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Every era in recent American memory has begotten its own conspiracy theories. The 1950s featured the outsized fear of communist infiltration, for example; the 1960s and 1970s spawned theories about political assassination, foreign wars, and the Nixon presidency; and the 2000s saw the 9/11 "truth" movement. I was moved to study the topic in the 1990s, a decade that by contrast is not remembered for any specific conspiracy theories. And yet it featured a wide array of beliefs, groups, and moments, including: The "death list" of murder victims that President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary purportedly perpetrated; allegations that during the 1980s then-Governor Bill was addicted to cocaine and complicit in the drug smuggling that ran through the airport in the small town of Mena, Arkansas; the federal government's deadly confrontations with Branch Davidian members in their complex outside Waco, Texas, and with Randy Weaver and his family in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, which were both the products of conspiratorial fears and fueled further conspiracy theories; the militia movement that inspired and organized right-wing gun enthusiasts' efforts to defend their localities from the coming New World Order; the fatal bombing of a federal office building in Oklahoma City by militia movement sympathizers, which remains the largest domestic terrorist attack in US history; Oliver Stone's Oscar-nominated film *JFK* (1991), which renewed interest in the decades-old theories around the Kennedy assassination; the hit television series *The X-Files* (1993–2008), which alleged among other things a government-orchestrated plot to keep secret its capture of and collaboration with aliens; and, to come full circle, Hillary Clinton's (not unreasonable) complaint about the vast right-wing conspiracy to remove her husband from the presidency.

Charming antiquities for present audiences, to be sure, but newspaper columnists and even congressional committees at the time deemed them to be grave threats to the republic (Fenster 2008 [1999], 52–81). The dread of conspiracy theories, it seems, is begotten just as surely as the theories themselves, as the proliferation of both Donald Trump-related theories and mainstream revulsion of them demonstrate. Contemporary conspiracy theory studies have identified the call-and-response dynamic that conspiracy theories and the panic about them have established (see, e.g., Fenster 2008 [1999], 1–2; Knight 2000, 5–10).[1] Conspiracy theories offer a populist explanation about the triumph of a secret elite, while commentators fret over how present-day conspiracy theories utilize such populist rhetoric to provoke the anger of the masses and destroy democracy. Conspiracy theorists and their detractors have a similarly parallel relationship with the past: The former connect the present to history—*there has always been a conspiracy!*—while worried academics and commentators duly note conspiracy theories' own history and continuous existence. Each side thereby proclaims both that things are the same as ever and that today we face existential and unprecedented dangers. Any attempt to persuade conspiracy theorists or those afraid of them that the sky is in fact not falling is doomed to at least short-term failure.

In this chapter I want to historicize and question the claim that the history of populism and conspiracy theory is continuous but soon coming to a frightening head. The public interest in conspiracy theories and public concerns about them wax and wane as the prophesied conspiracy and the dreaded full-on populist revolt have consistently failed to materialize and never seem to accomplish the ends feared and predicted of them. Maybe ours will be the moment about which the jeremiads have warned. After all, the sporadically violent riot in the US Capitol on January 6 seemed to be the very outcome predicted by anti-extremist prophets. But it was at once perilous *and* farcical, it ultimately proved easy to put down, and many of those who engaged in it have been successfully prosecuted and are currently incarcerated. The 1990s similarly felt uniquely weird and dangerous in the moment, with the bombing of a federal building suggesting that armed rebellion by right-wing militias was the first battle in an emerging conflict. It turns out, however, that it was just another American decade with spectacular but sporadic violence. Whether foretold in terms of the defeat of an exposed conspiracy or the authoritarian populist end of political order, the future proves resistant to catastrophic prediction.

Worried commentators and some conspiracy theory scholars presume that we can understand, project, and even control the direction that conspiracy theories will take, whether by comparing the present to the past or forgetting the past entirely. Conspiracy theories may feel like "primal myths," as the writer Jesse Walker (2013) describes them, but the pattern of finding

present-day conspiracy theories, connecting them to the past, and then claiming that today's myths are exceptional, exceptionally threatening, and demanding of a response—something Walker notably does not do—feels as much a part of the myth of conspiracy theories as conspiracy theorizing itself. Below I use Richard Hofstadter, the US historian whose work continues to cast a long shadow on conspiracy theory studies, to reconsider the relevance and prevalence of that pattern.

