

Down with Theory and Evidence?

A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy

By Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenbaum. Princeton, N.J.:
Princeton University Press, 2019. 211 pp. Hardcover, \$26.95.

Joseph M. Parent
Department of Political Science
University of Notre Dame
jparent@nd.edu

Joseph E. Uscinski
Department of Political Science
University of Miami
uscinski@miami.edu

27 March 2020
Word count: 3,000

Acknowledgements: The authors thank Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead for comments, Dion Thompson-Davoli for research assistance, and our families for support.

In *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead make three claims: 1.) conspiracy theories are nothing new, but what is new about the new conspiracy theories is that they dispense with theory (pp. 2-3), 2.) though both sides participate in conspiracy theorizing, the new conspiracism is predominantly a phenomenon of the American political right (p. 5), and 3.) the new conspiracism is caused by antipathy to political elites, hostility to government, social resentment, and the revolution in broadcast technology, which has displaced traditional gatekeepers (p. 40). Although we disagree with their core claims, we fundamentally agree that, when they are a problem, conspiracy theories are a political problem and require political solutions.

What are a lot of people saying about *A Lot of People are Saying*? A lot that is complimentary. *Washington Monthly* describes it as a “tremendous contribution because it identifies and names a new style of political discourse and clarifies the danger it poses.” *The Nation* describes it as “a very readable account of the identifying features and effects that distinguish older, healthier forms of conspiracy thinking from this newer, more dangerous, and for now, as they see it, largely American brand.” *New York* magazine says, “Muirhead and Rosenblum have pointed out something genuinely new and disturbing, but in an appropriately careful, levelheaded way.”

Naturally, some of what has been said has been critical. *The Nation* also notes “in the end, *A Lot of People Are Saying* offers scant empirical research of any kind to support its core argument.... they come close at times to relying on the kinds of assertions, unencumbered by evidence, that they reject in theory.” *Reason* rejects the book’s subtitle: “Muirhead and Rosenblum have simply cherry-picked some pieces of the present and past that seem to support their thesis, ignoring the vast swaths of data that would show them that literally no characteristic of their ‘new conspiracism’ is even remotely new.” The *Times Literary Supplement* objects that “Muirhead and Rosenblum insist that, ‘while the Left has participated in its share of classic conspiracy theories, it has not yet taken up the new conspiracism.’ They present little evidence in support of this claim, which reads like wishful thinking.”

As usual, praise and blame gravitate around similar issues, in this case novelty, symmetry, and causality. There is some crucial common ground that the books in this joint review share (of which more shortly), but we will begin by discussing how and why they differ. First is the novelty claim, that there is a new conspiracism: “conspiracy *without* the theory” as opposed to classic conspiracism, “conspiracy *with* the theory”, which “has not been displaced by the new conspiracism.” (p. 2). The new conspiracism is “the pure face of negativity” (p. 7), it “posits odious designs but not the how or why” (p. 25), and it is “*de* all the way down: destabilizing, degrading, deconstructing, and finally delegitimizing, without a countervailing constructive impulse.” Buried in this claim is really three: a) new conspiracism has a different intellectual structure than classic conspiracism, b) new conspiracism is additive, driving the amount of conspiracy talk up, and c) new conspiracism is politically different, devoid of constructive impulse. We dissent across the board.

Why? The most obvious reason is conceptual; Rosenblum and Muirhead use non-standard definitions of conspiracy theory and do not employ them consistently. They cite a classic definition — “a proposed explanation of some historical event... in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons... acting in secret” (p. 25) — but discard it because it does not describe the mental void that is new conspiracism. Instead, they define classic conspiracy theory as an explanation that “tries to make sense of a disorderly world by insisting that powerful people control the course of events” (p. 2, cf. 20). But even this definition is not loose enough because the new

conspiracism is not an explanation at all, has no political theory, calls for no collective action, and leads only to delegitimation (pp. 24-36). They attempt to tighten the definition by barring “narratives with only a tangential connection to politics” like those surrounding “the 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary” (p. 4), but this attempt is undermined when Sandy Hook is used as supporting evidence subsequently (pp. 54, 169). Without a stable conception of what counts as theory, the analysis is unmoored.

