“It Has All Been Planned”

Conspiracy Theories in the Middle East and the United States: A Comparative Approach. Organized by the FRIAS Schools of History and Language & Literature, January 13-15, 2011.

From January 13th to 15th, 2011, the FRIAS Schools of History and Language & Literature joined forces to host the conference “Conspiracy Theories in the Middle East and the United States: A Comparative Approach.” The aim of the highly interdisciplinary conference was, as the organizers **Michael Butter** and **Maurus Reinkowski** (Freiburg) explained, a twofold one: first, to examine the role that each region plays in the other’s conspiracy theories; second, to analyze in how far the tools and theories developed by Western conspiracy studies prove applicable in a Middle Eastern context, that is, to test the scope of the comparative approach. Sketching the history of conspiracy studies from the 1950s to the present, Michael Butter pointed out in his introduction that while conspiracy theories are clearly a global phenomenon, it has yet to be determined which of their aspects are transcultural and which are culturally specific.

Using the controversy surrounding the leak of U.S. diplomatic cables by the international information platform WikiLeaks, **Mark Fenster** (Miami) opened the conference with his talk on comparative conspiracy theories. He attested the cross-cultural value of conspiracy theories as texts and practices which share similar narratives, structures, and themes in different regions of the world and oftentimes travel between these regions, at the same time he advised against embracing a comparative study of conspiracy theorizing all too easily for the comparative approach opens the door for errors and oversimplifications. Fenster also addressed the connection between transparency and conspiracy theories, arguing that WikiLeaks offers a radical vision of transparency quite typical of the ultimately utopian worldview of conspiracy theorists. While conspiracy theorists consider the unlimited access to information as the key to democracy and rational thinking, the state, by nature, is unable to fully open itself – thus, the state reaches an impasse in which it cannot persuade conspiracy theorists of the absence of conspiracy. Fenster confirmed the importance of information to the vitality of democracies but argued that transparency did not possess the “magical qualities” that WikiLeaks attributes to it.

Questions about the flow of conspiracy theories between and within states and societies and their cultural specificity were raised in the first panel. **Andrew McKenzie** (Gotha) took a closer look at the processes and mechanisms involved in the transfer of conspiracy theories in the late 18th century. He briefly traced the history of anti-Illuminati conspiracy theories as they found their way from Enlightenment Europe to the early American republic and into the sermons of Jedidiah Morse before he used J.L. Austin’s speech act theory to describe the semiotic changes that the conspiracy narratives underwent as they traveled from one cultural context to another. The transfer, McKenzie pointed out, often alters the illocutionary dimension of the conspiracy theory – its performative function as an accusation – and extracts its locutionary dimension – the question of true or false.

Turning to the Middle East, **Stephan Schmid** (Beirut) thematized the political instrumentalization of conspiracy theories. He opposed the dismissal of conspiracy theories as products of paranoia by emphasizing their importance as political currency in Lebanon. Hezbollah, one of the region’s political key figures, constructs conspiracy theories about a

"Greater Israel" and uses them pragmatically for its political purposes – to mobilize resistance against Israel and to affirm its own reason for existence. This conspiracism proves to be fruitful, Schmid pointed out, for it builds upon the population's general anti-Semitic sentiments and frames actual Israeli interventions in the region.

Gold Rush California served as the stage for **Christopher Herbert**'s (Seattle) talk on criminal conspiracy theories in the 18th century. In contrast to the major conspiracy theories of the time that occupied the entirety of the United States with issues of slavery or religion, the conspiracy theories in California were highly localized and dealt with the rising criminality in the state – borrowing the term from Daniel Pipes, Herbert described them as "petty" conspiracy theories. Similar to Andrew McKenzie he argued that a transmission of conspiracy theories between regions takes place but that they are adapted to and conditioned by local specific circumstances. Despite their small scope these "petty" conspiracy accounts, Herbert stressed, nevertheless had a profound influence on how white middle-class men secured and negotiated their sovereignty in the area and the way the political and legal make-up of the state was developed initially.

Picking up on the idea of the "petty" conspiracy theory, **Christoph Herzog** (Bamberg) proposed a distinction between small- and large-scale conspiracy theories based on two examples of conspiracy theories that circulate in Turkey. He used this categorization to call attention to the issue of plausibility and raised the question in how far conspiracy theories are linked to and nurtured by the existence and experience of 'real' conspiracies, especially in Turkey and the Middle East. Herzog argued that this question needs to be treated differently when dealing with conspiracy theories of a small and of a larger scale as small-scale conspiracy theories are much more likely to be verified as true than large-scale conspiracy theories.

