

CONSPIRACY THEORIES LEFT, RIGHT AND ... CENTRE: POLITICAL DISINFORMATION AND LIBERAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Abstract: We are living in a time when conspiracy theories have never been more maligned by those who occupy the centre ground of politics. Liberal critics and journalists accuse conspiracy theorists to their left and right of paranoia, irresponsibly excessive rhetoric, and fallacies such as straw-targeting, ‘anomaly hunting’ and ‘determined flexibility’. At the same time, major liberal institutions from the BBC to CNN emphasise the risks that such conspiracy theories pose to public order, safety and trust – and to the very future of what they call ‘our democracy’. However, we argue that many of the same threats, flaws and fallacies have characterised hegemonic liberal analyses of contentious recent political events in the West from Trumpgate to the British Labour Party’s anti-Semitism ‘crisis’. With a proclivity for ad hominem, deliberate misrepresentations of evidence and other dubious methods, liberal conspiracy theories have had harmful societal impacts such as discrediting progressive political movements and fanning the flames of war. These are arguably consequences of greater magnitude than those resulting from right-wing conspiracism. Moreover, we show that centrist conspiracy theories often involve the implementation of genuine conspiracies against anti-establishment figures such as Donald Trump and Jeremy Corbyn. Despite the empirical existence of such conspiracies, we conclude by suggesting that the historical materialist critique of social reality has considerably more explanatory power than the conspiracist analytic. To demonstrate this we point to an epistemological weakness at the heart of liberal thought dating back at least to Thomas Carlyle’s ‘Great Man Theory of History’ that, much like the marginal conspiracy theories liberals condemn, involves a vast exaggeration of the role of individual agency and intentionality – and covert interpersonal relationships particularly – in determining social, economic and political affairs.

Keywords: Conspiracy theories, liberalism, centrism, media, historical materialism, journalism, disinformation, Donald Trump, Jeremy Corbyn.

INTRODUCTION

According to historian Kathryn Olmsted,¹ there are more conspiracy theories circulating today than ever before. Moreover, as philosopher Matthew

1. Cited in Joel Rose, “‘More Dangerous and More Widespread’: Conspiracy Theories Spread Faster than Ever”, NPR.com, 2 March 2021.

2. Matthew X.R. Dentith, “The Future of the Philosophy of Conspiracy Theory: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Conspiracy Theory Theory”, *Social Epistemology*, 37:4, 2023, pp405-412, p405.

3. Marcus Gilroy-Ware, *After the Fact?: The Truth About Fake*

Dentith has recently noted: ‘conspiracy theories seem increasingly salient to political discourse, and the academic interest in conspiracy theories has increased (quite dramatically) in the last five to ten years. That is, whether or not conspiracy theories are more or less prevalent, they certainly *seem* pertinent now, and thus what was once a marginal or even fringe topic has become mainstream news’.² Dentith’s emphasis on the mainstream currency of conspiracism in contemporary Western culture resonates with the present article’s focus on a hitherto neglected topic in conspiracy theory scholarship: namely, the prevalence and significance of ‘political conspiracy theories’ not just within right- and left-wing public communication, but also within liberal, centrist or ‘establishment’ media discourse.

By political conspiracy theories we mean analyses positing minority, covert action as the cause of events or situations of political import. It is worth noting at the outset that such conspiracies really do happen, as almost everyone who is interested in conspiracism, including debunkers, agrees. Marcus Gilroy Ware (2020) provides an instructive summary of real-world conspiracies including the tobacco, pharmaceutical and fossil fuel industries funding pseudoscientific research in support of their damaging products.³ Moreover, the Tuskegee Study, which took place from the 1930s to the 1970s, involved medical professionals working for the United States Public Health Service experimenting on African-Americans suffering from syphilis.⁴ Indeed, there is no doubt that, as philosopher Charles Pigden notes, ‘Western governments and government agencies have engaged in morally dodgy conspiracies’.⁵ A prime example from recent history is the paranoid and ultimately false reasoning behind the USA and UK governments’ 2002-3 claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction that could be deployed against Western allies within 45 minutes. Dentith, one of the few academics to give due weight to liberal iterations of conspiracism, cites this assertion as vulnerable to the ‘problematic evidence and evidential practices associated with conspiracy theories’.⁶ Moreover, the ‘45-minute claim’ played a key role in building public support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, described by Nathan Robinson and Noam Chomsky as ‘the worst crime of the twenty-first century’.⁷

In recent years, several political conspiracy theories have provoked alarm among politically centrist commentators. For example, liberals have vociferously condemned conspiracist ideas that pose a threat to public order and safety. Outcry rang out across the US mainstream media in 2016 when Edgar Madison Welch entered a Washington, DC pizzeria armed with a pistol and a rifle, allegedly because he subscribed to QAnon, a pro-Donald Trump online conspiracy theory claiming that a Hillary Clinton-connected paedophile ring was operating out of the restaurant.⁸ Liberal media outlets in Britain reacted similarly in 2020 to David Patterson, who burned down a 5G mast in Gateshead because he mistakenly feared it was causing people to become infected with the COVID-19 virus.⁹ Yet anti-social and criminal as these actions have sometimes been – and despite the furore surrounding

News, Repeater Books, 2020. (Hereafter *After the Fact?*)

4. Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, The Indigo Press, 2018.

5. Charles Pigden, ‘Complots of Mischief’, in D. Coady (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, Ashgate, 2006, pp139–66, p142.

6. Matthew Dentith, ‘Conspiracy Theories on the Basis of the Evidence’, *Synthese*, 196:6, 2019, pp2243–2261, p2244. (Hereafter *The Basis of the Evidence*.)

7. Nathan Robinson and Noam Chomsky, ‘The Worst Crime of the Twenty-First Century’, *Current Affairs*, 15 May 2023.

8. Sonam Sheth, ‘A Fake News Conspiracy Theory Led a Man to Fire a Gun in a Crowded DC Restaurant’, *Business Insider*, 5 December 2016; Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko, *Pastels and Paedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon*, Stanford University Press, 2021, pp41–45.

9. Tyne Tees, ‘Gateshead Conspiracy Theorist Who Torched 5G Mast Was Suffering “Severe Mental Health Problems”’, *ITV.com*, 1 October 2021.

10. Sébastien Seibt, 'China and QAnon Embrace Russian Disinformation Justifying War in Ukraine', *France 24*, 12 March 2022; Ilya Yablokov, 'Russian Disinformation Finds Fertile Ground in the West', *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6, 2022, pp766-767.

11. Silvia Mari, Gil de Zuniga Homero, Ahmet Suerdem, Katje Hanke, Gary Brown, Roosevelt Vilar, Diana Boer and Michal Bilewicz, 'Conspiracy Theories and Institutional Trust: Examining the Role of Uncertainty Avoidance and Active Social Media Use', *Political Psychology*, 43:2, 2021, pp277-296.

12. David Robert Grimes, 'Health Disinformation and Social Media: The Crucial Role of Information Hygiene in Mitigating Conspiracy Theory and Infodemics', *Embo Reports*, 21:11, 2020.

13. Natalie Nougayrède, 'Europe Is in the Grip of Conspiracy Theories – Will They Define its Elections?', *The Guardian*, 1 February 2019; Darrell M. West, 'How to Combat Fake News and Disinformation', *Brookings.edu*, 18 December 2017.

14. J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, 'Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion', *American Journal of Political Science*, 58.4, 2014, pp773-1091,

them – their negative impacts have tended to be relatively limited.

