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Beyond belief: The social psychology of conspiracy theories and the study of ideology

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Recent years have seen a dramatic rise of public interest in the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Events such as the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, the 7 July 2005 London bombings, the 2008 financial crisis or the flu pandemic have all provoked a host of often outlandish claims of cover-ups, hidden agendas and secret plots, capturing public imagination throughout the world. Although the internet is the main medium for the transmission of such claims, conspiracy theories receive regular coverage in the mainstream media. Conspiracy explanations about climate change, 9/11, the death of Lady Diana or even speculation about the sinister activities of the ‘Israel lobby’ have all featured in the mainstream press in the UK in recent years. Also, forty years after the assassination of John Kennedy or the Apollo 11 moon landing, claims that these events were the result of some secret plot or deception continue to receive coverage on network television and terrestrial channels. It is therefore unsurprising that recent opinion polls consistently show that a substantial proportion of people in the western world readily admit to believing in some form of conspiracy theory (see Byford, 2011 for a recent review).

Public fascination with conspiracy theories is, however, not limited to the US or Western Europe. Globally, conspiracy theories persist as a popular means of articulating the opposition to the forces of international capitalism, globalisation, America’s military and political supremacy and the more general rise of the transnational political order. There are some regional variations though. In Eastern Europe, and especially Russia, anti-westernism, a staple ingredient of populist politics in the region, continues to be based on the idea of a sinister western conspiracy intended to undermine or destroy local culture and traditions. In many Islamic countries, from Egypt to Malaysia it is the idea of a vast Jewish plot that permeates the rhetoric of politicians with

disturbing frequency, while in sub-Saharan Africa, conspiracy theories about the nature and origins of AIDS are so widespread that they have become an important obstacle to the success of public health campaigns.

Given this apparent rise in the popularity of conspiracy theories, it is perhaps unsurprising that in recent years social psychologists too have become more attentive to this phenomenon. In the late 1980s, in the concluding remarks to the edited volume *Changing conceptions of conspiracy*, Carl Graumann (1987, p.245) noted that, even though conspiracy theories are a topic of ‘intrinsic psychological interest’, there was, at that point, no substantial body of psychological research devoted specifically to their study. With the exception of the attempts to explore conspiratorial antisemitism in terms of psychoanalytic theory (e.g. Ackerman and Jahoda, 1950, Bettelheim and Janowitz, 1950), and some generic research on causal inference (see Billig, 1978, Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983), conspiracy theories had been left, almost completely, to the mercy of disciplines such as history and the other social sciences. However, in the quarter of a century since Graumann’s remarks, social psychologists have taken steps towards ‘reclaiming’ conspiracism from the other disciplines. The steady stream of empirical studies (a significant number of which were conducted in the UK) has explored psychological factors that might account for people’s susceptibility to conspiracist thinking, thus signalling a gradual emergence of a distinct *social psychology of conspiracy theories*.¹

The present chapter offers an assessment of this growing field of research through the prism of Michael Billig’s seminal writing on conspiracy theories published in the late 1970s and 1980s (Billig, 1978, 1987, 1988, 1989). In *Fascists: A Social Psychological View of the National Front*, Billig (1978) examined conspiracy theories as one of the central pillars of fascist ideology, which underpins the fundamental ‘logic’ of the fascist’s worldview. In a small number of essays published in the subsequent decade, Billig explored further the social psychological aspects of conspiracism in the ideology of both the far-right (Billig, 1989) and the far-left (Billig, 1987), but also considered some important methodological issues concerning the study of conspiracy theories as a form of ideological explanation (Billig, 1988).

In spite of its originality and continuing relevance, this body of work is largely neglected in contemporary literature on conspiracy theories, including that written by social psychologists. In fact, the only reference to Billig’s work in social psychological studies of conspiracy beliefs published over the past ten years is an article on Serbian conspiracy culture, which we co-

authored in 2001 (Byford and Billig, 2001). What is more, this study tends to be mentioned merely as an illustration of conspiracism's global appeal, without any engagement with the substance of the argument or the specific approach to conspiracy theories advocated therein.

