

*Impossible Knowledge*  
*Conspiracy Theories, Power, and Truth*  
Todor Hristov

London and New York: Routledge, 2019, £45 (UK), h/b

*The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory since the 1950s*  
*"A Plot to Make us Look Foolish"*

Katharina Thalmann

London and New York: Routledge, 2019, £29.99 (UK), p/b

**Robin Ramsay**

Todor Hristov alerted this reader in his short introduction by using the names of Jameson, Foucault and Baudrillard, three of the 'stars' of post-modernism. In this 'discourse' I have no interest. It is (literally) non-sense. I struggled through to page 12 where I was stopped by these paragraphs.

'Conspiracy theorists solve or dissolve the paradox of belonging without inclusion by representing the hidden order as a totality (Jameson 2009, 603, 1992, 3, 1991, 38). Indeed, the totality of a multiplicity of elements belongs to the multiplicity without being included in it, just like the totality of a city belongs to the city without being a part of it (Jameson 1988, 353)

But if totality is hidden, if it is lacking from the present social order, it cannot be represented, hence it cannot be communicated, even if one believes strongly in it. In fact, if one believes strongly in it, this would amount to a delusion. Therefore, in order to curb the anomia of late capitalism, conspiracy theorists need to represent the unrepresentable. And because of that, the mechanism of their theories can be captured by the concept of sublime.'

The 'anomia of late capitalism'? Anomia is 'a form of aphasia in which the patient is unable to recall the names of everyday objects'. From the context, I think he means anomie, a sociological concept dating back to the Émile Durkheim in the late 19th century. But who knows? With post-modernists the usual rules of sense and meaning do not apply. Including the index, there are 99 pages of this crap.

Katharina Thalmann tugs her forelock in the direction of this non-sense and in her introduction, for example, gives us this;

'Because I do not view conspiracy theory as "a symptom of the discourse that *positions* it" (Bratich 16; emphasis in the original), but as text, "a narrative of a possible past and present" (Zwierlein 72), defined by the narrative features listed in the beginning, conspiracy theories exist even when they are not labeled as such and represent a meaning-making cultural practice.' (p. 15)

Happily, the post-modernist genuflections are only one thread in her account of the role of 'conspiracy theory' in American politics since the 1930s and can be ignored for some of the book. What she does is this:

'By focusing, above all, on academic writings dealing with conspiracy theory and published from the 1930s to the late 1970s I demonstrate that the conceptual model of conspiracy thinking was stigmatized in academic discourses in three phases . . . . The first phase encompasses the beginnings of conspiracy theory research published between the 1930s and the early 1950s and can be seen as a reaction to the rise in totalitarian regimes in Europe; the second phase follows the height of anti-communism during the Red Scare in the mid-1950s; and the third phase runs from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s when, above all, consensus historians and pluralists denounced conspiracy theorists as members of a paranoid, extremist fringe of society and politics.' (p. 28)

Her account of the first two phases is OK. It is mildly interesting to read the smattering of academic references to conspiracy theories in the 1930s; and I had no idea that Karl Popper had something to say about them. Of Popper the author writes:

'Popper does not believe that members of modern society are able to comprehend social and political transformations or to identify the structural causes of socio-economic disparities; he suggests that conspiracy theories are quasi-religious belief systems which causally link social and political events to human machinations'. (p. 40)

But – duh! – surely some social and political events *are* linked to human machinations. She tells us:

'By the mid-to late 1950s . . . . conspiracy theorising was now the practice of pseudoscientists and cranks, the practice of frustrated pseudo-conservatives, the practice of populists who exhibited a paranoid worldview. . . .' (p. 52)

And:

'pluralist[s]. . . acted as relentless door guards who controlled the entrance to the marketplace by checking for "political baggage" in the form of conspiracy theory.' (p. 56)