The next panel turned to the Middle East to determine how the U.S. figures in the region's conspiracy thinking – and vice versa. In his comparison of conspiracy theories in Iran and the United States, **David Rose** (London) focused on a common denominator: the British Empire. Conspiracy theories from both countries, Rose stressed, tend to follow a pattern of demonizing and othering the British Empire or the United Kingdom. While fear of British conspiracism in Iran dates back to the experience of a semi-colonialism and revolves around control over the country's oil reserves, American conspiracy theories are marked by the self-understanding of a nation that was created out of a revolutionary movement against British imperial rule and feed into a skewed perception of the UK's allegedly superior financial powers.

Unfolding a brief history of conspiracy theories in Iran from Mosaddeq to HAARP, **Shirin Fathi** (Hamburg) analyzed the conspiratorial aspects of US-Iranian relations. Despite Barack Obama's promise to overcome "the decades of mistrust," the relationship between the two states is still tainted by the CIA-staged 1953 coup d'état against Mosaddeq that serves both as a proof of an American omnipotence and as a rich source for a proliferation of conspiracy theories. In sketching the Iranian socio-political and cultural context, Fathi closed with the question of why people believe in conspiracy theories: Do conspiracy theories thrive most in states and societies characterized by political unrest, authoritative governments, and the lived experience of 'real' conspiracies?

The American extreme-right occupied center stage in the paper presented by **Aaron Winter** (Dundee). He pointed out that while conspiracy theories have always played an important role in the politics and rhetoric of the American extreme-right, they tend to become even more central during crises or periods of political reorientation. Curiously enough it is exactly in those times, that the American extreme-right creates a narrative of alliance with the Middle East in order to make itself visible on the political stage. 9/11, in particular, triggered an increase in conspiracy theories and narratives that established this link between the two seemingly opposing players. In 'reality', however, Winter emphasized, the Middle East is reluctant to politically align itself with the American extreme-right. Therefore, these alliances prove to be unsuccessful and remain the subject of (mostly leftist) conspiracy theorizing.

In a more historical approach, **André Sleiman** (Paris) picked up the now mythical visit of Henry Kissinger to Lebanon to show that a seemingly minor event in the region's history can entail decades of conspiracy theorizing. Although then U.S. secretary of state Kissinger visited Lebanon only once in 1973, the idea that he deliberately started the Civil War in Lebanon and intended to split the state in half has been advocated in Lebanon until the present. The importance of scapegoating in conspiracy theorizing also manifested itself in Sleiman's paper as he sketched how the Lebanese projected their highly general and dispersed fears onto one individual.

The everyday use and knowledge of conspiracy theories was the subject of the third panel. **Türkay Salim Nefes** (Kent) followed Stephan Schmid in his perception that conspiracy theories oftentimes become subject to an instrumentalization by political parties in the Muslim and Arab world but differed in arguing that only certain parts of the political spectrum embrace conspiracy theories as a tool. In his empirical study, Nefes presented the findings of interviews he conducted with members of different political parties in Turkey. While right-wing and nationalist politicians seemed to embrace conspiracy theories as a political instrument, left-wing and liberal politicians tended to dissociate themselves from conspiratorial thinking. Nonetheless, Nefes was able to point out that conspiracy theories inhabit a very central space in Turkish politics and political rhetoric.

Examining conspiracy talk at the grassroots level, **Annika Rabo** (Stockholm) in turn took a closer look at an important aspect of conspiracy theory: the mechanics of othering. She noted that Syrian conspiracy talk often showcases a high sense of victimization and that the perception of the U.S. and Israel as distant others conspiring against Syria goes hand in hand with a perception of the self and the region as economically and politically weak. Shifting the focus of the conference from texts to practices, she raised the question in how far mundane conspiracy talk differs from elaborated conspiracy theories and in how far questions of agency and self-definition play out differently in Western and non-Western conspiracy theories.

The fourth panel dealt with the link between conspiracy theories and the White House in fictional narratives. **Brian C. Johnsrud** (Stanford) analyzed the revival of the history of the Crusades in the academe, the political sphere, and popular culture in the aftermath of 9/11. While the Bush administration showed a particular fondness for the Crusades rhetoric, thus labeling the terrorist attacks as signifiers of a Middle Eastern "medievalism," scholars were quick to denounce this political embrace and (mis)appropriation of medieval history. As a side effect, however, the popular sphere picked up the Crusades iconography and history.

Thus, the conspiratorial Crusade novel, as Johnsrud called it, enjoys a renewed popularity, in particular the novels by Dan Brown. By linking the Middle Ages to the present and metaphorically presenting the conflict between the Middle East and the U.S., these novels construct a historical narrative of continuity that the American public longs for in light of recent traumatic events. Johnsrud called for a nuanced, culturalist approach to these popular narratives since they disclose a lot about how people frame and make sense of the past and the present.

