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Vulnerability and conspiracism in the United States from McCarthyism to Trumpism

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Introduction: The new conspiracists are not crazy, they're foxy

1 A first claim of this paper is that most conspiracy theorists (in the US and elsewhere) are not crazy—in other words, they are not "certifiable lunatics…with profoundly disturbed minds" (Hofstadter 1964), though it's easy to pretend they are. [1] Instead they belong to one of two groups of basically normal people: either 1) the large number of economically vulnerable and/or socially insecure folks who find in conspiracism a consoling subculture of the like-minded who speak the same language within a presupposed meaningful, just world; or 2) a relatively small but influential number of wealthy and socially dominant individuals who find it to their advantage to operate as calculating conspiracy theory strategists and who boldly use this destabilizing technique that scrambles the brain's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, true and false (Arendt 1951). This technique, now commonly called *conspiracism*, has four goals: a) to erode confidence in public institutions and ordinary people-powered democracy; b) to create disorder and delays that consume a lot of

energy, money, and airtime; c) to render community-based democratic deliberations and problem-solving more divisive and less functional; d) to allow other agents (notably authoritarian and corporate leaders) to fill the breach and seize control amidst the chaos they have manufactured and offer their own services as uniquely gifted rescuer-saviors. The preparation, execution, and aftermath of the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol, supposedly to "stop the steal" of the 2020 US presidential election, offers clear empirical evidence of conspiracism in action that media outlets on every continent covered.

2 This paper follows the observation made by Robert Goldberg many years before Trumpism (in 2001 and 2010) and relayed by Matthew Dallek (2023) that conspiracy theorists of this second predatory type (e.g., Donald Trump, Tucker Carlson, Rush Limbaugh, Alex Jones) are "entrepreneurs in search of customers." In other words, both parties ("buyers" and "sellers") are meeting in the marketplace of ideas—whether top-tier media outlets, supermarket checkout tabloids, or today's social media platforms—with the goal of having a dose of certain basic human needs met, notably some *fun*, *power*, *freedom*, *love*, and *a sense of belonging and mattering* within a supposedly ordered and just universe. My claim is that conspiracism (the production and consumption of the discourse of conspiracy theories and the mindset that goes along with such practices) is a fluid relationship between chaos agents who act as predatory con artists (Carlson and Trump today, Joseph McCarthy and the John Birch Society in the 1950s) and their prey. The latter audience can be called conspiracy theory amateurs or conspiracy relaying hobbyists. These include today's QAnon Shaman (Callaghan 2022) and other ordinary citizens involved in the January 6, 2021 insurrection (some now convicted of "seditious conspiracy," see Feuer and Montague 2022) as well as, going back in time, outspoken people (Republicans and Democrats alike) who have claimed that 9/11 and JFK's assassination were both an "inside job" carried out by a branch of the US government (a claim also made about January 6), that men never really walked on the moon, that Jews use the blood of non-Jewish children in rituals and further back plotted with Romans to have Jesus killed, and many other air-tight, plot-driven conspiracy narratives in which, as Goldberg remarks, "everything can be

explained; all the dots can be connected" (2010). The second claim of this paper is that conspiracism is more active and virulent in times of high vulnerability and status loss anxiety provoked, in the American context at least, by three main factors: a) two generations of increasingly extreme economic and social inequality (roughly ever since the 1980s era of neoconservative Reaganomics that initiated the rollback of the forty-year FDR to LBJ egalitarian trend in American society), b) higher rates of immigration since 1965 that raise questions about foreigners' behaviors and motives (are they American or un-American?), and, more recently, c) asymmetrical exposure (depending on one's race, class, gender, and citizenship status) to the effects of globalization, climate change, extreme weather events, climate and economic migration, housing and food insecurity, and ecosystem collapse. The purpose of the following pages is to provide the historical background necessary to understand the damage to society caused by conspiracism and propose possible solutions to combat this persistent problem of exploitation of the power-*less* by the power-*full*.

1. Traditional conspiracism and two leading commentators: Richard Hofstadter and Robert Goldberg

3 Fundamentally, I share the view expressed by Richard Hofstadter in his landmark essay on "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964) that "It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant." I also share Hofstadter's commitment, relayed by Robert Goldberg (and by other prominent historians and concerned citizens from Jason Stanley and Timothy Snyder to Jamelle Bouie and Anna Merlan) that *calling out the excesses and abuse of conspiracism*—a habit of mind that goes well beyond healthy skepticism, provocative contrarianism, and normal scientific and journalistic methods—*is an important and never-ending task*. Why ? Because conspiracism is about power, both a story about power and an exercise of power, and power and storytelling are two basic human needs.

4 My interest in conspiracism grew out of a seminar and subsequent book on far-right threats to democracy (*Fascism, Vulnerability, and the Escape from Freedom: Readings to Repair Democracy*, 2022). [2] Chapter 10 of my book, a discussion of Keith Payne's *The Broken Ladder: How Inequality Affects the Way We Live, Think, and Die* (2017), takes up the problem (i.e., the pain, the harm) of conspiracism by making use of Payne's chapter 6, "God, Conspiracies, and the Language of Angels: Why People Believe What They Believe." That chapter confirms many of Robert Goldberg's observations in his 2001 assessment of "the culture of conspiracy in modern America" published, coincidentally, around the time of the terrorist attacks of September 11 that would provoke a swarm of conspiracist discourses and counter-discourses and thus add further empirical evidence to support Goldberg's argument.

