

Thomas M. Konda. *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions have Overrun America*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-02-26-58576-5. Pp. 442. Hardback, £23.00, \$30.00.

Conspiracy theories have become an increasingly popular area of study in the twenty-first century. Research on the US dominates, and attention there has magnified with Donald Trump's election. Most conspiracy theories target those in power, suggesting that they – or a clandestine group hidden amongst them – are plotting against individuals or groups. Governments sometimes propagate conspiracy theories, to justify clampdowns on civil liberties or opposition groups. The rhetoric of both superpowers in the Cold War was notably conspiratorial. Political perspective shapes which groups are most targeted, with Jews, Catholics, Communists, globalists, environmentalists and 'Big Pharma' just a few of the groups seen as conspiring against citizens' interests in recent decades. Most governments avoid association with conspiracy theories that seem obviously 'fringe' or 'extreme'. However, this appeared to change with Trump's election, given his promotion of multiple conspiracy theories, from the suggestion that the 'deep state' is undermining his own administration, to the increasingly bizarre QAnon conspiracy theory.¹

Amidst this apparent novelty, relatively few works have traced the historical evolution of the ideas underpinning contemporary conspiracy theories. Works for the general reader often seem designed to entertain through documenting the wide-ranging weird and wacky conspiracy theories that persist today. Much of the political science research on conspiracy theories seeks to measure belief in specific conspiracy theories, and quantify how this varies based on population characteristics, partisanship and personality. Superficially, results often appear alarming, with suggestions that majorities of liberal democratic populations believe at least one conspiracy theory.²

Thomas Milan Konda's *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America*, adopts a different approach. It

¹ Julia Carrie Wong, 'What is QAnon? Explaining the bizarre rightwing conspiracy theory', in *The Guardian*, 31 July 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/30/qanon-4chan-rightwing-conspiracy-theory-explained-trump> (Last accessed 1 July 2020).

² J. Eric Oliver & T.J. Wood, 'Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), pp. 952–66.

provides a meticulous historical examination of how specific conspiracy theorists developed their theories across US history. Underpinning this genealogy are several assumptions: that while conspiracies have been identified throughout history, only in the twentieth century did conspiracy theories become sufficiently complex to sustain an entire belief system – ‘conspiracism’. Secondly, that this belief system is ‘overrunning America’. And underpinning this, that America is uniquely prone to theorising about and belief in conspiracies. As will be explained, the first two are substantiated more strongly than the latter throughout the book.

Konda’s approach differs in focusing very narrowly on the detailed ideas of a select group of conspiracy theorists, who construct theories of such depth and breadth that they provide the foundations of conspiracism *as a worldview*. His focus excludes individuals who merely believe in a given conspiracy theory, such as ‘the array of assassination buffs, birthers, truthers and aggrieved white supremacists fighting the Racial Holy War’ (p. 11). The result is a detailed genealogy of the ideas inspiring a select band of theorists, with the ‘dominant strand’ being concern about a secret organisation conspiring to establish world government (p. 270). At this level of detail, Konda suggests that ‘there are perhaps only a dozen major conspiracy theories’, and there have been only ‘a few dozen’ conspiracy theorists since the French Revolution (p. 11). Konda situates these ‘true conspiracy theorists’ at the top of a ‘conspiracist pyramid’, with ‘conspiracist propagators’ immediately below, and ‘casual adherents’ providing the pyramid’s base (pp. 99-101). This focus on what is essential an ‘elite’ of conspiracy theorists makes the book original. However, it is harder to substantiate claims that such thinking is becoming more widespread among populations to the point of ‘overrunning America’, as the title suggests. For, as Konda admits, there is a lack of historical data about adherence to conspiracy theories, and levels of casual adherence are hard to assess (p. 99).

Konda’s in-depth focus on conspiracy theorists provides far more detail than much of the existing literature. His approach is exacting. The reader receives a grounding in a range of philosophical and religious ideas: premillenarian dispensationalism, theosophism and anthroposophy, British Israelism, occultism and far more. Explaining this complex accretion and intermixing of ideas makes for challenging reading at times, precisely because it is a complex process. Indeed Konda acknowledges this, in explaining that certain groups and theories are ‘confusingly similar’, ‘intensely bizarre’, with logics that are often ‘hard to follow’ (pp. 53, 55). The reader gets more

philosophy than Pizzagate (though both are covered). But with that comes greater nuance; this will be especially interesting for academics working on the evolution of ideas underpinning conspiracy theories, if perhaps a little less so for the general reader. The impressive level of detail makes it possible to illustrate how apparently contemporary concerns such as the White Genocide conspiracy theory are traceable back through decades of US history, and that it is very much a new incarnation of an old idea.