In the forthcoming discussion, I will examine the conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues that might account for why the emerging social psychology of conspiracy theories continues to ignore Billig's writing. As will become apparent, this has everything to do with experimental social psychology's continuing reluctance to engage with concepts that have been at the core of much of Michael Billig's work over the past forty years, namely *ideology* and *argumentative rhetoric*. Furthermore, I will argue that, at a time when conspiracism is said to be on the rise, there is much to be gained from a return to Billig's pioneering and original writing on the topic, and from steering social psychology of conspiracy theory in a direction different to where it is currently heading.

The emerging 'social psychology of conspiracy theories'

In the writing of Michael Billig, conspiracy theories are considered as a feature of extreme political views and an ideology that 'remains just beyond the mainstream of everyday thinking' (Billig, 1988, p.201). In the last two decades, however, there has been an important transformation in the public perception of conspiracy theories. The conspiracy mentality is no longer regarded as the prerogative of 'extremists', but as a form of everyday social explanation and an increasingly common way of accounting for some of the key political, and some would argue existential challenges of the modern age: secrecy in politics, increase in surveillance and threat to privacy, the rise in the power of transnational corporate bodies and their diminished accountability, the widespread sense of weakened personal agency, and so on (Knight, 2000, Fenster, 2008). In other words, conspiracy theories are said to have migrated from the margins to the centre ground of politics, and as opinion polls consistently remind us, are to be found among the general population, often in quite significant proportion.

The assumption about the widespread popularity of conspiracy theories underpins the recent social psychological research on the topic. Given that opinion polls clearly show that not everyone believes in conspiracy theories, the attention has focused squarely on identifying factors that distinguish believers from non-believers. Abalakina-Paap et al. (1999, p.646)

captured the essence of this strand of research when they wrote that ‘history may well be a conspiracy, but apparently only certain types of people endorse this view’. The goal has been, therefore, to uncover who these ‘certain types’ are, and to create a ‘profiling model of conspiracist individuals’ (Swami et al., 2010, p.751). Also, research has focused on identifying perceptual or cognitive deficits which might lead individuals to embrace conspiracy explanations, in line with Arie Kruglanski’s contention that conspiracy theories might be underpinned by ‘cognitive illusions, paralleling the widely documented perceptual illusions’ (Kruglanski, 1987, p.220).

Research looking at differences between believers in conspiracy theories and sceptics typically consists of lengthy questionnaires which are distributed to a sample of the population, often university students. These questionnaires are composed of different measures, or scales, one of which usually assesses the participant’s belief in conspiracy theories, while others tap into whatever variables the researcher hypothesises might explain the difference in susceptibility to conspiracy-based explanations. Statistical procedures are then used to assess the strength of the relationship between different variables, all with the view of uncovering factors that underpin the mind-set of the conspiracy theorist.

In developing specific hypotheses about the kind of things that might account for the differences between believers and sceptics, researchers have tended to rely on the work of non-psychologists, or in some cases simply on ‘intuition’ (Swami et al, 2010, p.752). For example, apart from exploring the relevance of more general demographic factors like gender, socio-economic status, educational level, or ethnic background, psychologists have set out to test empirically a variety of assumptions which appear regularly in sociological literature. These include the claim that conspiracy theories provide a way of simplifying a complex world, that they offer a convenient scapegoat or an outlet for hostility, or that they reflect a more general distrust of authority. The fact that in the classic essay ‘The paranoid style in American politics’ Richard Hofstadter (1967) mentioned that people who feel alienated and powerless are particularly susceptible to conspiracist beliefs has led to ‘anomie’ becoming a ubiquitous variable in this strand of psychological research. The same applies to authoritarianism, which was linked to conspiracy theories in Adorno et al.’s (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*. More recently, Swami et al. (2010) set out to explore also whether personality variables, such as Goldberg’s ‘Big Five’ personality traits might also account for individual differences in

conspiracy beliefs. Meanwhile, researchers interested in cognitive factors have explored issues such as people's (lack of) awareness of their own susceptibility to conspiracy theories (Douglas and Sutton, 2008), whether or not conspiracy theorists exhibit a bias towards seeking big causes to explain big effects, or whether they are, for example susceptible to 'biased assimilation' – the tendency to uncritically accept evidence supporting a pre-existing view and reject disconfirming information (e.g. McCauley and Jacques, 1979, Butler et al., 1995, McHoskey, 1995, Leman and Cinnirella, 2007, Leman, 2007).