5 In 2001, Goldberg was an early user of the word *conspiracism*. The term has not yet been accepted by Dictionary.com, but that could happen any day now given its increasing use by those commenting on the twenty-first century intensification of conspiracy talk, now turbo-charged since 2020 by the Covid-19 pandemic that killed over one million people in the United States (US) starting in the last year of the conspiracy-filled Trump presidency (see Robertson 2016, Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, Kelly 2023). With former president Trump now accused of "conspiracy to obstruct justice" (in the Mar-a-Lago classified documents case, see Savage 2023)—one of many conspiracy charges he faces in Washington D.C., Florida, New York, and Georgia—it is worth re-reading the original *New York Times* review of Goldberg's 2001 history of conspiracism, *Enemies Within*, especially the reviewer's concluding pushback against Goldberg's portrait of America:

> Conspiracism is an American tradition, Professor Goldberg writes, although only rarely, as in the 1850's and 1930's, do the conspirators seem even temporarily to have penetrated vital institutions. In that context his finger wagging over the emergence of a new nationalism of conspiracism seems a trifle alarmist. Conspiracy thinking has moved Americans beyond a healthy skepticism of authority, he writes. Lacking public confidence, core institutions become unstable and lose their ability to govern. The cancer of conspiracism has begun to metastasize. Without a new awareness of its character and

> quick intervention, countersubversion may overcome the body politic. Sounds to me like the makings of a conspiracy (Roberts 2001).

6 In hindsight, given all that has happened in this area since 9/11, the reviewer's attempt at humor (insinuating that Goldberg slips and falls into yet another overwrought example of the very phenomenon he set out to study) and his dismissive words "finger wagging" and "trifle alarmist" may sound smug and naïve. Idealism and hoping for the best are admirable traits in many contexts, but Sam Roberts might have adopted a more cautious "wait and see" approach in his December 18, 2001 book review. Goldberg, on the other hand, ends up looking like a genius and prophet (especially after the conspiracy theorizing about 9/11), which is probably why he gets invited to deliver a prestigious lecture at Florida Atlantic University nine years later—a talk that allows him to scold his early doubters and repeat a call for vigilance in his conclusion:

> *Conspiracy thinking is not harmless. It is not merely wrong thinking and poor reasoning. Conspiracy theories are potentially dangerous because they demonize public officials and erode faith in national institutions. Negotiation and compromise become impossible when charges of betrayal and treason pepper debate. The loss of trust in America's leaders and institutions has gone beyond healthy skepticism. Allegiance has become suspect and governance more difficult.*
>
> This is not merely a matter of history. It is our present [in 2010]. Witness that the Secret Service reported more death threats against Barak Obama than any other president-elect. Twenty-five percent of Americans have heard the rumor that Obama is the Anti-Christ. Obama has also been tagged as a racist, Muslim, usurper, radical communist, Hitler, and Manchurian Candidate in both conspiracist and mainstream circles. A Birther movement insists that he was born in Kenya and is ineligible to be president of the United States. Fifty-eight percent of Republican voters believe that President Obama is not an American citizen or are unsure. In an August, 2010 poll coinciding with Obama's birthday, 27 percent of Americans remained convinced that he was not or probably was not born in the United States. Eleven members of the US House of Representatives have sponsored a bill requiring future presidential candidates to provide proof of citizenship. This despite repeated confirmations of his American citizenship, that hundreds of people would have to be in on

> the plot, and that a time machine would be necessary to plant false evidence. Yet, CNN's Lou Dobbs concluded, "questions won't go away."

> *Conspiracy thinking will not go away. It is a long time American tradition.* We must learn to inoculate ourselves from it by education. Do not accept the sensational, however tantalizing and emotionally soothing it appears. Do not deny your American birthright to question. Reach beyond easily [sic] answers. Read, question, and think. Conspiracy theories, must not by default, become the conventional wisdom.

7 Viewed from 2024, there's a lot of truth to what Goldberg says (see my italics above). But Goldberg's remarks also contain a form of naiveté, namely his idea that we can "inoculate ourselves" and his repetition of the teacher's unproven article of faith that education and critical thinking will set us free. He forgets, it would seem, that the typical conspiracy theorist considers himself the very model of the critical, enlightened freethinker (a personality trait that Hofstadter, also a distinguished professor, pointed out 50 years earlier). Indeed, the speech's very last sentence with its call to prevent conspiracy thinking from becoming conventional wisdom seems forgetful of Goldberg's own opening claim which is that between 1945 and 2000 (because, he says, of Hollywood's endless thirst for juicy plots, America's sense of mission, and its love/hate relationship with both "diversity" and "big government") conspiracy thinking became "a mainstream phenomenon"; i.e., common and conventional. Looking back from 2024, we can also point out that it was unhelpful for Goldberg to speak flatly about "Republican voters" and "Americans" instead of distinguishing between ringleaders and enthusiastic followers; in other words, influencers with superspreading power by virtue of their wealth, reputation, charisma, technical know-how, or public office versus ordinary consumers of social media consulting their Facebook feeds, "friends," and "likes." In short, that Goldberg mentions the media circus known as the "Birther movement" but not its most famous promoter, Donald Trump, seems like a glaring omission.