One debate *Conspiracies of Conspiracies* takes a clear stance on is whether conspiracist theorising and belief is more prominent on the political Right. Konda accepts this assertion, on the basis that the predominant themes in those theories are more readily associated with and propagated by the Right, including anti-communism, anti-Semitism, nativist fears of immigration or racial mixing and fears of a conspiracy to achieve world – rather than national – government. In the five pages devoted to ‘Left conspiracism’, Konda does acknowledge, however, that right wing conspiracy theories did not dominate the nineteenth-century US, and that some make the case for Marxism being fundamentally conspiratorial, since an elite conspires to exploit the masses (pp. 227-231). Konda counters that the absence of a shadow government disqualifies Marxism as insufficiently conspiracist, and more generally that Left conspiracism has ‘never cumulated into a sprawling theory’ and ‘is at best a pale shadow of its right-wing counterpart’ (p. 231). Conspiracism, elevated to being a worldview, Konda suggests, is primarily found on the political Right. His evidence supports this in the US in the last century at least. But more comparative research is needed before generalisation across countries is possible, not least since anti-globalist, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are readily associated with the Left.

The text takes a somewhat less clear stance on the evidence for *public belief* in conspiracies being more prominent on the Right. Since 2016, research on the spread of conspiracy theories (and relatedly, ‘fake news’), has debated whether the greater dispersion of right wing conspiracy theories is simply because more right wing conspiracy theories were spread, or whether individual attributes predispose right wing people to conspiracism.³ Early on, Konda explains that ‘those obsessed with conspiracy theories saw themselves as besieged by changes in society that they did not like and threatened their position’ (p. 29). On the one hand, this might suggest Conservatives

³ Joseph Uscinski & Joseph Parent, ‘Conspiracy Theories are for Losers’, in *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 131-153.

might find conspiracism more appealing – and later, Konda cites psychology research indicating affinity between right wing authoritarians, social dominance orientation and conspiracism (p. 37). Conversely, the suggestion that conspiracies are more believed by those whose position is threatened by societal change also fits research suggesting that being in opposition to those in power is the stronger predictor of conspiracist belief.⁴ Konda later cites research suggesting that the more powerless people feel, the more appealing conspiracism is. If you oppose those in power and see their decisions as invidious to your interests, it is easier to imagine that they are conspiring to harm you. To date, conspiracy theory research has gained much popularity analysing the theories spread by right wing populists. Now that they are in power in several countries, more interesting would be to see how their opponents on the centre and left in different countries employ conspiracy theories. It may be that the most interesting findings in conspiracy theory research are still to come.

A final area in which stronger evidence would have been ideal is the claim that America is more conspiracy theory prone than other states. Konda suggests reasons why this might be the case, but without illustrating comparatively that conspiracist theorising or belief is quantitatively or qualitatively higher in the US than elsewhere. He cites a combination of Puritanism and anti-Catholicism, the rise of ‘evangelical Protestantism’, nativist fear of immigration, fears of failure to live up to the spirit of the Revolution, anti-intellectualism, and the idea of ‘America’s exceptional mission to civilise the world’ as explaining the greater popularity of conspiracy theorising in the country (pp. 32-33). The logic being that these elements fostered a good vs. evil mindset that made it easier to find plausible threats to the nation from conspiracist groups. Believing in the US mission to democratise the world required enemies plotting against it.

Perhaps these elements do explain the appeal of conspiracy theories in the US. But combinations of them can be found in other polities too – though little evidence is advanced to suggest why they are less conspiracy-minded. The key contemporary inflection points in Konda’s narrative – such as 9/11, Obama’s first term, the Tea Party movement – were experienced in a particular way in the US, though the history of conspiracism in other countries likely involves other events. In the absence of comparative evidence, it is hard to assess the validity of the claim that the US is particularly conspiracy-theory prone. In this respect, the book’s hook that conspiracism is especially

⁴ Ibid.

a US phenomenon wasn't really necessary to capture the book's value – which is in providing a comparably richer and more detailed examination of conspiracy theorising through US history than prior research, regardless of how the US compares to other countries. In that, Konda succeeds admirably – and to some extent, to ask for a comparative study would be to ask for a different book.

Overall, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies* provides a remarkably detailed account of how a small group of theorists combined a range of often disparate ideas to propagate a range of conspiracy theories in the US in the last two centuries. It provides limited comparative evidence to support the claim that this is a peculiarly US phenomenon, though its latter chapters document well how widespread reference to conspiracies – and conspiracy theories – have become in contemporary US politics. Most significantly, the book does an extremely good job of showing how conspiracy theories we see today can be traced back to the past. And while many aspects of political practices in the age of Trump appear novel, the ideas underpinning contemporary conspiracy theories, be it White Genocide or QAnon, are not as new as they seem.

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