Regardless of the specific focus of individual studies, the central tenet of this approach as a whole is that it conceptualises conspiracy theories as *individual beliefs*. Adherence to conspiracy-based explanations is seen as an aspect of individual differences and something that can be explained by reference to individual information processing biases, identity maintenance strategies or personality characteristics. The focus on the individual is reflected in the aforementioned use of attitude scales to tap into conspiracy beliefs. A number of such scales have emerged in recent years in the US (e.g. Goertzel, 1994, Abalakina-Paap et al, 1999), in the UK (Leman and Cinnirella, 2007, Swami et al. 2010), Poland (see Grzesiak-Feldman and Ejsmont, 2008, Kofta and Sędek, 2005), France (Wagner-Egger and Bangerter, 2007), Malaysia (Swami, 2012) and elsewhere. Some require respondents to rate the extent to which they believe specific conspiracy theories to be true (ranging from fluoridisation of water to the causes of 9/11), while others contain more abstract questions about the role of conspiracies in world history. Regardless of the variations among them, their common aim is to produce a single score, which quantifies the extent to which an individual endorses conspiracy theories.

In spite of an abundance of significant correlations reported in the studies, and the often impressive sounding results sections and abstracts, the 'profile of the conspiracist individual' has proven somewhat elusive. Studies that looked at cognitive, information-processing biases have only confirmed earlier conclusions that conspiracy theorists might not be as cognitively distinct as it is sometimes tempting to think (see Harrison and Thomas, 1997). Studies looking at social psychological factors have, on the other hand, produced largely inconsistent findings allowing only tentative conclusions. For example, some studies have found a positive correlation between conspiracy beliefs and authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al, 1999, Grzesiak-Feldman and Irzycka, 2009); others found no correlation (McHoskey, 1995), while one recent study even suggested that people who are authoritarian have a greater tendency to be swayed by non-

conspiratorial explanations (Swami et al, 2010). Similarly, while numerous studies have found a link between minority status and belief in conspiracy theories, the extent to which this relationship is mediated by socio-economic factors remains to be determined. In fact, the cynical view would be that the only consistent and robust finding yielded by the recent studies has been a rather obvious one, namely that conspiracy theorists are suspicious of mainstream explanations and resentful of conventional sources of authority.

One could, of course, attribute this lack of clear findings to ‘teething problems’ faced by a young field of research, and argue that the situation will improve with the creation of more sophisticated measures, or with the development of more systematic research programmes that will use larger or more representative samples. And yet, there are precedents within social psychology that suggests that the problem might be more profound, and that the ‘optimistic notion of cumulative progress’ (Billig 1996, p.106) that underpins this kind of research might never be realised. Traditional psychological approaches to persuasion are a relevant example: for virtually every empirical finding that proposed a general rule of persuasion, there were myriad others that suggested some qualification, exception and exclusion. In the end, years of research and meticulous accumulation of evidence have produced little more than a ‘mass of unintegrated findings’ (Billig, 2003, p. 223). Thus, one might predict that with the development of the social psychology of conspiracy theories, the number of psychological factors correlated with conspiracy belief will expand, as will the number of variables that will be shown to mediate those correlations. However, as the number of relevant factors increases, the proportion of variance in conspiracy beliefs accounted for by each factor will inevitably diminish. With time, the complexity of the ‘psychological profile of conspiracist individual’ will undoubtedly grow, but this will only make it more, not less obscure and intangible.

