

# Dangerous Machinery: “Conspiracy Theorist” as a Transpersonal Strategy of Exclusion

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*In a culture of fear, we should expect the rise of new mechanisms of social control to deflect distrust, anxiety, and threat. Relying on the analysis of popular and academic texts, we examine one such mechanism, the label conspiracy theory, and explore how it works in public discourse to “go meta” by sidestepping the examination of evidence. Our findings suggest that authors use the conspiracy theorist label as (1) a routinized strategy of exclusion; (2) a reframing mechanism that deflects questions or concerns about power, corruption, and motive; and (3) an attack upon the personhood and competence of the questioner. This label becomes dangerous machinery at the transpersonal levels of media and academic discourse, symbolically stripping the claimant of the status of reasonable interlocutor—often to avoid the need to account for one’s own action or speech. We argue that this and similar mechanisms simultaneously control the flow of information and symbolically demobilize certain voices and issues in public discourse.*

If I call you a “conspiracy theorist,” it matters little whether you have actually claimed that a conspiracy exists or whether you have simply raised an issue that I would rather avoid. As part of the machinery of interaction, the label does conversational work (Goffman 1967) no matter how true, false, or conspiracy-related your utterance is. Using the phrase, I can symbolically exclude you from the imagined community of reasonable interlocutors (Hall 1970:21). Specifically, when I call you a “conspiracy theorist,” I can turn the tables on you: instead of responding to a question, concern, or challenge, I twist the machinery of interaction so that you, not I, are now called to account. In fact, I have done even more. By labeling you, I strategically exclude you from the sphere where public speech, debate, and conflict occur.

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In this article we analyze the work accomplished by the phrase *conspiracy theorist* in two arenas of public discourse (Calhoun 1997): print news and the academic press. We argue not only that the phrase exemplifies mechanisms of interpersonal interaction that “animate public political discourses” (Cahill 2003) but also that as it “jumps” levels (micro to meso to macro) it becomes dangerous machinery. We show how the phrase reframes certain claims and claimants, separating them from the sphere of reasonable public interaction. Our analysis helps extend a distinctively symbolic interactionist approach to mapping the problems and promise of public discourse. Linking interactionist analyses of framing and political speech (Hall 1972), we show that an increasing culture of fear has generated new mechanisms of social control.

### GOING META: FRAMES AS MACHINERY OF DISCOURSE

In *Forms of Talk*, Goffman analyzes responses in interaction. Among Goffman’s (1981:43) features of responses is their reach as they shift focus from “*what* a speaker says to his saying it in this way, this being (it is now implied) the *sort* of thing he as a speaker would say in the circumstances.” Such responses are reflexive, becoming instances of talk about talk, and they can break the taken-for-granted frame of an interaction (p. 43). Simons (1994:470) refers to this kind of reflexive response as “going meta”:

Central to Goffman’s general point . . . are the notions of frame-altering (including frame-breaking) and reflexive address. If the expectation is that one should reply to situations directly in a given situation, then respondents will have gone meta . . . if they elect to step back from the immediacy of a question to question the questioner’s motives, or tone, or premises, or right to ask certain questions, or right to ask any questions at all.

While Simons theorized the concept of “going meta,” it has yet to be linked with the analysis of discrete pieces of discursive machinery that reframe interactions. We use the term *machinery* with care, not to suggest a structuralist reading of all interaction but for elements of it. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, machinery consists of apparatuses, means of action, or procedures constructed to perform certain functions. “Conspiracy theory/ist” is an apparatus that, when invoked, sets in motion a frame shift that exposes both the speaker’s claims and the speaker’s competence to attack.

Goffman’s (1974:21) frames are macro entities, large-scale cognitive “schemata of interpretation” through which actors make sense of “what’s going on here.” They are not necessarily consciously created (Goffman 1974; König 2006) but are in a sense “given” from the culture (although they can be consciously broken or altered). Among social movement and media scholars, frames, while still macro, are constructed and manipulated to mobilize collective action (Benford and Snow 2000) or to influence understandings of an event (Entman 1993; Gitlin 1980). For social movement and media scholars (e.g., Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1992), collective action frames are distinct from Goffman’s schemata: “Frames are not merely

aggregations of individual attitudes and perceptions but also the outcome of negotiating shared meaning" (Gamson 1992:111). Movement organizations and journalists strategically create and deploy frames in the ongoing process of defining meaning in interaction.

Most scholarship on framing focuses on large-scale frames that social movement organizations and journalists use to make sense of specific people, events, or problems. In this article we instead "go micro" to look at a framing mechanism that manipulates schemata of interpretation. Responding to your claim about "what's going on here," I can engage the direct content of your claim, embracing, refuting, or challenging it on factual grounds. Or instead, I can refuse direct response and use the phrase *conspiracy theory/ist* to go meta, shifting attention to the context of your utterances and your competence as a speaker. *Conspiracy theory/ist* reframes the ongoing definition of the situation, allowing an interactant to "claim the higher ground, or to displace attention from one issue to another, or to prevail in a battle over meanings of a key term" (Simons 1994:469). While the phrase can have many functions in the ongoing process of negotiating meaning, we emphasize one particular function: shifting the focus of discourse to reframe another's claims as unwarranted or unworthy of full consideration.

## SITUATING THE MACHINERY: SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF POWER AND LANGUAGE

Power, language, and meaning construction are central to our work. Power is a notoriously slippery concept, whether we take a Foucauldian or symbolic interactionist approach, but scholars across perspectives concur that we must approach power not as a "what" or a thing but as a "how"—a set of processes or mechanisms (Dennis and Martin 2005). Our project extends interactionist analysis of power to what Cahill (2003:51) has dubbed the level of "the transpersonal—the realms of mass politics and power, of social organization and policy." Such scholarship examines how linguistic and semiotic practices define situations and become a form of wielding power at the level of presidential politics (Hall 1979; Vannini 2004), organizations (Cockerham 2003), and mass media (Altheide 2002; Denzin 1992). In particular, Hall's work on the presidency (1979:284) examined political impression management through two related power-laden and power-generating processes: "(1) information flow control—the gathering of intelligence, the maintenance of secrecy, the planning and rehearsing of performances; and (2) symbolic mobilization of support—the use of symbols, verbal and nonverbal, in various settings and forms to maintain or strengthen the position of the actor."