Conspiracy Theory as the Historical Undead

Conspiracy theories from the 1990s survive as background figures in the conspiratorial imaginary. Trump's candidacy and presidency from the mid-2010s to the present, along with the 9/11 attacks and the attendant Truth Movement in the decade before it, may have pushed the earlier theories out of the popular imagination, but the 1990s helped establish the conspiratorial culture we now inhabit. Most prominently, the 1994 congressional elections made Newt Gingrich Speaker of the House of Representatives after he led an energized, divisive Republican campaign pitched (conspiratorially) against the Clinton presidency, which Gingrich depicted as elitist, debauched, and corrupt and which he and his fellow House members later attempted to end via impeachment. Gingrich's temporary success proved an important precursor to the "Tea Party" movement that organized right-wing and libertarian dissent against Barack Obama's presidency in the belief that the globalist and socialistic forces Obama represented were a grave threat to US sovereignty. And the Tea Party's contempt for President Obama served as a basis for Donald Trump's ideological success two decades later. The 1990s militia movement also presaged the present, as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, groups that played key roles in the January 6 riot, offer a less rural but no less threatening version of the militias' vigilantism, race politics, and oddball constitutionalism. Nicole Hemmer's recent history of conservatism in the 1990s (2022) identifies the decade's ongoing political relevance, even as the conspiracy theories and personalities of those who promoted them during the period seem quaint in comparison to those in the present.

New conspiracy theories refer incessantly to events that date back decades and even centuries, remixing alleged or real plots from the past to posit their current relevance. This relationship between past and present is at play not only in conspiracy theories but in the attempt to account for them. Academics inevitably explain contemporary conspiracy theories in their relationship to the past, as I did above. The extent of our effort to place a current manifestation in a historical context depends upon our disciplinary orientation and the questions we ask. In the attempt to provide a kind of structural account of conspiracy theory—identifying the underlying conditions and causes for conspiratorial belief based on culture, psychology, cognition,

or epistemology, for example—we explain how or why conspiracy theories circulate continuously across time. Alternatively, when we study a specific manifestation of a particular theory, we place it in the political, social, or cultural context within which it arose, or we evaluate its specific historical impact at the time of its popularity and in the period thereafter. Either way, we offer implicit and at times explicit accounts of the present in light of the past (or, in the case of historians, of one past in light of a further past). Like conspiracy theories, which focus on a particular event or individual with ties to the past or on a broader, structural cause for the present-day, academic accounts of conspiracy theories seek connections from the past to the present problem they aspire to explain.

Richard Hofstadter initiated this approach at the beginning of the modern study of conspiracy theories.[2] He explicitly connected the emergence of the insurgent mid-twentieth century conservatism represented by Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade and Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign to the American political tradition of what he called the nation's long-simmering "paranoid style": the "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" that views a "hostile and conspiratorial world . . . directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life" (Hofstadter 1965, 3–4). To explain the present, Hofstadter described a connected and continuing past in which the paranoid style had circulated throughout many of the most significant political disputes and controversies in US history. He offered an abundance of examples of this dysfunction:

> In the history of the United States one finds [the "style"], for example, in the anti-Masonic movement, the nativist and anti-Catholic movement, in certain spokesmen for abolitionism who regarded the United States as being in the grip of a slaveholders' conspiracy, in many writers alarmed by Mormonism, in some Greenback and populist writers who constructed a great conspiracy of international bankers, in the exposure of a munitions makers' conspiracy of the First World War, in the popular left-wing press, in the contemporary right wing, and on both sides of the race controversy today, among White Citizens Councils and Black Muslims.
>
> *(Hofstadter 1965, 9)*

"The recurrence of the paranoid style," Hofstadter explained, "suggests that a mentality disposed to see the world in the paranoid's way may always be present in some considerable minority of the population" (1965, 39). He presented a narrative in which conspiracy theories operate like *Dracula*'s undead:

> They cannot die but must go on age after age adding new victims and multiplying the evils of the world. For all that die from the preying of the Undead

become themselves Undead, and prey on their kind. And so the circle goes
on ever widening, like as the ripples from a stone thrown in the water.