From attitude to ideological tradition

One important feature of the emerging social psychology of conspiracy theories is that its approach to the topic is determined by the adherence to a specific methodology. At first sight, there is an obvious advantage to using questionnaires in this type of research, given their ubiquity in experimental social psychology generally. Questionnaires are common in studies of, for example, religious and mystical beliefs or belief in the paranormal (e.g. Thalbourne, 1994,

see also Humphreys, 1995), or in studies of authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1981). In all of these contexts, questionnaires offer a practical solution to a problem faced by researchers interested in social phenomena, namely how to take a complex social issue and ‘tailor’ it into ‘experimental size’ (Graumann, 1987, p.245). Questionnaires are not only easy and cheap to administer to large samples, but they also offer a standardised, ‘objective’ way of measuring belief, one that enables findings of different studies to be meaningfully compared. From this perspective, the reductionism inherent in questionnaires becomes their greatest quality. Scales comprising fairly simple items, derived using procedures that promise reliability and validity, seek to reduce conspiracy theories to their bare essence, and condense them to a single and quantifiable measure of judgment.

Even though Michael Billig’s writing on conspiracy theories predates the recent research by several decades, in it we find an important critique of the now dominant individual differences approach. In *Fascists* Billig (1978,p.314) argues that ‘when looking at the social psychological dynamics of so bizarre an outlook as the conspiracy theory, it is easy to overemphasise its eccentricities at the expense of noticing what is psychologically common place’. It is unnecessary, he argues, ‘to assume that the conspiracy theorist has a completely different cast of mind from the average person and that it must be described from a uniquely psychological perspective. History has shown that at times large numbers of both educated and uneducated people have embraced the conspiracy outlook’. For this reason, explaining what distinguishes believers from sceptics, might be far less important than accounting for how, why and when everyday thinking becomes contaminated by the characteristics of the ‘conspiracy mentality’. This is especially so given that belief in conspiracy theories tends to ebb and flow, with their popularity rising or falling in response to specific social conditions or political events (see Byford and Billig, 2001, also Byford, 2011).

More fundamentally, for Billig, attitudes (and this includes the stance towards conspiracies and conspiracy theories) are never ‘merely expressions of the personality or the outer rumblings of the inner psyche’ (Billig, 1996, p. 256). They are always a stance in an argument, a position in a matter of controversy. Thus, people do not volunteer their opinion about a conspiracy theory through simple statements, akin to those used in attitude scales. The conspiracy theorist is always *arguing* against conventional explanations of politics, but also against other versions of the conspiracy theory (Billig, 1989). Talking about conspiracy theories

is therefore an act of advocacy, replete with arguments and counter-arguments, accusations and justifications. This argumentative, rhetorical dimension of the conspiracy theory is accentuated by the fact that conspiracy theorising is more often than not a *shared* endeavour and a *social* activity. It is performed through organisations, movements and campaigns, or increasingly through jointly produced websites and internet forums where claims and arguments are continuously exchanged, debated, evaluated and modified. One might go as far as to say that conspiracy theories are least interesting when they are viewed as, or reduced to, an aspect of a person's mind or disposition. They are much more relevant as a dynamic set of ideas circulating in the public domain, an ideological discourse on the basis of which movements are established, political projects forged and power relations challenged and sustained.

The notion of ideology, or more precisely, *ideological tradition* lies at the core of Michael Billig's approach to conspiracy theories (see especially Billig, 1988). As he rightly argues, there is much more to conspiracy theories than a simple attitudinal position, or the claim that an event in history was the outcome of collusion or a secret plot. Anyone who has had the opportunity to engage with conspiracy theories about 9/11, the origins of AIDS or the machinations of the Bilderberg group, the Illuminati or Jews will have realised that conspiracy theories are also intricate and often enthralling stories. What is more, a striking feature of conspiracy theories is that they often sound remarkably alike. Tales of conspiracy – whether expounded in London, Moscow, Teheran or Beijing – and regardless of whether they purport to explain a political assassination, the cause of a disease or a financial crisis are marked by a distinct thematic configuration, narrative structure and explanatory logic, as well as by the stubborn presence of a number of common motifs and tropes (see Billig, 1989, Byford 2011). American historian Richard Hofstadter referred to the common features of conspiracy theories as markers of a distinct, and robust explanatory or rhetorical 'style' which he chose to call 'paranoid'. He employed the term style, 'much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style. It is, above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself' (Hofstadter, 1967, p.4).

