

Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories  
in the Age of Trump

Daniel C. Hellinger

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Daniel C. Hellinger  
International Relations  
Webster University  
St. Louis, MO, USA

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## PREFACE

In 1991 I published (with my co-author) *The Democratic Façade*<sup>1</sup>, an alternative, critical view of politics in the United States, mostly intended to be used as a companion to the main text for Introduction to American Politics. At the time, I was a regular contributor to the *St. Louis Journalism Review*, and I gave a copy of the new edition to the editor and publisher, Charles Klotzer.

Charles was enthusiastic about the book and said he was going to ask former U.S. Senator Thomas Eagleton to review it. I told Charles that Senator Eagleton, a thoughtful and genuinely liberal person, was going to hate the book. We were challenging the paradigmatic myths of American democracy. We argued, in the spirit of C. Wright Mills,<sup>2</sup> that elites were well-networked and usually able to manage popular discontent and, just as importantly, able to manage their differences among themselves. In a variety of ways, they could use their wealth to influence the media, maintain a consensus about defending capitalism at home and abroad, coopt elected officials through what even then seemed a campaign finance sewer, and in other ways translate their wealth into political power. Both in domestic and foreign policy the record suggested much less respect for democratic norms than the mainstream view in the standard political science literature. In that view, the theory of pluralism, elites are competitive and not in accord with one another on policies. Just as important our book contended that in contrast to the pluralist argument, liberal democratic institutions in the United States do not keep elites responsive to public preferences.

It is important here to specify that we were not arguing that liberal democratic theory and pluralism get American politics all wrong. And this book adopts that view as well. There are substantive differences in perspectives, to name some examples, on taxation, spending, trade policy and, to a less but still significant degree, foreign policy. But elite power circumscribes the policy alternatives put forward, much as Peter Bachrach argued.<sup>3</sup> His remedy for this state of affairs is more participation in democracy. I agree with both of those propositions. However, I think anyone who has examined contemporary populism and especially conspiracism in the years since Donald Trump began his rise to the presidency in 2013 would think that all kinds of participation are equally salutary to democracy.

I hardly imagined that the theme of elite power would lead me to take more seriously the importance of conspiracies and conspiracy theory in politics. My movement in that direction began with Eagleton's review,<sup>4</sup> which was even more damning than we expected. He honed onto a chapter in which we described how the CIA had intervened in Nicaragua and undermined the Sandinista revolutionary experiment, even after the revolutionary government had ratified its democratic legitimacy in an election largely hailed as free and fair by just about all international observers except the U.S. Department of State. Furthermore, U.S. military support of the Contra rebels continued in violation of international law and in violation of an express legislative prohibition by the U.S. Congress. We had cited it as example of the superficiality of the American ruling class's commitment to democracy.

Senator Eagleton took issue, as I thought he would, with our portrayal of weak democracy in America. What I didn't expect was that we would be proclaimed as "conspiracy theorists" for suggesting the CIA and elements of the U.S. national security state shared responsibility for the civil war in Nicaragua and the death squad government then ruling El Salvador. When the second edition of the book came out in 1994 we formulated a response to the "conspiracy theory" allegation: Conspiracies existed, we said, but they do not take us very far toward understanding politics. This is a common reaction among academics who write critically about social justice and American foreign policy. The most widely-read radical theorist of our times, Noam Chomsky, has consistently taken the same position.<sup>5</sup>

It must have been about a year or two later when I was telling this story to a colleague, a professor who had emigrated from Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> Somehow, the conversation turned to the Kennedy assassination, and I casually asserted that alternatives to the “lone gunman” narrative were nothing more than “conspiracy theories.”

My colleague offered a response along these lines: “Do you mean to tell me that if the prime minister of Pakistan had been assassinated allegedly by a killer known to the security service, who had sought to work for them, and that the next day the suspect was shot in plain view in a police station by a gunman associated with a shadowy criminal underground; that despite all this you would believe the findings of a government commission that the prime minister’s murder was carried out by the alleged assassin acting alone? And would you stand behind that idea even as it became clear that from the start the investigative commission was chosen by the successor of the slain leader to arrive at that opinion before it even began its work?”