(Stoker 1897, 200)

Zombie-like, the paranoid style survives over the course of US history as a
historiographical curiosity and a recurring problem in those moments when
it rises up from the grave, bringing with it all of the past theories that have
come before. Once bitten, the infected individual and group can contaminate
some portion of the population. The paranoid style cannot be defeated; it
can only be contained when those grounded in the ways of consensus and
moderation incant necessary common sense to mitigate the power of its spell.

The People

Hofstadter's writings made another, equally important and influential linkage
besides the past and present: Conspiracy theories in the US arise from and
operate within the tension between populism and democracy. In his critical
account of the populist and progressive movements in *Age of Reform* (1955)
as well as in the collection of essays in *The Populist Style in American Politics*
(1965), Hofstadter described a process by which populist surges emerge and
recede to challenge democratic institutions, including political parties and
constitutional governing structures. He viewed the takeover of the Republi-
can Party by the red-baiting conservatives of the 1950s and early 1960s who
opposed federal civil rights legislation as a triumph of militant right-wing
populism which threatened the New Deal consensus that had formed during
the Great Depression. He carried his skepticism of populism's role in Ameri-
can history to his concerns about the nation's direction. In so doing, he initi-
ated two related intellectual moves that continue to affect conspiracy theory's
study: viewing the rise of populism, particularly of the right-wing sort, as an
existential threat, and understanding that threat as both continuous with the
past—as the product of the undead "paranoid style"—and contingent upon
the ideological and material threats of the moment.

The populist and paranoiac through-line that constituted a longstand-
ing American tradition had spawned a particular danger in Hofstadter's
time—at least before Lyndon Johnson's thorough thrashing of Barry Gold-
water in the 1964 presidential elections. After describing a domestic politics
that had become more riven by frightening degrees of isolationism, pop-
ulism, and passion, Hofstadter pessimistically ended his essay entitled "The
Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," written in 1954 but included a decade later as
one of several essays in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* collection,
with this warning:

These considerations suggest that the pseudo-conservative political style,
while it may already have passed the peak of its influence, is on the long

waves of twentieth-century American history and not a momentary mood . . . [I]n a populistic culture like ours, which seems to lack a responsible elite with political and moral autonomy, and in which it is possible to exploit the wildest currents of public sentiment for private purposes, it is at least conceivable that a highly organized, vocal, active, and well-financed minority could create a political climate in which the rational pursuit of our well-being and safety would become impossible.

(1965, 65)

Hofstadter thus mixed his account of past and present phenomena with an existential dread about what the future would hold, offering predictive commentary unmoored from any sophisticated political or social theory. He paranoically hypothesized the possibility of highly organized, powerful conspiracy of a "well-financed minority"—a non-confirmable prediction, insofar as any future democratic backslide could not be connected to the ill-defined category of "pseudo-conservatives." His pronouncement claimed a clairvoyance that was undeterred a decade later in the introduction to the same collection as he noted how parts of the masses continued to "respond . . . to the great drama of the 'public scene'" (1965, x). Even after Johnson's resounding victory, he closed his mid-1960s essay "Goldwater and Pseudo-Conservative Politics" with the warning that the movement that had backed Goldwater

moves in the uninhibited mental world of those who neither have nor expect to win responsibility. Its opponents, as men who carry the burdens of government, are always vulnerable to discontents aroused by the manifold failure of our society. But the right-wingers, who are willing to gamble with the future, enjoy the wide-ranging freedom of the agitational mind, with its paranoid suspicions, its impossible demands, and its millennial dream of total victory.