The conceptual problems here are profound. Jettisoning a standard definition of conspiracy theory makes it difficult to engage the literature. Further, the idea that powerful people control events is not the definition of a conspiracy theory; it is the definition of all top-down theories, of which conspiracy theories are minnows in that ocean. Moreover, the differences between classical and new conspiracism loom so large that they are either no longer comparable or the new conspiracism is equally comparable to a wide array of (undiscussed) psychopathologies. Worse, it is not accurate. New conspiracism is a cartoon villain that seldom breaks into three dimensions. The paragon given is the pushback against Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation (p. 36). Yet the conspiracy theories that swirled around the investigation came from both Left and Right, posited that powerful actors were working in secret against the common good, and readied collective responses in preparation for worst-case scenarios. The archetypal example of new conspiracism has the same intellectual and political structure as classic conspiracism.

The conceptual problems contribute to methods problems. Rosenblum and Muirhead select on the dependent variable: they only investigate new conspiracism, so they find confirmation wherever they look. And because their definitions are flexible, falsification becomes much trickier. Sandy Hook is a good example. It is explicitly excluded in the introduction because it is not political enough, but by the conclusion it is explicitly included because it exhibits a defining feature of the new conspiracism, disorientation, and somehow is not disqualified because it has become a rallying cry for collective action to stop gun control measures. There is plenty to criticize in the Trump administration’s agenda (“lock her up” and “build that wall” leap to mind), but it is an agenda with intellectual and political structure, and among Republicans it garners steady approval ratings upwards of 80 percent. Plus, without a clear and consistent concept or systematic data collection, one cannot convincingly claim that the level of conspiracism is increasing, much less the level of a novel form of conspiracism, much less that either of those concepts is affecting democracy. If high-profile conspiracy theories are not representative of overall conspiracy theorizing — as we in fact find is the case — then only looking at prominent conspiracy theories will yield a badly distorted picture of the subject. All of these problems culminate in a dearth of evidentiary support.

Second, there is the matter of symmetry: are Republicans more prone to the new conspiracism than Democrats? In Rosenblum and Muirhead’s words “while the Left participates in its share of classic conspiracy theories, it has not yet taken up the new conspiracism.... Today, conspiracism is not, as we might expect, the last resort of permanent political losers but the first resort of winners.” (p. 5, cf. 49). This is a common trope in the literature: when political adversaries peddle conspiracy theories, they are mainstream *and* mad; when political allies peddle them, they are fringe *or* true.

The chief problem with this claim is the evidence. With neutral definitions and even-handed data collection, partisan asymmetry in the populace evaporates. Upsetting everyone across the political spectrum, a bevy of studies show that predispositions toward conspiracy theories are just as likely to come from the Left as the Right (e.g., Oliver & Wood, 2014). It is true that at any given moment,

conspiracy talk may be more frequent on one side than the other, but this is nothing peculiar to either political leaning or party ideology.

While the Trump years go beyond our data collection efforts, Donald Trump may be the exception that proves the rule. When Republicans were out of the White House, right-leaning conspiracy theories were much more common than left-leaning conspiracy theories, e.g. Barack Obama was a foreign Muslim socialist, who wanted to nationalize the economy and the health care system, empower death panels to execute our grandparents, and expand disability benefits to create a permanent bloc of Democratic voters. That many of his policies were Republican in origin and continued after a Republican took office made no difference; this was a competition for power, not coherence. With Trump in office, left-leaning conspiracy theories occupied our national political dialogue. Trump was accused of working in secret against the common good with a huge array of actors for plutocratic reasons. Victory did not stop Trump from disgorging conspiracy theories, but they were not random. He used them to explain away setbacks, like his losing the popular vote, the Mueller investigation, etc. Previous echoes of this phenomenon can be heard in the Clinton's accusation of a "vast right-wing conspiracy" out to get them, none of which resonated any farther beyond their political bases than Trump's claims.