In the context of the 1960s and 1970s, Hewitt and Hall (1973:18) identified a background expectancy that became a tool in the Nixon administration's management of dissent: namely, a widely shared assumption of a reasonable national community based on "a set of values upon which all Americans ultimately agree." This quasi theory, in the hands of journalists and the presidential administration,

symbolically transformed dissent into a failure to communicate and transformed dissenters from reasonable critics into immature youth who had yet to master the skills required for participation in our public sphere (e.g., rational debate and control of emotion).

But over the past thirty years the discursive context outlined by Hall has changed. Recent work on the transpersonal level indicates that U.S. public arenas are now characterized by anxiety and the constant specter of danger, in addition to or perhaps instead of a sense of homogeneity (Glassner 1999). Altheide (2003:42) has documented the rise of this politics of fear as a “dominant motif for news and popular culture” and as a political tool that works through “widespread . . . perceptions about fear as a feature of crime, violence, deviance, terrorism, and other dimensions of social order.” Invocations of fear pervade public culture and have become “part of the taken-for-granted world of ‘how things are. . . .’ danger and risk are . . . central feature[s] of everyday life” (p. 38).

Continuity with the Nixon administration’s rhetorical homogeneous community exists, of course, in selective constructions of a consensus society threatened by outsiders. Whenever “others” are constructed, they call into being their opposite: an imagined community of “people like us” that can be used to create a manipulable public (Husting 2006; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Nevertheless, increasing fears of violence, attack, danger, and exploitation abound (fueled largely by repression—treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, increased electronic surveillance of citizens, summary arrest and detention of suspected “terrorists,” etc.). Add to this culture of fear an ever-increasing flow of information, and “what’s going on here” becomes increasingly uncertain. Dean (2003) describes this well, arguing that we are often ensnared

in a clouded, occluded nightmare of obfuscation. I’m thinking here of my nanny’s efforts to understand the legalities of her divorce or my mundane and consumerist attempts to choose an affordable cell phone provider. We’re linked into a world of uncertainties, a world where more information is always available, and hence, a world where we face daily the fact that our truths, diagnoses, and understandings are incomplete.

In such a culture, fear and threat become the means for media, politicians, and corporations to sell commodities, buy votes, and justify policies reducing civil rights and promoting war (Altheide 2000). As a mythos of consensus has turned into a mythos of fear, we would expect to find new interactional mechanisms to shield authority and legitimacy from challenge or accountability in a society characterized by political, economic, and cultural inequalities.

*Conspiracy theory/ist* is one such mechanism. The label functions symbolically, protecting certain decisions and people from question in arenas of political, cultural, and scholarly knowledge construction. Such devices are strategies of exclusion (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004) and are used across the political spectrum and for a variety of topics. In all these contexts they can deflect attention from the claims at hand and shift discourse to the nature of the claimant.

### CAVEAT: I MAY BE PARANOID, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN . . .

Lemert's (1962) work on paranoia and Shibutani's (1966) work on rumor provide an important corrective for the impulse to say: "But it sounds as if you think that there are no genuine paranoid conspiracy theories or theorists, and that *any* reference to the notion is simply dismissive and refuses to take a serious issue seriously." Lemert draws our attention to the fact that even paranoids have enemies, and Shibutani shows us that rumor is a pragmatic sense-making activity in the face of uncertainty. Similarly, we argue that the charge of "conspiracy theory" in public spheres discredits specific explanations for social and historical events, regardless of the quality or quantity of evidence. The charge tends at least tacitly to involve the belief that conspiracy theories constitute a general type of claim that can be dismissed as such. We do not deny that some claims characterized as conspiracy theories are false. But conspiracy theories, like rumor (and the categories overlap), are forms of collective problem solving or meaning construction. Moreover, and more to our point, when the phrase becomes a means of delegitimizing, trivializing, or dismissing claims, it no longer matters whether they were in fact claims about conspiracy or simply demands that decisions, events, and uses of power be accounted for publicly.

Because conspiracies do happen, this process is a noteworthy preemption of the scholarly and investigative process. "Conspiracy" is a category of law. Indictments for criminal conspiracy are brought and convictions made. Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, and the Enron scandal all led to indictments and convictions on charges of criminal conspiracy. Even so, these events continue to be associated with the phrase *conspiracy theory*, which gets 135,000 Google hits when combined with *Watergate*, 79,300 combined with *Iran-Contra*, and 134,000 with *Enron*. Although one can demonstrate the existence of some conspiracies and disprove the existence of others, in any given case the decision should turn on systematic study of evidence.

Our concern, then, is neither explanation of any particular historical event nor any general distinction between conspiracies and other forms of social causation. Rather, we analyze "conspiracy theory" as a metamove that, true or false, breaches the "narrow circle of truth and falsity" involved in routine, unproblematic claims making (Simons 1994:479). The nature of that work is the focus of this article.

### METHOD AND DATA

This project focuses on discursive action in what is often called the "public sphere" (in this context speech is a form of action [Hall 1972; Ivie 2002]). Definitions of the public sphere vary; here we follow the conceptualization of Arendt (1998), a foremost theorist of democracy and political action, for whom public space is constituted in multiple contexts or kinds of interaction. Yar (2006) concisely summarizes Arendt's conceptualization of the public sphere as any space of disclosure through communicative action, any "context in which individuals can encounter one another as members of a community. . . . Politics is the ongoing activity of citizens coming together so as to exercise their capacity

for agency, to conduct their lives together by means of free speech and persuasion.” A broad brushstroke, to be sure, but certainly one congenial to symbolic interactionism: it positions politics as collective process rather than object. Thus we are interested in the label *conspiracy theorist* as a vocabulary of motive in struggles over the meaning of social and political worlds, events, and ideas.

Potential sites for the study of this phenomenon are numerous: chat rooms, listservs, blogs, news reports, congressional records, and political speeches are but a few examples. Google, for example, reports 1,030,000 hits for *conspiracy theorist*. To narrow the field, we selected instances of the phrase in use from print news, a primary public arena where political acts and speech occur, and from which data can be searched relatively precisely with engines like LexisNexis.

Our goal was not to provide an exhaustive or definitive empirical analysis of all appearances of *conspiracy theory* but to isolate and track its functions as one mechanism of discursive power in an age of fear and uncertainty. We are less interested in the particulars surrounding each instance of the phrase—this project differs quite radically, for example, from ethnographic analyses of accounts (e.g., Shulman 2000) or emic understandings of peoples’ experience of time as evidenced by their talk in interaction (e.g., Flaherty 1999). Our analysis has more in common with Hewitt and Stokes’s analysis of disclaimers (1975) or Scott and Lyman’s work on accounts (1968) than with projects that analyze deeper contexts of interaction and identity in narratives. Like Hewitt and Stokes, what we use are examples for illustration rather than a random sample for the estimation of parameters.