(1965, 140–41)

The relationship Hofstadter had identified between populism and "paranoia" correctly observed that populism and conspiracy theory travel together, as more recent work has also identified (Bergmann 2018; Butter 2020; Fenster 2008 [1999]). The academic study of populism studies can thus offer an additional framework for considering conspiracy theories both in historical and social contexts and as a diverse phenomenon. As with conspiracy theories, the literature on populism has expanded considerably in the past decade to study present trends, and it helps illuminate those characteristics that overlap with conspiracy theory: Populism offers a dualist, often Manichean vision of a world filled with good actors who champion the people and evil forces that represent elites (Canovan 1999, 3–8; Laclau 2005, 15); it posits a secret world under the surface that requires exposure to restore the rightful order of popular, accountable rule (Fenster 2017; Moffitt 2016, 43–47;

Taggart 2002, 76–77); and its political valence is highly contingent on a nation's or region's internal political dynamics—including its political system and parties—as well as on the current issues to which an individual populist movement appears to be responding (Mouffe 2018, 11; Müller 2016, 8–10). Academic interest in the subject has typically tracked the present fortunes of populist movements, and those who study it often make plain their own political commitments whether, as in Jan-Werner Müller's case (2016), his centrist concerns about populism or, in Chantal Mouffe's (2018) or Stuart Hall's (2021 [1988]), their desire to articulate a left form of it.

By contrast, Hofstadter's influential normative perspective on populism—that of the expert free of agitation, too mature to believe in millennial dreams and yet riven by (presumptively non-paranoid) suspicions of the irrepressible paranoid populists—was not necessary to his description. But, like his descriptive account, Hofstadter's normative perspective on populism reverberated in conspiracy theory studies' development in the decades since his work's wide dissemination, as writers have continued to associate the nation's "populistic" history to believers' "agitational mind" (Thalmann 2019, 59–63).

The Undead, Today

The first edition of my book on conspiracy theories was one of three academic monographs (Fenster 2008 [1999]; Knight 2000; Melley 2000) written in the late 1990s that concerned the "conspiracy culture" (as Peter Knight called it) of the US.[3] In different ways, the monographs asserted that conspiracy theories, having bloomed especially in the aftermath of the multiple legitimacy crises that followed political assassinations, the Vietnam War, and Watergate, exist at the center rather than the periphery of US cultural politics and therefore demanded close study and understanding rather than dismissal as the product of paranoid frustration by outsiders. That all three scholars worked in a set of fields broadly grouped as "cultural studies," rather than in political science or history, speaks of a time when conspiracy theories were a marginal subject to those who studied the political past and present while proving visible to those fascinated enough by their contemporary cultural pervasiveness to see them as an object of analysis. Each of us argued that Hofstadter and those who followed in his wake had not satisfactorily explained the phenomenon (Fenster 2008 [1999], 3–21; Knight 2000, 5–6; Melley 2000, 1), even if it was difficult to find a concerned commentator in the mainstream press who did not refer to conspiracy theories as the product of paranoid minds. But like Hofstadter we deployed extant literary and social scientific methods and theoretical frameworks from our intellectual milieu to explain the right-wing populism of his time.[4]

Our convergence in applying cultural studies to conspiracy theory spoke to the concerns of a specific corner of the humanities at the time as well as to the peculiarities of our personal tastes in literature and film. But it also constituted an early instance of what has become a thoroughgoing, multi and interdisciplinary reconsideration of conspiracy theories. The academic study of conspiracy theories now includes those who view the phenomenon as the product and/ or cause of political beliefs and behavior, as evidence of psychological function and dysfunction, and as an alternative and broken form of popular epistemology (Butter and Knight 2019). The amount of published academic studies of conspiracy has increased considerably since 2007 and exploded since 2020—according to one study, by 180 percent in 2020 alone (Mahl et al. 2022, 6). Researchers now measure conspiracy theories in polls, study their development and effects in experimental research, fashion belief in them in cognitive modeling, and find and analyze the traces left by believers in massive data sets. They focus on conspiracy theories as an isolated object of study or conceptualize them as an aspect of mis- and disinformation and as a symptom or cause of creeping authoritarianism and fascism. Although scholars and commentators still cite Hofstadter's work, the current ferment is not simply the result of his influence. Nevertheless, it replicates Hofstadter's core strategy: deploying one or more established disciplinary perspectives and their methods to observe a contemporary phenomenon, uncover its origins and impacts, and speculate about its future.