8 However, the major flaw in Goldberg's lecture—also somewhat surprising since he himself says that conspiracy thinking "is not

merely wrong thinking and poor reasoning"—is his unwillingness or inability to see conspiracism as anything besides a lack of the right kind or quantity of thinking and vigilance, instead of including in his calculus the role of possible material concerns, notably status loss anxiety among lower-middle and middle-income Americans, especially those who are predominantly white (and therefore accustomed to the "wages of whiteness," Haney López 2014), less educated, and located relatively far from coastal or interior metropolitan hubs and relatively close to the Mexican border. [3] Status loss anxiety—provoked by fears of faraway Chinese or neighboring Latinos "stealing" American jobs, among other causes—is real in 2010, especially after the subprime housing crisis, massive nationwide foreclosures, and huge asset losses of the 2008-2009 Great Recession that Barack Obama was put in charge of mopping up after his history-making inauguration as the first African American president in January 2009. Goldberg's silence about the possibility that *anxiety over vulnerability and loss of power* were driving conspiracy thinking between 2001 and 2010—and, we can add, in the years from Obama to Trump to Biden too—is another striking omission that this paper, along with my book on fascism and vulnerability, aims to correct.

9 In sum, Goldberg's book and lecture offer an instructive though incomplete Internet era update of Richard Hofstadter's Cold War assessment of "paranoid thinking" and "conspiratorial fantasy" from 1964. [4] That earlier study was also stronger at giving a backstory and lists of personality traits than it was at thinking about material causes. Hofstadter was inviting his reader to look *back* at both early American history and the country's recent recovery from the mass hysteria of McCarthyism and communist "witch hunts" as well as *forward* with a warning about the future potential for such harmful thinking and politically motivated persecution to continue away from the front pages and Congressional committees in less visible, banalized forms through the work of the John Birch Society and its neoconservative offshoots and networks of country clubs, alumni associations, and corporate boardrooms. Fundamentally, Hofstadter's essay underscores that conspiracy theories have always been a way for the power elite to control the narrative and retain power even if the subordination enforcement of outgroups occasionally comes with

histrionic displays of petulant, feigned vulnerability (i.e., playing the victim).

2. Exceptional witnesses of 1950s conspiracism: Arthur Miller and Hannah Arendt

10 Before turning to Keith Payne's observations in *The Broken Ladder* and the problem of "the new conspiracism" under Trumpism, which still holds a tight grip over the Republican party more than three years after Trump's decisive and yet persistently disputed loss to Joe Biden, it is important to say a word about two canonical texts from the early 1950s—first, because that is the time of America's mission pivot from fighting European fascism to combating the worldwide spread of communism (with Joseph McCarthy as the self-appointed lead crusader against that supposed new evil), and second because it is the virile time that Trump and many of his white, traditionalist, nationalist, and evangelical followers are nostalgic about, namely the pre-Civil Rights Act America that they consider "great" and say they want to restore. The first text is Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* from 1953. The second is Hannah Arendt's magisterial treatise, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1951. Obviously, there are countless studies of these two monuments of twentieth century writing, and adding two more would go well beyond the scope of this essay.

11 About *The Crucible* and its reception history, it's worth knowing that during the Clinton years in the context of a new film version of the play and a conspiracy (or "witch hunt" as some claimed) to remove the president from office, Miller looked back on his creation in a valuable *New Yorker* piece entitled, "Why I Wrote 'The Crucible'" (1996). A writer's testimony about their own work is not to be taken as gospel, nor however should it be ignored. Miller's backward glance has the virtue of giving the reader in 1996 and today a "distant mirror" along with other interesting tidbits of the "making of" variety. We learn, for example, that Miller witnessed the pivot from fighting fascism to containing communism as all-consuming and paralyzing of protest—two features he was determined to resist:

> There was magic all around; the politics of alien conspiracy soon dominated political discourse and bid fair to wipe out any other issue. How could one deal with such enormities in a play?
>
> "The Crucible" was an act of desperation. Much of my desperation branched out, I suppose, from a typical Depression-era trauma—the blow struck on the mind by the rise of European Fascism and the brutal anti-Semitism it had brought to power. But by 1950, when I began to think of writing about the hunt for Reds in America, I was motivated in some great part by the paralysis that had set in among many liberals who, despite their discomfort with the inquisitors' violations of civil rights, were fearful, and with good reason, of being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly. (159)

12 Later in the piece, Miller repeats the observation famously made by Melvin Lerner in *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (1980) and later restated by Goldberg, Payne, and other commentators on conspiracism. The punchline comes in the three last sentences:

> The more I read into the Salem panic, the more it touched off corresponding images of common experiences in the fifties: the old friend of a blacklisted person crossing the street to avoid being seen talking to him; the overnight conversions of former leftists into born-again patriots; and so on. Apparently, certain processes are universal. When Gentiles in Hitler's Germany, for example, saw their Jewish neighbors being trucked off, or farmers in Soviet Ukraine saw the Kulaks vanishing before their eyes, the common reaction, even among those unsympathetic to Nazism or Communism, was quite naturally to turn away in fear of being identified with the condemned. As I learned from non-Jewish refugees, however, there was often a despairing pity mixed with "Well, they must have done *something*." Few of us can easily surrender our belief that society must somehow make sense. The thought that the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied. (163-164)

13 "And so the evidence has to be internally denied" is a sentence that resonates strongly today for anyone who followed the aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election, witnessed the riot at the US

Capitol, read the detailed and damning findings of the January 6th Committee, and heard Republican elected officials refer to participants in that riot as "heroes" and "hostages."

14 I include one more quotation to restitute Miller's effort in the 1990s to convey for his reader the frenzied atmosphere of the 1950s, just as his play recreated the frenzy of the 1690s. Here Miller states where he thinks the play's enduring force and appeal is coming from. He does not use the words *vulnerability*, *insecurity*, or *status loss anxiety*, but I believe, following Keith Payne and Thomas Edsall, that those terms offer a better answer than do the theatrical but rather fuzzy words "fanaticism," "paranoia," and "paranoid center" chosen by Miller.

> It is only a slight exaggeration to say that, especially in Latin America, "The Crucible" starts getting produced wherever a political coup appears imminent, or a dictatorial regime has just been overthrown. From Argentina to Chile to Greece, Czechoslovakia, China, and a dozen other places, the play seems to present the same primeval structure of human sacrifice to the furies of fanaticism and paranoia that goes on repeating itself forever as though imbedded in the brain of social man. (164)

> I am not sure what "The Crucible" is telling people now, but I know that its paranoid center is still pumping out the same darkly attractive warning that it did in the fifties. For some, the play seems to be about the dilemma of relying on the testimony of small children accusing adults of sexual abuse, something I'd not have dreamed of forty years ago. For others, it may simply be a fascination with the outbreak of paranoia that suffuses the play—the blind panic that, in our age, often seems to sit at the dim edges of consciousness. Certainly its political implications are the central issue for many people; the Salem interrogations turn out to be eerily exact models of those yet to come in Stalin's Russia, Pinochet's Chile, Mao's China, and other regimes. (Nien Cheng, the author of "Life and Death in Shanghai," has told me that she could hardly believe that a non-Chinese—someone who had not experienced the Cultural Revolution—had written the play.) But below its concerns with justice the play evokes a lethal brew of illicit sexuality, fear of the supernatural, and political manipulation, a combination not unfamiliar these days. The film, by reaching the broad American audience as no play ever can,

> may well unearth still other connections to those buried public terrors that Salem first announced on this continent. (164)

15 Now as then, one often finds imaginative metaphors of fever, sickness, magic, and madness being used to characterize the furiously unrelenting and seemingly irrational character of conspiracism. One also hears optimists such as Barack Obama, for example, express the hopeful (others would say delusional) view that "the fever is breaking" or will break, by which they mean that people they consider deranged are now "coming to their senses" (Tomasky 2012). These metaphors are unhelpful because they shut down inquiry into where the conspiracism is coming from (namely from status loss anxiety and power loss anxiety, which of course are related, plus vulnerability caused by extreme inequality, unregulated globalization, contradictory immigration policies, and fear of change and disorder). These metaphors also facilitate the naïve belief that the problem will take care of itself and that conspiracy theorists will eventually just go away. Here it might be helpful to recall the wise words of James Baldwin from 1962: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

16 Turning to Arendt, let's first say that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* meets Mark Twain's definition of a classic: a book that everyone wants to have read but no one wants to read. Those who do venture in will discover a densely argued and documented presentation written in a tone of high seriousness with occasional darkly humorous touches reminiscent of ironists such as Paul de Man or Jane Austen. For our purposes Arendt's study clarifies the attraction and the harm of conspiracy theories. She explains how antisemitism becomes the template for all later conspiracy theorists—the main strategy being to allege a large and increasingly negative influence of a marginal group (Jews) whose actual power, they omit to say, was in decline starting in the 1850s as imperialism intensified. It's easier to punch down at a weakened group after your conspiracy narratives have slyly (mis)represented that group as something powerful and menacing. Arendt also usefully explains how totalitarian propaganda relies more on domination than persuasion—the main strategy being the use of *repetition* and *consistency* to satisfy the common human desire to believe in a just world and reject chance, gaps, and

indeterminacy. Arendt's observations in 1951 about how "modern masses" behave—in particular their thirst for consistency and causal narratives—is strikingly resonant when one considers the operation of today's conspiracy-laced information spaces in the US and elsewhere:

> [Modern masses] do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. Repetition, somewhat overrated in importance because of the common belief in the masses' inferior capacity to grasp and remember, is important only because it convinces them of consistency in time. What the masses refuse to recognize is the fortuitousness that pervades reality. They are predisposed to all ideologies because they explain facts as mere examples of laws and eliminate coincidences by inventing an all-embracing omnipotence which is supposed to be at the root of every accident. Totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency (351-52).