When the conspiracies – or supposed conspiracies – involve nation states, anxieties run even higher. Liberal voices in the media, academia and government often warn of the potential for conspiracy theories hatched or fuelled by the espionage and propaganda bureaux of foreign state actors – especially Russia and China¹⁰ – to impair the functioning of 'our democracy' by eroding trust in authoritative institutions from parliament to the scientific establishment and state-corporate media.¹¹ To counteract such malign interference, liberal academics and journalists typically call for tightened media regulation¹² and recommend that 'reliable', 'responsible' or 'moderate' platforms take action to combat the scourge of misinformation through improved fact-checking and news literacy.¹³

We would not necessarily oppose such calls. We argue here, however, that liberal anti-conspiracy concerns are often hypocritical and even indulge in a form of projection. All too often, many of the fallacies that liberal commentators see as constitutive of the conspiracy theories they *oppose* can in fact be ascribed to their *own* analyses of current affairs. This should not be so surprising. As Oliver and Wood put it, 'although some scholars argue that conspiracism is a defining feature of the political right ... it is not clear why conspiracy theories would be appealing to only one end of the political spectrum'.¹⁴ Indeed, as Pigden long ago pointed out, conspiracy theorising 'cuts across ordinary party political divisions. People with radically opposed ideologies can agree that conspiracy theories are appropriate when explaining social phenomena. It is just that they will tend to believe in different conspiracies'.¹⁵ It is even arguable that fallacious or irrational conspiracist thinking is as common amongst liberals as it is amongst any other ideological faction.

Liberal conspiracy theories, it seems to us, have become so discursively naturalised that they are seldom regarded as conspiracy theories at all. An exception to this situation is American conservative, libertarian or Republican discourse, wherein pundits castigate their centrist adversaries for spreading 'liberal conspiracy theories'. In 2016, for instance, the conservative magazine *National Review* excoriated what it claimed was the Democratic Party's susceptibility to 'notions of shadowy groups and hidden agendas' in light of John Kerry's 2004 allegations of vote-rigging against George W. Bush and the *New Yorker's* 'speculation' about Mitt Romney's 'politically explosive investments' in dubious offshore private equity firms.¹⁶ The notion of liberal or centrist conspiracy theories is perhaps even less common on the political left and only a handful of independent left-wing journalists, such as Aaron Bastani and Aaron Maté, have invoked the term.¹⁷ Moreover, there have been few scholarly attempts to define and theorise liberal conspiracism, whose material impacts are often far more destructive than those of right-wing or left-wing conspiracy theories. It is to the latter that we turn first, however, in order to establish the scope of our argument.

Promoted by high-profile alt-media figures such as Alex Jones, right-wing conspiracy theories have attracted ample discussion among academics, making an extensive analysis in this essay unnecessary. Yet a few observations are in order. Right-wing conspiracy theories include the machinations of powerful figures such as George Soros, the existence of a plot to poison Western society with ‘Cultural Marxism’, the supposed ‘woke’ takeover of the Western academy and the rococo QAnon intrigue.

Right-wing conspiracy theories are typically heavily reliant on Manichean narratives of Good versus Evil (*The Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion*, p953) and enemy construction; indeed, as the psychoanalytic theorist Todd McGowan¹⁸ has discussed, the paradoxically anxious enjoyment they provide to their adherents often involves a great deal of racist, sexist and nationalist othering. Conspiracy theories such as QAnon, the so-called Great Replacement theory, or the hypothesis that the world is ruled by a ‘globalist elite’ – often an anti-Semitic code term – all scapegoat minority groups and purport to explain social problems stemming from the material realities of life under capitalism as the fault of ‘outsiders’. Thus, while such theories may appear radical or at least disruptive of liberal norms and sensibilities, they pose no real challenge to the neoliberal political and economic status quo.

In terms of their effects, right-wing conspiracy theories certainly can be dangerous. As well as promoting a generalised feeling of distrust, they can give rise to a range of deleterious material effects. For example, despite their ostensible anti-state scepticism, the anti-vaccination and anti-mask canards that circulated among many right-wingers during the recent coronavirus pandemic not only created a climate of fear around rational (if imperfect) public health policies, but provided ideological cover for right-wing regimes, including the Johnson government in the UK and the Trump administration in the US, that were slow or reluctant to respond to the COVID-19 crisis with appropriate healthcare measures.¹⁹

While right-wing conspiracy theories tend to attract most public attention, conspiracy thinking certainly does circulate among left-wing media commentators, although it is often less lurid, more rational and more subtle in tone than is typical of its right-wing iterations. In discussions about political unrest around the world, for example, there is a tendency for certain left-wing pundits to assign exclusive or excessive blame to ‘outside meddling’ or CIA interference for uprisings and protests in countries whose governments oppose Western geopolitical interests. This is a perennial theme in Stalinist or Stalinist-adjacent media commentary. Take, for example, the way that the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests in 2019 were covered by representatives of what might be called the authoritarian left. In an interview segment broadcast on his *Sputnik* show for the pro-Russian TV station RT in 2019, the British former Labour Party MP George Galloway lamented the ‘mass disruption and

p954. (Hereafter *The Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion*.)

15. Charles Pigden, ‘Popper Revisited, or What Is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 25:1, 1995, pp3-34, p5.

16. Jim Geraghty, ‘The Media’s Weakness for Fashionable Conspiracy Theories’, *National Review*, 20 November 2016.

17. Aaron Bastani, ‘Peak alt-centrist conspiracy theory. I’ll be writing a thorough response defending my research method and situating it, and my findings, within the scholarly literature’, Twitter status, posted 3 January 2019; Aaron Maté, ‘A very happy one-year anniversary to @lukeharding1968 & the @guardian for your game-changing, totally vindicated expose on Paul Manafort’s multiple secret meetings with Julian Assange in the Ecuadorian embassy’, Twitter, 27 November 2019, <https://twitter.com/aaronjmate/status/1199696288641699841>

18. Todd McGowan, *Enjoyment Right and Left*, Sublation Media, 2022, p31.

19. Richard Horton, *The COVID-19 Catastrophe: What’s Gone Wrong and How to Stop It Happening Again*, Polity Press, 2020.

20. George Galloway, *Hong Kong Protests – Comrade Ranjeet Brar Speaks with George Galloway on Sputnik*, YouTube, August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Xelo17WK2c>

21. Grażyna Piechota, 'Storytelling as a Form of Political Propaganda: Political Protests in Hong Kong in the Narrative of RT and CCTV Networks', *Zarządzanie Mediami*, 8:4, 2020, pp347-370, p352.

22. Rania Khalek, *Reality vs Propaganda: Understanding Iran's Protests, w/ Navid Zarrinjal*, YouTube, October 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqsqk_114jA

23. Jean Shaoul, 'Protests Against Hike in Food and Fuel Prices Across Middle East and North Africa', *World Socialist Website*, 18 May 2022: www.wsws.org/en/articles/2022/05/18/mena-m18.html

24. Adam Garrie, 'International Geopolitical Expert Says Duterte is the Philippines [sic] Lee Kuan Yew, More Popular Than Trump in the US and Merkel in Germany', *Pinoytrendingnews.com*. Available at: <https://pinoytrendingnews.net/international-geopolitical-expert-and-political-analyst-says-duterte-is-the-philippines-lee-kuan-yew-more->

economic loss caused by the demonstrators' who, he claimed, were driven by 'the black hand of American interference'.²⁰ Galloway's perspective was echoed by his interviewee, Dr Ranjeet Brar, who asserted that workers in Hong Kong and China are not 'oppressed by the state' as they are in the West, expressed concern about attacks on the police and stated that the protests bore 'all the hallmarks of a colour revolution'. Galloway and Brar's discussion of the Hong Kong protests was consistent with RT's general approach to the news, which is described uncompromisingly by Grażyna Piechota as 'building a conspiracy message [and] using it as a political instrument to attract global audiences from different political views. Thus, the purpose of messages broadcast in RT is to undermine the policy pursued primarily by the US government, while at the same time strengthening and lending credence to the policy pursued by Russia'.²¹