In his paper, **Sebastian M. Herrmann** (Leipzig) read two conspiracy novels by Larry Beinhart against the background of postmodernism. Both novels thematize the deception of the American public at the hands of the president: *American Hero* turns the Gulf War into a staged media event; *The Librarian* shows the efforts of a government to fabricate its re-election. But they do not simply interpret the experiences with the George W. Bush administration as a crisis of representation, Herrmann argues, they are expressions of what he refers to, with a nod to Timothy Melley, as an epistemic panic. Similar to Mark Fenster's observations about WikiLeaks's idealization of transparency, Herrmann attests the American public a general anxiety about the limitations of knowledge and reality which manifests itself in a search for truth and facts – key components of the conspiracy narrative.

The last panel focused on epistemological questions and the problem of theorizing conspiracy theories. **Alexander Dunst** (Nottingham) used the theoretical framework of Jacques Lacan's writings about paranoia for his critique of contemporary conspiracy scholarship. The culturalist turn of the late 1990s that redefined the field mainly in antithesis to Richard Hofstadter's psycho-pathological view of conspiracy theories as products of paranoia, Dunst worried, had caught conspiracy studies in an ideological binary. While contemporary conspiracy scholarship denounces Hofstadter's pathologization, it still continues to draw and reaffirm the boundaries between reason and madness. This led Dunst to postulate a revision of conspiracy studies on the basis of Lacan's argument that paranoia embodies the most general structure of human knowledge and underlies all cultural production.

The conference's inherent problematic surfaced as **Matthew Gray** (Canberra) questioned the comparability of Western and Middle Eastern conspiracy theories and the applicability of theoretical tools in a different cultural context. Gray underlined that the abundance of Western scholarly productions stands in contrast to the few works on Middle Eastern conspiracy theories which also lack the objectivity, coherence, and theoretical approach of Western conspiracy studies. However, Gray advised against applying the Western theories all too easily to the Middle Eastern context as he sketched the limitations of theoretical transferability. Gray explained that conspiracy theories in the Middle East diverge from their Western counterparts in many ways: they often target an external enemy while Western conspiracy theories focus on the enemy within the own social order; furthermore, the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts leave a distinctive mark on conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, Gray argued that when used with caution and awareness for simplifications and bias, Western theories could, in some cases, be applied to non-Western conspiracy theories – and vice versa.

"What kind of man are you?" thus hypothesized **Birte Christ** (Gießen), represents the essential question that every male conspiracy theorist (and conspiracy scholar) sets out to

answer for himself. Using Oliver Stone's conspiracy narrative *JFK* to support her thesis that conspiracy theories negotiate and define masculinity and agency, Christ subsequently assumed a meta-reflective stand on conspiracy studies. Not only did she call for an investigation into the connection between manifestations of masculinity and conspiratorial thinking but also advertised a heightened awareness of the gendered nature of conspiracy theories and studies.

As the conference moved from more empirical accounts of conspiracism to the complex world of theories of conspiracy theory, it became obvious that the current scholarship about conspiracy theories not only grapples with the issue of comparing two highly diverse and different cultural contexts but also with its self-definition and self-understanding. Some scholars proposed a(n ideological) revision and rethinking of conspiracy "studies" while others repeatedly questioned the term conspiracy "theory." In his conclusion, **Reinhard Schulze** (Bern), for example, argued that conspiracy narratives are referred to as "theories" even though they can hardly be regarded as theories at all. Bridging the gap between a religious order and scientific reasoning in a secularized world, conspiracy narratives only purport to be theories, he stated. **Peter Knight** (Manchester) joined the calls for a more reflective (meta-)stance of conspiracy studies in his concluding remarks, contending that the field has to reposition itself now that the moment of cultural studies has passed. Knight agreed with Matthew Gray in that he acknowledged the problems of a comparative approach to conspiracy theories in the U.S. and the Middle East but he also conceded its values and advantages. By analyzing the transfer and interconnectedness of ideas and people, the translation of theories and truths, conspiracy studies could view the field from a different perspective and, ultimately, redefine itself.

To view the field from a different perspective, to attempt a theorization of Middle Eastern conspiracy theories, to analyze the cultural specifics of each region, to address issues that have been neglected by conspiracy studies so far – questions about the instrumentalization and commercialization of conspiracy theory, for example, or the nexus between agency, gender, and conspiracy – the conference offered much incentive to invest scholarly capital into this object of study. In particular the insightful and diverse contributions, the thought-provoking discussions, and the range of disciplines represented left both attendants and audience rest assured that even if the comparative approach to conspiracy theories has its limits and weaknesses, the interdisciplinary one does not.

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