Third, causality is a major difference between our two books. Rosenblum and Muirhead's causal story is somewhat opaque. The new conspiracism appears to be one among many factors ("dark money," polarized political parties, rising social inequality and social insecurity, and more) weakening democracy (p. 6). Advocates are drawn to practice the new conspiracism not because of the policy payoff—the new conspiracism is described as "politically sterile" (p. 31)—but because it encourages performative aggression, the satisfaction of knowingness, and sheer defiance (pp. 38-39). Underlying these pleasures are rising animosity to political elites and government, social resentment, and changes in communication technology, which have displaced traditional gatekeepers (p. 40). So, the primary independent variables seem to be resentments (social and political) and communications technologies; the primary intervening variables seem to be psychological pleasures, and the first dependent variable is the type of conspiracism (classic or new), which in turn influences the second dependent variable, democratic strength through the secondary intervening variables of delegitimation and disorientation. In short: resentments + communication technology → [psychological pleasures] → type of conspiracism → [delegitimation + disorientation] → democratic strength.

In contrast, our basic model is that socialized motive joined with political opportunity drives conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent, pp. 17-20). That is, people are predisposed to believing conspiratorial logic along a normal distribution, and this is independent of other personal traits. People also have their tribal political commitments, to country, party, and group. Consequently, changes in the quality of information that a conspiracy is afoot combined with unfavorable shifts in the international or domestic distribution of power will lead to more or less belief in conspiracy theories. When there is evidence that foreign malefactors are conspiring against Americans, sharp-eyed citizens will increasingly speculate about the plot. But when domestic threats overshadow international threats, then internal divisions will grow more salient. As power trends move unfavorably, citizens predisposed to conspiracy thinking are more likely to see plots, and their number will increase as the evidence overcomes others marginal propensity to disbelieve and/or their power declines. Thus, ideological predispositions + distribution of power → conspiracy theories.

Commented [MOU1]: Please cite your book here and in the references

Why the differences in our arguments? For starters, we are explaining different outcomes. We found no evidence of a qualitatively different kind of conspiracism at the mass or elite level, and so focused on who and how many believed in conspiracy theories across time. Conspiracy theories – as expressed by most people in our data – are largely devoid of deep theory and evidence. Conspiracy theories for most people are expressed as backhanded accusations based on little more than feelings and intuitions. This leads us to suspect that Rosenblum and Muirhead are comparing professional conspiracy theorists of old to the ramblings of all conspiracy theorists today.

Another reason we part company is that Rosenblum and Muirhead's account is more descriptive than ours, and spends more time discussing the psychological rewards for unorthodox beliefs. This is a real contribution, but not one we set out to make. A final reason is that we think about the variables differently. We examined changes in communications technology as a main cause, but found little to no support for them. The internet may have had an effect on conspiracy theorizing, but this is a claim no one has yet successfully demonstrated. Yet Rosenblum and Muirhead's "resentments" actually appear to have a lot in common with our chief causes. In our view, we are trying to tell the story of where those resentments come from. Rosenblum and Muirhead also have different intervening and dependent variables, but because neither is measured we were not persuaded.

Which brings us to remedies. Rosenblum and Muirhead's recommendations do not follow from some of their claims. For instance, they make a strong case for the nihilism of the new conspiracism: it lacks explanatory power, political theory, collective action, ideology, organization (pp. 24-33); it has a "crippled epistemology" (p. 49) and is "politically sterile" (p. 8). But that turns new conspiracism into a paper tiger. Like 19th century anarchism or Osama bin Laden's caliphate, the new conspiracism should collapse of its own weight, a politically non-viable force doomed by its own contradictions. Wisely, Rosenblum and Muirhead do not pursue that logic to its conclusion. They sense the real threat that today's conspiracy theories pose, and example after example in the work show that contemporary conspiracy theorists and their fellow travelers have serious ends and sometimes the serious means to approach them (e.g. pp. 27, 32, 96, 132, 169).