Coverage of the 2022 protests in Iran following the death in custody of 22 year-old Jina 'Mahsa' Amini by certain leftist commentators offers another case in point. Discussing the protests in an interview streamed on the leftist social media channel BreakThroughNews, Lebanese-American commentator Rania Khalek interviewed Iranian scholar Navid Zarrinjal about the meaning of the unrest. Khalek sardonically noted that 'everybody has suddenly become an Iran expert' and cautioned that 'we don't know what's going on over there'.²² For his part, Zarrinjal questioned the scale of the protests, pointed out that the Iranian authorities dispute that Amini was beaten and noted that any protest in what he called 'anti-imperialist' countries is open to manipulation 'by the forces of empire' – something he claimed 'many Iranians on the street are not very aware of'. We will leave to one side Zarrinjal's implication that the Iranian state – despite its involvements in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen – is not imperialist; but the attempt to discount the significance of the Iran protests in this exchange is less easy to ignore. As well as straining to downplay the grievances of large numbers of people – especially young women – protesting against a highly repressive regime, Khalek and Zarrinjal's discussion ignored the material reasons for the protest wave that has swept across Iran in recent years, such as water shortages and huge increases in the price of basic foodstuffs.²³

Despite presenting themselves as radicals, by laying the blame for political unrest at the door of powerful Western outsiders, figures such as Galloway and Khalek offer a mirror image of right-wing conspiracists, ignoring or understating the motivations of ordinary people and the material conditions that push them to struggle against state repression. In the Iranian case, they overlook the citizens who have been sentenced to death by the state during the protests; and with respect to Hong Kong, they disregard the massive scale of the 2019 demonstrations, which could not possibly be accounted for solely by the meddling of Western intelligence agencies (despite the very strong likelihood of such interference). According to these left-wing conspiracists, the protestors in Hong Kong and Iran are merely dupes of Western media

propaganda and covert intervention.

With equal left-populist cynicism, Galloway's occasional broadcasting collaborator Adam Garrie has defended the autocratic and mass-murderous Duterte administration (2016-22) in the Philippines. In an interview with RT, Garrie deployed a similar form of emotional-ideological blackmail that can be seductive to many sincere leftists concerned about imperialism and global injustice.²⁴ Garrie called Duterte a popular leader who has 'put control back in the hands of the people'. In Garrie's view, those who criticise Duterte for his summary executions of drug criminals and political antagonists are patsies of a conspiracy orchestrated by 'imperialistic' and 'neoliberal' Western actors such as the US Congress and 'what some idiot in the UN says, what the silly European Union says'. The grain of truth in Garrie's analysis is the abiding hypocrisy about Western denunciations of non-Western state crimes. However, like Galloway's and Khalek's verdicts on Hong Kong and Iran, Garrie avoids certain hard realities; there was nothing progressive about Duterte's slaughter of 40,000 mostly working-class people, nor about his imprisoning of journalists or the oligarchic corruption he helped cultivate.²⁵ Unfortunately however, Garrie's perspective is shared by other Duterte-focused commentators such as vlogger Malcolm Conlan, who avers that 'there have been some unexplained deaths in the war on drugs, there have been some people who have lost their lives'.²⁶ Conlan dismisses as 'fake news' the considerable evidence uncovered by investigators confirming the accuracy of the body count.

Much older and more pernicious than these knee-jerk endorsements of anti-Western despotism are left-wing conspiracy theories that have placed Jews in their sights. Rightly dubbed 'the socialism of fools' in the nineteenth century, this brand of leftist conspiracism has noxiously blamed international Jewish wealth and power for injustices that have traditionally concerned progressives, including corporate corruption, unethical banking and investment practices, unemployment and workplace exploitation.²⁷ Over more than a century, varieties of left anti-Semitism have manifested all over the world. In 1870s Germany, Wilhelm Marr, a radical social democrat, posited that his country's social ills would be cured by depriving Jews of their wealth and influence.²⁸ In 1960s and 1970s United States, certain Black revolutionary nationalists held Jews responsible for the Atlantic slave trade and for continuing to economically exploit African-Americans after emancipation.²⁹ In contemporary Britain, meanwhile, David Icke – whose unconventional ideas have 'infiltrated' elements of the left, according to Rachel Shabi – is trying to alert another docile herd of 'sheeple' to the skulduggery of a world-dominating cabal of shape-shifting 'lizard people'. Although Icke denies that 'lizard' is a cipher for 'Jew', suspicions persist about his belief in the ideas promoted in the infamous anti-Semitic hoax document *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.³¹

Meanwhile, some vulgar leftists who profess a concern for Palestinian

popular-than-trump-in-the-us-and-merkel-in-germany/

25. Tom Sykes, *Imagining Manila: Literature, Empire and Orientalism*, Bloomsbury, 2018.

26. Malcolm Conlan, *Well Done to the UN for Not Interfering in the War on Drugs of President Duterte*, October 2020, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyDSxj-LH4g>

27. Michele Battini, *Socialism of Fools: Capitalism and Modern Anti-Semitism*, Columbia University Press, 2016.

28. Moshe Zimmermann, *Wilhelm Marr: The Patriarch of Antisemitism*, Oxford University Press, 1987, p22.

29. Batya Ungar-Sargon, 'Is Jewish Control Over the Slave Trade a Nation of Islam Lie or Scholarly Truth?', *The Tablet*, 5 August 2013.

30. Rachel Shabi, 'How David Icke Helped Unite Labour's Factions Against Antisemitism', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2018.

31. Yair Rosenberg, 'The *New York Times* Just Published an Unqualified Recommendation for an Insanely Anti-Semitic Book', *The Tablet*, 17 December 2018.

32. David Rich, *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism*, Biteback Publishing, 2018. (Hereafter *The Left's Jewish Problem*.)

33. Rachel Wearmouth, 'Academic Who Defended Jeremy Corbyn Over Anti-Semitism Storm Probed Over Facebook Posts', *Huffington Post*, 17 April 2018.

34. Rachel Wearmouth, 'Jeremy Corbyn Told To "Drain The Cesspit" of Anti-Semitism Plaguing The Labour Party', *Huffington Post*, 27 March 2018.

35. Greg Philo, Mike Berry, Justin Schlosberg, Antony Lerman and David Miller, *Bad News for Labour: Antisemitism, the Party and Public Belief*, Pluto Press, 2019, pvi.

liberation have succumbed to a new strain of anti-Semitic conspiracism. In rare cases these 'new anti-Semites', as David Rich calls them, have fallen for a conspiracist fallacy colloquially known as 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'.³² The most chilling instance of this was perhaps the British academic Jane Dipple, who in 2018 was expelled from the Labour Party for sharing and endorsing online screeds by neo-Nazis that denied the Holocaust – or at least underplayed its scale and severity – and postulated Zionist plots to install Jews into pre-eminent roles in the Western media and, much more disturbingly, 'create a pure race'.³³

As Rich argues, 'most left-wing people are not antisemitic and, overall, the left's history of opposing antisemitism outweighs its history of indulging it' (*The Left's Jewish Problem*, p163). But this did not stop a complementary conspiracy theory from emerging in the mid-2010s to discredit then-British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters. One reason why this theory proved to be so publicly emotive and politically significant was that it took an element of truth – genuine fears about anti-Semitic conspiracism occasionally tainting left-wing politics – and grossly exaggerated its magnitude. Indeed, the Corbyn affair constitutes our first case study in how accusations of conspiracism can be mobilised by centrists in support of the political status quo.

LIBERAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES: COMBATTING CORBYN

After the election of Corbyn as Labour leader in 2015 on a radical social democratic ticket, his centrist opponents within and without the party aggressively promoted a conspiracy theory that he and his allies were responsible for turning Labour into a 'cesspit' of anti-Semitism.³⁴ As the Dipple affair illustrates, there was of course a small number of high-profile actionable – and unforgivable – cases of anti-Semitism among Labour members at the time. Yet the work of media scholars Greg Philo et al has disproved the notion that anti-Jewish racism was rife among the Labour rank and file, revealing the centrist media's myriad 'reporting errors' and its exaggeration of the number of members disciplined for anti-Semitism.³⁵ Philo et al also note the concerted efforts made by anti-Corbynites to conflate Corbyn's long-standing criticisms of the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories (Corbyn had been a long-time lobbyist on behalf of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign) with anti-Jewish racism. This centrist conspiracism committed one of the cardinal sins often imputed to fringe conspiracy theories, that of spreading disinformation, defined by Dentith as 'the activity of presenting fabricated or manipulated information to make some explanatory hypothesis look warranted according to the evidence when it might not be' (*The Basis of the Evidence*, p2239). In addition, several other fallacies are discernible in this conspiracy theory that liberal sceptics would have us believe only plague the 'extreme' frontiers of conspiracism.

A 2018 article by Moya Sarner entitled ‘What makes a conspiracy theory?’ on sciencefocus.com, a subsidiary website of the quintessentially liberal BBC, avers that there are ‘certain ingredients that many conspiracy theories share’.³⁶ Sarner goes on to write that ‘in many conspiracy theories, the motivation is apocalyptic and wicked’, citing QAnon’s preposterous indictment of the Democratic Party elite for ‘running a paedophile ring through pizza restaurants’. While centrists’ allegations of Labour anti-Semitism were not as fanciful as that, they nevertheless involved similarly fiery and excessive rhetoric. First, they accused Corbyn of making the party ‘unsafe for Jews’³⁷ and later portentously warned that the Labour leader was prompting Jews to flee the UK, risking ‘engulfing Britain in the kind of flames of hatred that have reappeared throughout Europe’.³⁸ Though arguably to the right of these centrists, the American Rabbi Marvin Hier, on the eve of the 2019 election, went further by directly equating Corbyn with the Nazis and the Holocaust.³⁹ ‘Britain was at the forefront of defeating Hitler,’ says Hier, ‘and now, on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the person who wants to sit in Winston Churchill’s chair at No 10 is fostering antisemitism. If Mr Corbyn wins he will make Britain a pariah on the world stage.’ As Philo et al have concluded, these attempts to associate Corbyn with the genocidal consequences of anti-Semitism were gratuitous and baseless.

While liberals mobilised the technique of guilt by association against Corbyn, they have often condemned the application of the same technique in conspiracy theories with which they disagree. For instance, climate deniers disingenuously conflate the campaign against anthropogenic climate change with the poisonous agendas of elite actors.⁴⁰ These actors, so the deniers claim, include factions who wish to promote nuclear power. In 2007, liberal commentators⁴¹ railed against the claim made in the pro-denial Channel 4 documentary *The Great Global Warming Swindle* that Margaret Thatcher, the *bête-noire* of British liberals, had promoted anthropogenic global warming in order to develop Britain’s nuclear energy capacity and mitigate the impacts of striking miners. Just as Hier unfairly associated Corbyn with Nazism, so the documentary makers linked environmentalists to the Thatcherite agenda in order to insinuate that believing in human-caused global warming is an extreme right-wing position.

Another fallacy detectable in conspiracist thought is what Sarner terms ‘deception’. ‘Conspiracy theorists tend to believe that everyone else is being deceived apart from themselves,’ she writes, so that the deception ‘[pulls] the wool over the eyes of those who haven’t yet “seen the light”’ (*What Makes a Conspiracy Theory?*). This belief is all too apparent in the way that, say, Alex Jones or David Icke denounce the public as easily-manipulated ‘sheep’; but it was also a hallmark of much of the centrist commentary on popular support for Corbyn. In an article for *Foreign Policy* magazine entitled ‘Jeremy Corbyn’s Followers Are Stuck in the 1970s’, Andrew Brown invoked the argot of holy fanaticism to vilify the Corbyn project, which had

36. Moya Sarner, ‘What Makes a Conspiracy Theory?’, *BBC Science Focus*, 5 September 2018. (Hereafter *What Makes a Conspiracy Theory?*)

37. Ned Simons, ‘Jeremy Corbyn Has Made Labour “Unsafe for Jews”’, Says MP Ruth Smeeth’, *Huffington Post*, 30 June 2016.

38. BBC News, ‘Anti-Semitism Row: Corbyn Has Been Misinterpreted, Says Close Ally’, 2 September 2018.

39. Marvin Hier, cited in Ian Herson, *Anti-Semitism and the Left*, Amberley Publishing, 2020, p76.

40. Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton, ‘Climate Change: Why the Conspiracies are Dangerous’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 71:2, 2015, pp98-106.

41. See, for example, Martin Durkin, *The Great Global Warming Scandal*, YouTube, June 2007.

just lost the 2019 UK General Election. After comparing socialism to ‘a religion’, Brown stated that Corbyn’s ‘style of politics’ was ‘transcendentally attractive’ to his ‘followers’ who were ‘self-righteous’ and living in a ‘dream of a world of abundance and kindness’.⁴²

42. Andrew Brown, ‘Jeremy Corbyn’s Followers are Stuck in the 1970s’, *Foreign Policy*, 17 December 2019.

Those who challenged the veracity of the anti-Semitism charges levelled by liberal pundits faced equally condescending rebuttals. *The Guardian*’s Jonathan Freedland accused such people of ‘gaslighting’,⁴³ while Nick Cohen in the *Spectator* extended Brown’s accusations of Corbynite zealotry.⁴⁴ The left-wing website *SKAWKBOX*’s defence of Corbyn was, Cohen wrote, tantamount to believing that Corbyn ‘is the way and the truth and the light, and anyone who is against him is against all hope and goodness’. Cohen and his colleagues even indulged in the brainwashed ‘sheeple’ rhetoric they would elsewhere revile in far-right conspiracist discourse. The political cell Momentum’s comments on the anti-Semitism furore were reminiscent of the ‘robotic curses of [Soviet] communism’, Cohen wrote, and a ‘nest of academics’ – an allusion to the idiom ‘nest of vipers’? – ‘[had argued] that black was white’ and that ‘two plus two equals five’, in chilling Orwellian mode.

43. Jonathan Freedland, ‘Labour and Antisemitism: Once Again It’s all About Corbyn’, *The Guardian*, 30 October 2020.

44. Nick Cohen, ‘Jeremy Corbyn and the Far Left’s Anti-Semitism Doublespeak’, *Spectator*, 3 April 2018.

LIBERAL CONSPIRACY THEORIES: TOPPLING TRUMP

Our second case study relates to so-called ‘Russiagate’: a long-running mediated scandal based on allegations about Russian meddling in Western electoral processes that came to prominence with Donald Trump’s election as US President. A dossier compiled by former British intelligence operative Christopher Steele, which circulated amongst journalists, officials and intelligence agents in 2016 and was published in full by BuzzFeed News in early 2017, contained charges of collusion between Trump aides and Russian operatives, as well as a claim about Trump romping with urinating Russian prostitutes in a Moscow hotel room. The US intelligence community alleged that damaging emails about the Democratic National Convention (DNC) published by the whistleblower organisation WikiLeaks had been obtained from Russian spies. It was all part, they claimed, of a wider campaign aimed at helping Trump get elected. The major liberal media in the US, represented by CNN and MSNBC, picked up on these rumours, launching a propaganda onslaught against both Trump, who was widely accused of being a Russian Manchurian candidate, and supposed Russian interference in US affairs. To take just a few examples from an extensive list: in December 2016 the *Washington Post* claimed that Russian hackers had taken control of Vermont’s electricity grid. In 2017, meanwhile, *Fortune* magazine claimed that the Russian TV station RT had hacked into the American broadcaster C-SPAN. CNN claimed that Trump aide Anthony Scaramucci was involved in a Russian hedge fund under US Senate investigation. None of these stories was true – and CNN was even obliged to sack three of its journalists when the Scaramucci claims were disproven.⁴⁵

45. Glenn Greenwald, ‘Beyond BuzzFeed: The 10 Worst, Most Embarrassing U.S. Media Failures on the Trump-Russia Story’, *Intercept*, 20 January 2019.