The rhetorical style and the explanatory logic of the conspiracy theory have also been shown to persist over time. The worldview which defines contemporary conspiracy culture and the distinct manner of expression through which it is articulated, bears a close resemblance to that found in the writings of 19th and 20th century conspiracy theorists. Conspiracist

interpretations of the 2008 financial crisis draw on the same armoury of arguments and tropes which were used to interpret the Great Depression of the 1930s. The 9/11 Truth movement relies extensively on the interpretative framework established in the 1940s, when the opponents of Franklin D. Roosevelt accused him of allowing Pearl Harbour to happen in order to create a pretext for taking America to war. Throughout post-communist Eastern Europe, criticism directed at the supposedly seditious and sinister activities of western non-governmental organisations and human rights activists is similar to the late 18th and 19th century anti-Illuminati and anti-Masonic rhetoric. These resemblances point to the fact that the rhetorical style of conspiracy theory forms part, of and helps to sustain, a distinct ideological tradition of explanation which dates back to the early, anti-Illuminati conspiracy treatises of Augustine Barruel and John Robison, published after the French Revolution (Roberts, 1974). This tradition consists of an evolving corpus of ideas, arguments, ‘facts’, ‘revelations’ and ‘proofs’ pertaining to the alleged world plot, which have been referred to, cited, quoted and perpetuated by successive generations of conspiracy theorists.

The ideological tradition of the conspiracy theory is kept alive by the tendency among conspiracy writers to regurgitate, revamp and apply to new circumstances the body of knowledge, the explanatory logic and rhetorical tropes expounded in texts, books or pamphlets written and published by conspiracy theorists in the past (Byford and Billig, 2001). One reason for this is that conspiracy theorists always deal with imperfect evidence: they are concerned with matters that are inherently secret, and which the most powerful forces in the world are supposedly working hard to suppress. Because they cannot offer incontrovertible evidence for their claims, writers will tend to rely on the work of other conspiracy theorists, past and present, and invoke their authority as a substitute for direct proof. Furthermore, a conspiracy-based explanation of a significant political event cannot be reasonably conceived as historically isolated. The conspiracy theory is a view of the world not only as it is at present, but also as it always was. Hence, specific plots need to be, and invariably are, imagined as links in a longer chain of conspiracies. When locating current plots and schemes within the centuries-long line of conspiratorial activity, conspiracy theorists draw on the work of their predecessors and place their own discoveries and revelations about the present within a broader tradition of explanation (see Billig 1978 and Byford 2011 for a more detailed account of this dynamic).

Importantly however, the ideological nature of the conspiracy tradition does not mean that it is static or prescriptive. One of the central motifs of Billig's writing on ideology (Billig, et al. 1988, Billig, 1990) is that ideology is not 'a complete, unified system of beliefs which tells individuals how to think'. Rather, it involves arguments, debates and clashes which reflect its essentially 'thinking nature' (Billig, et al. 1988, p.2). Conspiracy theories are no different. In fact, the rhetorical and argumentative nature of conspiracism has been instrumental for its survival as an ideological tradition. The main force behind this permanent process of evolution and change has been the need to make conspiracy theories more plausible, acceptable, and pertinent in response to changing social and political circumstances. Conspiracy theorists are, and always have been surrounded by sceptics who place them under pressure to modify their theories in the direction of greater plausibility. The threat of ridicule, which has been hanging over purveyors of conspiracy theories from the outset, makes anticipating and reacting to potential or actual charges of irrationality, paranoia or prejudice, an essential feature of the conspiracy theorist's endeavour. This is especially so given that conspiracy theorists always, if only implicitly, address an audience beyond the conspiracist community. They seek to convert the masses, but also to satisfy their need to be recognised by the very mainstream that they consistently reject and accuse of being in the pockets of powerful conspirators. The evolution of the conspiracy culture, therefore, entails the continuous creation of novel and more convincing ways of stating conspiratorial claims. Yet at the same time, the connection with the past persists, and is often manifested through no more than a loose pattern of 'interpretative habits, implicit in a stream of assertions or arguments' (Cubitt, 1993, p.2) or in barely noticeable, but ideologically significant 'half-hinted allusions' (Billig, 1988).