17 Arendt later returns to the same point with a zinger that hits home for anyone who sees totalitarian neofascism as a genuine threat to democracy in their own neighborhood or nation: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist" (474).

18 Arendt is an excellent guide to the similarities and differences between classical and modern tyrannies that first Tocqueville and then later historians such as Robert Paxton and Timothy Snyder would also place at the center of their work. As a final example, we can cite Arendt's observations on the usefulness of isolation to the modern tyrant. Isolation and loneliness are constantly being singled out as a major problem in today's America of smartphone addiction, the aftershocks of covid lockdowns, and the collapse of local newspapers and associative life that dates back at least to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* lamentation from 2000.

> It has frequently been observed that terror can rule absolutely only over men who are isolated against each other and that, therefore, one of the primary concerns of all tyrannical government is to bring this isolation about. Isolation may be the beginning of terror; it certainly is its most fertile ground; it always is its result. This isolation is, as it were, pretotalitarian; its hallmark is impotence insofar as power always comes from men acting together, "acting in concert" (Burke); isolated men are powerless by definition (474).

19 Arendt's presentation continues with a stimulating discussion of the differences between isolation and loneliness. For example, one glimpses in these pages a possible attraction for actual conspiracists and conspiracy theorists alike: by conspiring, literally "breathing together" as Goldberg reminds us, conspirators are undertaking an unauthorized, Promethean act of powerful and empowering collaboration and community building. An important takeaway suggested by Arendt's study is that conspiracists of all stripes see themselves as powerful heroes on a mission, a band of brothers, not rogues or sinners. In the Christian tradition this goes back to Adam and Eve's alliance to transgress God's interdiction to eat from the Tree of Knowledge—a story discussed by Erich Fromm in his *Escape from Freedom* (1941) which is a centerpiece of my book on fascism and vulnerability. Classic works such as those by Fromm, Arendt, and Miller are infinitely suggestive, clarifying, and helpful—in vulnerable times especially.

3. Understanding the new conspiracism with the help of Keith Payne's *The Broken Ladder*

20 As a transition between Arendt and Keith Payne, I offer this quotation from Hofstadter's "Paranoid Style" essay which until now I have mostly left aside because it is generally so well known to those interested in the conspiratorial mind:

> Perhaps the central situation conducive to the diffusion of the paranoid tendency is a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not

> susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise. *The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular social interest–perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of its demands–are shut out of the political process. Having no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception that the world of power is sinister and malicious fully confirmed.* They see only the consequences of power–and this through distorting lenses–and have no chance to observe its actual machinery. A distinguished historian has said that one of the most valuable things about history is that it teaches us how things do not happen. It is precisely this kind of awareness that the paranoid fails to develop. He has a special resistance of his own, of course, to developing such awareness, but circumstances often deprive him of exposure to events that might enlighten him–and in any case he resists enlightenment. We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well. (my italics)

21 In short, the paranoid rejects the quip by Hegel (perhaps the "distinguished historian" Hofstadter has in mind?) that "the only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history." In any case, these 1964 observations by Hofstadter on the isolation and grievances of the paranoid about "the world of power" can serve as a bridge to Keith Payne's 2017 study of the psychological effects of extreme inequality and the related problem of political polarization that many also see as a factor in the recent spike in the use of force, fraud, and conspiracism.

22 The Crux of Payne's *The Broken Ladder* is that extreme inequality deranges the faculty of judgment of both the highly vulnerable and the less vulnerable: the former become fearful and meek (at least on the surface, while in private chatrooms and at political rallies they may be loud and raucous), while the latter tend to be arrogant, preachy, and insensitive everywhere and all the time. As more people become vulnerable and lose power, the more they are susceptible to conspiracy theories which give the illusion of power and control because they provide the security of a knowable narrative. In exchange for loss of power and control in the real world, one has the consolation of being the narrator of a (self-pitying and/or self-

righteous) story of one's loss: "The system may not be working for them, but at least there *is* a system" (146).

23 With some clever experiments, Payne shows his reader how our brains fill in gaps and seek patterns. Not only do we want a "just universe" (Payne's debt to Melvin Lerner, 143) where the bad are punished and the good are rewarded, but we seem to need it to be so at a very basic, physiological level; and if a rational order does not manifest itself spontaneously, we'll invent and customize the logic, order, and rules. Payne: "We are especially likely to manufacture meaningful patterns when we feel powerless. The predictability, and therefore controllability, of patterns provides a bit of solace from the lack of control. This might help explain why it never seems to be the Volvo-driving accountant who sees Jesus in his cinnamon toast" (140). What Payne's humorous punchline covers over, however, is that in today's world the Volvo-driving accountant or other more powerful people can see it in their interest to play along as a means to retain their domination over the rubes and plebes who fall for such stuff—because while the many are staring at their toast, a few are consolidating their control over the whole Volvo dealership and all other assets. To borrow from Muirhead and Rosenblum's account of "the new conspiracism," the dominant are able to leverage their advantages in a context of "malignant normality" that the conspiracist discourse spawns like so many toxic algae blooms, except here it's democracy, civil society, and whole communities that get poisoned not just plants and animals.