The anti-Trump hysteria has had a long tail and some of the associated

media stories in more recent years have been disturbing. In September 2020, various liberal media sources, including the *HuffPost*, asserted that an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centre in Georgia was performing unconsented hysterectomies on immigrant women on a mass scale, surely evidence that the Trump regime had turned to outright fascism. Yet the story turned out to have no factual basis. Meanwhile, speculation about Trump's putative Russian involvements were never-ending and seemed as libidinally invested as any QAnon fantasy. MSNBC anchor Rachel Maddow visited the topic with striking regularity, while Democratic Party loyalists identified themselves with the dramatic hashtag #theresistance and spoke of the president's treason – a rabble-rousing attempt to maximise online outrage of a kind more commonly associated with the political 'extremes'. In the end, however, none of the lurid claims made in the Steele dossier were proven and Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation found no evidence of Russian election interference.⁴⁶ This had been a case of a runaway liberal conspiracy theory that arguably served to obscure some unpalatable realities, notably the Democratic Party's failure to win the presidency in 2016 with its tired 'free market' policies and its purging of the supporters of the party's more left-wing candidate Bernie Sanders – one in ten of whom ended up voting for Trump.⁴⁷ The Trump fantasy allowed American centrists to blame foreign intrusion, rather than the bankruptcy of their own neoliberal ideology, for their political failures.

Russiagate had its adherents in the UK, too, including *The Guardian's* former Moscow correspondent Luke Harding. In an interview with Aaron Maté on the US-based Real News Network in December 2017, Harding offered circumstantial and anecdotal details in support of his elaboration of 'transactional' relationships between Trump and the Kremlin – meetings took place, trips were made and so on – but provided no hard evidence showing Russian political collusion with Trump.⁴⁸

As with the case of the Labour anti-Semitism conspiracy theory, Russiagate demonstrates how readily centrists appeal to argumentational fallacies that they themselves would dismiss as hysterical conspiracism among their opponents. In his book *Voodoo Histories*, an attempt to demystify some of the most highly publicised conspiracy theories of the twentieth century, the London *Times* columnist David Aaronovitch (incidentally, an enthusiastic disparager of Trump and Corbyn) proposes some characteristics of irrational conspiracy theories with which few sensible people would disagree. 'Conspiracists are always winners', he observes; 'their arguments have a determined flexibility whereby any new and inconvenient truth can be accommodated within the theory itself'.⁴⁹ This is often the case, of course; but it is as true of liberal as it is of supposedly more 'fringe' conspiracy theorists. In his interview with Maté, Harding demonstrated precisely such a 'determined flexibility', contending that every tangential connection between Trump and Russia was yet further evidence for the collusion hypothesis. Moreover, Aaronovitch writes that 'a conspiracy theory

46. American Bar Association, 'Mueller Finds No Collusion with Russia, Leaves Obstruction Question Open', 25 March 2019: <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2019/03/mueller-concludes-investigation/>

47. Daniella Kurtzelben, 'Here's How Many Bernie Sanders Supporters Ultimately Voted For Trump', 24 August 2017: <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/24/545812242/1-in-10-sanders-primary-voters-ended-up-supporting-trump-survey-finds-2017>

48. Luke Harding and Aaron Maté, *Where's the 'Collusion'?*, YouTube, December 2017.

49. David Aaronovitch, *Voodoo Histories: How Conspiracy Theory Has Shaped Modern History*, Vintage, 2011. (Hereafter *Voodoo Histories*.)

is likely to be politically populist, in that it usually claims to lay bare an action taken by a small power elite against the people'. Populism is indeed a feature of right-wing conspiracism; but it also characterised the Russiagate allegations that Trump and his circle constituted an elite bent on treason against American citizens.

Finally, Aaronovitch contends that fringe conspiracists benefit financially from their activities, writing that 'large amounts of money can be made by people able to spin far-fetched but portentous-sounding yarns about coincidences'. Once again, this applies to Russiagate, too, which was a veritable money-spinner for the US liberal media. As Batya Ungar-Sargon has detailed, Trumpgate constituted 'journalistic malpractice, but it was manna from heaven for the bottom line, especially at the *New York Times*. During the last three months of 2016, the *Times* added 276,000 digital subscribers: nearly 100,000 up on 2015. In 2017, the paper gained \$340 million in online subscriptions: 46 per cent up on 2016. Forty-six per cent growth is what Facebook boasts, and double Google's growth rate. In 2019, the *Times* added more than one million net digital-only subscribers, reaching a total of 5.2 million. Thanks to Trump, the company met its \$800-million digital revenue target for 2020 a year early'.⁵⁰

The latest example of Russiagate irrationality relates to Paul Mason, a well-known British liberal journalist who has occupied senior roles at both the BBC's *Newsnight* programme as well as *Channel 4 News*, and has become known for waging war against pro-Moscow 'disinformation'. In the summer of 2022, leaked emails revealed that Mason had been in contact with British intelligence over plans to discredit those questioning the dominant Western media narrative about the Russian assault on Ukraine. Among the leaked materials was what Mason called 'a dynamic map of the left pro-Putin infosphere' that contained a spider's web of individuals, states, small-scale organisations and activists supposedly supportive of the Russian regime. Mason's racially-tinged enemy chart contained an odd assortment of culprits, including 'China', the 'Black Community', 'Zarah Sultana' (a British Asian left-wing Labour MP) and, unsurprisingly, Jeremy Corbyn. It remains one of the most curious artefacts of Russiagate propaganda to have emerged in recent times.⁵¹ In *Voodoo Histories*, self-styled sceptic Aaronovitch writes that 'conspiracists work hard to give their written evidence the veneer of scholarship. The approach has been described as death by footnote. Accompanying the exposition of the theory is a dense mass of detailed and often undifferentiated information' (p21). Aaronovitch's observation about the pseudo-academic nature of much conspiracism seems rational enough, but once again, the observation cuts both ways, since 'a dense mass of detailed and undifferentiated information' serves equally well as a description of Mason's tendentious diagram.

