the language, jargon, and methods we are most familiar with were replaced with other modalities. To be fair, the editors of this volume probably felt the same way about our work.

That said, we are very glad we took on this dialogue, and found plenty of important ideas and arguments in this edited volume. We found a shared perspective in both our text and *Conspiracy/Theory.* This perspective, which for convenience we will call critical analysis, is one that looks skeptically at the claims of those in power and questions the status quo and conventional wisdom.

Moving past our paradigmatic disagreements, we believe both of our books should be considered works of critical analysis. We agree that the popular discourse often gets conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking wrong. We further agree with the assertion in the Epilogue to *Conspiracy/Theory* that "precarity is one key driver of conspiratorial reason, enabling for many a charged psychosocial space that can be ripe for political manipulation, for misrecognition and for targeted exploitation" (p. 429). We also strongly agree with their idea that facts do not speak for themselves, and that the stories we tell ourselves (or rather the stories that exist in our social environment from which we pick and choose) shape reality in profound ways. Put simply, narratives matter. Most crucially, both our book and *Conspiracy/Theory* argue that discontented politics (including conspiracy theories but also populism, ethnonationalism, and violent contention) are not aberrations but rather natural consequences of the inequalities and inefficacies of neoliberal democracy.

As is to be expected, there were points of contention we had with the text. While the goal of *Conspiracy/Theory* is to add nuance to the study of conspiracy beliefs by pointing out how "the system" uses them to shut down dissent and how they can be an important way to make sense of a senseless world, these debates are disconnected from the wider social scientific literature on conspiracy theories that has developed since Hofstadter, and thus are a bit of a "straw man." This absence of the current literature reoccurs throughout the text starting with defining key terms in the introduction; there is no attempt to engage with the wider understanding of the terms used to either criticize or utilize existing conceptualizations. Furthermore, there has been a significant move in recent work to avoid pathologizing those who believe in conspiracies as irrational.

Many of the criticisms found in *Conspiracy/Theory* are also widely discussed in the current positivist literature. For example, Douglas et. al write that the term conspiracy theory can "be weaponized, and because of this, people often deny that their ideas are conspiracy theories even though they clearly qualify. Politicians sometimes use these terms to deflect criticism because it turns the conversation back onto the accuser rather than the accused" (Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology*, 40(S1): 3–35, 2019, p. 5).

In short, *Conspiracy/Theory* fails to recognize that a critical perspective is alive as well in contemporary social scientific treatments of this topic. If the goal of this book is to provide an antidote to the popular coverage and conception of conspiracy theories, this is fine, but its impact on the broader field will be limited due to this lack of engagement with the literature. This may have been a conscious choice on behalf of the authors—after all "mainstream" political scientists are not known to seek out critical theory work, much less engage with it—but it left us wanting to ask the editors: how do these arguments challenge, support, or expand what is already out there?

The rift between critical theorists and positivist political science is deep and long standing. A reader coming from a background similar to ours, finding that this text assumes a high degree of familiarity with critical theory concepts, ideas, and prose style, may be intimidated or put off. This itself is a problem as critical theory provides a useful (and often necessary) corrective to the (often unconscious) elitism of our own discipline. Political science is a field that, at its core, is the study of power, and yet we (on the non-critical side) all too frequently uncritically accept the perspectives and biases of the powerful in our analyses.

That said, we believe that for critical theorists, further engaging the positivist side might also be beneficial. The editors write that what separates critical theory from conspiracy theory is "the pursuit of rigor itself, as opposed to indifference to truth and variety" (p. 430). This rings both true and hollow, the latter because *Conspiracy/Theory* spills so much ink explaining why the kind of concrete, reliable information that would banish conspiracy theories is impossible to get. Positivist social science may be profoundly imperfect, but we ask the editors: what method would be better to achieve the rigor the editors themselves aspire is necessary to distinguish critical theory from conspiracism? And isn't the close line you draw between conspiracy theory and critical analysis at best unhelpful and at worst perversely system justifying?

As noted earlier, it is highly unlikely that we would have delved into a book like this in the ordinary course of business. That would have been a shame, as the perspective in *Conspiracy/Theory* is essential to consider as we all grapple with rising discontent with democracy and the post-war systems across the globe.