Like Hofstadter, many of those who study conspiracy theories offer normative judgments of conspiracy theories and prescriptive proposals to address their political impacts. A recent book by two political theorists exemplifies this tendency in the authors' association of what they identify as the "new conspiracism" that Donald Trump helped introduce with older, "classic" versions and understandings:

> We agree with Hofstadter's assessment: the urgency that disdains any ordinary approach to politics as inadequate is something classic and new conspiracism share. Yet there is this difference: the new conspiracism not only is averse to the mundane workings of democratic politics but assaults its institutions and practices wholesale.
>
> *(Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 45)*

Current research asserts that conspiracy beliefs are fast-spreading and represent, as one recent article asserted, "one of the most pressing threats to . . . democracy and national security" (Walther and McCoy 2021, 115). Rosenblum and Muirhead more precisely engage Hofstadter in arguing that the rise of the "new conspiracism" is primarily caused by political and institutional failures, and they call for responsible political representatives and civil society groups

to communicate truthfully to those with more "open minds" (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 141–65). In a similar if more insidious suggestion, the law professors Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule have proposed that government "cognitively infiltrate" online venues where conspiracy theorists meet to interrupt the "informational cascades" into which new believers fall (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). Their widely circulated article presaged an explosion of studies that have offered numerous psychological interventions—including informational inoculations against cognitive contagion, priming potential believers to resist conspiracy theories' siren call, and providing narrative persuasion against such beliefs—which, a review study has recently concluded, work only occasionally and at best result in small, marginal changes in beliefs (O'Mahony et al. 2023). Unlike Rosenblum and Muirhead, recent social scientific research makes little reference to history, but contemporary scholars' concern with the present—presuming that conspiracy theory belief is a constant across time as well as one that constitutes a significant current threat—and the confidence they tend to show in their mix of interventions reveal the extent of their similar parallels to Hofstadter's work.

If, as I am suggesting, Hofstadter's scholarship on and interventions in conspiracy theories and populism established a model that contemporary research has followed, what are the lessons and cautions we should take from it? Contemporary scholars who are frustrated with his work focus on how time-worn some of the methods and theories on which he relied now feel, as well as with how time-bound and anachronistic his concerns now seem. I might quibble with Michael Butter's (2021) vehement complaint that Hofstadter's history was bad and his prophecy useless, but Butter's concerns are well-founded. Some critics at the time, including Hofstadter's friend and contemporary C. Vann Woodward (1959), attacked Hofstadter and especially other so-called "revisionist" historians of populism for unfairly and inaccurately allowing their opposition to the present-day right-wing to ignore the complexity of late nineteenth and early twentieth century populist movements. The historic populist movements of that period were mainly focused on regional economic and class interests, Woodward argued; some of them may have engaged in scapegoating and paranoia, but such beliefs had a longer history in the US and were at least as pervasive among others at the time, including in the region and among the classes that midcentury critics and skeptics of populism were more likely to embrace. Hofstadter and historians who followed him accentuated those movements' retrograde and reactionary beliefs, as well as their racism and antisemitism and "status anxiety," and overstated their ideological connections to southern resistance to post-Civil War Reconstruction in the past as well as to right-wing activists in the then-present. And the populists neither resembled nor were direct antecedents of McCarthy, Goldwater, or their supporters, whose politics was rooted in different regions in the US and came from different economic and social classes.

The northeastern liberals of whom Hofstadter was a leading light sought the roots of such movements in the populist past, in the process simplifying and misreading history to make sense of and justify their present fears of the populist right while distinguishing themselves from historians who had embraced populism's challenge to prevailing US class and power structures (Collins 1989).[5] Hofstadter's surveys of Joseph McCarthy and the post–World War II Red Scare and of the far-right activists of the early 1960s warned of a triumph by right-wing populists rooted in a historic political style. But he did so soon after McCarthy's death as a diminished figure and Barry Goldwater's defeat in the 1964 presidential election by historic margins. His predictions were either wrong or decades too early. To what can we attribute these failures?