Even today I do not discard the theory that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone; nor on the contrary have I embraced any of the particular JFK conspiracy theory that has been advanced. Having listened to recordings of Lyndon Johnson cajoling politicians and judges to serve on the Warren Commission, as well as having reviewed other materials about his presidency, I believe theories regarding his alleged participation are completely unwarranted. However, I did begin to re-think the anomalies of the assassination and to seek out perspectives critical of the usual views of conspiracy theories. It left me agnostic about the possibility that there was a conspiracy behind the assassination and especially concerned about the way the political class, the mainstream media, and most elites closed ranks around the Warren Commission, despite the evidence that the investigation, if not the assassination itself, was product of a conspiracy to hide something.

Just as importantly, I began to realize that I myself had been panicked into dismissing the plausibility of a conspiracy. I simply rejected the notion that conspiracies could really matter in a politically developed country like the United States. I began to realize that being upset about being labelled a “conspiracy theorist” had to do with worrying about being relegated to the margins of the academy. I began to think that both conspiracies and conspiracy theory needed to be reconsidered within political science.

As a specialist on Latin America politics, I began to think about how military coups, so common in the region's history, require a conspiracy to be carried out. One of the best and most widely read books on coups, a case study of coups in Brazil by the highly respected Alfred Stepan, suggested to me that carrying off the military overthrow of a government requires a conspiracy, and that this element of agency can be combined with attention to larger forces, such as political polarization and the breakdown of consensus among political elites, to understand underlying forces of political instability in a society.<sup>7</sup> To be clear, Stepan does not explicitly address conspiracism in his work; nor, to my knowledge, has any political scientist characterized this aspect of his work as "conspiracy theory." But how can one not see coup making as anything but a project that requires secrecy and collusion to achieve a political goal? These are the elements of a conspiracy, I believe. And they apply to much more than just coup making. What we call today "fake news" is one example.

My desire to explore conspiracies as a form of doing politics has deepened with Donald Trump's ascent to the presidency. I cannot help but take note that political scientists are beginning to doubt American exceptionalism, and that concepts, such as the "Deep State," once regarded by mainstream journalists only for paranoid conspiracy theorists, are beginning to appear in editorial pages and news commentary. Also, another political phenomenon, populism, closely associated with conspiracy theories in mainstream history and political science, has once again made an appearance, this time on a global level, and in the United States in the candidacies of Trump and Bernie Sanders. I began to recognize a form of conspiracy panic in the way that Sanders and left populism have been equated by some pundits to what historian Richard Hofstadter called nearly 60 years ago the "paranoid style in American politics."<sup>8</sup>

Influenced as I have been by Marxist theory and especially by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci,<sup>9</sup> I began to rethink many positivist assumptions about history and explanations of social life. I am still searching for a satisfying synthesis between positivism and post-modern social science that sees history and politics as less patterned and determined. Political life does seem more chaotic and less likely to yield theories and laws comparable to those found in the natural sciences. I certainly cannot agree with Engels, who in his speech at the graveside of Mark said, "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history."<sup>10</sup>

This book will not contribute any law-like theories about the root causes of conspiracies and conspiracy theory, but I hope it contributes to some re-thinking about how “conspiracy theory” is used to discredit journalistic and academic work that raises uncomfortable and unconventional views of liberal democracy. I hope readers will also find some help in its pages as they try to sort out facts from balderdash, progressive populists from political charlatans, and dangerous conspiracy theories from ones that point to needed reforms in our political institutions.

St. Louis, USA

Daniel C. Hellinger

## NOTES

1. Daniel Hellinger and Dennis Judd, *The Democratic Façade* (1st ed., Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks Cole, 1991 and 2nd ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth 1994).
2. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, original 1956).
3. See Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism* (Boston: Little, Brown Publishers, 1967).
4. Back issues of *The St. Louis Journalism Review*, now called the *Gateway Journalism Review*, unfortunately are not available electronically, and I have not been able to locate the exact issue in which Senator Eagleton’s review was published.
5. See Nathan J. Robinson, “Lessons from Chomsky,” *Current Affairs* (2017, July 30). Available at <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/07/lessons-from-chomsky> (accessed October 30, 2017).
6. I prefer not to refer to the individual by his real name, as I am reaching far back in my memory banks, and the conversation was private.
7. Alfred C. Stepan, *The Military in Politics: Changing Patterns in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).
8. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage Reprints, 1968). This is a collection of his essays related to the topic.
9. See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell. Available at <http://abahlali.org/files/gramsci.pdf>.
10. Retrieved from [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm) (accessed December 31, 2017).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Readers will find that this book leans heavily on investigative journalism. In the face of difficult economic circumstances, in a difficult political environment, and often in dangerous contexts, reporters from a broad range of institutions, some of them mainstream corporate owned newspapers and journals, others working in journalistic refuges from constricting corporate environments, have uncovered troubling, concealed political activities—“conspiracies”, whether so-named or not. This book could not have been written without their work, and I hope it shows why this kind of work is essential to the practice of democracy. I want to thank my longtime friend and colleague, James Brasfield, for constant probing and questioning my claims and theories about the role of conspiracies in politics. My late friend and colleague, Arthur Sandler, questioned and encouraged my attempts to theorize conspiracy when I was not sure I wanted to go down this intellectual path toward views that will be seen as apostasy in some quarters of social science. Another colleague, Mike Hulsizer, and my friend, John Sterling, helped me with the survey analyses presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