The conceptualisation of the conspiracy theory as an evolving ideological tradition brings with it a different task for the scholar studying conspiracy theories. The focus is on locating specific explanations within the appropriate ideological and cultural context, scrutinising their logic and rhetoric against the backdrop of the broader historically situated patterns of thought, and analysing them as manifestations of a longer tradition of political explanation (see Billig, 1988). The central difference between this approach and that found in contemporary social psychology is that the main object of analysis is not the individual mind or disposition of the *theorist*, but the theory itself and the social nature thought. For as Billig et al. (1988, p.2) point out, psychologists focusing on the mind-set of the individual 'have been notably remiss in

examining how the processes of cultural and ideological history flow through the minds of their laboratory subjects'. Put differently, what is required is a shift towards a greater engagement with 'the thinking society' (Moscovici, 1984), and rather than looking for psychological underpinnings of social phenomena consider how historically situated ideologies, worldviews and cultural traditions produce and sustains particular patterns of thinking and behaviour.

Between believers and sceptics: boundary markers of opinion

A further advantage of the approach to conspiracy theories as an ideological tradition is that it moves away from the assumption implicit in questionnaire-based studies that engagement with conspiracy theories is reducible to the simple issue of a person's latitude of acceptance and rejection (Billig, 1987). This is important because what makes conspiracy theories so prevalent in modern society is precisely the fact that they are *not* confined to a narrow category of firm believers ('conspiracist individuals'), sealed off from the mainstream by a set of dispositional characteristics or the adherence to a dysfunctional cognitive style. Conspiracy theories, as social beliefs, are sustained also by the notion that while conspiracy based explanations might not be true, they nevertheless constitute a legitimate view for people to hold. This position, which is often espoused by mainstream publishers, sections of the media and public figures with little history of adherence to conspiracism is completely sidestepped in the recent psychological research. And yet, it is crucial because it helps foster a 'climate of opinion about the boundaries between acceptable and nonacceptable opinion' (Billig, 1987, p.133). What is more, it does so in way that gives conspiracy theories an air of respectability, and converts a matter of established historical fact into a matter of opinion and belief. An awareness of the shifting boundary markers of opinion, and the exploration of the discursive and ideological dynamic behind this process is crucial for understanding the continuing appeal of conspiracy theories and the ways in which the images, motifs and assumptions which are rooted in the conspiracy tradition become part of the shared knowledge and beliefs, which people draw upon as they make sense of events around them.

Related to the issue of boundary markers of opinion is a recent development in conspiratorial rhetoric, namely the tendency among conspiracy theorists to articulate their position in the form of a question (see Aaronovitch, 2008, Byford 2011). Rather than purporting

to have a definitive answer about the causes of an event or a series of events, conspiracy theorists will claim to be ‘merely’ posing a set of questions. They will usually hint at some inadequacy in the official non-conspiratorial explanation, and call for a ‘rational’ and ‘informed’ debate in a way that alludes to a hidden ‘truth’ that is yet to be uncovered or demonstrated. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Byford, 2011), the motif of ‘just asking questions’ is rhetorically designed to open up the space for conspiracy theories while allowing those asking the questions to retain the aura of respectability. Furthermore, the ‘“it is not a theory” theory’ (Aronovitch, 2008) shifts the burden of proof onto the sceptics and seeks to cajole the mainstream into a ‘debate’ with the conspiracy theorist, which invariably enhances the latter’s status and esteem.