Both of those statements I would say are true. Up to there all is well-ish. Her guided tour through what academics thought about conspiracy theories, up to the publication of Richard Hofstadter's famous essay 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' in 1964, is rather interesting. Things go off the rails when she tries to deal with the world after the assassination of JFK. This happens because, like other academics I have read in this particular field,<sup>1</sup> she has no interest in the *content* of what she sees as conspiracy theories. All that is required is that something be *described* as a conspiracy theory for it to be fit for her analysis. (A definition of 'conspiracy theory' isn't required, either.) The content doesn't matter. Post JFK, the material she looks at shifts from being loopy statements from the likes of the John Birch Society to detailed research about events. You might think that the content of that research is thus unavoidable. Not for our author. So we get lists of JFK researchers in the 60s and 70s and book titles, but little about what was being written (and little evidence that she actually read any of them). We get half a dozen pages on the Warren Commission's Report without any mention of the fact that it has been comprehensively demolished and has been disowned by several of the Commission's members.

But she does feel she has to explain why these new 'conspiracy theories' don't resemble their predecessors. To do this she ignores their content and comes up with this:

'Because they were (made) aware of their marginal discursive position, I argue, conspiracy theorists began to present their ideas in a way that would still be accepted by a mainstream audience by asking rhetorical questions, by hinting at rather than developing conspiracy scenarios, and by avoiding the semantic field of conspiracy'. (p. 131)

Cunning, these new conspiracy theorists, weren't they? Not only did they not offer a conspiracy theory, they didn't even use the term!

This is baloney, of course. You are unlikely to read a more obvious example of someone ignoring reality to preserve a theory. She has read enough about the early work of JFK researchers to know that were mostly doing basic intellectual ground-clearing – reading, note-taking, assembling and

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<sup>1</sup> Notably Peter Knight, who is the editor of the series from Routledge in which these two books appear.

indexing material. However, she cannot bring herself to state the obvious: in the early years after Dallas the serious Kennedy researchers didn't offer theories because, for the most part, *they didn't have any theories*. Conspiracy theories without theories? But then this is post-modernism and any old bollocks will do.

From Dallas the author moves to Watergate and she has actually read some of the Watergate literature. But the muddle grows.

'Weissman's collection<sup>2</sup> thereby points towards a trend in conspiracy theories in the 1970s: the rise of superconspiracy theories which weave Watergate and other events in recent U.S. history into a fabric of large-scale, multi-player event and systemic conspiracy theories. Such superconspiracy theories had existed before the 1970s: Robert Welch . . . . spread superconspiracy theories about communists, the Illuminati and the "Insiders" in the 1960s, and in light of the right-wing, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the 1930s, Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman already viewed the belief in superconspiracies as an essentially American tendency . . . . Nevertheless, in the mid-1970s, these superconspiracy theories for the first time appeared *en masse*.' (p. 164)

Comparing the output of Robert Welch and the Birchers (and the earlier Jewish conspiracy theorists) with the research which followed the sixties' assassinations and Watergate would seem ridiculous to all but the contemporary social theorist. The Birchers had few facts: like the author, they didn't *need* facts. But, by the mid-1970s, the post JFK researchers were *drowning* in facts: they were uncovering a hitherto largely hidden history of the post-WW2 United States. But this passes the author by because she has no interest in the content of the propositions she is discussing.

The mistake she has made is not recognising that post-JFK things changed: as well as there being conspiracy theories there was also research into conspiracies.<sup>3</sup> Failing to make this distinction, in her survey of the post Watergate world *inter alia* she offers as examples of superconspiracy theories/theorists Mae Brussel<sup>4</sup> and the *Skeleton Key to the Gemstone File*<sup>5</sup> – which is

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<sup>2</sup> The Ramparts Press 1974 anthology *Big Brother and the Holding Company*.

<sup>3</sup> This distinction I first saw formulated by Anthony Summers like this: he said he had no interest in conspiracy theories but was interested in theories about conspiracies.

<sup>4</sup> See <<http://www.maebrussell.com>>.

<sup>5</sup> An account of which is at <<http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/anti-masonry/gemstone.html>>. Martin Cannon debunked Gemstone in *Lobster* 41.

correct; but also Peter Dale Scott – which is ridiculous. But then this is post-modernism and any old bollocks will do.