For more than a decade I have regularly taught Webster University students in an interdisciplinary seminar on conspiracy, and many of their research papers have pointed toward themes I might not otherwise have recognized as fruitful areas of inquiry about the role of conspiracies in history and politics. Teaching them also gave me valuable experience in tempering any tendency to go too far toward extremes in arguing for a more tolerant attitude toward conspiracy theories. Much harm can come

from embracing certain kinds of conspiracy theory; much good can come from removing certain taboos about naming secretive political plotting for what it is.

I want to thank Michelle Chen and John Stegner for their encouragement and especially for the patience in granting me more time than I originally estimated to bring this project together. Palgrave-Macmillan's referee, Joseph Uscinski of the University of Miami, provided essential, constructive advice to make this book better. Joann Eng-Hellinger read and marked up drafts of some important chapters and as so often been the case supported me in ways too numerous to recount here. After nearly 50 years together, our journey still feels like it is still beginning. I thank her for her love and everything she has done in the service of peace and justice.

PRAISE FOR *CONSPIRACIES AND CONSPIRACY*  
*THEORIES IN THE AGE OF TRUMP*

“Hellinger presents a compelling argument that conspiracies are a way of doing politics, of reclaiming agency and of delegitimizing critics. As such, this book is a masterful exposition of why political science needs to engage with conspiracy theories, better problematize conspiracy and, as Hellinger argues, understand conspiracy as a symptom of political decay.”

—Julia Buxton, *Professor, Comparative Politics, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary*

“*Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theory in the Age of Trump* is not just a timely look at the swirling conspiracy and counter conspiracy theories involving the 45th President of the United States of America: it is also a deep dive into the kind of civic and intellectual culture which has produced these theories. Hellinger reframes both the debate on these things called ‘conspiracy theories’ and the kind of societal discourse which lends itself to conspiracy theorising by looking at the evidence. Focusing on how people use (and sometimes abuse) talk of the Deep State, Dark Money, and the effects of Globalisation when talking about Donald J. Trump’s rise to power, Hellinger rightly argues we should take theories which cite conspiracies seriously, rather than just dismiss them because they have been labelled ‘conspiracy theories.’ His analysis of how people can be reluctant to embrace conspiracy theories despite a wealth of evidence, and also how conspiracy theories are sometimes weaponised in public debate is a refreshing antidote to the tired cliché that we should just ignore these theories and move on. Instead, Hellinger argues that rather than reject conspiracy theories as emblems of a paranoid style, we should treat the phenomena seriously,

ask whether these theories are warranted on the evidence, and look at what their truth or falsity tells us about the kind of society we find ourselves in.”

—M. R. X. Dentith, *Fellow, New Europe College, Romania*

“This book offers a unique and unsettling take on the many conspiracy theories that now animate political discourse and influence politics in the United States. Hellinger argues that these theories run the gamut from the plausible and the outlandish, but all of them derive from a fundamental truth that a deep state is a sphere of politics that exists in all states to some degree. A transcendent question is whether populist paranoia about ‘how it all works’ may threaten democratic governance and institutions.”

—Dennis Judd, *Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri-St. Louis and University of Illinois at Chicago, USA*

“Perhaps the first book to address conspiracy theories in the Trump era, and one of the first to attempt to connect the epistemology, philosophy, and politics together, *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in the Age of Trump* makes a valuable contribution.”

—Joseph E. Uscinski, *Associate Professor, Political Science, University of Miami, USA*

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