24 What's different about Payne, as compared to a Goldberg, Hofstadter, or Arendt, is that he backs up his claims with the evidence of psychological experiments, not with political speculation, historical narratives, or philosophizing:

> All told about half of Americans believe in some form of conspiracy theory [...] At bottom, conspiracy theories are about two things: power and distrust. [...] The best predictor of which conspiracy theories people believe at any given time is which political party is in power. [...] People who feel powerless tend to believe in conspiracies carried out by the powerful. [Payne then recounts some experiments that prove this] Distrust—not facts or logic—made even contradictory theories seem more plausible than the official account. To believe in a conspiracy, you trade a bit of your belief that the

> world is good, fair, and just in exchange for the conviction that at least someone—anyone—has everything under control. […] One of the simplest ways that people maintain the sense that the world is orderly is merely to insist that it is so, and then backfill their reasoning to make everything add up." (142-143)

25 A few pages later in the same chapter Payne allows himself to step back and make a hypothesis about where all this might be going:

> Although no research has yet firmly established why inequality and religion are linked, I predict that when the research is done, the key factor will be inner feelings of status [loss] and [in]security. […] In predominantly Christian countries, inequality is linked to greater belief in Jesus; in predominantly Muslim countries, inequality is linked to greater belief in Mohammed, and so on. People tend to turn to whatever belief system they were raised with when they feel insecure in the world. […] [W]hen people feel that they are being left behind, that life is chaotic and their position is precarious, their brain picks up the pace in its work of steadying the world. And the method works. Individuals who are religious tend to be happier and less anxious—about both life and death—than those who are not. Some belief systems provide comfort and reassurance in ways that ordinary thinking cannot." (150-154)

26 Note, Payne is saying that secularism—the rejection of religion as superstition and the embrace of reason—will not protect people against conspiracism as much as will the sense of security that comes with lower vulnerability when the many are having their basic needs met most of the time; and not just *food*, *shelter*, and *clothing* but also their emotional needs for *freedom*, *fun*, *love*, *power*, and *a sense of belonging* and *mattering*. Without that basic sense of security about needs being met, conspiracism, says Payne—with or without God or other supernatural phenomena—is likely to proliferate, even within the most educated and rational civilizations.

Conclusion: Combatting the corrosive effects of the new conspiracism

27 That's enough on Payne, but this review of older and newer forms of conspiracism would be incomplete if we did not offer some practical solutions. As should be clear by now, my claim is that conspiracism is not the main problem but part of the coping mechanism (for amateurs) and cover up (for professionals) when confronted with the pain caused by extreme inequalities of power. What happens when inequality is too large and unruly to ignore or hide? Answer: censorship and other forms of resistance, including conspiracism—which ultimately is about power and controlling narratives of power. Polarization in the US, due in large part to extreme power inequalities—which are societal choices not natural disasters or fate—has greatly increased since roughly 1980 (Payne 4-8). Lately this is causing the brain's normal anxiety reduction mechanisms (through pure belief and happy talk, no matter how "crazy") to break down even though paranoid thinking (which is hardly exactly calming) and conspiracy theorizing are today working at top speed and being further boosted in the Internet age by Twitter and other dizzying rage platforms. Extreme power inequalities, vulnerability, and status loss anxiety form a vicious circle leading to 1) more high-risk behavior such as unplanned parenthood, drug abuse, and other addictions and recklessness; 2) reduced education and fewer skills; 3) poorer mental and physical health; 4) fewer friends and more isolation and loneliness. The cumulative effect of 1-4 is a generally shorter and poorer life, in all senses of the term, with less personal fulfillment.

28 If extreme inequality is unjust (though some disagree, more on that later), what happens when that injustice becomes too large to ignore or hide? Answer: more censorship, suppression, and oppression. The message about the effects of extreme inequality and the extreme vulnerability that it produces is effectively covered up—especially within filtered information spaces such as Fox News and other ideologically pure "silos"—by the chaos and confusion of conspiracy theories. All the time spent by the Anti-Defamation League, for

example, challenging libelous "theories" about Jews is a bonus for the dominant group whose goal is subordination enforcement and diverting attention from the injustice of extreme inequality (economic, but also political and social). Conspiracy-mongering (by Fox News, Trump, Tucker Carlson, and their epigones) keeps attention away from the fifty-year "new Jim Crow" history of an organized and consistent effort by minorities of powerful elites and slim legislative majorities (often achieved through gerrymandering) to advance a political, social, and economic agenda that serves the wealthy and powerful, and produces more inequality and vulnerability for everybody else.