Hofstadter, "Presentism," and Conspiracy Theory Studies

Hofstadter's work was a response to current events. He oriented his descriptions of the past around those current events, and he applied the present to make sense of the past and future. As such, his work seems "presentist," a frequently used term of approbation among academic historians. The eminent historian Lynn Hunt has described the twin failings of a "presentist" approach as the tendency to interpret and judge the past in terms of the historian's own period, and "the shift of general historical interest toward the contemporary period and away from the more distant past" (Hunt 2002). Hofstadter equated movements throughout US history, condemning some and pardoning others for using a paranoid style, in order to explain the present, and he applied very loose and poorly defined concepts from the social science of his time, including psychological concepts like anxiety and paranoia and sociological terms like "status," to understand the past. Read today, his work on conspiracy theories seems that of an impassioned, presentist pundit rather than a careful historian.[6]

As an expanding historiographic literature has demonstrated, however, presentism does not represent a simple and sinful wrong for historical scholarship. Rather, presentism constitutes an atmospheric condition through which all historians must travel. At a basic level, historians must use present-day language and concepts to describe and understand the past, making some form of presentism inevitable (Loison 2016, 31). And presentism is neither a single methodological lens, nor does it singularly produce anachronistic judgments and empirical errors. Multiple presentisms exist that vary in their value to historical study and in their danger to lead to misunderstanding the past; one historiographic survey, for example, finds three forms (Chang 2021), another finds four (Loison 2016), and a third finds five (Armitage 2023). These forms can include *motivational* presentism, where present concerns influence and even drive choices of topic, an inevitable circumstance

for every historian (Oreskes 2013, 604); *empirical* presentism, which applies currently prevailing theories to infer the occurrence of past events (Loison 2016, 31); *descriptive* presentism, which uses prevailing terminology to describe the past (Tosh 2003, 658); and *evaluative* presentism, which evaluates the past within present understandings and debates (Barseghyan 2022, 61). Presentism's latter form is unavoidable. Scholars cannot help but view the past within their own moral and ethical context. But if the past is excessively evaluated by a current metric, a historical account can become not only unfair to its subjects but distorted and even inaccurate. The problem of excess also threatens each of the other presentisms: One could, for example, be motivated to strategically seek historical evidence, incorrectly infer additional evidence when it can't be found, and then describe it inaccurately to support a current normative project. The most trenchant example of such distortion has been the US Supreme Court's selective use of history to support contested judgments about the constitution's meaning in recent cases expanding gun rights and limiting reproductive rights (Sweet 2022).

Although presentism in any form is neither inherently wrong nor unprofessional, historiographers call on historians to practice scholarly self-reflection on the dangers each type poses to understanding the past and connecting it to the historian's and reader's present (Oreskes 2013, 603–04). Historians must inevitably choose a method of inquiry to apply to the topic they have chosen from the infinite number of available topics, sift among a plethora of historical resources and facts, and then interpret and narrate what they find. In the process, the present inevitably seeps into the empirical enterprise of historical inquiry (Barseghyan 2022). The most compelling theoretical accounts of presentism concede that historians graze in their own time to find topics and perspectives before and as they research, and then frame their accounts to prove relevant to present readers. But even if some degree of presentism is inevitable, a self-reflexive account of the past that reckons with the effects of the observer's position and work in the present can protect an account of the past from serving merely as a tool of the present.

Hofstadter's use of the vague, flat concept of an historical "paranoid style" to intervene in present political debates was deeply presentist. The right-wing of his time, which only partially resembled the populisms of the past, inspired him to revisit his historical account to derive a concept through which he could describe the present. Developing an evaluative and anachronistic psychological framework to describe historical phenomena, he helped simplify popular and scholarly understanding of a current mix of populations and social movements whose beliefs and actions range more broadly than whatever psychological resemblance some of their views might have with the mentally ill. It allowed him to avoid self-reflection by ignoring his own prejudices, like that of the Cold War intellectual who engaged in his own form of paranoia, albeit in a more reasonable and justified form.