Using LexisNexis, we searched the *New York Times* to track the frequency of *conspiracy theory/theorist* from 1968 to 1995. As Table 1 shows, the phrase has been on the rise since the mid-1980s. Because we were particularly interested in its recent manifestations in the context of increased fear and anxiety, we narrowed our search to the years surrounding 9/11 and the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—2000–2005. We selected all 114 *New York Times* articles in which the phrase appears in the title or lead paragraph. In addition, we collected other instances of the phrase as we encountered them in other presses or as they were referenced in our *New York Times* articles.

Our coding and analysis were emergent (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Although we did not formally use grounded theory coding, we read and classified articles by topic, nature of use, and source, and we looked for emerging patterns and resonances. We examined the labels *conspiracy theorist* and *conspiracy theory*, as well as explicit articulations of the phrase’s semantics (e.g., “paranoia platoon” [Chass 2002] or “crazy conspiracy theorist” [Heartney 2003]). We quickly discovered that the phrase, no matter the context, reframes or shifts the grounds of the interaction.

To locate uses of the phrase in the social science press, our second discursive arena, we relied on searches of the *Sociological Abstracts* for the terms *conspiracy*, *conspiracy theorist(s)*, and *conspiracy theory(ies)*. This led us to a number of materials in sociology, political science, communication, and philosophy, but for this analysis we relied on books and articles that used one of the latter phrases in the

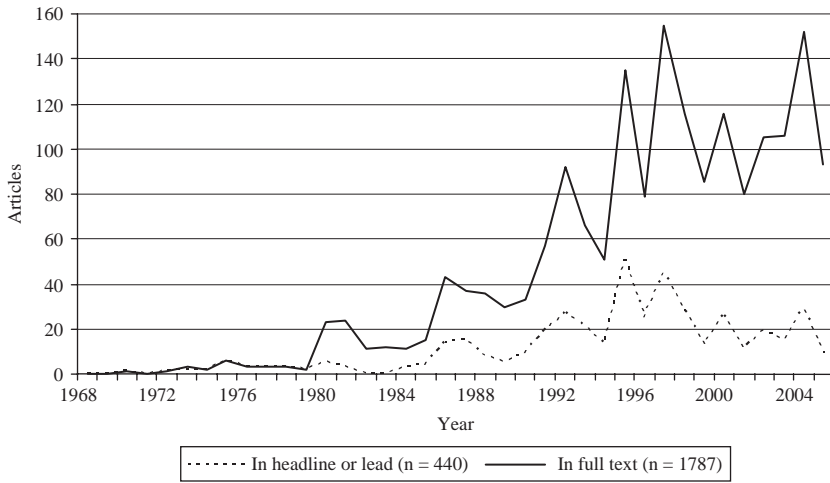


FIGURE 1. References of Conspiracy Theory in the *New York Times*

title or abstract. To clarify, we are using scholarly texts not as a literature review but as empirical materials or primary sources to illuminate how *conspiracy theorist* becomes a category of deviant personhood. Fine (1994) and others (Schwalbe et al. 2000; Thorne 2003) have noted that researchers in social sciences often engage in othering: people become “objects” of the knowing, scholarly gaze and are positioned as “different,” which accomplishes or performs their difference. In both the academic and popular U.S. press, the phrase is a mechanism of exclusion that symbolically banishes questions, claims, and concerns so labeled from the public sphere as unwarranted—or worse.

### MAINSTREAM NEWS AND CONSPIRACY THEORY

*Conspiracy theory* might be used variously, for example, to conceal, defend, label, or paraphrase. In our data it is uniformly a metamove with several analytically distinct yet co-occurring functions. It reflexively reframes an interaction, challenges the legitimacy of claims or claimants, and allows its user to avoid addressing the claims themselves. It shifts discourse from claimants’ manifest content to their right to be taken seriously.

While reframing need neither disparage a speaker nor neutralize his or her claims (e.g., “that was very clever, young man”), *conspiracy theory* simultaneously does both in our data. It calls a speaker or claim into question in one of three ways. First, *conspiracy theory* may be directly associated with other pejorative terms—examples from our data include *wingnut*, *paranoid*, *loony*, and *primitive*. Second, it can be attached to a caricature or misstated claim. Finally, the label can challenge a claim by

equating it with another taken or implied to be patently absurd. In all three of these ways, *conspiracy theorist* allows a respondent to shift concern from the truth or falsehood of a claim onto the character, quality, or competence of the claim or claimant.

In the *New York Times* data from 2000 to 2005, *conspiracy theorist* accomplishes this reflexive work across very different types of articles. In fact, almost all of the 114 articles fall into the following topical categories:

1. Politics (26 articles)—for example, stories on 9/11 and war, dismissing concerns about intelligence or the Bush administration during 9/11 and the Afghani and Iraqi wars
2. Sports (27 articles)—stories on claims of sports bias
3. American character (25 articles)—stories on the theme of Americans' love of wild stories and distrust of authority, often with a focus on "conspiracy theories" in relation to the arts, books, or celebrity personalities
4. Race, nation, ethnicity (23 articles)—stories recounting "third world" majority or "first world minority" irrationality, labeling "third worlders" or "Western" people of color and their tribal, paranoid ways

In these stories the phrase is a metamove that neutralizes claims and disparages claimants. We now turn to examples of the phrase in action—in each case inquiry is deflected by turning the tables on a specific other or imagined group of others.

### Politics: Power as Conspiracy Theory

A *Vancouver Sun* article (Mulgrew 2002) quotes Norman Mailer to discredit concern about foreknowledge of the September 11, 2001, destruction of the World Trade Center:

When the paladin of Camelot joined the fray, I knew 9/11 had become the Kennedy Assassination of the 21st century—a real-life *X-Files* episode occurring before my eyes. Like those *X-Files* accounts of aliens living in oil deposits . . . , simmering conspiracy theories [are] being propagated in alternative publications, on wingnut Web sites and among some serious media outlets.

This journalist describes conspiracy theories as the product of others who believe either that Oswald was not alone or that the *X-Files* outlines the truth about aliens among us. Equivalences like these ridicule questions about documented forewarnings of 9/11 (such as the President's Daily Brief on August 6, 2001, titled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US"). Distinctions between questions, suspicions, and conspiracy theories are erased. The label denigrates associated claims as it calls into question the identities of those who believe and make them. This challenge is bolstered by direct labeling—the label *wingnuts* directly impugns claimants' competence as trustworthy, rational, intelligent interlocutors. Conspiracy theorists, according to Mulgrew, fail to understand or perceive aspects of the world correctly (Hewitt and Stokes 1975:244).