In the context of the argument presented in this chapter, what is especially important about this relatively new development in conspiracist rhetoric is that it exposes another important limitation of the questionnaire approach adopted in much of the recent social psychological literature. When completing a ‘belief in conspiracy theories’ scale, the conspiracy theorist of the ‘I am just asking questions’ kind could quite plausibly claim to be ‘undecided’ about various conspiracy claims, such as whether the US government caused 9/11, whether mafia killed JFK, or whether or not Barack Obama was born on US soil. As a consequence, they would obtain a moderate score, and inevitably slip under the radar of the researchers. This is yet another illustration of the necessity to move away from the simple notion of belief, and embrace the study of conspiracy theories as a dynamic yet historically contingent set of arguments, images and interpretations which are flexibly drawn upon, modified, debated and applied to novel circumstances in the course of the on-going, everyday sense-making practices.

Conspiracy theories and critical scholarship

Finally, there is an additional reason why Michael Billig’s approach to conspiracy theories is important. Contemporary mainstream social psychology exhibits a surprising tendency to treat conspiracy theories as ideologically neutral, sometimes even with sympathetic understanding. Although authors typically acknowledge the dangers posed by AIDS denialism or conspiracy theories which target Jews or Muslims, they treat conspiracy theories generally with less disdain. For example, it is not uncommon to find claims that because conspiracies do happen, at least some conspiracy theorists might be onto something (e.g. French and Brotherton, 2011, Douglas, 2011, Douglas and Sutton, 2011, Swami and Coles, 2010). Writers will also

sometimes explicitly warn against using ‘pejorative terms’ when talking of conspiracy theorists (French and Brotherton, 2011), or they will simply refuse to get involved in the discussion about whether a particular conspiracy theory is true. As Karen Douglas (2011) put it recently, her concern ‘as a psychologist’ is not whether conspiracy theories are ‘true or false’ but ‘simply’ why people believe certain explanations that are not accepted by the mainstream. In a few cases, authors have gone as far as to suggest that conspiracist ideas possess some ‘positive aspects’ such as ‘providing alternative histories in periods of declining faith in traditional authorities’ (Swami et al, 2010, p.751).

This stance of political ‘neutrality’ is made possible by the researchers’ general reluctance to engage with conspiracy theories themselves, with their ideological dimensions and historical legacy. Conspiracy theory as a specific tradition of explanation should not be confused with the broader discourses of suspicion (the so-called ‘routinised paranoia’, see Knight, 2000, p.73) which permeate modern society, or with enquiries into genuine instances of corruption or cover-up (for a detailed account of this distinction see Byford, 2011). Especially as, for the past two centuries, conspiracy theories have played a notable role in shaping public perceptions of history and politics, and have done so all too often as a feature of political ideologies and projects whose role in history has been far from positive. Conspiracism has been the staple ingredient of discriminatory, anti-democratic and populist politics and a trademark of the rhetoric of oppressive regimes (see especially Cohn, 1967). This is a legacy that conspiracy theories have not been able to shake off (Billig, 1978). What is more, the irrefutable logic of conspiracy theories gives them a distinct self-isolating quality. Conspiracy theories can only lead to more conspiracy theories, and never to genuine solutions to social problems. For that reason alone they cannot be ideologically neutral.

Michael Billig’s approach to conspiracy theories contains within it an explicit critique of the kind of the detachment encountered in contemporary writing on conspiracy theories. As Billig argued in a somewhat different context, social psychology, especially when it deals with ideological phenomena, must always seek to combine empirical enquiry with social critique. The researcher’s task is not to be neutral or to shun controversy, but on the contrary, to ‘find out which beliefs are worthy of respect, and which are not’ (Billig, 1979, p. 427). Nowhere is this more relevant than in the case of conspiracy theories. The main legacy of Billig’s work is that it

not only demonstrates *why* this is so, but also shows *how* to do a socially committed social psychology of conspiracy theories.

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ⁱ The discussion in this chapter will remain confined to research which belongs to the domain of traditional, experimental social psychology. For an overview and critique of the recent literature which examines conspiracy beliefs through the lens of psychoanalytic theory or in terms of ‘paranoid cognition’, see Byford (2011).