LIBERAL CONSPIRACIST EPISTEMOLOGY: A CRITIQUE

As the preceding case studies indicate, liberal commentators have

50. Batya Ungar-Sargon, 'What Broke the *New York Times*?', *The Spectator*, 27 October 2021.

51. Max Blumenthal, 'Paul Mason's Covert Intelligence-Linked Plot To Destroy The Grayzone Exposed', MR Online, 9 June 2022.

promulgated conspiracy theories very successfully in recent years, often while deploring the conspiracism of their ‘extremist’ political opponents. Indeed, for centrists, it is not conspiracy theories in general that are problematic, but only those that challenge what might be called mainstream political orthodoxy. As Neil Levy puts it, it is only ‘conspiracy theories which conflict with ... official stories that come under suspicion’.⁵² Popular liberal debunkers like Aaronovitch, for example, dismiss conspiracy theories in the name of neutrality and common sense; yet their own political commitments are highly partisan and their assumption of the rationality of the status quo makes them myopic about the potential for conspiracy theorising to emerge from within their own worldview. This is even true of some academics specialising in conspiracism. Quassim Cassam, for instance, proposes some unobjectionable categories for discerning conspiracy theories. Few would disagree with him that conspiracy theories ‘express and promote an ideology’ or that they function as a type of political propaganda; however, Cassam focuses his attention almost entirely on right-wing and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and, indeed, tends to regard conspiracy theories as fundamentally right-wing and anti-Semitic.⁵³

Like its left and right varieties, liberal conspiracism is beset by deep epistemological flaws. Conspiracy theories ‘[impute] intentionality to a wide range of apparently unconnected phenomena’.⁵⁴ Usually this intentionality is attributed to small groups of people often referred to as ‘cabals’ or ‘elites’. Such groups, it is said, wield disproportionate power over – or, to use the conspiracist vernacular, ‘pull the strings’ of – entire industries, economies, societies, nations or cultures – and sometimes the entire world. These groups may be defined by religious or ethnic affiliation (i.e. the Muslims in Europe who are threatening ‘the Great Replacement’ of white populations), common financial and political objectives (the Bilderberg Group, the New World Order), a project of industrial protectionism (the Freemasons) or an agglomeration of these characteristics (as seen in conspiracy theories about the Jews in Europe or the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines). The power and agency of certain individuals within these already relatively low-membership groups is drastically overstated in rhetorical acts of personalised framing. After all, it is easier to convince the public of a conspiracy when it can be attributed to influential historical personages such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and the Frankfurt School of intellectuals – who are frequently blamed for the so-called Cultural Marxist takeover of the Western academy – or hypervisible contemporary philanthropists like George Soros and Bill Gates.

But far from being unique to the fringe conspiracies of the left and right, the view that world events are driven primarily by the decisions of powerful individuals is also integral to classical liberal thought. In his 1840 book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, the philosopher Thomas Carlyle outlined his ‘Great Men’ theory of history:

52. Neil Levy, ‘Radically Socialised Knowledge and Conspiracy Theories’, *Episteme*, 4:2, 2007, pp181-192, p181.

53. Quassim Cassam, ‘Conspiracy Theories’, *Society*, 60, 2023, pp190–199, p193. (Hereafter *Conspiracy Theories*.)

54. David Harper, ‘The Politics of Paranoia: Paranoid Positioning and Conspiratorial Narratives in the Surveillance Society’, *Surveillance and Society*, 5:1, 2008, pp1-32, p19.

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.⁵⁵

55. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History: Six Lectures*, James Fraser, 1841, pp1-2. (Hereafter *On Heroes*.)

56. Melanie Phillips, *Londonistan*, Encounter, 2006, p20.

57. E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, Penguin, 1964. (Hereafter *What is History?*)

58. Jamie Roberts, *The Rise of the Murdoch Dynasty*, BBC iPlayer, July 2020. (Hereafter *The Rise*.)

For Carlyle, extraordinary men from Martin Luther to Napoleon Bonaparte exercise an almost magical influence over the masses, steering their behaviours and shaping their beliefs. Contemporary right-wing conspiracists like the British journalist Melanie Phillips have condemned the baleful influence of iconoclastic imams on British public life and the Islamification of British society⁵⁶; yet canonised liberal intellectuals such as Carlyle assigned even more charismatic agency to the very founder of Islam. ‘One man,’ wrote Carlyle of Mohammed, ‘single-handedly, ... [welded] warring tribes and wandering Bedouins into a most powerful and civilised nation in less than two decades’ (*On Heroes*, p43).

In his classic study *What is History?*, the socialist historian E. H. Carr upbraided a similar strand of liberal thought – epitomised in his time by Isaiah Berlin – that asserted the primacy of ‘human free will’ in determining world events. This, Carr went on to argue, was necessitated by the liberal fixation on the individual responsibility of ‘the Charlemagnes, Napoleons and Stalins of history’.⁵⁷ Having assigned such a high degree of responsibility to these individuals, it is a logical next step for liberals to ‘pronounce moral condemnation’ on them. However, Carr found this method simplistic and moralistic, for ‘the historian deals in a multiplicity of causes’, some of which are indeed ‘personal’ and ‘short-term’, but others that are of equal importance are ‘long-term’ and larger-scale, belonging to ‘economic, political [and] ideological’ categories (*What is History?*, p120).

Even so, the Great Men framework has become a central assumption within much of our mainstream media culture. The critically acclaimed BBC documentary series *The Rise of the Murdoch Dynasty* investigates Rupert Murdoch’s annexation of large parts of the British media landscape in the 1970s and 80s.⁵⁸ The series foregrounds a handful of seminal personalities including members of the Murdoch family, David Cameron, Tony Blair and former *Sun* editor Rebekah Wade, whose personal beliefs, values, ambitions, actions and interactions are presented as decisive in establishing Murdochian hegemony. *The Rise* deploys narrative and visual tropes that commentators such as Aaronovitch would likely condemn as contrived had they featured in a text promoting a left- or right-wing conspiracy agenda.

Long sequences in *The Rise* recount Faustian bargains struck in private to secure the support of Murdoch’s media platforms for successive British

governments. The leitmotif of the series is a graphical depiction of the names and faces of key individuals. These appear on cards connected to one another by lines that represent how these figures relate to one another either familiarly or through their collusion to facilitate the Murdoch ascension. The cloak-and-dagger atmosphere is intensified by the cards featuring names and mug shots resembling those in the crime-solving board game *Cluedo* and those that cinematic detectives pin to an incident room wall when trailing a serial killer. The soundtrack's orchestral horns add to the portentousness of these sequences. Sometimes *The Rise's* shady web of plotters intersects with other liberal conspiracy theories such as Trumpgate. In the third episode, one of the lines extends distantly beyond the Murdoch family tree to culminate in the pouting grimace of Ivanka Trump. She, we are told, was able to broker an 'approach' to Rupert Murdoch on behalf of her father due to her being the trustee of Rupert's daughters' fortunes. In the Carlylean idiom, it is interpersonal gestures and relationships like these, *The Rise* implies, that are the prime movers in Murdoch's seizure of media and political power. However, the series shows little concern for the political-economic dimensions of the Murdoch narrative; to explore that would involve engaging with precisely what this documentary avoids, namely the structural determinants of media marketisation and monopolisation in the 1970s and 1980s.

To take another contemporary example, the documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis, celebrated as the BBC's *grand auteur* of cerebral factual television, also tends to exaggerate the role of individuals – and the often covert complicity between them – in deciding the sweep of history. There has always been a weakness in Curtis' narratives for postulating 'individual emotions [as] the most powerful guiding force' of events, according to the critic Will Fenstermaker.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Carlyle-like, 'Curtis's secret history demands a noble, heroic figure of action'. Ultimately, for Fenstermaker, Curtis's 'theory of everything ... offers the titillating frisson of conspiratorial thinking without QAnon trappings like paedophilic cabals and lizard people'. Curtis might, therefore, be seen as a liberal conspiracist, albeit a pessimistic one who is often unconvinced about the efficacy and wisdom of actions taken by the renegades and lesser-known operators his films document. His privileged position within the British media establishment and regular appearances at elite convocations illustrate how liberal conspiracism can maintain a degree of respectability, immunised from the charges of 'crankiness' frequently directed at fringe conspiracy theorists, despite displaying similar methodological shortcomings.