29 To summarize, the "bait and switch" strategy of the new conspiracism is this: While you are busy debunking conspiracy theory a, b, or c, you are paying less attention to X, Y, and Z that are often not even secretive nor exactly illegal actions. On the one hand there are (fake) threats and conspiracies, we are told and "a lot of people are saying," led by: Jews (or Catholics or Muslims); witches, uppity women; communists, socialists, liberals; punks, poets, artists; illegal aliens, immigrants; the sexually deviant; Blacks, drug users, rapists; the "Woke"; the "Deep State"; Anthony Fauci, scientists; Anne Hidalgo, Carlos Moreno, "the 15-minute city," and the list goes on. On the other hand, there are questionable practices going on mostly in broad daylight. These include individuals and large companies operating without oversight or accountability; extra-governmental "free zones" and "freeports" with their own rules and 100% impunity; massive tax avoidance and tax evasion; verifiably rigged elections or no elections at all; land and other resource capture, smuggling, dumping, polluting; human trafficking and slavery; blatant ignoring of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and other international laws, charters, treaties, and protocols; judicial branch capture, and the list goes on. Conspiricism wins and democracy loses when the conversation becomes an endless loop of claims and counter claims about which threats are real and which are fake.

30 It is important to remember that not everyone believes in *Equality* or is opposed to inequality—quite the contrary. Many people, not just Protestants or those raised within authoritarian regimes, are at peace with large amounts of inequality; they consider it natural and normal, and see no reason, for now at least, to lift a finger to reduce it, even if

it reaches extreme levels. [5] Low solidarity and tribalist "us" versus "them" thinking, though highly corrosive of democracy (Stanley), is the norm in much of the world and rising inside many democracies. Three symptoms of US tribalism: 1) the 2017 Charlottesville riots ("Jews will not replace us"); 2) the January 6 riot at the US Capitol and the self-righteous "vice signaling" of some participants; 3) the entertaining 24/7 broadcasting of Fox News (more tactical storytelling than fact-based reporting) for whom a $787.5 million fine for spreading conspiracy theories is just an operating expense to run a profitable anti-political business.

31 To conclude, I offer my answer to the old question "What is to be done?" First, remember that chaos agents spreading conspiracy theories win when they get you to believe that conspiracy theories are the main problem, when in fact conspiracy theories are the epiphenomenon, the entertaining side-show, diverting attention from the material problem (for the 99%), namely extreme inequality and vulnerability that result in shorter, poorer lives (Wallace-Wells 2023). Second, persuade the 1% that *they too* are negatively impacted by extreme inequality (see Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, 2010). Third, speak and write clearly, directly, and accurately. The authors in this essay and bibliography are models of clear, argument-driven prose. Do not yield in advance to those who deal in "alternative facts" or who celebrate or lament a "post-truth" world. ("Post-truth is pre-fascism," writes Timothy Snyder in *On Tyranny*, 2017). Do not give a debate platform to conspiracy theorists who are unwilling to submit real evidence in advance to back up their claims. Only participate in rule-governed public debates and avoid forums that risk degenerating into chaos theater or worse. That does not mean abandoning the field to "the crazies"—it means insisting on reality-based discussion and the consistent enforcement of ground rules. Similarly, one should defend real politics as argued confrontation between policy alternatives under the utilitarian principle of advancing the general public good and call out the anti-politics of chaos agents who want to replace politics with unmediated domination by force, fraud, and cruelty toward demonized and dehumanized "enemies of the people." And most importantly, because individual vigilance has proven over and over to be inadequate, we should work collectively at *reducing*

extreme inequality to more manageable, peaceful levels that most people consider normal and to be expected, even desirable, within an open society composed of individuals and groups with different backgrounds, gifts and talents, practices and projects. Reducing extreme inequality may not eliminate all conspiracism, but it has the best chance of reducing the vulnerability and insecurity that stoke conspiracism to uncontrollable and destructive levels that punish everyone. That some professional and amateur conspiracists may revel in chaos, stick to their stories, and refuse to back down is not a reason for those who believe in truth, facts, science, and democracy to walk away or stay silent.

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1 In a piece about the tendency of very wealthy people (from Henry Ford to Elon Musk) to make baseless claims and spout conspiracy theories, the economist Paul Krugman seems to believe that "The Rich Are Crazier Than You and Me," (*The New York Times*, 6 July 2023). However, he may not mean that literally and is instead making a serious point similar to my own which is that rich people can be cagier—more opportunistic and foxy—than many people. The tip-off is his concluding paragraph: "In any case, what we're seeing now is something remarkable. Arguably, the craziest faction in US politics right now isn't red-hatted blue-collar guys in diners [i.e., the typical MAGA crowd], it's technology billionaires living in huge mansions and flying around on private jets. At one level it's quite funny. Unfortunately, however, these people have enough money to do serious damage."

