy theories in the 21st century are more popular, omnipresent, and influential than before, recent literature on conspiracy theory has often portrayed the political and social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s—the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate affair, to name but a few—as a turning point in what Knight calls American "conspiracy culture" (3). "Since the 1960s," he writes, "conspiracy theories have become far more prominent, no longer the favoured rhetoric of backwater scaremongers" (2). In the aftermath of these events, the argument runs, Americans have lost faith in the integrity of the administration in particular and political institutions in general and instead have begun to approach politics with a hermeneutics of suspicion. However, as I have shown, by the time the Kennedy assassination and Watergate shook Americans' faith in their political institutions and authorities, conspiracy theory had already been delegitimized as an epistemological concept. The tumultuous 1960s and 1970s did not challenge the status of conspiracy theory as illegitimate knowledge. Instead, I believe, conspiracy theories began to travel into the realms of the private and the popular because they, at this point, no longer produced legitimate knowledge and no longer served as an accepted currency in the political sphere.

On the one hand, conspiracy theorizing seemed to become more popular and commodified in the wake of the Kennedy assassination. Michael Barkun has argued that a large-scale "cottage industry in conspiracism" (2) emerged when conspiracy theorists demanded a new investigation of the assassination. These "assassination researchers" (Trillin 41) became increasingly professional as they founded networks and new channels of distribution for their theories and sometimes even worked their way onto the bestseller lists as, for instance, Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* (1966).[6] At the same time, mainstream newspapers and magazines such as *Life* or the *New York Times* increasingly devoted pages to these theories, often trying to refute or corroborate their claims and labeling them as reasonable

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[6] For a more detailed account of this professionalization and commodification of conspiracy theory after the Kennedy assassination see chapter 4 in Kathryn Olmsted's *Real Enemies* (111-48).

or unreasonable. Thus, the famous title of the November 1966 issue of *Life* magazine deemed the Kennedy assassination "A Matter of Reasonable Doubt."

On the other hand, just like Robert Welch and the John Birch Society, the conspiracy theorists of the 1960s and 1970s were never well-respected and mostly ridiculed as the "assassination conspiracy cult" (Donner 658). The press never failed to remind readers that conspiracy theories no longer served as an accepted means to voice concerns about the political upheaval. Rehashing the arguments of earlier conspiracy theory research, journalists criticized conspiracy theories as faulted "habits of mind" (Cohen 33), as outlets for "fears and mental struggles" (Harris 12), and concluded that the "tendency to see slimy things under every paving stone of national life [wa]s irrational" (MacLeish A16).

The Watergate scandal also did not change the illegitimate status of conspiracy theory. Although it had proven that conspiracies existed, for the journalists who commented on the Watergate scandal conspiracy theories still represented and produced problematic and illegitimate knowledge. Like the intellectuals in the 1950s who were concerned about the proliferation and manipulation of anti-communist conspiracy theories during the Red Scare, the journalists in the 1970s feared that the Watergate scandal and the Kennedy assassination had caused among Americans a resigned disillusionment with politics which was fuelled by endless streams of conspiracy theories (see Fairlie 159). For them, the conspiracism of the post-Watergate era resembled an irrational cultural paranoia that was beginning to taint the public's judgment (Hertzberg and McClelland 52). Similar to Edward Shils, who demanded that conspiracy thinking should be confined to the back streets of American society, journalist Frank Donner warned in a 1979 article in *The Nation* that "it [is …] time to abandon the escapism, media hustle and radical chic of political conspiraphilia [because] we cannot permit the political meaning of what has been done to us by real conspirators [i.e. Nixon] to be lost in the cries of 'Wolf!' by those for whom the truth is never bad enough" (60).

In Donner's article the long-lasting effects of the John Birch Blues are still manifest. But they are also manifest today, fifty years after the heyday of the John Birch Society—even despite the Edward Snowden leaks. By drawing historical parallels between today's Tea Party movement and the John Birch Society of the 1960s, Adam Gopnik thus observes in the *New Yorker* that the conspiracist beliefs of political extremists remain unchanged. Once again, he

writes, the radical right warns of an impending apocalypse brought about by conspiracy; once again, the President of the United States presumably serves as an agent of this conspiracy: "the Bircher-centered loonies and the Tea Partiers created [and create] a world of fantasy, willing mild-mannered, conflict-adverse centrists like J.F.K. and Obama into socialist Supermen." Like the writers of the 1960s and 1970s Gopnik is convinced that both political extremism and the irrational belief in conspiracy theories will continue to haunt American politics and society. "The fever won't break," Gopnik predicts, "because it's always this high." The same can be said for the John Birch Blues: it has been this high for more than fifty years. And because conspiracy theories continue to circulate and continue to be contested—both in terms of their claims about communists and conspirators and in terms of their legitimacy—I suggest we call them what they have always been: highly contested knowledge.

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