A related flaw in liberal conspiracist epistemology is its tendency towards causal reductionism, a problem it shares with right and left-wing conspiracy theorising. For instance, centrist pundits have bemoaned the criminal and destructive impacts of Pizzagate and 5G paranoia, suggesting that imbibing such irrational theories has direct harmful material results. However, some theorists have questioned the plausibility of strong claims about the psychological or behavioural 'effects' of media communication⁶⁰ and it is

59. Will Fenstermaker, 'Adam Curtis' Theory of Everything', *Dissent*, Summer 2021.

60. David Gauntlett, 'The Things Wrong with the Effects Model', in R. Dickinson, R. Harindranath and O. Linne (eds), *Approaches to Audiences: A Reader*, Arnold, 1998, pp120-130; Martin Barker and Julian Petley, *Ill Effects: The Media Violence Debate*, Routledge, 2001.

certainly highly unlikely that exposure to an online conspiracy theory would serve as the *only* or *primary* motivation for entering a restaurant with a gun or vandalising telecommunications equipment.

Conspiracist thinking in all its cultural and social manifestations, then, fails adequately to comprehend the material causes and effects of its objects of enquiry. It is striking that Adam Curtis told another bastion of British liberalism, *New Statesman* magazine, ‘when I was growing up, I disliked Marxists because they were always going on about how everything was economics’.⁶¹ This admission exemplifies the epistemological and ideological differences between liberal conspiracism – inflected by the thought of Carlyle, and the contemporary practices of culture-makers like Curtis – and more holistic critiques of social reality. Into this latter category we can place the historical materialist approach to socio-political analysis. This is distinctive from conspiracism – liberal or otherwise – because it transcends the preoccupation with private decision-making and secretive collaboration by proposing that events are determined by an interplay of social, political, economic and cultural dynamics. Such forces are larger-scale and more impactful than the actions of individuals or small networks of individuals. Conspiracists left, right and centre tend to overlook the role of collective human agency and class consciousness. Time and again, conspiracy theories of all ideological tenors downplay the struggles, hopes and aspirations of powerless majorities. Right-wing and left-wing conspiracism, as we have shown, tends to dismiss working-class people as ‘sheeple’ or as dupes of hegemonic ideology. Yet the same de-agentifying impulse is at work in liberal conspiracy-mongering as well. The centrist fantasy about Corbyn was a strategy that avoided the unpalatable fact of his widespread popularity among many of Labour’s left-wing members, including students and the young, more and more precariously-employed people, who have been least well-served by the erstwhile neoliberal settlement in which centrists remain so invested.⁶² In Trump’s case, the liberals’ obsession with Russian collusion excused them from grappling with the material reasons for his ascendance, primarily the alienation of millions of mostly working-class Americans from market-driven society in an era of declining standards of living and wages. Pankaj Mishra argues that the rise of populist resentment not just in the USA but all over the world – including, most notably, in Turkey, Hungary and India – has been fuelled by a combination of long- and short-term economic and political drivers.⁶³ ‘The ideals of modern democracy – the equality of social conditions and individual empowerment – have never been more popular,’ Mishra writes. ‘But they have become more and more difficult, if not impossible, to actually realise in the grotesquely unequal societies created by our brand of globalised capitalism.’ By drawing attention to the dysfunctional nature of contemporary capitalist realism, Mishra resists liberal attempts to simplify and personalise world historical events and processes.

To reject the liberal conspiracist framework is not to deny that there

61. Cited in Gavin Jacobson, ‘Adam Curtis: “Big Tech and Big Data Have Been Completely Useless in this Crisis”’, *New Statesman*, 15 February 2021.

62. Peter Dorey and Andrew Denham, “‘The Longest Suicide Vote in History’: The Labour Party Leadership Election of 2015”, *British Politics*, 11, 2016, pp259-282.

63. Pankaj Mishra, ‘Welcome to the Age of Anger’, *The Guardian*, 8 December 2016.

64. Brian L. Keeley, ‘Of Conspiracy Theories’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96:3, 1999, pp109-126, p124.

65. Lizzy Buchan, ‘Jacob Rees-Mogg Faces Sacking Calls After Soros Remark “Straight From the Far-Right’s Antisemitic Playbook”’, *Independent*, 15 October 2019.

66. James Slack, ‘Enemies of the People: Fury Over

are powerful clandestine forces at work in the construction of world affairs. Writing in 1999, conspiracy theory scholar Brian Keeley critiqued conspiracist epistemology for insisting that world events are controlled, whereas, for Keeley, ‘our contemporary world view, which the conspiracy theorist refuses to accept, is one in which nobody not God, not us, not even some of us is in control’.⁶⁴ ‘The world,’ Keeley goes on, ‘is uncontrollable, irrational, and absurd’. This is surely going too far; there are orchestrated power networks at work in the world and, as noted earlier, conspiracies do happen; but they provide too narrow an accounting for events that are the outcomes of complex social and political processes.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully account for other recent events that have been subject to conspiracisation, we can begin to identify the advantages of a materialist over a conspiracist analysis through a brief consideration of a politically pivotal moment that has been intensely analysed by commentators on the left, right and centre. In the run-up to the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU, a plethora of right-wing fringe media pundits – including the alt-right influencer Sargon of Akkad (Akkad Daily) and a sitting leader of the House of Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg⁶⁵ – castigated George Soros for funding the Remain campaign. While Soros did contribute £40,000 to a group lobbying for a second referendum, the right’s demonisation of him and other figures, such as three High Court judges they infamously accused of being ‘enemies of the people’, dramatically overstated the role of ‘out of touch’ elite personages in a plot to halt Brexit and ‘frustrate the verdict of the British people’.⁶⁶ Yet while the liberal media was quick to highlight such paranoid populism among conservatives, it indulged in some vulgar conspiracy theorising itself about how Brexit came to pass. In a *Guardian* piece accompanied by a graphic of descending columns of luminescent zeros and ones seemingly inspired by the ur-conspiracy film *The Matrix*, noted investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr explored the ‘shadowy global operation’ that ‘influenced the result of the EU referendum’.⁶⁷ This operation, she claimed, involved ‘big data, billionaire friends of Donald Trump and the disparate forces of the Leave campaign’, a network that is visualised at the end of the article in a Paul Mason-esque spider diagram. The emphasis, as is typical of liberal conspiracy theories, is on the secretive yet decisive agency of individuals and their intrigues. Other centrist columnists – and indeed elements of the left – at that time followed the same strategy of foregrounding the supposed machinations of pro-Brexit actors, such as ‘Jacob Rees-Mogg and [a] shadowy group of Tories’;⁶⁸ the ‘Bond villain’⁶⁹ and ‘evil genius’⁷⁰ Dominic Cummings, who was accused of single-handedly manipulating the public vote in favour of UK withdrawal from the EU; and the usual Russian folk devil whose clout was severely overestimated within the liberal fantasy.⁷¹ Other commentators fixated on the post-Brexit fortunes made by Rees-Mogg and other Eurosceptic oligarchs such as Crispin Odey. That these individuals did reap major financial benefits is undoubtedly true,

“Out of Touch”
Judges Who Have
“Declared War on
Democracy” by
Defying 17.4m
Brexit Voters and
Who Could Trigger
Constitutional
Crisis’, *Daily Mail*, 3
November 2016.

67. Carole
Cadwalladr, ‘The
Great British Brexit
Robbery: How
Our Democracy
Was Hacked’, *The
Guardian*, 7 May
2017.

68. Dan Sabbagh
and Caelinn Bar,
‘Jacob Rees-Mogg
and the Shadowy
Group of Tories
Shaping Brexit’, *The
Guardian*, 6 February
2018.

69. John Wight,
‘Trump and Dominic
Cummings: Caligula
and Dr Strangelove’,
Public Reading Rooms,
2020: <https://prruk.org/trump-and-dominic-cummings-caligula-and-dr-strangelove/>

70. Alastair
Campbell, ‘It’s Hard
to Work out From
the BBC’s Dominic
Cummings Doc if
He’s an Evil Genius
– Or Just Evil’, *GQ
Magazine*, 18 March
2020.