This is where our divergent paths converge. Neither of our books thinks that conspiracy theories are inherently bad or dangerous. When those theories are validated by the consensus of impartial experts, they become simply conspiracies, and are a time-honored way to defend democracy (see also Watergate). As kooky as many of them are individually, they are usually collectively harmless. Yet, the provenance of conspiracy theories as a national phenomenon is not psychological; it is political. And political problems call for political responses.

Here we come out about the same. Rosenblum and Muirhead call for speaking the truth and enacting democracy, which is to say that we must contest conspiracy theorists' claims to own the truth and repel their assault on democracy through model democratic action (pp. 158-159). Admittedly, this is rather delicate because experts make their own claims to own reality (pp. 101-102), and populists feel they are the true democrats in this situation. Nevertheless, a robust public sphere depends on scientists and experts being outspoken and candid about what they know about the likely effects of different causes, and democracy cannot function if it lapses into illiberal minority rule (by experts or anyone else). There is little daylight between their policy recommendations and ours. Unfortunately, both of our proposals are inadequate.

We all agree that it would be wrong to fight fire with fire when it comes to conspiracy theories. Trying to out-conspire conspiracy theorists is a self-defeating game. Rosenblum and Muirhead are

right to fight fire with water. But the amount of water that both our books bring to the problem amount to only a couple of buckets against a blaze. Speaking truth and enacting democracy did not stop the rise of a conspiracy theorist to power, and, now that conspiracy theories are being politicized by polarizing elites, it has scant chance of slowing the forces that could do so again. What is needed are hoses, and they should be aimed at the origin of the conflagration.

Opinions differ on what that origin is, but we broadly concur it is political. Allow us to start that discussion with a suggestion. Since forever, people had a predisposition to conspiratorial thinking and have lived in different worlds because of it. What may have happened in the United States recently is that the country succeeded so well in protecting its people, that they feel more threatened from within than from without (Bafumi and Parent 2012). As Machiavelli argued, “Security and the weakness of their enemies made Romans no longer regard virtue properly, and they lifted to leadership those who knew better how to entertain than conquer.” (*Discourses* I 18). Barring an increase in threat from overseas, it is time to consider devolving federal power to states and local politics, which are more popular. That would lower the stakes and lessen the anguish that Americans seem to experience increasingly at every election. That path too has its flaws and may be insufficient, but the risks seem to be greater on the side of inertia. Ultimately, Rosenblum and Muirhead are right: the United States cannot remain on this path and remain the United States.

References:

- Bafumi, J. and J.M. Parent. (2012). International Polarity and America’s Polarization. *International Politics*, v. 49 (n. 1), pp. 1-35.
- Drutman, L. (2019). The Cork Board President. *Washington Monthly*. Available at: <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/july-august-2019/the-cork-board-president>
- Lepore, J. (2019). Taking history seriously. *Times Literary Supplement*. Available at: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/modernity-conspiracy-theory-jill-lepore/>
- Oliver, J.E. and T.J. Wood. (2014). Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, v. 58 (n. 4), pp. 952-966.
- Rosenfeld, S. (2019). Have Americans Become More Conspiratorial? *The Nation*. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/american-conspiracy-thinking-trump-era-book-review/>
- Singal, J. (2019). Even Conspiracy Theories Have Gotten Dumber, a New Book Shows. *New York*. Available at: <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/04/the-new-conspiracism-is-conspiracy-theory-without-theory.html>.
- Uscinski, J.E. and J.M. Parent. (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Walker, J. (2019). There’s Nothing New About the “New Conspiracism.” *Reason*. Available at: <https://reason.com/2019/05/08/theres-nothing-new-about-the-new-conspiracism/#>.