Response to Matthew Rhodes-Purdy and Rachel Navarre's review of *Conspiracy/Theory*

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— Joseph Masco
— Lisa Wedeen

We appreciate the authors' efforts to engage with our work. Unfortunately, the review is misleading and misrepresents what the book is about. The audience we geared

this book to is avowedly interdisciplinary, with contributors from anthropology, history, political philosophy, and cultural studies, among other diverse fields. *Conspiracy/Theory* showcases insights that are primarily historical and ethnographic, reaching beyond the relatively narrow literature in political science the authors lament our missing. Among political scientists, we do hope the book will appeal to scholars of political theory, as well as to others, mainstream or not, who are open to thinking outside their comfort zones.

We explicitly tackle the well-known article by Hofstadter in order to understand the evident overreliance on it in contemporary scholarly and journalistic works—and to move past it. We make the point that conspiracies do exist, while noting that a lot of powerful players have found the accusation of conspiracy theory useful as a means of crushing critique. Our focus, however, can hardly be reduced to an analysis of elites or systems. In fact, when a phrase like "the system" appears in our book, it is as a form of ethnographic speech, that is, a local idiom to be explored as discourse. More generally, the review overlooks our attention in many chapters to how conspiratorial reason operates variously in diverse communities and through everyday language. *Conspiracy/Theory*'s added value lies in its exploration of the core logics of conspiracy, proposing a major reset on how conspiratorial reason functions, the work it does in the world, and the implications and ramifications it has for our current political life.

Another of the reviewers' misleading suggestions is that we depend too much on critical theory as a method, missing the point that the aim of our project is not to celebrate critical theory but to investigate the complex terrain between the plausible and the implausible, the believable and the flagrantly fictitious, between knowing and not knowing. Our objective, in other words, is to ask about the boundaries between different kinds of epistemological frames, some of which are coded as conspiratorial and others as critical. We do not say, as the authors assert, that conspiracy theory is a maladaptive cousin to critical theory. The authors do not engage our careful categorizations, including the various meanings of conspiracy, theory, conspiracy theory, and critical theory we offer. They ignore our analyses of social media and technological innovations as powerful infospheres, failing to address our account of the countervailing roles social media plays in both building new experiences of community and generating confusions that impede political judgment.

It is the reviewers' view that we neglected to grapple with the literature (singular) in political science and would know more if we had. But they do not acknowledge the huge bibliography from other fields on conspiratorial reason, in addition to the works written by political scientists, that we do engage. From their point of view, there is only one disciplinary approach that counts—political science—and only one way of doing political science that *really* generates knowledge. With profound respect for political science, we nevertheless find such judgments to be deeply anti-intellectual.

Conspiracy/Theory is the product of the concerted efforts of seventeen experts to identify the epistemological lines between things marked as conspiratorial and those labeled critical, without overlooking suggestive and generative discursive similarities. The volume covers examples from South Africa to Syria to the United States to Cyprus. It examines the variegated cognitive and affective experiences that interpellate subjects into a world filled with unavoidable uncertainty—a world of ongoing crises, destructive populist politics, nation-state overreach, dissimulation, and new digital technologies that are transforming authority, influence, and surveillance as we speak.

The slash in our title is important, indexing three somewhat distinct aspects of our reconsideration of conspiratorial reason. First, we underscore the evident affinities between conspiracy theory and critical theory, including the enjoyment to be found in exposing obscure or hidden connections—and the ways in which both styles of reasoning generate solidarities with the aim of producing a political "otherwiseness" to status quo conventionalities. A difference remains, of course, in the scholarly rigor with which critical theory operates in conspiratorial mode and many more popular forms of conspiratorial thought. We acknowledge these differences to move beyond them, inviting readers and ourselves to interrogate our own habits of thought, as well as to recognize, in particular, the force of narrative in collective worldmaking.

The second and third aspects must be dealt with quickly for lack of space. Along with exploring affinities, the volume stems from a scholarly curiosity in stories, even the cockamamie ones, that animate communities of argument. How are we to understand the semiotic, sociological, and political-economic universes in which outlandish stories appear true even to large groups of people? And third, the book exposes hidden and not-so-hidden conspiracies that are not only real but operate to organize our lives. Conspiracies inhere in the logics of capital accumulation, including its commodity form fetishisms, emerging structures of financialization, racialized and gendered hierarchies, exploitative labor practices, and militarisms; they can be found in the blurry boundaries between nation-state and academic knowledge production—and increasingly, in the overwhelming power of ultra-wealthy donors to influence the intellectual agendas of academic institutions.