2 This paper, by the way, is adapted from a lecture on "Vulnerability and the Language of Paranoid Thinking and Conspiracy Theories from McCarthyism to Trumpism" that took place on April 25, 2023 on the invitation of the CEL (Linguistics Research Center) at the Université Jean-Moulin Lyon3 as the third in a four-day "Seminar on Conspiracy Theories." Coincidentally, that one-hour talk happened the very day after the notorious conspiracy strategist Tucker Carlson was fired from Fox News for undisclosed reasons, and one week after Fox News settled a lawsuit for libel brought by Dominion Voting Systems for $787.5 million. Dominion Voting Systems had been the target of conspiracy theories spread by Carlson and other Fox journalists who, with no evidence to back up their claims, had repeatedly attacked the reliability and neutrality of the company's voting machines that were used in the 2020 US elections.

3 Another expert on conspiracy theories, Cynthia Miller-Idriss (*Hate in the Homeland*, 2020), is primarily interested in how they contribute to catalyzing far-right movements ("the mainstreaming of extremism," 46); but she too is conspicuously silent about possible material causes and instead

recommends “inoculating against hate” (161) with more and better information and conversations about “the *where* and *when* of far-right extremism” (162).

4 These lines from Goldberg’s 2010 talk are as good as anything in Hofstadter’s essay, and even include the key word *vulnerability*, but unfortunately in a way that is looking back to the *spiritual* shakeup of September 11, 2001 and not to the catastrophic *economic* fallout of the Great Recession that was happening in 2010: “Conspiracy theories like those surrounding 9-11 offer much to believers. In the face of national crisis and human failure, conspiracy thinkers rush to find purpose and meaning in tragedy. Conspiracy theorists order the random and bring clarity to ambiguity. They respond to the traumatized, those who cry for vengeance and demand to know who is responsible. Conspiracy thinking poses as a cure for powerlessness. It lifts the despair of vulnerability by arming believers with tantalizing, secret knowledge to expose the enemy.”

5 Astra Taylor (2023) continues Payne’s efforts from 2017 in a piece about how capitalism breeds insecurity and what to do about it. It begins with a stark reminder of what *extreme* inequality means today: “Since 2020, the richest 1 percent has captured nearly two-thirds of all new wealth globally — almost twice as much money as the rest of the world’s population. At the beginning of last year, it was estimated that 10 billionaire men possessed six times more wealth than the poorest three billion people on earth. In the United States, the richest 10 percent of households own more than 70 percent of the country’s assets.”

English
This text offers an overview of conspiracism in the United States from the 1950s to the present. Even if contemporary conspiracy mongering extends certain practices and attitudes that were already well-known at the time of Richard Hofstadter’s classic study of the “paranoid style in American politics” (1964) and Robert Goldberg’s more recent study of “the culture of conspiracy in modern America” (2001, 2010), it also introduces new techniques by savvy strategists, such as Donald Trump and Tucker Carlson, who exploit the economic vulnerability of many and the status loss anxiety of many others to destabilize the faculty of judgment of American citizens, increase polarization and suspicion between opposing camps, and weaken confidence in public institutions and democracy. This new conspiracism, we claim, serves to console the most vulnerable and turn the attention of the American public away from a forty-year social trend (conspiracy or not)

which would be a neoliberal globalization that deepens inequalities and advances most often with total impunity to advance the interests of powerful deciders and loyalists—the first being to retain power and their control over narratives of power. The paper concludes with some recommendations for combatting this highly cynical and corrosive new conspiracism.

Français

Ce texte offre une synthèse du complotisme aux États-Unis depuis la guerre froide. Même si le complotisme contemporain prolonge certaines pratiques et mentalités déjà connues à l'époque des commentaires classiques de Richard Hofstadter sur le « style paranoïaque dans la politique américaine » (1964) et celui plus récent de Robert Goldberg sur « le complotisme comme tradition dans la culture américaine » (2001, 2010), il comporte de nouvelles techniques de manipulation par de fins stratèges (Donald Trump et Tucker Carlson en première ligne) qui exploitent la vulnérabilité économique des uns et la peur d'un déclassement social des autres afin de déstabiliser la faculté de jugement des citoyens américains, augmenter la polarisation et la suspicion entre camps adverses et affaiblir la confiance dans les institutions et la démocratie. Nous affirmons que le complotisme sert à consoler les plus vulnérables et à détourner l'attention de l'ensemble de la population américaine d'une tendance sociale de quarante ans (conspirationniste ou non) qui serait une mondialisation néolibérale creusant les inégalités et opérant le plus souvent en toute impunité pour servir les intérêts des dirigeants et de leurs proches – en premier lieu de conserver le pouvoir et contrôler les récits de pouvoir. Enfin, nous proposons quelques pistes pour combattre le fléau de ce nouveau complotisme cynique et corrosif.

Mots-clés

conspirationnisme, théorie du complot, vulnérabilité, style paranoïaque, anxiété de perte de statut, agent du chaos, extrême inégalité

Keywords

conspiracism, conspiracy theory, vulnerability, paranoid style, status loss anxiety, chaos agent, extreme inequality

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Christopher Jon Delogu

Université Jean-Moulin Lyon 3, IETTchristopher-jon.delogu@univ-lyon3.fr
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/075708477
ISNI : http://www.isni.org/0000000052885366
BNF : https://data.bnf.fr/fr/15530987