71. Ian Sinclair,
‘Russian Interference
in Western Politics?
What About Israel,
Saudi Arabia and
UAE?’, *Morning
Star*: <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/russian-interference-western-politics-what-about-israel-saudi-arabia-and-uae>

but it is only one small piece of the hugely complex social, political and economic Brexit puzzle.

Little of this coverage addressed the motivations and experiences of the mostly working-class voters who narrowly, it must be admitted, took Britain out of the EU. As is typical of conspiracy theories generally, the material impacts of collective discontents and deprivations are ignored in favour of the clandestine manoeuvres of privileged 'Great Men'. Cadwalladr and Sabbagh were reluctant to discuss the longer-range historical causes of Brexit which, again, point to an elite blind spot about those 'left behind' by capitalism, as noted in relation to liberal accountings for the Trump moment. Perhaps the most politically concerning aspect of the liberal conspiracisation of Brexit is its assumption of an otherwise well-functioning democratic state absent the political cronyism and covert chicanery of 'a few rotten apples'. In her article, Cadwalladr makes no secret of her faith in the liberal status quo: 'In Britain, we still trust our government. We respect our authorities to uphold our laws. We trust the rule of law. We believe we live in a free and fair democracy.' As with Adam Curtis above, Cadwalladr gets away with making these highly partisan claims because such claims appear to be commonsensical, at least from an establishmentarian perspective. As journalism scholar Mark Pedelty argues, 'Mainstream journalists tend to adopt frames whose logic is drawn from the most penetrant and unquestioned cultural values, myths and ideologies – perspectives least likely to be challenged, or perhaps even identified, by audience and journalist'.⁷²

72. Mark Pedelty, *War Stories: The Culture of Foreign Correspondents*, Routledge, 1995, pp7-8.

73. Bernhard Poerksen, *Digital Fever: Taming the Big Business of Disinformation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

74. Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid*, Taylor and Francis, 2022, p1.

75. Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*, Vintage, 2009.

76. Tom Mills, 'Can the Ruling Class Speak?', *Jacobin*, 14 October 2018.

CONCLUSION

Anxieties about the 'threat to democracy' posed by social media, with its tendencies towards the generation of 'fake news' and outrage culture, have been extensively documented by media scholars.⁷³ Yet the mainstream, liberal media has never been innocent of the same charge. Its long history has arguably culminated in our current age of 'highly visible forms of populist distrust of expert knowledge, democratic institutions and the mainstream media'.⁷⁴ Western publics are very critical of mainstream news media narratives, with several surveys over recent years showing a high degree of public suspicion towards journalists (*After the Fact?*). And with good reason. Mainstream journalism has become increasingly reliant on government and corporate press releases reflecting partisan establishment agendas⁷⁵ that have often promulgated conspiracy theories such as the ones discussed in this article. Such liberal conspiracism does not attract the critical attention it ought to because its authors tend to project conspiracist thinking onto their political opponents. As media scholar Tom Mills remarks, more and more centrists are levelling the conspiracism slur against any intellectual endeavour to '[analyse] concentrated social power'.⁷⁶ Mills avers that the liberal 'guardians of our public sphere ... confidently pronounce that those

critical of, or angry at, the established order are not only misinformed, but paranoid and tantamount to conspiracy theorists’.

It is not only in popular liberal media discourses that such fallacies are to be found. Quassim Cassam (*Conspiracy Theories*, p198) notes that: ‘The ideological motivating force of new conspiracism is not opposition to democracy as such but the belief that the *status quo* is not truly democratic and needs to be replaced by a different form of government that genuinely expresses the will of the people.’ The first problematic presupposition here is that the status quo is indeed democratic and the second is that there is no requirement for a ‘different form of government that genuinely expresses the will of the people’ (*Conspiracy Theories*, p198); in fact, this happens to be the underpinning objective of most – if not all – progressive analysis of world events. Moreover, Cassam neglects to mention that there are conspiracy theories that *support* the political status quo.

The point is not just that these liberal arguments are used to suppress more radical interpretations of reality. In the cases of Trumpgate and Labour anti-Semitism, the promulgation of conspiracy theories about how these phenomena came to pass (Russian connections, the political left being inherently anti-Semitic, etc.) masked *actual*, empirically observable conspiracies that liberals orchestrated against both Trump and Corbyn. The Democratic Party assiduously attempted to impeach Trump on assorted grounds such as colluding with Moscow during the 2016 election and contravening the Foreign Emoluments Clause of the Constitution. The campaign by Labour Party centrists to undermine Corbyn’s political programme, meanwhile, is ongoing, as was conclusively demonstrated by a recent Al Jazeera documentary in which a contributor described ‘the Labour Party’s criminal conspiracy against its members’.⁷⁷ Setting a worryingly anti-democratic precedent, an anonymous army general told the media shortly after Corbyn’s election as leader of the Labour Party that should Corbyn become Prime Minister, he could face a military coup – in many ways the ultimate conspiracy.⁷⁸ There is also evidence of the intelligence services – those bulwarks of the liberal state – recruiting journalists working in the liberal media as conduits for fabrications in support of state-sanctioned conspiracies. In a 2007 article for *New Statesman*, reporter David Rose revealed that he had been a ‘recipient of what we now know to have been sheer disinformation about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and his purported “links” with al-Qaeda’, courtesy of MI6.⁷⁹ Rose was not permitted to quote any intelligence source on the record, allowing MI6 the ‘priceless advantage’ of ‘plausible deniability’, because had ‘the service told me something that turned out to be mistaken, or even tried to plant sheer disinformation for who knows what purpose, there would be no comeback, no accountability’.

This double strategy of attributing conspiracy thinking to ‘bad actors’ while at the same time implementing a genuine conspiracy against those same actors has proven to be highly effective. Both Trump and Corbyn emerged

77. Al Jazeera English, *The Labour Files – The Crisis I Al Jazeera Investigations*, YouTube video, 25 September 2022.

78. John Stone, ‘Almost Nobody Would Support a Military Coup Against Corbyn, Poll Finds’, *Independent*, 18 October 2015.

79. David Rose, ‘Spies and their lies’, *New Statesman*, 27 September 2007.

from such two-pronged attacks marginalised and discredited – a significant achievement for the centrist political establishment and one that conspiracists on the left or right would struggle to match, given their comparative lack of resources and mainstream legitimacy. The same double strategy has been used in more materially damaging and long-standing liberal justifications for foreign military interventions from the Spanish-American War in 1898 to the more recent debacles of Iraq and Libya. In the latter cases, centrists attributed conspiracies to Saddam Hussein’s putative possession of WMDs and Colonel Gaddafi’s supposed plan to massacre civilians in Benghazi, while in fact conspiring to overthrow both of these leaders. It is important to state that, while establishment conspiracies against Trump, Corbyn and the bogeymen of the Global South are empirically verifiable, once again we emphasise that the identification of such conspiracies does not provide a fully material accounting for the attacks made upon these figures.

Cassam, who is arguably the most prominent liberal scholar of conspiracism, has rightly argued that ‘the philosophy of conspiracy theories should be sensitive to their political role’ (*Conspiracy Theories*, p192). However, he does not extend this principle to centrist conspiracy theories – indeed does not even acknowledge their existence although many of them conform to his own definitional criteria. Yet the political role or impact of centrist conspiracy theories is at least as pernicious as many of the right-wing confections that Cassam examines, such as QAnon. There is every reason to believe that the deleterious power of liberal conspiracism will continue unless challenged by a materialist critique that reflects the interests of the masses of working people who, when united, really do have the capacity to transform the world.

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