The task of critical analysis in our perilous moment is to cultivate modes of discernment, drawing attention, for example, to things we may already know but haven't been able to recognize or acknowledge or think about collectively. By reassessing the tradition of critical theory in light of conspiracy theory, and vice versa, our approach draws attention to new factual truths and new ways of thinking

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or seeing that have eluded scrutiny. And as in all cases of political divination, *Conspiracy/Theory* is about the satisfactions to be found in connecting the dots.

The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism, and Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary Democracies. By Matthew Rhodes-Purdy, Rachel Navarre, and Stephen Utych. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 307p. $34.99 paper.
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In *The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism, and Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary Democracies*, Matthew Rhodes-Purdy, Rachel Navarre, and Stephen Utych offer readers an ambitious, multimethod account of why there is so much "discontent" in the world, while identifying the "various forms" taken by contemporary anti-system movements, specifically, the rise of the far right, expressions of regime antipathy, and the move of "conspiracism" from the fringes to the center of institutional democracies. The authors trace these phenomena back to the economic crises of the Great Recession(s) beginning in 2008, as well as to the broader effects of neoliberal reforms. Registering a profound rejection of the contemporary status quo, many of these movements express their anger and disaffection in what the authors call "cultural" terms, i.e., through attacks on others' values and identities. The causal chain, in this approach, termed provocatively by the authors an "affective political economy," thus looks something like this: economic discontent generates emotions that are articulated in the register of "cultural discontent." Or, in the summary at the end of Chapter three, "economics are the roots, culture, the branch, and emotions the trunk connecting the two" (70).

We write with appreciation for the clarity of the authors' presentation, their attention to rigor, their stated desire to contribute to salutary policy reforms, and the volume's concentration on mainstream political scientists as the key audience. The book also has an impressive comparative range—with accounts of the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, Brazil, Chile, Canada, Portugal, and Uruguay. Its mixed-methods approach extends beyond the case studies and surveys to an experimental analysis in Chapter four. As an anthropologist and an interpretive political theorist, we leave assessments of the latter to more qualified colleagues, engaging instead the book's conceptual contributions and substantive claims. In this regard we have three major comments.

First is the authors' choice of *discontent* as the concept best suited to what they view as people's rejection of the "sociopolitical status quo" (p. 2). Discontent, they point out, is broader than annoyance, so that *all* policies are bad and *all* politicians corrupt. It also suggests agitation that runs "deeper" than irritation. The view is not that policies are simply ill-advised or otherwise worthy of critique, but that they are "intentionally harmful," spearheaded by politicians who are themselves conceived of as malevolent (p. 2). Discontent, as opposed to, say, dissatisfaction, is also "cumulative." Over time, the sense of leaders or the system failing repeatedly to "rectify wrongs" builds, corroding "systemic trust and confidence in the political class" (p. 2). Discontent, according to the authors, is also to some extent "latent, or unobservable," a "vague and inchoate evaluation of the political environment: it is a free-floating, ill-defined sense that a democratic regime has gone badly off course" (p. 2).

We shall return later to the issue of latency to show how greater familiarity with affect theory could have enriched the book's analysis. Suffice it to say for now that from our standpoint, "discontent" scarcely begins to capture the quite observable rage, ressentiment, and nihilistic fantasy investments we see animating contemporary political life. By implying that what is going on is well described as a lack of contentment, the very affective experiences and narratives this book rightly seeks to highlight are rendered almost anodyne, problems open to solutions of management. The misogyny of men of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, the longing for a greatness that never existed, the blood curdling racist claims by President-Elect Donald J. Trump, suggest an alternative diagnostic language that might be more suited to the political economy of affect proposed by the authors.

Conceptualizing the intense animus characterizing today's political scene as a failure of contentment has implications for the prescriptive dimensions of the book, suggesting that antipathy for democracy requires more democracy. A restored welfare state more capable of delivering goods and services will result in more allegiance and citizen buy-in. While we are sympathetic to this view, if our understanding of what is going on is correct, in its complexity and fully recognizing its affective charge, fixing it will take more than tweaking institutions or even the wholesale revitalization of the welfare state. The very populist dynamics and far-right challenges the book charts testify to large swaths of the citizenry who would oppose such moves. As Jonathan Metzl's *Dying of Whiteness* (2019) demonstrates, the MAGA community in the United States would rather reject government-funded healthcare, living shorter, more painful lives as a result, than see their taxes go to healthcare for Black and Brown people. They prefer not having schools to having schools that teach sex education. They insist that guns keep them safe, even as the rates of gunshot suicide increase. Appreciating the hatred that fuels these movements, as well as the pleasures to be taken in the nihilism, means grasping