Stories about former U.S. Representative Cynthia McKinney, a Georgia Democrat, further illustrate how calls to account for behavior and information are rebuffed. McKinney raised concerns both about what the Bush administration knew before 9/11 (i.e., how intelligence could have failed so spectacularly) and about the administration's direct financial ties to defense corporations (such as the Carlyle Group or Halliburton) and the profits behind a march to war.

The Bush administration, the mainstream press, and the Carlyle Group immediately tarnished McKinney as a conspiracy theorist. The Carlyle Group's Chris Ullman's comments best illustrate the fusion of conspiracy claims and paranoia. He asked the *Washington Post*: "Did she say these things while standing on a grassy knoll in Roswell, New Mexico?" The reporter who penned this story embellished:

McKinney has often given voice to radical critiques of U.S. policy, especially in the Middle East. She defied the State Department to investigate assertions that international sanctions are brutalizing innocent Iraqis. . . . [She] seems to have tapped into a web of conspiracy theories. (Eilperin 2002)

Such statements, combined with quotes from another Georgia Democrat, U.S. Senator Zell Miller, who dubbed McKinney "loony," "dangerous and irresponsible," impugn her character. Yet the mainstream press has since echoed her concerns about the forewarnings of 9/11 and potential corruption because of close ties between politicians and defense contractors. The phrase *conspiracy theories* deflects attention from a call for political transparency. No direct rebuttal of McKinney's concerns or claims is advanced in the article.

### Sports: Bad Call or Conspiracy?

Many articles have only passing references to conspiracy—for example, most of the sports stories (that comprise nearly one-fourth of our news data) have only brief mentions of the phrase. One story (Spousta 2001) starts: "For most of five games, the Milwaukee Bucks' complaints raked across the Eastern Conference finals like fingernails on a blackboard. The Bucks spoke of conspiracy theories and sounded more concerned with winning friends and influencing referees than with beating the Philadelphia 76ers." Nowhere in the story are conspiracy theories named or explained. Nevertheless, the label reframes the team's alleged complaints, shifting attention from the manifest content of the charges (which may be true or false) to a brief characterization of the trivial nature of the players and their claims.

Some stories make explicit the nature of the claims dismissed as conspiracy theories. In "Conspiracy Theorists Miss One at the Line," the journalist Harvey Araton (2002) repeatedly attacks Ralph Nader for his request that the NBA investigate possible referee bias in a playoff game: "I can't understand how [this victory happened] . . . when everything about these playoffs is supposedly, you know, prearranged. That's what Nader . . . was suggesting when he attached his name to a letter . . . calling for an

investigation into Game 6 of the Western Conference finals.” Sarcasm and labeling allow the journalist to turn on Nader, thus avoiding the need to address Nader’s concerns:

Before floating the aforementioned letter like a long-distance air ball, Nader might have asked himself why there is inevitably an outcry after most major sporting events: because in this era of high-octane incivility—in sports, politics, and elsewhere—losing must invariably evoke shame and blame.

The journalist fabricates a caricature or grotesque of Nader’s expressed view—Nader precisely did not claim in his letter that everything “about these playoffs . . . is prearranged.” In an arena of massive profit making and a site for the celebration of “community-in-common,” conspiracy baiting deflects concern about bias and corruption, obviating the need to directly address claims. Nader’s accusations are not directly refuted; instead, the article shifts to a metaframe in which Nader fails to understand the nature of sports.

### American Character: Everyone Loves a Conspiracy Theory

Associations between conspiracy theories and pathology are forged in the genre of articles structured around the question: “Why do Americans love conspiracy theories?” For example, Eleanor Heartney (2003) starts her story “The Sinister Beauty of Global Conspiracies” as follows: “Conspiracy theories are a grand old American tradition—the mother of them all being the speculation surrounding President John F. Kennedy’s assassination. . . . paranoia sells.” In the next paragraph she directly equates the Enron scandal, which “uncovered a network of off-the-books partnerships,” with “the Sept. 11 attacks [that inspired] wild charges about the secret involvement of the United States and other governments.” Disparate concerns are folded into one extreme claim that the U.S. government planned the attack on the World Trade Center. Creating equivalencies between documented fraud by corporations (Eichenwald 2005; McLean and Elkind 2003) and claims that the U.S. government orchestrated 9/11 frames the former as questionable or ridiculous. Later in the story, a documented conspiracy—the Iran-Contra affair (Kornbluh and Byrne 1993; Parry 1999)—is equated with claims about U.S. planning of 9/11. The move to tarnish what was in fact conspiracy shows the label’s power.

This story also explicitly renders “political” questions and viewpoints outside the purview of the reasonable, as it showcases an artist whose work maps empirical links between global events:

Nor . . . did [the artist] have a political ax to grind. He noted wryly that you probably need to have less understanding about the connections to be political. Instead . . . he was just completely fascinated by connections . . . how one thing led to another.

The story articulates meanings usually submerged in the condensed symbol *conspiracy theorist*—that such people are “political.” Hence to understand the world one must be apolitical. Persons with “political axes to grind” become part of the “white noise” or nonsense surrounding regular discourse.

## Race, Nation, Ethnicity: The Other as Conspiracy Theorist

Articles on Iraq reveal a conjunction of racism and conspiracy baiting as a means of national identity spoilage (the mechanism functions to tarnish any particular member of a nation or collective linked with the label). For example, Sandra Mackey (2003), in a story on the killing of Saddam Hussein's sons, feeds postcolonial constructions of the "oriental" with assertions like "the United States continues to forget it is dealing with a culture that is far older and far different. . . . suspicion and distrust of authority [are] deeply rooted in Iraq." She flatly asserts that Iraq is a "society that rejects authority and thrives on conspiracy theory . . . [and] a deep-seated need for revenge." She claims that the Baath party reflected "the tribalism that had been a characteristic of Iraq since its inception . . . [and operated] according to the values of the tribe [and] sanctioned the age-old principle of revenge." Peoples' attempts to construct definitions of the situation in the context of war are reframed; as with rumor (Shibutani 1966), attempts to make sense of a dangerous and uncertain situation become a characteristic of certain *kinds* of people (tribal, vengeful, primitive).