Given the terminology he used, his debt to the social theories of his time, his preeminence as a public intellectual, and the notoriety of the "Paranoid Style" essay, Hofstadter's influence extends beyond historians. His historiographical presentism has spread to scholarship that decontextualizes the phenomena it concerns, whether by simplifying and distorting the past to support an argument about the present or by finding, measuring, and drawing conclusions from data to buttress a normative view of contemporary politics. The same framing that regarded conspiracy theory and populism as ever-present influences and viewed the present as a particularly calamitous threat affects current social scientific literature that catastrophizes extant politics, seeing the seeds of democratic ruin in the traces left by online disinformation and misinformation campaigns rather than studying the messy beliefs and social practices in which humans engage (Bernstein 2021; Birchall and Knight 2023, 43–65). And, as with Hofstadter's form of presentism, non-historian social scientists who implicitly rely on "paranoid style" framing invite authorities to surveil and police conspiracy theory believers in a manner that would confirm their prejudices and suppositions about an enemy state. It stops rather than begins discussion, dialogue, and understanding. It can become an anti-liberal counter to populists' skepticism about liberalism and pluralism by casting populist movements outside of a fragile center that needs protection—not only those that are violent but also those who share aspects of their beliefs. And it causes the same lack of self-reflection by commentators and scholars who fail to question centrists' conspiracy theorizing and paranoid projection about Donald Trump's alleged ties to Russia.

Nevertheless, I want to avoid presuming that today is the same as the past—that, as with the 1990s, our time too will seem relatively benign and merely part of a history that is receding. The threats represented by contemporary right-wing populism and conspiracy theory are not merely illusory—whereas in the 1990s militia-adjacent terrorists bombed a federal building, in 2020 Trump supporters broke into the Capitol. The approach to which I have contributed recognizes the relative normality of conspiracy theorizing in democratic politics, popular culture, and the general discourse, but it risks neglecting tonal changes in conspiracy theories' and populisms' political and cultural pitch. It could miss moments when their ambient sounds increase and they emerge into the foreground as a threat. Conspiracy theories and their relationship to misinformation and disinformation may not be among the most important social and political problems confronting the contemporary world, but their causes and effects are symptomatic of more significant democratic failures and the consequences of power and wealth inequities.

Hofstadter's work on the paranoid style stands for the proposition that confident prognostication bears risks, no matter if one is predicting doom or stasis. The best way for conspiracy theory studies to proceed is by viewing the present with caution and a better understanding of the past and

models that consider historical and social context. Fears of conspiracy, like the still-percolating claim that Covid-19 was in fact a "plandemic," revamp and reframe existing ways of understanding the past and present that are inevitably available for deployment to explain the next cultural and material crisis (Birchall and Knight 2023, 190). We should expect to see new theories emerge, rooted in the past to reconfigure the future, but we should study and describe them without hysteria and with an understanding of their history.

Notes

1 Jack Bratich called this "conspiracy panic" (Bratich 2008). Although I am skeptical of the vehemence and theoretical apparatus he brought to the phenomenon, he helpfully identified and emphasized this dynamic.
2 A separate approach to conspiracy theories in philosophy that failed for decades to attract significant academic interest was Karl Popper's characterization of them as one of the enemies of his open society ideal (Popper 1966, 94–99). Popper shared Hofstadter's distaste for them. It was not until the 1990s that the discipline began again to take an interest in conspiracy theories (see, e.g., Keeley 1999).
3 Clare Birchall and Jesse Walker similarly characterize the 1990s as a "high pop-cultural moment" (Birchall 2006, 38) and a "golden age" (Walker 2013, 15), and Birchall's and Bratich's (2008) books are part of the same wave.
4 On the interdisciplinary sources for Hofstadter's work, see Dunst (2017, 23–39); McKenzie-McHarg (2022).
5 Hofstadter lamented his having come to symbolize the overstated, ahistorical revisionist critique of the populists, but his own sloppy language and his prideful ability to craft a well-turned phrase gave his critics sufficient ammunition to do so (Brown 2006, 112–19).
6 The historian David Greenberg (2006) has derisively referred to Hofstadter as "the pundit's historian." But to be clear, I am only applying the term "pundit" to Hofstadter's use of history in his interventions into contemporary politics, not his entire corpus.

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