

Masco and Wedeen's Conspiracy/Theory

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Volume 22, numéro 3, 2024

Open Issue

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113688ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v22i3.17833>

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Éditeur(s)

Surveillance Studies Network

ISSN

1477-7487 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Olivares, J. (2024). Compte rendu de [Masco and Wedeen's Conspiracy/Theory]. *Surveillance & Society*, 22(3), 340–342. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v22i3.17833>

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Book Review

Review of Masco, Joseph, and Lisa Wedeen (Eds).
2024. *Conspiracy/Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke
University Press.

512 pp. US\$33.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9781478025559.

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In a political climate where conspiracies run wild about former President Trump's attempted assassination, a fresh perspective is needed to understand why some humans flock to conspiracy theories. The prevalence of such theories has only intensified in recent years, driven by a combination of social media proliferation, political polarization, and widespread distrust in traditional institutions. *Conspiracy/Theory* (2024), edited by Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen, provides a timely and nuanced exploration of the affinities between conspiracy theories and critical thinking. Rather than dismissing these conspiratorial narratives outright, the editors challenge readers to reconsider their understanding of political judgment and knowledge-building in an age of pervasive disinformation. Conspiratorial reasoning has become so interwoven with our social and intellectual landscape that it cannot be neatly excised from serious discussions about society, politics, or current events. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of why people are drawn to conspiratorial narratives, recognizing the impulse to search for patterns and uncover hidden truths. While the volume's argument may be controversial to some, it offers a valuable framework for examining why people believe in conspiracy theories and how these beliefs shape our collective reality.

The volume's contributors explore the blurred line between paranoid thinking and critical theory, challenging readers to examine their own biases and thought processes. Conspiratorial thinking, much like theoretical reasoning, serves as a fundamental tool for shaping our understanding of the world. Critical thinking allows individuals to articulate and make sense of societal structures, potentially uncovering unfair conditions. Crucially, it provides a framework for envisioning alternative realities, demonstrating that our current circumstances are not fixed or inevitable. The editors argue that while critical theory cannot be reduced to conspiracy theorizing, it can be productively related to it (431). The crucial difference lies in how facts are interpreted and the pursuit of rigor, which is essential for critical theorizing and contrasts with conspiratorial thinking that disregards truth and diversity. Yet, both conspiratorial thinking and critical theory attempt to "navigate the complex terrain between the plausible and the implausible, the believable and the flagrantly fictitious, between knowing and not knowing" (430). Conspiracies and theories can act as a similar lens through which people can critically examine their environment and imagine different possibilities for social organization. At the core, the volume asks how humans make judgements and discernments about incoming information. In other words, it asks how and why people connect the dots

Olivares, Jessica L. 2024. Review of Masco and Wedeen's *Conspiracy/Theory*. *Surveillance & Society* 22 (3): 340-342.

<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index> | ISSN: 1477-7487

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between seemingly unrelated events for the purposes of understanding one's world. To think conspiratorially is more than paranoid thinking, it is also an attempt to reconcile inconceivable moments as a group.

One of the volume's strengths lies in its interdisciplinary contributors, who bring expertise from diverse fields: Anthropology, English, History, Political Science, and Science and Technology Studies. The volume provides a rich tapestry of perspectives through distinct conspiratorial thinking across historical periods and geographical locations, from the origins of AIDS and COVID-19 to the financial structures of higher education, revolutions in Syria, the January 6th Capitol insurrection, the origins of al-Qa'ida, the fiction-making of novelists, state surveillance of Muslims, global money-laundering in Cyprus, gold as the object of conspiratorial thinking in South Africa, and oil companies denying climate change. The contributors track how conspiracies not only shape real-world violence but also fuel non-violence movements. The inquiry into the affects and imaginaries of political mobilization encourages readers to reflect on their own investments in conspiratorial thinking and the human impulse to search for patterns and uncover hidden truths.

While conspiratorial thinking may seem like an issue particular to contemporary society, the analysis of a range of temporal conspiracies of uncertainty and suspicion shows the historical value of conspiratorial thinking through chapters on conspiracy in Plato's *Republic*, settler colonialism, the imagining of new worlds during colonization or "a conspiracy on a global scale" (21), white supremacy after the Civil War, paranoia in Cold War logic, and Russian attempts to influence liberal democracy in the 1880s. Historical examples show how conspiracy theories have served as an early warning system for group security, helping to explain their appeal and persistence in modern contexts. Studying how past theories evolved can help understand the lifecycle of modern conspiracies and reveal recurring patterns in how conspiracy theories develop and spread through cultural transmission. Conspiracies and critical thinking have shaped and will continue to shape history, impacting the past, present, and future.

Conspiracy theories often emerge during impactful and rapid societal change. In these moments, precarity can drive conspiratorial reasoning because people attempt to make sense of their unhappiness and pain. In the current moment, the convergence of persistent societal challenges, populist rhetoric, and emerging surveillance tools has created a widespread state of intellectual and informational vulnerability leading to an increase in conspiratorial thinking. By exploring the affects and imaginaries of political mobilization, the contributors provide insights into the emotional and psychological factors that drive conspiratorial thinking: people's motivation to search for patterns in events and uncover covert, hidden, or unreliable information.

Similar to conspiracy theories, surveillance studies scholars track the hidden actions of power by examining the traces left on everyday surfaces. Understanding the human dimensions of surveillance often requires navigating conspiracy theories, paranoia, heightened self-consciousness, and suspicion. These elements are intertwined in a feedback loop where increased surveillance can fuel the development of conspiracy theories and paranoia. Popular representations of surveillance in conspiracy theories and dystopian futures frequently feature the figure of an anonymous observer. While the authors engage with surveillance as an object, notable citations were missing around surveillance studies' discussions about the value of understanding paranoia and conspiracy theories (see Harper 2008). Nonetheless, the authors acknowledged how a paranoid style of observing the world is part of making the dangers of surveillance visible.

Conspiracy/Theory is a compelling and timely anthology that offers a fresh perspective on a complex and often misunderstood phenomenon. While it may not provide definitive answers, it certainly raises important questions about how we construct knowledge and make political judgments in an increasingly complex information landscape. For surveillance studies, the volume provides intellectual encouragement to reexamine conspiracy theories about mysterious government surveillance programs from a different perspective. Much like the volume's call to show the overlaps between conspiratorial thinking and academic

theory-making, the anthology is a valuable addition to both academic and public discourse willing to make problems in the world visible.

References

Harper, David. 2008. The Politics of Paranoia: Paranoid Positioning and Conspiratorial Narratives in the Surveillance Society. *Surveillance & Society* 5 (1): 1–32.