Thomas Friedman, a columnist for the *New York Times*, has used the phrase to paint a reified "Muslim world" as a seething nest of tribalism and ignorance. Friedman (2002) asserts: "Not all the signals for 9/11 were hidden. Many were out there in public, in the form of hate speech and conspiracy theories directed at America and preached in mosques and schools throughout the Muslim world." He claims a war within Islam exists: "It is a war between the future and the past, between development and underdevelopment, between authors of crazy conspiracy theories vs. those espousing rationality." According to Friedman, "Islam had not gone through the Enlightenment or the Reformation, which separated Church from State in the West and prepared it to embrace modernity, democracy and tolerance." Friedman constructs telling binary oppositions between the rational, tolerant, modern, "democratic, Enlightenment West" and a hateful primitive, intolerant "Islam" in which each term defines what the other is not and cannot be. The phrase *conspiracy theory* symbolically shifts the Muslim world outside the realm of serious people with whom one can reason. With it, Friedman reframes a variety of activities (e.g., hatred, objection to military intervention) as the unwarranted, irrational feelings of a superstitious people.

A story by Erica Goode (2002) parallels Friedman's construction of the conspiracy-minded Muslim world:

Whatever the evidence to the contrary, suspicious minds will always believe that the truth about the Kennedy assassination lies buried in government files. Indeed, in a 1999 poll, 3 out of 4 Americans insisted Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone. . . . Given this immunity to disproof, the persistence in the Arab world of conspiracy theories surrounding the Sept. 11 attacks should not be surprising.

The seamless shift from the Kennedy assassination to the Arab world accomplishes racism through discursive politics—because Arabs have suspicious minds and little

reasoning capacity, they believe in conspiracies about 9/11. Linking conspiracy theories, “immunity to disproof,” doubts about Kennedy’s assassination, and concerns about 9/11 reframes the Arab world as unreasonable. This effectively tarnishes an imagined community, the Arab world, while foreclosing any questioning of the Bush administration’s response to 9/11. The article oversimplifies complex, disparate beliefs, misidentifies causes, and draws facile comparisons between groups of people. Goode ends by citing a psychologist’s survey of conspiracy theories among African Americans: “Among study participants, those who said the government had infected African-Americans with AIDS were more likely to blame prejudice for the problems of blacks. Believing that a deadly virus did not strike randomly . . . offered a ‘way to make sense of the world’” (Goode 2002). Goode characterizes African Americans as gullible and paranoid for beliefs about AIDS (which she assumes to be ridiculous, despite incidents like the Tuskegee Experiment). Through discursive reframing, the claim that racism exists is transformed into a conspiracy theory that assuages confused African Americans.

### CONSPIRACY THEORISTS AND THE ACADEMIC PRESS

News on conspiracy theories tends to rely on scholarly sources and literature to anchor its discursive work (e.g., Eakin 2004; Goode 2002; Heartney 2003; Lyall 2004; Zeller 2004). Journalists regularly use academic references to bolster their discourse. Full understanding of the mechanics of the phrase requires unpacking academic definitions of theories and theorists. This literature is sparse but rapidly growing. We identify three main strands of this literature: analyses of conspiracy theory as individual psychopathology, epistemological analyses of conspiracy theorizing as a type of unwarranted knowledge claim, and recently, more careful cultural studies analyses of conspiracy theories that redress some of the problems of the other two strands.

The first two strands, found in political science and philosophy, pathologize conspiracy theories or dismiss them out of hand as unwarranted and often use the phrase *conspiracy theorist* as a resource for delegitimation. In other words, this literature tends to ask the question: “Why are some people conspiracy theorists?” Assuming the internal validity of the category *conspiracy theory*, these scholars make normative claims while they purport merely to describe or document facts. Such scholarship demarcates legitimate claims and scholars from illegitimate (Mills 1940), untrustworthy, or paranoid “types.” Conspiracy theories are constructed because their authors are, in a word, “nuts.” The third type of scholarship, from cultural studies, attempts to redress some of these problems by taking conspiracy theorizing “more seriously.” However, it also comes perilously close to ignoring the micropolitical function of the category. We now examine these three scholarly approaches in more detail, tracing how academics use the epithet *conspiracy theorist* to construct as illegitimate certain ideas and persons. In all three, the phrase is a reframing device, challenging claims and claimants through the same mechanisms we

identified in the mainstream press: direct association with pejorative phrases, caricature/exaggeration of claims, and the creation of equivalencies between very different claims.

### Pathologizing Conspiracy Discourse: Hofstadter and His Followers

The first strand of scholarly writing on conspiracy theory arises from "consensus" or "pluralist political theory" (Fenster 1999). This literature claims to identify social and cultural patterns that create such persons (e.g., alienation caused by "mass society"), but in so doing establishes the deviant and dangerous nature of those who believe conspiracy theories. Richard Hofstadter's influential work on this topic explicitly pathologizes those who propound or believe in conspiracy theories. In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, Hofstadter (1965:3) explains: "I believe there is a style of mind . . . [that I call] the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind." Hofstadter hastens to explain that his is not a diagnostic usage of paranoid:

In using the expression "paranoid style" I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes. . . . Of course this term is pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than for good. (p. 3)

Hofstadter denies making ad hominem attacks. He claims to be labeling a style rather than characterizing types of people, yet his descriptions and definitions reveal his target: the personal, moral, and intellectual competence of individuals. Hofstadter provides a scholarly foundation for the reframing device with his direct associations between conspiracy theories and pejoratives: conspiracy theorists are "angry minds at work" (1964:77) that make "characteristic paranoid leap[s] into fantasy" (1965:11). "Militant and suspicious minds of this sort" (p. 39) share an "obsession with conspiracy" (p. 14) and advance an "apocalyptic and absolutist framework in which . . . hostility . . . [is] commonly expressed" (p. 17). "The paranoid is a militant leader" who formulates "hopelessly demanding and unrealistic goals" (p. 31), who "sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms . . . [and] expresses the anxiety of those who are living through the last days" (pp. 29–30). "The paranoid's interpretation of history is distinctly personal; decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone's will" (p. 32).

Hofstadter shifts between describing actions and classifying persons. Despite his claims to focus on a rhetorical style, he sets up a simple equation between the terms *conspiracy*, *paranoia*, and *irrationality*. This equation typifies individuals and utterances; he discusses "*the paranoid*," "*the militant leader*," "*the angry mind*." This slippage between styles and persons is reflected in a blurb on a 1996 edition of the book: "The crank and his following have attracted a gifted historian in Richard Hofstadter. . . . His account stands as the most balanced and authoritative analysis we have of a formidable

and apparently permanent force in American politics” (Vann Woodward 1996). Hofstadter sets the terms for moral personhood of those who espouse conspiracy: they are cranks and lunatics, or the followers of cranks and lunatics.

Hofstadter’s construction of the paranoid conspiracy theorist has become the cornerstone in the discursive construction of the conspiracy theorist, and many have since contributed to its edifice. Echoes of Hofstadter’s crank resonate in Charles Mackay’s *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1995), Daniel Pipes’s *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (1997), and Robert Robins and Jerrold Post’s *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (1997). These texts attack cultural agents while purporting to identify cultural rhetoric. Wexler and Havers (2002:253) argue that this scholarship “walks the line [in] rendering conspiracies a domain of abnormal psychology, even psychiatry.” The specter of the cultural dupe/dope as a category of personhood runs through much of Hofstadter’s writing (Fenster 1999). While only sometimes articulated, the assumption lurks throughout that those who believe conspiracy theorists have some personality flaw (an essential character weakness predisposing them to paranoia or gullibility) or are buffeted by forces not only beyond their control but beyond their ken—in short, they are ignorant if not stupid, and have little or no autonomy or self-awareness.

Much discourse about conspiracy has become almost inseparable from Hofstadter’s creation of the paranoid mind. His “conspiracy theorist” has become a condensed symbol saturated with constellations of taken-for-granted meanings. Any particular invocation of it need not be fully elaborated, since a set of shared assumptions is invoked with each instance of its use, which tarnishes the claim and identity of anyone who claims that powerful groups may operate covertly. While it is tempting to argue that Hofstadter is simply pointing to certain claims and claimants who seem truly misguided—for example, those who argue that aliens walk among us—this conclusion neglects a fundamentally important process. In fact, Hofstadter set in motion a discursive tool for delegitimation, which allows its user to reframe claims and claimants as utterly questionable.

### Conspiracy Theories: Unwarranted Categories of Knowledge

Recent philosophical work on conspiracy theory furthers Hofstadter’s agenda, establishing the epistemological limitations of *conspiracy theory* as a general type of knowledge claim (Clarke 2002; Keeley 1999, 2003; Pidgen 1995). Like Hofstadter’s work, this scholarship secures the micropolitical power of the term. For example, Brian Keeley (1999:121) argues for dismissing claims that sound like they might be “Unwarranted Conspiracy Theories” because they generate increasing skepticism over time. Lee Basham (2001:272) critiques Keeley’s delegitimizing move as

well, *slightly crazy*. . . . [The] existence of “openly secretive” governmental and corporate institutions is the norm in contemporary civilization. Despite occasional “leaks” they appear to have been quite successful in their control of profoundly disturbing information.

Despite Basham's repeated arguments in favor of "conspiratorial agnosticism" and against the dismissal of conspiracy theories as "bad knowledge claims," Steve Clarke (2002:131) attempts to justify a priori rejection of anything that sounds as if it might be a conspiracy theory.

If we can identify a consistent form of cognitive failure among such conspiracy theorists then we can go much of the way to justifying the attitude of intellectuals who dismiss conspiracy theories out of hand. . . . The intellectuals can be shown to be entitled to assume (perhaps implicitly) that, like most conspiracy theorists, the conspiracy theorist being ignored is likely to be the proponent of a degenerating research program.

Elsewhere, Clarke reiterates:

Intellectuals are entitled to an attitude of *prima facie* skepticism toward the theories propounded by conspiracy theorists, because conspiracy theorists have an irrational tendency to continue to believe in conspiracy theories. . . . Most conspiracy theorists . . . produce theories that are harebrained and lacking in warrant. (P. 131)

Clarke constructs a kind of immoral personhood for those who commit cognitive errors; these dupes or dopes become the antithesis of, or the other to, "the intellectual." To substantiate his claims about conspiracy theorizing, Clarke uses one source: *Is Elvis Alive?* by Gail Brewer-Giorgio (1988). Based on a single source—a book whose argument is that Elvis is not dead—Clarke condemns the entire category of conspiracy claims. The mechanism reframes an entire category of knowledge claims (in all its instances) using one extreme example.

The illogic of such positions is ironic in a literature devoted to the dispassionate use of reason. In treating "the conspiracy theory" as a general type that can be summarily dismissed without due consideration, authors like Keeley or Clarke have assumed as given that which must be demonstrated—the truth or falsity of any particular knowledge claim. In fact, a claim is unwarranted only when a systematic examination of the evidence has demonstrated that it is false. Claims are most unwarranted when experiential evidence that is long-standing and widely accepted indicates otherwise. Clarke, however, argues that anything resembling a conspiracy theory can be dismissed out of hand. In attempting a logical argument, these authors in fact perform boundary maintenance by constructing the stigmatized other and her/his conspiracy theory. The category *conspiracy theory* polices the borders of legitimate versus risible statements, and intellectually competent actors versus paranoiacs. Keeley and Clarke explicitly justify the reframing work that the phrase does, arguing that, *prima facie*, conspiracy theories can be ignored because such claims are unwarranted, unreasonable, or "harebrained."

### Cultural Studies and Conspiracy Theorizing in an Age of Anxiety

A third, much stronger scholarship has recently developed around the notion of conspiracy and conspiracy theory. This scholarship lies in the nexus between cultural studies, sociology, and history. Unlike the two literatures reviewed above, this

work is careful in its theorization and analysis of conspiracy, treating conspiracy claims as potentially legitimate responses to a postmodern cultural moment and often noting the pejoration of the phrase *conspiracy theorist*. Authors in this strand of the literature include Jodi Dean (1998), Peter Knight (2002), Timothy Melley (2000), Ray Pratt (2003), and Mark Fenster (1999). Their analyses share a number of themes: the United States has seen a recent resurgence of conspiracy theorizing; its popularity is a manifestation of deeper anxieties and problems; and, finally, conspiracy theories are in some sense “rational” responses to a postmodern environment where information saturation, uncertainty, globalization, and the increasing power of governmental and corporate elites spark increasing skepticism about “official” accounts of the world.

These authors see conspiracy theories as reflections of a culture of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety (Altheide 2002; Glassner 1999) in the same way that Shibutani (1966) treated rumor as a serious means of sense making or improvising news in ambiguous, confusing, or ill-defined situations. In their view, large groups of people across the globe have begun to feel powerless or buffeted by agencies and forces beyond their control or knowledge. Dean argues that people find it increasingly difficult to discern truth in an age of virtual technology and overwhelming information flows. Thus aliens—both immigrant and planetary—come to signify our very real “fears of invasion, violation, mutation” (Dean 1998:2). Dean’s is a semiotic reading of anxiety in which we displace our legitimate but ill-informed fears into tales of covert harm wreaked in secret by small groups of powerful, malignant others. We live in an age of uncertainty:

[A] world where more information is available, and hence, a world where we face daily the fact that our truths, diagnoses, and understandings are incomplete—click on one more link, check out one more newscast, get just one more expert opinion. . . . [We] should expect large-scale feelings of anxiety, suspicion, and conspiracy theorizing. (Dean 2003)

Melley links conspiracy theorizing more specifically to a shift in postmodern political culture from democratic citizenship to consumerism. Melley (2002:62) argues that conspiracy theorizing is less a reaction to specific events or issues than a manifestation of what he calls “agency panic,” or deep anxieties arising from “a sense of diminished human agency, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action.” Conspiracy theory is “a displaced (and often misplaced) attempt to come to terms with the possibility that underlying structural forces might well shape our destinies” (Knight 2002:10).

Mason (2002:53) points to conspiracy theorizing as a form of political agency in a “global society pervaded by technologies and simulacra.” And Fenster (1999) describes the renaissance of conspiracy theories in terms of populist politics: “They ideologically address real structural inequities, constituting a response to a withering civil society and concentration in the ownership of the means of production, which together leave the political subject without an ability to be recognized or achieve representation in the public realm” (quoted in Pratt 2003:2). Conspiracy theorizing is a “normal” reaction to an uncertain, confusing, and dangerous contemporary cultural and political climate; it represents one of the few forms of resistance to power left to



citizens-turned-consumers (Fenster 1999). Again, the rapprochement with Shibutani is clear—people in confusing or ill-defined circumstances engage in various kinds of interactive meaning negotiation to answer the question: “What’s going on here?”

This genre of scholarship on conspiracy theory is compelling and offers us a backdrop for understanding the micropolitics of “conspiracy theorist.” Yet it also tends to shift between using words that denote certain kinds of truth claims and words that denote cognitive failures and psychologically pathological states. Dean (1998:8), for example, argues that “because of the pervasiveness of UFO belief and the ubiquity of alien imagery, ufology is an especially revealing window into current American paranoia and distrust.” In the same sentence, distrust becomes equated with paranoia. While her point, at one level, is precisely that “I may be paranoid but they’re still out to get me,” the failure to distinguish between paranoia, distrust, and the proliferation of political and economic conspiracies among a global power elite is precisely what gives the label “conspiracy theorist” its power to discredit.

Similarly, Knight (2002:vii), in his introduction to *Conspiracy Nation*, writes that “the prominence of conspiracy culture tells an important story about . . . American culture. . . . These essays . . . refuse instantly to dismiss it as the product of narrow-minded crackpot paranoia or the intellectual slumming of those who should know better.” Yet his next paragraph uses language resonant of Hofstadter:

But the kind of low-level everyday paranoia that sees a hidden hand . . . everywhere is more prominent in the United States than elsewhere because it taps into the traditional American obsession with ruggedly individual agency. . . . the influence of larger social and economic forces in determining the lives of individuals is often regarded as a paranoia-inducing encroachment on the self-reliance of individuals.(P. vii)

This statement reinscribes psychopathology as the framework for understanding conspiracy beliefs. Even as it points to cultural causes, suggestions of individual delusion sneak in sideways, and the power of the phrase to go meta remains unchallenged by those who seek to trouble facile uses of the label.

This strand of the literature shifts between seeing conspiracy theory believers as victims of a culture of fear and as people disturbed by the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a few. While these two visions are by no means mutually exclusive, failure to distinguish between them leaves intact the cloaked interactional power of this discursive machinery in which a conspiracy theorist is an individual incapable of understanding the complexity of the world.

While we agree with this analysis of the current era, we believe that such accounts may end up reflexively strengthening categories of “otherness.” Instead of questioning the coherence of “conspiracy theorizing” as a category, or pointing to the reframing power of the phrase, these analyses come dangerously close to reifying it. Lumping together alien abductees, the *X-Files*, and concerns about corporate or political corruption erases distinctions between varying concerns of conspiracy, treating them all as part of the “freak show” of American culture in the postmodern moment. Scholarly analysis must engage the micropolitics of the term. While this work on conspiracy

has shown us the importance of cultural contexts for understanding many different kinds of phenomena, it must *also* attend more systematically to the micropolitics of the term: its ability to reflexively tarnish identities of widely disparate claimants and to place limits on what can be uttered in the public sphere.

## DISCLAIMERS

Variants of the phrase *conspiracy theory* deter some discourses and produce others in our data. Certain ways of knowing, thinking, and talking about power are encouraged while others are rendered abnormal. The charge “conspiracy theory” has become serious enough that writers now routinely engage in self-surveillance lest they be labeled “a conspiracy theorist.” Since the conspiracy theorist is often equated with a pathological type (delusional, incompetent, or just stupid), the disclaimer “I’m not a conspiracy theorist but . . .” is an increasingly common strategy among those who would question or make claims about abuses of power and provides evidence of the policing of public discourse (on disclaimers see Hewitt and Stokes 1975). This disclaimer cuts across the mainstream and academic press, reinforcing the reframing power of *conspiracy theorist*. A LexisNexis search of major U.S. newspapers for the phrase “conspiracy theorist, but . . .” brings up 130 articles between 2000 and 2005, compared with a total of 84 articles between 1975 and 1999 (it should be noted that some of these do not function as disclaimers—as in “I hate to disappoint conspiracy theorists, but . . .”). Examples from both the mainstream and scholarly press follow. These demonstrate the use of the disclaimer to distance the writer from nutcases and paranoiacs.

A *New York Times* article by Mark Santora offers one example of the use of this disclaimer. In this piece, titled “Sharpton Fire Is Spawning Conspiracy Theories,” a resident of Harlem reacts to the fire that destroyed Al Sharpton’s 2004 presidential campaign headquarters: “‘Nobody around here really is buying that it could have been an accident,’ said Calvin B. Hunt Jr., 42. Mr. Hunt said that Mr. Sharpton’s supporters were not Oliver Stone–type conspiracy theorists but that their skepticism was understandable” (Santora 2003). That one of the most controversial contemporary African American political figures would be a victim of arson is not beyond the realm of possibility, given the long history of violence perpetrated against black leaders. Still, this resident feels compelled to distance himself from paranoiacs by offering the disclaimer.

Michael Arrietta-Walden’s commentary in the *Portland Oregonian* provides another example. In an article on voting irregularities in the 2004 presidential election, he writes: “I met with a committed group of representatives of the dozens of people in Oregon working to investigate election irregularities. They were not wild-eyed conspiracy theorists, but everyday Oregonians, ranging from a teacher to a software engineer to an interior designer” (Arrietta-Walden 2004). Here he proffers the disclaimer to distinguish this group of normal citizens from the pathologically “wild-eyed.” The disclaimer inoculates the speaker against interlocutors’ attempts to go meta and reframe concerns as illegitimate or unreasonable.

A news article on 9/11 illustrates the use of the disclaimer to "jam" the discursive machinery put into play by the label *conspiracy theorist*. The journalist quotes then U.S. Congressman Curt Weldon on discovering that military intelligence officers had identified several 9/11 hijackers well before September 11, 2001: "I am not a conspiracy theorist, but there is something desperately wrong," he said. "There is something outrageous at work here" (Rosen 2005). Although the claim of foreknowledge was first advanced by decorated military intelligence officers, Rep. Weldon still believed it necessary to offer the disclaimer.

Recent books on politics supply further evidence of the disclaimer's power in thwarting the machinery of the accusation "conspiracy theorist." Kevin Phillips's *American Dynasty* (2004) documents corporate and political misdeeds among generations of the Bush family. A member of the Nixon administration, and by no means outside the mainstream of U.S. political discourse, Phillips nevertheless reassures his readers on page 2: "We must be cautious here not to transmute commercial relationships into a latter-day conspiracy theory, a transformation that epitomizes what historian Richard Hofstadter years ago called the 'paranoid streak' in American politics." Phillips's concern illuminates the power of the machinery and reveals the care with which claims about the concentration of power in the United States must be carefully and overtly distanced in advance from the accusation "conspiracy theorizing."

Those who make institutional critiques of media, corporate, and political behavior often go to great lengths to distance their analyses from the label *conspiracy theory*. For example, the media critic David Barsamian (2005) recently wrote: "To describe objective reality is not to conjure a conspiracy theory [which] has become a term of derision. . . . One way to dismiss anyone who challenges the official interpretation of events is to say that you're a conspiracy theorist. In other words, you're a jerk, you're a moron, you believe in UFOs, aliens, flying saucers."

In the introduction to *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1989:xii) argue that one need not explain monolithic media messages as conspiracy: "Institutional critiques . . . are commonly dismissed by establishment commentators as 'conspiracy theories,' but this is just an evasion. . . . Censorship is largely self-censorship, by reporters and commentators . . . and by people at higher levels within media organizations." If, as Chomsky suggests, "censorship is largely self-censorship," journalists engage in a form of Foucauldian self-discipline. As they self-censor, authors themselves police the boundaries of what can legitimately be articulated in public arenas.

More recently, Chomsky (2005) spells out the power of the label:

If you're down at a bar . . . and you say something that people don't like, they'll . . . shriek four-letter words. If you're in a faculty club or an editorial office, where you're more polite—there's a collection of phrases that can be used which are the intellectual equivalent of four-letter words and tantrums. One of them is "conspiracy theory" . . . [part of] a series of totally meaningless curse words, in effect, which are used by people who know that they can't answer arguments, and that they can't deal with evidence. But . . . they want to shut you up.

In similar fashion, Michael Parenti (1996:174–75) writes of “conspiracy phobia”:

There are individuals who ask with patronizing, incredulous smiles, do you really think that the people at the top have secret agendas, are aware of their larger interests, and talk to each other about them? To which I respond, why would they not . . . ? The alternative is to believe that the powerful and privileged are somnambulists, who move about oblivious to questions of power and privilege . . . , that although most of us ordinary people might consciously try to pursue our own interests, wealthy elites do not.

Chomsky and Parenti describe the use of the epithet to banish a challenge into the realm of fantasy, paranoia, and unreality.

## CONCLUSION

Twenty-seven years ago, Hall (1979:302) answered the question: “How does it happen that the news is always so bad?”

The answers are to be found in a world which has changed over a period of 30 years and is less subject to control and domination of the United States . . . [.] in a socioeconomic order which is experiencing problems in the United States and around the world which were not supposed to occur and for which no solutions seem forthcoming, promising, or legitimate . . . [.] in the exhaustion of interest group liberalism or corporate liberalism as political responses to unstable economic conditions. . . . The answers are also to be found in consequences of the tragedy of Vietnam.

An apt description of the start of the twenty-first century, if we update the war and replace the word “liberalism.” Again, or still, deepening global inequalities are paramount. The United States has become a culture of fear characterized by free-floating anxiety, unease, and uncertainty, and new mechanisms of exclusion have appeared in public discourse by which critical questions and claims are symbolically delegitimized. This article traced one such mechanism in news and academic discourse: the phrase *conspiracy theory*. In our data, the charge “conspiracy theory” is a reframing device that neutralizes questions about power and motive while turning the force of challenges back onto their speakers, rendering them unfit public interlocutors. Indeed, those who question uses of power increasingly feel compelled to disclaim “I’m not a conspiracy theorist, but . . .” Such a squeezing of what can be said and done constitutes a form of discursive violence: thus do public accounts become less and less critical and “political.” Our examination of the uses of “conspiracy theorist” in public discourse contributes to and departs from the traditional macro focus of literature on framing as schemata of interpretation that precede discourse or as large-scale strategic moves on the part of social movements or the media. Instead, we refocus on concrete instances of a micro-reframing device or mechanism that attempt to freeze the ongoing negotiation of meaning through claims. This device allows its user to “go meta,” rendering claims questionable or unworthy of consideration on their own terms.

We suggest that a whole host of similar devices can be examined. Recent argument over "uncivil discourse" and social decay seem more like new mechanisms of social control than indicators of social decay in the populace. Like *conspiracy theorist*, the label may also serve to set some issues, claims, and concerns outside the symbolic boundary of "reasonable" deliberation and contestation.

Variants of the label *conspiracy theorist* become dangerous. The mechanism allows those who use it to sidestep sound scholarly and journalistic practice, avoiding the examination of evidence, often in favor of one of the most important errors in logic and rhetoric—the ad hominem attack. While contest, claim, and counterclaim are vital to public discourse, we must recognize that "democracy is a fragile and delicate thing" (Denzin 2004) and mechanisms that define the limits of the sayable must continually be challenged. We call on scholars and journalists, then, to continue to develop a language for systematically tracking and diminishing such dangerous machinery. We are not conspiracy theorists, but we believe that this machinery weakens public spaces that are central for interaction, contest, and deliberation: the spaces where we define our world.

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